



Classics Are for Kids

Joy Hakim

You've heard the sad news: Our children are culturally illiterate. Well, I'm here to tell a different tale. I plan to take you to a multi-ethnic public school where nine-year-olds are reading important books, writing eloquently, and arguing with sophisticated reason.

And to another school in a crime-besotted city where fifth and sixth graders read Homer, write epic poems, and delve into archaeology, architecture, and etymology. This public school is 92 percent black.

But I am not writing about black and white. I am writing about children experiencing the joy of intellectual discovery. Children too busy to be problems. Children who are receiving a gift no one can take from them.

These children are learning from some of the world's greatest teachers: Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Plato for starters. Some are brilliant children; most are not. They are ordinary kids and, like the rest of us, eager to learn—unless the lessons are patronizing.

"Patronizing" is the word for those tales in the common basal readers we have all come to abhor. "Exciting" is what children say of classic myths and stories of adventure. We used to teach those myths and stories to all our children. They were a part of our common heritage. They gave us cultural roots. Why did we stop teaching them?

It happened in the twenties, for what seemed to be good reasons. We were becoming a technological nation. We thought we needed to study the

concrete and practical. So we did something no society has done before: We threw out our heritage. We stopped teaching our children the myths and fairy tales and great writings of our past. It was a sad mistake. We replaced wisdom with facts. But, now, in a small but fast-growing movement, elementary school teachers are returning to classic texts. If what I have seen is typical, the results are astounding.

In Chicago, I listen as Mary Tracy Sigman tells kindergarten children a tale from Egyptian mythology. A substantive tale. A story of an eloquent peasant and a nasty official. A story of the triumph of good over evil, of justice over injustice. The five-year-olds have no problem understanding the issues.

"Does anyone know what a peasant is?" Sigman asks.

"An animal that crawls around the sea," eager C.J. opines.

The teacher—who is herself a student of the classics—leads them to an understanding of the words "eloquent" and "peasant."

"Was it important for the poor farmer to use beautiful words?"

"Yes," says Michael. "The king heard him."

"Does anyone know what justice is?" Sigman asks.

"Justice is fair," says Ulanda.

"Was it easy for the farmer to get justice? Did he give up?"

"No," Eric answers. "He went to court."

The class hears that C.J.'s aunt had her purse stolen. She went to court.

Now, Sigman springs a big question. "Whom do we know who used beautiful words, who spoke out for justice and who never gave up?"

"Martin Luther King!" These five-year-olds make an intellectual leap from ancient Egypt to contemporary America. No big deal. They seem to do this kind of thing all the time.

In Washington, DC's Shepherd Park Elementary School, I ask eleven-year-old Alison Harris why children should study the classics. "It helps us understand humanity," she says. Alison wants to be an archaeologist. I suggest she become a poet—after reading the first two stanzas of her epic.

Sing in me, muse,

And let me tell

Of the warrior

The world knows well:

Achilles.

The most godlike of mortals

The greatest of Greek men,

The best of all warriors,

Who is as famous now as then:

Achilles.

The children at Shepherd Park are predominantly black and middle class. This city school is in a neighborhood of fine homes and clipped lawns. Not so Chicago's Goldblatt Elementary, where 95 percent of the students live at or below the poverty level.

A seminar is in process at Goldblatt. The fourth graders have read an African myth called "The Serpent's Bride." Steven Werlin, a graduate student at Loyola University who has spent two years teaching in rural schools in Alabama, is conducting an inservice training session for new teachers. They are observing this class. In the story, a snake—king of the river—will wed a beautiful girl. The snake has made the girl promise not to fear him.

"Should she have made that promise?" Werlin asks.

"Yes," says Leon, noting that the snake gave her water when she needed it.

"I disagree with Leon," says Dwayne. "I can't never make a promise like that to nobody."

That starts it. There is a chorus of comments from snake-haters and others who see the foolishness of making a promise you can't keep. Some read from the text—as they have been trained to do—to support their ideas. They all—politely—disagree with Leon.

Some of these children carry a heavy ghetto burden: They speak in monosyllables. They don't know what it means to be articulate. And yet here they are—arguing with words—in a way that is spontaneous and passionate, as good conversation is meant to be. They are caught up in the story and don't want to stop.

Leon is thinking. He has heard every word of the argument. He can hold back no longer. "I disagree with 'myself,'" he says, an ear-to-ear grin spreading across his face.

A school poster displays these words:

Socrates:

Let us examine this question together, my friend, and if you contradict anything that I say, do so, and I shall be persuaded.

Crito—Plato

Upstairs, the boys and girls in a fifth grade at Goldblatt have read a portion of Plato's Republic. I enter near the end of a discussion. They are talking of a man with a ring that makes him invisible. What would a good man do with that ring? What would a bad man do?

Belinda, Devin, and Robert use the words "justice," "virtue," "goodness," and "wisdom." These children have had much experience in seminars. Their teacher, Paula Walker-Nevels, is skilled, it is obvious. Their desks form a big open square, they talk face to face.

I ask a question: Is Plato relevant today? They look at me incredulously.

"We need justice today," says Patizza.

But what do they really think of Plato, I want to know.

"It has sort of hard words."

"You have to read it a couple of times to understand it."

"I read it over and over again. Three or four times."

"You have to think about it a lot."

It is clear that they did read and think about Plato a lot.

In Pittsburgh, David Baumbach's students work with an artist-in-residence fashioning 10' long wall hangings to illustrate the folk tales and myths they read. Of the classics, Baumbach says, "It is material that is very easy to teach. Children recognize quality. They love the stories. And they teach good values: Brain usually triumphs over brawn."

Baumbach helped write a classroom simulation that takes children on an adventure with Aeneas. The simulation was published in *Prima*—the journal of the Elementary Teachers of the Classics, a professional organization to support teachers who wish to teach classical literature and civilization.

Visit any of these classes and you will be struck by the oral reading. It is part of the classical tradition. Homer was sung. The myths were meant to be told. Some teachers do choral readings—they call them "raps." In older days, before TV, reading aloud used to be a pleasurable, and regular, activity in American homes and schools.

There's something else important about this story. Maybe I should have put it at the beginning. Maybe it should have been the main theme. The classics speak to teachers, too. Well, of course, they wouldn't be classics if they didn't. Everyone knows that.

Everyone doesn't know that. Search your heart. What happens when you think of classical literature? Guilt? Classics are those books you know you should read but never seem to find time for. And, besides, if truth be told, aren't they dull?

Ask Berrice K. Jefferis—who teaches fourth grade just outside of Cleveland, Ohio—if the classics are dull. Jefferis applied for a grant a few

years ago that allowed her to spend a month, with forty other elementary school teachers, studying Virgil. That grant, she says, "changed my life."

It proved to her that she could think—really think—which was exactly what it was meant to do.

But let's go back in time, if not quite to Homer, at least to 1982. That was when Joseph F. O'Connor, a Georgetown University professor of Latin and classical literature, wrote a proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

What he proposed was a summer seminar for elementary school teachers. It would be called "The Odyssey Institute." Teachers would study Homer and classical civilization in a rigorous academic environment.

When he wrote the proposal, O'Connor had two children of his own in elementary school. He saw the need for stronger content in the elementary curriculum. "You can't do better than the classics," says O'Connor. "The world of the ancients is especially pertinent in our pluralistic society," O'Connor added. "That Mediterranean culture touched three continents."

Three hundred and sixty teachers applied to be Odyssey fellows. Sixty were chosen. O'Connor put together a distinguished faculty and worked the fellows hard—like Trojans, in fact. He followed the institute with visits to participants' schools. He wanted to see how the fellows applied their learning. He saw—in a town of a thousand people—three hundred participants in a school-sponsored Greek and Roman festival. In another town he watched Odyssey games—patterned after the Olympics. In a classroom in Delaware, he laughed at a videotaped parody of the Odyssey called "The Idiocy." In a Michigan classroom, children had built a stone-age cave "complete with tools and foods," miniature dwellings from American ancient cultures, and Egyptian and Greek trading and military vessels. In the state of Washington, a teacher wrote a "big book" edition of stories from the Odyssey for first and second graders to read. Everywhere Joe O'Connor went he felt the impact of the project. "Where an imaginative teacher presented some aspect of classical material, the response of the children was stunning." It was the response of the teachers, however, that remains with him most vividly.

"It gave them a new concept of themselves. The system sees elementary teachers as the least educated in the academic world. The community says, 'If they were intellectual, they would have become university professors.'" Their training just reinforces that. They are trained in technique, not content.

PRIMA

"At first many were hesitant and unsure. We gave them substantial intellectual content. What we saw was a surge of confidence. It changed their perception of themselves."

The Odyssey Institute was followed by the Aeneid Institute, held at Miami University in 1986. (Miami, in Oxford, Ohio, was once home to William McGuffey, of the famous McGuffey Readers, books laden with classical stories.) Robert and Michelle Wilhelm—classics professors (who happen to be married to each other)—ran the Aeneid Institute. It, too, combined a faculty of top classicists, carefully chosen elementary school teachers, and tough, graduate-level academic work.

Driving to Oxford for that session, Bernice Jefferis was terrified. "I had recently lost my husband, I didn't think I could do the work, I actually thought about turning back. As soon as I got involved in the studies, I felt more alive than I had ever felt before."

Jefferis brought her enthusiasm—and Virgil—back to her fourth grade at the Coventry School in Cleveland Heights. She soon had several of her fellow teachers equally excited.

Myra Winograd, in an adjacent pod in the open plan school, started teaching Homer to fifth graders. Librarian Susan Charнас began reading Greek myths aloud. "All I can tell you is that many contemporary books stay on the shelves. Children love these stories," says Charнас.

Tall, soft-voiced Terry McGarry, another fourth-grade teacher at Coventry, attended the Mythology Institute at Miami University the summer of 1989. The institute focused on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its retelling of Greek and Roman tales. "I had never read the classics," says McGarry. "What I got at that summer session was more intellectual and better than anything I had experienced at college. It was much more applicable to teaching than reading methods classes. As far as personal satisfaction, it was much greater. It was the kind of experience I had been searching for but had never found."

Baumbach and Jefferis served as faculty members at the Mythology Institute. They functioned as master teachers, providing a bridge between the professorial lectures and the practical world of the elementary school classroom. Both Baumbach and Jefferis received the same salary as the professors.

Elizabeth Fashingbauer is master teacher for "The Great Conversation," a sophisticated fifteen-week college course dealing with the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. It was conceived by members

of a consortium that includes Chicago State University, the Northeastern Illinois Center for Inner-City Studies, and the University of Chicago; it is funded by the NEH. I attend a session and hear University of Chicago professor John Brinkman talk of "Gilgamesh," an epic poem that describes a heroic king who lived in the time between Noah and Abraham; a poem that tells the story of a great flood. The author of Gilgamesh was writing of a dimly remembered historic time, as was Homer when he told of Achilles and Odysseus. The Epic of Gilgamesh was 1,500 years old when Homer sang his great songs. "These teachers are hearing the world's top authorities in their fields," says William Lowe, Chicago State dean, who helped put this class together.

Gilgamesh is King of Uruk. The walls of the city-state of Uruk are famous. "This is the story of the guy who built the wall. The wall is his immortality," says Brinkman. "The poem was meant to be sung. Literacy was very limited. It's ideal for oral presentation."

Mary Tracy Sigman, kindergarten teacher at Kilmer Elementary, has told her small students the story of Gilgamesh. "I never would have attempted it without this class."

None of these teachers seems able to limit his or her teaching to mythology, or Homer, or Virgil. One thing kind of leads to another, which means they allow the Greek and Roman civilizations to take them in directions they find stimulating. Joe O'Connor doesn't think that is surprising. "Elementary teachers have an affinity for interdisciplinary approaches," he says. "So do classicists."

Linda Buzzard, in Chelsea, Alabama, teaches a unit on geography and urban planning. "We study aqueducts. The children marvel to find them still in place with technology adequate for today. Our students create cities. They even make their own household deities. We talk about phrases like 'All roads lead to Rome' or 'When in Rome do as the Romans.'"

Fifth graders in Scarborough, Maine, study Greek architecture and the physics of design with Mary Jo Kelley. Describing their reaction to the Parthenon, she said they "developed new ideas about architecture and its role in expressing the personality of a culture." Her students built a scale model of the temple of Athena Nike in Athens.

Some teachers have found the classics on their own. Josephine Baker, who teaches a fifth-sixth-grade class at Shepherd Park Elementary, began studying mythology "on my own initiative because it was so much fun for me and the children."

She then became a participant in a two-year university-sponsored enrichment project that paired great works of literature: Homer's *Odyssey* with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*—for starters.

You get going on this learning process and there is no end to it. Baker applied for a professional development grant, from the Cafritz Foundation, and that paid for a trip to Greece and Italy. (Her slides get hauled out regularly.) Next she went to the McAuliffe Foundation for a grant to develop a humanities curriculum for grades four, five, and six. Students in those three grades at Shepherd now delve into the civilizations and stories of the Sumerians, Greeks, Roman, Egyptians, Africans, Incas, and Mayas. All this is done in an across-the-disciplines fashion to include music, history, geography, language, and more.

One of Baker's students, Chris Carroll, a lad of eleven, tells me of a twenty-page report he wrote on the labors of Hercules. I notice a large, detailed poster of his mounted on the wall outside his classroom. Chris was a member of a team that wrote a prize-winning skit about ancient Greek heroes.

"We had a restaurant called Medusa's, where we served snake fries and stoneburgers," he recalled.

Likemost of the teachers I visited, Baker uses basal readers only to teach skills. Her room is filled with "real" books—classics of the ancient and modern worlds. Books paid for by parents, by parent fundraisers, and with foundation money.

There are no basal readers at all at the Marion W. Cross Public School in Norwich, Vermont. "We are an all-literature school," says David H. Millstone.

The shades are drawn in his fifth-grade classroom. Children huddle together on the floor; light comes from candles. A professional storyteller, a guitar on his lap, begins the story of *Odysseus* ... "and of his wars and wanderings." For the next six days these boys and girls will hear the *Odyssey* told and sung—as in ancient days. Each storytelling session will be followed by a "debriefing." Millstone will write names and words on the chalkboard. Characters and places will be identified, talked about. While this is going on, a shortened version of the same tale will be told to children in the first grade. Soon a collaboration will begin. Each first grader will become a storyteller. Each will be paired with a fifth grader. The first-grade child will recite a part of *Odysseus'* story; the fifth grader will be a scribe. They will have editorial conferences; they will write, and rewrite, until the

younger child is pleased with his story and it can be printed neatly, illustrated, and hung. Then the stories will be read aloud and praised.

Meanwhile, the fifth graders are preparing their own versions of the *Odyssey*. They will listen to the tale on tape, read it over and again, and compare translations. And then—and this isn't easy for ten-year-olds—they will become storytellers and go to the first grade and stand up before all those small children and tell the tale themselves.

"The oral approach brings acclaim to some children who don't normally shine," says Millstone.

But doesn't it get a bit boring, hearing that same story again and again? Remember when you were a child, if the story was good, did you want to hear it again? "No, they don't get bored," Millstone answers.

What they do always ask, he says, is if the *Odyssey* is true. And that leads to a whole lot of questions.

Like what is truth? Could myths be society's way of searching for ultimate truths? Just what do we mean by myths? What are some scientific ways of finding out about the past? What is archaeology? What is anthropology? Was there a Troy? How do we know?

David Millstone's students spend about six months on their quest. During that time they delve into books, produce a Greek play, study history and geography, learn a lot about the Greek roots of English words, and do much writing and public speaking.

How do these teachers turn a classroom into a Roman forum or a Greek polis—as some do—teach classic stories, teach some Latin and Greek words, and also satisfy basic curriculum requirements?

"The required curriculum is so dull and easy we can handle it in a daily half-hour session," said one teacher, who describes herself as a professional—"skilled as any surgeon"—and quite capable of making decisions for her classroom. She has devised her own interdisciplinary, classics-oriented curriculum.

Are you having a problem with all this? How do you even begin to teach the classics? Suppose a teacher has no chance of attending an *Odyssey* Institute.

Millstone and the other teachers say—because children respond to the stories so avidly—that they are easy to teach. Classic stories and books on

ancient cultures can be found in editions suitable for elementary school children. There is considerable help available for interested teachers, and a fair number of foundations seem eager to fund this kind of activity. Hovering like a good angel over the whole scene is the NEH. That agency continues to encourage college and university programs. It also sponsors Masterworks grants—funds given to groups of teachers who set up their own programs in conjunction with local universities. (In St. Louis, teachers have organized a seminar to study the *Odyssey* with a local college professor.) The Council for Basic Education gives individual grants to teachers who plan study programs.

Goldblatt Elementary and Kilmer Elementary (where Mary Tracy Sigman leads her remarkable kindergarten discussions) are Paideia Schools. The Paideia Institute—headquartered in Chapel Hill, North Carolina—has been a pioneer in the movement to return good books to classrooms. Many Paideia teachers have studied classics texts at St. John's College campuses in Santa Fe and Annapolis.

You may be thinking that this is a good idea at a few select schools but, after all, aren't classical studies elitist? Yes. And that is the very reason the classics need to be taught to all our children. It offers them a chance to join the intellectually elite.

At a conference entitled "Teaching the Ancient World," Sharon Quinn Katz of the NEH addressed the issue. "Our job as American educators is to steal that heritage [the culture of Plato and Cicero] from the world of privilege," said Katz, "and by so doing to rob privilege of one of the sources of its power, which is collective learning. As classicists and educators, our job is to train students, to the extent of their ability ... to be citizens in a democracy and also, in mind and spirit, aristocrats."

Mark Morford, a classics professor at the University of Virginia, says, "Studying the classics does good things for people. It improves one's knowledge of English ... It raises SAT scores. It helps make people upwardly mobile. Besides, it's enjoyable."

Here is what some other experts say:

Katherine Patterson, whose books are considered contemporary classics, writes in *The Spying Heart*: "Myths and fairy tales deal directly with archetypes, and there is a very real place for them, especially as they help children to map the dark regions of their souls, to face and conquer their inner dragons. We cannot, we must not, deprive children of these powerful

images. Without them, not only do art and literature lose their power, but the soul itself stands ravaged and windowless like a vandalized cathedral."

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim says: "The idea that learning to read may enable one later to enrich one's life is experienced as an empty promise when the stories the child listens to or is reading at the moment are vacuous."

Joe O'Connor sees classical humanities "not as enrichment for a few but as a basic feature of both the social studies and the language arts curriculum."

"We have come quite a distance," says O'Connor, "from the time when we wondered if perhaps this content area might belong among the elective enrichment subjects, perhaps restricted to special programs for the gifted, to the point where it is clear ... that it is serviceable and important as a major content area ... within the elementary program."

And, a final word from yet another expert:

Thomas Jefferson, who knew a thing or two about education, wrote his friend Joseph Priestly in 1800. He was talking about the classical authors.

"I thank on my knees him who directed my early education for having put into my possession this rich source of delight; and I would not exchange it for anything ..."

To Begin Your Odyssey:

The Elementary Teachers of Classics, a 3,500-member group associated with the American Classical League, offers the following:

- a biannual journal, *Prima*, that includes scholarly articles; instructional materials, including lesson outlines and classroom simulation; book reviews; and audiovisual materials related to the use of classics in the elementary curriculum.
- Classics Clubs, through which enrolled teachers receive classroom materials four times a year. Examples: maps outlining the heroic journeys of Aeneas and Odysseus; creative writing projects on specific myths such as Jason, Orpheus, and Achilles; suggestions for board games such as "Myth Concentration"; bulletin board materials; construction projects; and suggestions for study corners.

- the National Mythology Exam, taken this year by more than 3,500 elementary students. All students get Mythology Ribbons, top-place winners get medals.
- the Teaching Materials and Resource Center, from which you can purchase such items as slides of Pompeii, Rome and Athens; collections of learning activities; and twenty-four award-winning Greek mythology posters.

Contact ETC, The American Classical League, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056.

The National Endowment for the Humanities offers:

- Masterworks Grants, for which groups of teachers can apply to fund humanities studies in an area of their own choosing.
- Summer Institutes for teachers on such subjects as Virgil or The Iliad. Some are specifically geared to elementary teachers.

Write: Division of Education Programs, NEH, Room 302-FT, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., Washington, DC 20506 or call (202) 786-0377.

Classical Calliope, an ancient history magazine for children aged nine to fifteen, published five times a year. Subscriptions are \$15.95. Write to Cobblestone Publishing, 30 Grove St., Peterborough, NH 03458.

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