

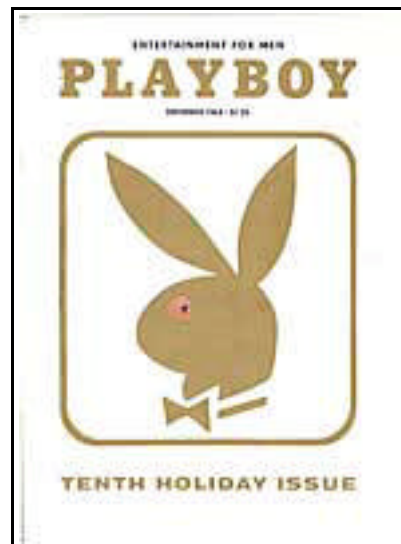
# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Mortimer Adler  
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# HOW TO READ A BOOK SUPERFICIALLY

• IN TWO PARTS •

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BY MORTIMER ADLER

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## Part 1

**A**S A MAN long identified with the great-books movement—indeed someone once called me “**The Great Bookie**”—I am painfully aware that many of the great works of thought and imagination I have been talking and writing about for 30 years are not read by those who might enjoy them most. A generation entertained by C. S. Forester, Herman Wouk, Georges Simenon and J. D. Salinger finds the works of Homer, Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare practically unreadable.

The truth is that these books are actually fully as readable as *Captain Horatio Hornblower*, *The Caine Mutiny*, the Inspector Maigret mysteries and *The Catcher in the Rye*. The knack lies in knowing how to read them.

First, let us observe how not to read them. Consider, for example, the approach of the romantic lover of culture and learning who sets out to tackle the masters. Does he advance upon these renowned works as he would a contemporary best seller? Of course not. Instead, full of reverential awe, he approaches them as if they were sacred scripts. He starts from the first word on the first page

and proceeds to the last word on the last page—or at least that is his goal. He proceeds cautiously, pedantically, feeling compelled to comprehend every sentence the moment he reads it—or to succumb in the attempt.

What happens to our lover of culture is not difficult to predict. The “stops” become more and more frequent as he tries to track down every allusion to unknown legend, myth or history, or is diverted by the author’s own digressions—all too plentiful, incidentally, in many of the great literary works of the past. No matter how pronounced a glutton for punishment our reverential reader may be, there comes a point when even he has had too much of a bad thing and he finally gives up. A few more experiences like this with the great books, and he becomes convinced that reading them is a fruitless pursuit and that they have acquired their lofty reputation through snobbery, stupidity or skulduggery.

It is not hard for us to see where the poor fellow has gone wrong.

Obviously, he has not given these renowned books any chance to display their worth. No sensible person reads an ordinary book in this way, and it’s no way to read a *great* book either. Our disillusioned culture seeker has been betrayed by his naiveté and his prim solemnity. He has so encumbered himself that he cannot function as a reader, loaded down as he is with all his dictionaries, encyclopedias, classical companions and literary histories, as he tries to track down every obscure allusion and understand every word of the venerable book.

Now, let me speak for myself. Whenever I have found a great book worthy of its reputation, it was the shape, tone, drive, mood and essential content of the book as a whole that impressed and interested me. Some parts of it I found especially enjoyable or vivid, while others bored, puzzled or stymied me until I slid by them and went on with my reading. This is the common-sense way of reading a great book the first time around. Otherwise—via the stop-and-look-it-up or stop-and-figure-it-out way—one would never get it read the first time.

Note that I did not say this is the only good way or even the best way to read a great work. I said that this admittedly superficial reading is the best and only way *the first time around*. I grant, indeed I urge, that the great books are infinitely rereadable, that we discern more meaning in them the more we read them and the more

we bring to them. But we must start from where we are and with what we are—with our present age, experience and insight—and let these works and writers communicate to us here and now.

What soured many of us on so vital and juicy a writer as William Shakespeare in our school days was not simply the fact that we were far too young to understand all that he said. Of course, we were too young—what schoolboy could understand *Othello*, what schoolgirl understand Cleopatra? But that was not our trouble, just recall how a play as tight and simple in structure as *Macbeth*, with a single story line and theme, moving swiftly toward its climax and conclusion, packing everything into a terse 2100 lines, was hopelessly obscured by pseudoscholarly busyness. We were so busy reading the explanatory footnotes and glossary, and laboriously tracking down unfamiliar terms and allusions that we were never able to view the play as a whole. We never suspected that the proper way to read a play for the first time is to do it in one continuous reading, so as to grasp the action as a whole—and then, and only then, if we care to do so, to go over it carefully, searching out the meanings and connections of the details of dialog and plot. In school, we never got to see what the shouting was all about or to discern why the characters behaved as they did. What wonder, then, that Shakespeare seemed dull?

Granted that more elaborate and complex plays, such as *Othello* and *King Lear*, will not reveal as much of their meaning as does *Macbeth* in a quick once-over, the fact remains that it is the essential theme and action that must enlist our interest before we can become aware of all the details. In *King Lear*, what excites, astounds and terrifies us is the sad and mad career of that amazing, impulsive, raging old man as he realizes the consequences of his blind stupidity in his relations with his daughters. This is the core of the play and everything else runs in or out of it. This is what it is important to follow and grasp. As for the side story or subtheme of Gloucester and his sons, which crisscrosses the main story throughout the play, it is not important to see exactly how it fits, or whether indeed it fits at all with the central theme, when first we read the play. If we wonder about it, we can return and search it out, with the actions and reactions of Lear and his daughters fixed firmly in our minds.

It is pedantic fussiness that interferes with our enjoyment of Shakespeare, not the Elizabethan, poetic language that some readers claim is the hazard. Actually, the problem of understanding the idiom in most of Shakespeare's plays is not much more difficult than

that of grasping any other English local dialect, such as the speech of Faulkner's rural Southerners or Sillitoe's provincial British workingmen. The philologist Jespersen once pointed out that Shakespeare's language is for the most part the ordinary conversational English of his day and not at all a fancy poetic diction. We should not find it too hard to grasp what Iago means when he tells Desdemona's father that his white ewe is being tupped by an old black ram. "Tup" is certainly less of a problem to us than Norman Mailer's odd three-letter word in *The Naked and the Dead* will be to readers three centuries hence (they may well confuse it with "fig").



As I have indicated, the distinguished literature of past eras provides quite a few obstacles, detours and blind alleys, where an innocent and serious-minded reader may well come a cropper. One of the most annoying things to many readers, especially in very ancient literature, is the repetition of terms, narration and dialog. Homer's reference to "the rosy-fingered Dawn" in the *Odyssey*, for example, may charm us at first, but some of us are ready to chew off our fingernails at the thousandth repetition of this phrase. Moreover, certain parts of the story of Ulysses' wanderings are repeated many times in full detail.

One explanation of this may be that the ancient writers did not have an editor peering over their shoulders, telling them what to cut and what to condense. In those days, perhaps, books were more written than edited, in contrast to our "advanced" present-day practices. But the most likely explanation is that Homer was still close in manner to the ancient bard who chanted his tale at the banquet table or around the campfire. Oral recitation, particularly of long narratives, required repetition at various points in the tale, and no doubt the audiences liked to be reminded of the details and events that had gone before (as in the serial stories in our weekly and monthly magazines). And they would nod appreciatively at the repetition of a favorite metaphor or phrase.

However, we who read the *Odyssey* today usually do so alone, and most often without moving our lips. If we have read and remember a certain situation, event or interchange, there is no need to read it again, often in the very same words, a second and a third time. What most of us do when we are aware of this ancient practice is to skip the repetitive passage entirely and go on with the story, which is, of course, the sensible thing to do. It certainly in-

volves no less majesty or blasphemy, for however sacred Homer may have been held in certain Greek circles, his text is not sacrosanct to us. We are not compelled to mull and ponder every single word—including duplications and reduplications. Reading is, after all, an active and selective process, the analog of writing, not a merely passive echoing of the writer's words.

Another favorite practice of the ancients, and one which has been followed by writers all the way down to the present, is the frequent use of digressions. Sometimes these digressions dovetail into the narrative proper and serve to fill in what has gone before, like the movie flash back. But often they seem to serve no particular purpose. In the *Odyssey*, for instance, Ulysses' lying yarns when he is trying to preserve his incognito, and the long and detailed accounts of their pasts by various minor characters. All these digressions seem to do is to keep us from going on with the main story. According to such eminent literary critics as Goethe and Schiller, this was just what the author was trying to do, to "retard" us in the reading of the story, in order to keep things relaxed and leisurely. Ancient audiences, it seems, liked a man who took his time, and they liked to take their time in getting to the culmination of a story.

The modern temper, however, is not a leisurely one and we are likely to be annoyed rather than mollified by digressions from the main story. Our tendency is to skip or skim these interruptions. Certainly something is lost when we do this, for a full appreciation and enjoyment of Homer requires an awareness of the richness and clarity of detail even in his offshoots from the main narrative. It would be unfortunate if we did not catch the wonderful story of how Ulysses got his scar in Book XIX of the *Odyssey*, and the many other magnificent miniatures that adorn the work. Still, in a first reading we must achieve a middle ground between the slow sipping which never gets to the bottom of the glass and the quick gulp which never senses the flavor, body and aroma. We must not permit ourselves to become so engrossed in our admiration of Homer's miniatures that we lose the main thread of the story of that most crafty and devious of men, Ulysses; his ambiguous, devoted, sly and catty wife; and his weak, uncertain, father-seeking son.

A great book which certainly seems to call for the skipping device is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. This engaging, comical, touching story of the Knight of the Rueful Countenance and his fat, pragmatic squire is interspersed with all kinds of side stories, stories

within stories and subplots. There are many of these tales, such as “The Novel of the Ill-advised Curiosity” (in which the husband prevails on his friend to test his wife’s virtue—to his sorrow), which have nothing to do with the story of Don Quixote. A recent translator of Cervantes’ work, J. M. Cohen, advises us to skip these interlarded tales entirely. Certainly most of this extraneous material can be skipped in a first reading without affecting our grasp of the main theme.

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