My Forbidden Passion for Reading

I am one of the few who takes pleasure in meandering through the rows of books in bookstores to bypass the “New Releases” or the newly published book by Nicholas Sparks to browse through a pile of neglected novels called classics. I think sometimes in our culture, in this modern-day world, the very mention of the names Charles Dickens, Henry James, or Leo Tolstoy brings shivers to the very hearts of the American populace. The names and their novels are synonymous with the words “boredom” and “academics” in the same way that the term “algebra” is synonymous with the idea that one’s personal grade point average is doomed to plummet because of the evolution of mathematics. Mark Twain was once quoted as saying that “A classic is a book which people praise and don’t read.” I would like to take the quote a step further by saying that a classic is a book which teachers praise and force their students to read; which is why, I believe, most people associate classic works with anything short of something praiseworthy or enjoyable.

And yet why should anyone care? After all, these novels are still considered great in many academic circles, and it should not matter whether or not students or people in general read them in their free time. I suppose that is true in a manner of speaking, but I feel as though I have a desire to make any book, classic or otherwise, accessible to the modern reader. The fact of the matter is that people tend not to read anything, so we cannot even make a viable argument for classical works if we cannot even get many people to peruse anything more than the newspaper or a picture book (or if you prefer, a magazine). Novels like A Tale of Two Cities and Crime and Punishment are dying on the proverbial bookshelf because most people would rather watch the movies—after they have been adulterated by Hollywood, of course—before they would dare pick up the actual book, only to thrust it down because its length and its font seem more like a textbook than an enjoyable story. Teachers, moreover, do little to calm the ebb and flow of disgust from their students by forcing their students to digest this classical medicine, and making the act of reading as enjoyable as writing a twelve page literary analysis on the novels in question. It is no wonder that students hate the classical authors—I would wager that Dickens himself would be less than pleased to analyze his own work when he could be reading the story for the mere enjoyment that it brings him, and discussing it with other people who may or may not share the love of literature, but who all share the blood of humanity.

There is no easy answer to this dilemma, and this paper does little more than provide a canvas for my literary displeasure. I think the most basic idea that one should grasp from this discussion is that the problem lies with the classification of literature as a whole: classics have survived through the ages, and therefore have their merit; but it is because people associate classics with the antiquated and the scholarly that they have lost their luster in the eyes of the modern populace. We think they should be read, and thus we require them throughout high school and college; but it is because we are coercing, rather than coaxing,
that Shakespeare and the like are lost in the abyss that teachers and the matronly alone frequent on a consistent basis. Let’s not lead our horses to water with a whip or an academic prerequisite; let’s lead our students to the literary watering hole with an enthusiasm for not only the classification (i.e. classic) that the book holds, but also for the fictional gems that can be mined within its pages. Let’s show that a book is not judged by its cover, but judged by its ability to germinate the human heart and soul. If we can do that as educators, we can revive the corpses of the classics and make them into living beings that everyone will and can enjoy.