



# CLASSICAL INFLUENCES

BY TOMMY NEWTON



Virginia Woolf

Homer

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Dante

Ernest Hemingway

Plato



Dr. Nikolai Endres

**FROM PLATO, HOMER, AND SHAKESPEARE TO OSCAR WILDE AND GORE VIDAL, NIKOLAI ENDRES IS SURROUNDED BY THE CLASSICS.**

The shelves of his Cherry Hall office at Western Kentucky University are filled with classical literature. But they aren't sitting there gathering dust. Dr. Endres uses the classics not only for his research but to show today's students how classical literature influences modern writing and culture.

"I believe that texts that are 2,000 years old can still teach us something," said Dr. Endres, an associate professor of world literature in WKU's English Department. "Sometimes people question that, but I tell them that the Bible is more than 2,000 years old and it is used to teach us something."

Dr. Endres' research reflects a fundamental belief in the importance of ancient literature to our time. He is able to use his knowledge of languages (Ancient Greek, Latin,

German, French, and Italian) and his classical background to interpret modern works.

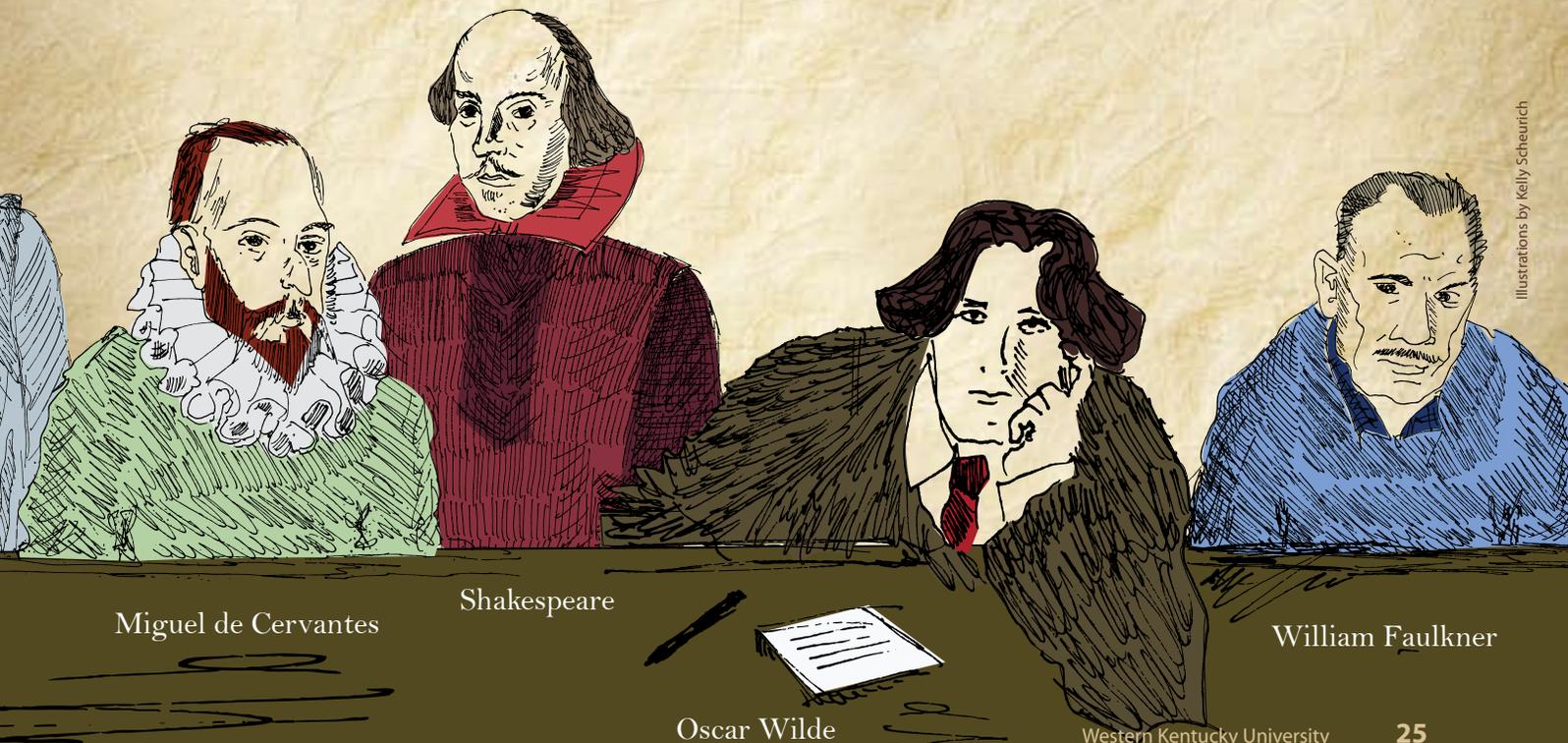
In 1993, Dr. Endres received his "Zwischenprüfung" (or equivalent to an American bachelor's degree) in English, French, and Classics from Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg, Germany. He earned his master's (1996) and doctorate (2000) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

His master's thesis was entitled "Eros in the Closet: Platonic and Greek Love in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." His dissertation was entitled "Failures of Love: Plato and Platonism in E.M. Forster, Thomas Mann, and André Gide."

"A professor at UNC got me interested in classical literature and its reception in modern times," he said. "As a researcher, you have to carve out a niche."

In his dissertation, Endres explores the appropriations of Plato's discourses on love, investigates the politics of sex and gender in antiquity and modernity, and looks at how Platonic love figures as a homoerotic signifier.

Since same-sex love was unspeakable, what Oscar Wilde termed "the love that dare not speak its name,"



Illustrations by Kelly Scheurich

Miguel de Cervantes

Shakespeare

Oscar Wilde

William Faulkner

same-sex desire had to be conveyed in a code. Endres says the two most important literary models were Plato's erotic dialogues and the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

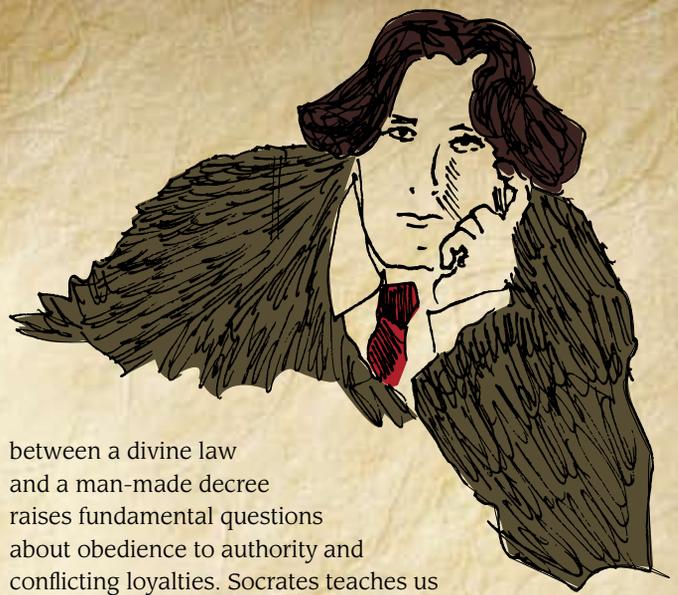
In the future he plans to write on Platonic love in Mary Renault's *The Charioteer*, Patricia Nell Warren's *The Front Runner*, and Yukio Mishima's *Forbidden Colors*.

Dr. Endres also is interested in the Roman novel *Satyricon* by Petronius and how it has been used in modern literature — for example, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

An essay Dr. Endres wrote about one of Gore Vidal's novels, *The City and the Pillar*, led to a friendship and research opportunities with the noted American author. Dr. Endres has visited Vidal's Los Angeles home and has been given permission to study the author's personal papers at Harvard.

"That's a great experience for me since I'm a classicist and the whole idea of contacting a living author isn't something you can do with the classical authors," Dr. Endres said. He has in his possession a couple of letters from Vidal, which he always shows his students when he teaches Vidal.

Dr. Endres is able to share what he learns about classical authors with his students to show how the classics are still relevant. For example, he said, "Antigone's choice



between a divine law and a man-made decree raises fundamental questions about obedience to authority and conflicting loyalties. Socrates teaches us to beware of the sophists, who can make the weaker argument appear stronger, just like all the double-talk of political rhetoric. Theseus, in Euripides' play *Hippolytos*, wonders how we arrive at truth. Rather than consult an oracle, we, like Theseus, prefer to engage in cross-examination and debate. In the 21st century, we believe that reason (*logos*) can get us anywhere, but technical disasters (Chernobyl, Challenger, or the Concorde), or miscarriages of justice, or the application of the word 'unreasonable' to dismiss minorities should make us pause. Theseus finds out — too late for him — that there is a higher power that human beings should never ignore."

**"Enhancing the quality of life is one of our educational requirements. I think that's what reading a book does. Technology makes classical literature widely available online. I believe in the use of technology as long as it advances learning."**



Dr. Endres, who came to WKU in 2002 after two years at University of the Ozarks, teaches a mythology class and also teaches world literature, literary criticism, and gay and lesbian studies.

When he teaches masterpieces of world literature from antiquity to modernity, he must immerse himself in a new literary world nearly every week. The classes include Homer and Virgil, Boccaccio and Chaucer, Dante and Milton, Cervantes and Rabelais, Shakespeare and Goethe, Flaubert and Kafka, Mann and Sartre, Faulkner and Allende, Joyce and Woolf, Fitzgerald and Steinbeck, Kawabata and Mishima, and Morrison and Achebe.

"A course I would like to teach in the future is 'The Classical Background of American Literature and Culture,'" Dr. Endres said. "Our political structure comprises a Senate located on Capitol Hill. George Washington was known as Father of his Country, a literal translation of *pater patriae*, the honorific name bestowed on Cicero and other Roman

heroes. Thomas Jefferson, an outstanding educator among the Founding Fathers and deeply steeped in classical literature, modeled his life and home (Monticello or “little hill”) on the ideal of a Roman gentleman. The Great Seal of the United States bears three Latin quotations: *e pluribus unum* (“out of many, one”), *novus ordo seclorum* (“a new order of the ages” as celebrated in Virgil’s *Eclogue IV*), and *annuit coeptis* (“[God] has favored our enterprise,” an adaptation of the *Georgics*). Countless townships bear Greek and Roman origins, such as Cincinnati or Carthage. The myth of Manifest Destiny, of a New Eden, originates not only in Genesis, but also in the *Aeneid*, where Jupiter promises Aeneas an *imperium sine fine*, an empire without limitations.”

Dr. Endres is also interested in finding ways to use his research in the classroom and in using technology to help students develop their appreciation of the classics. “Enhancing the quality of life is one of our educational requirements,” Dr. Endres said. “I think that’s what reading a book does. Technology makes classical literature widely available online. I believe in the use of technology as long as it advances learning.”

For example, when his mythology class is studying Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, students can use technological tools to learn “how pervasive the influence of mythology is in our popular culture,” he said. They can find that popular songs are inspired by mythology; nicknames of sports teams (Tennessee Titans) go back to mythology; and even numerous company names (like Nike or Hades, a heating company) are influenced by mythology.

“If you look at ads for perfume, you often see a woman coming up out of the water, which is inspired by the birth of Aphrodite,” Endres said.

As a teacher, Dr. Endres strives to make the classics more relevant to students. In *Metamorphoses*, several characters change into animals or other objects as their true nature is revealed. “Metamorphosis results in clarification.” Dr. Endres encourages his students to choose villains and transform them. “That’s just one way to make a difficult book more accessible,” he said.

Dr. Endres’ efforts are paying off. “The literature courses I teach are always full,” he said.

In a world where high-tech and cutting-edge are the buzzwords, “I find that students are very much interested in classical literature,” Endres said.

“I think there will be a new revival of reading. I can’t think of anything more exciting than reading a good book,” he said. “We literature teachers may not save lives, but we make them more pleasant.” ■

