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## Why Read the Masters?

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### Abstract

The present article is a plea for the value and the obvious relevance of reading in the formation of every generation of students and teachers. Reading brings us knowledge and it usually comes as a pleasant surprise. It helps us and it guides us in our quest for knowledge, especially when we break open different kinds of texts – scientific, philosophical, literary, historical, to name a few. Are there any lessons to be learned? Can we really find role models? What is the main thing that reading can do to make us better people? A quick introduction about history, followed by quotations from various scholars like C. S. Lewis, takes us back to the experience of (re-)reading Plato and Aristotle. When recent or contemporary scholars continue the conversation, we segue into the concepts of a good character and the value of virtue, which lead us to moral education and moral imagination. They all confer reading a unique quality that eventually gives us a chance to savor its greatness and at the same time hope to achieve something equally rewarding.

**Keywords:** Education, Reading, Communication, Knowledge, Imagination

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### 1. Introduction

The word education comes from the Latin word *educare* meaning “to bring up” or from another Latin word *educere* meaning “to bring forth.” Education, therefore, means the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of certain necessary skills to prosper and to be successful in life.

Academic skills would include all those innate or acquired abilities that learners of all ages might need in order to navigate through the job market and the everyday life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The present article is going to focus on reading as one of those necessary skills in question. In this context, the first question we might ask is: Why read? According to Adler (2011), the goals of reading would include: reading for information and reading for understanding, and our success in reading it is determined by the extent to which we received everything the writer intended to communicate:

We can employ the word ‘reading’ in two distinct senses. The first sense is the one in which we speak of ourselves as reading newspapers, magazines, or anything else that, according our skills and talents, is at once thoroughly intelligible to us. Such things may increase our store of information, but they cannot improve our understanding. [...] The second sense is the one in which a person tries to read something that at first he does not completely understand. Here the thing to be read is initially better or higher than the reader. The writer is communicating something that can increase the reader’s understanding. (Adler, *How to Read a Book*, [www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com))

In Adler's view, this type of communication also implies learning new things, and if the reader can manage to acquire new knowledge, he is reading and at the same time reaches a greater understanding. "He has indeed elevated himself by this activity, though indirectly, of course, the elevation was made possible by the writer who had something to teach him." In other words, we can learn from our "betters." We get to know who they are, what they did, and how to learn from them.

History tells us that famous personalities learned life lessons from other people who lived before them. George Washington, for example, is said to have followed the example he saw in Cincinnatus (519 BC – 430 BC), a Roman patrician and military leader who was living on his farm when his fellow citizens asked him to lead them against an unexpected invasion. He left his plough (you can see his statue in the city that bears his name now – Cincinnati), assumed complete control over the state and led his folks to victory. However, right after that, he relinquished his power and returned to his farm. So did Washington, who in his later years returned to his home and continued his life as a farmer.

Stories passed on to our Founding Fathers helped them put together the Constitution. They resorted to ancient stories related to what is right and what is wrong. When they had to make important decisions, they looked back and were inspired by our ancestors, who had lived in other times and other places, but had to deal with similar challenging questions.

## 2. Discussion

If we really want to fully understand who we are, where our own culture came from, and what it is, we would definitely need to consider and appreciate what is called classical literature. According to Jenkyns (2016), it is worthwhile to take into account what Greek and Latin authors invented and imagined, of what they learned from one another, or how their literature grew and flowered and changed. In other words, if they were able to impart knowledge to each other, it is only fair to say that our generations can also learn from them.

Classical literature includes some works that rank among the supreme achievements of the human mind. Here are brilliance, depth, originality, as well as a variety and daring which would surprise anyone who takes the word 'classical' to imply marmoreal correctitude. (Jenkyns, 2016, intro)

How do we learn to choose what is right and what is wrong for ourselves and for generations to come? This how C. S. Lewis recaptures the old wisdom that crossed the centuries, which was made possible by delving into the moral values embedded in ancient times.

The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be only by reading old books. (Quoted in Piper, 2006, p. 11)

Another good example might be Sir Winston Churchill, who was adamant about certain human skills that might be extremely useful in the quest for knowledge. In 1941 the British Prime Minister addressed a group of students at Harrow and said: "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never. In nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense." (Churchill, 2014, p. 254)

From Churchill, J. F. Kennedy, among others, borrowed ideas that materialized into speeches that generation after generation of people admired. In turn, people living in this age may want to go back to the same ideas that can be used as a reminder of the depth of old wisdom.

We go back to our masters to see how they learned from their predecessors and how they answered their big questions with good examples from our cultural heritage. It all starts by tracing our roots and our cultural values, the relevance of education, and the impact of knowledge to create a cultural continuum.

Aristotle's lesson: Why do we strive to be good – and where does education come in? This is how Aristotle begins his monumental work entitled *Ethics*, which history has considered one of the best books ever written about ethics, and some would even venture to say that this might be the best book ever written: "Every art and every inquiry, and likewise every action and choice, seems to aim at some good, and hence it has been beautifully said that the good is that at which all things aim". (Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 1)

Aristotle was born in 384 in Stagira in north-eastern Greece. From an early age, he joined the Athenian Academy, where philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, and politicians gathered under Plato's leadership. Although a Macedonian by origin, Aristotle soon turned to be on friendly terms with Plato. If you remember Rafael's School of Athens, you will immediately recognize the two walking together, evidently engulfed in a daily conversation.

King Philip of Macedonia soon found out that Aristotle had carried out valuable scientific research and brought him to the capital to teach his son, the future Alexander the Great. We have very little to go on regarding the monarch and the philosopher, but we know that while Alexander the Great was conquering Asia, Aristotle was back in Athens, where he deftly built a library soon to become as famous as the city itself. Among his followers were mostly research students we now know as *peripatetics* (from the Greek word *peripatein* meaning 'to walk up and down') because they walked up and down while discussing philosophy.

The main idea of this groundbreaking work was that ethics is that special branch of philosophy that deals with what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. In Aristotle's view, we are defined by our character, and we build character by doing good, or better yet, by becoming good.

### 2.1. What Is the Cultivation of Good and Good Character?

In 1998 Vigen Guroian published a solid and elegant piece of work entitled *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, with its subtitle *How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination*, in which he promoted the idea that children should learn what is

good, goodness, and what is to be upright. In other words, education should be the cultivation of goodness and good character. Is he talking about instruction of morality in general, or maybe he is going a little deeper? Himself a parent with lots of questions regarding morality and its value, not only in the family, but also in the large frame of our society, Guroian argues in favor of imagination as essential in the process of education, with the caveat that morality and virtues should definitely be analyzed from a learner's perspective:

Mere instruction in morality is not sufficient to nurture the virtues. It might even backfire, especially when presentation is heavily exhortative and the pupil's will is coerced. (Guroian, p. 156)

What does he mean by "mere instruction?" Is this acceptable? Or is it not enough? Do we force our students to be what we deem appropriate?

Instead, a compelling vision of the goodness of goodness itself needs to be presented in a way that is attractive and stirs the imagination. A good moral education addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of human nature. (p. 156)

Notice that the author points to something that "is attractive and stirs the imagination." Young readers should find the attraction themselves to something that nurtures their imagination.

The great fairy tales and fantasy stories capture the meaning of morality through vivid depictions of the struggle between good and evil, where characters must make difficult decisions between right and wrong or heroes and villains contest the very fate of imaginary worlds. The great stories avoid didacticism and supply the imagination with important symbolic information about the shape of our world and appropriate responses to its inhabitants. (pp. 17-18)

William Kilpatrick, Gregory and Suzanne M. Wolfe in *Books That Build Character, A Guide to Teaching Your Child Moral Values through Stories* (1994) continue the same idea when they make the connection between imagination and virtue:

Imagination is one of the keys to virtue. It's not enough to know what is right. It's also necessary to desire to do right. Desire, in turn, is directed to a large extent to imagination. In theory, reason should guide our moral choices, but in practice, it is imagination much more than reason that calls the shots. Too often our reason obediently submits to what our imagination has already decided. (p. 23)

#### 2.2. How do Children Understand the Value of Virtue?

The process of teaching can be better understood as a way of distilling the intricate aspects of everyday life and making daily routines a source of entertainment and personal achievement. Plato addressed the value of virtue and its acquisition during a child's formation years by suggesting that formal training might not be enough, but, instead, young learners should get a chance to taste and experience the best of what literature and practical arts can offer.

Children should be brought up in such a way that they will love virtue and hate vice. How does a child fall in love with virtue? By being exposed to the right kind of stories, music, and art, said Plato. Such an education helps a child to develop the right sort of likes and dislikes, and without those dispositions it won't matter how much formal training in ethics a youngster later receives. (Kirkpatrick et al., p. 23)

Furthermore, a plea for the choice of good books can hold the key to a proper moral education:

That is why books are so important for moral education. They inspire a love of goodness. [...] Stories, then, because of their hold on the imagination, can help to create an emotional attachment to goodness. If other things are in place, that emotional attraction can then grow into a real commitment to goodness. (p. 24)

#### 2.3. From Moral Education to Moral Imagination

In 2016, Jon M Fennell, Professor at Hillsdale College, asserted that for many years he was puzzled by certain phrases containing 'moral imagination.' After careful research, he contradicted some of his predecessors who claimed that moral imagination is something that can be lost and that it exists in some persons but not in others. His personal view was that "all of us possess moral imagination." (<https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/04/what-is-the-moral-imagination.html>)

The same author goes on to say:

...moral imagination is the name of a store of images—images pertaining to ideals, principles, meanings, and possibilities—in terms of which one grasps the world and, thereby, in light of which one acts. But the way one acts is a synonym for character. Thus, the building of moral imagination is the formation of character, and to the degree that parents and teachers systematically involve themselves in this activity they are engaged in character education. moral imagination is the name of a store of images—images pertaining to ideals, principles, meanings, and possibilities—in terms of which one grasps the world and, thereby, in light of which one acts. But the way one acts is a synonym for character. Thus, the building of moral imagination is the formation of character, and to the degree that parents and teachers systematically involve themselves in this activity they are engaged in character education. (ibid.)

To recap, according to Professor Fennell, parents and teachers should involve themselves in the building of moral imagination which is synonymous with character education.

#### 2.4. What Do We Need to Know about Moral Imagination?

Our everyday life, our life experience, and in our case, the teaching experience might be the best place to foster such ideas through conversations, debates, and similar practical knowledge. According to Guroian (1998), the classroom activities should also include sharing the best moments of our life experience that empowers and enriches the exchange of information, ideas, and opinions. Or, better yet, "The richness or the poverty of the moral imagination depends on the richness or the poverty of experience". (Guroian, p. 24)

In other words, the moral imagination can be kept active because it motivates us to find meaning, but it needs nurture and proper exercise. And this brings us back to practice, daily classroom activities where we can resort to good examples of literature. However, according to Kilpatrick et al., there is always another caveat:

The danger facing children's literature does not come from ogres and villains that haunt the pages of fairy tales and adventure stories; the danger lies, rather, in the continued proliferation of normless books that cater to anxiety and self-absorption, and have nothing to teach about life, except, perhaps, that whatever happens is okay. The danger is not that such books lead to a life of crime, but to a life of boredom, selfishness, and limited horizons. (Kilpatrick et al., 1994, p. 6)

#### 2.5. *Are There any Good Books to Recommend?*

When dealing with important issues that imply a good reception among young learners, who may become avid readers, the choice of reading material is obvious. Unlike resources that exclude the positive aspects of being absorbed in a good story, a better solution is readily available:

Fortunately, there is no shortage of stories of another sort: books that challenge, thrill, and excite, and awaken young readers to the potential drama of life, especially to the drama of a life lived in obedience to the highest ideals. Such books have something better than therapeutic reassurance. Like true friends, they encourage us to be our best selves. (p. 6)

How do these books display our intellectual acumen?

What in these books connects us with other people and events in the real world?

How and where do we find meaning in such stories?

Asking such questions will turn on the lights. The deeper we go into various disciplines, the deeper truths we are bound to discover. When we engage in the delightful experience of reading profound texts, we re-live crucial moments in our history, and thereby learn life lessons that can be handed down from generation to generation. For the younger ones, the access to great books might provide innumerable accounts of unsurmountable obstacles, but at the same time, encourage actions that could become exemplary and habitual. Like one of my professors said, the human mind, once expanded by knowledge, will never get back to its original shape.

#### 2.6. *How about Some Examples?*

While reading a good story, the intrinsic value of our imagination can easily be nurtured in a child's mind by the power of the written word and its multiple ramifications. Real life examples and good role models can work miracles if they are all properly introduced:

*The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Little Mermaid*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Snow Queen*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and the *Chronicles of Narnia* ... [reveal] an aspect of to be truly human, not in a moralistic way by spelling the rules and regulations of right behavior, but in a way that educates the imagination of the reader to see patterns of linking characters, decisions, and events in the real world. It is a way not just of communicating the rules, but showing how the rules work and perhaps even why they work. However fantastic and unreal the landscapes in which these stories unfold, however untrue to life they may be in a factual sense, they are true in the meaning of the word, in that they reflect the way things are. They open our eyes to look not merely at the surface of things, but at their form. (Quoted in O'Toole, 2019, <https://theclassicalclassroom.com/2019/11/20/caldecott-on-choosing-fiction/>)

The same author goes even further and argues that "At its best, fiction can show us something true about the world that a mere recording of events might not show as clearly." From an early age, reading, and the knowledge that comes with it, can bring us happiness.

Human beings are known to be in a perpetual quest for knowledge, which applies equally to people of all ages, and this comes from our innate ability to perpetuate innovation and to look for new things, new information, and new life experiences. According to Van Doren,

The desire to know, when you realize you do not know, is universal and probably irresistible. It was the original temptation of mankind, and no man or woman, and especially no child, can overcome it for long. But it is a desire, as Shakespeare said, that grows by what it feeds on. It is impossible to slake the thirst for knowledge. And the more intelligent you are, the more this is so. (Van Doren, 1993, p. xxiii)

Why read the ancient Sumerian poem, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*? Do we really want to go back that far in our history? According to Davis (2015), "*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the oldest story that has come down to us through the ages of history. It predates the *Bible*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*." (p. 11) Readers who venture into deciphering the oral poem about Gilgamesh the King who lives approximately between 2850 B.C and 2700 B.C. will undoubtedly get a chance to savor, even in translation, the moral values "recounting mankind's unending quest for immortality." The unknown author speaks to us about a unique moment when Ancient Sumer presented itself as one of the first civilizations in history. Its written form, in what is now known as cuneiform, the story of Gilgamesh comes with a magic spell that takes us back about eight thousand years.

The King Gilgamesh is presented in all his glory and grandeur of his days, and page after page, his personality and his entire culture is revealed in front of our eyes. One short passage should suffice:

He had seen all. He all knowledge possessed. Wise was he beyond measure. Gilgamesh was the possessor of all understanding. He had wisdom of all things. He knew the Secret and the Mystery. He knew the time before the Great Flood. (Quoted in Davis, p. 17)

The historical king is going through battles, fights monsters, and has a good friend, a wild man named Enkidu, whose death makes the "hero inconsolable and takes him on a desperate journey to find the one man who can tell him how to escape death."

(Mitchell, 2004) The hero's universal appeal is what attracts our attention to human values that cross centuries in stories that can teach the permanent questions about good and evil, with life lessons for generation after generation of readers. His journey is also a quest – with questions and answers – but also a much needed example of wisdom for all mankind.

Going back in time, we encounter significant moments in our history when prominent figures had a profound influence on the life of the mind. From Socrates we learn that he was never happy with what he knew and always asked questions. The famous principle that a composition must have a beginning, a middle, and an end comes to us from Aristotle, who was also the first one who thought of parts of speech. Cervantes gave us Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, who learn together and teach other. By the same token, in *The Little Prince*, a fox asks the young man to tame her. When the prince admits he doesn't know how, the fox just tells him to do it and learn by doing it. Hemingway was the master of understatement in writings you need to read twice to appreciate them. In Shakespeare we see a seemingly impossible combination of tragedy and comedy, two opposites glued into one witty synthesis of characters and plot.

This brings us to the concept of world literature, which is self-explanatory. In 1907, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) gave a lecture on the topic of 'vishva sahitya,' a Bengali term that can be translated as 'world literature.' The Comparative Literature Association of India deems his lecture as ground-breaking. Tagore, the Nobel Prize Winner for Literature in 1913, known for having written a variety of genres, including drama, essay, novel, novella, and short story, is also famous for his approach to literature all over the world:

He identifies three modes of connection with the world: intellect, need, and joy or delight (*Ananda* – a particular difficult term to translate). The intellect 'places truth in a witness box of its own making and interrogates it to extract its secrets,' whereas need is driven by self-interest. (Quoted in Helgesson & Thomsen, 2019).

Where does 'joy' come in and what does it mean? "It is to know another as our very own, and to know ourselves as if we were another's." In Tagore's view, literature is "a temple that the universal man has built; writers have come from all times and all nations to work as laborers in that project." (Quoted in Helgesson & Thomsen, 2019) That being said, good books will always have sentences so well-crafted that we need to re-read them and images or ideas so enjoyable that they return to us for days to come. Words, in their turn, will lead to building blocks of knowledge that will delight the mind and therefore develop new skills of interpretation and evaluation. From intellect to need, and finally to joy or delight, the exploration of great books can teach us how (not what) to think.

According to Prior (2018), reading should definitely include literature that embodies virtue. "Reading virtuously means, first, reading closely, being faithful to both text and context, interpreting accurately and insightfully. Indeed, there is something in the very form of reading – the shape of the action itself – that tends toward virtue." For those who live surrounded by books, reading should be savored, because good reading material should not be "rushed through," but slowly be "luxuriated in," word by word, and page by page.

### 3. Conclusion

The article is meant to encourage and empower readers to go on a journey of discovery. If our ancestors climbed insurmountable heights or fought vital battles, we can learn to do the same. Here we are learning how to apply the most significant elements of experience into a life of accomplishments. Reading, for those who want to spend their lives with books, will definitely give them a chance to savor the greatness and the hope of achieving it. In doing so, we will also get a chance to be enthralled by masterpieces that were written, read, re-read, translated, memorized, interpreted, imitated, adapted, and let loose into the world cultures, for all of us to savor and admire.

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