

# Who Is Uriah Heap?

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Last week, one of my professors, wringing his hands during a lecture, laughed nervously and said, “I’m turning into Uriah Heap up here.” It was a reference to an obsequious, constantly hand-wringing character in Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, one of those “classic” books that makes you sound smart if you’ve read it. David Copperfield is one of those books that only a few people might understand a reference to outside of a college campus.

Statistics from the United States Census Bureau show that, on average, a high school diploma is the highest level of education reached in the United States, and according to the CIA, 99% percent of Americans are literate.<sup>1,2</sup> If that is the case, why might so few people outside of academia understand a Dickens reference? The answer lies in a study conducted by Renaissance Learning, Inc. that breaks down the top 40 books read by students from ninth to twelfth grade in the United States. The list makes no distinction between assigned reading and reading for pleasure, but the two are easy to tell apart. For example, only two Shakespeare plays made the list, but all of the Hunger Games and Twilight book series did.<sup>3</sup> I can personally attest to the different ways public high schools can decrease an overall appreciation of classic Western literature: In tenth grade one of the books we were required to read was *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens again—but at a third of the length of *David Copperfield*, it’s certainly more easily digested). One of the Honors English teachers, upon hearing several students complain that it was “too hard,” told her classes that they didn’t have to finish it, and promptly moved on to the next unit in the curriculum.

This unfortunate trend is not limited to English departments. For example, statistics from the National Endowment

for the Arts indicate that only about four percent of Americans who have only a high school diploma regularly attend live theater, and those in the highest-income group are more likely to see stage performances than anyone else.<sup>4,5</sup> Additionally, total attendance at live theater events has been steadily declining over the past seven years, reports Americans for the Arts.<sup>6</sup>

Interest in the arts and humanities has been declining at the university level as well. The Institute of Education Sciences reports that more Bachelor’s degrees have been awarded in business than in any other major and that the total number of business degrees is almost double the next-highest-ranking set of degrees, those in the social sciences and in history.<sup>7</sup> In third and fourth place are health and education, respectively. Natural science, health, and engineering have all seen dramatic increases in the number of bachelor’s degrees conferred in the last decade, but this trend fails to appear in the number of liberal arts degrees awarded.

The arts and humanities are indeed in a state of crisis, both in the public and in academia. We can see it reflected in the adolescent crowd’s favorite books (which have an average difficulty level of fifth grade) and in songs whose lyrics pander to the lowest common denominator. As a culture, we’ve come a long way from Mrs. Dalloway and Eleanor Rigby—a long way in the wrong direction.

To quote The New York Times op-ed writer David Brooks, “People think by comparison—Iraq is either like Vietnam or Bosnia; your boss is like Narcissus or Solon. People who have a wealth of analogies in their minds can think more precisely than those with few analogies.”<sup>8</sup> He’s right: We think with similes and we make allusions in speech, media, and culture. For that we can thank the two thousand years’ worth of material that is

the focus of liberal arts studies. In the midst of all this history and literature we can live a multi-layered existence, one that engages our minds and connects us to the distant past. But as we devalue the arts and humanities, it seems more and more as though our society is taking a dive into the shallow end of the pool—we humans are naturally creative and insightful creatures, but if we keep on our present path our only collective knowledge base will consist solely of catchy pop tunes, teen romance novels, and Internet memes. We need to stand up for the past and encourage the appreciation of classical works and great artists, so the great artists of the future still have hope of being inspired.

### References

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- <sup>8</sup>Brooks, D. (Jun. 2010) “History for Dollars.” The New York Times. A27.