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Relationship Between the Kindergarten and Great Literature: Homer

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Harrison, Elizabeth, "Relationship Between the Kindergarten and Great Literature: Homer" (1893). *Elizabeth Harrison's Writings.* Book 33.
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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE KINDERGARTEN AND GREAT LITERATURE

HOMER

BY ELIZABETH HARRISON

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NUMBER ONE

HOMER

PUBLISHED BY
CHICAGO KINDERGARTEN COLLEGE
10 VAN BUREN STREET
CHICAGO

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The Lakeside Press
R. R. DONNELLEY & SONS CO., CHICAGO

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE KINDERGARTEN AND GREAT LITERATURE.

No. I — HOMER.

Hon. William T. Harris, in his admirable introduction to Froebel's "Education of Man," uses these words:

"Perhaps the greatest merit of Froebel's system is to be found in the fact that it furnishes a deep philosophy for teachers. Most pedagogical works furnish only a code of management for the school room.

"Froebel gives a view of the world in substantial agreement with the

spiritual statements of philosophy which have prevailed in the world."

Let us begin our study by a review of this spiritual statement of philosophy from the standpoint of the Kindergarten. We will then see whether or not the study of the great literature of the world gives any added light to the student of childhood.

The "organic unity of life" is the central thought of Froebel's entire system of education. By "organic unity" is meant such interdependence of parts upon the whole as may be illustrated by the branches, limbs, trunk, and roots of a tree, which are separate and distinct parts of the tree, and yet a knowledge of the function of each is necessary in order

that we may understand a tree. So, too, is it necessary that all phases and relationships of life would be understood before we can readily comprehend what life is, and how to prepare the growing child for it.

In the first place Kindergarten study leads to a realization of the influence of environment and the evolution of character. Froebel would have the mother understand the nature and effect of the surroundings of her child in order that she may avoid unwholesome and weakening influences, and, in so far as lies within her power, surround him with a healthful and wholesome atmosphere of material things. This study of environment is just beginning to be understood in our treatment

of the pauper and criminal classes. Of even more importance is it in the treatment of a sensitive child.

Again, the student of the Kindergarten must learn to observe and understand the manifestations which indicate the different stages of development through which the child passes. When, for example, he ceases to be a mere savage, caring only for his own physical comfort, and begins to show signs of affection for his parents or attendants, thus indicating that the *tribal* period has arrived. Later on she must know when that very valuable sense of ownership of property has begun to awaken, and, still later, when the idea of justice indicates an advanced stage of civilization which the child

has inwardly reached. In each individual child can be traced the development of the race. Let us hope that from this study of childhood will come more charity and sympathetic forbearance with the 10th century, the 4th century, and even the 450 B.C. development which we meet with in some of the adults about us.

An earnest and careful study of little children gives to the philosophic mind the insight which sees beneath whims, caprices, moods, inheritance and training, certain *universal instincts* common to all children. These must, too, be studied faithfully and sympathetically as the seed-germs of future character. Much of the after-pettiness or nobility of life depends upon the right or wrong

training of these instincts. From this study arises the science of the *evolution* of *character*, which shows habit to be a strong aid in character-building, though it does not take the place of the development of will-power. The kind of a childhood through which a man may have lived inevitably has its effects upon all of his after-life, be that what it may. A realization of this truth helps us to understand the motive springs of conduct and thus helps us to a deeper insight into human nature.

Again, Froebel would have us not only study the individual life as a whole, but also the life of mankind as an organic whole. This brings us at once to the study of the institutional world, and shows us how these

great "ethical structures" arose from the *interdependence* of *mankind*, and how the safety of the commonwealth depends upon the sacredness with which the home, society, and the state are guarded. Even as far back as the days of Plato it was realized that if a child was to become a law-abiding citizen he must begin in his early childish play to respect law. The kindergarten, *by means of play, brings this whole institutional world into the child's life.* It therefore remains with the mother, or kindergartner, whether the child shall have a high or low standard of home life, of the trade world, and of the offices of state.

There is yet one step further in our study of this organic unity of life

before we have grasped fully what Froebel means by the term. This last is the deepest and most important relationship of all, that of the spirit of man to the spirit of God; in other words, the comprehension of the divine element within the human breast. Viewed from this standpoint, every activity in life should tend toward the development of this highest part of man's nature.

In our thought of the influence of environment, in our study of the evolution of character, in our contemplation of the ethical relationships of the world, in our efforts to realize the spiritual possibility existing within man, where can we turn for help and find so rich a field as that offered by the great literature

of the world? Here the master minds of the race have left the record of their vast experiences; their all-embracing sympathies, their deep, clear insight into life.

Let us read carefully and appreciatively Homer's poems, not for the pleasure alone, but for the added educational insight we may gain from them in our study of human nature. Do we not feel the fresh breeziness of the Greek world; the vigor and physical activity of his heroes, who can banquet three times in a single night and fight all the next day? Their fearless courage and astonishing bodily dexterity bring to us the freshness and daring of youth as we watch them hurl javelins formed from the trunks of young trees; guide with

one hand their plunging chariot horses; seize their ships and drag them on to the shore; battle for whole days amid the angry waves of the sea; be dashed ashore by Neptune, yet spring up again as fresh and vigorous as ever. The very atmosphere is stimulating. This wholesome change of environment, if only for an hour, is good for *us*, care-worn toilers of the nineteenth century that we are. Does there not come to us a dim impression, at least, that a part of this bouyancy of Greek life came from their habit of breathing out-of-door air, of living much in their boats, of giving prizes to their wrestlers and runners? We thus gain a new realization of the *environment* which helps to keep the freshness of

youth in the heart of man. Is there not need of this insight in the training of the children of to-day?

In our study of character development the great poet gives to us more real characters than we meet in the every-day contact with men and women. The people about us are clothed with customs, reserves and moods, which often-times disguise the real man or woman, but, in the *really great books* of the world, genius pierces through all outside conventionalities and concealments and shows us the motive of actions, often-times leading us into the inmost recesses of some struggling soul. We see heroes overcoming external obstacles and struggling with internal defects. Sometimes the battle is so

real that our hearts cry out, "It is I of whom he is speaking; these are my struggles and my defects!"

Let us turn again to Homer. How wonderfully does Homer portray that conflict which *ability* must ever fight with *authority* until it learns the great lesson of self-control and tolerance. We see Achilles, the proud man of superiority, arrogant in his own integrity, rising up in his wrath to sweep away a wrong which has been committed against Calchas, the priest, by the violent retention of his daughter. What cares *he* if the wrong-doer is Agamemnon, the King, chosen by all the Greek hosts. Shall *he*, the man of courage, stand tamely by and see this wrong done? He sees need of tact on his part, not

need of patience. Is not *he*, the *hero*, greater than Agamemnon the *King?* Can the Greeks conquer without him? So we hear the petulant words of rebuke administered publicly to his chief. In his tone there is no respect for authority because it is authority; no forbearance shown toward his commander because he is his elder; no seeking of council with Nestor or Ulysses as to how the evil can be overcome. *He* is *Achilles!* What need has *he* of the advice of other men, and proudly and harshly he utters the words, "Wine-bibber with the forehead of a dog and a deer's heart! Thou dost rule a spiritless race, else this day, Atrides, were thy last!" We see the result. Could we not have predict-

ed it? Have we not come in contact with it in every society and organization with which we have been connected, when the blunt, self-sufficient man undertakes to "*set things right?*" Aye, do we not meet it every day of our lives in our kindergartens and our nurseries, *ability resisting authority?* The famous quarrel scene comes next, and Achilles sulkily retired from the camp. Then comes the long and bitter experience, by means of which he learns that Achilles championing the Greek hosts in their struggle against a great wrong is one man, while Achilles sulking uselessly in his tent is another. It is a splendid lesson given for all time and all conditions of man. *Service alone makes us of*

any value—ceasing to serve we cease to be valuable. A hard lesson for a proud soul to learn. Haughtily Achilles rejects the apology and offer of restitution which the now penitent Agamemnon sends to him by the hands of his three best friends. Then comes the death of Patroclus. Achilles is softened toward his comrades. His sorrow has made him one with the sorrowing hosts. His wrath mingles with their wrath against the Trojans. He once more becomes one with the Greeks, and goes forth to conquer. Hector, his chief opponent, is slain. The proud, impetuous hero has slain his enemy, but he has not subdued himself. He has yet to learn the meaning of those words, "He that conquereth himself

is mightier than he that taketh a city." He lets his rage sweep beyond all bounds. He insults the body of the dead and gloats over the suffering of the living. And yet Achilles is not a bad man — he is an angry man. The deep, tender, confiding appeal of the aged Priam to be allowed to carry away for burial the body of his beloved son melts him to tears, and the closing book of the Iliad is perhaps, after all, its most sublime.

No moralizing is needed here. Throughout the ages the great picture has stood. The strong, tender-hearted but too proud hero, fighting against, struggling with, and suffering from deeds which his own untrained will has brought about.

Is not the statue, chiseled in heroic size, worthy of our study? Numerous and striking are the character-studies offered by the less prominent personages who surround the hero. *It is the drama of life revealed by the hand of genius*, and the heart of humanity has been hardened to indignation or softened to pity as the mighty play went forward.

Who can read the story of Ulysses, of his long and weary wanderings, of his temptations and his mistakes, and not be made the wiser for the lessons which experience taught this "man of many sorrows?" How many of us have been detained on the isle of Calypso, and have not had divinity of purpose sufficient to break away and pursue our onward

journey? Alas, alas, how many have heard the song of the sirens and have fallen victim to their wiles! — the bleached bones alone remaining to tell the tale that strong, true *life* has died out! Who has not tried to sail midway between Scylla and Charybdis? And has not many a despairing soul since clung, as did Ulysses, to the one frail fig-tree with the yawning whirlpool below, awaiting tremblingly the possible return of the raft of safety? Who has not met the problem which confronted the wanderer upon his return to his beloved Ithaca? A choice between two evils — shall he remain disguised and by strategy slay the suitors, or shall he frankly confess who he is and be slain by them? Do we not

understand all mankind better for having sat at the feet of Homer?

When we come to the study of man's relationship to man, out of which has grown the ethical institutions of the world, the gradual evolution of the thought makes a comparative study of great literature an exceedingly interesting occupation. Herodotus tells us that the Persians thought the Greeks were greatly to blame in going to war on account of Helen, adding, "To carry off women by violence the *Persians* think is the act of wicked men, but to trouble one's self about avenging them when so carried off is the act of foolishness."

In Homer we find the dawn in the *Greek* world, at least, of the realization of the *sanctity* of the *family life.*

The Greek army has encamped before the walls of Troy, not merely because the beautiful Helen has been stolen from them, but because the Trojan prince, familiar with the Oriental harem as the form of relationship between man and woman, has not hesitated to take possession of the wife of Menelaus. An ethical institution has been violated, and the Greeks assemble as one man to restore it and to punish the wrong-doer.

The final insult which Agamemnon heaps upon Achilles in their quarrel scene is the taunt that he can take Briseis, his promised bride, from him, and the hero feels that this is too much. He turns and leaves the camp, even at the risk of the defeat of the whole army. When

Agamemnon wishes reconciliation and sends gifts of gold and silver and all sorts of promises to Achilles, he sends word also, as highest of all arguments that peace should be restored, that Briseis shall be returned to him, thus showing that the ethical wrong must be righted. Gifts of worldly wealth could not compensate for it.

In all literature I know of no finer comparison between the sweet, tender tie that binds the brave Hector to his lawful and legitimate wife, Andromache, and the galling bond which holds together Paris and his illegitimate mistress, Helen. Surely no preacher in the puritan pulpit of the early New England days could have shown the bitterness which fol-

lows sin more vividly than does this one touch of Homer. In the Odyssey we find Ulysses punished and made to wander over the face of the earth because, in his state of alienation, he heedlessly attacked the *homes* of Ciconia on his return from Troy. The long-enduring Penelope has remained throughout all time as type of the faithful wife. Where do we find *home*-life pictured more ideally than in the land of the Phœacians? Indeed, the dignity and equality accorded to Arete, the beloved wife and honored mother, has not yet become a realized fact in modern society. Old Homer has something to teach the most advanced reformers of to-day — so far-seeing is the eye of genius!

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Total,	7	Total,	557

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