

Teaching Continuities in the Great Books Tradition and Contemporary Popular Culture

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Abstract : This paper studies the trope or meme of the Siren in terms of what long-standing cultural continuities can be found in college classrooms today. Those who have raised children may remember reading from Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Little Mermaid' (1836), not to mention regaling them with colorful Disneyesque versions when they were younger. Though Anderson tempered the darker first ending of the story to give the little mermaid more agency in her salvation—a prognostic developed in Disney adaptations—nonetheless, the tale pivots on an image of a 'heavenly realm' that the mermaid may eventually come to know or comprehend as a beloved woman on dry land. Only after 300 years, however, may she hope to see that 'which lives forever' and 'rises through thin air, up to the shining stars. Just as [sea-people] rise through the water to see the lands on earth.' What students today can see in this example is a trope of the agonistic soul in a hard-won disembarkation at a harbour of knowledge--where the seeker after truth may come to know through persistence (300 years)—all that is good and true concerning human life. This paper discusses several such examples from the Great Books and popular culture to suggest that teaching in the world of the 21st century could do worse than accede to some such perennial seeking.

Keywords : the Great Books, tradition, popular culture, 21st century directions in teaching

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