

Strengthening Leadership through Literature

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The demand on leaders is great. They must not only be a technical expert in their profession, but also a social scientist capable of understanding people. People are the foundation of any organization, but understanding an individual's ideals and connection to society and culture is daunting. Failure to see these subtle ties risks limiting a leader's ability to motivate or comprehend long term consequences. Leaders must immerse themselves in the social sciences, and one way to achieve this, while balancing professional expertise, is by actively reading literature. When examining the leader or follower, their character drives organizational progress and change, and literature helps uncover the richness of character. This essay examines how literature opens leaders to experience the vastness of the human condition and reflect upon their own understandings and biases, which in turn expands awareness and empathy. It will also examine the value of literary leaders and how the relationship between author and reader mirrors the relationship between leader and follower.

There are many ways leadership is defined. One such definition comes from Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of the book *The Leadership Challenge*: "Leadership is the art of mobilizing others to struggle for shared aspirations."¹ Leadership changes people's actions, minds, and hearts toward a goal. But to "mobilize others" for "shared aspirations" a good leader must recognize the diverse group they want to inspire. They are subordinates, peers, superiors, and anyone else who contributes to the organization's aspirations. This collective whole exists both in and out of the organization and contributes intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Leadership succeeds when it gains people's commitment to fulfill the vision. Great leadership is challenging because it hinges on understanding complex people.² As such, leaders need to be students of human culture, behavior, and character. They need to seek answers to questions like:

“What inspires the individual or the group?” “What shapes individual and social behavior?” A failure to grasp human complexity will hinder a leader’s effectiveness.

Self-awareness is the driving force of human culture. People yearn to experience life beyond survival necessities, and we possess the ability, and curiosity, to question existence.³ Civilization spends an enormous amount of time, energy, and resources toward searching for answers, which are often expressed through various art forms. For example, cathedrals are a testament of human ingenuity and dedication to art, expression, and ritual. The pre-renaissance writer Alighieri Dante, in *The Divine Comedy*, described a self-reflecting journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven to understand and experience life beyond the senses. In contrast, Greek and Roman philosophies, reintroduced during the Western Renaissance, centered the universe on humanity. From this sprung a yearning to understand the natural world through scientific discovery. In this way, culture - and in particular western culture - experienced and adopted changes in thought, and modern individuals are imprinted by this legacy.

People are products of their culture and ideals forged by history, but they are also shaped by surroundings and associations. The social scientist Dr. Erik Goffman in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, wrote that each person performs a role, or “persona” in the social play called daily life.⁴ This includes everything from household interactions between family members to political and business dealings. The playwright William Shakespeare said it best in his play *As You Like it*: “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players.”⁵ From these different personas, people project themselves. Dr. Goffman wrote, “As part of personal front we may include: insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like.”⁶ These outward expressions instill barriers and limitations into a person’s true nature

restricting open interaction. People are not only characters but are also audience members.⁷ This dual role means people not only perform but affect the performance of others through formal and informal interactions. A leader, who wishes to inspire and motivate people to follow a vision, must understand the multiple characterizations individuals play in their daily lives and how they are effected by culture and society.

Human nature and culture can be studied through symbols and stories. These imaginative projections develop not only from experiences but also from the human psyche. Likewise, leadership is defined and shaped by cultural and societal change.⁸ Because leadership and culture are linked, it is critical leaders explore the complex forces affecting society and the individual. Literature chronicles and retells humanity's great stories and symbols passed down through history, the same history that has shaped culture and people's identities. Learning to explore those great literary works provides an unending amount of insight into human character.

The most beneficial form of reading happens when the piece is initially beyond the reader's ability, and solely through the reader's careful assimilation does the work reveal its secrets.⁹ Active reading is an imaginative dialog between the reader and the author inspired by the literary work. Reading for information or entertainment provides unknown facts or recreational value, but the reader has not experienced a fundamental change in their world. Reading a work that opens one up to new ideas and questions facilitates active reflection, and reflection allows us to frame, justify, or challenge our biases and prior scholarship.¹⁰

Reading an author who stretches the mind means to experience strangeness. Enlightenment comes from transforming the strangeness into the familiar. Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren's literary guide *How to Read a Book* states, "To be enlightened is to know, in addition, what *it* [emphasis added] is all about: why it is the case, what its connections are with other

facts, in what respects it is the same in what respects it is different, and so forth.”¹¹

Allegorically, it is glimpsing into the unknown and seeing something in humanity that was not there before. A lifetime of reading teaches people critical thinking. The reader learns to comprehend and challenge an author’s purpose and assumptions. This open dialog between the reader and the author energizes further quest for learning. Through this dialog and process people, culture, and civilization no longer remain static but become an evolving form.

Leaders need to challenge themselves to understand humanity better. Humanity’s foundation comes from character. Great literature is created from the struggle characters faced because of change. Kouzes and Posner helped define leadership as the ability to inspire to “struggle for shared aspirations.”¹² Literature encompasses a multitude of character struggles across the human experience. These include the personal, social, economical and political, which are all areas leaders are affected by, and can change. Examining character provides insight into centuries of human conditions and emotions. As Dr. Goffman wrote, people present themselves through masks.¹³ It is easy to forget people see only glimpses of another’s true nature. Leaders need to ask how much more lies beyond a person’s persona.

Mythology professor and writer Joseph Campbell concluded that many mythological characters and themes are echoes from a human subconscious shared across cultures and time.¹⁴ At its best, literature reveals the strangeness of character through humanity’s universal attributes. This should encourage leaders to better understand the nuances in the people they lead. A good example of the complexity and familiarity in a character is Jane Austin’s Elizabeth Bennet, from the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, whose struggles with love, friendship, societal expectations, money, family, and emotions can resonate in modern readers. The desire, decisions, and consequences Elizabeth Bennet faces are multifaceted. Even in the quiet countryside of early

nineteenth century England, subtle pressures move and shape a struggle with self-identity and freedom. It is uncomfortable to experience how Austin's created world is similar to our own. Leaders and followers alike live under the force of social pressure, and as with Elizabeth Bennet's story, the manner in which one chooses to overcome or face these pressures may have unforeseen consequences.

Literature reminds readers even well-intentioned attributes can become toxic. One example comes from Homer's *The Iliad*, where the Greek hero Achilles sulks after his pride is wounded by King Agamemnon's insults. Achilles refuses to fight, which leads to the deaths of many Greek soldiers. But his pride also rallies him and his fellow compatriots into battle over Troy. Another conflicted character is Inspector Javert from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables*, who represents the law in its most clinical form. While laws and compliance to authority is critical in society, Javert's extreme nature leaves little room for compassion. Hugo describes him as, "This man was a compound of two sentiments, simple and good in themselves, but he made them almost evil by his exaggeration of them: respect for authority and hatred of rebellion..."¹⁵ These two characters remind us personal traits are often beneficial or detrimental, depending how they are applied. Leaders who study the many realities of character gain insight into the internal and external forces shaping individuals and groups. That understanding can be transferred into better awareness as new situations unfold.

It would be an error to try to literally apply lessons learned from stories to modern problems. One cannot read Homer's *The Iliad* and compare its ten year campaign with current events. Yet Homer's great war epic ought to give readers pause at the familiarity this 4,000 year old story bestows. Homer, in great detail, recounts the sacrifice war demands. There is no clear good or evil represented between the Greek and Troy warriors, only soldiers, heroes, and families caught

in a campaign that takes on a life of its own. Missed opportunities to end the war lead to Troy's inevitable destruction and loss of a great civilization. To experience Homer means to connect with a primal part of humanity unleashed against civility. Not only has western culture been influenced by this epic, today's reader can still find value from the story. Literature has the power to recreate the environment, loss, struggle, passion, and intricacies life offers and still provide the reader the opportunity to add meaning. It also reveals how past problems continue to plague modern civilization. The Greek playwright Sophocles, in 5th century BC, captured a soldier's post-war struggle to reunite with society, family, the army, and himself in his plays *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, and the organization "Outside the Wire," recognizing parallels between these ancient warriors and modern day soldiers, is producing these plays to help returning veterans and families understand the complex soldier character.¹⁶ Here, leaders are not looking to the past for solutions, but instead are reconnecting with older wisdoms and emotions to generate thought and discussion.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of literature is its ability to generate self-reflection. The Army's Leadership Field Manual says a leadership core competency is to prepare one's self.¹⁷ Self development in a leader includes excellence in task performance and a developed ability to reflect upon one's understanding and assumptions. Learning to understand is different from learning to perform tasks, and reflection helps this process by correcting assumptions.¹⁸ Culture and experiences form paradigms used to view and understand the world. Without a reflective habit, people risk making decisions based upon unquestioned or incorrect assumptions and beliefs.¹⁹ Therefore, overcoming assumptions is critical toward understanding others.

Literature facilitates reflection by forcing the reader to experience the work and then question why they did so. When one reads Shakespeare, Tolstoy, or Austin you cannot help but react to

their words and story. Reviewing how we reacted means asking hard questions about our own stereotypes and internal beliefs, and this is the heart of self-examination. A good example is Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, which can generate a strong reaction. Although often classified as a comedy, this play tackles complex and emotional issues of race, power, money, law and forgiveness. The character of Shylock demands both our criticism and sympathy. Harold Bloom wrote this about Shakespeare and Shylock, "Shakespeare's greatest originality is in representation of character... Shylock, a permanently equivocal trouble to all of us...."²⁰ Acknowledging such contradiction in a character and story allows readers to reflect upon their own values, beliefs, and assumptions about the world. Without self-examination, people are not ready to adjust and accept change, but to help Bloom argues "reading is to prepare ourselves for change"²¹ and in turn facilitates personal growth.

People are challenged to find adequate time and space to reflect in today's informational climate. While technologies allow people and leaders to access large amounts of data at a rapid pace, they do not facilitate reflection and greater understanding. In his book *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr explained how the Net and instant information access not only change what people can know, but also changed the mind's ability to process information.²² The internet, with extensive search and hyperlink capability, quickened the capability to absorb monstrous amounts of information bits but has also limited the ability to comprehend longer and more complex material.²³ Information overflow may cost people the ability to actively read and understand complex characters such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. While short tweets and Facebook posts are beneficial for keeping up with family and friends, they do not lend themselves to addressing humanity's existential questions. Too much information, particularly the type tailored for quick and easy assimilation, hinders higher level

understanding.²⁴ True world experience requires time and energy not found through short data bursts, but by immersing one's self in story and character. The act of reading allows a person to ignore the distracting bombardment generated from mass media and enter deeper levels of understanding.

While literature offers insight into human nature, there are also many examples of leaders in literature. Some are imaginary and some are actual personas turned legend. People's imagination stirs the desire to experience great leadership. What would it be like to have listened to Shakespeare's character of Henry V when he spoke:

This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered, -
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.²⁵

Imagining following such a leader creates a need to be a part of something larger than ourselves. This is at the heart of the "mobilizing others" aspect of Kouzes and Posner's leadership definition.²⁶ People like to be swept up in such inspirational moments. Literature offers many similar rousing moments that tug at the reader's heart strings. And while there is a distinct separation between the influential moments of story and reality, understanding our own inspirational triggers, and examining how others grasp onto purpose and dedication, can help shape leaders' approach toward achieving the mobilization of people and ideas.

A study by Daniel Boggs examined nine literary works to gather insight into the leadership process. There were two key aspects literature can teach about leadership. One is, like mythological heroes, leaders have a many different personalities.²⁷ Additionally, this study also observed quality leadership is directly related to the relationship between leader and follower, and over time, the increase in social complexity changes the leader-follower relationship.²⁸

Leaders also influence social and cultural change. Boggs wrote:

...the leadership/culture relationship is essentially cyclic. The leader is formed by the society or the organization to the extent that he or she becomes one of its tangible symbols. In turn, and from that solid symbolic base, the leader-the good leader-may then influence and perceptibly alter the society or organization from which he or she was created.²⁹

Leadership influences society, culture and the human psyche. These ripple effects will outlast a leader's tenure, so a leader has the responsibility to grasp how their actions will affect society and culture. They become identities in society, in the human psyche, which is exactly the type of leadership found, and learned from, in literature.

This study also analyzed the relationship between leaders and heroes. Culturally, we like to look for heroes in our leaders and leaders from heroes. Organizations create their own heroes, remembering them through honors and traditions. It is a way to inspire and connect past greatness with future aspirations. Boggs observed the qualities and characteristics found in leaders do not necessarily equate to those of heroes.³⁰ That said, there is value in studying the idea of a hero from literature beyond the example of leadership. Literary heroes spring from the depths of human psyche, and are universal across cultures and regions.³¹ The hero, despite a variety of forms, is common to all people. It is an archetype found from primitive to modern society and unites people in a common thought and quest³² Acknowledging the universal aspects of heroes and experiencing the multifaceted image through cultural art and literature reminds people of cross-cultural commonality. From this view, heroes are a lasting part of humanity

transmitted through story to the individual. As organizations expand and are affected globally, finding such commonality is essential to every leader, and the hero is a universal guide through life's challenges.

While analyzing leadership in literature reflects some of society's attributes and complexities, there is a danger in applying this type of study too directly. Literary characters are not role models, nor do their actions reflect what should or should not be done. Instead, they are to be cherished for the rich introspective they offer, not the applicability of their actions. The better value of literature is to realize humanity intersects across cultural, racial, and geographic boundaries, and there are infinite characters to experience.

Literature and leadership inherently share certain qualities. Literature is a way to organize a chaotic world. The relationship between an author and a reader reflects the relationship of leader and follower. While the best writers frame the chaos into characters, settings, and plot, they also acknowledge life is greater than what can be bound in words. Leaders face a similar problem: to guide and inspire people toward an unrecognized goal is forging something new from a chaotic existence. Leaders, like the author, must shape and project their future vision into a cohesive idea. They dare to see their organization and the world in a different light, and leaders risk criticism for their vision. Followers, like the audience, not only accept this vision but allow the vision to challenge their paradigm. Reading well means listening to different voices who envision the world in many different ways. Followers, like active readers who mentally dialogue with the author, participate in the dialogue with the leader, and increase their ability to become more than the role they play in the organization. They are elevated above the organization and can see and anticipate its deeper meaning and needs.

Leadership demands professional and social expertise. While many leaders grow in technical and professional skills, social learning can be limited. Literature is humanity's collective memory passed through time. Authors evaluate social and individual ideals through plot, character, and setting, and readers willing to grapple with these stories are the benefactors. Literature does not provide a perfect template for addressing today's issues, but reading works beyond our limited understanding helps foster an attitude of questioning and aggressive learning, two traits every leader needs. Society, through globalization, will only become more complex and despite rapid access to information spread across multiple electronic mediums, leaders will need to contemplate, reflect, and pause to engender understanding. Literature will help.

End Notes

1. Craig Haponstall, "Leader or Leadership? Which Leader are You?" under *Leadership Reflections: January 2010*, The Leadership Challenge Website. <http://www.leadershipchallenge.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-420503.html> (accessed August 21, 2011).
2. Dallas Boggs, *Literary Perception of Leadership* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1990), 1-2.
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4. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 2.
5. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Globe Edition (Ann Arbor: Borders Press, 1911): Act II, Scene VII, 239.
6. Goffman, 24.
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8. Boggs, 188.
9. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 7-11.
10. Jack, Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning" in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), 10.
11. Adler and Van Doren, 11.
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13. Goffman, 24.
14. Joseph Campbell, "The Impact of Science on Myth" in *Myths To Live By*, (New York: Penguin, 1972), 9-15.
15. Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*, Trans. Charles E. Wilbour. (New York: Signet Classics, 1987), 171.
16. Elizabeth Blain, "In Ancient Dramas, Vital Words for Today's Warriors," *All Things Considered*, NPR (November 25, 2008), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97413320> (assessed August 28, 2011).
17. *Department of the Army, FM 6-22, Army Leadership, Competent, Confident, and Agile*. (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, October 2006), 2-4 - 2-8.
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19. Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 2-4.
20. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994), 45.
21. Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 21.
22. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows, What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010), 1-16.
23. Ibid.
24. Adler and Van Doren, 4.
25. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act IV, Scene III, 511.
26. Haponstall, "Leader or Leadership? Which Leader are You?"
27. Boggs, 8.

28. Ibid., 184-85.
29. Ibid., 41.
30. Ibid., 182.
31. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 3, 11, 16-20.
32. Ibid., 19-20.

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