

READING THE SONG OF SONGS AS A CLASSIC

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As a tribute to Cheryl Exum's abiding passion for the Song of Songs, I propose to discourse under this title on what makes a classic, on what it is that makes the Song of Songs a classic, and on—even if it is not a classic and even if there is no such thing as a classic—why we are better off reading it as a classic than not. I will propose that thinking of the Song of Songs as a classic moves one on to a higher plane of appreciation of this antique text, makes one a better reader and critic and scholar, and—just possibly—could actually improve one's love life. But I will begin somewhere that may be a little unexpected.

1. *Not Reading the Song of Songs as a Classic*

I will read the text along with some readers who are *not* reading it as a classic—or at least, not consciously reading it as a classic. They are for the most part reading it for the first time, they do not have much experience with classics, they know next to nothing about the Hebrew Bible, and they are on average 20 years old. They are my first-year classes of some years ago, who were one week invited to write 300 words in response to the following assignment:

What does the book do to you if you read it? (Be intellectual about this, not confessional!) Would it be different if you were the opposite sex?

You will recognize that what I was asking for was a reader response—an initial, rather unreflected response, an untutored response prior to any reading of authors or commentators on the Song of Songs, and prior to attending my course on the Song of Songs. I did not of course desire that students would cling to their first reactions to the Song of Songs, but I did want them to compose a written benchmark against which they could measure their more mature responses at a later date in their academic career.

You might have thought that students in a Department of Biblical Studies would automatically be reading the Bible as a classic, or even that anyone reading a part of the Bible would think they were reading a classic. Not so. I suspect that the very idea of a classic cuts little ice with those who think

they are already cool enough, and I certainly did not read any student responses of reverential awe for the status of the book. In any case, I had done my best, with my assignment, to have the class focus on *their* reaction, an invitation no member of the Me Generation will lightly refuse.

I do not myself often get the opportunity of reading the Song of Songs *not* as a classic, and so I found I had lot to learn from my students. If I was at times dismayed by their reactions, I was equally given to think furiously about how I could adjust and inform their responses in the future, and if I was saddened by how shallow their appreciation of the work sometimes seemed to be I was equally convinced that these were indeed real readers' real responses and equally challenged to explain and defend myself and my own evaluation of the book, if only to myself.

I have organized these readers' reactions to the book under a series of headings:

a. *Length*

Song of Songs doesn't have a great impact when read and towards the end of the book it becomes quite tedious.

It is not forbidden to say of a classic that it is long-winded. Yet if the Song is of a tedious length at 2500 words (1142 in the Hebrew), what would the *Faerie Queene* or the *Divine Comedy* be? Nevertheless, in the age of the soundbite, when a single line in a televised debate can make or unmake a President, in an age of the visual and the impression, 2500 is a lot of words, and this is a genuine reader's response, a response of our century. Perhaps one definition of a classic will have to be that it is a work that may demand a very comfortable easy chair and hours of free time.

b. *Structure*

Personally, I would like a narrative alongside this text to explain what is actually happening. I find it to be slightly confusing and annoying that what is happening is never clear. The book does not need to be explicit but simply to carry the story better than it does.

It is not forbidden either to say of a classic that one cannot be clear about what is going on. This reader, who knows nothing of classics, has come to the text with expectations of clarity and narrativity. When the expectations are disappointed the reader becomes confused and annoyed. The reader would like the text better if it were accompanied by a midrash or a time line or a scroll bar that commented on 'what is actually happening' and kept the reader up to date on the progress of the poem. Perhaps then we should say that a classic is a work—unlike pulp fiction, textbooks and airline timetables—that may well refuse a reader's expectations, even reasonable expectations.

To tell the truth, this reader is no fool: even mature and experienced readers of the Song of Songs sometimes tear their hair in desperation at not knowing ‘what is going on’, and would sell their shirt for the author’s annotations on what in the Song is ‘reality’ and what is ‘fantasy’, for example (as if there were anything you could call ‘reality’ in this fiction). But, knowing that there are no such annotations, they do not conclude their critique with a complaint about that defect, but are more inclined to make the absence of ‘clarity’ part of the charm and the quality of the work.

c. *Sentiment*

When I first read the Song of Songs I thought, ‘Yuck, this is so sickly sweet’.

I find their language very antiquated, especially that of the young man which is very ‘cheesy’ and clichéd.

I have a nose like the tower of Lebanon and like the Great Wall of China, but I do not consider it worthy of romantic poetry.

The book of the Song of Songs is one which I consider to be fairly tasteless and unnecessary ... a simple pathetic attempt at flattery from one lover to another.

The language used a large number of metaphors and, in my opinion, it goes over the top. The descriptions of the lovers are a prime example of this.

An experienced reader of the Song of Songs might do well to take seriously these reactions from today’s youth. What is over-sweet, sickly, sentimental, cheesy and unnecessary is a matter of taste, and everyone is entitled to their taste. I do not by any means propose capitulating to the taste of 20-year-olds, but if we more mature readers of the classics believe ourselves to be in the business of educating the taste of more immature readers, we are going to need some help in overcoming that initial, hugely expressive, Yuck! Easier, perhaps, to turn disgust into adoration than to make a passionate poet out of a prosaic woodenhead; but the Yuck! remains a challenge.

d. *Intensity*

After reading Song of Songs I wonder what it must feel like to be that passionate and committed to one particular thing, not necessarily love but just one aspect of life; it makes me want to experience feelings that strong.

This reader, I submit, has already experienced the Song of Songs as a classic *avant la lettre*. The reader has found the intensity of the Song surprisingly attractive, even though the reader does not claim to have experienced that degree of intensity in life personally: they are still just wondering what it must feel like to be so passionate. In a remarkably bold and mature move,

the reader even goes so far as to read the Song of Songs as being, not primarily about love—despite all appearances—but about this matter of intensity, and so as having a reference and significance well beyond its ostensible subject matter. I would call this a truly original reading of the Song (I don't of course mean by 'original' one that no one else has ever had, or ever published—too narrow a definition—but one that the writer did not learn from someone else but which is worthy of being promulgated). It doesn't matter, at this point, whether this perception is 'right' or 'wrong'; I just like it when someone offers me an idea I can ponder on for somewhere between five minutes and the rest of my life.

e. *Panic?*

Images spring to mind of the later Romeo and Juliet story, where two people's love is so strong but banned from them. Here we feel the same kind of intensity and almost panic.

Here is another focus on the intensity of the poem, but with a special addition: 'almost panic'. The day I read this student's work I could think of nothing else than this wonderful (even if wholly flawed) interpretative key that phrase was offering to the readership of the Song of Songs. No one, to my knowledge, has ever seen *panic* in the intensity of the Song of Songs, but what if this reader is right?

What if the excess in the poem is, in some degree, hysterical? What if the desperate searching for the beloved is more a demented, unreasonable, uncontrollable lust than a fervent absorbing desire? What if the lovers are driven by *fear*—by fear of losing one another, fear that their love is unreal, fear that it is not wholly reciprocated, fear that love of this intensity cannot possibly last? What if it is a 'banned' love, one that is above all socially unacceptable, like that of Romeo and Juliet? Is the love in the Song of Songs then doomed, will it not then end in death? Is the Song of Songs an idyll, or is it a tragedy in the making? Is intensity of this degree desirable, or is it a danger? Has the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs been following a false trail, in applauding the mutual attraction of the lovers and in finding the lovers' union a consummation devoutly to be wished? Should it instead not have taken a cue from the 'fantasy' itself, from the lack of realism, from the terrifying sentence 'Love is as strong as death' (8.6—which must also mean that death is as strong as love), that this is an other-worldly love, which is not so much impossible as fatal in the real world? What would happen to our reading of the Song of Songs if its default intertext were Romeo and Juliet?

This is a 'strong' interpretation, I would suggest, one that cannot easily be forgotten, even if we do not 'buy' it. That 'almost panic' is a phrase with the potential to destabilize the interpretation of the Song of Songs.

f. *The Abyss* (?)

Much the same thought seems to have been in the mind of another reader, though in a more negative mode:

In reading the book I felt the sense of foolishness of being tied to some thing that is the only thing you seem to live for; it shows the notion of throwing yourself into the 'abyss', the unknown.

For this reader, the intensity of the Song and the total absorption of the lovers in one another are experienced as a 'foolishness', as the absurdity of throwing away all firm standing ground and 'throwing yourself into the "abyss", the unknown'. This reader shrinks from the intensity the former reader felt as 'panic' and invoked Romeo and Juliet to explain.

g. *A Love Poem*

When I read the Song of Songs I feel that I am reading a love poem.

It took me a long time to realize that this was not the naivety I first thought it was. The author of the comment does not mean that it is a poem about love (which would not be a very stunning observation), but that it feels like a poem written by a lover to a beloved. That is what this author understands a 'love poem' to be, I now believe. No one, of course knows for sure what the original intention or purpose or setting of the Song of Songs was, though a few ideas have become enshrined in the textbooks. No one, to my knowledge, however, has suggested that it was a poem written by a male lover to a female beloved—or perhaps by a female lover to a male beloved—with the aim of seduction or arousal of love. This, to me at any rate, was a new idea.

Here then is a reading that cuts across the generally accepted view that the Song is a *depiction*, a fiction in which there are two characters created by an artist who personally stands entirely outside the poem, the unbroken first-person speech and second-person address being merely literary devices. What if, to the contrary, we were to regard the poem as the composition of one of the lovers depicted in the poem, and delivered to the beloved as a love token? Or even that the poem, while being a literary fiction, has the form of such a love poem?

h. *Magic*

Song of Songs can be compared to a dreamy 50s Hollywood production, starring for example Doris Day where everything is just perfect and the key theme is the true magic of passion.

I find Song of Songs a beautiful poem which gives me the desire to read it in its original tongue ... its great emphasis on eros love in the most romantic of settings, the Middle East.

Roland Murphy, the learned *Song of Songs* commentator, does not, I think, refer to Doris Day, and Marvin Pope, his eminent equal, almost certainly did not think of the Middle East as the most romantic of settings (not a lot of people do these days). But what these readers who are not reading the poem as a classic are finding in it that the commentators cannot see, or else cannot bring themselves to say, is something about the mood of the poem, the mood induced by the poem. Magic is the word, and with it its associates, dreamy, perfect, true, passion, beautiful, desire, eros, love, romantic. Magic means spellbinding, and these readers I have just quoted have either fallen under the spell of the poem itself or are recognizing in it the kind of magic they have come to identify elsewhere. Already they are well on the way to reading the *Song of Songs* as a classic.

2. *What is a Classic?*

I will not be trying to compose watertight definitions of a classic, since perhaps being a classic is not a property of a text but rather of the shifting patterns of appreciation and esteem texts are held in by their manifold readers. I am not even sure that I think the idea of a classic is politically correct, which is, if anything, even more serious.

All the same, there are certain family resemblances among things that are spoken of as classics, and uncovering those will now become, for a moment, my task.

The Classic Car Club of America defines a classic car as

a 'fine' or 'distinctive' automobile, either American or foreign built, produced between 1925 and 1948. Generally, a classic was high-priced when new and was built in limited quantities.¹

Antiquity, rarity, value.

What of classic video games?

The following is a list of video games we consider 'classics' (most were made from 1979 to 1983) ... Classic games will generally sell for more money than other games of similar age.

Antiquity alone does not make a classic.²

On the other hand, being a classic is a status that may be attained in the course of time, at least for Tektronix instruments for measuring:

First, we need to realize that 'classics' were all once brand new and, therefore, not classics. But just getting old does not make a piece of equipment a 'classic' in my view. It also had to be something special during its prime. In

1. www.classiccarclub.org/definition.htm.
2. www.peterboro.net/~recroom/whatisclassicvid.htm.

my view, virtually all early Tektronix instruments were special ... Currently, I draw the line at those products introduced by Tektronix after 1969 ... they are not classics ... yet! Many of them will be, however. Some will never make 'classic' status, in my view.³

There is something else: beauty. A classic car must be 'fine', even oscilloscopes are called 'classic' when 'care and effort ... went into their design and manufacture'. And as for a yacht:

Most of us in the yachting scene know a genuine classic when we see one. She was built years ago when all yachts were things of beauty and grace with fine lines and acres of canvas. The survivors of that golden era are unmistakably classic.⁴

Beauty and grace, with fine lines, from a golden era.

More to the point is the essay by the novelist Italo Calvino, 'Why Read the Classics?', offering no fewer than 14 definitions, in a discursive and tantalizing style.⁵ I will boil down his points into five.

1. The classics, says Calvino, are books about which people say, 'I'm rereading ...', never 'I'm reading'. The more often you reread a classic, the more details, levels and meanings you appreciate in it. You don't tend to reread an airport thriller—the immediate effect is all.

2. A classic is a text that is always new, no matter how often you read it. Our youthful readings are often of little value because we are impatient, cannot concentrate, lack experience in how to read or experience of life itself. As we mature and return to our classics, each rereading offers as much a sense of discovery as the first reading.

3. A classic 'come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations', having generated a 'pulviscular cloud' of critical discourse around it, which readers do well to shake off. Introduction, commentary, critical apparatus and bibliography are a smokescreen concealing the work itself. 'Classics are books which, the more we think we know them through hearsay, the more original, unexpected, and innovative we find them when we actually read them.'⁶

4. A classic is a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, one which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it. It would not be desirable, even if it were possible, to shut oneself up to the reading of classics alone. In order to read the classics, you have to establish where you

3. www.reprise.com/ash/clients2/classic.asp.

4. www.antiguaclassics.com/00docs/00whatis.htm (for the Antigua Yacht Regatta 2000).

5. In *Why Read the Classics?* (trans. Martin McLaughlin; London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), pp. 3-9. The essay was first published in the newspaper *L'Espresso*, 28 June, 1981.

6. Calvino, 'Why Read the Classics?', p. 6.

are reading them ‘from’, ‘otherwise both the reader and the text tend to drift in a timeless haze’.⁷ ‘The person who derives maximum benefit from a reading of the classics is the one who skilfully alternates classic readings with calibrated doses of contemporary material.’⁸

5. A classic is a perpetual challenge to the values of the present. It is ‘a work which persists as background noise even when a present that is wholly incompatible with it holds sway’. That does not mean that we read, or should read, the classics *for the purpose of* finding challenges in them; it is just that ‘reading them is always better than not reading them’.⁹ ‘While the hemlock was being prepared, Socrates was learning a melody on the flute. “What use will that be to you?”, he was asked. “At least I will learn this melody before I die”.’¹⁰

I have two more characteristics of a classic of my own I would like to throw into the ring. First, I suggest, a classic is a text you are willing to forgive. A classic may well not conform with contemporary standards of good taste, political correctness, clarity, structure, and the like, but that will not stop us reading it. An airport novel as rambling and chaotic as *Tristram Shandy* would be likely to get the heave-ho from our holiday deckchair, but with the classic we will persevere, and even make heavy weather of the holiday. A black and white Hollywood classic might offend every canon of feminist sensitivity but remain among the staple viewing of a refined thinker. We forgive a classic its flaws and even its outrages. And even if we cannot actually forgive our classic, we may suspend our judgment against it.

Second, a classic is a work that lends itself to being treated with irreverence. Especially if the classic status of a work is assured, there is no harm in being cheeky about it, and perhaps there is even something of a necessity so as to sustain our own sense of autonomy and resist to a degree capitulation to a universal consensus that threatens to make our decisions for us. Jokes about the Bible, for example, or reusing its language for comic purpose, as in the Wodehouse line, ‘I was one of the idle rich. I *toiled not, neither did I*—except for a bump supper at Cambridge—*spin*’,¹¹ do nothing to harm the classic status of the Bible, but rather confirm it.¹²

7. Calvino, ‘Why Read the Classics?’, p. 8.

8. Calvino, ‘Why Read the Classics?’, p. 8.

9. This is not to say that reading the classics makes you a better person; Cheryl Exum has reminded me of the remarks of George Steiner on this point: ‘We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning’ (*Language and Silence: Essay on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* [New York: Atheneum, 1958], p. ix).

10. Calvino, ‘Why Read the Classics?’, p. 9.

11. P.G. Wodehouse, *Leave It to Psmith* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1924), pp. 123-25 (124).

12. It is an old tradition to make fun with the classics: I think of the Hellenistic novel

3. Reading the Song of Songs as a Classic

So, with these pointers to some family characteristics of a classic, let us imagine what it would be like to read the Song of Songs as a classic. This is quite a hard task for a biblical scholar, since it is not in our training to esteem the works we comment on—at least in print.

As an example, I take the Song of Songs commentary of Roland Murphy, which is as fine a commentary as any you could hope to find on a biblical book. But I search high and low for any appreciation of the book approaching Calvino's characteristics of a classic. True, there is word of 'the marvellous theological insight that the Song opens up',¹³ of the Song as 'a crafted work of poetic imagination',¹⁴ but there is nothing in Murphy that is remotely as appreciative of the book itself as he is of Origen's third-century commentary on it, a work that he admires as 'an intellectual achievement of monumental proportions, a grand synthesis of exegetical reasoning, philosophical reflection, as theological vision'.¹⁵ Murphy, like most of us, has not been able to develop a vocabulary or a rhetoric that can appreciate the Song of Songs as a classic without sentimentality, exaggeration or embarrassing autobiography.

A second example is the Foreword to Robert Gordis's commentary.¹⁶ While the esteem and affection in which books are held are often a matter of fashion, he begins by saying, in this respect the Song of Songs is 'a shining exception. For over twenty centuries it has retained its appeal to men's [sic] hearts'¹⁷—which I would take to be an estimation of the book as a classic. But this remark is sadly undeveloped, and proves to be no more than an entrée into a discussion of the varying interpretations of the book that have been advanced over the centuries and the rightness of a literal reading of it. On the next page too we find the beginnings of an evaluation of the book: 'When the *Song of Songs* is studied without preconceived notions, it emerges as a superb lyrical anthology, containing songs of love and nature, of courtship and marriage, all of which revel in the physical aspects of love and reveal its spiritual character'.¹⁸ Yet this paragraph topic sentence does not

of Chariton, *Callirhoe* (2nd century BCE), where lines quoted from Homer amusingly give a heroic cast to the feelings of the all too unheroic protagonists of the novel.

13. Roland Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Canticles or The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), p. 103.

14. Murphy, *Song of Songs*, p. 91.

15. Murphy, *Song of Songs*, p. 21.

16. Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary* (revised edition, New York: Ktav, 1974).

17. Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, p. ix.

18. Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, p. x.

lead into an exposition of the lyrical qualities of the Song, but rather into the question of its acceptance into the canon of Scripture.

What then of the first four characteristics of a classic that I suggested above: antiquity, rarity, value, beauty? On all these grounds the Song of Songs is a precious classic. It is not the most ancient love poetry, but it is older than most classics; it passes the antiquity criterion with flying colours. It is a rarity, in Hebrew literature at least, since there is nothing like it, and if it did not exist no one would have imagined such a work for ancient Israel. It is a rarity to the extreme of being unique, and that inevitably makes it valuable—for our understanding of Hebrew life and culture, for our appreciation of the possibilities for literature and sensibility in ancient Israel. But its chief value lies in its beauty, which cannot easily be exhausted. Were one to compose a *wāṣf* to the Song of Songs, such an itemized list of the beloved's parts as we find more than once in the Song, one would have to fasten in turn upon the extraordinary match between the subject and the language, upon the modernist and impressionistic swirl of its profligacy of images, upon the reticence and, at the same time, the suggestiveness of its erotic depictions, on the delicacy of its sketch of female subjectivity, on its leisure together with its intensity, on its imagination that could construct a best of all possible worlds, a world in which time stands still, in which nothing *happens* but everything *is*—and yet more.

Perhaps it was too much to ask of a *commentary* on the book that it should read the book *as a classic*. And yet Francis Landy, though not exactly writing a commentary, manages to do just that. Critics, he remarks, 'have been quick to note the beauty of the Song, but few have made any attempt either to analyse it, or to consider it an integral part of its composition. They ignore it as purely decorative, and turn to more serious matters.'¹⁹ On the contrary, he writes, 'Beauty in the Song is an all-pervasive quality, that one cannot separate from the love of the lovers, the world they inhabit, or the language in which the poem is written. The three levels signify each other ... [T]heir beauty is contagious, passes from one level to another. Lyricism persuades us to accept the possibility of this beauty, because we imagine it emanates from a supreme inspiration.'²⁰ The whole book is an exposition of the beauty of the Song, and one word in what I have just quoted shows he is reading it as a classic: 'us'. 'Lyricism persuades us to accept the possibility of this beauty.' If we do not say, 'We' (or 'I' at least), it is hard to see how we can be talking about *reading*. Reading as a classic implies inserting the reader into the frame, abandoning talk of the Song as an objective external reality and talking

19. Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Bible and Literature Series, 7; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), p. 137 (2nd edn, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011, p. 131).

20. Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise*, p. 138 (2nd edn, p. 131).

instead about readers—not indeed about readers in general, or pushing the Song into the shadows cast by readers, but talking about readers engaged in this one project, reading the Song of Songs, and reading it as readers read classics.

Now the role of the reader becomes even more explicit when we turn to the characteristics of a classic in the eyes of Calvino. In the first four characteristics I outlined above, there was no place given to the viewer (there were no *readers*, of course, for yachts and cars). Being a classic was an intrinsic quality of the object, even if the object acquired the status of a classic only after the passage of time. But for Calvino, a classic is a book *we* are rereading, a book that is always new, no matter how often *we* read it, a book *we* find original and unexpected, a book to which *we* cannot remain indifferent, a book that challenges the values that surround *us*. We might summarize him: ‘No classic without a reader’. He is in no danger of subsuming the book beneath the reader, but he cannot imagine a classic that is not being read.

But what can we say of readers reading without descending into embarrassing or exhibitionist autobiography (like ‘what the book means to me in a very real way’)? It is not very difficult. We could do a survey of readers, which would be informative but time-consuming; or we could look at what readers of the Song of Songs write about the book, or (just as good) at what they fail to write, and that will tell us how they are reading.

1. Are readers rereading the Song of Songs—for pleasure, for themselves, and not just for advancement in their career or to fill a slot in a lecture series? Is there any evidence that people are reading, and rereading, the Song of Songs not just because it is in the Bible but because they like it? Yes. It would be hard to gainsay the evidence of the enormous bibliography in Pope’s Anchor Bible commentary, for example. Whether it was the most popular Old Testament book in the Middle Ages would be hard to calculate, but it would certainly be a candidate for that honour.

2. Is the Song of Songs a text that is always new to its readers? I cannot speak for all readers, but need I look further than my esteemed colleague, who published her first paper on the Song in 1973²¹ and is self-evidently finding new things to say about it today?

3. Calvino would have us shake off the ‘pulviscular cloud’ of critical discourse about our classic, and read the book for ourselves and for itself. Who can deny the force of that demand? And yet who has not found that the critical discourse is not necessarily a ‘smokescreen concealing the work itself’ but precisely our route into appreciating the originality, the unexpectedness, the innovation of the book? Alongside smokescreen commentaries,

21. J. Cheryl Exum, ‘A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs’, ZAW 83 (1973), pp. 47-79.

there are revelatory commentaries, which turn us back to the work itself, and ensure that we truly savour its originality.

4. Calvino's fourth characteristic of reading a classic is one that I cannot with such confidence assert is commonly true of contemporary readers of the Song of Songs. To read a classic, he says, you have to establish where you are reading it 'from', you have to alternate classic readings with 'calibrated doses of contemporary material'. The traditional reading position for biblical scholars has been an allegedly neutral one, in which the reader's 'position' is neither here nor there. That is a view that is changing rapidly, as the social location of the interpreter becomes more and more a subject for scholarly interest. *Reading from This Place* is the title of a couple of recent volumes in biblical criticism,²² and the slogan for an even wider recognition of the indispensability of situating ourselves and our readings. I am seeing too some evidences of 'calibrated doses' of contemporary material as the role of the Bible in contemporary culture becomes a recognized topic within biblical criticism; but we have yet a long way to go to meet Calvino's criterion with much success.

5. Calvino wants to stress that a classic is 'a perpetual challenge to the values of the present'. That has always be true about biblical texts as classics, since those who have preserved them have usually regarded them as enshrining truths that call the values of the present into question. Those today who foreground the mutuality of the couple in the Song as a contribution to contemporary discussion of relations between the sexes are reading it in just that way, as are those who speak, like Gordis, of its 'healthy-minded attitude toward life and love'.²³

I would like to add, however, the converse of Calvino's point: that also the present is a perpetual challenge to the values of the classic. If we alternate our contemporary reading with our classical reading, as Calvino himself recommends, we will not always find ourselves in sympathy with our classic texts, but will sometimes at least want to challenge them from the perspectives that we ourselves adopt and that we share with our contemporaries.

This is why I would like to add to Calvino's characteristics of a classic my definition of a classic as a text we are willing to forgive. Do we need to forgive the Song of Songs, I need to ask, and, if so, *can* we? I mention just three points at which I think the Song needs to be forgiven—and at which I myself am more than happy to do so, though others may feel differently.

22. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from This Place*. I. *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*; II. *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

23. Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, p. x.

a. The way that even while it is representing mutuality in love and giving more prominence to female subjectivity than any other text in the Bible, it is sustaining the patriarchal social order and (on the whole) the image of female passivity, from the first verse, where she wants *him* to kiss *her* (1.2), not the other way around, to the last, where she (apparently) is waiting for *him* to come to *her* (8.14), not the other way around.²⁴

b. Its creation of a world that does not mesh with the realities of its society. It is no crime that it is not social realism, that it is a fantasy; but it might as well be a depiction of life on Mars for all its connection with Israelite life. For example, the lovers are surely not married, for otherwise she would not be living in her mother's house and they would not be having to make excursions to the countryside for *al fresco* sex; on the other hand, if they are not having sex, what for goodness' sake *are* they having? Now, no matter how common premarital sex was in ancient Israel, it is hard to believe that it was extolled to the degree it is in the Song of Songs. So there is something fishy about the Song.

c. And finally, as I have argued before, its implication that eros can compensate for social oppression is a grave fault by the standards of today. Even if the lovers are wholly and absolutely on an equal footing at this moment, for how long in the life of an Israelite woman may such a happy state of affairs be presumed? It will be downhill all the way for the female lover of the Song once chap. 8 is over. She will remain forever the social inferior of her lover, she will be admired throughout her life for her fertility rather than for any bodily perfections, which will probably never again be mentioned, she will be for the most part excluded from male society and spend her life producing children and bringing them up—if she does not die prematurely in childbirth.

And finally, does the Song of Songs lend itself to irreverence? Let us see.

The male lover's logic is very odd, do you not think? In chap. 2 we see him arriving at her house with a hop, skip and jump over mountains and hills. There he is, peering in at the windows (what is wrong with the front door?), till she comes within speaking distance. What would we like him to say? How wonderful she is, how happy he is to see her? Perhaps how much he would like a nice cup of tea after all that strenuous bounding over the hills? No, this Romeo waxes all meteorological and *National Geographic*:

24. Admittedly, she imagines herself actively looking for him in the streets (3.1-4; 5.6-7), but I take both these narratives as dreaming wishes (as is clear in 5.2) rather than as depicted action (as against Exum). She imagines herself kissing him in the street (8.1), but only on fulfilment of an impossible condition (that he were her brother). Her most autonomous action is to invite him to go and spend the night in the countryside (7.11-12).

for now the winter is past,
 the rain is over and gone.
 The flowers appear on the earth;
 the time of singing has come,
 and the voice of the turtledove
 is heard in our land.
 The fig tree puts forth its figs,
 and the vines are in blossom;
 they give forth fragrance (2.11-13).

Has he spent all that effort just to give her the lowdown on the seasonal news? To be sure, he calls her 'my love, my fair one', but he seems to be paying a lot more attention to the weather than to her.

What then do you think of his line of reasoning when he is knocking at her door in the night time (this woman seems to have unique domestic arrangements for ancient Israel, since her bedroom door opens straight onto the street). Think of a line you might use under such circumstances. A line to follow 'Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one'. What would be a good 'motivation' for this nocturnal request? What seductive language will get her out of her bed in the middle of the night? Something romantic, do you think, like

for my head is wet with dew,
 my locks with the drops of the night (5.2)?

This man needs a towel, not a woman. Also, he is fibbing. Dew, I am reliably informed, forms when moist air is in contact with a colder object, such as the ground that has lost its heat by radiation. Now since the heat of his head is 98.6° F (unless he is suffering from a fever, which seems not unlikely, in which case it is higher still), it must be a very warm night for spring if dew is forming on his head.²⁵ If his head feels wet, it will be unevaporated sweat, not so romantic as dew.

Now the question is: Does the Song of Songs survive such mockery? Without question. The Song survives all wrong-headed and wooden commentary, it survives all the readings that over the centuries have maintained that it is certainly not about the very thing it is so evidently about. It is all the stronger for its survival of attempts on its life and its virtue. Whatever is said about 2.11-13 it remains the most beautiful song to nature in the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ A mere handful of images of spring are enough to create,

25. Murphy reminds us that the night dew 'is assuredly very heavy in Palestine' (*Song of Songs*, p. 170), and Pope that 'the heavy Palestinian dew is bone-chilling before the sun comes up' (Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Anchor Bible, 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977], p. 512).

26. As Wilhelm Rudolph called it (*Das Buch Ruth. Das Hohelied. Die Klagelieder* [KAT 17/1-3; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus (Gerd Mohn), 1962], p. 134).

with great evocative power,²⁷ an unforgettable sense of the joy and beauty of the new season.

And as for 5.2, perhaps the irreverent reading may not be so far from the mark anyway. Murphy for one thinks there is 'a deliberate exaggeration here; it is clear that this is not the real reason for seeking entrance'.²⁸ The young man fears, or pretends he fears, that he might be refused entrance if he says too candidly why he really wants to come in. Perhaps he deserves the teasing response he gets from his lover, who pretends that she can't come to the door because she has no clothes on and she doesn't want to get her feet dirty. Then, for their teasing, they both deserve what happens when she does get to the door: he is not there! Or rather, nothing happens, for it was all a dream anyway: she was asleep but her 'heart' was awake (5.2). The irreverence of the reading may have put us in touch with the teasing, playful, misdirection of the lovers.

4. *But Is There Such a Thing as a Classic?*

At the beginning I hinted that, despite the title of this paper, maybe there is no such thing as a classic. Even worse, that there *should* be no such thing as a classic.

I certainly want to claim that being a classic is not an intrinsic quality of a text. Classics are made classics by their readers, and it is possible to imagine one generation overturning the decisions of a former generation about which works should be regarded as classics. No book will necessarily be a classic in perpetuity.

But there is a more serious question. It is whether the very idea of a classic has outlived its usefulness, whether the concept of a classic should now perhaps be declared politically incorrect. Even if it is readers that assign the title of classic to literary works, the title adheres to those works as if they owned it. New generations are told by their elders that such and such works are the received classics, that they should be spending their time with these books and not some others, that they should be allowing their present values to be challenged by a certain selection of works that have already been chosen. And chosen in the interests of a hegemonic class, who have had the authority to declare certain works classics and others not.

The situation is very clear when it comes to the Greek and Latin classics, which in many circles are still what is understood when the term 'classics' is used. Their worldview, their ideology, their philosophy, and their notions of gender relations, were for many decades the horizon of a privileged English

27. Murphy, *Song of Songs*, p. 140.

28. Murphy, *Song of Songs*, p. 170. Michel Fox points out parallels.

education, for example, and their influence is still quite visible (I am speaking of the United Kingdom, where I live as a somewhat bemused alien) in public life, in state religion, in the education system, in the letters columns of *The Times*. Their values are not values freely adopted by the English people or the leaders of public opinion; they are values imbued in the elite by their schooling, and not open to sustained or systematic critique.

Whatever the works referred to as classics may be in one culture or another, at one time or another, collectively they constitute a canon, a prescribed and recommended list of books. It does not matter very much if there is a multiplicity of canons or if canonical lists are fuzzy at the edges. It is enough that the concept of an authorized canon flourishes (even if no one can say definitively which particular books are in and which are out). The notion of a canon implies an authorizing body, such as a democratic and multicultural society can only find anathema.

I conclude that the day of the classics is approaching its end, and that we would be better off without the concept or the term. And yet I would hate the day to dawn when no one was treating books in many of the ways I have outlined above as characteristics of classics. Will we not always treasure certain books from the past, find them beautiful and rewarding, be refreshed by them and challenged, find ourselves returning to them with delight and surprise? We will recommend them and suggest them to others, not asserting a universal acknowledgment of them, not prejudging their superiority over other works that are treasured by other people, not despising those who find no pleasure in our books. If we do that, I shall not be surprised if the *Song of Songs* long remains one of those former classics that no longer bear the name, classics, shall we say, *après la lettre*.

See more ideas about preschool songs, classroom songs, circle time songs. Do this every morning with your students to practice reading aloud, fluency and the importance of kindness towards others. [Preschool Songs](#). [Preschool Classroom](#). Song Words for Song Box. A few days ago I added a post about my song box, I have now seen that it has quite a few pins and repins on Pinterest. I have noted a few people say they don't know the words to all the songs/ rhymes, so here are all the lyrics! [Winter Songs For Preschool](#) [Preschool Poems](#) [Songs For Toddlers](#) [Preschool Music](#) [Preschool Christmas](#) [Preschool Lessons](#). [Kids Songs](#). The Song of songs, which is Solomon's. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. Because of the savor of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee. Draw me, we will run after thee: the King hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee. A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts. My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi. Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes. Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green. Creating a hit song is never easy, but crafting a Christmas hit may be even more difficult. Not only are you competing with other contemporary artists, but you're also going head-to-head with classic religious and cultural carols that have had hundreds of years' head starts to build their popularity. Despite this, many musicians take a swing at crafting memorable holiday music. And while the majority of efforts fall by the wayside, those that do catch on inevitably crop up year after year, delivering festive cheer in the process. Here are the stories behind 13 of classic rock's most-loved Christmas songs. Slade, "Merry Christmas Everybody" (1973). At the suggestion of his mother-in-law, Slade bassist and songwriter Jimmy Lea decided to try his hand at a Christmas tune. The Song of Songs is enigmatic because it has no unambiguous reference to God, religion, or spiritual things. The closest that any verse comes to mentioning God is Songs 8:6, which reads: Put me like a seal over your heart, Like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, Jealousy is as severe as Sheol; Its flashes are flashes of fire, The very flame of the Lord. As an overview of the Song of Songs, this message will present: 1. Different approaches to understanding the book. 2. Various opinions regarding its structure, meaning, and story lines. 3. Advice on how to read the book for enjoyment and understanding. 4. The Song's lessons for body, soul, and spirit.

The Song of Songs is a book of the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh, and also in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. It is one of the five megillot (scrolls). The Song of Songs is also known as the Song of Solomon or as Canticle of Canticles. It is known as Aisma in the Septuagint, which is short for $\acute{\alpha}\iota\sigma\mu\alpha$, Aisma aismat $\acute{\alpha}$ n, "Song of Songs" in Greek. Verse 1 seems to show that the author is Solomon, since it says that it is "Solomon's Song of Songs", but this could also just mean a song for or... Today's post is on inspirational songs: songs that motivate us into action, that remind us about the beauty of life, that remind us of our true worth and potential, and that lift us up when we're down. In writing this post, I listened to over hundreds of songs and handpicked 56 songs. Because there are so many great songs out there, it's impossible for me to include every single one. An all-time classic, "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" speaks of this magical place over the rainbow where things will be better. It refers to this other place that is better compared to where we are now. The song was originally sung by Judy Garland in 1939 (Wizard of Oz) and has since been covered by many people. The version below is by Israel Kamakawiwole. Song of songs. Review by: David Vernier. Artistic Quality: 10. The program intersperses the primary choral works with pertinent plainchant settings of Song of Songs texts a sensible idea both for variety and for calling attention to the relationship between formal church liturgy and composers' more elaborate (sometimes more "worldly") interpretations of these popular passages. The plainchants, each lasting less than a minute, also serve as a nice contrast to the longer motets, the most impressive of which must be Victoria's huge (10-plus-minute) Vadam et circuibo, recorded many times by others but never better than here. And songs are usually a great tool to jazz up the lessons. You may choose the one you like and even better to pick the song preferred by a student. It is up to you, what part of a lesson and how to use a song, however, the plan below might make things easier: Introducing new vocabulary from the lyrics (especially for lower levels). Listening to a song and doing the tasks: filling in the gaps (provide a worksheet with gapped lyrics) Genre: classic rock. Topic: Life/Feelings/Society/. Grammar: Continuous tenses (past/present). This song might be used as a task for Warm-up or Lead-in on topics related to memories, past events. Here is the article about the song and its meaning. If you have a student(s) who is a fan of Maroon 5, it could be interesting to read and discuss the article.