

## YOUNG SCHOLARS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

### CLASSIC IS AS CLASSIC DOES

Lauren Augino  
Utah Valley University

The word “classic” is a term that grants meaning, legitimacy, depth, and age. It can be applied to everything from a memorable action to a song that will be remembered forever and sung over and over again. The classics are the ancient languages, Greek and Latin. A classic movie is often a black-and-white film that has withstood the test of time—something that your grandmother paid a nickel to see and you are now pulling off of the living room shelf to experience for yourself. The word classic can mean many things, but when we speak of classic literature, what are we saying?

What does a work of literature have to be to be considered a classic? What does it have to do to the field of writing, the general audience, society, or even to one individual? The answers to these questions should paint a pretty accurate portrait of what exactly a classic work of literature is. But in the long run, do these answers really tap into what the general public views classic literature to be?

#### The Deconstruction of a Term

It is very often the case that language can acquire a meaning different from what it was originally meant to have. This may be what has happened to the word “classic” specifically. It is a word that is applied to a number of fields and is understood in a multitude of ways. The two ways that I would like to focus on most are those that I have designated as the *real* and the *ideal* as they apply to the classic novel.

It could be argued that literature—classic literature, to be more exact—should be viewed and judged by genre and not as a whole. However, in my own defense I will don a limit of time as my shield and, admittedly, a lack of in-depth knowledge of each genre as my helmet. Every genre has its own requirements and conventions to be considered classic, but the purpose of this study is not to show the differences between genres. The purpose is to show the differences in *perceptions* of the classic novel.

#### Two Different Perspectives and Where to Find Them

Generally speaking, these are the two basic perspectives concerning classic literature, both of which I have defined through characteristics that I have compiled from my own studies. The complex, *ideal* perspective deals with how well a novel addresses the issues of the time. In terms of complexity, a classic novel does something to its audience and creates some kind of change. It shines its spotlight on matters of politics, economics, society, civil rights, or international relations, just to name a few. The complex classic novel does more than entertain. It touches its audience and somehow withstands the whims of time to create a lasting impression. In short, the ideal perspective of the classic novel is one that appreciates what the novel does to the reader, the way that it portrays the issues, its choice of words and style, its ability to catalyze change, and its staying power in the hearts of society (Hoopes).

The *real* perspective, on the other hand, deals with what the majority of the public views clas-

sic literature to be. The *real* perspective is one that concerns how well the general population can relate to the novel and, above all, the pleasure that the work brings. It involves the novel's popularity, readability, age, and reputation. A novel that has always been considered a classic is most likely viewed as a classic because of this *real* perspective. The difference between the ideal and the real is that the real perspective values a classic novel for what it immediately brings and for how long it has been considered a classic. This perspective has a lot to do with what other people have said—the novel's reputation—and the amount of entertainment that it provides rather than with what the individual can find within the novel for him- or herself. The individual who values a classic novel from the real perspective bypasses complex issues such as style, tone, and deliberate efforts by the author to affect the reader, and moves straight on to how well it amused and who said that it was a classic in the first place (Anastalpo).

These two categories, the ideal and the real, do not define two *types* of classic novels. They define two perspectives of what classic novels *are*.

Appreciation of a novel by means of what I am calling the *real* perspective does not immediately exclude the possibility that it could also be appreciated by those who hold the *ideal* perspective. A classic novel that changes the person who reads it and addresses the issues of the time, for example, may be valued both for its ability to speak to people about a very complex and disturbing issue and for the way that it made the person feel as it entertained. These two terms are simply a way of marking the difference between two very different ways of thinking, in this case between a perspective established by those marked as “experts” (literary critics, social critics focusing on the “value” of a good book) and more common ways of thinking likely found among the rest of us.

## The Ideal

Publishing companies devote whole series to what they call the “classics.” Critics review them and point out the criteria that make them “classic.” They comment on the use of historical, cultural, and even biblical references. The Everyman series, for example, which began in London in 1906 with Joseph Dent and Ernest Reese, is a list of novels that have been approved as classics. Every novel is judged by a group that assesses its merit, its effect, its content, its meaning, and so many other things. Those involved in the book's fate analyze, criticize, and judge the novel in every minute respect. But what is it that they look for?

NPR's interview with Sonny Mehta, editor in chief of the Everyman Classics, on the topic “In Literature, What Makes a Classic?” offers a case in point. What I found most interesting in the interview was that neither Mehta, Z.Z. Packer (author of *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*), nor Joan Didion (author of *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*) would offer a concrete list of the characteristics of a classic novel. The features of a classic that were offered, however, were consistent with those that I have designated as *ideal*. They include an ability to speak across the generations, the effort to address issues that may be uncomfortable or hard to discuss, and a combination of excellent style and subject matter. But above all, a classic must change you and your awareness of yourself. Mehta said that the definition of a classic novel that he would agree with most is one by Clifton Fadiman (editor and critic, 1904–99), who said, “When you re-read a classic, you do not see more in the book than you did before; you see more in yourself than was there before.” This may accurately be said to be one of a classic novel's greatest strengths: its innate ability to change the way a person views the world and everything in it, as seen through the ideal perspective.

## The Real

The *real* idea of a classic novel is one that entertains and one that has age. (Both of which, I should note, are characteristics that I found popping up in the surveys described below, as are those listed below in the description of the real classic.) Commenting on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Somerset Maugham said, "What makes a classic is not that it is praised by critics, expounded by professors and studied in college classes, but that the great mass of readers, generation after generation, have found pleasure and spiritual profit in reading it" (qtd. in Anastalpo 1). In terms of popularity, a classic novel is one with an entertaining theme, an intriguing plot, captivating characters, and lots and lots of juice. It is a novel that the majority can appreciate and one that survives because its theme will never die. Most interestingly, however, the real classic is one that has been formed by reputation. Mark Twain once defined a classic as "a book which people praise and don't read." And when generation upon generation of students are exposed to the same works and are told that these are what classics are, then the general idea of a classic will have been imprinted, and Mark Twain's definition will have been shown to be closest to the truth.

## The Approach

As the perceptions of classic literature are twofold, so must be the approach to studying them. There is the opinion that describes the way people *should* view a classic novel, and then there is the opinion that is more true to how people actually do. The views of society can be categorized, as I have already said, into the *real* and the *ideal*, and to attack both categories you must look in two very different places.

My own study took this two-pronged approach. For examples of the "ideal," I studied what I considered to be the more official side of classic literature. I examined the reviews of a few classic works and attempted to deduce what the connections and relationships between all of the reviews could tell me about what classic literature was, albeit *ideally*. I looked into literary journals and newspaper columns in an attempt to discover what literary society as a whole might think on the topic. Next I studied what I felt could tell me the most. I verbally surveyed students of varying educations and focuses. I did not exclude those who seemed to have never picked up a book in their lives because their opinion matters just as much as that of someone who is widely read. Surprisingly, I found that they all had generally the same response. My surveys were designed to elicit answers of an appropriate length and useful depth. By doing so, I also hoped to obtain answers that were as candid as possible.

And so, half of my research was comprised of endless hours in front of a computer screen rifling through databases, and the rest was formed as I pestered students all over campus, laptop in tow.

## Found: The Two Perspectives

### The "Ideal" Classic Novel

The ideal appreciation and realization of what a classic novel is and does looks deeper than its entertainment value. It must not only do more, but it must do it all. A classic novel addresses an important issue and is entertaining at the same time. It tells the story of a society and its values and tragedies and accomplishments (see Peters). It is an exceptional work of writing whose style and engaging language open the eyes of the public to injustices that seemed at the time to have been considered the norm (see Birkerts). These are issues such as racism, lack of women's rights, child abuse, alcoholism, and warfare. Most importantly, a classic novel does not go away, a characteristic that seems to be thor-

oughly agreed upon (NPR). It survives years of dusty shelves and does not crumble; it is a story that people attempt to re-create but constantly fail to (Birkerts 122). It is something that people remember and something that constantly reappears.

Reviews of literature were the most extensive sources of information in my study. In one in particular, an in-depth analysis of the novel *The Great Gatsby*, Sven Birkerts reviews the novel as an American classic and goes deeply into why it is so in “A Gatsby for Today.” The reasons he lists go through and beyond those such as style, language, tone, imagery, and plot. It is not just a memorable story that touched peoples’ hearts when they read it, it’s more. It is a novel that captures the mentality of an entire time period, the Roaring Twenties, with its fashion and violence and wealth and leisure. Most importantly, Birkerts claims that a novel must “perpetually renew its relevance for audiences” (122). It cannot become out of date in the next generation. Instead, every single new age must appreciate what it is.

The very close analysis of the novel is exemplary of the reasons I was hoping to prove are the main ones that a novel should truly be considered classic. It draws the line that separates a “good” novel from a “classic” novel, and what’s more, a novel that has a lasting impact on society and makes an indelible mark on literature. *The Great Gatsby* is a novel that captures a culture and a time, and when you read it you can’t help but think that you are being more than entertained. You are receiving insight into a time period both tragic and incredibly legendary.

Further evidence of the connection between a novel and its culture could be found in the article illustrating the thoughts and studies of Caryl Emerson, a professor of Russian at Princeton. Her in-depth studies of the language and culture and her extremely captivating lecture style led to her being interviewed and quoted in “To Know Russia, Know Its Classic Novels” by Nathaniel Hoopes. She states that “the real wisdom of cultures has to be in literature.” She also makes the connection between culture and literature, classic literature specifically. The important events and movements of a people are written down and always have been. Whereas they were once memorized and passed down from generation to generation in a time of oral tradition, stories can now be written down and produced for the masses. It is simply a way for a culture to remember its own history and its own pride. Classic literature opens a window through time and gives a very in-depth insight into the people of a nation (Hoopes). Even the biased versions of a historical event can tell you something of a nation’s stubborn pride.

It is important not only to define what a novel says but what it does. “Of Truth and Ostriches” is an article that expresses this important distinction to some extent. It is an unsigned story that states that throughout history novels have been a source of information and a catalyst of change. One example used was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which changed the way people viewed slavery in the Northern United States and other places around the world. According to this anonymous article, this novel was one of the catalysts of an event that would become one of the most terrible wars in our nation’s history. Terrible because we were divided and killed our brothers and fathers. The novel played a part in bringing awareness to the people of the North, and the slaves were soon, to some extent, freed, and the era of civil rights began. Of course, there were numerous other sparks that helped to build the fire, but in the literary world, this novel has been given what it’s due. The ability of a novel to open the eyes of its audience, to offer insight into something that people would rather ignore, is another instrumental aspect of the classic novel. And although all novels may not have the impact that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has had, to be considered a classic—at least in the *ideal* perspective, as described above—it is important that they have an impact in some way.

Another article that makes an important connection between what a novel is and what it does to its audience is “*Animal Farm Fifty Years On*”. This article was written by Michael Peters, who analyzes the effects of the novel *Animal Farm*, which is widely considered a classic and has been used in the classroom for years. Peters, who has critiqued numerous other novels as well while providing reviews for them all, discusses in an indirect way what it is that makes a classic novel a classic. His article is a review of literature. He examines what *Animal Farm* did, and continues to do, to society and to its audience years after its publication. In his analysis of the novel, Peters addresses a couple of main points: the author’s intention in writing the novel and the effects that the novel had on its audience or how it was received (90). Peters claims that the novel is a classic and that it will continue to be, as it has been, considered such. *Animal Farm* is one of many novels that have created great controversy. It was a novel that fit its time and linked the world of literature and fiction with the world of reality (Peters 90). Essentially, Peters’s article does not directly list the reasons why *Animal Farm* is a “classic” novel. It does, however, explain what the novel did and the impact it had on the world in which it was invented, both politically and socially. According to Peters, *Animal Farm* got people thinking about politics and society and their own world. It was written at a time when people were vulnerable and order hardly existed. It is an allegory that portrays the events of World War II and the actions of Communist Russia—in a less than flattering and more than controversial manner. As a classic novel, it says a lot about a cause and an entire period in history.

One of the critical aspects of a classic novel must be that it is a respectable work of literature. When you take away the connections to history and society, it really is just a book. And as a book, it must be a great piece of work. “Cutting a Classic Down to Size” is an article written by Peter Shaw, who breaks down the novel *Moby Dick* and goes into depth about what makes the novel so remarkable and memorable. The complexity of the novel is addressed, as well as the social and political messages that may have been weaved throughout. Shaw’s focus, however, was the literary genius of the novel in its entirety. The symbolism, word choice, tone, and development of plot make it complex and force the reader to reflect. The implications of Shaw’s argument echo something any one of us who have read this novel know instinctively: *Moby Dick* is not a novel that a person can simply sit down on the couch and read through and understand completely the first time—unless that person’s genius is beyond any that I have ever known to exist. The skill of an author must come out in his or her work and has substantial weight in whether or not it can be considered a great and classic work of literature.

The timelessness of a classic novel is a key aspect. All of the novels discussed thus far have been read and reread for decades. And let me make a distinction between “timeless” and “old.” James Russell Lowell said, “[A classic] is something neither ancient nor modern, always new and incapable of growing old” (qtd. in Anastalpo 1). Put simply, an old novel shows its age, and a timeless novel seems never to age at all. The idea that a novel must self-perpetuate its importance is critical (Birkerts 122). If a novel is good, it will not be put up on the shelf and dismissed. It will clutch the hearts of readers indefinitely.

## **The “Real” Classic Novel**

If everyone in the world who has ever read a book or play or short story has thought in depth about what made it good, every writer would surely feel appreciated. As it is, however, that is most definitely not the case. Many readers appreciate books for what they most immediately bring: entertainment, distraction from the real world, or some kind of romantic connection to themselves. In regard to

classic novels, specifically, the case is very bleak. These novels do not really receive the appreciation many argue they deserve. It seems that, in general, people accept that a novel is a classic because it has always been categorized that way. For example, a high school student may be reading a novel that his teacher tells him is a classic. His father read the same novel in high school and was also told that it was a classic. Neither the father nor the son question that the novel is a classic because of this lasting reputation and do not look into the true reasons that the novel is considered in such a way. Very often, as in this example, the label is what they are comfortable with, what they have always known, and what they have accepted. In the very real sense of what a classic is, it entertains, it is old, and everyone has, for as long as anyone can remember, called it a classic. Based on the results from the extensive survey on the *real* perspective of “classic” literature, people generally view “classic” literature in this way.

The people I surveyed are a mix of male and female students of varying levels of education. They are all either high school seniors, undergraduate students, or graduate students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. I interviewed whomever I came across, without regard to area of study, ethnicity, religion, etc. There was a grand total of fifty-two students surveyed, all with unique backgrounds and outlooks. They were questioned either through email, in person, or by phone. If interviewed in person, they were questioned in the hallways, classrooms, parking lots, or sitting areas of the Utah Valley University campus. When I surveyed students I asked them the following four questions:

1. List three novels that you would say are classics.
2. Why did you choose those three?
3. How are you familiar with those novels? Where have you heard of them or who introduced them to you?
4. How would you define the word “classic” and to what do you apply the word?

The answers to these questions, in general, did not vary. Regardless of the respondents’ major, gender, or age, the novels suggested repeated. The reasons people gave for thinking of them repeated. And the “whys” and “wheres” people offered seemed to repeat even more.

Most students named novels such as *Animal Farm*, *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Most of these were analyzed in book reviews that I read and studied. Yet none of these students mentioned even one of the reasons that the authors of the reviews gave for the novels to be considered classics. When I asked students why they chose these novels, they shrugged and said that they had just always been told that they were classics. They were forced to read them at varying levels of their education and the titles just stuck. Ironically, reading these novels in an educational setting should ensure that things such as plot, theme, style, and historical relevance or impact are covered and understood. Even though these students must have studied these novels and discussed them with their peers, they gave none of the ideal reasons for which a classic novel should be appreciated.

These are some of the novels that students listed:

*Moby Dick* (9)  
*To Kill a Mockingbird* (23)  
*Oliver Twist* (1)  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (15)  
*The Count of Monte Cristo* (1)  
*The Great Gatsby* (7)  
*Wuthering Heights* (2)  
*Pride and Prejudice* (7)

(Note that not all books students listed are included and the figures will not add up to an even 156.)

There were a few exceptions. Out of the fifty-two students I surveyed, nine listed books that they couldn't help but mention because of how much they had loved them when they read them, whether they were universally considered classics or not (17.3%). Eleven said that they were introduced to the novels they chose by a family member or friends, or that they had found them on their own, which separates them from those who had been introduced to them at school and were required to read them (21.2%). And four gave reasons that in some way mentioned a connection to culture, society, history, or complexity (7.7%). Those four students fell into the category that I would say valued a classic novel for the "ideal" reasons. Most students, however, think of a classic as a large, dusty volume that you find in the corner of the local library. The remaining twenty-eight students surveyed had been required to read the books they had listed and responded in such a way simply because they had always been told that those novels were classics (53.8%). This group viewed classic novels with what I have dubbed the "real" perspective. One encouraging aspect of the survey was that many students insisted that they enjoy reading a novel before they call it classic.

### Ask Why

The United States, in particular, is a nation that questions the cards it has been dealt. Americans do not simply take what they are given or swallow what they are told without explanation. Therefore, it is disturbing to think that students all across the nation are reading novels, being told that they are classics, and simply accepting the fact. Asking why we consider literature in a certain way plays into this concept. Our nation values the challenging of indoctrination, and that is exactly what I am doing in asking this question.

I have found that there are two distinct sides to classic literature so long as the subgenres of the classic genre are ignored. Those subgenres are, of course, those that we often hear about—drama and poetry, for example. It is important to remember that within each of those genres, there is a different list of requirements for classic status. However, for the purposes of this study, classic literature is considered a genre in and of itself. And there happens to be a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde characteristic to this genre, which no one seems to consider. There is the true value and accomplishment of a novel—which should give reason for anyone to want to study its pages—and yet that value seems to be wholly ignored. And there is the shallower version: loving a novel for how well it kept you entertained, believing it is a classic because someone—a teacher, maybe—told you so in the seventh grade.

Classic literature is a genre. The novels fitting into such a distinguished group play a large role in the world of literature and can be found all around us. They weave into the curriculum of students of all ages, the movie industry, comic strips, allusions, and television series. Without a doubt, classic literature, both as a genre and as a feature of culture, is a relevant topic to discuss. What makes people recognize a work as a classic is one of many social traditions. And ultimately, a classic novel is a product of culture and circumstance, and so long as it contains a worthy message, it is worthy of the term. Unfortunately, society does not always recognize or appreciate the impact of the product or its message. And so the disparity between the *ideal* perspective and the *real* perspective continues to exist.

I would like to thank Professor Downs for all the encouragement he gave me over the course of the semester.

## Works Cited

- Anastalpo, George. "What Is a Classic?" *The Artist as Thinker: From Shakespeare to Joyce*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1983. 1–16. 8 Sept. 2007 <<http://www.ditext.com/anastalpo/classic.html>>.
- Birkerts, Sven. "A Gatsby for Today." *Atlantic* 271.3 (1993): 122–26.
- Hoopes, Nathaniel. "To Know Russia, Know Its Classic Novels." *Christian Science Monitor* 95.72 (2003): 14. 10 Mar. 2007 <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.
- NPR: "In Literature, What Makes a Classic?" *Talk of a Nation*. 21 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6519562>>.
- "Of Truth and Ostriches." *Civilization* 3.4 (1996): 28. 10 Mar. 2007 <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.
- Peters, Michael. "Animal Farm Fifty Years On." *Contemporary Review* 267.1555 (Aug. 1995): 90–91. 19 Mar. 2007 <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.
- Shaw, Peter. "Cutting a Classic Down to Size." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 69.1 (1993): 60–86. 21 Mar. 2007 <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>.