

Beauty and the Books

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A sonorous Shakespearean voice intones lines from the Dylan Thomas poem "Death Shall Have No Dominion." Are we at a poetry reading? Are we watching public television? No, it is prime time on CBS, and we are enjoying the award-winning fantasy Beauty and the Beast.

The literary nature of this series, now unfortunately cancelled, became apparent with the first episode. Ron Perlman, the classically trained actor who plays the beast Vincent, states that it is like playing Hamlet every week ("Will Hollywood Ever Take Him at Face Value?" 36).

Roy Dotrice, who plays Father, the leader of the underground community, comments "One thing I hope Beauty and the Beast doesn't lose is its literacy. There's a sense of elegance about the language" (Shapiro, 84). Loosely based on Jean Cocteau's 1946 film *La Belle et la Bête*, it is the only series in the history of commercial television to regularly feature literary credits at the end of many episodes. Among Beauty and the Beast collectibles found in many bookstores are bookmarks bearing quotations from Shakespeare.

The occupants of Vincent and Father's home, the tunnels below the streets of New York, spend a great deal of time reading to one another from the books shelved in Father's book-lined study. If we listen carefully, we will hear a generous sampling of the classics of world literature from Shakespeare to Rilke to Dickens.

The premiere episode "Once Upon a Time in the City of New York" ends with Catherine and Vincent's love awakening as they share Dickens' *Great Expectations*, a work alluded to throughout the three seasons the series has run. In one of the first episodes of the third season, "Snow," Vincent mourns the now-deceased Catherine by reading the literary works they once shared. His friend Pascal gently reminds him that life goes on by reading to him once again the familiar first lines of *Great Expectations*. Even Vincent's signed gifts of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and *Great Expectations* play a role as clues in solving Catherine's murder.

Another read-aloud favorite in the world below is *Jane Eyre*. In the last episode of the second season, "The Rest is Silence," Father recalls reading *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and all of Shakespeare to Vincent as a youth, and comments "You came out of it a scholar." Not surprisingly, Vincent's scholarly education has served him well in communicating his wide range of emotions. He quotes dark passages from Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" and Robert Frost's "Acquainted With the Night" to express his

pain, rage, and fear, as readily as he woos Catherine with Shelley's "She Walks in Beauty."

Even many episode titles are literary allusions. Examples include "A Kingdom by the Sea" (Poe, "Annabel Lee"), "A Gentle Rain" (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*), "To Reign in Hell" (Milton, *Paradise Lost*), "The Rest is Silence" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*), "Beggar's Comet" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*), "Nevermore" (Poe, "The Raven"), "What Rough Beast" (Yeats, "The Second Coming"), "The Hollow Men" (T.S. Eliot), and "Ozymandias" (Shelley). Perhaps some of the allusions are a little obvious, but each is entirely appropriate to the plot of the episode. For instance, "Ozymandias" portrays the defeat of Elliot Burch, a Donald Trump-like urban developer who loves Catherine but loves power and money more. It is no wonder that the consistently high quality of *Beauty and the Beast* scripts has earned the series a reputation among writers as a difficult show to which to make a sale (Gordon, 47).

Viewer interest in the series can even extend to an appreciation of the many versions of the original fairy tale, of a charming contemporary re-telling (*Beauty*, by Robin McKinley), or of similar stories such as *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. "These stories involve compassion, which is the germ of our relationship," states Linda Hamilton, who plays Catherine ("TV's Most Romantic Couple" 71). The series can also kindle interest in classic literary lovers such as Catherine and Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights*.

As I watch *Beauty and the Beast* I have taken great pleasure in identifying passages and allusions familiar to me from my high school and college literature courses and a lifetime of personal reading. I have found none frustratingly obscure. As I listen to Vincent's soothing voice and then re-read the originals, I am reminded of the nobility of spirit that is common to all great literature. As William Faulkner said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, man is immortal because

"he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail" (Faulkner, 4).

What better way to communicate the urgency and importance of great ideas as expressed through great literature than to introduce students to a world of readers, the role models of *Beauty and the Beast*? Several videocassettes of episodes are available commercially, and many are available from fans everywhere. Although cancelled, the series will live on in video and reruns. Another medium is the 1989 Capitol recording *Of Love and Hope: Music and Poetry from Beauty and the Beast*, which contains a sampling of the poetry showcased in many episodes. Interest in reading the originals can then be kindled and encouraged by librarians, parents, and teachers.

Despite his inhuman appearance, Vincent has learned much and has much to teach us about human values. Through reading he has transcended the physical confinement of the tunnels and has traveled the universe in his imagination. Let us willingly suspend our disbelief and join him on his odyssey. It's a trip!

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