

Dickens, Thurber, Andersen, and London by Jay Dubya

As far back as I can remember my mind has always thought and learned by association. My brain fancifully connects things like computer terminals and bus terminals, Indian reservations with plane ticket confirmations, and carpetbaggers with ruthless rug stealers. Don't ask me why, but I think I get bored with ordinary human communications and then out of sheer depression lapse into my imaginary fantasy association world, finding *that* mental paradise much more fascinating than the nightly news, soap operas and talking head yakety-yak cable tabloid shows.

Because my cerebrum delights in working by making bizarre associations, whenever my mind thinks of Charles Dickens, the great English author is filed and classified in a "mental cabinet" along with James Thurber, Hans Christian Andersen, Jack London and surprisingly, the mythical ancient Greek hero, Perseus, all of whom had to give somebody "the dickens" at one point in their lives. All of those marvelous personages had to also overcome obstacles, challenges, trials, tribulations and adversity. They elevated themselves above grief and ridicule, stayed focused on their goals and in their individual lives and exploits were not defeated by an abundance of public criticism and rejection. I admire each of them because all five were *motivated by failure*.

Charles Dickens' (1812-1870) father had great financial difficulties. The boy had a rather miserable childhood and the lad spent much of his time in cheerless poorhouses and workhouses. Did poverty overwhelm Charles Dickens? Was his cruel negative environment to blame for an unproductive and fruitless life? No, it wasn't. Dickens retreated into his secret imaginary world and incisively wrote about the need for social reform in what later became such immortal literary classics as *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*.

James Thurber (1894-1961) ranks as one of America's most popular humorists. The author is most renowned for his classic short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," who was a meek absent-minded hen-pecked character who daily suffered the sharp-tongued ire of a dominant bossy wife. Thurber's hilarious stories and self-drawn cartoons appeared for over thirty years in the reputable classy *New Yorker* magazine. James Thurber had been blinded in one eye in a childhood accident and then he unfortunately lost vision in his other eye in later life. Despite those difficult and encumbering hardships, the determined author still continued his unique storytelling pursuits and he even appeared late in life as himself in a popular Broadway play *The Thurber Carnival*.

Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) was born in a small fishing village in Denmark. (If a last name ends in *sen*, the person is probably from Denmark; in *son*, probably from Sweden). At age fourteen Andersen journeyed to Copenhagen to diligently pursue either an acting' or writing career. Hans auditioned as an opera singer, was a humiliating failure and spent the next three years anguishing in abject poverty. Much to his utter disenchantment his first plays and novels received little acclaim. Was Hans Christian Andersen soundly defeated by rejection? If he had been, *poor* Hans Christian and his delightful fairy tales would have remained wallowing in obscurity, his literary work undiscovered, his reputation hiding in the giant anonymous void that history so aptly calls "the masses."

Jack London (1876-1916) has to be one of my favorite authors in American literature. He certainly is a source of inspiration whenever I feel depressed. London was born into grim poverty, had little formal education, and was definitely heading toward a criminal life. As a teenager he was an oyster pirate on San Francisco Bay and spent several years roaming the city as a hobo. But Jack London loved going to the library and reading books, so much so that he decided to endure what he had possibly hated most, formal

education. Consequently, Jack became a “student of life.” London managed to finish high school and then eventually enrolled into the *University of California*.

I admire men such as Charles Dickens, James Thurber, Hans Christian Andersen, and Jack London. I find inspiration in considering the fact that formidable negative social and economic environments had not overcome the spirit of any of the four great authors. Each man elevated himself above mediocrity through sheer determination and tenacity. Failures and handicaps made them tougher, more resilient, and more adamant about achieving success. They didn’t blame society for the bad cards they had been dealt. These great authors were motivated at being shunned by the literary establishment. The stellar writers refused to be mere products of their environments. Instead, the admirable men’ transcended adversity by having faith in their dreams and then being able to subsequently define themselves, find a reading audience and ultimately shape *their* environments.

Now, how do I *associate* the mythical Greek hero Perseus with Charles Dickens, James Thurber, Hans Christian Andersen, and Jack London? Perseus had to overcome many obstacles in his pursuit of honor and glory. Kings and noblemen rejected his ambition. The hero was about to surrender to failure when the goddess Pallas Athene appeared to him and asked, “Perseus, which would you prefer to have, a soul of clay or a soul of fire?” Obviously, Perseus answered a “soul of fire.” Translated, this awesome statement means that the hero intensely wanted to distinguish himself’ from the faceless masses, all of whom possessed souls of clay.

This exceptional quality is what Perseus has in common with Charles Dickens, James Thurber, Hans Christian Andersen, and Jack London. Success wasn’t given to them; they earned it by defeating challenges that only temporarily obstructed their achievements. They all realized how ephemeral human existence is and that every second counts. They made the most of their lives by seizing opportunity the moment it came their way, and when it didn’t come their way, their industry, their’ perseverance and their inner strength compelled them to create opportunity. The five would not accept “*no*” for an answer from anyone. Each man opened his own window of opportunity. Those great “heroes” of mine transcended the bitter sarcasm, the banality and the castigation that surrounded them. They refused to go through life satisfied being sheepish men having *souls of clay*. The four champions of literature (like Perseus) aptly demonstrated to the cynical world that they possessed “souls of fire.”



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