



Teaching the Classics:

A Socratic Method for Literary Education

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

Why Literature?

To experience literature is to see the world through new eyes. As C. S. Lewis stated in his *Experiment in Criticism*, “Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realise the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors. . . My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others.” When we read, we broaden our perspective, so that we are no longer trapped within the limits of our own experience. “In reading great literature,” Lewis says, “I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. . . I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”

This broadening of perspective is a necessary and crucial part of a strong education. The ability to interact gracefully with important ideas is one mark of a truly educated person, and exposure to such ideas is the only way to become conversant with them! Great literature, because it presents ideas with eloquence, provides models and examples by which students can hone their skills of expression and debate.

However, this is only half of the reason.

The other half is that great literature, because it beautifully portrays the tragedy, pathos and wonder of the human condition, is an end in itself. It’s not just a tool for teaching the skill of debate, or a training manual on how to discuss ideas; it is art that richly rewards educated contemplation. It represents the contributions of its authors to what Mortimer Adler called the Great Conversation about the good life, the relationship between the human and the divine. The pleasure and fulfillment that come from reading literature are part of what it is to be human, in the fullest sense. This is what sets man apart from the animals.

Why should you want your student to read and understand Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*? So that he will get the chance to think critically about literature and about life, of course, but also so that he will have read *Hamlet*. So he will see and understand, in all its beauty and tragedy and glory, the plight of the human soul. As he reads, he will see himself mirrored in Hamlet’s nobility and heroism, in his anxiety and indecision, in his glory and his destruction. The student’s mind will be uplifted beyond the facts of his own experience to the world of ideas, which will eventually bring to his own life a depth of understanding and a sense of perspective that would otherwise be unavailable to him.

It’s an odd and somewhat disturbing thought, but statistics say that most of us will be utterly forgotten by history within fifty years of our deaths. Achilles, however, still lives, 3,000 years later. Hamlet lives. Huckleberry Finn, Augustine of *The Confessions*, Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor – they are all immortal, in a manner of speaking. Why? Because there is something about them, be it the bitterness of Achilles, the repentance of Augustine, the tortured humanity of Hamlet or the earthy wisdom of Huckleberry Finn, that calls out to us at some deep level and makes us answer—that touches us in our humanness, that mirrors our own glorious potential and our own sinful wretchedness. These characters have the power to move us and inspire us, to ennoble us. They are the gifts of God to men, and he who would know God, not only in his heart but also in his mind, would do well to meet Him in the history of ideas.

This is why we study our past, our traditions, our cultural heritage; this is why we read great literature. The world God has made for us is filled with gifts of beauty, truth and goodness, and among these gifts are authors, philosophers, and poets. To understand their work is to understand the goodness of God.

This seminar is presented because of the conviction that your students can get a head start on the road to this kind of understanding of their world and their history. They need not wait until they go to college to begin learning to appreciate great literature. They can start right now. The techniques are easy to learn, and easy to teach; and much pleasure and fulfillment awaits him who would pursue them.

The following lessons present a model for teaching the skills of literary analysis and interpretation. They are organized according to **three important ideas**, which together form the heart of the *Teaching the Classics* approach to literature:

1. All works of fiction possess **common elements**: Context, Structure and Style.
2. Because of their clarity, **children's stories** are the best tools for teaching the recognition and evaluation of these elements.
3. The best classroom technique for presenting and analyzing literature is the **Socratic Method**.

LESSON 1: PREPARATION FOR LITERARY ANALYSIS

Context and Authorship

Of primary importance in the study of any literature is the *context* in which it was written. Every story is written by an individual living in a particular culture and period. Consequently, each author's work is, in a sense, a relic of the period in which it was written. Just as George Washington was a product of his time, so also *Pride and Prejudice* is a product of its era. It is impossible that an author may write from any experience other than his own, no matter how fictional the account he weaves might be. He writes folk, fable, truth, and fiction from his own sensory experience. He tells of sunsets he has seen, trips to lands he has traveled, and conversations he has enjoyed. He may use these sensory experiences to create fantasy worlds, languages, and places beyond his reach, but they still smack of the human reality he has experienced.

A passing knowledge of the history of the time in which a piece was penned is therefore invaluable in its study. Social and class structures, moral sensibilities, roles for men and women, theological and philosophical trends and more are at the root of many a tale as authors use their literary genre to examine, criticize, or reflect on the life issues of their time and place. While Jane Austen, for example, ridiculed the rigid social and class structures of her day, Mary Shelley criticized the subjection of women. While Wordsworth, Coleridge and their fellow Romantics contemplated the new revolutionary spirit of the age, the Victorians who followed concerned themselves with the origins of man, the existence of God, the Scientific Revolution, and the problems of urbanization.

In addition to understanding the historical period behind a piece of literature, a good reader must also acknowledge the personal history of the author. While fiction is not necessarily autobiographical, and cannot be read as such, knowledge of the character and life of the author can at times provide a window into a work. When Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, he not only wrote during a period of racial tension and incongruity in America at large, but also from a wealth of personal experience in the culture of the Mississippi Valley.

"But don't I need a degree in Literature or History to understand these intricacies?"

Of course not! A variety of college level survey texts include short essays on the periods of English literature and on the lives of great authors, many of which are perfect for the home school teacher looking to "bone up" on some history. We recommend especially the Norton Anthology series, which contains dozens of such essays, and is an indispensable source of background information for virtually every Classic. Such study guides as "Cliff's Notes" or "Masterplots" are also helpful in this regard.

To understand the wide range of personal histories that make authors who they are, consider the following sample:

- **John Milton** (author of *Paradise Lost*) lived in England from 1608 to 1674. He was a Puritan and a follower of Oliver Cromwell, who ruled England for a time after the execution of Charles I. While in his forties, Milton became completely blind, and it is said that he dictated much of his poetry to one of his daughters. The theological and political earmarks of Milton's Puritanism thoroughly characterize his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, while he deals directly with the psychological and spiritual effects of his blindness in several of his greatest poems.
- **Daniel Defoe** (author of *Robinson Crusoe*) lived in England from 1660 to 1731. He was a dissenter from the Church of England, and once mocked the highhanded ways of his Anglican opponents by arguing in a satirical pamphlet that all Dissenters be exterminated. This stunt earned him an arrest and a term in the pillory, where it is said that he castigated his accusers aloud by reading his own satirical poems, while audiences (who had been sold copies) drank his health in the streets. Worth noting is that Defoe's most famous character, Robinson Crusoe, comes to espouse a form of Christianity that would have made him as convinced a Dissenter as Defoe himself.
- **James Fennimore Cooper** (author of *Last of the Mobicans*) lived from 1789 to 1851, and was the first great American novelist. As a young man, he was expelled from Yale, and spent time at sea as a midshipman. Cooper wrote more than fifty books, creating in the process the archetypes of the rugged frontier woodsman and the Noble Savage.
- **Charles Dickens** (author of *Great Expectations*) lived in England from 1812 to 1870. His father was plagued by debt, and the whole family spent time in debtor's prison in 1824. Originally writing for magazines (where he was paid by the word!) Dickens eventually became a famous author and public personality. He campaigned against social ills (such as those endured by debtors and other unfortunates) during long lecture tours in Europe and the United States. He is considered by many to be the greatest Victorian novelist.
- **Robert Louis Stevenson** (author of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* and *The Black Arrow*) was a Scotsman who lived from 1850 to 1894. He suffered from tuberculosis from childhood. Stevenson traveled extensively, once taking a tour of France and Belgium *by canoe*. He lived in California for a time in the late 1870's and finally settled in Samoa, where he died.
- **Harper Lee** (author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*) is an American writer who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 with her first and only novel. Like Scout Finch, *Mockingbird's* young heroine, Lee is the daughter of a country lawyer. She is also a descendant of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, and grew up in a tiny Alabama town that was no stranger to the tensions and incongruities that characterized the American South generally in the first half of the 20th century.

Literary Structure: The Five Elements of Fiction

Once you have grasped the importance of context and authorship, you are ready to move on to the work itself. The key to understanding literature lies in recognizing its structure. All stories are composed of five basic elements: *Conflict, Plot, Setting, Characters* and *Theme*.

The powerful “secret” of literary interpretation is really no secret at all: *All* stories have these components, even the children’s stories you read to your second graders at night! What’s more, the elements of fiction are very accessible in children’s literature, even for the children themselves. Children’s stories are therefore powerful tools for explaining the elements of fiction to students of all ages. Once grasped, an understanding of these elements may then be applied with great results to the works of the masters.

The next five lessons demonstrate the parts of a story and the techniques used by the author to assemble these parts into a beautiful whole. The story chart on the next page is a graphic representation of this assembly of components and the relationships that exist between them.

This story chart is the foundational tool of the *Teaching the Classics* approach to literature. You will be encouraged in the sessions that follow to put each and every story “up on the chart,” and through continuous repetition to get into the habit of thinking in these categories. In this way the story chart will become a template for interpretation that you can apply to any work of fiction.

The Five Elements of Fiction: Story Chart



