

# The New Criterion

## Notebook

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### Unmasking the unmaskers

by [Gary Saul Morson](#)

On the uses & abuses of the Great Books.

What is literature good for, apart from providing employment to literature professors? How is it taught and how should it be? And why are enrollments in literature courses steadily declining? If you listen to the academics, you will discover that students' decreasing interest reflects the pernicious values of capitalist society. In my experience, students offer rather different and less flattering explanations.

Often enough, undergraduates do not see the point of what their classes teach. To be sure, they know that they are supposed to be "well-rounded," a term to which they can attach no clear meaning beyond a prophylactic against nerdity. They recognize that the social class to which they belong or aspire demands an antidote to cultural illiteracy. For such reasons, Shakespeare and Tolstoy have become entirely medicinal. They exemplify Mark Twain's definition of a classic as ...

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