**What is a classic?**

Classic means “of the highest quality,” or “of enduring interest and value.” A book becomes a classic because people keep reading it. It’s like a popularity contest, or a public opinion poll, except that it goes on year after year, generation after generation. A book that people are still reading fifty or a hundred and fifty years after it was first published has to have something going for it to keep people interested.

Another reason books become classics is that they are genuinely entertaining. People who take time to read the classics are usually pleasantly surprised to discover just how interesting they really are.

One proof that classics contain really exciting stories is that contemporary writers “borrow” ideas from classic works all the time when they’re creating new ones.

If the classics only offered engrossing entertainment, they’d be well worth your time. But they have a lot more to offer.

To begin with, classics are better written than most other books. This may seem obvious, but it’s worth mentioning. One of the qualities that causes a book to endure decade after decade is that the author put extra care into choosing each word, into creating real, believable characters, into giving them genuine human emotions and challenging problem to solve. The world you’re reading about his suddenly vivid and compelling and real, as real as the world you live in every day — and sometimes more so.

There is one other reason that the classics of endured as long as they have. In fact, it’s the most important reason of all. Books become classics, and stay classics, because they tell us something about ourselves. The authors understand the human heart better than most of the writers working today.

When the world grows too difficult to bear, it’s sometimes helpful to give a bit of perspective, to see how people dealt with life’s problems, and its opportunities, in other times and places. The classics offer fresh view points on the human condition showing how other people dealt with heart break and shame, greed and ambition, anger and terror.

~ H.G. Wells in *War of the Worlds*, p. 201.

How do we define a great book? A great book has a great theme, it is written in noble language, it speaks across the ages, and it can speak to you personally. It is written in the most sublime poetry and prose. It certainly speaks to individuals. It transforms individuals lives.

~ Rufus Fears, *Life Lessons from the Great Myths*, p. 210.

**Our Cannon Becomes our Plot or Life Story.**

There are four types of stories: bent, broken, whole, and healing. (*The Healing Power of Stories*, ~ Daniel Taylor)

A. *Bent* stories portray evil as good, and good as evil. Such stories are meant to enhance the evil tendencies of the reader, such as pornography and many horror books and movies. The best decision regarding *Bent* stories is to avoid them like the plague.

B. *Broken* stories portray evil as evil and good as good, but evil wins. Something is broken, not right, in need of fixing. Such books are not uplifting, but can be very inspiring. *Broken* stories can be very good for the reader if they motivate him or her to heal them, to fix them. *The Communist Manifesto*is a broken classic; so are *The Lord of the Flies* and *1984*. In each of these, evil wins; but they can also be very motivating because people often have felt a real need to help reverse their messages in the real world.

C. *Whole* stories are where good is good and good wins. Most of the classics are in this category. Readers should spend most of their time in such works.

D. *Healing* stories can be either *Whole* or *Broken* stories where the reader is profoundly moved, changed, and significantly improved by his or her reading experience.

Following is a recommendation for the reader who wishes to come face-to-face with greatness through the classics: Avoid Bent stories. Develop a personal canon of Whole and Healing stories. Spend the majority of your studies in Whole works, but don’t neglect Broken stories that you ought to be fixing. It is okay to have some entertainment also. Just remember you become what you read. Your beliefs (which drive your behaviors) are highly influenced by what you read. (*A Thomas Jefferson Education*, ~ Oliver DeMille, p. 66)

**The Classics Teach Us Human Nature**

A knowledge of human nature is a key to leadership. There are four basic needs which all humans have:

1. Survival, security and a sense of personal control. A sense of self.

2. A desire for relationships and connectedness. A sense of being connected.

3. Adventure, excitement. A sense of challenge and growth.

4. To gain meaning, to know self, truth and God. A sense of belonging to something bigger.

The classics give us a glimpse into each of these basic needs. In fact, the thing which makes a classic great is glaring insight into basic human nature. Ultimately, as you study the classics, you learn about your own personal nature. Learning through experience is good, but often it is better to learn from someone else’s experiences and build on them. If we will let them, the classics can teach us lessons without the pain of repeating certain mistakes ourselves. They can also show us correct choices which will get us where we want to go.

We will certainly get our own share of challenging experiences, but learning from others can help us immeasurably on our journey. Classics allow us to experience, in an intimate way, the greatest mistakes and successful choices of human history. If we learn from these mistakes and successes, we will make fewer mistakes and have more successes.

And at a deeper level, knowing how others think, feel and act allows us to predict behavior and lead accordingly. We can develop empathy, compassion, wisdom and self-discipline without subjecting our relationships to a long learning curve. (*A Thomas Jefferson Education*, ~ Oliver DeMille, p. 62)

**The Classics Bring Us Face-to-Face with Greatness**

The purpose of studying literature is to *become* better human beings. First, as we read we experience despair, heartache, tragedy-and we learn to recognize what causes them and avoid those experiences in our own lives. As we study the characters, real or fictional, in the classics, we are inspired by greatness, which is the first step to becoming great ourselves. *Who we are* changes as we set higher and higher standards of what life is about and what we are here to accomplish. (*A Thomas Jefferson Education*, ~ Oliver DeMille, p. 63)

**The Classics Take us to the Frontier to be Conquered**

All generations before this one have had geographical frontiers to conquer. We don’t. And without a frontier we cannot become what the founders, the explorers and the pioneers became in their extremities. Our challenges define us, our reactions to them mold and shape us.

Human beings need a frontier in order to progress. Fortunately, we do have one frontier left, and it is in fact the hardest one. It is the frontier within. In all of history, this frontier has not been fully conquered. The most challenging struggles of life are internal. We as a world are lousy at relationships-and the classics can help.

The classics deal with the real questions of life, our deepest concerns: joy, pain, fear, love, hate, courage, anger, death, faith. These issues are reality; they are eternal and more lasting than jobs, careers, school, material things.

In the classics, we can often experience other people’s character more powerfully than in real life because the author lets us see their thoughts, feelings and reasons for and consequences of their choices (which we hardly ever see in others, and often not even in ourselves). Our goal in life is to become truly good, really happy. The classics help us see that quest in others and how their choices fail or succeed. A by-product of this rapport is the erasure of prejudices and ill-founded biases that divide and factionalize us form others. Classics help us connect with individuals whatever their race, creed, age, culture and even place in history.

Modernity has come to mean ignoring what is important because we are too busy with what is immediate. The classics are a remedy and can be a cure. They force us to turn off the TV, DVD and computer, to quietly study for hours and hours-reading, pondering, thinking, asking, crying, laughing, struggling, and above all, feeling, changing, becoming. And then, because we are better, we must go out and serve. (*A Thomas Jefferson Education*, ~ Oliver DeMille, p. 63-64)

**The Classics Force Us to Think**

First, when reading good books, we are caused to think about the characters in the story, then about ourselves, then about people we know and finally about humanity in general. At first reading the classics can be a chore, an assignment. If we persist, it eventually becomes entertainment. Then one-day (after a few weeks for some, perhaps years for another) something clicks; all the exposure to greatness reaches critical mass and you the reader, awaken. Your exposure to greatness changes you. Your ideas are bigger, your dreams wilder, your plans more challenging, your faith more powerful.

The classics can be demanding work, and that is exactly what is needed to learn to think. Thinking is hard; deep thinking is not entertaining or easy. Thinking is like exercise, it requires consistency and rigor. Like barbells in a weightlifting room, the classics force us to either put them down or exert our minds. They require us to *think*. And not just in a rote memory way. The classics make us struggle, search, ponder, seek, analyze, discover, decide, and reconsider. And, as with physical exercises, the exertion leads to pleasing result as we metamorphose and experience the pleasure of doing something wholesome and difficult that changes us for the better. (*A Thomas Jefferson Education*, ~ Oliver DeMille, p. 64-65)

**Summary**

A classic work must address matters of universal human concern, have something to say about the human condition, identifying fundamental human problems and providing some sort of guidance for dealing with them. They touch on big themes of life like love loss, justice, social classes, race, sexual politics, etc. in a way that resonates for years to come. A classic must address these fundamental issues in ‘beautiful, moving, and memorable ways,’ with ‘stimulating and inviting images.’ It must be complex, nuanced, comprehensive, and profound, requiring careful and repeated study in order to yield its deepest secrets and greatest wisdom. They must have characters with complexity, layers revealing surprising facets or a relationship to the plot that is unexpected and not commonplace, while also addressing the philosophical questions used to investigate the vicissitudes (usually unwelcome changes of circumstances or fortune) of humanity. One might add that precisely because of these characteristics, a classic has great staying power across both time and space. Classics are wroth rereading and the rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading. A classic never finished saying what it has to say. They stand the test of time. They have relevance and meaning that can outlast any fashion of the time and thus, remain in one’s mind. It is exemplary or noteworthy. It is worth giving to others and worth passing on to your children. Classics shift people’s views of views of life and they influence subsequent works.