



Teaching the Great Books with Josh Gibbs

Lesson 2: How Should We Read the Classics?

Outline:

How to Approach the Classics

- "Classical literature has made us, we have not made it."
- We are the parents of pop art, but the children of the classics. Thus, we must strive to please the classics while pop art pleases us.
- "Classics free us from the tyranny of having to find something interesting to say."
- With pop art you have to scramble to say something fast before things move on.
- You cannot stand outside Homer's artistry to criticize it. We do not know exactly what has and has not influenced us so the book is beyond the reader with one so influential.
- Homer's work is more interesting than you are so in humility listen and learn from the text - it requires submission.

The "Plunder the Egyptians" Method

- This method does not work well.
- Search for the good stuff (looking for treasure) and throw out the bad after one read.
- If we are listening because the text is the master, we cannot also be judging to determine what is treasure yet.

Asking Questions of the Text

- You need to ask the right questions and to teach students to ask the right questions.
- Classicism requires you even as the teacher to approach with the mind that you have nothing interesting to say.
- "The teacher is just the person with the greatest appreciation of how little his opinion matters."
- Do not ask the students, "What did you think?" This takes the burden off the teacher to examine the text and assumes the students have interesting thoughts about the book. Basically you are saying, "Just someone talk!" It is far too open.
- It is not for the student to judge the goodness of a text, but it is for the student to be judged BY goodness.
- "Learn to think without thinking of yourself."
- Classical education requires the humility of Job - pantomime Job's humility until it becomes real. Imitation is not judgement.



- Make questions deeper. Instead of asking, “What did you think?” ask, “Was this really about dancing? What might give the impression that this is not really about dancing?”
- The teacher must take the responsibility to use questions to shape students while still recognizing that the teacher does not know more about the text than the author of the text.
- Teach students to realize their own ignorance.



“Job and His Friends” by Ilya Repin