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Relationship Between the Kindergarten and Great Literature: Dante

Elizabeth Harrison

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE
KINDERGARTEN AND GREAT
LITERATURE

DANTE

BY ELIZABETH HARRISON

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NUMBER TWO

DANTE

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE KINDERGARTEN AND GREAT LITERATURE.

No. II — DANTE.

“Of what *possible* use can that mystical, mediæval poet be to us? We are nineteenth century thinkers!” exclaimed my friend, one day. My reply was: “As kindergartners are we not students of human nature? Has the man who taught the whole Christian world the true and awful meaning of sin, of sorrow, and of redemption, nothing to teach *us?*”

As the defenders and protectors of childhood, let us keep always in

mind the meaning of the word "education." Most people have altogether too narrow a view of the subject. Rightly understood, it becomes the chief word of the English language. It means to draw out, or develop the child physically, mentally and morally. It stops not with knowledge of text-books, nor is it merely the accumulation of facts, valuable and indispensable as such accumulations are. *Its real aim is character-building.*

Great yet glorious is the task set before us! We are to change these young, unformed beings into strong and noble men and women—the world's greatest need. No dreamy enthusiasm, no painstaking, conscientious, but blind, effort will fit us

for the work. We need *insight, and the serene wisdom and unfaltering judgment which come from insight alone.*

Let us remember always that we are to strive to comprehend the influence of environment. We are to understand the evolution of character; we are to know the relationships of life; we are to feel as the most vital thing in life the Fatherhood of God, the sonship of man. Our work is not simply the mastering of the gifts, games, occupations, songs and stories of the kindergarten. These are but tools in our hands. Our real work is to fit ourselves by the broadest and highest culture the world can give us to "think God's thoughts after Him," that we may understand

His highest creation — a little child — and thus help and not hinder the sublime unfolding. How can we fill our souls more deeply with this true enthusiasm than by the study of the prophets and seers of the race?

Let us turn to Dante. We feel at once the art-atmosphere which he has created, and its effect here, as elsewhere, is to lead us away from temporary things to eternal things. Is there no lesson in this for the bare and ugly walls of our school-rooms of to-day? Is there no suggestion in it for the improvement of the silly, trivial elementary readers which we put before the hungry child-mind? All true art has the element of the eternal, the universal, in it. This is why Dante's types and images have stood

for ages. They are not merely reflections of his time, but of all time. There *are* eternal pictures which we can place before our children. There *are* eternal stories which we can give to them. Truth, deep living truth, can be told in no other way so effectually as in an *art form*.

What do we find to aid us in the study of character development? Or, rather, what do we not find? The soul, not of *a* man, but of man seems to have been searched. Slowly and solemnly and with bowed head he leads us downward, past the wayward, shallow souls whose lives have been spent in frivolous pursuits. They had never learned to care for the great things of life, and now they are *punished* by the little things, gad-

flies and gnats torment them, and their chief occupation in eternity is to chase back and forth after a flag blown by the wind. We stop for a moment to listen, in gentle pity, to the sad but tender voice of Francesca da Rimini as she tells the mournful story of her fall. But that one moment's pause has for six hundred years made the heart of every reader soften towards those whom love has led astray. It was the *Christ-voice* echoing through Dante.

On down we go. No service of Dresden china nor glitter of cut glass saves the glutton from being revealed to us in all his gross swinishness. No accumulation of millions, to be clutched by means of family name even after the grave has closed over

the gatherer of the pile, hides from us the robbery which the deluded soul has committed against his own divine nature. No lavish coach and four, nor Parisian costumes, nor glitter of jewels, covers up the miserable and petty selfishness of the spendthrift. There each soul stands naked. The clothing of earth has been torn from its limbs.* The angry, the sullen, the disbeliever in a spiritual life, the murderer, the suicide, the blasphemer, the seducer, the flatterer, the abuser of sacred trusts, the soothsayers, the barterers of public office, the hypocrites, the thieves, the evil counselors, the breeders of discord, the counterfeiters, the liars, the traitors, all are there. No court of justice can now

be bribed, no legislature bought up. The *light of eternity is turned upon the deeds of Time*, and all external covering of excuses, all calling of things by polite names, is done away with. The scales fall from our eyes. We stand and look upon the human soul as God looks upon it. And involuntarily we cry out, "Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable sinners!" Never before nor since has such a picture gallery of spiritual portraits been presented to the world, with lurid background changing to suit each picture. The monsters and demons serve to intensify the loathsomeness and hideous nature of the distorted soul, which, made in the image of God, has *chosen* to become a devil—all this terrible revelation

of sin and suffering and sickening horrors is but to teach us that it is man's *free will* which makes a hell, and not God's wrath. Wonderful truth, which the church has not yet fully grasped! It is needed daily by each one of us, not for ourselves alone, but that we may feel the great and solemn duty of training the child to choose the right or to be willing to suffer the result of choosing the wrong. Such insight as Dante gives in this terrible poem nerves the weakest, most yielding mother-heart to be true in her love for the child intrusted to her, and to teach him, by not shielding him from the consequences of his deed, that wrong-doing must always bring suffering.

This leads us to the study of the

Purgatory, where we see men of all degrees, learning through weary and painful toil, just this lesson — to bear patiently and bravely, aye, even joyfully, the consequences of their own evil deeds, until through effort and suffering they are prepared to see the angel of God's mercy standing ready to lift them up to a higher plane, or to listen to his heavenly voice calling to them along what new path the climbing must be made. No wonder we hear pæans of praise as the beatitudes are chanted with a meaning never before felt. Is not Dante showing us that the human soul has so much of the divine in it that it *must* help the Great Divine in its own salvation? The truth comes to us with increased significance that

character-building is part of religion, that as we teach the child to expand his lungs and make them strong and as capacious as possible that they may take into themselves larger and still larger quantities of life-giving oxygen, so the discipline and the training of the will increase and enlarge the soul's capacity in order that more and more of divine grace may flow in to enrich and purify the life. Is there nothing for us to learn in all this? Does this give us no insight in our training of the child? Does not such a revelation of the slow and oftentimes painful development of character give us courage to persevere in this invisible part of our work which so few outside people appreciate? Is not the law of all will-

growth here written out for all time? Man must, to the utmost extent of his ability, undo the wrong done; with the most tremendous effort of which he is capable must he strive to do the right deed. Then Divine grace stands ready to help him. With this thought in mind what think you of the usual "I'm sorry!" as sufficient atonement for the child's misconduct?

When we turn to Dante for the portrayal of the ethical world we find that it would be impossible to understand him at all if we did not keep always in mind man's relationship to man. That whole, wonderful sweep down into the abyss of sin, and the rise up to the summit of the Mount of Purification, is based on

the gradation of sin as measured by man's relationship to society. Personal sins, no matter how disgusting and loathsome, are not placed by the poet in as low a circle as sins which disturb the ethical life of society. Without this institutional gauge by which to measure the extent of a sin, how could we reconcile the putting of a barterer of public office for private gain below the sensualist or glutton?

In the toilsome journey up the purgatorial mountain we find that *those sins which separate man from his fellow man are the first which must be purged away.* Slowly and with painful effort does the repentant soul learn to acknowledge the

brotherhood of mankind, upon which our ethical world is founded.

It seems almost a waste of time to point out the value of this insight to a kindergartner. Does it not teach that the first duty in the upbuilding of the child's character is to lead him into that atmosphere of participation and sympathetic helpfulness in which all virtues flourish and all vice withers? Does it not lead her to avoid all showing off of the clever child, by means of which pride is fostered? Does it not guard her against injudicious comparison and praise, because they cause envy to spring up in the young heart? Does it not help her to work ever toward a spirit of industry in her young brood, knowing, as she now does, that

sloth is one of the great separators of a soul from its fellows? A hundred such clear and helpful warnings it brings to her.

Of the lessons to be learned from the *Paradiso* I dare not speak. The glory of its environment, the exultant rejoicings of the redeemed spirits, the tender and mystical relationship of the soul to its Maker which the *Paradiso* portrays, is but felt by me in a dim way, not comprehended. It always leaves me with the impression that God is great and good, and the nearer man gets to him the happier he is. I leave this part of the poem to be interpreted and applied to our work by a deeper soul than mine.

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Total, 7		Total, 557	

Total No. Students enrolled, 465 } Total Registration, 2,987

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OF

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