

28 February 2014

**READING THE CLASSICS WITH  
DR. LELAND RYKEN**

**Annotations**

1. In the **IN YOUR OWN WORDS** space under each of the four reasons below, paraphrase in your own words Dr. Ryken's reasons why we should read classic literature.
2. Find 2-3 points that you strongly agree with, highlight or underline, and write an **A** next to them. In the margin, briefly note why you agree.
3. Find 2-3 points that you disagree with, highlight or underline, and write a **D** next to them. In the margin, briefly note why.

**CLASS DISCUSSION:** Is it important to read and study classic literature? Share your ideas and reasons.

**1. Superior Entertainment**

My first defense of the classics is one that may seem surprising: we should read the classics because they provide superior entertainment. I grant that this is truer for people who have been educated to love the classics and who have developed a taste for them. I need to add, though, that everyone can develop that taste. No one is barred from the classics. For centuries the classics formed the basis of education at every level, starting in grade school. It was not until the contemporary decline of culture and a general laziness of mind that the classics have seemed to annoy people. Happily, there are pockets of the world that have continued to value the classics.

Do I actually find Homer (the Greek playwright, not Homer Simpson) and Shakespeare and Dickens more entertaining than the latest movie or television drama? I do. The subject matter that the classics put before us for our contemplation (thought) is more entertaining and striking than what popular entertainment generally does. The surface remoteness of the classics of the past gives them a quality that is itself entertaining, namely, arresting strangeness. And it is not only the story material of the classics that is entertaining: even more important is the superior artistry and technique and beauty that they display. Robert Frost's description of a great poem extends to other genres as well: a classic is "a performance in words." We do often think of a movie or television drama as a great verbal performance, but we do think of the classics that way.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS:

## **2. Reflecting the Human Experience**

Another virtue of the classics is that at the level of content they do greater justice to the richness and vastness of human experience than lesser forms of literature do. It is a truism that the subject of literature is human experience, presented so vividly that we relive the experiences in our imaginations. Some experiences are more worthy than others. Great literature and art probe life at deeper levels than works that are transitory.

Why are most literary works of the contemporary (modern day) moment so fleeting (short-lived and barely remembered)? Because they are surface-level portrayals of life only. Once we get beyond the realistic portrayal of contemporary life that momentarily grabs our attention because we can relate to it, there is nothing more to see in the work. Here today, gone tomorrow. By contrast, Homer's hero Odysseus lives on through the centuries as a model of the ideal family man in whom can see our own experiences and longings. The classics possess a universality of human experience that "popular" literary works often lack.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS:

## **3. Hard Work**

I have another reason for valuing the classics that will surprise some of my readers. I value the classics because they are demanding. They elicit greater attention and thoughtfulness from us than non-classics do. The classics elicit our best, and this is a mark in their favor. My students regularly do their best work for me with Shakespeare and Milton, who would certainly rank as demanding authors. In keeping with what I said earlier about the richness and depth of experience and artistry that the classics provide, there is simply so much more that a reader or student can do with a classic text than with an ordinary one.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS:

## **4. A Gateway to the Past**

Finally, the classics are our gateway to the past. They give us what the Victorian Matthew Arnold called "the best that is known and thought in the world." To have contact with the best that has been known and said is elevating. This does not mean that we always agree with what the classics assert, but they are always a great catalyst to our thinking about life. "We need intimate knowledge of the past," C. S. Lewis asserted in a famous sermon, adding that "a person who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village." Reading the classics of the past allows us to live "in many places" of the imagination and intellect.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS: