

Prompt: One of the classic defenses of literature's value dates from ancient Rome. It is embedded in the Latin phrase, "utile et dulce," or "useful and sweet" (pleasurable). The idea is that literature will not only teach you something (utile), but it will also entertain you in the process (dulce).

Largely, this is how the authors of "Fairy Tale Motifs" see the ideal value of fairy tales. A healthy society would use fairy tales to teach its children about virtue and vice, light and darkness. However, the authors claim, "The society that is depicted in 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been' has failed to make available to children like Connie maps of the unconscious such as fairy tales provide . . ." (1453). Thus Connie is completely vulnerable to darkness.

For discussion, I would like students to consider two related questions. 1) Do fairy tales have much play in our American popular culture? 2) If so, what do we or our children get out of them? Do these tales teach anything on the order of life lessons? How's "utile et dulce" holding up in our own popular culture? Consider movies, TV, songs, magazines. (One full paragraph minimum.)

"Utile et Dulce" in Contemporary American Pop Culture

When one seeks the "utile et dulce", or "useful and sweet", in contemporary American pop culture, it is frighteningly apparent that we place an overwhelming importance in the sweet (or pleasurable) instead of the useful. Fairy tales became widely appreciated for their careful balance of these two qualities. They gave both children and adults stories which contained valuable truths about life and living, and communicated them in a way which also provided enjoyment to the reader. Popular stories of the present day—whether they are delivered through television, video games, movies, books or other mediums—instead garner appreciation by serving up the heftiest portions of quick thrills and open the widest channels of gratification. Sadly, the success of most modern stories can be measured almost entirely by how thoroughly and effectively a particular audience has been indulged.

It's hard to say whether fairy tales have much relevance today. In some ways they are still a part of our collective purview—simply watch almost any Disney movie to find examples in how they have been recently interpreted. Fairy tales continue to appear on television and in films, such as the 2012 action-packed and story-lite blockbuster "Snow White and the Hunter". Of course, a person can still find books containing collections of fairy tales with only minimal digging at your local bookstore (usually buried somewhere underneath a mountain of Harry Potter books and related accessories). But the aforementioned balance, that between "utile et dulce", is on the whole absent. Using American pop culture as a gauge, fairy tales are only relevant in the most superficial of ways. Sadly some of their most important qualities consistently come up absent.

I do not believe that fairy tales can be faithfully represented in the space of popular culture. It is simply impossible for one to fit comfortably into the other and adjustments are made whenever a meeting between the two occurs. It is not hard for me to attribute this to the consistently fickle state of American pop culture (not to mention it being a frightening business apparatus that, when harnessed, generates tremendous amounts of income daily). Put simply: pop culture does not make concessions, and when fairy tales surface in our movie theaters and through our television sets, one begins to see the many incompatibilities.

Fortunately, there are still many people today who both appreciate and understand the importance of fairy tales. They still read these stories to their children and do not use the distorted forms that appear in our many media outlets. Fairy tales have persisted for centuries because they encapsulate life's lessons and then effectively communicate them to people of all ages. For children they provide enjoyment along with carefully drawn boundaries where new ideas and subjects may be introduced and understood. For adults they also provide enjoyment and serve as reminders to the things that are important.

Re: The Importance of "Utile et Dulce" (by Adam Jones)

We are not interested in figuring out what a story, or piece of literature, or any form of art says about life or the human condition, because every story we have read or watched, or known as we have grown up has blatantly told us what it is trying to say, or flat out had nothing valuable to say.

Very well put. I will add to this by saying that there are many people out there who require someone or something to hold their hand through whatever it is they are engaged with, whether it be watching a movie, reading a book, having an important conversation with another person, or voting in the next election.

People automatically surrender their faculties when they are exposed to something challenging because somehow it became customary to do so. As a result of this, people have a difficult time forming their own opinions and cannot figure out relatively straightforward problems. Comically, many of these people insist that they actually do have their own opinions and that not being able to calculate a percentage isn't that big a deal (maybe because so many others cannot do it so somehow it becomes normal and thus acceptable).

How can a person possibly survive in an increasingly technology-focused society if she cannot accurately balance her checkbook? What does it mean when society constantly tells someone that this sort of indiscretion is okay by sending a dozen credit card applications in the mail every month? Is the TV right when it says you should participate in a class action lawsuit against a large pharmaceutical company whose drugs you used for many years? Are the saplings on a Chia Pet edible and, if so, what do they taste like? Etc....

Re: The Importance of "Utile et Dulce" (by Devin Seth)

I am going to have to take umbrage with your last paragraph. While I am not a Michael Bay fan boy by any means I think that you gloss over rather quickly much of the "utile" in his movies. In Armageddon, Pearl Harbor, and all three of the Transformer movies (these are the only Michael Bay films I have seen), the "utile" factor is what creates the suspense in between the action scenes. All five of these movies are about selfless sacrifice, people willing to put their lives on the line to save the people that they love, knowing full well that they may not return. To me this is teaching and conveying one of the most important "utile" that kids can learn and that is selflessness. In fact this idea is the basis for all of Christianity, a religion subscribed to by over a billion people. While I will grant you that these films are definitely a product of Hollywood and all the connotations that may bring are probably accurate, the core "utile" of these films is greater than just be nice or don't cry wolf like many other fairy tales, both modern and classic. I think that the underlying problem in our society is that maybe we have not been taught how to look for the "utile" in a story.

You said it yourself that it takes a college level course for us to learn how to direct and analyze a story, maybe this is something that we should start teaching at a younger age, that way children and future generations will be able to see the "utile" that I believe is in almost every story told.

I can tell that you are eagerly anticipating the unique allegory that will be come wrapped in his next film: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles from Outer Space.

Only kidding. In response to your statement "it takes a college level course for us to learn how to direct and analyze a story, maybe this is something that we should start teaching at a younger age, that way children and future generations will be able to see the 'utile' that I believe is in almost every story told", I agree with you that all stories have at least some small amount of "utile". If they didn't then they wouldn't be stories anymore—they would become something else. For example, we don't show up to the movie theaters just to watch a bunch of random explosions, car chase scenes, and the like over and over again (even though it seems to be getting closer to this every Friday). Gratifying sequences like these have to be part of a story and that story is serving some sort of purpose or another, no matter how trite and ridiculous it may be.

So even if every story has some amount of "utile", that doesn't mean all are worth experiencing, or that we should encourage people to search for substance in films/music/books where there is very little to be found in the first place. We shouldn't teach children to spend their time trying to appreciate bad stories when there are so many thoughtful and carefully constructed works with great amounts of substance out there that deserve more attention than they are getting.

Couldn't make it through Transformers, by the way.

Re: The Importance of "Utile et Dulce" (by Devin Seth)

all five of these movies are about selfless sacrifice

I was thinking this morning while sipping my coffee about what you said here. I couldn't help but wonder if a Transformer dying for a human being can be considered a sacrifice. They are robots, after all. Sure, they are exceptionally cool robots that can turn into dumptrucks and laser canons and such, but does a robot really have feelings? Do they really die? Have they ever really lived? Is a Transformer somehow different from a robot (aside from the fact that they are cooler, of course)? Has a Transformer ever once been concerned with "utile et dulce"? Does Cybertron have its own form of robot literature and a mechanized equivalent of Shakespeare (and if so, what kind of vehicle did he change into)?

There are many more questions I could ask here, but I think you get the idea.

Re: The Importance of "Utile et Dulce" (by Devin Seth)

Ahh, yes... there are a plethora of questions that can be asked about the wonderful denizens of Cybertron. However, the self sacrifice I was talking about was that of the main Human character, Sam Witwiki. I did allow myself to get a little hyped up about the Michael Bay movies. I was typing on little to know sleep and had been brooding over that particular post for about 3 hours as I mindlessly inspected vehicles for defects in the middle of the night.

That's alright. These are the times when watching a Michael Bay film sounds like a really grand idea.