

A study of the great classics of English literature is absolutely essential for a true education. The English classics have played a key role in teaching individual virtue and for laying foundations for western civilisation.

### Character Shaping

Reading the works of William Shakespeare, John Milton, Jane Austen and Charles Dickens helps us exercise our minds and enrich our experiences. Great Christian literature enables us to recognise truths, appreciate beauty and admire what is virtuous. The literary classics include drama that purges our minds, with breathtaking intensity, heartbreaking pathos and poetry that makes us hunger and thirst after virtue and courage.

Good literature enables us to recognise what is truly beautiful and honourable. It helps shape our character by teaching us to despise what is dishonourable, to love what is noble and to aspire to higher standards in our own lives.

In his 1950 Nobel Literature Award acceptance speech, William Faulkner described the primary duty of authors to remind men of the courage and honour and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.

The study of great works of literature have always been considered foundational in education.

### Under Attack

Unfortunately, like every other aspect of western civilisation, English literature is under relentless assault today. In all too many universities, English professors seem to be teaching almost anything and everything but classic English literature. Many who have enrolled in English classes at university have found themselves studying Marxist theory, an investigation of pornography through the ages, the gender theories of Freud, Latin culture, feminist theories, deconstructionism, lesbianism, misogyny, tirades against racism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, and a bewildering array of other radical post-modern political agendas.

Many politically correct professors in English departments so despise and fear western civilisation that those enrolling to learn more of English literature are more likely to find themselves assailed with bankrupt ideologies than to be exposed to some of the greatest literature in western civilisation.

### Back to the Sources

Instead of subjecting oneself to anti-Christian indoctrination in so called English departments of some universities, students would immeasurably enrich their experience and their education by going directly to the works of Dickens, Austen, Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Waugh, Blake, Chaucer, Mallory, and other greats of English literature.

### The Value of English Literature

English literature teaches appreciation for military valour, chastity and integrity. Self-criticism and the Christian Faith are at the heart of English literature. Beauty and ugliness in our characters are exposed, along with the capacities, for good and evil, of the human mind and heart. Skill is admired, achievement is extolled, the disastrous consequences of laziness, cowardice and foolishness are laid out. There are an infinite variety of wonderful life-changing lessons to be learnt from English literature.

## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare's plays have universal appeal because of his intuitive understanding of human nature. Shakespeare's plays reflect the world as it is. Shakespeare evidences a comprehensive, accurate and deep perception of the nature of things, especially of human nature.

### Insightful

Shakespeare's plays are delightful, breathtaking, real and natural. He gives us characters who show us more about what human beings really are. When you see a Shakespeare play, you recognise the characters, you know them from your own experience, although his insights enable us to understand these characters better than ever before.

### Hamlet

Hamlet is

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much more than a depressed and confused young man. He is self-conscious, sensitive to the moral failings of his elders, keenly aware of the implications of everyone's actions, but tragically unwilling to shoulder responsibility and to gain control over events.

### Richard III

Richard III is a wicked king who resents other people's happiness, and plots to ruin them for his own advantage. He is an outrageous villain whose schemes succeed for a time, but then unravel completely.

### Defining the Issues

Shakespeare's plays enable us to understand human nature, human history, and the things that human beings think about, in a clearer way than any other playwright has succeeded in doing. Shakespeare's characters look at things from many different angles. They do not merely consider the issues, they define them. His plays are full of famous speeches which get to the heart of an issue.

### Death

Each play seems to explore a major issue. For example *Hamlet* considers death from every angle. Why we long for death. Why we fear it. What it does to our bodies. What it does to our souls. What we know about death. It's mysteries. The many ways that there are to die. The many reasons for dying. *Hamlet* includes a girl who goes mad and kills herself. A rash young man who throws his life away in a duel over his sister's honour. A scheming courtier who is killed as he eavesdrops. College friends who betray their schoolmate and conspire to kill him, only to fall into their own trap. A fratricide who is racked by guilt but cannot bring himself to give up his brother's wife and his brother's kingdom. *Hamlet's* famous *To be or not to be* speech, and numerous poisonings, both purposeful and by accident, are also in this play.

### Success

*Henry V* considers every aspect of kingship and success. *Small time, but in that small most greatly lived/this star of England: fortune made his sword; by which the world's best garden he achieved* What is a king? What are the qualities that make for greatness? How many parts generosity, courage, leadership and humility? How many parts ruthlessness? What are the costs? Are not even the heaviest costs worth these great achievements?

### Wealth

*The Merchant of Venice* concerns wealth. Every person and incident in the play seems to have something to do with money. Antonio, a merchant who has grown rich by risky ventures in trade. Shylock, a Jew who lives by lending money at interest and hoards coins and jewels at home. Shylock's daughter, who elopes, taking large amounts of his wealth with her, wasting it prodically. There are two marriages which are made, at least partly, for money. Portia, an heiress whose father's will specifies that she be awarded to the man who guesses rightly among three treasure chests. Bassanio, a charming young man with large debts, promising, handsome, spendthrift, disingenuous, careless, who dares to ask his friend (from whom he has already borrowed money he cannot pay back), for a large and very risky loan. There's a lawsuit over a defaulted loan in which the money lender claims the right to cut a pound of flesh from the merchant's chest. The play includes much poetry concerning wealth and treasure, where it comes from, where it goes and what it means to men and women and to their relationships.

### Understanding Human Experience

Such themes are the bones and muscles underneath the surface of the drama in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare was an expert in the common fundamental laws of our nature and he plainly drew his plays from the actual structure of human experience. Shakespeare prods and pokes at reality. He throws characters, events and ideas together and makes them combine in every possible way. He shows how ambition tends to work differently in men and women. He

exposes the ugliness of human greed, lust, violence, envy and betrayal.

### Macbeth

Macbeth exposes what unbridled selfish ambition can do to human beings. Macbeth becomes a progressively more paranoid and isolated murderer. Lady Macbeth, who is all strength, confidence and resolve when she provoking Macbeth to commit the initial murder, cracks under the weight of the responsibility once the deed is done. The tyrant's crimes set in motion destructive forces that will ultimately overwhelm him.

### Jealousy

Othello is focused on jealousy. Othello's ensign, Iago, envious of Othello's Lieutenant Cassio deceives Othello into murdering his faithful wife, Desdemona, by persuading Othello that she's been unfaithful with Cassio. The play revolves around the nature and effects of jealousy

the green eyed monster which doth consume the meat it feeds on.

### King Lear

King Lear is a profound play set in the remote past of pre-Christian Britain. King Lear abdicated his kingdom to his two daughters, Goneril and Regan who feed his appetite for affection with extravagant and insincere and speeches. When they turn on him and reduce him to being a homeless wanderer in the wind and rain, he finds support from his third daughter, Cordelia, whom he had disinherited because of her failure to flatter like her treacherous sisters. The tragedy of King Lear centres on being deceived by insincerity and the failure of the most basic natural relationship between parent and child.

### Choices

Shakespeare's tragedies show that some choices are inherently destructive. It is no wonder that Shakespeare is so shunned and slandered by many liberal professors. Shakespeare repeatedly exposes the wickedness of fornication and adultery, the importance of pre-marital virginity, the shame of unfaithfulness, and the foundational importance of Christian marriage and obeying the Laws of God.

## JOHN MILTON

One of the greatest English poets, John Milton, was a dedicated Evangelical Christian. Milton was one of the most learned writers of literature. He studied for seven years at Cambridge University, and then completed six years of postgraduate studies, becoming fluent in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Italian. He knew all the great literature in each of those languages, and studied Philosophy, Theology, Maths, Music, History and Science. He travelled throughout Europe and met many of the great minds of his time. During the English Civil War Milton was a leader of the Puritan Forces fighting for Parliament. John Milton served as Secretary for Foreign Tongues under General Oliver Cromwell.

### Temptation

John Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. To Milton, the most important events of history were the events of the Bible. The central drama of human life was temptation. The highest form of heroism was patient resistance to temptation.

*Comus*, a play written by Milton centres around the temptation of *The Lady*, a 15 year-old daughter of an Earl. *Comus* exalts temperance and chastity as essential for our safety and happiness. We fall by giving in to temptation, but we rise by resisting it.

### Personal Heroism

Despite personal tragedy in his own life, losing his sight by his mid-forties, and being disgraced and impoverished by the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II, Milton epitomised the heroic ideal by patient endurance of affliction and unjust abuse. As he wrote: *Who best bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best*

### Paradise Lost

The opening lines of *Paradise Lost* declare:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree,  
whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of

Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us, and regain the blissful state

### The Degrading Doom of Disobedience

Milton's works show how obedience to God can be heroic and liberating. He exposes the ultimate folly of giving in to temptation. Milton shows that disobedience, that begins by looking so attractive, is ultimately selfish, squalid, degrading and doomed.

### Paradise Regained

Just as in *Paradise Lost* he focused on the Fall of Adam and Eve, in *Paradise Regained* Milton focuses on Christ's victory over temptation in the desert, and His triumph over sin and Satan.

### Freedom of Expression

Even when a key leader of the victorious parliamentary forces, John Milton championed the freedom of the press. It is a fact of history that freedom of speech and freedom of the press were not invented by the Enlightenment rationalists, but rather by the Puritan Christians of the English Protectorate.

Milton argued for a wide liberty to publish opinions, even erroneous ones! When the Puritan Parliament was triumphant over all its enemies, John Milton addressed the Members of the House to urge them to decide for free speech: "in the midst of your victories and successes." To Milton truth is so important that we cannot afford to miss the opportunity to learn from some piece of it that may never see the light of day under the restrictions of government censorship.

### Seeking Truth

Anyone who thinks that the work of Reformation is complete, betrays that he is still very short of the whole truth. Censorship would hinder the work of truth seekers. Milton explained that it is our duty to sift through different opinions, to test them, to find what is right. "All opinions, yea errors, learned, read and collated, are of main service and assistance toward the speedy attainment of what is truest." Even "bad books" may be useful to the truth seeker, to the "discreet and judicious reader." Milton taught that even errors can be used to "confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate."

### A Champion for Freedom

We live in a world where good and evil "grow up together almost inseparably" because God wants human beings to be free. "For God sure esteems the growth and completing of one virtuous person more than the restraint of ten vicious." As a champion of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of the press, and as an unparalleled poet, John Milton, and his epics *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, testifies against the danger of societies exiling religious Truth from the public square.

## JANE AUSTEN

Jane Austen is widely recognised as one of the greatest English writers of all time. No other writer is so often compared to Shakespeare. Jane Austen has been described as: "The most perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal" and "the greatest female writer in English."

### A Literary Genius

Despite the fact that Jane Austen spent her whole life financially dependant on her father and brothers, sharing a room with her sister Cassandra, and writing her novels in the general sitting room, subject to every kind of interruption, Jane Austen was a genius whose novels present some of the most insightful commentaries on society, and the most extraordinary understanding of human character.

### A Feminist's Nightmare

It is understandable why many "politically correct" radicals would want to distort, or ignore, Austen's literary contributions, because Jane Austen is so obviously a conservative Christian whose novels celebrate marriage and patriarchal society.

### Dereliction of Duty

Jane Austen's novels encourage men to take charge. The male tendency to not take responsibility, to keep their options open, and not to get involved, is what makes young

men so dangerous. The villains in Jane Austen's novels are generally the men who don't stick around. The male tendency to avoid, or weasel out of, commitment creates havoc.

### Psychology and Sin

Jane Austen recognises the stubborn realities of male and female psychology. She takes her religion very seriously, and finds it completely natural that men and women should occupy gender specific roles. She accepted that human misery is caused, not by traditional societal rules and structures, but by individual sin.

### Identifying the Root Issues

Flying in the face of feminist rhetoric and egalitarian theory, Jane Austen's novels portray the failure of female self-control on one hand, and male abdication of their proper responsibilities on the other, as among the chief causes of people's unhappiness. Her novels celebrate old-fashioned marriage, in which a woman can expect to be guided and protected by her husband, and to be responsible for the management of a household and the nurture of her children as her most intense sources of fulfillment.

### Humour and Hypocrisy

Jane Austen happily pokes fun at every kind of superficiality, pretense and hypocrisy. Her novels are full of women who are too free with their tongues, such as the embarrassing vulgar Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Mrs Bennet's gossip about her eldest daughter's success with the rich young man determines that man's friend to get his friend out of the neighbourhood and nearly break her daughter's heart.

Numerous female characters' habits of selfish whining make their families miserable and cause untold suffering. Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* so violates accepted social customs and good sense, that she ends up dependent on relatives and friends needing to bribe her seducer to marry her.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* is a rich widow clearly spoiled by too much money. Elizabeth found that nothing was beneath this great lady's attention, which could furnish her with an occasion for dictating to others.

### Emma

Emma Woodhouse, although handsome, clever and rich and only 21 years old, is spoiled, not only because of money and good looks, but because her affectionate, indulgent father is a hypochondriac who doesn't have the energy to give her the guidance and direction she so clearly needs. Emma is in some danger of ending up as an interfering, bossy old dragon like Lady Catherine de Bourgh as she amuses herself with matchmaking. Because Emma is blessed with more than most young woman could possibly want, (more intelligence, more freedom, more money, more good looks, and without the needed constraints from her parents), she is always used to getting her own way and mercilessly interferes in other people's lives. Emma chooses to adopt Harriet Smith to manipulate, rather than Jane Fairfax, who is of Emma's own class, because Jane is just as intelligent as Emma, and much more accomplished. Jane reminds Emma of her own few faults, whereas Harriet gives Emma endless opportunity to indulge herself in condescension, and advice, and to bask in Harriet's uncritical gratitude. Emma falls to the temptation to enjoy Harriet's blind flattery rather than make the effort to live up to a real friendship with a girl who's her equal. Laziness and pride almost destroy Emma.

### Spoiled Men

There are many spoiled men in Jane Austen's novels too. These men are not the feminist villains of those who attempt to dominate women. Jane Austen's male villains are those who shirk their responsibilities, don't involve themselves, and fail to take charge. Mr Elton humiliates Harriet Smith in public in order to please his vulgar new bride. John Dashwood allows his selfish wife to persuade him to break his promise to his dying father to take care of his sisters. Mr Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* fails to be an effective father, retreating into his library, and his sardonic sense of humour, to escape his ridiculous interfering

wife and the daughters she lets run wild. Mr Woodhouse is so weak that it doesn't even occur to him that he has a duty to guide Emma.

Sir Thomas Bertram of *Mansfield Park* is a strict parent, but he fails to adequately interfere to the extent of teaching his daughters the necessity of self-denial and humility. Most seriously, he allows his daughter Maria to marry a worthless man whom he knows does not love her, just because he's reluctant to scrutinize her motives too closely.

Jane Austen exposes the tendency of men to fail to take responsibility, and in each of her novels there's at least one man who pays a woman the kind of attention that he shouldn't unless his intentions were serious which in these cases they were not.

**Traditional Family Values**

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood, seriously hurt by her experience with passionate Rousseauian naturalism finds refuge in religious principles, conventional standards and traditional family values. She marries with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship settling for much less than she had once hoped for. However, having seen where her blindness to the cold, hard facts of human nature had almost taken her, she recognises how much worse it could have been. Such as in the case of the already seduced, pregnant and abandoned other girl who was in love with her almost lover.

The Victorian reaction to the excesses of Romanticism were also seen in the writings of Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, George Meredith, Gerard Hopkins, the Brontes, George Eliot and Charles Dickens.

**CHARLES DICKENS**

Charles Dickens was a crusading social reformer against the debtors prison, the workhouse and other abuses in Victorian society. However, as an astute observer of human nature, Charles Dickens exposes the faults typical of new liberal thinking as well.

**A Tale of Two Cities**

Charles Dickens' monumental *A Tale of Two Cities* about the French Revolution, not only exposed the decadence of the pre-Revolution French Monarchy, but was such a devastating exposé of Revolutionary ideology, that Margaret Thatcher presented French President Francois Mitterrand with a copy.

**Unintended Consequences**

Charles Dickens' novels illustrate the unintended consequences of liberal actions. Every set of choices set in motion a complex chain of events that no one could have foreseen, let alone control. Good and evil deeds have long shadows.

**Actions Have Consequences**

The ultimate effects of our actions are determined more by the intrinsic character of the acts themselves than by our motivation at the time. Deeds of greed and cruelty have devastating consequences. The end does not justify the means. It is never right to do evil that good may come of it.

**Hard Times**

In his *Hard Times* novel Dickens not only depicts the conditions of factory workers, but exposes the destructiveness of the radical modern experiments in education as well.

**Bleak House**

In Dickens' *Bleak House* Mrs Jellyby loves the Africans so much that she neglects her own family, even persecuting her own children in pursuit of her high and compassionate ideals for strangers. Her children become casualties of the Revolutionary era in which large projects for the betterment of the human race crowd out traditional individual responsibilities and absolute moral standards.

**Non Art**

Evelyn Waugh points out that *art*, the only aim of which is to annoy and upset its audience, isn't really art at all.

**Without Faith Civilisation Crumbles**

Waugh observes that without the

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Christian religion human beings are disgustingly selfish and shallow. The loss of the Christian Faith means death for western civilisation.

This may explain why so many politically correct English professors today have stopped teaching English literature.

Finally brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy meditate on such things.

Philippians 4:8

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