



Mortimer Adler  
in  
**PLAYBOY?**



**YES!**

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## THE NOT-SO-CLASSIC CLASSICS

*Opinion by*

**Mortimer Adler**

***Founder of the Great Books Program offers an unexpected appraisal of some of literature's sacred cows***

Part 2 of 2

Mention of tedious allegories reminds me inevitably of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, to which I award the palm as the most boring of all allegorical tales. Here again is a book which has been called a "classic," a "masterpiece" and, damn their eyes! a "great book," too. Moreover, it is supposed to have won acclaim and lasted so long in our literature because of its interesting and even exciting story. Well, all I can say is that I find the story utterly dull and unreadable, and the allegory as crude and corny as can be. The characters bear such names as Christian, Mr. Money-Love, Little-Faith, Lord Hate-Good and Mr. Greatheart. (Bunyan also wrote a humdinger called *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*.) Our hero flees the City of Destruction and traipses past such oddly named spots as the Slough of Despond, the Valley of Humiliation and the Delectable Mountains on his way to Zion, the City of God.

Literary historians tell us that this story was welcomed enthusiastically among English Puritans when it was published because such sinful literary fare as novels and plays were forbidden to them. Perhaps my lack of response to the story which these good people in 17th Century England found so exciting is simply due to the fact that I am not as hard up as they were literarily. Lord Macaulay once remarked that "the *Pilgrim's Progress* is perhaps the only book about which the educated minority has come over to the opinion of the common people." If indeed they have, I think they were ill-advised and I find their reasons mysterious. When I want stories of sin, damnation and redemption I prefer to go to such works as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* among the great books of the past, or to the novels of Graham Greene among the fictions of the latter-day sinners.

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I find famous works on the saving of human society as boring as I do such works as Bunyan's on the saving of men's souls. It makes no difference to me how influential the work in question may have

been upon the development of social and political thought. If it bores me, it bores me, no matter how “influential” it may have been or what its “historical significance.” If I have to read such a work for a research project, then of course I do it, but that does not make it any the less boring.

A good example of this type of work is Thomas More’s *Utopia*. It is over 400 years old, a germinal work in social thought, a “classic” that is on every respectable list of important political writings—and it bores me. Why am I bored with More’s book, but not with Plato’s *Republic*, which also presents an ideal human community as the answer to the search for justice and the good life? Perhaps it is because Plato deals with ideas rather than with the bare facts of communal living, and sets his perfect state within the framework of eternal values. Nothing could be duller than More’s deadpan description of life in Utopia. It is as flat and unvaried in tone as an accountant’s report. As between Plato and More, there certainly is no contest as to literary vitality and skill, not to speak of profundity of thought.

More is reputed to have been quite a gay person, with a delicious sense of humor, and to have demonstrated his masterful wit—his “merriness”—in this work on Utopian society. Erasmus advised a friend to read it “whenever you wish to be amused,” as well as for serious social analysis. But I, unfortunately, do not get the joke. I am not amused. More, for me, rhymes with “bore.”

An example closer to our time of eminently influential and utterly boring works of social thought may be taken from any of the works of Thorstein Veblen. He is reputed by respectable scholars to have been one of the most dynamic and seminal influences on the development of economic theory in this century, particularly in the United States. He is also credited with having expressed his economic theses in an intricate, highly ironic style; indeed, Veblen himself once modestly referred to the “consummate diction” of one of his works. Nevertheless, despite my awareness of these high recommendations, I must confess that I find it painful to get through any of Veblen’s works. As for his famous style, I find it frightful as well as tedious—it is leadenly didactic, with a lugubrious professorial irony and the symptomatic inhibition against saying anything in a direct, human fashion.

The so-called irony is of the type that uses words like “eleemosynary” instead of “nonprofit,” “charitable” or “free.” This sort of thing may draw a smile if it is used sparingly, but when it is done for 300 to 400 pages, it’s no joke. Veblen’s satirical coinages consist of such gems as “pecuniary emulation,” “conspicuous con-

sumption,” “hedonistic equilibration” and “noninvidious interest.” Whole books are filled with such phrases as the “emulative process of accumulation by the quasi-predatory methods of the pecuniary occupations.” The use of such barbaric jargon apparently gives a ritualistic satisfaction to many persons who work in the social sciences, and who apparently think they are not being scientific or intellectual unless they write in this ugly and inhuman manner. At the same time it is supposed to be mordantly humorous.

Joseph Dorfman, who wrote the definitive account of Veblen’s life and work, gave the dubious accolade to *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that “from a literary standpoint the book is doubtless worthy of Ph. D. dissertations in English literature,” and went on to point out Veblen’s rich store of literary devices, “including etymological precision, foggy language and sharp comparisons and contrasts ever changing in order.” This suggests that the academic coinages and ungainliness are deliberate and that we have to do with an elaborate spoof, a great professorial joke—at the expense of professorial jokes and academic economists, anthropologists, etc. But somehow this grandiose feint, if it is one, is lost on me. I fail to find the book amusing, and I find its language incomprehensible and painful to read.

H. L. Mencken, a homemade scholar and literary critic, assessed Veblen’s style correctly, in my opinion. He said that Veblen wrote as if he thought “in some unearthly foreign language—say Swahili, Sumerian or Old Bulgarian and then painfully [put] his thoughts into a copious but uncertain and book-learned English.” The results, he says rightly, are “singularly laborious and muggy . . . incomparably tangled and unintelligible works,” written in a “clumsy, affected, opaque, bombastic, windy, empty” style. In short, Veblen is another Cicero.

Mencken also noticed what I consider to be the main reason for the tediousness of Veblen’s works, their prolixity and repetitiveness. A book of Veblen’s will take a simple theme (such as, that the profit motive frustrates economic efficiency, or that we irrationally value nonproductive over productive activity) and repeat it again and again, without any logical development that justifies its presentation running from 300 to 400 pages. Works such as *The Theory of the Leisure Class* or *The Theory of Business Enterprise* have enough idea content to fill an essay, perhaps a long essay of up to 100 pages, but no more. Veblen, however, is one of those writers—not all of whom are professors—who think they are saying more if they use 300 pages to say what can be said well in 30.

There is an old Latin tag about repetition being the mother of

learning. Certainly repetition may be a useful device for a teacher with a classroom full of students at various levels of attention and comprehension. However, to have to suffer through the incessant repetition of the same theme through hundreds of pages of text is like having to learn the same lesson day after day.

There are other old sayings that are even more relevant than the one just mentioned. For instance, “In repetition, there is no fruition,” or better yet, Juvenal’s observation, which we may take as applying to the pitiable reader:

Like warmed-up cabbage served at each repast,

The repetition kills the wretch at last.

Veblen’s malady—prolixity and repetition—is common to a whole slew of present-day works in various fields of study. Think for a moment of how many well-known serious works you have read in recent years which you found tedious, not because of a lack of interest in the theme, but because the author couldn’t stop when he was ahead, because he didn’t have the grace to leave us asking for more instead of making us feel stuffed to the gills.

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Shocking as it may seem, or shameful to admit, even sex can be boring in its literary delineation. Books that are famous for their tales of sexual encounters (although they may include a good deal else), and yet which have proved quite tedious to me, include such “classics” as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and the *Arabian Nights*. I wonder how many other readers have picked up these works, expecting a rousing good time, and been thoroughly disappointed. And I ask myself why I find the *Decameron* a bore, but not Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, which is also made up of stories told by a group of characters within the main narrative. The literary device is the same, but the effect is far different.

The reason for the greater interest and enjoyment in Chaucer’s work is quite obvious: Chaucer is a better storyteller. His characters and the stories they tell fit together, and so do the incidents and conversation between the stories. The main prologue, the prologues to the tales, and the joining pieces are interesting and enjoyable in themselves. Indeed, the main prologue, setting the stage and introducing the characters—soldiers, clergymen, businessmen, craftsmen, farmers and housewives of 14<sup>th</sup> Century England—is perhaps the best story of all. Second to it, if not its equal, is the prologue to the Wife of Bath’s tale, the autobiography of this

hearty, juicy woman, well versed in “the old, old dance” of love since the age of 12, the redoubtable housewife who has had “five church-ed husbands . . . Not counting other company in youth.” And all the interchanges, conflicts and agreements among the characters before and after they tell their stories make the main setting more than a mere mechanical device.

There is nothing like this in the *Decameron*. The ten young people holed up in a country estate in refuge from the plague, who while away their time in telling stories, only serve as a device on which to hang the stories. There is no significant interchange among them. And this is so despite the fact that the group is composed of seven young ladies and three young men, who are supposed to be wooers of at least some of the ladies. Nothing, as they say, “happens” between them, not even on the level of conversation, despite the plethora of tales of lusty and lustful erotic combinations. Moreover, the characters who tell the stories are for the most part of little individual interest in themselves and have no special relation to the stories they tell.

As for the stories, those told in *The Canterbury Tales* are far more artful and varied (even when they have been cribbed from the *Decameron*), and this is true also of the group of bawdy stories in each case. A good many of the nonsexual stories are rather banal and pointless, the sort of tale that people not gifted in telling stories would narrate to a captive audience, but not the stuff one wants to read through page after page. As for what are commonly called the “dirty” stories, granted that such tales are a joy to hear when they are well constructed and have a witty or humorous turn, still there can be too much of a good thing. The first story or two about the priest and the girl, or the wife’s deception, or similar hanky-panky may have a jolly effect, but the same thing again and again gets tedious.

No doubt there are some wonderful stories in the *Decameron*, lovely and enjoyable pieces that earn Boccaccio his place among the great writers of the Italian Renaissance. But it is a dreadful chore to have to go through hundreds and hundreds of pages of boring stuff to find them. In this case, it might be better to have someone else do the work for us, and give us “the best of the *Decameron*.”

What I have said of the *Decameron* is doubly true of the *Arabian Nights*. The same old thing night after night! If I had been the Caliph, Scheherazade would have insured, instead of delayed, her execution by telling these tedious, mechanical, pointless stories. It would have been me or her—my death by boredom or hers by the

sword. Besides, I don't like stories that do not pause for paragraphs. These paragraphless stories, in Burton's famous translation, intensify the tediousness and the soporific effect.

No account of boring accounts of sexual action would be complete in the present age if it excluded James G. Cozzens' *By Love Possessed*. The most masterly job of exposing the lugubriousness, clumsiness and tediousness of the book was done by Dwight Macdonald in an article for *Commentary* (later included in his book *Against the American Grain*). I would like here, if I may, to add my own note of dispraise.

The style of *By Love Possessed* is simply overwhelming. It is as if Thorstein Veblen had tried to write a novel. And this muggy, convoluted, pretentious style is used to convey rather simple things which are best said simply. The verbal acrobatics add no color, depth or tone, as the chorus of admiring reviewers damnably quoted by Macdonald would have us believe. This, for instance, is an account of the embarrassing effect of prolonged necking upon a young man courting a proper young lady:

...Due to that blameless neglect of Hope's to call the halt she (the fair, the chaste, the inexpressive she!) had no need to call; and to her partner in petting's reluctance to leave, since he was free to remain, there had been awkward occasions when the animal (disregarded by the hour and teased too far) reacted of a sudden, put to the shilly-shally so long imposed its own unpreventable end.

And this is the account of the mating of a man and his mistress:

. . . At his advance, a patent fury, a torment, of inner vellications that would not admit of delay made her encounter of him instant. Hardly down on the mattress, the mucid encompassment took place, he was invested by her. To the multi-sonous harsh music of stretched springs, she, seized of him, hied him on, forcing a pace (she usually in the lead) which must, with something of her fury got into him, in some impetus, some plunge of venereal urgency long unfelt—no; never felt!—soon terminate the violent to-and-fro, let the giving springs be still, leave the prostrated mattress-mates spent, exhausted of motion. That was all—for the time being.

Naturally, the author prefers the word "vellications" here to the term "twitchings," for the latter is too clear and direct.


The trouble with Cozzens' book is that the attitude of the main

character, Arthur Winner, toward sex is one of distaste. For him, if not for his author, it is something messy and disgusting. His adulterous coupling with his friend's wife is merely a matter of being the "he-half" of "the beast of two backs." Intercourse is simply a momentary spurt. Listen to this lyrical tribute to the mating of a man and a woman:

The little life span of the beast soon sped, its death was died.  
At the she-half's flings-about in her extremity, the he-half's  
spoonful of phrenetic sensation was tweaked to spend it-  
self—and, there! There was the buy, the bargain, the prize,  
the pearl of price!

And so on. It is hard to make interesting and enjoyable what is regarded as loathsome and distasteful.

It should also be noted that, even if one enjoyed Cozzens' clinical and involuted accounts of the sexual act, most of the 570 pages of the book are concerned with other things—and the story is simply not very interesting. Despite all its pretensions to offering us a serious view of the human situation, it is about on the level of women's magazine fiction—perhaps even the sex passages could be printed in the ladies' literary companions in this age of Henry Miller, Genet and Beckett. Jessamyn West, one of the book's admirers, has cued us on what to expect. "You may come away with a certain feeling of tiredness," she says.

It is that certain tired feeling that I do not want to have when I read a book, no matter how much coupling it may describe. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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