

GIFTED EDUCATION NEWS-PAGE

VOLUME 12, NUMBER 5

**Published by GIFTED EDUCATION PRESS; 10201 YUMA COURT;
P.O. BOX 1586; MANASSAS, VA 20108; 703-369-5017 www.giftededpress.com**

Dr. Michael Walters has written articles for this publication since its beginning twelve years ago. This issue presents a sample of these articles on literature, poetry, the arts, and society. They have emphasized that education for gifted children must create a *culture of giftedness* based upon the Humanities in order to effectively develop their sensibility and intellectual abilities. There are other important factors involved in this culture such as providing numerous opportunities for children of similar abilities to learn and work together.

The Greatness of Charles Dickens: Author, Humanist and Prolific Observer of Human Society. It is universally accepted that next to William Shakespeare, Dickens is the second greatest writer in the English language. In a manner similar to Shakespeare, there is a continuing interest in his writings. For example, in 1998 a film version of **Great Expectations** (1860-61) was released that updated the events in this book to correspond with the United States in the latter part of the 20th century and New York City (substituting for Victorian London).

Charles Dickens is an obvious example of the linkage between giftedness and sensibility. He did not possess an education beyond grammar school and he was not economically secure as he was growing up. Moreover, there was little intellectual stimulation from immediate family members. His giftedness derived from his own innate sensibility as expressed by the urge to capture the human condition through the written word. Throughout his entire life, he was stimulated by a love of reading and interpersonal observations.

Dickens created characters that remain within the reader's psyche for a lifetime. His concept of a plot involves studying and analyzing the development of human character. Even his villains are given a humanity that permits one to comprehend the reasons for their malicious behavior. His humor and satire were rooted in love rather than hate for humanity. In **Our Mutual Friend** the theme is: the ability of the main characters to transcend the dominant values of their society, and to achieve a higher level of human development based upon spiritual and humanistic values. The predominant value of Victorian England was the money nexus. The only mutual friends that most Victorians sought were ones that benefitted them both socially and economically. However, this book emphasizes that human mutuality is based upon love, respect and kindness. The main characters discover that they can become human only when they achieve the values of decency and sensitivity. **February-March 1999.**

A Celebration of National Poetry Month: Encounter with Rita Dove. The themes of Ms. Dove's poetry reflect the true sense of multiculturalism. Her personal background is African American (born in Akron, Ohio in 1952). She studied in Germany and married the German novelist, Fred Viebahn. The subjects of her poems have a wide range of cultural and intellectual interests, and they are influenced by her travels in Europe. Many of the poems with European motifs are stimulated by her highly developed sense of the history of the place where she is traveling. One group of poems is situated in Italy, but it is the Italy of the late middle ages and the early Renaissance. Even though she is writing about a subject in the past, her images and concerns are contemporary. One of her poems is called "Boccaccio: The Plague Years" (from **The Museum**, 1983). The subject is the Italian writer Boccaccio who wrote the **Decameron Knights**, a series of tales supposedly told by refugees who had fled from a plague in Florence. The modern concern of this poem is how the writer or poet can help human beings endure suffering. "Even at night the air rang and rang./Through the thick swirled glass/he watched the priests sweep past/in their peaked hoods, collecting death./On each stoop a dish burning sweet clotted smoke. He closed his eyes/to hear the slap of flesh onto flesh, a/liquid crack like a grape/as it breaks on the tongue." **June-July 1999.**

A Tribute to Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) on the Centenary of His Birth. Three novels by Hemingway are among the greatest of the twentieth century. These are **A Farewell To Arms** (1929), **For Whom The Bell Tolls** (1940), and **The Old Man and The Sea** (1952). He also wrote several short stories that are masterpieces, e.g., **The Snows Kilimanjaro** (1936). His descriptions of nature are among the best that have ever been written. The content of his novels and short stories concern the major issues that have confronted the human condition such as war, political ideology, totalitarianism, bureaucracy, ecology, and the need for individual freedom. Gifted students will benefit by studying Hemingway as a writer, and how his writings reflected the aforementioned social issues. Gifted individuals from varied backgrounds have been influenced by his style and content. For example, the African-American writer, Ralph Ellison (1914-94), was influenced by Hemingway, and expressed this influence in his book of essays, **Shadow and Act** (1964): "Because all he wrote – and this is very important – was imbued with a spirit beyond the tragic with which I could feel at home, for it is very close to the feeling of the blues, which are, perhaps as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy." John Keegan (the British historian and author of the highly acclaimed book, **The First World War**, 1998) said that Hemingway's novel about that war, **A Farewell To Arms** (1929), inspired his writing and views. **August-September 1999.**

A Study in Multicultural Literature: The Writings of Derek Walcott (1930-). It is helpful for gifted students to study and reflect upon Derek Walcott's works. The history of St. Lucia is an important ingredient of his personality. For over a hundred years, the British and French fought over this island. But, it was the only Caribbean island where the native inhabitants were never subdued. Despite the ultimate victory of the British, one of the languages that is spoken is a French dialect. In order to harvest the lucrative sugar crop, the European land owners brought slaves from Africa. Now St. Lucia is an independent nation whose population represents a mixture of native, European and African cultures. Derek Walcott's poetry and literary works express this multiculturalism.

Walcott wrote an epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), inspired by Homer's *Odyssey* (~800 BC). However, the setting is contemporary St. Lucia instead of the ancient Mediterranean world. However, the same conflicts of Homer's epic are contained in Walcott's poem, e.g., heroism, grace and the tragic. Yet, the imagery is the landscape and people of St. Lucia: ". . . I said, 'Omeros,' / and O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was / both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, / *os*, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes / and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore." (*Omeros*, 1990, p. 14, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux). **April-May 2000.**

Anna Akhmatova: Russian Poetess of the 20th Century. Akhmatova wrote two epic poems that describe human beings' agony and personal endurance. Her first one is *Requiem* which was written during the early 1930's and late 1940's. Besides many personal friends, she saw her own immediate family being victimized by the Stalinist tyranny. One of her closest friends and colleagues was the Russian Jewish poet, Osip Mandelstam. She watched him disappear into the Gulag Archipelago of Stalin's concentration camps. Her own son was also a victim of Communist persecution who was imprisoned merely for being the son of Akhmatova's first husband (executed in 1921 as a "counter-revolutionary"). She spent seventeen months standing outside a prison awaiting news concerning her son. He was finally exiled to Siberia and was one of the lucky few to survive this dark period of national persecution. Akhmatova's poem, *Requiem*, was an attempt to keep the memory alive for persons that the Stalinist regime was seeking to remove from history. This poem became part of the resistance against Stalinism aimed at crushing the human spirit.

The second epic is *Poem Without A Hero* which was written during the siege of Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) by Nazi Germany in 1941. Although she opposed the Stalinist regime, she was a patriotic Russian who did not want her nation to become part of another evil regime, Nazism. The siege of Leningrad was among the greatest battles of World War II, and was a test of the Russian people's determination to oppose Nazism. Her poem captures the nobility of their suffering and endurance.

Gifted students will benefit from studying her poetry by seeing how it can be used as a "lyrical diary." (Akhmatova, 1989). These poems emphasize the fusion of personal and collective suffering that have resulted from war and other calamities. Anna Akhmatova is one of the great poets of the 20th century and an obvious role model for gifted students, especially females. "To give life/ To my miraculous/ Sadness/ You have become/ Memory." From *White Flock*. In **Poem Without a Hero and Selected Poems** (p. 55, 1989, Oberlin College Press). **October-November 2000.**

Narratives of Mentoring the Gifted: The Life of James Baldwin and the Movie *Finding Forrester*. Recently, I have encountered the role that mentoring plays in the lives of different individuals through narratives in both written and visual forms. The print narratives were about the African American writer, James Baldwin (1924-87). I read both a biography about Baldwin and several of his own writings, e.g., **Go Tell It on the Mountain** (1953), **Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son** (1961), and **The Fire Next Time** (1963). The other narrative was a film which is presently very popular -- **Finding Forrester** (2000).

James Baldwin is acknowledged by critics and colleagues as one of the most important writers in the last fifty years. His essays are among the best examples of expository writing. Baldwin represents how despite his impoverished background in Harlem, the public schools were effective for him personally. His mentoring encounters started as early as elementary school. At Public School 24 his mentor was his principal, Gertrude Ayer -- the only African American to hold that position in the New York Public Schools during the early 1930s. His other mentor, a drama instructor named Orilla Miller, took him to see his first theater performance. At Frederick Douglass Junior High School, his French teacher was the famous African American poet, Countee Cullen, who also introduced him to Black writers such as Langston Hughes. Another mentor there was his mathematics teacher and faculty adviser to the school newspaper, Herman Porter. He traveled with Baldwin to the main branch of the New York Public Library to explore its massive collection. Baldwin attended De Witt Clinton High School (located in the Bronx) beginning in 1938. Here, one of his mentors was his fellow student, Richard Avedon -- later to become a world famous photographer. Near the end of the 1940s, Baldwin received a Rosenwald Foundation grant and was published in leading literary journals (e.g., *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*).

Finding Forrester is a fictional account of mentoring that has struck a chord among many inner-city teenagers. They identify with the African American teenager who shows both literary and basketball skills. He becomes a disciple of a famous Scottish American writer living reclusively in the South Bronx. The writer is played by Sean Connery who also came from a poor environment. The life of James Baldwin and the movie ***Finding Forrester*** emphasize how important it is for gifted individuals to be recognized and encouraged. One of the best ways to satisfy these needs is by being mentored. Despite students' personal disadvantages, mentors can release the gift of genius. We are blessed by and appreciate these mentors for enriching our artistic enjoyment. **February-March 2001.**

L L Maurice D. Fisher, Publisher, Copyright © by Gifted Education Press, June-July 2003 7 7