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**Classics? The dickens you say**

**AS I SEE IT**

**By Charles Chieppo and Jamie Gass**

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Certain literary works are inextricably woven into the fabric of our civilization. At this time of year and in the 200th anniversary of Charles Dickens’ birth, one timeless example is his classic, “A Christmas Carol.”

When Dickens was young, his father and entire family except for himself were thrown into Marshalsea debtors’ prison. This heart-wrenching separation ignited an overwhelming drive to succeed and great sensitivity to the plight of poor children, which was apparent in his genius-inspired writings and vigorous advocacy for those neglected in Victorian England.

When touring the United States he was only lukewarm, except for his favorite American cities — Boston and Lowell. He was struck by Boston’s high literacy, charitable institutions, and the education levels attained by the Lowell Mill Girls. An impressionable Samuel Clemens saw Dickens lecture in New York City.

While the brilliance of Dickens’ novels, including “Oliver Twist,” “The Pickwick Papers,” “Martin Chuzzlewit,” “Bleak House,” “David Copperfield,” and “Great Expectations” will live on, they’re on the endangered list in America’s public schools.

You see, according to Pioneer Institute research, Shakespeare is one of the very few British writers named in the nationalized English standards adopted by the commonwealth and 45 other states. So, watching “A Christmas Carol” on television may be kids’ only exposure to the magic of Dickens’ characters.

“There were two people in him, [Dickens] told me: one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite,” the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky reported. “From the one who feels the opposite I make my evil characters,” Dickens said, “from the one who feels as a man ought to feel I try to live my life.”

Most of Dickens’ characters live unnoticed on the margins of society, orphaned or poor. They were the victims of the squalor and ignorance he witnessed in mid-19th century London. “All his characters are my personal friends,” said Leo Tolstoy, author of “War and Peace” and “Anna Karenina.”

Dickens’ works have instructed generations of novelists and schoolchildren around the world. His characters capture the spectrum of vices and virtues found in human nature: Oliver Twist, Mr. Bumble, Ebenezer Scrooge, Tiny Tim, Pip, Estella, Miss Havisham, David Copperfield, and Madame Defarge.

Many of these cleverly named characters speak the most enduring lines in the English language.

“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done;” said Sydney Carton, the unlikely hero of “A Tale of Two Cities.” “[I]t is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known,” before his selfless guillotine execution, which saves the husband of the woman Carton loves.

Our children must read Dickens to grasp the universality of the human condition, compassion for human suffering, and the reality of human heroism.

After Massachusetts’ landmark 1993 education reform law, classic literature became the cornerstone of the commonwealth’s public school English standards. Former Senate President Tom Birmingham, a Rhodes Scholar from Chelsea and co-author of the 1993 legislation, remembers Beacon Hill policymakers discussing which Dickens’ novels students should be reading.

The returns Massachusetts has enjoyed on its investment in classic literature are a testament to the higher-level vocabulary found in great fiction, poetry, and drama, which is qualitatively superior to the language found in non-fiction, or so-called “informational texts.”

Since 2005, Massachusetts students have topped those from every other state on each administration of the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as “the nation’s report card.”

But the commonwealth discarded all this when the Patrick administration ditched Massachusetts’ literature-rich English standards for national standards, known as Common Core, which will cut the amount of classic literature Bay State students will read by 60 percent.

When the Ghost of Christmas Present comes to visit Ebenezer Scrooge in “A Christmas Carol,” he shows Scrooge two destitute children. “This boy is Ignorance,” the Ghost says. “This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased...”

Could there be a clearer Dickensian omen for the price our country will pay if American public education turns its back on great literature?

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