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Why Literature Matters

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In one issue alone of the Sunday *New York Times* three major articles featured new data on external factors important to children's well-being and long term success:

- What they are fed for breakfast and why it matters
- How the time they are delivered as infants—early, on time, late term—impacts learning & aptitude
- How reading versus screen time affects their cognitive function

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Naturally, we care and want to understand more about children's health, as well as the contexts and conditions conducive to their overall education. Parents and educators readily turn to experts for sage advice. With new data emerging everyday and a plethora of "how to" manuals available to parents, child development has almost become a function to be optimized.

Our tendency to focus on the external conditions we can control and optimize in childhood can sometimes obscure the equally important needs of the child's inner world. This inner world, where children ultimately mature and decide *who they are, what their life is for, and who they will become*, requires its own careful tending.

The practical terrain on how to cultivate this inner world remains largely uncharted. Perhaps the most fundamental questions for parents and educators to consider are *how do we help children learn to want to be good, how do we help them to become authors of their own lives?*

In this paper I am primarily interested in exploring the "schooling of desire"—that unseen but critical education of feelings, choice, and action. It is in our inner world, where desires emerge, come into conflict, mature, and shape our agency. It is through the schooling of desire that a person learns to *be* virtuous rather than simply *appear* virtuous (Bohlin, 2005).¹

Similarly, it is through the *miseducation* of desire that a person becomes weak-willed, fragmented, more a victim of circumstance than an author of his or her life. When it comes to the schooling of desire in young people (and adults for that matter), the challenge is threefold:

- It is not enough to simply have an inner world - we must realize *that* we have one, and that it needs cultivation through reflection and action.
- Mature growth in our inner world does not occur spontaneously, i.e., without cause— it is brought about by *encounter*, relationships with persons and ideas, and by experience.
- We *can* influence and optimize the external factors that help young people overcome the first two challenges, but this requires a sustained and thoughtful approach; there are no quick fixes.

¹ Throughout this paper I refer to virtue in the Aristotelian sense, those excellences, internal strengths of mind and character, developed over time, which enable a person to flourish. The case studies in character developed at length in *Teaching Character Education Through Literature* (Bohlin, 2005) help to reveal the factors central to the schooling of desire. For another discussion on the schooling of desire and virtue, see Bohlin (2014) "Virtue: An Argument Worth Rehearsing."

In the sections that follow, I will consider the unique potential of literature to respond to these three challenges.

- First, we will look at what literary characters can teach us about the inner world and the factors that contribute to the schooling of desire.
- Second, we will look at the power of the relationship between the reader and the text to awaken readers to their own inner world and the schooling of desire.
- Finally, we will consider what teachers can do to engage and strengthen readers, to elicit ethical reflection and evoke the schooling of desire.

I. Case Studies in Character: A Window to the Schooling of Desire

The beauty of literature is that it points to the inner life. Great authors are psychologist portrait painters, who provide a window to the soul, inviting us to see what we cannot see in ourselves—or in others—on our own. Rich narratives draw moral motivation into relief and illuminate the factors that help to *school* a character's desires and choices.

The case studies that follow are adapted from a larger qualitative analysis of Sydney Carton from Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* and Jay Gatsby from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*². These contrasting portraits reveal the influence of both relationships and reflection in the schooling of desire. Carton grows as a result of their influence and Gatsby does not as a result of their absence.

Sydney Carton: Disappointed Drudge to Purposeful Friend

A brilliant but lonely barrister in London, Carton appears at first glance a moral profligate—"careless and slovenly, if not debauched." He lurks in the shadows, escapes into heavy drink and wanders aimlessly with an air of apparent indifference.

Perhaps the first morally pivotal point we witness for Carton in the novel is his encounter with the accused Frenchman, Charles Darnay. In his conversation with Darnay, he describes himself as a "disappointed drudge." The physical resemblance between himself and Darnay prompts him to reflect. In Darnay, Carton sees "honorable ambition, self-denial, and perseverance" all he "might have been" had he led his life differently.

Nevertheless, Carton remains weak-willed, unable to escape "the low companions and low habits that [he] scorn[s] but yield[s] to." He is conflicted. Dickens describes him as "the man of good abilities and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help, and his own happiness" (p. 122).

² See *Teaching Character Education Through Literature* (Bohlin, 2005) for a full account of these cases and two others: Elizabeth Bennett from Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*, and Janie from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Despite the distinctions among these protagonists—in time periods, socio-economic contexts, and life circumstances—I found several factors, that when present, awaken and sustain the virtuous cycle, and when absent, the vicious cycle.

Carton's feelings of envy and resentment toward Darnay do not inspire him to change, but they do provoke a desire and decision to spend more time in the company of people whose lives he finds admirable - Lucie Manette, who later marries Darnay, and her elderly father, Dr. Manette. Carton begins to make small changes, after having secured permission to visit; he "claimed his privilege...some half-dozen times a year, at most" and "he never came there heated with wine" (p. 240).

His desires are ultimately refined by his observations of Lucie Manette with her family, and his purposefulness increases with each visit. "From being irresolute and purposeless, his feet became animated by an intention, and in working out that intention, they took him to the doctor's door" (p. 179).

Up until this point in his life, Carton has not confided in anyone. At a second morally pivotal point, he tells Lucie, "In my degradation I have not been so degraded but that the sight of you with your father, and of this home...has stirred old shadows that I thought died out of me.... [I] have heard whispers from old voices impelling me upward, that I thought were silent forever." He is grateful for her trust and promises to "embrace any sacrifice" for her or those closest to her.

The opportunity arises, when Carton learns that Darnay has been condemned to death for treason and imprisoned in La Force. He heads to Paris immediately. By choosing to go, Carton not only seizes the opportunity to keep his word, but he also embraces the risk it poses. His practical wisdom kicks in and enables him to execute his plan with extraordinary deftness. Quick thought and precise action characterize his unnoticed work in Paris. Dickens tells us,

It was not a reckless manner...nor was it more expressive of negligence than defiance. It was the *settled manner* of a tired man, who had wandered and struggled and got lost, but who at length *struck into the road and saw its end*. (p. 342, emphasis added).

Carton's reflections combined with his relationship with the Manette Family enable him to progress from a state of conflicted desires to integrated and harmonized desires that sustain fluid virtuous action and a newfound sense of freedom.

Taking Darnay's place, a choice Carton knows will lead him to the guillotine, he remains at peace.

They said of him, about the city that night, that it was the peacefullest man's face ever beheld there....It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.' (pp. 403-4)

Jay Gatsby: the tragedy of blind eros

Jay Gatsby, by contrast is wholly unreflective. He is schooled by relationships but unlike Carton's these relationships are founded on lies and pretence rather than trust and humility. A strain of tragic optimism runs through the novel as a whole. The reader is invited to revel in

Gatsby's "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" and to mourn their lack of fulfillment. As the novel progresses and Gatsby's dream unfolds, we come to discover the shallowness of his inner world.

The narrator points out, Jay Gatsby "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (p. 99). A seventeen year old Jay Gatz surrenders his family identity and fashions a new one, when he sees Dan Cody, on his yacht. This encounter with Cody, "a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, and of every run for metal since seventy-five," signals the first morally pivotal point for Gatsby. Unreflectively determined to respond to the "drums of his destiny," Jay Gatz pursues what imagines to be his "future glory" and "the beginning of his career." From that moment Cody's yacht drops anchor, a new young man sets out fervently in "the service of the vast, the vulgar, and meretricious beauty."

Five years later Jay Gatsby, thoroughly trained in worldliness but penniless, deceives Daisy Fay into believing he is of her "same stratum," seduces her, and falls madly in love. While this second morally pivotal point represents something ostensibly positive - Gatsby's love for someone beyond himself - he corrupts its potentially transforming power by basing it on pretense. Daisy is the wealthiest and most popular girl in Louisville; even her "voice is full of money." Daisy represents all that Gatsby did not have and all that he has been seeking since joining up with Dan Cody. Gatsby believes he can possess Daisy, and when this plan is foiled, a saddened and sentimental Gatsby sets out to build an empire and win her back. How Gatsby earns his wealth is never fully disclosed. We are left to infer that it is primarily through his illegal dealings. When Gatsby acquires enough money to purchase a great mansion across the Sound from Daisy, he is convinced he has everything she would want.

Gatsby is met with a challenge. At what *could* be a morally pivotal point in his life, he turns a blind eye to the truth. His lack of reflection is evident in his mindless and frenetic pursuit of an untenable goal. Wrapped up in recovering "some idea of himself...that had gone into loving Daisy," and in what he believes to be the climactic moment in restoring their relationship, he showcases his house and all of his belongings. Gatsby clings to the belief that he can "change the past....he wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you.' After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken" (p. 111).

At each morally pivotal moment for Gatsby, there is a lack of ethical reflection – an absence of consideration about his fraud, subterfuge, and denial of reality. At each morally pivotal point, Gatsby relinquishes a part of himself. When he allies himself with Dan Cody, he abandons his family and identity as Jay Gatz from North Dakota. When he falls in love with Daisy and loses her, he loses any last vestige of who he is. Finally, in blindly pursuing Daisy despite her marriage to Tom, he becomes insensitive to the truth altogether. This insensitivity is epitomized at the end of the story, when he ignores Daisy's refusal to leave Tom. And later, after letting Daisy drive recklessly and kill Myrtle Wilson, he fails to take responsibility or show the slightest remorse.

Gatsby has no true friends. The people who come to his parties, “were not invited - they went there.” Most of his guests simply “paid him the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him” (p. 61). Nick cannot secure the presence of any of these guests or even alleged friends to attend his wake or funeral. And perhaps the most telling testimony is Daisy’s failure to call, write, or inquire about the funeral.

Nick Carraway’s friendship with Gatsby, while stemming from mutual regard, is essentially utilitarian. Gatsby needs Nick to secure Daisy. If Nick had “wanted what was best” for Gatsby and vice versa, he would have confronted him about the folly of his dream. There are two moments when Nick calls Gatsby’s enterprise into question - when he tells him that he cannot change the past (which Gatsby flatly denies) and when he is disgusted with him after Myrtle is killed. Nevertheless, Nick’s sympathy for Gatsby triumphs in the end. He chooses to overlook Gatsby’s self-deception and not to hold him accountable. It would seem as though he too is seduced by Gatsby’s dream. Gatsby ends up living his short life guided by blind ambition and unchecked *eros* in pursuit of an impoverished yet glittering ideal.

II. The Relationship Between the Reader and the Text

A Tale of Two Cities speaks to readers’ inner world on a variety of levels. Students can identify with Carton’s sense of powerlessness and self-loathing. They are familiar with what it means to regret mistakes, to feel as though they are a failure or that they missed their chance to do something worthwhile with their time or talents. Others will know exactly what it means to see great possibilities before them but to feel held back by the pull of their laziness, lack of discipline, or fear. They can think of people who helped them beyond their internal conflicts and paralysis. Gatsby’s story has a particular appeal because it challenges readers to reflect on the meaning of friendship, love, and the pursuit of happiness. It confronts them with the meaning of personal identity. Timely and resonant with the pulsing enticements of an image-saturated culture, *The Great Gatsby* raises a number of important questions that appeal to young people in the throes of developing their own sense of self: Will possessing the right ‘stuff’ and cultivating the right image make me more attractive? Will they make my life more satisfying, exciting, and happy? Why or why not?

What is the relationship between the reader and the text? Can this relationship inform the reader’s desire to want to be good? If so, how? As William Kirkpatrick (1994) puts it, “Imagination is one of those keys to virtue.”

It is not enough to *know* what’s right. It is also necessary to *desire* to do what’s right. Desire in turn is directed to a large extent by imagination. In theory, reason should guide our moral choices, but in practice, it’s imagination much more than reason that calls the shots. (p. 23)

The power of literature to awaken and shape the imagination is extensive and beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of scholarship that underscores the potential of literature to strengthen and build the *moral* imagination and character of the

reader (Carr & Harrison 2015; Pike, 2015; Gregory, 2009; Bohlin, 2005; Guorian, 2002; Booth, 1998; Kilpatrick, 1994; Johnson, 1993; Roberts, 1992; Appleyard, 1991; Vitz 1990; Nussbaum, 1990; Coles, 1989; Rule, 1985) .

For St. Augustine, the *New Testament* changed his life forever. For Alexander the Great, the epic battles in Homer's *Iliad* provided instructive insight on military strategy and leadership (Tigner 1993). Abraham Lincoln took Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with him as a faithful traveling companion. He read and reread the play to ponder the dangers of unbridled ambition (Knox Beran, 1998).

Writer David Brooks (2012) highlights the power of literature to illuminate moral nuance and nurture aspirations:

In whatever field you go into, you will face greed, frustration and failure. You may find your life challenged by depression, alcoholism, infidelity, your own stupidity and self-indulgence...It's worth noting that you can devote your life to community service and be a total schmuck. You can spend your life on Wall Street and be a hero. Understanding heroism and schmuckdom requires fewer Excel spreadsheets, more Dostoyevsky and the Book of Job. (p. A31)

Brooks attributes rich literature with the power to shaping our humanity and wider sympathies. Lois Lowry, award-winning children's author tells us literature strengthened her inner world, explaining that the books she read in childhood helped her to mourn the loss of her son who died in a military accident. "Part of the way I dealt with the loss of my child was the books I'd read from a very young age... Reading such things is a rehearsal, in a way. Without realizing it, we rehearse what we would do. And then, if we are called upon to face it, we do what we had rehearsed" (Kennedy, 2003, p. B7).

In addition to providing exemplars, insight and opportunities to "rehearse" vicariously, good stories meet Augustine's criteria for good preaching – they 'delight,' they 'instruct,' and they 'move.' They delight and satisfy our appetite for enjoyment. They instruct the mind. They move the heart, awakening new idealism and ambition. They school our desires both by feeding them and cultivating a hunger for what is resonant with deepest yearnings of human experience.

Delight

The novel, as its name suggests introduces novelty. We know from cognitive science that the brain craves and delights in novelty. Learning is activated and engaged by novel stimuli (Jensen, 2015). The reader experiences "transport" as a result of this delight (Denby, 1996; Gregory, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1978) and widens his imagination and perspective. I was first transported by a book when I was eight years old. I remember being transfixed by *The Little Witch*, a story of a witch whose dream is to become a normal girl. I remember where I sat on the couch when the protagonist described the yellow bloodshot eyes of her mother. I remember the little witch's fear and desire to be different.

It was not until I was thirteen that I encountered a great story—I remember experiencing Jane Eyre’s terror in the red room. I remember the tears that welled in my eyes as her best friend Helen Burns lay dying by her side; I remember each encounter with the intimidating and strangely romantic Mr. Rochester.

Fictional narratives provide rich vicarious experiences that enable readers to travel the world and become acquainted with people from all walks of life. Jane Austen never traveled outside south west England, yet she is one of the greatest novelists of all time. In her understated way, she offers high praise for both the delights and depths of the novel as being

only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language. (Austen, 1817/1998).

Instruct

In Ray Bradbury’s classic science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451*, books have been banned as a threat to peace. Those who illegally hide and read books are turned in by neighbors, and their houses are burned by firemen, the new “custodians of ...peace of mind.” A girl whose family is suspected of having books is criticized by the Firechief: “She didn’t want to know how a thing was done, but *why*. That can be embarrassing. You ask why to a lot of things and you wind up very unhappy indeed, if you keep at it. The poor girl’s better off dead” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 64).

Bradbury wrote this novel as a way to communicate his belief in the power of reading and his gratitude to libraries and books so central to his education. In an interview he explained, that hearing about the book burnings in Nazi Germany and reading about the libraries burned in Alexandria more than 5000 years ago, he wondered what would happen if books were destroyed. “Since I’m self-educated, that means my educators—the libraries—are in danger.” As an adult he grew increasingly concerned with censorship, with attempts to force a uniformity that robs writers of their voice and literary contribution (Gioia, 2005, p. 8).

Bradbury’s reflections remind us that narratives—in both their structure and meaning—have unique educational power. We are storytelling animals. We relate to one another and, transmit culture, memories, and tradition by way of stories. Stories invite readers to ponder and make connections among and between other narratives, between stories and their own lives. Stories have the potential to challenge our worldview or our deeply held assumptions. They prompt us to think deeply, to ponder meaning—the author’s intended meaning and our own. Good narratives ultimately invite us to consider Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1984) key ethical question, “Of what stories or stories do I find myself a part?”

In short, good reading prompts us to reflect and evaluate. When we are not reflective we run the risk of floating aimlessly along the surface of life. F. Scott’s Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* celebrates the allure of a glittering life replete with fancy parties, sparkling personalities, and

showpiece cars, but it also points to the evanescence of it all. The novel's tragic strain challenges readers to take a closer look at casual recklessness, brutal snobbery, and self-indulgent lust.

Move

When I taught *The Great Gatsby*, I was struck by the influence of its characters on my students. They were troubled by Jordan's reputation for lying, Tom Buchanan's arrogance, and Daisy's total preoccupation with self. They had mixed feelings toward Gatsby, trying to decide if he was naïve and misguided or if he was dangerously obsessed, borderline insane, and more of a stalker than a lover. The sway these characters held over my students was given eloquent testimony at the end of one class.

Two girls were packing their books and preparing to leave the room. They had begun discussing weekend plans and who was invited to an upcoming party, when one of them blurted out indignantly, "You are such a Daisy Buchanan." Whether or not the details of the conversation warranted such a slight I'll never know. What I do know is that the young woman accused felt the blow with full force. She was reduced to tears. A bitter quarrel ensued. Perhaps their exchange was more striking to me than it was to them; it was the first time I had witnessed the invocation of a literary character nearly give rise to a fistfight.

A faculty colleague shared her experience as a reluctant reader in childhood. When she picked up *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she initially struggled with the text. Yet, as she grew more engaged in the story and the plight of slaves, she wept. This experience was pivotal in her life as a reader. It motivated her to read more and ultimately, to become an avid reader.

Like the fictional character in the case studies, the reader's experience with the text is shaped by the relationships, new pleasures and pain, opportunity for reflection, intellectual humility and personal change the narrative may awaken.

III. What can teachers of literature do to engage readers?

Engaging and strengthening readers

My interest is not only the literature, which Kafka says has the power to melt "the frozen sea within us."³ I am also interested in how skillful teachers of literature can generate the metaphorical heat to help this melting process along for the reader. I am keenly aware that novels and their moral merits are increasingly lost on students, whose reading level and habits of thinking deeply about a text may not be well formed.

Teachers of literature are confronted with a number of challenges to engaging and strengthening readers. Educators, parents and policy makers bemoan poor literacy, the decline

³ Kafka's actual words in a letter to Oskar Pollak are as follows: "The books we read are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation – a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us."

in reading comprehension. They cite students' poor reading habits, screen time, lack of attention and focusing power, and an uninspiring selection of young adult fiction as culprits (Wolf, 2007).

Common Sense Media's report, "Children, Teens, And Reading" (2014) finds the decline in young people's reading habits as follows. Since 1984, the percentage of

- 13-year-olds who are weekly readers went down from 70% to 53%,
- 17-year-olds who are weekly readers went from 64% to 40%.
- 17-year-olds who never or hardly ever read tripled during this period, from 9% to 27%."

Barbara Whitlock (2014), English Department Chair at the Montrose School, cites the following research about the declining reading level of students:

The 2013 *Renaissance Reading Habits* surveyed more than 9 million high school students and teachers last year. The study revealed that the books teachers assigned and seniors read independently were written at a 5.3 (age 10) grade average reading level. To address this literacy crisis, many schools are slowing down the pace of reading to help students catch up to higher standards while debating how much fiction versus nonfiction reading they should assign. (p. 3)

Oftentimes the selection of young adult reading material is simply not robust enough to engage readers at their highest cognitive level, let alone engage their inner world and inspire ethical reflection. In *This is Your Brain on Jane Austen* (Goldman, 2012), a Stanford University researchers used functional MRIs to capture and document the complex thinking regions of the brain triggered by reading Jane Austen, regions which remain unaffected while reading light, popular fiction.

In addition to a decline in reading habits and level, *how* young people read and is also a problem (Wolf, 2007). Whitlock, a practitioner, underscores this.

Saturation in a digital culture, even when we are reading thoughtful online articles, can also undermine intellectual development. When reading online, studies suggest that our brains and eyes track in zig-zag patterns, grabbing bits of information in a process called "meta-data content chunking." While this scanning process may be a quick way to grab bits of information, this pattern of reading undermines the development of critical thinking skills. Students miss nuance and overlook new vocabulary. They do not develop a habit of structured thinking. They miss movements in the development of an argument. In short, online reading patterns do not enable students to develop the close reading and intellectual virtues essential for complex thinking and effective writing. (Whitlock, 2014, p. 3)

Even adults are struggling to engage with a text in a meaningful way. Author of *The Shallows* (2011), Nicholas Carr tells us “...what the Internet seems to be doing is chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation...Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski”(Carr, 2008). He reflects,

Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages... The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle. (Carr, 2008)

Eliciting ethical reflection

Confronting these challenges with innovative strategies and approaches to good reading is key if we want to promote ethical reflection on literature. Mark Pike's book *Ethical English* (2015), as well as Tom Harrison and David Carr's *Educating Character through Stories* (2015), help do this well. They offer a plethora of ideas and examples for educators to adapt to their own curriculum. *The Knightly Virtues Project* (The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtue, 2014), the *Narnian Virtues Character Education Project* (Pike, ongoing), and *Great Lives, Vital Lessons* (Bohlin & Lerner, 2005) provide a framework and learning activities that promote aesthetic engagement with narratives as well as ethical reflection on themes and characters. *Teaching Character Education Through Literature* (Bohlin, 2005) provides extensive instructional ideas for teaching the novel at the secondary level.

The question remains, *Does good reading promise to change us and make us better people?* We do not have sufficient research in the field to claim any direct correlation between the reading of good literature and growth in virtue. We see in the examples above, evidence of the relationship between the reader, the story and the characters. When readers experience a relationship with characters, their emotions are schooled in new ways. They develop new aversion, for example, to characters they do not want to be like—Dickens's Scrooge or J.K. Rowling's Dudley Dursely. In his book, *A Jane Austen Education: How Six Novels Taught Me About Love, Friendship, and the Things That Really Matter*, William Deresewicz (2011) tells of his transformation from a hedonistic self-centered 20-something to a gentleman concerned about the humanity of others. As Hamlet put it “the readiness is all.” The reader must be disposed to learn, and teachers are critical to helping nurture these dispositions along.

Too often children and young people are not given the opportunity to become acquainted with great narratives, literature that can indeed delight, instruct and move. To keep students attentive to the inner world and the schooling of desire, teachers of literature must bear in mind that *what* students read is as important as how they read and how often they read.

Mark Twain remarked, “The man who doesn't read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.” And Henry David Thoreau advised, “Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.” Yet, Jordan Shapiro (2014) points out, “Books

like *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* are more popular than literary classics...Teachers assign these more often than Shakespeare or *Don Quixote*...because they figure any reading is good reading.... On the one hand, this makes sense. On the other hand, ... popular fiction prioritizes sales over content.”

If we understand reading as important exercise and nutrition for the brain, an activity that strengthens mind and character, attuning us to the inner life, we will be more inclined to choose judiciously. What constitutes the meat and potatoes? The protein and vegetables? What makes for a good dessert? Good reading that delights, instructs and moves includes all of these elements.

The vicious cycle of which educators need to be wary is a steady diet of superficial, one-dimensional fiction—poorly written novels marketed specifically to adolescents as realistic, relevant and easy-to-read. It often sensationalizes the challenges adolescents face—drug addiction, eating disorders, divorce, sexual experimentation—and presents one-dimensional and descriptive but not deep characters. It tends to be issue-focused but not sensitive to the complexities of personal identity, character and aspirations. The characters are frequently caught in series of problems. They muddle along blindly through the school of trial and error, and their stories do not provide the kind of imaginative richness that heightens a reader’s moral vision of him or herself and the world.

Evoking the schooling of desire

So what kind of books ought we feed to our students? "We are as liable to be corrupted by books as by companions," novelist Henry Fielding quips (Fielding, 1902, p. 317). And it is no small coincidence that his quote frames the door of a Public Library.

Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 film *Rope* offers a frightening illustration. After reading Nietzsche with interest and being taken with his notion of the Superman who is “beyond good and evil,” this student applies what he has learned. He enlists a friend, and the two find exhilaration in plotting and murdering a classmate. The satisfaction the student experiences is even more chilling when the truth is ultimately disclosed. He cannot understand why his teacher (played by Jimmy Stewart), who introduced him to Nietzsche in the first place, is not proud of his feat.

My own experience teaching Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* followed by *All My Sons* to fifteen-year-olds bears this out. Miller is good literature—there is depth, truth, and complexity. But a balanced diet matters. This is a depressing series of plays for an adolescent struggling with identity and family difficulties. In his *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Syllabuses of Risk” English professor Jeffrey Berman (2002), saw a correlation in the number of students disclosing both their depression and suicidal thoughts with the literary diet he was feeding his students.

The question is not whether it is better to read *Hamlet* than *Hunger Games*. The question is why does Hamlet matter? What makes it nutritious—intellectually, aesthetically,

ethically? Why does *The Hunger Games* need to be balanced by *Jane Eyre*? Why do the age, dispositions, temperaments, and personal circumstances of students matter?

Anton Chekhov explained in a letter that "The aim of fiction is absolute and honest truth." Good literature helps us to gain greater clarity on the truth, the truth about people and life. Research published in *Science* (Kidd & Castano, 2013) by social psychologists at the New School for Social Research in New York City, suggests that reading good literature can improve our ability to read social cues in a wide range of social situations. Pam Belluck (2013) explains, the research team "found that after reading literary fiction, as opposed to popular fiction or serious nonfiction, people performed better on tests measuring empathy, social perception and emotional intelligence." Why? "Literary fiction... encourag[es] readers to make inferences about characters and be sensitive to emotional nuance and complexity...."(Belluck, 2013)

What can curriculum developers, policy makers and communities do to help students want to read more frequently, more deeply, and to choose quality literature?

1. Encourage schools, teachers, and libraries to recommend and feature good books. Many schools have initiated an all school "community read" to promote conversation from the classroom to the dinner table.⁴
2. Initiate school and public reading groups that hook readers with dramatic readings and animated conversation.⁵
3. Follow the lead of famous high-tech parents on how to create a reader-friendly environment in schools and homes. The following is excerpted from Nick Bilton's 2014 *New York Times* article, "Steve Jobs Was a Low-Tech Parent."

[Jobs told me,] "We limit how much technology our kids use at home".... "Every evening Steve made a point of having dinner at the big long table in their kitchen, discussing books and history and a variety of things, [Jobs' biographer Walter Isaacson] said. "No one ever pulled out an iPad or computer. The kids did not seem addicted at all to devices."

Chris Anderson, the former editor of *Wired* and now chief executive of 3D Robotics, a drone maker, has instituted time limits and parental controls on every device in his home.... "That's because we have seen the dangers of technology firsthand. I've seen it in myself, I don't want to see that happen to my kids."

Evan Williams, a founder of Blogger, Twitter and Medium, and his wife, Sara Williams, said that in lieu of iPads, their two young boys have hundreds of books (yes, physical ones) that they can pick up and read anytime.

⁴ See for example, The National Endowment for the Arts Initiative, The Big Read <http://www.neabigread.org>

⁵ Shakespeare Alive, Poetry Alive, Poetry Aloud and America's Favorite Poem's Project are all initiatives that promote dramatic reading of literature as well as public discourse about literature and why it matters.

How does reading literature help to cultivate virtue and promote a virtuous cycle of learning and growth? It helps us to take ourselves seriously, to take other people seriously—in other words, it promotes healthy relationships. It *delights*, introducing new pleasures and awakening appropriate pain in the face of injustice, indignity. It *moves* us to think about the kind of person we would like to become. And it ultimately *instructs* and challenges us to reflect on what matters most and why. William Deresiewicz (2011) puts it this way. “Learning to read means learning to live. Keeping your eyes open when you’re looking at a book is just a way of teaching yourself to keep them open all the time.”

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