

Emily Smith

5.2 Position Statement

I define classic stories as ones which stand the test of time, contain themes or lessons which span across generations, races, genders and other differentiating factors, allows readers to connect to the story, are quality stories in literature or illustrations, and contain some sort of universal struggle. This definition has come from our group discussion on what makes a classic (from *Peter Rabbit* to *Little Women*), the list of classics we defined as a class and my own mulling of the topic. Children today who don't take time to read these stories are missing out, however, I do not think that children should be forced to read them.

One of the ideas about classics that comes from the themes, lessons and connections that span across generations, races, genders, etc., is that part of what makes a classic a classic is that there is a sense of tradition that is part of the experience of reading the story which is where I think a book goes from being a just a book to a classic. When a person reads a book that they enjoy (which usually involves some sort of making a personal connection with the book) then they recommend the book to their friends, and if the friends enjoy the book they pass it on to their friends and so on and so forth. This starts a book onto being a classic, if people continue to enjoy it. If one person enjoys the book and the person they give it to does not then the story does not continue to get passed on and does not become a classic. What makes sense about this being part of the definition of a classic, is that the general population is the one making the call on whether or not it is a "good book." If many different types of people enjoy it then it is fitting the criteria for classic stories, in that people are connecting, and there is probably struggle and it is most likely quality or it wouldn't hold up. This process also takes lots of time and therefore helps to cover that criteria as well.

This phenomenon also happens generationally. When a person goes to a bookstore to pick out a story for their child, there are going to be much more likely to get something that they enjoy, has emotional connection with, or at least are familiar with rather than something that they don't know anything about. This is true of others who buy gifts for young children (which is essentially where young children get their books since I don't know many 3 year olds who go out shopping by themselves). People are

going to be more likely to pass on stories that they heard when they were younger, which probably came from someone who had it read to them as well. This then too allows for books to become classics.

After working with *Little Women*, it occurred to me that another way a classic comes to be in through multiple interpretations of the story. The two versions of the story are not the only movies that had been made of the story of the March sisters, nor the only media through which someone has adapted the story. There are plays and abridged versions. Many other classics have been adapted multiple times. One of my favorite stories is *Anne of Green Gables*, which has been movies, cartoon shows, picture books, cookbooks, plays, and there is even a whole tourist trap devoted to it. Another thing, then, that I would add to making a story a classic, is over time, while the basic story line remains in tact, many people change and adapt it and it continues to be popular.

Classics are a part of every young reader whether they know it or not. Classics are so engrained into our society that often times they are a part of new stories without people even realizing it. I am not sure there are any children in the world who have not come across some form of *Cinderella*. I have heard someone say before that there is not “chick flick” created today that you can’t trace back to Shakespeare. While I am not an expert when it comes to Shakespeare (I have probably only read 3-5 of his works) I believe there is probably some truth to the statement. Along with these influences which are ether intentional or unintentional adaptations, there are stories which intentionally include the characters or themes of the classic within a new story, for example the *Percy Jackson Series*. In these books the old classics (Greek mythology) is resurrected through its contemporary characters and give it’s readers (or watchers if people only see the movie) a taste of the classic story at least on some level.

It would be my hope that these are not the only experiences that people have with the actual classic stories. Classics themselves (not adaptations) should be a part of young readers’ experiences. If for no other reason, children and adults should still read classics to connect them to their history. As a defining part of being a classic, time tested-ness is a trait a story must have to be a classic. There is a societal history that people can be a part of if they choose to, just by reading a book. Hundreds of thousands of people share in the history, and I think that it should be a shared experience, because there are not

many other opportunities for people to actively take part in something that big especially not by doing something so simple.

People should also still read classics to vary their knowledge base of the adaptations and add ons. Experiences with the new stories can become so much richer if you experience the original and adjust to the adaptation. For example, I had seen the Wynonna Ryder version of *Little Women* a long time ago, before I had read the story, then after reading the story and watching the movie again, I got a lot more out of watching the movie because I had the experience of reading the book and recognizing how the producers, writers and directors had interpreted Alcott's vision, since I now knew (or at least had a better idea of) what her vision was. It was very interesting to me the different light I saw the movie in watching it now after having read the book rather than what I thought of it before.

Another reason that classics are important to read is they give children a sense of the world. Through their themes and lessons children can help shape their ideas about what the world holds and how they fit into it. I also think books are a great way to reinforce universal truths, like good over evil, hard work over laziness and truth over corruption and lies. Children get mixed messages about what is ok or not ok and books help to enforce the ideals that I still believe in and would want for all of my kids to believe in as well.

All that being said, and in spite of the fact that I believe a teacher's number one responsibility is to help her students grow, I do not believe that classics should be taught formally as a requirement. I am not saying that I think we should get rid of classes that help readers understand the classics and study them formally, but in order for person to truly enjoy and appreciate a classic, I am not sure they can be forced to read it. Electives which students can choose to be a part of I am ok with, because it does not take the "joy" out of reading it, and classics are so rich and have surrounding factors it is important to have people who know about them and can help others learn about them as well. There are so many times when I believe (especially young) children do not take as much away from a classic as they should because they are forced to read it. Even by allowing children to choose between classics and they pick which one to read, gives them some ownership and helps them to not feel as if they need to rebel against the story, which I

believe happens in schools and is not fair to the stories they are happening to. I think the best way to “teach” classics is to have them available to students, and to be knowledgeable about them as the teacher, but then you have to let the student grapple, question, and enjoy the story. They have to be allowed to make the connections that are so important in reading, and often times are crushed by deadlines and a rebellious attitude because children feel as if adults are making them read it. The other thing that needs to be done in order to help teach the classic is that the students must see others (whether that is other students or teachers or parents) be excited about the story. Just like the process of passing on the story to one another helping it to become a classic, the best advertisement for a book in a classroom is people enjoying it and recommending it to others. This also gets students discussing with each other the story and makes the experience all the more powerful and authentic, which is the goal.

The classics are still a very important and integral part of today’s reading society. It is important for all readers to understand and appreciate its importance in the literary world. It is my hope as a teacher to help children continue to fall in love and enjoy the stories that so many before them have and become part of something historical. I am looking forward to watching more contemporary books hold up to the criteria and become classics themselves.