Is the Study of Humanities Relevant?

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October 24, 2005

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John Milton, in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, [(1)] takes as his theme the creation of the angels, man, the fall of mankind from grace, and mankind's subsequent redemption by Jesus Christ. Milton attempts in his opening stanza to "justify the ways of God to man." This poem, written in the seven year period from 1658 – 1665, attempts to explain the nature of evil in the world; man's place in the cosmology of God, angels and demons; and to explain the nature of the Trinity and Jesus' crucifixion and Resurrection. Admittedly, Milton's task is enormous, but he manages to achieve his goals in noteworthy fashion, producing the finest epic poem in the English language in the process.

What then, can we say of Milton's goal of "justifying the ways of God to man?' I believe that this sentiment, the understanding of man's place in the cosmos, is at the heart of the study of the humanities; of what it means to be human. Certainly, the theme of understanding man's place in the cosmos is not unique to Milton; it is, in fact, at the heart of every great piece of western literature ever written. From the earliest beginnings in myth, literature has been concerned with the relationship of man to his surroundings.

This paper attempts to trace man's quest to understand his place in the cosmos through western history, from the times of the Greeks to the present day. Admittedly, this is a large undertaking for a paper which is limited in scope, so that some generalizations will have to be made, and short shrift will unfortunately, be given to some periods of history. Additionally, this paper will generally be concerned with the study of literature during this time period, but will occasionally make use of other disciplines in the arts, as well. Some writers will be given precedence over others, either because of the author's preference for some writers over others, of because the author has failed in reading some important work. In addition, it is difficult, if not impossible, to precisely state that an age of man begins or ends at a certain point in time. All too often, the distinction between the starting and stopping-off point of an age is too tenuous to call; we must take on faith that the attitudes and convictions of one age somehow influence a reaction or change in a later age.

To the early Greeks, the world was a somewhat arbitrary and unknowable place. The early creation myths dealt with the appearance of order out of chaos, and the creation of the gods and man. To the early Greeks, Chaos was a real being and the progenitor

of the Titans. A later myth dealt with the usurpation of heaven from the Titans by the Olympic gods, and was an attempt by the Greeks to put a human face on their deities. Indeed, the Olympic gods acted in much the same manner as their human counterparts, and in so doing, made the cosmos seem more manageable, more human, to the Greeks. The theme of the "human" face to the cosmos returns time and again in Greek mythology, from the myths of Prometheus and Pandora, to the various liaisons which the gods have with humans. (2) In addition, it has been suggested that many of the Greek myths dealt with the struggle between the earlier, matrilineal societies, and the patrilineal societies that were introduced by the Achaeans, Dorians and later invaders from the East (3). The early Greek explanation of the cosmos takes its final form in the epic poetry of Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where myth transforms a battle for economic supremacy on the Hellespont into a sublime treatment of man's place in the cosmos. The very names of the heroes of these epic poems are alive today: Achilles, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Hector, Paris, and Ajax, to name a few, as modern man continues to search for his place in the cosmos, and recalls the names of his progenitors.

So too, are the exploits of these heroes remembered in a style and language which has seldom been equaled.

> Sing O Goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Acheans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Zeus fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles first fell out with one another. (4)

As the Greeks became more comfortable with their place in the universe, their thoughts turned to other areas: is there a life after death; does man possess something of the divine in him; does the soul outlive the body? These questions are most eloquently stated in Plato's Socratic dialogues. Plato, through Socrates, engaged in a series of dialogues designed to explore man's place in society, in dealings with other men, and man's relation to the gods. In the *Phaedo*, Plato relates the last days of his mentor, Socrates, of his belief in the laws of his state, and of his great courage in facing his death. Phaedo's comment on Socrates' passing is at once reverent and hopeful, and expresses the Greek ideal of man. "Such, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those whom we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man." (5)

The Romans are generally acknowledged to be more practical than the Greeks, and are sometimes viewed as a derivative culture, in terms of architecture, sculpture and literature. The Romans' unique

contribution to history was their ability to organize and govern. This organizational ability allowed Rome to achieve a single republican state, which the Greeks, with their independent city-states, were not able to do.

The Roman governmental ability led them to excel in political writings and rhetoric. The names of Cicero, Cesar, and Marcus Aurelius are renowned as statesmen and rhetoriticians even though each achieved a certain literary notoriety. Despite their active natures, these men sought to find their place in the universe, and to share with their contemporaries, their thoughts on the matter.

Consider Cicero's *Conversations at Tusculum*, where the author attempts to set out a justification for the stoic life, which he believed was necessary to deal with the vagaries of fortune.

> The whole life of the philosopher, Plato said, is a preparation for death. For what else do we do when we remove the soul from leisure – that is to say, from the body, from private property (the body's agent and servant), from public affairs and from every kind of private business... (6)

That later Roman stoic, Marcus Aurelius, who was also Emperor of Rome at the time of writing his meditations, writes of equanimity of nature when dealing with unexpected outcomes.

> Begin the morning by saying to yourself, I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful, and of the bad that is ugly, and the nature of him who does wrong, that it is akin to mine, not only of the same blood or seed, but that it participates in the same intelligence and the same portion of divinity, I can neither be harmed by any of them… nor can I be angry with my brother, nor hate him. (7)

Much of the balance of Roman literature is an extension and refinement of styles developed earlier in Greece. As an example of this point, Virgil, in writing the *Aeneid*, attempts to establish Aeneas, one of the heroes of the Trojan War, as the founder of Rome. In so doing, Virgil adopts the conventions of the epic poem, which originated in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The action begins “in media res,” and involves the intercession of the gods, and an early invocation to the muse. The heroes are literally larger than life, and the action takes place on a vast scale. The poet attempts to explain the founding of the Roman state, its relationship to the heroes of Troy, and the animosity between Rome and Carthage which would eventually lead to the destruction of the Tyrean city. The poet also invokes stock phrases or sayings that will resonate with the audience throughout the poem, and the meter and verse pattern are formal (in the case of the poems of Homer and Virgil, hexameter). Virgil combined these elements with a consummate mastery of Latin to produce a beautiful

and moving poem (Dante later called him the “Prince” of poetry when Virgil acted as his guide in the underworld).

Listen now to the opening of that famous poem to hear the invocation to the muse to begin the story of Aeneas.

> I sing of arms and a man: his fate
> had made him fugitive: he was the first
> to journey from the coasts of Troy as far
> as Italy and the Lavinian shores. …
> Tell me the reason, Muse: what was the wound
> To her divinity, so hurting her,
> That she, the queen of gods, compelled a man
> Remarkable for goodness to endure
> So many crises, meet so many trials?
> Can such resentment hold the minds of gods? (8)

To the Romans, man’s place in the cosmos was defined in terms of duty, order, and conquest; and these themes are reflected in their literature and art.

In similar fashion to Virgil, Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*, looks back to the Greek myths and imparts a new and fantastic element of change into the earlier myths. Similarly, the most beloved historian during early Roman imperial times was Plutarch. Plutarch, himself a Greek living in Rome, developed a series of biographical comparisons between the noble Greeks and Romans, with the latter almost always

being seen as a lesser and somewhat derivative, version of their Greek counterparts. (9)

It seems ironic that a small sect originating in the first and second centuries in the remote Roman province of Judea, one of the provinces of the Roman Empire would raise the questions of man's place in the cosmos to new levels. Indeed, within four centuries of the founding of the sect, Christianity would become the official religion of the Roman Empire, and for the next thousand years, Christian officials and the faithful would continue to wrestle with man's place in God's creation. Sometime after Christianity would emerge as the official religion of Rome, in approximately 400 to 500 A.D., a wave of migrations from the East and North would end the Roman Empire in the West, and would plunge Western Europe into a period known as the Dark Ages.

During this time period, wave after wave of nomadic tribes would invade the lands occupied by the Romans, and eventually, would settle down and become part of the fabric of life in the areas which they conquered. Throughout this time period, the notion of culture or civilization, as we now define it, would lapse. Where literature occurred, it was in the form of an oral tradition, much in the same way as with Homer and the early Greeks. *Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon saga

which is seen as the precursor of English literature (indeed, *Beowulf* is often cited as being among the first Old English works extant), was originally an oral poem that was reduced to writing at a later period. Its theme reflected the times during which the poem was developed: loyalty to a liege-lord, warfare, change, disruption, and uncertainty. For *Beowulf*, resolution came in the form of a hero who slays the monster Grendel; such resolution, while wished for, would not be forthcoming in everyday life. [(10)] For everyday people, writing and the study of literature would cease to be practical, and the last outposts of civilized life could be found in the geographically dispersed monasteries and abbeys in Ireland, England, France and some smaller Italian towns.

Gradually, the power of the Church increased, as towns began to re-form near the monasteries and abbeys in these formerly out-of-the-way places. Clerics preserved the arts of reading and writing, both of literature and law, and began to exert a greater influence on the local towns. As a result of the increasing power of the Church, man's place in the cosmos shrank somewhat, and soon his place was seen to be subservient to that of God, His Church, and the priests, brothers, friars, and nuns who ran the organization of the church. Indeed, as the power of the Church increased, man's place in the world became

more and more to be defined by the Church. The literature of the period reflected this belief in man's subservience to God, and is exemplified in the Latin liturgical plays which dealt with the birth, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These plays were enacted first in Churches, and then as commerce expanded, were enacted in village fairs and gatherings. As the villages prospered, and as commerce developed, a new set of plays, known as Morality Plays, which were enacted in the vernacular, and were concerned with religious or moral themes, began to be given, usually in concert with Church feasts. A regular cycle of plays was developed each of which corresponded to a Biblical event or occurrence, and included such topics as creation, the fall of man, Abraham and Isaac, etc. (11)

It seems somewhat paradoxical that the great Universities of Europe arose during the Middle Ages. On the one hand, the Church, which exerted tremendous influence on the lives of everyday people, was steeped in tradition and steadfastly opposed modernization. At the time of the rise of universities, circa 1100 to 1200 A.D., mass was still said in Latin, and most textbooks were written in Latin; mass in the vernacular would not be heard until the twentieth century within the Roman Catholic Church (although as a result of the Protestant Reformation, services would be conducted in the vernacular in some

countries of Europe as early as the sixteenth century). Universities arose as groups of scholars joined together in loose communities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in an attempt to expand their knowledge, cope with an influx of new ideas generated by Arab scholars in Spain, and shake-off the restrictions imposed by the Church. (12)

The typical University curriculum consisted of classes in rhetoric, grammar, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. This differed greatly from earlier monastic schooling, which emphasized logic, arithmetic, astronomy, and a bare modicum of grammar and rhetoric. The goal of the curriculum was not to foster mere memorization of earlier writings and knowledge, but to develop the student as a well-rounded person, able to understand the concepts propounded by the curriculum. (13)

At about the same time that Universities were being founded, trade guilds were beginning to form among the merchant classes, and among the skilled trades. These guilds were formed in response to the increase in trading activity associated with the spice routes to the East, the increase in village fairs mentioned above, and the growth of towns themselves. The guilds offered merchants and skilled tradesman a voice in setting quality standards and prices for their

products, and acted as a counter-balance to the growing power of the towns and town councils.

The increase in Universities, Guilds, and towns led to a prosperity which was heretofore, not present on such a large scale. With increased prosperity came increased leisure time, and an increase in the arts and literature. (14)

Perhaps no other works of the period visually expressed man's place in the cosmos than the Books of Hours, or illuminated manuscripts, which were undertaken in the Middle Ages. The common biblical themes of man's creation, fall, and redemption were visually depicted in these hand-painted books, and were accompanied by a series of prayers, which provided commentary for the illustrations. *Les Tres Riches Heures Du Duc De Berry*, *The Visconti Hours*, and *The Rohan Master*, works from France, Italy, and Germany, respectively, attest to a thought process and belief system that was dominated by the Church, while the differences in style and form point to a growing secular influence that was beginning to be manifest in the late Middle Ages. The influence of the secular was felt through the inclusion of everyday life in these manuscripts, with plates showing work in the fields, the

presence of realistic, if somewhat stylized animals, and the depiction of people performing tasks in daily life. (15)

Of course, no review of medieval literature would be complete without mentioning Dante Alighieri and his *Divine Comedy*. (16) Dante's work was a uniquely personal vision of a man who had lost his way in the world, and despaired of finding it. Relying on his guides, Virgil, and Beatrice, Dante made his way through hell, purgatory, and heaven, and eventually had his faith restored. It is important to note that Dante's Divine Comedy was in many respects, an indictment of the state of the Church as it existed in the late fourteenth century in Italy, and Dante's quest an allegory for reform within the Church. The work reflected Dante's life and that of his city, Florence in the fifteenth century, which witnessed a series of wars between rival factions, the Guelphs and Ghibellines. Many of Dante's rivals were pictured within the various circles of hell undergoing punishment for their actions during the war. For this reason, Dante's work was much more personal than other epic poems which preceded it. It differed from other epic poems in its meter and rhyme scheme, and use of language that was often graphical, and sometimes scatological. It also introduced the convention of the troubadour, or traveling poet, who attempted to win the affections of his love, into the epic genre. *The*

Divine Comedy is still considered an epic poem however, and employed many of the conventions of epic poetry that were mentioned above.

Despite the somewhat rough language, Dante, through his invention of the triple rhyme scheme, achieves quite beautiful verse. Consider this passage, which has Dante asking his guide Virgil, why he has been selected to accompany him through hell.

> To free you of this dread I will tell you all
> of why I came to you and what I heard
> when first I pitied you. I was a soul
>
> among the souls of Limbo, when a Lady
> so blessed and so beautiful, I prayed her
> to order and command my will, called to me.
>
> Her eyes were kindled from the lamps of Heaven
> Her voice reached through me, tender, sweet, and low,
> An angel's voice, a music of its own:
>
> O gracious Mantuan whose melodies
> Live in earth's memory and shall live on
> Till the last motion ceases in the skies… (17)

The next few hundred years, from the period of 1300 through 1500 would see an increase in secular thought. The rise of the Universities, increase in commerce, and the development of the merchant class would lead to the Renaissance, which had its origins in Italy and Sicily, spreading eventually to Spain, France, and ultimately England. Works by Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer once again sought to understand

man's place within the universe, but within a decidedly more "human" universe than that dominated by the Church in the early Middle Ages. [18] The impetus for the Renaissance lie in the re-discovery of the classical works of antiquity, primarily those Latin works by Cicero, Plutarch, and Ovid, and later, the works of the Greeks, especially Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, and Homer. Once the classics were re-discovered, a process first of imitation, and then original composition followed. From there, the use of the vernacular was introduced, and combined with the widespread use of printing, made books more accessible to common people.

Indeed, the Renaissance witnessed the rise of secular humanism in Europe, as artists, authors and poets attempted to break away from the orthodoxy of the Church. The break from orthodoxy was not easy, nor clean, just as the break between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was not easy to discern, and happened gradually, almost imperceptibly, over time. Perhaps the best way to distinguish between the Medieval and the Renaissance mindset is to distinguish the change in emphasis from the divine to the human, in the affairs of men.

The interest in the classics, the spread of books, and the leisure to read were all the product of an emerging mercantile system, which

started in the Middle Ages, and expanded during the Renaissance. The development of a middle class led to extra leisure time, which in turn, encouraged renewed interest in the arts.

A sea change in the expressive arts occurred during the Renaissance, with architecture, painting, sculpture and literature all using the classics as the starting-off point, but developing in new and wonderful ways. The paintings of Botticelli, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and Raphael use perspective and realism in a way never before accomplished, although the art of perspective was first introduced in Greece, and realism had been effectively invoked in Medieval times. Similarly, the sculptures of Michelangelo, Donatello, and Bernini achieved a level not seen since Phidias in ancient Greece. [19] As for architecture, while the Gothic Cathedrals of the Middle Ages were indeed impressive, none of them quite compare to the majesty of St. Peter's in Rome, a church which boasts Michelangelo, Bramante, Raphael, Della Porta, and Bernini as its primary architects and painters.

The list of literary figures who lived during the Renaissance is almost too numerous to mention. Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer are among the giants of the early Renaissance, along with Erasmus, who was considered as the quintessential humanist. The Renaissance

arrived in England later than on the continent, but did not lack in great literary figures, which include John Lyly, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, and Sir Walter Raleigh, to name a few.

That change in perspective, from the divine to the secular, which marked the Renaissance, had the effect of letting the genie out of the bottle, as it were. Once man became the center of all things, and religion was less central, the way was open to challenge the authority of the Church. The challenge arose first in Germany and the Low Countries, and quickly spread to England. Heresy was no newcomer to the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, heretics arose almost as soon as the religion was founded. Prior to the sixteenth century, these heresies were for the most part manageable, with the notable exception of the schism between the Eastern and Roman Catholic branches of the Church. During the sixteenth century, there arose a new form of challenge to the church, and one that would indeed drive the church apart.

There were several factors at work which led to the Protestant Reformation, some of which follow. (1) The change in perspective from the divine guidance of human affairs, to man's involvement in his own affairs. (2) The rise of a mercantile class, and the spread of

wealth to the middle class. (3) The rise of nationalism among the various European entities, which began to think of themselves more in terms of a modern state. (4) The righteous indignation, expressed by some members of the clergy, against a growing profligacy on the part of the papacy in Rome. (5) A sense of disillusionment on the part of the populace that church officials acted on their behalf rather than acting in a dialogue with God. (6) The increase in literacy among the lower and middle classes, brought about by the rapid spread of printed books. For the first time, the Bible was available in the vernacular languages, which allowed people to study the Bible more fervently, and to ask questions of faith, not asked before. (7) A desire, on the part of secular rulers, to disengage themselves from the power of Rome, and to take a more active role in the governance of their lands. (20)

Such were the forces at work that led inexorably to the Reformation, which produced the first real break from the Catholic Church since the great schism. Martin Luther, with his famous posting of the 95 theses for debate on the north door of the Frederick's Castle Church, marked the first formal notice that the absolute rule of the Roman Church was at an end. Soon, other reform movements would follow: Calvinism, the Church of England, and the Huguenots, to name a few. By the end

of the sixteenth century, the monolithic power of the Catholic Church had been broken in Europe forever.

The upheaval caused by the protestant Reformation was reflected in its art and literature. In England, the periods known as the Renaissance and the Reformation were often jumbled together, both in terms of timing and thought. For this reason it is difficult to precisely delineate the start and stop of each period in the events of the country. It is safer to characterize the periods of English life from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid seventeenth century in England as the Elizabethan and Stuart eras of the monarchy.

The two great figures of the mid sixteenth to mid seventeenth century in English literature, forming almost bookends in time and thought, were Shakespeare and Milton. Shakespeare is often referred to as a "Renaissance Man" due to his understanding of the human condition, the range of his knowledge, and broad understanding of the currents of his time. This label is at once largely apt, but also limiting; in the latter part of his life, he lived in the age of the Stuarts, and his vision grew to encompass some of the upheaval, discovery, and freedom that marked this period in English life.

In his earlier works, particularly the sonnets, Shakespeare is writing very much in the tradition of the early Elizabethan, one might say Renaissance writers. A great many Renaissance poets produced a series, or cycle, of sonnets. These cycles were concerned with lover's quarrels, the beauty of the poet's mistress, eternal fame, the author's fate, etc. Shakespeare not only wrote his own set of sonnets, but we may fairly say, mastered the form. The following, sonnet twenty-nine, finds the author meditating on his fate, his shortcomings, and his love. It has been speculated that this poem followed the general conventions of the sonnet cycle; to me, this seems a somewhat superficial answer. The poet seems to be genuinely concerned with his abilities, fate, and love of his mistress, to be writing merely to satisfy the conventions of the time.

> When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
> I all alone beweep my outcast state,
> And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
> And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
> Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
> Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
> Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
> With what I most enjoy contented least;
> Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
> Haply I think on thee – and then my state,
> Like to the lark at break of day arising,
> From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
> For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
> That then I scorn to change my state with kings. (21)

It was with the plays that Shakespeare established himself as a writer, and distanced himself from his contemporaries of the Elizabethan age. Indeed, in the histories and tragedies it can be said that he makes a transformation from the early Elizabethan author to the more mature author of the age of the Stuarts. In the histories, Shakespeare addresses the right of the monarch to rule, the effect of the state when unlawful authority attempts to overthrow the rightful monarch, and the cost to the state of civil war.

Shakespeare as well as his audience knew all too well the effects of a prolonged battle for the throne of England. The prior century witnessed the troubles that befell the kingdom as the houses of Lancaster and York fought for control of the country. The issue of legitimate succession to the throne was heightened by the unfortunate murders, while ruling monarchs, of Edward II, Richard II, Henry VI, and the death on the field of battle of Richard III in a period of some 200 years. These deaths caused an upheaval in British society that was to have a profound effect on the Elizabethans; regicide was abhorrent, and led to calamitous troubles for the nation. As Elizabeth aged without taking a mate, the state of the succession to the throne of England was on the minds of most citizens; a repeat of the destruction of the prior century was to be avoided at all costs.

Such was the political climate in Britain when Shakespeare wrote the histories and tragedies; works that were to place him as the foremost writer in the English language. The play Richard III was the last in a line of historical plays concerning the British monarchy. Richard was the last of the Plantagenets, signaling the end of the strife between the houses of Lancaster and York; the Tudors would assume the throne after the death of Richard. This play was then, both an end to the struggles of the past two hundred years, and a starting-off point for the new monarchy. (22)

Shakespeare takes little time to introduce Richard as an unsympathetic character, as the opening soliloquy illustrates:

> Now is the winter of our discontent
> Made glorious by this son of York;
> And all the clouds that low'r'd upon our house
> In the deep bosom of the ocean buried….
> But I, that am not shap'd for sportive tricks,
> Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
> I, that am rudely stamp'd and want love's majesty
> To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
> I, that am curtail'd of this proportion,
> Cheated of feature by dissembling nature;
> Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time,
> Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark at me as I halt by them – (23)

It was, no doubt, Shakespeare's intention to paint Richard in a poor light, especially so that the Tudors would look better by comparison. Shakespeare's treatment of Richard seems to be worse than would be justified in the historical record. This is due, in part, to make the Tudor legacy look better as mentioned above, but also because to the Elizabethan mind, Richard, by deposing a sitting king, and murdering the king's heirs, would continue that regal bloodshed that began with Edward II.

As Shakespeare matured, the events of the preceding century, coupled with the continued discoveries in the New World, and his own advancing age, led the author to become more reflective, and at the same time, more universal. In The Tempest, Shakespeare develops themes of upheaval (the boat wreck), the New World, and man's place in this changing cosmos. Miranda's exhortation "O brave new world that hath such people in't," [24] speaks not only within the context of the play, but of the context of the Reformation, as well. The New World had been discovered, and was being colonized, with new discoveries appearing on an almost daily basis; the stranglehold of the Roman Church had been broken; and nations began to emerge from the city-states that previously existed. Indeed, for mankind, this era was a brave new world.

John Milton was the other great figure of this period in English life. His early poems were marked by a classical influence, and an appreciation of lyric style that foreshadowed his later epic, *Paradise Lost*. Johnson remarks that Milton's literature was:

> …unquestionably great. He read all the languages which are considered either as learned or polite: Hebrew, with its two dialects, Greek, Latin, Italian, French, and Spanish. (25)

His middle years were spent as an avowed supporter of the Protectorate, a position that earned him the disdain of several later writers, such as Johnson, who admired his work, but were at odds with his politics.

Never before in the English language was the theme of man's creation, fall and redemption so beautifully and fully explained; nor was a sustained work so skillfully done. Of course, Milton's theme was man's place in the cosmos, and *Paradise Lost* made that place clear. Johnson, commenting on Milton's selection of the epic poem as the form with which to relate the creation, fall and redemption of man remarks:

> By the general consent of critics, the first praise of genius is due to the writer of an epic poem, as it requires an assemblage of the powers which are singly sufficient for other compositions….Epic poetry undertakes to teach the most

> important truths by the most pleasing precepts, and therefore relates some great event in the most affecting manner. (26)

Finally, Johnson accords Milton a singular honor, when he indicates that Milton's epic, which "considered with respect to design, may claim the first place, and with respect to performance the second, among the productions of the human mind." (27)

As proof of such praise, we turn to Book IV in *Paradise Lost*, when Satan, seeing Adam and Eve for the first time, admires their form and almost gives up his plan to contribute to their downfall.

> O hell! What do mine eyes with grief behold,
> Into our room of bliss thus high advanced
> Creatures of other mold, earth-born perhaps,
> Not spirits, yet to heavn'ly Spirits bright
> Little inferior; whom my thoughts pursue
> With wonder, and could love, so lively shines
> In them divine resemblance, and such grace
> The hand that formed them on their shape hath poured. (28)

Let us now skip forward by some sixty to eighty years after the publication of Paradise Lost to a new generation of writers living in Great Britain. The Reformation has passed, as has the Catholic Counter Reformation; the colonies in the Americas are just beginning to become dissatisfied with their trans-Atlantic mother country, and the French have not yet witnessed their bloody revolutions, which

would last some twenty years and produce that famous general, then emperor, Napoleon.

We will visit with a man who was eminently loquacious, learned and erudite, yet at the same time approachable and ultimately I believe a common man, who happened to possess uncommon talents. Samuel Johnson was born to poor estate, and attended Oxford for a period of one year before returning home and unsuccessfully starting a school in his hometown. That the school failed, and Johnson was forced to move to London was perhaps, one of the most fortunate failures in the history of England. Johnson took up residence in the city of London at a most propitious time, both for himself and the city. London, was by then, already a large city, and one of the most famous in the World; Johnson, however added to its luster by his writings, and more importantly, the force of his personality.

Johnson had the knack of being able to supply the right phrase at the right time. His is acknowledged to be, along with Shakespeare and Pope, among the most quoted people in the English language. His facility in language extended itself to lexicography, and he is credited with producing the most comprehensive dictionary of the English language to be written by one man. Indeed, the dictionary is

acknowledged as his greatest work, and combines word definitions and their usage through quotations gleaned from famous authors into an entertaining whole. His definition of the word network is often cited as an example of his felicity in defining words. One can literally open the dictionary on any page to find a similar apt description. Take for example, his definition of heart, for which he supplies 20 separate entries, each accompanied by a quotation for further illumination. Here is entry number sixteen, in which the heart is defined as:

> Conscience; sense of good or ill.
>
> *Every man's heart and conscience doth in good*
> *Or evil, even secretly committed, and known to*
> *None but itself, either like or disallow itself.*
>
> Hooker [29]

Through his vast reading and love of words, he was able to supply the correct turn of phrase drawn from his knowledge of the English language and study of other great writers. [30] Yet despite his erudition, he comes across as a deeply caring man, who was not afraid of his own humanity. As Mrs. Thrale remarked in her diary about Johnson's charity:

> He loved the poor, as I never yet saw anyone else do, with an earnest desire to make them happy. What signifies, says some one, giving halfpence to common beggars? They only lay it out on gin or tobacco. 'And why should they be denied such sweeteners of their existence (says Johnson)? It is surely very savage to refuse them every possible avenue to pleasure,

> reckoned too coarse for our own acceptance. Life is a pill none of us can bear to swallow without gilding…' [31]

Here then, is a man of letters who is at once erudite, and a man of the people. He reflected the sensibilities of his age, a love of language and learning, with a pragmatism and common touch, which was evident in the later writings of Jefferson and the framers of the U.S Constitution. Johnson had the ability to make people comfortable despite his knowledge, and through Boswell's eyes we see the greatest conversationalist in the English language. Much of the conversation we hear related by Boswell comes through at table; it is remarkable that so much of brilliant conversation occurs during the simple act of eating. But Johnson did not dismiss eating as other men did; his remark to Boswell that

> Some people have a foolish way of not minding, or pretending not to mind, what they eat. For my part, I mind my belly very studiously, and very carefully; for I look upon it, that he who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else. [32]

In addition to his great knowledge and love of conversation (he started The Club in order to pursue his love of literature and debate with his like minded friends including Boswell, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Oliver Goldsmith, and Edmund Burke among others), he also had a wonderful sense of humor and sportsmanship which manifested itself in unusual ways. The stories which tell of his climbing fences and running races

at an advanced age show a man with a lively sense of playfulness. Perhaps the most touching story concerns Johnson's race with John Payne. Payne was a small man, and race was proposed between the two. Johnson, at the start of the race, snatched Payne up, and deposited him in a tree. Completing half the course, Johnson grabbed Payne from the tree, and completed the full circuit. (33)

That Johnson represents the characteristics of the Age of Reason, a sense of morality, wide learning, compassion for his fellow man, is, I hope, made clear. It is a curious coincidence of history that another man, with similar background, love of mankind, scope and intellect, lived at almost the same time in the Americas. That person is hailed as one of America's founding fathers, and is no less a personage than Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin, like Johnson, was from a family of humble beginnings. Franklin's father was a chandler in England, who moved to the colonies to leave behind the popish tendencies of Charles II. Benjamin left home at the age of seventeen, having apprenticed with his brother as a printer. By the age of sixteen, he had already written a series of published articles under the pseudonym of Silence Dogood. By the

age of twenty he had already relocated from Philadelphia to England, and back to Philadelphia.

Like Johnson, Franklin was mostly self-taught, but was a man capable of enormous amounts of work, and possessed of a remarkable intellect. Also like Johnson, Franklin was possessed of a strong moral bent, and strove to become the best man he could. Franklin published his own newspaper, the Philadelphia Gazette, and wrote and published the *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which combined a calendar, phases of the moon, tide chart, medicinal formulas, and sayings into one popular volume.

Also like Johnson, Franklin organized several acquaintances into a semi-formal group, called the Junto Club, for the express purpose of conducting discussions aimed at morality, political events, the dissemination of scientific knowledge, and literature. Franklin's inquisitive nature caused him to start the first Fire Brigade and the first public library in Philadelphia. Also like Johnson, he was the source of many popular sayings, such as "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," "Well done is better than well said," "Love your neighbor, but don't pull down your hedge."

His written achievements were many, but he also achieved notoriety as a scientist. Franklin is often cited as discovering electricity and the electrical properties of lightning with his famous kite experiment. He is credited with a patent for a heat-efficient stove, bi-focals, and swim fins. In fact, it was for his scientific discoveries that he became known in Europe, and led to his appointment as colonial representative of several of the new colonies.

His finest political hour came when he and five other patriots drafted the Declaration of Independence for the colonies. He was later given the position as Ambassador to France, in part to gain France's acknowledgement of the new government of the United States, and in part, as a reward for his service to his country. (34)

Who can read the Declaration and not acknowledge Franklin as a man of the Age of Reason?

> We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. (35)

It is somewhat ironic that both men, Johnson and Franklin, considered themselves Englishmen first. Franklin broke off any thoughts of being English, when he was summoned before the solicitor general of Great

Britain to answer for the effects of the Boston Tea Party. After this meeting, Franklin resolved to make America free of British rule. It is also somewhat ironic that Johnson, a man of great forbearance, did not think highly of the British colonies in the New World. Time and again, he railed against them to Boswell, whose sentiments leaned toward the colonies.

Ultimately, it is sad that these two great representative men of their age did not meet; the conversation would have been instructive, to say the least. Yet for their political dissimilarities, both men reflected the beliefs of their age to a remarkable degree, and in their somewhat parallel lives, advanced the place of man in the world.

From a vision of man as a rational being at the center of the universe, there gradually arose a feeling that man had overstepped his bounds in transforming the world to his liking. The age of mechanization started in the late seventeenth century in England. As foundries, coal works, and trains began to encroach upon the English countryside, there arose a group of poets who seeing this change, longed for a return to a simpler time when nature, not man, was the sum of all things.

The English Romantic poets were in part, a reaction to the prevalent idea that man was a rational being, and that progress was not only good, but inevitable. The Romantics did not see progress as being the end achievement of man; indeed, they believed that the experience of life, a life in touch with nature, was “devoutly to be wished.”

The experience of life in nature would take different forms among the various Romantic writers. For some, nature was in a sense, independent of man, and somehow, overpowering. This sense of the grandeur of nature, and its ability to over-match man’s works comes through especially in the poetry of Shelley, Byron and Keats. The poem Ozymandias, written by Shelley speaks to man’s transience when measured against the backdrop of nature.

> …And on the pedestal these words appear:
> “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
> Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair.”
> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
> The lone and level sands stretch far away. (36)

A similar sentiment is echoed by Keats in his poem “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”:

> …So do these wonders most dizzy pain,
> That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
> Wasting of old time – with a billowy main –
> A sun – a shadow of a magnitude. (37)

Perhaps the best example of the theme which shows man's relative insignificance when compared with nature is summed up in Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much With Us; Late and Soon."

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
> This sea that bears her bosom to the moon;
> The winds that will be howling at all hours,
> Are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
> For this, for everything, we are out of tune:... (38)

In some cases, the prospect of nature would inspire a sort of reverie, or dream, which hopefully, would impart some truths of man's nature to the poet. Coleridge's Kubla Khan was a dream reverie that the poet wrote down after waking from the reverie. Critics have posited that the poem is a metaphor for the creative process, since it is concerned with the famed pleasure gardens created by Kubla Khan, and that the process of creating is a symbol or archetype of the creative process. The dream-like, euphoric state is evidenced by the ending lines of the poem:

> ...I would build that dome in air,
> That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!
> And all who heard should see them there,
> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,

And drunk the milk of Paradise. (39)

In “Frost at Midnight,” Coleridge continues with the theme of reverie, and develops it into an insight regarding the life of his son, which he imagines will be different from his own life:

> … Dear babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
> Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
> Fill up the interspersed vacancies
> And momentary pauses of the thought!
> My babe so beautiful! It thrills my heart
> With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
> And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
> And in far other scenes!... (40)

Keats continues the notion of reverie in nature, in his poem “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” which recalls a faraway time, but offers no hint of deeper meaning or cognizance, merely lassitude, somewhat like Odysseus’ sojourn in the land of lotus eaters.

> …I met a lady at the meads,
> Full beautiful – a faery’s child,
> Her hair was long, her foot was light,
> And her eyes were wild.
>
> …And there she lulled me asleep,
> And there I dream’d – Ah! Woe betide!
> The latest dream I ever dream’s
> On the cold hill side…. (41)

The notion of reverie, which leads to unexpected insights into the nature of things, is also seen in Wordsworth. Wordsworth’s insights into the nature of reverie, and how it relates, or impinges upon the

real world, are more fully developed than in Shelley, Keats or Coleridge. Consider the theme of reverie first develop in "Expostulation and Reply," when Wordsworth, makes the connection between reverie and a higher order:

> Why, William, on that cold grey stone,
> Thus for the length of half a day,
> Why, William, sit you thus alone,
> And dream your time away?
>
> …The eye – it cannot choose but see;
> We cannot bid the ear be still;
> Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
> Against or with our will.
>
> Nor less I deem that there are Powers
> Which of themselves our minds impress;
> That we can feed this mind of ours
> In a wise passiveness.
>
> "Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
> Of things forever speaking,
> That nothing of itself will come,
> But we must still be seeking?
>
> "- Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,
> Conversing as I may,
> I sit upon this old grey stone,
> And dream my time away." (42)

Wordsworth's "Ode - Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," continues this theme of discovery through reverie, and posits that through early reveries come insights into the nature of man, his place in the cosmos, and insights into the immortality of the soul.

I

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream,
It is not now as it hath been of yore; -
Turn whereso'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

...O joy! That in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest;
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast: -
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,...

...The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won,
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blooms can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears. (43)

The insights offered by the Romantic poets into the nature of man's place, not only in the natural world, but within the cosmos, continue to resonate with us in the twenty-first century. We, like the Romantics, are keenly aware that man does not live entirely by himself, but is dependent on an ecological balance to sustain life on earth.

The theme of man despoiling nature would continue into the nineteenth century. As industry progressed, the rustic, agrarian life diminished, and the life of the cities took on increasing importance. As the countryside shrank and the urban metropolis expanded, the dissatisfaction with the new order, which began in the Romantic period, would intensify, and find new expression in the Victorian period.

Perhaps no other author encompassed the Victorian period in England, as did Charles Dickens. Dickens was born to a lower middle class family in Portsmouth in 1812. As a child, Dickens moved frequently, as his father's rising and (mostly) falling fortunes caused the family to move and adjust to newer, less appealing, housing accommodations. Finally, at the age of twelve, Dickens' family was forced to move to the Marshalsea debtor's prison, a fact which would alter young Charles' perception of the world for his entire lifetime.

Dickens, like all youngsters his age whose families were consigned to the debtor's prison, was forced to work for a living at a young age, in order to satisfy the family's debts. Dickens worked at a shoe blacking factory, and later as a clerk in a law firm, a legal reporter, and

eventually a journalist. During this time period, Dickens' schooling was often haphazard, and was a source of embarrassment to him in his later life. That he had such a remarkably broad knowledge base as well as keen understanding of the human spirit, is a testament to both his work ethic and self-study.

Dickens' broad background served him well in writing his novels. His is known for his keen insights into his characters, complicated plot twists, and of course, the long length of his novels. The book length owes to the subscription method of publishing novels, which paid the author not only for the content, but the *length* of the book as well. The themes of Dickens' novels run the gamut of Victorian life, from child labor, depicted in *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist*, to the Byzantine legal institutions depicted in *Dombey & Son*, to the trash collection business as portrayed in *Our Mutual Friend*, to the life in a debtor's prison as depicted in *Little Dorrit*.

Dickens' writing is always flavored with his own personal experiences in each of these books, and in his semi-autobiographical novel*, David Copperfield*. After the success of his first work, the *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens became the best selling author in the world, and did not have to seriously worry about money for the rest of his life. Despite his

success and fame, Dickens carried a fear of poverty to his grave, and he was frequently troubled by fears of a return to debtor's prison, event though the prisons were disbanded in the middle of the century.

There can be no doubt of Dickens' stature as a novelist in the nineteenth century; he was the most famous, most widely read, and most prolific novelist of his time. But despite the fame he earned as a novelist, it is his legacy of changing English institutions, which I believe is his greatest accomplishment. His publication of *Barnaby Rudge* was responsible for having the corn laws repealed. His invective against the English legal system in *Dombey & Son* was responsible for several reforms being enacted in the English judiciary. His indignation over child labor and poor living conditions in *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist* led to the passing of child labor laws in the U.K., and later the United States. Finally, *Little Dorrit* raised the awareness of Englishmen to the plight of people in debtor's prisons, and the sense of hopelessness and despondency, with little hope of release, that so brutally characterized life in these prisons. All this, from a man who did not attend secondary school, and was embarrassed by his lack of formal education. (44)

For Dickens, literature served as a means of exposing wrongs and providing means to correct them. Man's place was to transform that which was oppressive, unequal, and cruel into something better. His life stands as an affirmation that one man can make the world a better place, even against unbelievable odds.

In America, in the year 1809, another man was born in adverse circumstances. He too, came from a hardscrabble background, in which the necessities of earning a living would take precedence over a formal education, and a life of learning which he so desperately wanted.

The conditions surrounding Abraham Lincoln's birth, life and death are so well known that they have achieved mythical status in our country. Like Dickens, Lincoln was a self-made man, who through various odd jobs, including store owner, surveyor, trader, boat navigator, lawyer, and statesman, developed a broad perspective and keen understanding of human nature.

Lincoln's penury and hard existence forged a man of iron will, and deep compassion; qualities which are often inimical and rarely found in one person. From early in his life, Lincoln's thought developed around

two great themes: that slavery was wrong on a human level, and that the freedoms granted to Americans in the Declaration of Independence were the basis of the social compact of the country.

Lincoln, while navigating his flatboat down the Mississippi to New Orleans to trade corn, hogs and pork at the age of twenty-two, saw the “business” of slavery for the first time in the form of slave auctions, and large numbers of slaves on display, and was to develop a lifelong antipathy for slavery from these images. Lincoln did not make his views on slavery known immediately in the political realm; it would wait until the eighteen-fifties for Lincoln to make his political views known in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Douglas, the head of the Democratic Party in substance, if not in form, was a proponent of states rights in determining the adoption of slavery. Lincoln, who was opposed to slavery, and had begun to say so openly, was a proponent of the Missouri Compromise which fixed the boundaries of slavery in the eighteen-forties. (45)

During the debates, Lincoln attacked Douglas for his indifference toward the morality of slavery. As he remarked later in life, Lincoln was of the opinion that “If slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel.”

His denunciation of slavery was tied to the other great theme in his life, that the Declaration of Independence provided the basis for freedom in America. Lincoln originally struggled with the notion of freedom for everyone, which was guaranteed in the Declaration and the lack of freedom for the slaves. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that the founding fathers wanted to limit the practice of slavery, so that someday it might be extinguished.

It is in Lincoln's writing that we become familiar with his two great themes. Indeed, in his book Lincoln's Virtues, an Ethical Biography, William Lee Miller develops the idea that Lincoln was a poet as well as being a statesman and sixteenth president of the United States. (46)

The Gettysburg address is a testament to Lincoln's abilities as a writer. His invocation to the attendees at the dedication of the cemetery bears witness to the idea of the poet president:

> But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it cannot forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. (47)

Later, when the end of the war was near at hand, he demonstrated plans for the healing of the nation in his second Innagural Address. Many of his aides urged him to deal harshly with the South; this Lincoln would not do, letting them know that we were one country, one nation. Once again, the power of the language and the clarity of his vision were apparent.

> With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. (48)

After he died on April 15, 1865, Edwin Stanton Secretary of the War Department, once an opponent and bitter foe uttered those famous words over this great man "He belongs to the ages."

Lincoln and Dickens both encompass their times perhaps better than any other figures in their greatness of soul, steadfastness and courage, and in their determination to change that which was wrong in their respective countries. Each of them brings a new element to the question of man's place in the Universe: the element of the equality of all men: it is not enough for *some men* to be equal, true equality cannot be achieved unless *all men* are equal.

The end of the Victorian Era in England, and the twenty to thirty year period after the Civil War in the United States, marks the beginning of what we call the Modern Age. By the start of the Modern era, the work of Dickens and Lincoln had been completed, and the optimism generated, for however brief a time, by the works of these men was beginning to fade.

Slowly, gradually, a feeling of isolationism began to creep into many of the countries of the world. This might seem strange, given the fact that the British Empire was at the height of its powers, but as national sentiments began to develop once again, governments began to act in their own self interest. The First World War was a turning point in history: never before had so many countries participated in a war of this magnitude, with the involvement of so many men. The Second World War, coming so soon after the "war to end all wars," and the atrocities committed during that war, left many people wondering what had become of progress, to say nothing of the new destructive power unleashed by the atom?

Since the end of the Korean War in the nineteen-fifties, the world has been almost continually at war; this at a time when people are

expected to be enlightened. The stress of continual warfare and threat of nuclear holocaust are the defining fears of our time.

Yet, despite the backdrop of war, and the awesome power of the atom, the twentieth century marked a series of triumphs that few could have predicted at the start of the century. In one century, we went from manned flight to space exploration; from rudimentary telephone communications to cell phones; from the beginnings of understanding cell biology and cures to common diseases to cloning.

How then, are we to judge the state of literature, and the arts in general, during this time period? An honest answer to this question would probably only be directional, not definitive. We are too close to these events to make a safe call; we can however, offer some observations. These observations, like the century itself, will be filled with an admixture of fear, hopelessness, enthusiasm, new beginnings, and curiously, hope. A strange mixture of emotions, for a strange century.

At the end of the nineteenth through the beginning of the twentieth century, W.B. Yeats looked back at the past with a sense of longing, and towards the future with a sense of apprehension. This feeling of

longing and sense of loss is evident in his poem, “The Wild Swans at Coole.”

> The trees are in their autumn beauty,
> The woodland paths are dry,
> Under the October twilight the water
> Mirrors a still sky:
> Upon the brimming water among the stones
> Are nine and fifty swans.

The choice of the setting, autumn, the October twilight, the still sky, all echo a sense of later times, an ending. In the third stanza, Yeats makes it clear that the world has changed since first looked upon the birds.

> I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
> And now my heart is sore.
> All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight,
> The first time on this shore,
> The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
> Trod with a lighter tread.

Finally, Yeats explicitly states his apprehensions in stanza five:

> But now they drift on the still water,
> Mysterious, beautiful,
> Among what rushes will they build,
> By what lake’s edge or pool
> Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day
> To find they have flown away? (49)

Yeats’ continued the theme of age and loss in “Sailing to Byzantium,” but added an element of eternal life, through poetry and song, to his earlier theme of loss. The poem is a curious mixture of sadness over

impending old age, and hope that eternity may be seen through his poetry, and is set in the city of Byzantium, which serves as an historical locus, as well as being an eternal city of beauty and knowledge.

> That is no place for old men. The young
> In one another's arms, birds in the trees
> - Those dying generations – at their song,
> The salmon falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
> Fish, flesh or fowl, commend all summer long
> Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
> Caught in that sensual music all neglect
> Monuments of unageing intellect.
>
> …Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any living thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (50)

Sometimes the feeling of apprehension became too strong for Yeats, and then it was combined with a vision of chaos or instability, as in "The Second Coming."

> Turning and turning in a widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;… (51)

Let us turn now to T.S. Eliot, who picks up this feeling of apprehension, and turns it to a sense of dread and futility in his poem,

"The Waste Land." The poem is marked by sudden shifts in point of view, and in narrative; its fragmentary structure a metaphor for the seeming disjointed nature of modern life. Throughout the poem, Eliot scatters classical allusions, and sets them off against the meaninglessness of modern life. The opening stanza is an illustration of this point and is reminiscent of an earlier poem –

> April is the cruelest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain. (52)

How different the April of Eliot, with its appellation as "the cruelest month," from that April noted by the father of English literature, Chaucer, at the start of *The Canterbury Tales*.

> Whan that April with shoures soote
> The drought of March hath perced to the roote,
> And bathed every veyne in switch licour
> Of which, vertu engendred is the flour: (53)

It is apparent that Eliot is contrasting the month of April – the month of new life as seen in Chaucer, and the April of the dead, which Eliot sees in his poem.

The allusions and contrasts continue throughout the poem, as when Eliot refers to scenes in *The Divine Comedy*, which shows Dante's loss

of self and recovery, and “The Waste Land,” where Eliot is lost, but can see no means of recovery.

> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, we exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (54)

Compare this now with the scenes in Dante, where the poet first talks about the souls of the pagans in limbo (*Inferno*, Canto III, lines 53 - 54)

> I had not thought death had undone so many
> as passed before me in that mournful train (55)

And then again in *The Inferno* (Canto IV, lines 25 - 27), when Dante talks about the virtuous pagans, who sigh because they cannot reach divinity.

> No tortured wailing rose to greet us here
> But sounds of sighing rose from every side
> Sending a tremor through the timeless air, (56)

In the end, Eliot sees human existence as a kind of limbo, where like the virtuous ancients, present day men cannot attain divinity. Unlike Dante, who can use reason and sanctity (Virgil and Beatrice) as guides to find his way back to holiness, Eliot (and modern man) can only rely on myths and legends to remind him of what was lost. Ultimately, modern man cannot achieve redemption, and is left with despair.

The themes of life and death, sacred and profane, creation and destruction, existing at the same time in the modern world, continue with Dylan Thomas. Thomas, himself a religious man, was at the same time, filled with a fury and passion that drove him to drink throughout his life. His poetry combines the antithetical elements mentioned above, in new ways.

In his poem, "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," combines these antipodal notions in unique ways.

> The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
> Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer.
> And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
> My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. (57)

A similar juxtaposition of emotions is seen in Thomas' poem to his dying father, "Go Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

> Do no go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day:
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> ..And you my father, there on the sad height,
> Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
> Do not go gentle into that good night.
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (58)

What then, are we to conclude of modern sensibilities, having witnessed the ennui, despair and hopelessness of these voices? Is the modern era necessarily one of despair and hopelessness?

In answer, let us turn to a story originally published as a children's book, but expanded to encompass a much larger and well developed universe. The literature of fantasy, or alternate reality, has not been accorded a place of honor as "serious" literature in modern practice. This may be due to its proximity to Science Fiction, which in its worst manifestations appears as a series of formulaic set-pieces, but at its best produces works of profound insight, as evidenced by the *Robot* series of Asimov and the *Dune* series by Herbert.

The book of course is the *Hobbit*, and the sequel, known as *The Lord of the Rings,* which was actually conceived of before the *Hobbit*, developed the world of the "little people" into a full-fledged universe. Both works were written just prior to the start of the Second World War, and were finished just after the war ended. Tolkien denies that the books were merely an allegory for the war, but grew out of his love of language and mythology. Tolkien was in fact, professor of linguistics at Oxford University, and taught language (primarily Teutonic and Norse languages) as well as mythology at Oxford.

One is struck in readings of these books by the complex mythology created for Middle Earth, as well as by the sense of morality which is the foundation for the struggle between good and evil and which is central to the books' premise. Indeed the struggle between good and evil is the central theme of the book, and the various races of beings, and the character of the protagonists are judged by their allegiance to these two over-riding principles.

Many theories have been propounded as to the nature of the people of Middle Earth, especially the elves and wizards, who are its most powerful denizens. Tolkien, being keenly aware of the nature of the Germanic and Judeo-Christian myths, consciously invokes the notion of the Judeo-Christian creation myth in describing Middle Earth. Indeed the concept of Middle Earth is derived from the creation myth, where earth is named as that "Middle Earth" between heaven and hell. So too, is Tolkien's description of Middle Earth as being between Valinor (heaven) and Mordor (hell).

The story of the Company of the Ring's struggle against long odds, and the eventual triumph of good over evil (after many harrowing adventures), speaks of a sense of hope in Tolkien that was lacking in

the other modern writers mentioned before. But like his contemporaries, hope is tinged with a touch of sadness, since the passing of the elves has been dictated by the ascension of man. It is a tenet of the Tolkien belief that mankind strive against long odds, even if it means that the attainment of a goal might be mixed with a sense of loss or of a passing, as witnessed by the loss of the elves from Middle Earth. (59)

In the end, courage, devotion, and goodness win out. Tolkien goes to great lengths to re-enforce the idea that the hobbits, unlikeliest of heroes, are instrumental in the battle to overthrow the dark lord. It is the sense of compassion and pity that Tolkien evokes in his writing, which gives hope to the modern era.

Witness Gandalf's reply to Frodo before the start of the Fellowship, for a confirmation of the power of compassion and pity. When commenting on the fallen proto-hobbit, Gollum, Gandalf states:

> Pity? It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and mercy; not to strike without need.
>
> …Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the wise cannot see all ends. (60)

The answer to the question posed above, is that the modern era is not necessarily one of despair, ennui and hopelessness, but also of hope, but a hope tempered by sadness, nevertheless.

But a larger question remains; one that, while hinted at, has not been answered. What then, is the purpose of a study of the humanities? Why should people of the twenty-first century study humanities?

In tracing the literature, and to a limited extent, art of western man from the Greeks to our present day, we can see several themes emerge.

1. Man is concerned with his relation to God and other spiritual entities.
2. Man is concerned with his place in the cosmos; how he fits in with scientific or empirically known things.
3. Man is concerned with his relationship to other men; how and why he fits in with his fellow creatures.

It is by studying humanities that man can begin to answer these questions. Notice the wording to the statement: we are attempting to answer a question; ultimate answers cannot be found.

But what do we say to the man of business; to the man who wants answers; the man who devotes his life to the “getting and spending;” to the man to whom literature is a waste of time? How do we justify “the ways of God to man?”

The answer to this question is not easy or simple, but perhaps we can start by defining what is meant today by an education, and by providing a brief history of technical education, as opposed to a liberal education. According to the most recent census of the United States conducted in the year 2000, and updated in 2002, 84% of all adults over the age of twenty-five have graduated from high school. According to the same census data, 27% of adults over the age of twenty-five have obtained a bachelor’s degree. Approximately 9% of the population had a graduate degree or higher. Closely linked to the attainment of a bachelor’s degree or higher is the prospect of enhanced earnings. On average a person completing high school is expected to earn $1.2 million over the course of his or her lifetime; people who earn a bachelor’s degree will earn $2.1 million over their lifetime; while the holder of a doctoral degree can be expected to earn $3.4 million over the lifetime. Lawyers, doctor and dentists are expected to earn $4.4 million during their lifetime. [61]

The link between educational attainment and wage earning ability is of course, not new. Yet, the increasing emphasis on “practical” or applied learning which has accelerated over the past thirty to forty years, is in fact, quite different from the curriculum which was practiced since the rise of humanism mentioned earlier in the paper. The rise of technical or applied learning can be directly linked to the growth of the modern corporation, and the need for qualified individuals to act as workers and managers within the corporation.

The idea of the division of labor, first propounded by Adam Smith in his book, *The Wealth of Nations*, led to the development of technical training, as distinct from University training, to prepare the workforce to operate specialized machinery in the work place. Indeed, one of the tenets of Smith’s book is that as work becomes more specialized, it also becomes more homogenous, so that the amount of actual ability needed to master the tasks presented on the shop floor would diminish. It was therefore incumbent upon the managers to make work more uniform, more common, and more mistake-proof. The early vocational training provided by companies, and eventually adopted by vocational schools, was geared toward providing a skill set,

and away from the more esoteric considerations of a humanist education.

The provision of a set of capabilities, geared toward the vocational aspects of life which required specialized knowledge (i.e. “division of labor”), has led to a mind-set that knowledge should be directed toward a particular set of capabilities which are pragmatic, and quantifiable, and that the development of other abilities is somewhat superfluous.

The emphasis on the “quantifiable” led to a notion that management is science, and less an “art.” The definition of management science is akin to that of the Social Sciences, that is, a “soft” science, as opposed to one of the “harder” sciences, such as physics or chemistry. A number of management theories have been propounded which attempt to demonstrate the “science” behind the tasks of running a company.

The relatively new degree of MBA (Master of Business Administration) was developed in the early to mid twentieth century to provide a formal program to train new managers in the “science” of business management. The typical MBA curriculum of graduate studies is

comprised of a core series of quantitative classes, a series of case studies of actual work experiences, and degree specialization in the fields of marketing, human resources, finance, operations or logistics. These classes are all geared toward providing a series of competencies in a general business environment, and depending on the school, are more or less quantitative in nature.

The result of this training is that we have generated more and more MBA graduates over the past several years, with the average salaries of these graduates rising accordingly. According to the U.S. census bureau, 116,475 students graduated with an MBA in 2000 – 2001. (62)

In his book, *The Leader*, industrial psychologist Michael Macoby, drives home the point that today's educational system stresses work-related, rather than humanistic studies:

> Educational institutions justify curricula in terms of preparing people first for successful careers and only secondarily for life outside of work. The work place may be improved by workers with better schooling, but education will change only because it is no longer adaptive to what goes on at work. (63)

While we are producing an increasing number of MBA graduates, there appears to be a growing disparity between the knowledge imparted by these programs, and the leadership exhibited by the graduates of these programs. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, in their book

Leaders, make the case that there is a gap between the MBA curricula and the graduates who lead modern corporations.

> …Management education relies heavily, if not exclusively, on mechanistic, pseudorational "theories" of management and produces 60,000 new MBAs each year. The gap between management education and the reality of leadership at the workplace is disturbing, to say the least, and probably explains why the public seems to hold such a distorted (and negative) image of American business life.
>
> But the image problem, though serious, is hardly the major problem. The major problem is that what management education does do moderately well is to train good journeymen/women managers; that is, the graduates acquire technical skills for solving problems. They are highly skilled problem solvers and staff experts. Problem solving, while not a trivial exercise is far from the creative and deeply human processes required of leadership. What's needed is not *management* education, but *leadership* education. (64)

Thomas Teal, Senior Editor of the *Harvard Business Review* makes an even more compelling argument in his article "The Human Side of Management" that the human side of running a business, the side that deals with people, is often given short shrift in our educational institutions, and within most corporations themselves. Teal asserts that management requires something more than just a technical proficiency, it requires empathy and imagination.

> Great management requires imagination. If a company's vision and strategy are to differentiate its offerings and create competitive advantage, they must be original. Original has to mean unconventional, and it often means counterintuitive. Moreover, it takes ingenuity and wit to bring disparate people and elements together into a unified but uniquely original whole. There is even a name for this capacity. It's called esemplastic

> imagination, and although it's generally attributed to poets… [65]

Teal continues in his assessment of leadership in the corporation:

> Another characteristic of great managers is integrity. All managers believe they behave with integrity, but in practice, many have trouble with the concept. Some think integrity is the same thing as secretiveness or blind loyalty. Others seem to believe it means consistency, even in a bad cause. Some confuse it with discretion and some with the opposite quality – bluntness – or with simply not telling lies. What integrity means in management is more ambitious and difficult than any of these. It means being responsible, of course, but it also means communicating clearly and consistently, being an honest broker, keeping promises, knowing oneself, and avoiding hidden agendas that hang other people out to dry. It comes very close to what we used to call honor, which in part means not telling lies to yourself. [66]

Finally, Teal talks of the kinds of managers that people in the workplace admire:

> The managers people name with admiration are always the ones who delegate their authority, who make subordinates feel powerful and capable, and draw from them so much creativity and such a feeling of responsibility that their behavior changes forever. [67]

Surely, the thinking goes, even though business school trains managers to become technically proficient, if there are unmet educational requirements, corporations will act to correct them. Corporations, realizing that education is necessary, will endeavor to provide a quality education in their own self-interest. Unfortunately,

this is not often the case, or where corporation recognize the need for better education, the methods proposed are often not what is needed.

Consider the article written by Bernard Avishai, Associate Editor of *The Harvard Business Review*, "What is Business's Social Compact," evaluates the compact between a business and its managers and concludes that the educational system needs to be reformed, and that business needs to take the lead in this effort, as a form "enlightened self-interest." His remedy for this situation is to model education on the principals of the corporation, and develop quality circles in education, a six-sigma approach, if you will. Educators will develop

> …a whole new set of incentives and accountability measures that provide real rewards for school staff whose students make real progress. (68)

At the same time, schools will offer

> …a new language of explanation for city school boards (thus for instance, students are "customers," failing students are "defects"). (69)

Later in the same article, Mr. Avishai posits that schools should teach the "discipline of competition," (70) which would, presumably, allow schools to be run more like corporations.

To summarize the thinking of the “man of action,” the study of management science is the basis for establishing educational norms for the modern day, produces talented and serious students in the form of MBA graduates, and should be relied upon to set curricula for college and post graduate studies.

In fact, this practice has continued apace for the past thirty or so years. So, how are we to judge results, which is the canon of the “man of action?” Within the past ten years, we have witnessed the largest financial frauds ever perpetrated in history in the form of World Com, Adelphi Communications, Enron, Global Crossing, and Tyco Industries, all led by eminent business school graduates. In each case, the people who were charged with leading the companies failed to provide real leadership, and the people who worked for them turned a blind eye to the problems that plagued these companies.

How could these scandals happen; where was the oversight that was developed to prevent the fraud from occurring? In their book, *The Smartest Guys in The Room, The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron*, Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind point to a culture that was populated with MBAs who were so busy setting grand strategy that they did not focus on day-to-day operations. Similarly, they set-up

compensation schemes that encouraged inflated results, and then did not set-up reporting systems to adequately monitor the results. Finally, the culture at Enron was one of “bigger is better” and exaggeration, which started at the highest levels in the company, and worked downward to every level of the company. [71] When fraudulent results were suspected, people did not act to correct them; since the fraud was endemic; correcting abuses would lead to the death of the “golden goose.”

This picture of corporate excess, greed and self-serving was not unique to Enron; in fact, it was repeated to greater or lesser extent, at all of the companies noted previously. How then, can we say that the practice of “management science” works and that corporation should be entrusted to set school curricula?

In answer to this question, let us go back to the opening premise of this paper- is the study of humanities relevant? Or more to the point is the study or humanities relevant in an age where the principal driver of societal change is the modern corporation? To both questions, the answer is emphatically – ***Yes!***

We cannot ignore that for better or worse, the corporation as an organizational construct is here to stay. A corporation is the most efficient way to organize large groups of people toward a single goal, and to raise the large sums of capital needed to ensure the financial wherewithal to achieve those goals. But a corporation is a construct, not a person, and people are needed to set goals for educational curricula and excellence. Corporations are guided by "enlightened self interest:" people are sometimes guided by altruism, charity and compassion, all of which are needed to establish effective educational standards.

It is time to stop churning out hundreds of thousands of technically proficient "doers," and instead concentrate on a series of programs that will teach people to think, and then to do. The ancients, in teaching their future statesmen, recruited the brightest minds they could find to entrust the development of their young. Philip of Macedon, in searching for a teacher for his son Alexander, recruited the finest mind of his time, Aristotle. Did Alexander learn to tote numbers, account for taxes, and perform statistical analysis? No, he learned what it meant to be a man – Aristotle taught him about character. (I'm not sure if in his conquests he applied all these principles, but Plutarch in his life of Alexander calls him a noble man

who was fair and merciful to those he conquered). Similarly, Marcus Aurelius' teacher was the stoic Epictetus, and Erasmus taught the son of James IV of Scotland, and the sons of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Great Britain.

We must take a lesson from the ancients: it is important to trust the teaching of our young people to the brightest minds of our time. Certainly, today's business leaders yield wealth and power grater than that known in ancient times, yet we teach them how to "cipher" and not how to develop character. The development of character was the primary attribute of a liberal education until the middle of the twentieth century, when we did an about-face and began to emphasize the vocational aspects of teaching to the detriment of the liberal arts.

Let us turn once again to Michael Macoby, and his work *The Leader*, to understand his notions on the educational requirements of a leader.

> What is most lacking for the education of leaders in our culture is education in the humanities, first of all in clear writing and speaking, but also in religion, ethical philosophy, depth psychology, and history.
>
> The best modern managers are well educated in science and technology and perhaps law and ahistorical social sciences, such as economics. But they know little history and lack a sense of what human development means over time. They do not see that history is not an unbroken line of progress, but includes models of progressive social organization that appear, disappear, and need to be rediscovered. They are unaware that irrational

> rules and institutions were probably once rational solutions to a problem that no longer exists. They do not understand that the modern scientific method did not spring full-blown into the eighteenth-century mind, but is rooted in values of truth and free inquiry that have been defended by heroic individuals. Science could not have progressed without the courage of men like Galileo and Benjamin Franklin. To maintain and develop the scientific tradition, we must further develop our humanistic values to struggle against the superstition, fear, and distrust that mushroom in the darkness of uncertainty. (72)

The real shortcoming of the business education as it is currently structured is that it teaches a narrow set of proficiencies without providing a context in which to use these new talents. It is one thing to teach a set of statistical techniques, and quite another thing to be able to apply those techniques in a real-life setting.

I can site one example from my own work career, which points out the difference between being taught a series of techniques, but being unable to use them in daily life due to a lack of understanding of the larger context. I was working as Chief Financial Officer at a subsidiary of a Fortune 50 company. We were attempting to correct a poor implementation of a fixed asset accounting system, and had to re-enter assets based on original data collected from invoices, asset logs, and existing fixed asset records. We had assigned the job of gathering and entering the data to the fixed asset accountant, who had a bachelor's degree in accounting, and MBA from a well-known East

Coast school, and five years experience. The work was going very slowly, and finally, after getting no satisfactory answers from my subordinates as to why the work was not progressing, I called in the person responsible for doing the work, who indicated to me that he was having a difficult time attempting to gather the relevant data. In his text books, all the relevant data had been provided; at work, he had to go to various departments to find the data, and neither he, nor the people working in those departments, was sure that they knew where to look for the data, which consisted of invoices and old fixed asset reports.

Turning again to Macoby, we read that businessmen often lack the understanding to deal with people issues at work, because they have not been taught to understand problems in a larger context.

> Elsa Porter and Pher Gyllenhammar (in their book, *People at Work*) emphasize their view that education for leadership should teach the ethical and humanistic tradition of religion, philosophy, and literature. Stan Lundine (mayor of Jamestown, NY from 1969 – 1976, and 3 time democratic congressman from New York) observed that in new factories, managers are unable to handle new responsibility because they are not prepared by an education in the humanities. Once they give up mechanical control, their understanding of people and ability to articulate principles of moral conduct fails them. He says "The problem is not lack of modern psychological insight, but a lack of the deeper sense of the humanities and the struggle to realize human values through the centuries. We have engineers who are technical experts, but who don't really understand people. On the deeper scientific issues, you can't

> trust science to solve the problems. These are ethical issues. We have gone beyond the simple scientific fix for anything."
>
> … The study of the Bible, comparative religion, ethical philosophy and psychology, and great literature leads one to explore the inner life, particularly the struggle to develop the human heart against ignorance, convention, injustice, disappointment, betrayal, and irrational passion. Such an education prepares one to grapple with his fear, envy, pride and self-deception. It raises questions about the nature of human destructiveness and the legitimate use of force. Without it, a would-be leader tends to confuse his or her own character with human nature, guts with courage, worldly success with integrity, the thrill of winning with happiness. (73)

Perhaps, then, we have come to the essence of why a study of the humanities is relevant today: it provides a mirror to the soul, a touchstone for man to understand his place in the world and in society at large. It provides a context to the seemingly unrelated events that happen each day; it provides us with the comfort that we are not alone when asked to do difficult or unasked-for actions. It allows us to relate to other human beings, even if we are forced, through circumstance, to perform actions which may be unpleasant for both parties. The study of the humanities provides us with an historical perspective that is lacking in merely toting numbers, or analyzing trends.

The study of humanities can counteract that feeling of isolationism, of unreality, and dis-connectedness that seems so rampart in our society.

It can counteract the feelings of hopelessness and despair that have crept into our lives in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It can also serve as a bridge to the great minds that have preceded us, so that we can open a Shakespearean play, or a Dickens' novel, and understand their times and concerns and gather insights into how they reacted when faced with similar problems. We can converse with the great men and women of the past, and allow us to put our concerns and cares, which are real and troublesome, into the context of the larger scope of history, and in small measure draw comfort from the fact that we are not really alone, after all. Finally, the study of the humanities allows us to understand "the ways of God," when dealing with our fellow man.

Notes

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(3) Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths, Vol. One* (Penguin Books, 1960), p. 11-24.

(4) Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Samuel Butler, (Walter J. Black, Inc, 1942), p. 7.

(5) Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, (Penguin Classics, 1971), p. 183.

(6) Anthony Everitt, *The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician Cicero,* (Random House, 2001), p. 257.

(7) Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations,* (Walter J. Black, 1945), p. 19 – 20.

(8) Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by Allen Mandelbaum, (Bantam Classic, 2004), p. 1.

(9) Plutarch, *Selected Lives and Essays*, (Walter J. Black, 1951).

(10) William Alfred translation, *Beowulf – Medieval Epics*, (The Modern Library, 1963). Please note that the notion that the poem Beowulf was originally in the form of a collection of memorized verses was originally propounded by Albert Bates Lord, and that this theory is still open to debate.

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(17) Ibid, p. 36.

(18) Frederick B. Artz, *Renaissance Humanism*, (The Kent State University Press, 1966).

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(20) Edith Simon*, Great Ages of Man – The Reformation*, (time-Life Books, 1966). The *Reformation* was used as a basis for summarization of life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

(21) William Shakespeare, Sonnets, from *Renaissance England*, edited by Roy Lamson and Hallett Smith, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1956), p. 545.

(22) Antonia Fraser editor, *The Lives of the Kings & Queens of England*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975). Peter Earle, "The Plantagenets," p. 72-117; Anthony Cheetham, "The House of Lancaster," p. 118-148; Anthony Cheetham, "The House of York," p. 149-167.

(23) William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 712.

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(39) Ibid, p. 431.

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(41) Ibid, p. 1181-1182.

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(43) Ibid, p. 279-282.

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