

A

CHRISTIAN

GUIDE TO

the

Classics



LELAND RYKEN

**A CHRISTIAN GUIDE
TO THE CLASSICS**

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LELAND RYKEN

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A Christian Guide to the Classics

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Preface

This book is a defense of works of literature (and by implication works of art and music and even nonartistic texts like political and historical ones) that go by the name of *classic*. In our current cultural situation, several distinct groups exist in relation to the classics. One is enlightened non-Christians who value the classics in many of the same ways that Christians value them. A second group is people of liberal (or “politically correct”) persuasion who have a knee-jerk negative reaction to the classics and try to eliminate them from the public’s possession and school curricula. A third group is Christians who value the classics.

In this book, all supporters of the classics, Christians and non-Christians alike, would agree with most of what I say in defense of the classics. We will see, however, that a Christian worldview and outlook supply a few additional arguments and lines of defense. This is why the book is entitled *A Christian Guide to the Classics*. Christians have a value-added defense of the classics and methodology for assimilating them.

Every art form, discipline of thought, and activity (such as sports) has its classics. In this book, I have discussed the subject in terms of literature because I am a literary scholar, and additionally because this book belongs to a Crossway series of Christian guides to literary classics. Nevertheless, what I say about literary classics has ready carryover to other art forms and disciplines.

To defend the classics requires that we understand what they are. The lay of the land for this book consists of answering three main questions, spread over multiple chapters:

1. What is a classic?
2. Of what value is a classic?
3. How should we read and assimilate a classic?

CHAPTER 1

Misconceptions about the Classics

There have always been misconceptions about the classics, but until recently these were relatively minor. The picture changed when liberal or “politically correct” advocates wrongly decided that the classics are harmful to society. These false claims need to be refuted. We need to realize at the outset of our discussion that all claims made about the classics are self-revealing of the people who make the claims. The rival positions often say less about the classics themselves and say more about the values and mind-sets of the people who hold the positions. The Christian defense of the classics grows out of the Christian value structure, and attacks on the classics are rooted in the worldview and political outlook of the attackers.

I will note in advance that some of the material covered in this chapter will be taken up in greater detail at various points later in this book.

Misconception #1: *The classics are irrelevant to us today because they come to us from long ago.*

This claim of irrelevance is an expression of what some scholars call “the myth of the contemporary.” Those who hold this mind-set think everything contemporary is automatically better than what preceded it. Correspondingly, something that belongs to the past is inferior. Sometimes this expands into a presumptive rejection of everything from the

The context in which any defense of the classics occurs today is the contemporary assault on the classics by people of liberal persuasion. They are the ones who have made the classics a life-or-death matter intellectually and educationally by attempting to suppress the classics and keep people from reading them.

One way in which the liberal establishment has killed the classics is to remove them from course syllabi. About thirty years ago professors and students in English departments started to lose interest in literature and to replace it with other material. A graduate student is recorded as saying that he was bored with Wordsworth's poetry but couldn't get enough of the philosopher Heidegger. The result is that in most English courses today, literary texts are barely touched.

past for no better reason than that it comes from the past.

The first thing to say is that this viewpoint presupposes that the past holds little value for us today. The issue of how we should regard the past will loom large in later sections of this book, so we do not need to say a lot about it here. At this early point, all we need to do is express disagreement with the premise that the past is irrelevant. Under that umbrella, we can note the following:

- Anyone who looks at the contemporary scene can see that it does not represent an ideal. On many fronts the modern world is in a state of decline. To hold it up as an ideal by which to denigrate the past is preposterous. At the very least, we need to be open to the possibility that taking an excursion into the accumulated wisdom of the past by way of the classics might provide an avenue for bringing order to our present situation.
- The pleasure principle is also a relevant consideration. For people who develop the capacity to enjoy being transported from their own time and place to a world of long ago, reading the classics is one of the inexpensive pleasures of life. It is a right and a delight that we can exercise simply by opening a book.
- The classics have a particular knack for capturing what is universal in human experience. As a result, they are perpetually up-to-date, contrary to what devotees of the contemporary myth claim. The case can be made that Homer is as up-to-date and relevant as a contemporary novel. It just takes more interpretive skill to see the relevance of Homer,

and that is where literature courses and published literary criticism show their worth.

- Taking excursions into the past by reading the classics opens up alternatives to the way things are in our everyday world. At every point in history, good alternatives have existed to the current situation regardless of what ultimately occurred. If we do not tap that source of insight, we become victims of what is imposed on us by the circumstances and thinking of the present.

The foregoing barely scratches the surface of what can be said about the benefits that come from the classics by virtue of their pastness; more will be said in later chapters.

Something additional that needs to be noted is that not all classics come to us from the past. Many of the classics of the past were originally classics in their own time. There have always been contemporary classics. Even if we decide that a classic needs to stand the test of time before fully meeting the criteria of becoming a classic, the passage of time merely validates the status of the work as being a classic. It had the qualities that made it a classic right from the start.

Misconception #2: *The classics are elitist and instruments of social oppression.*

This line of thought requires some unpacking. We can start with the charge of elitism. There are multiple fallacies in the claim that the classics are elitist, but also some truth. We can start with the obvious: to enjoy reading the classics, we need to be initiated into them. Until we are introduced to

“Nowhere has the attack on the old literature been more strident than in the very place where we might have expected that it would have been most stoutly defended, the university literary departments. . . . The activities of [those] who have been taking the old literature apart seem oftentimes so excessively violent, so irrational, and so counter-productive, so contrary to self-interest as to mystify us” (Alvin Kernan, “What Killed Literature”).

“Nor do I agree that great books and ideas are distinctively masculine; nor that they are at all elitist. On the contrary, I believe them to be distinctively human and eminently democratic. They have survived the ages precisely because they are accessible to people of different backgrounds and characters, all of whom can aspire to understand them and to be elevated by them” (Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Revolution in the Library”).

Homer or Milton or Hawthorne, they are a foreign world to us. The corresponding question is, “So what?” This is true of every human activity or skill or realm of thought.

We do not know how to write until we are taught to do so. Until we learn to read, we are excluded from reading books. We cannot play baseball until we are initiated into the rules of the game and the techniques of holding a bat and throwing the ball. Playing the piano requires us to take piano lessons as a prerequisite. There is nothing elitist about any of these activities. It is simply in the nature of life that we are prevented from doing certain things until we are initiated into them, usually by someone who takes us under wing and educates us. The word *elitist* carries automatic sinister overtones that need to be rejected.

The charge of elitism usually implies that someone is acting as a gatekeeper to keep people on the outside from entering. But reading the classics does not exclude anyone. Classic books are free in a library or can be found inexpensively at hand. The only force of exclusion from the classics is the inertia or unawareness of the person who has not yet entered that world. The gateway to the classics is wide open for anyone to enter. All it takes to enter the “realms of gold” (John Keats’s metaphor) that we know as the classics is to allow oneself to be educated into the joys of reading them.

There is a small way in which the claim of elitism is true. One dimension of being elite is that in whatever field, the pursuit of excellence—raising the bar of achievement high—does not appeal to most people. As a result, the people who value the best almost automatically place themselves into a

smaller category. To those who are content with a lower level of achievement (or who have not been educated into something higher), a common maneuver is to stigmatize achievers with the label *elitism*. At this point we need to accept the label as honorific.

For example, anyone who strives to follow Jesus's command in the Sermon on the Mount that "you therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) is in a small and "elite" group within the broader society. So much the better. We do not denounce all-American basketball players because only a few rise to that small circle of superior athletes, nor do we attempt to prevent the public from playing basketball. Instead we honor the small circle of players who rise to the top.

The claim that reading Homer's *Odyssey* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an instrument of oppression should be named for what it is—preposterous. The classics as a whole embody the entire range of intellectual and political viewpoints that the human race has produced through the ages. They are not monolithic. At the heart of the "politically correct" enterprise is censorship. Attempting to keep people from reading the classics is in fact an instrument of suppression. We live in a cultural situation in which the liberal establishment attempts to deny people access to any literary work that does not advance the propagandistic cause of liberalism. There is absolutely no way in which reading Dickens's *Great Expectations* enslaves anyone who reads it. The censorship consists of the attempt to make sure that no one reads Dickens if certain people do not wish to read him.

The fact that a great artist portrays a world view "does not mean that we should automatically accept that world view. Art may heighten the impact of the world view (in fact, we can count on this), but it does not make something true" (Frances Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*).

Misconception #3: *Because we know that classics are great works, we can presume that they tell us the truth.*

The two misconceptions discussed above share the quality of undervaluing the classics. But it is also possible to overvalue them or value them incorrectly. This is a danger that resides with those who elevate the classics, just as the first two misconceptions belong to people who dislike the classics and attempt to make sure that people do not have access to them. It is possible to attach an automatic and arbitrary positive value to the classics that they do not entirely merit.

The most common manifestation of this is to venerate the classics (and especially those belonging to the classical Greco-Roman tradition) so highly that in effect they are regarded as being beyond criticism. No work of literature is above criticism. The fact that a classic is artistically and intellectually great does not necessarily mean that it embodies the truth. We know this partly because the classics do not agree among themselves. In fact, taken together, they express the full range of human thinking and feeling, both good and bad. Additionally, the only book that Christians should presuppose to be completely trustworthy and truthful is the Bible. We need to weigh *whether* all other works match up to biblical truth, not presume *that* they do.

Misconception #4: *The classics are relics in the museum of the past, and their primary function is to preserve the past as something that we can visit.*

Earlier I made the case that part of the value of the classics is the very fact that most of them come

to us from the past (and many of them from the *distant* past). But this line of defense, too, can be carried to an untenable extreme. Some enthusiasts for the classics view them only as a gateway to the past, with no regard to what is contemporary in them. These people are historians and antiquarians at heart; they simply like to know about past people and cultures.

There is nothing wrong with this love to know about the past. However, to read the classics only as giving us information about the past is to reduce the scope of what they stand ready to give us. In fact, that would be to make them a source of historical data instead of a living presence. Works of literature embody universal and timeless human experience, and the classics should be read as imparting that form of knowledge to us. The classics are partly windows to the past, but as works of literature they are (even more) pictures of what is true for all people at all times in all places, including us.

Misconception #5: *Classics are by definition long and difficult works.*

We most readily think of the classics in terms of masterworks—long works such as epics and novels and perhaps, with a little bending of the definition, plays such as those of Shakespeare. These works are difficult and demanding, requiring literary expertise and sophistication. They are works that are studied in advanced high school courses and college literature courses.

Several things are wrong with this automatic assumption that classics are necessarily long masterworks.

First, every genre has its classics, including

“There are various legitimate reasons for teaching a diversity of works in college classrooms, but at the heart of our curriculum should be the ‘canon’—a list of classic works that embody in a universally significant manner the common experience of men and women and enable us, by studying them, to grow into the full humanity that we share with others. . . . We teach such works because they help us to discern the order and purpose in human existence. . . . An acquaintance with great literature is certainly no substitute for character, but it enhances the moral imagination and is a good thing in itself” (R. V. Young, *At War with the Word*).

Frederick Buechner is a sophisticated literary and theological writer. Yet he has many times claimed that L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is one of the enduring and influential classics in his life. He claimed that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is "not only the greatest fairy tale this nation has produced but one of its great myths" (*The Annotated Wizard of Oz*). Buechner said in an interview that he "lived in Oz more than in whatever house we were living in at the time." He even made *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* the basis of one of his novels.

short works and simple ones. There are classic nursery rhymes (Mother Goose) and children's literature (*The Tale of Peter Rabbit*). Dick and Jane is a classic first-grade reader. There are classic riddles and sayings ("A penny for your thoughts"). There are classic hymns ("Amazing Grace") and proverbs ("Curiosity killed the cat"). Folk stories, such as Little Red Riding Hood or Paul Bunyan, can be classics. So can murder mysteries (Sherlock Holmes). I offer these categories simply as examples that show that a classic does not need to be a long and difficult masterwork.

Second, short lyric poems can be classics. Hundreds of them are. They meet all the criteria that will be explored in chapter 2. It is therefore misleading to picture the classics, either to ourselves or others, as being more formidable than they are.

Furthermore, we are all entitled to have our own private list of classics. If they serve the function of classics in our personal lives, they are classics to us. The Narnia books by C. S. Lewis and the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder have been classics to generations of families. They are children's books for children and also adult books for adults, and in both cases they are simple stories and not epics on a par with Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Finally, the Bible is the supreme classic. Is it a masterwork? Yes, but that is not how Christians through the centuries have experienced it. They have experienced it as an everyday companion in their lives. The Bible has been the most accessible of all books for believing families and individuals. If the Bible is a classic, all Christians have at least one great classic in their repertoire. If they have one, they can have many.

To value the classics does not require us to have an advanced literary education. This is not to disparage the classic masterworks. For people of sophisticated literary taste, they are the best of the best. What is most important, however, is to value classics in whatever form they enter our lives. Of course, to aspire to the highest is always a virtue. Additionally, all education is ultimately self-education. The way to acquire a taste for the classics is to read them. The tragedy would be to settle for our current level of attainment and not aim higher than that.

Chapter Summary

Before we construct a case for the classics and a methodology for reading them, we need to clear the ground of obstacles. Many of the obstacles come from people who try to keep the classics out of our schools and out of sight in our culture, but some of the wrong thinking about the classics also comes from their advocates. The positive antidotes to the fallacies explored in this chapter are the following:

- The classics are important to us today, partly because they are a voice from the past and partly because they speak to the universal human condition.
- The classics do not enslave anyone and in fact liberate those who read them (in ways to be explored later).
- But the classics are not infallible, with the result that they always need to be critiqued by Christian standards of truth and morality.
- Classics are available to us at whatever level of literary sophistication we possess;

“Full-scale revival will come only when English professors recommit themselves to slaking the human craving for contact with works of art that somehow register one’s own longings and yet exceed what one has been able to articulate by and for oneself. This is among the indispensable experiences of the fulfilled life” (Andrew Delbanco, “The Decline and Fall of Literature”).

“The humanities are an essentially human enterprise. . . . The record of that enterprise reposes in the library in the form of books. . . . These are the books that sustain our minds and inspire our imaginations. It is there that we look for truth, for knowledge, for wisdom” (Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Revolution in the Library”).

if we cannot yet master a Shakespearean tragedy, we can read Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

The classics are a paradox. On the one hand, they are the best of the best and belong to a very elite circle of the very greatest works. They raise the bar high in terms of what they demand from us. On the other hand, many of them are familiar to us because they have traditionally been central in our educational experience. Some classics that we have not yet read are familiar to us by simple cultural osmosis. For example, even if we have not read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we probably know that Hamlet is a brooding loner who toys with a skull in a churchyard and utters a famous soliloquy that begins, "To be, or not to be: that is the question." Most people know about Hester's scarlet letter even before they read Hawthorne's great story about it.

CHAPTER 2

What Is a Classic?

The first thing to say is that the concept of a classic is not limited to literature (although that is the subject of this book). Most objects and events in our lives have examples that rise to the status of being a classic. "Give the gift of a timeless classic," says an advertisement for a watch. "It's a classic," a wife tells her husband as they look at suits in a clothing store. In some American towns, residents can saunter downtown one evening per week during the summer to see displays of classic cars. One of the ESPN television channels is called ESPN Classic; it specializes in reruns of past sports events or profiles of athletes from the past. It is obvious, then, that when an English professor tells a prospective student and her parents that "we still teach the classics," the professor is tapping into something universal and not only literary.

A second preliminary observation is that the universal concept *classic* should not be confused with the adjective *classical*. Classical literature and art were produced by the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. The classical school movement derives its inspiration and content from Greco-Roman civilization and is not necessarily built around classics from all eras. (It is also the case, though, that people who value classical edu-

cation in this specialized sense tend to embrace the classics generally, even when they are not ancient in origin.)

A third thing to note at the outset is that in popular culture today, words such as *classic* and *epic* are tossed around as honorific terms with little specific meaning—like the all-purpose adjective *awesome*. When people do this, the word *classic* is assumed to carry automatic positive associations and is little more than a way to express enthusiasm for the work or event in question. Often publishers resort to the quick fix of pinning the label *classic* on a book that they wish to promote. It was an editor who once changed a book title from *Reading Literature with C. S. Lewis* (the accurate title) to *Reading the Classics with C. S. Lewis* (a title that the marketing department thought would carry more popular appeal). As the author of multiple guides to the classics, I am of course gratified by this vote of confidence for the classics, but it is important that we validate the label with some genuine content.

Toward a Definition of the Term *Classic*

Every academic discipline, as well as such cultural pursuits as sports and cooking, has its classics. That is useful to keep in mind as we consider the concept of a literary classic. It helps to think of a literary classic in light of classics in other spheres because the literary definitions that I am about to quote can illuminate the concepts of a sports classic or a classic family photograph as well.

The format that I have chosen for this chapter is to quote some touchstone definitions of a literary classic and then unpack what these com-

There are many famous essays and books that address the question of what makes a classic. T. S. Eliot wrote an essay "What Is a Classic?" and his statement on historical longevity is often quoted: "It is only by hindsight, and in historical perspective, that a classic can be known as such."

The classics are so great that they often remain a permanent part of us even if we read them only once in school. A literary critic has written that “the classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory” (Italo Calvino, “Why Read the Classics?”).

plementary definitions tell us. Here are the definitions:

- “We speak of a book as a classic when it has gained a place for itself in our culture, and has consequently become a part of our educational experience. But the term conveys further meanings implying precision of style [and] formality of structure” (Harry Levin, Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter and Other Tales of the Puritans*).
- “There are many reasons why certain works of literature are classics, and most of them are purely literary reasons. But there’s another reason too: a great work of literature is also a place in which the whole cultural history of the nation that produced it comes into focus” (Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination*).
- A classic “modifies our very being and makes us feel . . . we are not the same men and women we were when we began it” (Sheldon Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief*).
- A classic “lays its images permanently on the mind [and] is entirely irreplaceable in the sense that no other book whatever comes anywhere near reminding you of it or being even a momentary substitute for it” (C. S. Lewis, review of *Taliessin through Logres*).
- The classics “deal with the archetypes of human experience, with characters at once concrete and universal, and with events and relationships that are invariant in the lives of all men. . . . The perils of the soul and its achievements are constant. From his earliest literary efforts man does not seem to have advanced in

his comprehension of them, and may well have declined” (Kenneth Rexroth, Introduction to *Classics Revisited*).

- “Among the best of a class; of the highest quality in a group. . . . A literary classic, then, ranks with the best of its kind that have been produced” (*The Harper Handbook to Literature*).
- “A piece of literature which by common consent has achieved a recognized position in literary history for its superior qualities; also an author of like standing. Thus *Paradise Lost* is a classic in English literature” (Thrall and Hibbard’s *Handbook to Literature*).
- A classic “is doubly *permanent*: for it remains significant, or it acquires a new significance, after the age for which it was written and the conditions under which it was written, have passed away; and yet it keeps, undefaced by handling, the original noble imprint of the mind that first minted it” (Arthur Quiller-Couch, “On the Use of Masterpieces,” in *On the Art of Reading*).
- “The classics are books that come down to us bearing the traces of readings previous to ours, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through” (Italo Calvino, “Why Read the Classics?” in *The Uses of Literature*).

The first thing to note about these definitions is how little overlap there is. This should alert us to the fact that we are dealing with a many-faceted phenomenon. We can regard the differences among the definitions as reflecting what each of the authors regards as the primary or most obvi-

Until recently, certain agreed-upon classics formed the core of the literature curriculum at both high school and college levels. This aggregate of works was known as the “canon”—the definitive list of works that any educated person knew. With the collapse of the old culture, the canon has become so eroded that it is hard to come up with a list of masterworks for a series like Crossway’s Christian Guides to the Classics (authored by Leland Ryken). Many leading English departments no longer have a list of required courses that all English majors must take, or works that students are expected to know.

In 1987, E. D. Hirsch Jr. published a bestselling book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. In it he made the case for the benefits to society of educating every child and citizen in a shared body of essential information. Cultural literacy of this type is broader than just the literary classics, but the literary classics are an important part of the cultural literacy that Hirsch and his supporters envision. Hirsch repeatedly stresses that it is the currently disadvantaged that have the most to gain by becoming culturally literate and able to participate in society.

ous trait of a classic. Probably none of the people who formulated the definitions would disagree with the other definitions.

As the definitions show, the concept of a classic combines an objective, verifiable aspect and a subjective element that is personal to the experience or perception of an individual. One of the objective criteria is *endurance*. A classic has stood the test of time and yet is still current. It is both timeless and timely. Unlike a classic car, which sometimes immediately strikes us as dated when we see it, a literary classic is only superficially dated. It actually lives on. People who sneer at the classics and their authors as being “dead” miss the point: the classics are like Abel, who “though he died . . . still speaks” (Heb. 11:4).

The fact that historical continuity and permanence are required before we call something a classic explains why a literary work does not immediately attain the full status of being a classic. It may possess the quality of excellence that entitles it eventually to be called a classic, but the ESPN Classic sports channel is not quite right in calling the previous day’s game “an instant classic.” The original book reviews of C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* were extraordinarily positive, but the *Narnia* stories did not fully establish themselves as classics until they had been on the scene for a decade or two.

A second objective criterion for a classic is that it is *influential* in the cultures that embrace it, starting with the culture that produced it. As part of this permanent influence, classics have historically been part of the educational program of cultures. This extends not only to what happens in schools but also in families (where education be-

gins). Often the classics have formed the core of the educational curricula of a society. This applies to all of the academic disciplines, so that law and biology and history (for example) all have their classic texts.

We do not personally need to like every literary classic, but even when we do not like a given classic, we acknowledge its importance as a cultural phenomenon. As a literature teacher, I teach and would defend the classic status of some works that I personally do not enjoy and would not choose to read on my own initiative. But in keeping with what I have said about the cultural importance of a classic, when I leave a given classic unread, I am aware of a cultural gap and deficiency at that point. This cultural significance of the classics shows that at some level, they are indispensable to societies and to individuals who claim to be part of their cultures.

The most universally agreed upon component of a literary classic is the criterion of *excellence* or superiority. This extends to both the form and content of the work. A classic rises above most other members of its class. Thus Homer's epics are the best Greek epics, and Shakespeare's tragedies are the best of Renaissance drama. This ingredient of excellence quickly reaches out to encompass other qualities. For example, to rise to the top, literary works need to possess a certain multiplicity and richness. They become central to a culture or curriculum because literary critics can do a lot with them. They have a density of technique and content that make them inexhaustible. By comparison, ordinary works seem a little thin, no matter how much we personally might enjoy them.

There continue to be those who believe that the classics should remain central to a literary curriculum. One of them writes, "The heart of any good curriculum in literature must be what has proved through the ages its wearability, and its power to liberate, illuminate, and support" (Helen Gardner, *In Defence of the Imagination*).

One of the traits of the classics is that they are inexhaustible—not only for individual readers over the course of their lifetime with its changing experiences, but also in the sense that successive cultures see different things in a classic, based on their own experiences and worldviews. Homer's original audience relished the battle scenes that figure prominently in his stories; today we are likely to be repelled by such violence.

We should note two further things about the criterion of excellence. The fact that classics are the best of a group or category explains why the word has become a standard honorific adjective. When people want to praise something or garner a market for it, they readily resort to calling it a classic. Second, the mere fact that something has been around for a long time does not make it a classic. A kooky-looking car can be a collectible and an antique, but a car needs to be beautiful and shapely to rank as a classic.

An additional subjective test for a classic literary work is that it *touches us at a profound level*. Before we willingly call a work a classic, we need to be deeply affected by it. To meet the test fully, the work needs to be a landmark in our intellectual, spiritual, and literary experience. If it does not rise to that stature, our granting it the title of *classic* is just a little halfhearted.

Chapter Summary

The following definition does a good job of incorporating the threads that have been woven in this chapter's definition of a classic literary work. To achieve this distinction, the definition is a long one that keeps expanding:

“What we tend to require for something called a literary [classic] is a display of great craftsmanship [and] . . . striking originality. . . . Beyond this . . . the text must make a powerful emotional and intellectual impact, provide a rich reading experience, and leave behind a larger understanding of our past experience and perhaps a new way to think about our lives. In the case of the greatest works we return to them time

and again in our minds, even if we do not reread them frequently, as touchstones by which we interpret the world around us.” (Nina Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*)

CHAPTER 3

Why We Should Read the Classics

There are some things in life whose value is apparent if we simply understand what they are. The classics are one of these. Implicit in the definitions of a classic provided in the preceding chapter are reasons for wanting to read and possess the classics. The purpose of this chapter is to make those reasons explicit.

The Entertainment Value of the Classics

The first reason to read the classics will surprise some people. It is that the classics provide superior entertainment for the people who have developed a taste for them. I myself prefer the classics because I find them more entertaining than other forms of reading.

I need to make some immediate concessions on this point. First, I am by profession a teacher of literature. Naturally, I like to read Dickens and Browning and Chaucer. But I have known many people in my life who are not literature teachers and yet enjoy reading the classics.

I will also concede that the taste for the classics is partly an acquired taste, especially in a day when, if left to their own designs, children

The hedonistic defense of literature (defending literature on the pleasure principle) is as old as literary theory. The most customary word that writers have used to name the pleasure-giving aspect of literature is the word *delight*, and often it has been paired with truth or wisdom to form a twofold defense of literature. The author of Ecclesiastes tells us that he “sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” (12:10). Romantic English poet Percy Shelley called poetry “a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight” (*A Defense of Poetry*). Shelley’s definition is a good summary of what the literary classics give us.

WE'VE ALL HEARD ABOUT THE CLASSICS and some of us have even read them on our own. But for those of us who remain a bit intimidated or simply want to get more out of our reading, this companion to Crossway's Christian Guides to the Classics series is here to help.

In this brief guidebook, popular professor, author, and literary expert Leland Ryken explains what the classics are, how to read them, and why they're still valuable. Written to help you become a seasoned reader and featuring a list of books to get you started, this guide will give you the tools you need to read and enjoy some of history's greatest literature.

"The classics are peaks I've always wanted to climb, but never had the chutzpah to tackle. That's why I'm delighted to see the release of Crossway's Christian Guides to the Classics. Now, I have a boost to my confidence, a feasible course in front of me, and a world-class guide to assist along the way."

TODD A. WILSON, Senior Pastor, Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, Illinois

"In an age in desperate need of recovering the permanent things, I am thankful that Crossway and Ryken have teamed up to produce excellent guides to help Christians take up and read the books which have shaped the Western intellectual tradition."

BRADLEY G. GREEN, Associate Professor of Christian Thought and Tradition, Union University; writer-in-residence, Tyndale House, Cambridge

LELAND RYKEN (PhD, University of Oregon) served as professor of English at Wheaton College for over 45 years and has authored or edited some 50 books.

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