

Elizabeth Pridgeon

Ms. Bonnem

AP Lit

2 November 2016

Great Literature: A Personal Definition

I'd like to think of myself as an intelligent reader whose literary appetite consists of lauded and challenging texts. "I'd like" is the operative phrase here. When I was younger, this statement appeared to be true as I regularly devoured books such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Oliver Twist*. However, as I grew older, it became easier to read shallow books with no more substance than air. "Great literature" muddled my already high-strung, high school brain. Those books actually caused me to think, sorting through the complex diction and hidden meaning. It was certainly a challenge to read those small print books when I just entered the sixth grade. "Great literature" was old, confusing, and often times boring. And why were those dusty books considered "great" anyway? Despite the obstacles, I continued to gravitate towards "great literature."

My background for fully delving into "great literature" was my education. I attended a classical Christian school from pre-first to eighth grade. The school is even smaller than Whitefield as my eighth-grade class had seven people. The school stressed a classical education which resulted in me taking Latin in the fourth grade and reading books that had been around longer than I had been alive. Reading was a key component of my early education, emphasized at my school through the annual Reading Rally competitions, graded reading logs, and regular excursions to the library down the hall. I also was not allowed to talk about "pop culture" during school hours and I did not watch much TV. The only things that were filling my mind in the

early years were good, quality books and the Bible. Yet, reading never was forced upon me or felt like a dreaded homework assignment. I truly loved books, spending many hours curled behind a chair in my living room or occasionally in a tree. That school, despite all its strictness, helped foster my love for reading. I was never ostracized for being a nerd. In fact, I was proud that I was such an avid reader.

I was never really concerned with reading “great literature” or really knew what the term meant. I merely read the books in my school’s library and what my teachers had assigned in class. As long as I was drawn into the story, I would enjoy almost every book I read. I especially sought out books that could make me laugh or cry so the author’s envisioned world would become alive for me. Yet, when I choose a book that my school defined as “great literature,” I immediately noticed the difference in the overall quality of the book. Looking back, I realize that the school I started at pressed upon me that “great literature” are books that have withstood the test of time, ancient texts such as the *Iliad* or relatively more recent texts such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Though my choice in books has changed over the years, my foundation of “great literature” forever changed the way I read books.

I read *The Importance of Being Earnest* over the summer before junior year on the way back from the beach. I thought that it was a required summer reading book. It wasn’t. (I promise I was not being a try-hard.) But I did thoroughly enjoy the book, actually a play. The play did not allow me to be a passive reader. It made me think as I tried in my own way to understand the complex relationships between the characters. Also, the quick-witted dialogue of Oscar Wilde’s play made me laugh quietly, well somewhat quietly, to myself. Many months after reading the book, I don’t remember the lines that made me laugh or many of the characters’ names besides Ernest. Yet, I clearly remember that the play caused me to have an earnest emotional reaction

which allowed the book to remain with me.

Subconsciously (which I now am realizing consciously), I judge books on a long list of criteria: the quality of writing, the overall story, the time period in which the novel takes place, the relatability of the characters, and most importantly my personal enjoyment of the book. The standard I have in my mind is based on my steady diet of “great literature” when I was young. This foundation allowed me to become a discerning reader, able to know if what I was reading is considered “great” or not worth my time. (I do indulge in shallow books more than I care to admit.) If books meet my personal high standard of criteria, the book is immediately admitted to my permanent reading list with the Elizabeth stamp of approval. However, my long list of criteria on what makes “great literature” has its faults.

The Picture of Dorian Gray also written by Oscar Wilde is considered by a vast majority of people to be great literature. Now, I will examine the book with my criteria in mind. The quality of writing is superb. Oscar Wilde writes, “Lord Henry elevated his eyebrows, and looked at him [Basil Hallward] in amazement through the thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled up in such fanciful whorls from his heavy opium-tainted cigarette.” That line is exquisite. The overall story is fascinating. A handsome young man called Dorian Gray, who never ages, is supernaturally connected to his portrait as his soul is embedded in the painting. The time period is the late 19th century. Books that take place in modern day seems so ordinary; I personally prefer books which take place in the past or the future as it seems to increase the richness of text. Oscar Wilde clearly wants the characters to be relatable in his book, allowing the readers to intimately know the characters as the book goes along. However, I did not like the book. The protagonist’s moral decay was repulsive. The elevated language and the metaphysical symbolism

made the book hard to understand. So does that mean when I personally do not like a book, the book is denied the definition of “great literature”? In my eyes, yes.

Yet, is that the right mindset to have? To let my personal opinion on whether I like a great masterpiece decide whether or not a book is “great literature?” Don’t the opinions of generations of readers and critics before me have weight in regards to this issue? I think they do. It would be equivalent to an amateur musician declaring, “Mozart is not one of the greats because I do not like him.” See how ridiculous that statement sounds? “Great literature” exists without the Elizabeth stamp of approval I am sure all authors are eagerly waiting to earn.

But that Elizabeth stamp of approval does matter to me, because “great literature” has genuinely shaped me into the reader and person I am today. Books I like have really had an impression on me, and books that I don’t personally like haven’t had that same impression. *The Book Thief* written by Markus Zusak in 2005 is one of my all-time favorite books, matching my long list of criteria. Yet, literary critics probably wouldn’t consider *The Book Thief* to be “great literature” like I do. Towards the end of *The Book Thief*, the main character Liesel begins to write down the story of her young life, full of tragedy and sporadic moments of joy. Liesel “read over what she’d written . . . ten parts, all of which were given the title of books or stories and described how each affected her life.” While writing this essay, I realized that to me “great literature” is the books that have changed my life.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Edited by Michael Patrick Gillespie, Second Edition.

W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007.