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Cory wrote this comparison/contrast essay for Elyse Lamszus’ English 103 course.
Drop Everything and Read

MLA Format

Cory Ellis

When was the last time you read a book? When was the last time you read a book for fun? I applaud you if the answer to the latter question was anything within the last month. The value of reading as a hobby or interest has dropped to nearly nothing. This is a trend that has been in the making for years, and it is, in many ways, directly related to the somewhat unintelligent and irrational manner of behavior of today’s teenagers. Most young—and regrettably, some old—people today cannot seem to grasp the importance of reading outside the classroom. While this invaluable skill should be viewed as a tool used for broadening one’s horizons, the common perception is that such behaviors are to be treated as evidence for being nerdy, lazy, boring, or some other adjective with a negative connotation behind it.

Richard Rodriguez understood the importance of reading outside the classroom. In his essay, “The Lonely, Good Company of Books,” he went into full detail about his adventures in delving into the classics at an early age. In doing so, he became an intelligent individual who succeeded academically, even if his reading skills themselves were not the greatest. This is not to say that Rodriguez knew immediately that reading was important. It took a lot for the young reader to realize that his unusual habit of reading for enjoyment was actually beneficial in some way. By feeling a connection between himself and the author, letting himself get lost in the worlds created by the books, and learning which books were good and which were bad, Rodriguez became much more academically successful.

When Rodriguez was first discovering his affinity for literature, he would shy away from reading in his head, opting instead to read aloud to himself. Rodriguez claimed to use this technique to “console myself for the loneliness I [felt] when I read” (173). After a few private, remedial reading lessons, Rodriguez soon got into the mindset that “the author somehow was speaking directly to [him]” (174). This idea filled the loneliness that Rodriguez felt as he read through book after book. In a way, this provides an interesting incentive to becoming more literate. Not many other sources
provide such an insight into the life of somebody from a different place, culture, or even time. Even if the work in mind is a fictional novel that takes place on some desert planet in a galaxy billions of light-years away from ours, we are still reading words put on a page by the hand of another person. That person could have been thinking of that very planet from his private study over a hundred years ago. You are sharing that moment alone with a person who has long since passed, allowing their memory to live on.

Indeed, in addition to sharing a moment with an author, Rodriguez also learned a thing or two about stepping into the world these authors created from the old nun who gave him his private reading lessons. Rodriguez would ask himself: “Didn’t I realize that reading would open up whole new worlds? A book could open doors for me. It could introduce me to people and show me places I never imagined existed” (173). He goes on later to describe the feeling he got whenever he would read works by Charles Dickens. “I loved the feeling I got—after the first hundred pages—of being at home in a fictional world where I knew the names of the characters and cared about what was going to happen to them” (174). This particular point is one with which I can empathize. Being the simplistic reader that I am, I have yet to explore much territory in the world of classic literature, but I do know what it feels like to be lost in a world outside your own, a world created by another person. I am very much a fan of fantasy, and when I am in the middle of a novel such as *Harry Potter* or *Eragon*, I usually find myself reluctant to release the book from my grip, thinking it absolutely critical that I stay beside the hero to the bitter end, which often comes too soon. On that point, I also seem to draw a parallel to Rodriguez, who likewise feels bothered by being “forced away at the conclusion, when the fiction closed tight, like a fortune-teller’s fist—the futures of all the major characters neatly resolved” (174).

Rodriguez feels that one must be wary of such enjoyable novels as *Harry Potter*: “A book so enjoyable to read couldn’t be very ‘important’” he claims (174). Rodriguez was very critical of his reading habits, often staying away from books that were simple and enjoyable and instead being attracted to those that provided more of a mental workout. Rodriguez also claims to have felt similarly when reading the aforementioned Charles Dickens works. Commenting on the feeling he got from reading these novels, Rodriguez states, “I never knew how to take such feelings seriously, however. Nor did I suspect that these experiences could be part of a novel’s meaning” (174). I am a little skeptical about this particular point. While I agree that easy-reading may not be the most enriching experience, there is still a mental workout going on, no matter what you are reading. A
person will inherently visualize what they are reading, whether it be *The Canterbury Tales* or *Twilight*. Regardless of how simple a book is, one must put in the effort to create the world that the characters live in, and that requires a little brain work, no matter how small the effort. The point I am trying to make is that all books are beneficial in some way, and discrediting a book’s merit is a way of narrowing the window of opportunity for potential book-lovers.

However one interprets the value of books, a unanimous decision can be made on the subject: books are important and even essential to the educational process. While learning about the many things that books could do for him, Rodriguez cleverly states, “I was thinking then of another consequence of literacy, one I was too shy to admit but nonetheless trusted. Books were going to make me ‘educated’” (173). When you are well-read, you become more intellectual. You gain insight into the world around you, coming from the perspectives of all the authors you have read, each one just as important as the last. Every person has his own opinions, especially writers. Listening to and understanding these opinions will make you, in turn, a more tolerant and respectable person. Perhaps you have heard the phrase “to see through another’s eyes,” or maybe, “to walk in another’s shoes.” Both are traditional phrases used to teach people the merits of empathy. Both can be learned by reading a book. Not only will a book help to make you a moral person, but it will help you in the classroom as well. Any person knows that if you practice something long enough, you are eventually going to become more proficient at whatever it is you are practicing. The same applies to reading and grammar. If you are constantly being immersed in beautiful grammar and literature, you will eventually become better at it yourself. “My habit of reading made me a confident speaker and writer of English,” Rodriguez states in his essay (175). What better example to use than a beautifully constructed essay written by one who claims to have his abilities in English enriched by his prowess as a reader?

Obviously, Rodriguez believes that reading is an important component of the educational process. His personal accomplishments include “having read hundreds of books” by high school, which I find to be nothing short of amazing (175). I could personally count on my fingers how many books I had read by high school, and that is no exaggeration. Rodriguez appears to have little opinion one way or another about people’s attitudes toward reading, but it is notable how strongly he feels that reading has impacted his own life. I want to empathize with Rodriguez. However, I cannot, and there is only one reason why not. Remember when I said that I could count the number of books I had read before high school on my fingers?
Well, that list has grown by seven since high school—that is all. I have always admired those who are able to find the joys of reading because I have always found it difficult to read anything more challenging than *Harry Potter*. Where Rodriguez has read hundreds of books, I have read a maximum of twenty, and even that may be an exaggeration. Perhaps I feel a connection with Rodriguez because I want the importance of reading to be impressed upon today’s students more than it was on me. I want kids to find enjoyment in books more than I was able to.

I have carried on and on about the benefits of reading in and out of the classroom. It is true that reading is an enriching experience that can do nothing but benefit you in the long run, but I have thus far failed to emphasize one of the most important benefits of reading: it is fun! Rodriguez realizes this fact as well, for he states, “In spite of my earnestness, I found reading a pleasurable activity. I came to enjoy the lonely, good company of books” (174). Now, as a singer, I have learned that anytime you sing or state the title of the work, it tends to be important. The title of the essay from which these quotes are taken is “The Lonely, Good Company of Books.” Obviously, Rodriguez wanted that particular sentence to be stressed. This is also the reason why simple novels are so appealing to wider audiences. They are easy to read and as a result are quite enjoyable. Why not pick up a book and read for fun? I realize that this may not be the simplest task in the world. I will be the first to admit that oftentimes I prefer to play my Nintendo DS over reading *The Great Gatsby*. However, sometimes we need to realize which is the better option. It is like selecting which foods to eat for dinner. While eating a plateful of French-fried potatoes will be enjoyable and much more appealing than a bowl of steamed asparagus, such a feast would be detrimental to your health and would provide little to no benefit to your well-being in the long run. The asparagus, on the other hand, does wonderful things for your body, and it tastes great!

I may not be as fluent a reader as Rodriguez, but he and I both understand the importance of reading as an educational medium. Perhaps that may sound hypocritical, and perhaps I truly do not understand the importance of reading to the extent that Rodriguez understands it, but I am not completely blind to the insight that books can bring. It would be foolish of me to claim that reading provides no benefit to your education, because I know that is a lie. Reading connects you to people and places that may have been lost to history, or fantastic worlds that are beyond even your wildest dreams. A person can always benefit from expanding their horizons both in and out of the classroom. Sometimes, that can be done by doing what your teachers have been teaching you in school since you could first understand them: drop everything and read!
Works Cited