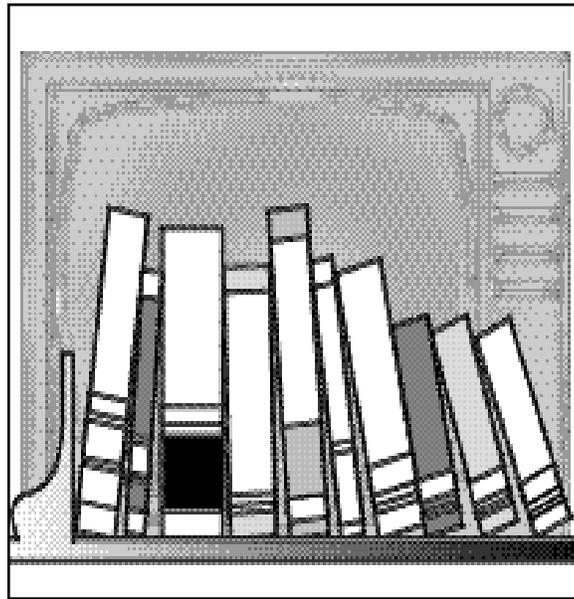


WHY COLLEGES NEED GREAT BOOKS

DAVID MULROY

Last December, I posted a humorous flyer in Curtin Hall, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's (UWM) humanities building. My flyer advertised a fictional "winterim" course entitled "Masculinity in the Media." Students enrolling would supposedly be "required" to watch and discuss all NFL playoff games. "Gee, honey, I'd love to visit your mom," the promotional text read, "But I have to watch this game. **It's an assignment!**" Again, this was a joke.

This summer, there is a flyer posted in Curtin hall advertising a real English course entitled "Representations of Womanhood on Television." The topic is described as "gender construction" in three popular television genres: sitcoms, soap operas, and music television. Accompanying photographs indicate that the shows studied will include *I Love Lucy*, *All My Children*, and *Friends*. This is not an isolated example of courses that apparently pander to students' frivolous interests. Another flyer advertises *English 316: World Cinema*. In this course, students will analyze Hong Kong cinema with special attention to its influence on American television — as reflected in *Xena: Warrior Princess*,



Buffy: Vampire Slayer, and *La Femme, Nikita*. A third course on the topic of "laughter in literature and film" lists *Gross Pointe Blank*, *Heathers*, and *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* among its "screenings."

The tendency illustrated by these courses is made more troubling by the economics of higher education. Teachers are under increasing pressure to keep enrollments

up. The pressure is greatest on those who are the lowest in hierarchy. Hence courses in popular movies and television shows are usually taught by graduate students facing dire consequences if too few students sign up for their sections. The result is that some undergraduates who might otherwise be reading Homer, Plato, the *Bible*, or Shakespeare end up talking about Rachel, Phoebe, and Monica with a near peer, who is under great pressure to be liked.

Most courses at UWM are above reproach in concept and implementation. The vast majority of teachers are bright, accomplished, hardworking, and idealistic. Even when their topic is an episode of a popular sitcom, their

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students undoubtedly benefit from their instruction. All in all, students get an excellent education here for a relatively low price. Still, courses like the ones mentioned raise obvious concerns. You might think that they would have sparked serious debate in faculty circles. They have not. They are insulated from criticism in part by the ideals of collegiality and academic freedom, but most especially by the myth of literature's hidden meanings, which has deep roots in contemporary universities. This last point demands a bit of explanation.

The myth of literature's hidden meanings gained ascendancy in the fifties, spread by English professors practicing what was called the New Criticism.* Most folks who graduated from college before the era of multiculturalism studied literature from this point of view. Its central assumption is that the value of a literary work resides in its hidden meanings. Supposedly, "close readings" of texts with special attention to "images" reveal these hidden meanings, philosophical themes whose presence previous generations of readers never glimpsed. *Hamlet* is really about appearance versus reality; *The Tempest* concerns the conflict between order and chaos, etc.

The founders of the New Criticism, poets and scholars like John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, were erudite and eloquent, but the method of literary study that they popularized was radically flawed. They never even pretended that they were following any rigid procedure in interpreting literature. Beneath their fine rhetoric, they were just using the details of literary texts as stimuli for free association. The philosophical reflections that happened to occur to them as they read became literature's "hidden meanings." What should have been apparent from the outset is now perfectly obvious from the perspective of fifty years: none of their interpretations were really right. None of them succeeded in defining the meaning of a major literary work once and for all.

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Though their conclusions were clearly wrong, the personal qualities of the founders of New Criticism lent their random thoughts considerable interest. The same is not necessarily true of the countless lesser lights who followed in their footsteps. The practice of interpretation by free association has continued unabated, however, because New Criticism gave it such great prestige, and no influential group has yet seen fit to blow the whistle.

Naturally, as fashions have changed, so have literature's "hidden meanings." Now *Hamlet* is more likely to be explained as a critique of heterosexuality; the *Tempest*, as a meditation on imperialism, etc. Many scholars have spoken out against the leftist tilt of current literary interpretations, but the flawed principles on which they are based do more damage. For one thing, these principles have led many professors to become indifferent to the literary quality of the works that they teach. Obviously, if the value of a literary text lies in its hidden meanings, and its hidden meanings are essentially whatever some professor says they are, then — given the right professor — any text can become profound. So it has come to pass that college teachers do not have to limit themselves to "serious literature." In the early days of this realization, Jack Zipes, formerly of UWM, gained national prominence for his interpretation of *Little Red Riding Hood*. As the courses cited above show, that was just the beginning.

An underlying error of the New Criticism is the confusion of the literal meaning of a text, i.e., its objective meaning as determined by dictionaries and grammars, with the broad, subjective significance that a text is likely to have for any given reader. With this distinction blurred, it was just a matter of time until the "texts" deemed worthy of interpretation expanded to include not only popular and juvenile literature but also, literally, everything. Only words have literal meanings, everything has subjective significance. If meaning refers to the latter, then everything is a "text" and fair game for "interpretation."

The interpretation of everything is now a flourishing, avant-garde academic discipline known as Cultural Studies, which is consciously rooted in the practices of the New Critics. A well-known example of cultural studies in American universities is a course on black hair offered at Stanford a few years ago. The SUNY-New Paltz Conference entitled "Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom" and featuring the sale of dildos and workshops on "safe and sane" sadomasochism is another. The reason that English departments now feel free to offer courses on sitcoms and popular movies is that they are evolving in the direction of Cultural Studies. Having once gotten away with the claim that they knew Shakespeare's hidden meanings, they now claim to know the hidden meanings of everything and anything. It is an inevitable progression.

Cultural Studies touches on important issues. Its fatal flaw, inherited from New Criticism, is its lack of scientific methodology. One could learn much by subjecting children's stories, movies and television programs, and even sex toys to scientific investigation, but first one needs a science, a system of definitions and procedures that arrives at definite, verifiable conclusions. One does not create a science of X merely by talking about X or offering a college courses in it. In the absence of rigid methods, students get nothing but their teachers' opinions. In the early days of New Criticism, these at least came attached to important works of literature, but now they are just as likely to concern movie stars, sitcoms, comic books, and dildos.

I do not think that this is a salutary trend. The time is brief that students spend in college under pressure to read what their teachers assign. Why should we ever assign anything

other than the best books of all time? In four years, even the best students will read only a small fraction of those, but they could at least get started. Why *require* them to watch sitcoms and movies?

Of course, I am not the only educator who holds to this philosophy. Many schools and programs have adopted it. They have what are called Great Books curricula. These fell out of favor in the sixties and are now struggling to make a comeback in the face of much criticism. Coming from various directions and interwoven with the myth of hidden meanings, this new criticism has made it harder than it once was to persuade people of the value of the

Great Books. In fact, the only good way that I know to reassert their value and respond to the criticism is by considering specific examples, typical passages from a Great Book. Otherwise, one ends up trading in empty generalities. Hence, I would like to digress to describe some scenes in the oldest work in the canon, Homer's *Iliad*.

In book six of that great, epic poem, the Trojan general Hector leaves the battle that

rages outside his city to ask women of Troy to pray for divine assistance. Before returning to the carnage, he seeks out his wife, Andromache, who is watching the armies from the walls of Troy. She is accompanied by a maid who holds their infant son. Seeing Hector, Andromache scolds him for risking his life unnecessarily in battle. She says that he should bring the Trojans inside the city and secure the walls, an eminently sensible strategy under the circumstances. Hector replies that his manly spirit would not allow him to do so, since people would call him a coward. He adds that he knows that Troy is doomed and that he hopes that he will die in battle before the awful day when Andromache is led into

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slavery by some Greek. He then puts on his helmet. The helmet's crest frightens the baby, who starts to cry. This makes Hector and Andromache laugh. Hector removes his helmet, picks up his infant son and prays that he might grow up to be a mighty warrior, like his father. He then tells Andromache not to worry so much, since he will not die before he is fated to. She should return to the house to attend to the women's chores. War, he says, is the business of men, "especially this man."

Most readers think back to this scene later, in Book 22, when Hector finally meets Achilles in battle. Achilles has driven the rest of the Trojans warriors into the city, but Hector waits outside the gates to confront him. As Achilles approaches, Hector's mother and father beg him to take refuge inside the city. Hector apparently ignores their pleas, but then inwardly he does consider the possibility of making peace with Achilles. "What if I put down my sword and shield," he says to himself, "and speak to Achilles, promising to surrender all of Troy's treasures to the Greeks?" He quickly rejects the idea, however, because, "Achilles might kill me as though I were a woman once I set my weapons down."

Thus Hector decides to fight, but when Achilles gets within hailing distance, Hector panics and runs. Achilles chases him around the city of Troy three times. To bring matters to head, the goddess Athena disguises herself as Hector's brother arriving to help him. Hector stands to face Achilles, but when his "brother" vanishes, he realizes that he has been tricked by the gods and is doomed. Nevertheless, he summons his courage to charge Achilles and dies fighting valiantly.

As these passages show, great works of literature do not gain their ends by imposing hidden meaning on unsuspecting readers. There is nothing hidden here. Homer's depiction of Hector and Andromache is carefully crafted to enliven its audience's intellects by stirring strong, complex, and often conflicting reactions. Homer makes it clear that Hector's need to be "manly" leads to his destruction and hastens the fall of his city. The Trojans would

have been better off with Andromache as their warlord. On the other hand, Hector's courageous actions, especially his last desperate charge, are presented in a favorable light. This tension is one of many that run throughout the *Iliad*. The result is that both warriors and pacifists, feminists and male chauvinist pigs, have viewed the *Iliad* as an inspired and inspiring work. Its value as an educational tool is not that it imposes any particular value or belief on its readers. Rather it facilitates intense but free mental activity. It is the intellectual equivalent of a jungle gym, a superb, irresistible, gleaming jungle gym, a hundred feet high.

When Great Books are defended in this way, on the grounds of the interest that they stir, detractors point out that movies and television shows are interesting too, as indeed they are. The difference, of course, lies in the complexity of the works involved and the intensity of the mental activity that accompanies one's appreciation of them. Enjoying the *Iliad* is like enjoying a game of chess; enjoying *Friends* is checkers at best.

Although their complexity puts off some readers at first, it also seems to be what gives Great Books their staying power. The richness and intensity of the mental activity that they foster overcome, at least to some degree, shifts in fashions caused by the passage of time. This in turn is their defining characteristic, which is simply a matter of statistics. Good translations of the *Iliad* still make best seller lists. Scholars write dozens of books and articles about it every year, while countless works of comparable antiquity, including the lightweight entertainments of every age, languish in deserved obscurity. If you write a book and thousands of people are still reading it and talking about it centuries later, you have written a great book.

The complexity of the Great Books also clarifies the teacher's role in a Great Books course. It is to make sure that the students understand the book on the literal level, not an insignificant challenge. The *Iliad* has over twenty well-developed characters and a plot that takes a few hundred words just to sketch.

In many years of teaching, I have never known a student who actually mastered the literal facts of the text without also experiencing obvious intellectual stimulation. As a Great Books teacher, I help the students master the facts, then stand back and savor their reactions. If my subject were an episode of *Friends*, I do not know what my role would be.

Currently, the most potent objection to the Great Books as teaching tools is that their authors are almost all white males. Undeniably, at first glance, lists of Great Books seem to lend tacit support to doctrines of racial and sexual superiority. Advocates of Great Books education are generally high-minded people who are inclined to dismiss this criticism scornfully. Still, the appearance is there. The facts need to be confronted.

Great books are not the only thing involved. White males also dominate lists of great inventors, physicians, painters, etc. It might seem that either our perception of human intellectual history is seriously distorted or white males really are genetically superior. Few people are comfortable with either horn of that dilemma.

In fact, there is no need to choose between them. White males have been the beneficiaries of two great accidents. First, we do not give birth to children; second, we lived in the right part of the world to learn the alphabet at a comparatively early date.

The implications of the first accident are well-known. Before the advent of modern conveniences, raising a family was much harder than it has subsequently become and, reasonably or not, society placed the burdens of doing so mostly on women's shoulders. Hence a far smaller percentage of them had the time to compete for distinction in intellectual realms. A

few beat the odds: Sappho, Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, Flannery O'Connor, Virginia Wolfe seem to have become permanent fixtures in Great Books lists, and it is difficult to detect male chauvinism in common estimates of their contributions. Obviously, as society changes, more and more women will make the lists of the best sellers of all time, but there is no way to restore gender equity to the past.

The cause of the racial imbalance is less familiar. It is the emergence of alphabetic literacy in Greece around 800 BC. Although many societies had systems of writing before the Greeks, the alphabet was a method of revolutionary simplicity. By systematically distinguishing between vowels and consonants, the Greeks perfected a system of twenty-four signs that accurately represented the sounds of their language. The system was so simple that children could and did master it easily. It made the Greeks the first literate people. Just before the alphabet was invented, Greece was impoverished; its culture, on the verge of extinction. In the wake of the alphabet, it quickly became the dominant power in the

Mediterranean, achieving the kind of advantages over its rivals that have been associated with "western" societies every since. The Romans who succeeded the Greeks did so only after adapting the alphabet to their own language and the same is true of the other nations that moved into positions of dominance in the west. Chiefly because of geography, these nations have all been white. The simple reason that so few black Africans appear in the canon is that there was no alphabetic literacy or anything like it in black Africa until the colonial era. The same is true for native Americans.

In the wake of women's liberation and the spread of alphabetic literacy, educators have been anxious to identify female and black

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authors worthy of being added to the canon, which is perfectly natural and appropriate. Unfortunately, the politics of diversity combined with the myth of hidden meanings has led some to go further, asserting that the sexual and racial composition of the traditional canon is no accident. It is supposedly an expression of the underlying male chauvinism and racism of western civilization. Its "hidden meaning" is that white males are superior.

That assertion is spectacularly untrue. The foundational values of the champions of diversity have no other source than western education with its reliance on the Great Books and it is obvious why. By enlivening their readers' intellects, the Great Books liberate them from stereotypical attitudes. Even when a Great Book contains an explicit endorsement of a tra-

ditional attitude, like Hector's "war is the business of men," the context compels readers to question it and decide its merits for themselves.

A central purpose of education is to enliven intellects, to hook young people on the thrill of using their minds freely. No kind of material or strategy that could be used for this purpose has anything like the time-tested success to its credit that the Great Books do. In Milwaukee and across the nation, college and university leaders are looking for ways to improve their campuses' images. More should consider the approach taken by the premier Great Books college, St. John's (Annapolis and Santa Fe). "The following teachers will return to campus for the academic year of 2000/2001," its brochures read, "Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Shakespeare"