

“Economic Insights From and About Literature, Drama, and Literary Criticism”<sup>\*</sup>  
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After minoring in English as a graduate student at LSU in the 1970s, then publishing pieces on how to use passages from literature and drama to teach economic concepts and issues, reviews of how other economists have used literature and drama and how literary critics and historians have used economic ideas and themes in literature and drama, and most recently an anthology of literary passages dealing with economics (Watts and Smith, 1989; Watts, 1999, 2002, and 2003), I am occasionally asked me to offer some general reflections on how economic concepts, issues, and themes are presented in literature and drama, and what can be gained in this particular vein of interdisciplinary endeavor. In this paper, I first discuss some general trends and patterns in literary passages dealing with economic concepts and topics. Then, in two separate sections, I suggest several reasons why economists and literature instructors may want to use excerpts from this kind of literature and drama in their courses.

I. Economics in Literature, Drama, and Literary Criticism: Some General Patterns and Issues

First, and most important, if you think of economics as the study of “the ordinary business of life,” it is hardly surprising to find that there is a great deal of literature dealing with economic issues, concepts, themes, and problems. In fact, that was true long before there was an autonomous academic discipline called economics: Aristophanes presents the first statement of Gresham’s law in *The Frogs*; Horace shows a soldier’s demand for safety increasing as his income/wealth rises (which Alexander Pope and other authors imitated long before Adam Smith began teaching and writing); Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and uncounted other authors wrote about merchants and fairs (i.e., early markets), things that caused prices to rise and fall, etc.

Some individual authors and the literature from some particular periods are more likely to include or even focus on economic material than others. Other authors and even a few bodies/periods of literature rarely develop economic ideas in any depth or detail, except perhaps as very general background or setting. Both economists and literary critics and historians have pointed out notable intertemporal differences in how and how much literary authors have dealt with economic issues and themes (e.g., Brandeis, 1961; McKendrick, 1986; and McVeagh, 1981). A wide range of social and economic factors have been suggested to explain these shifts, including such major disruptions as wars and the Great Depression; sweeping intellectual movements such as the Enlightenment and Romanticism; and economic considerations including the technology and costs of printing and marketing literary works. Along with these random shocks, systematic forces, and perhaps even recurring cycles, to a large extent literary authors’ interest in economic topics seems to depend largely on what other issues and values are topical or of greatest interest to the authors and their readers at any particular period. For example,

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McKendrick (1986, p. 114) concludes that for British writers, “far from the twentieth century representing a peak of . . . attacks on the businessman, there is a decline in attention to him in the literature of the last fifty years, reflecting a relative indifference to business capitalism and a preoccupation with other values.”

From my own (more limited) reading, I would suggest that the variance in interest in economic ideas and themes across individual authors is probably more important than the difference across eras and even centuries. In other words, an author who deals extensively with economic ideas in one work is more likely to do so in his or her other works, too. Nevertheless, another important caveat put forth by McKendrick (1986, p. 114) also holds: literary attitudes in a given period *and* for a particular author are “often partial, particular to a single class or interest group, prone to reflect specific political connections and social obsessions, and open to mimetic distortion as a result of literary convention, passing fashion, the needs of the readership, the demands of the critics, or the pressure of public opinion.” And perhaps most important of all in terms of particular works by any individual author are the pragmatic issues they face in developing plot and characters: if a pro-market/business or anti-market/business character, scene, or speech helps to do that, many authors will be willing and able to write that character, scene, or speech, whether or not they personally share that opinion. Therefore, using one character or work, or even a small subset of works, to evaluate the author’s own attitudes about economic and business relationships is at best a dubious procedure.

This leads to a broader question/assertion put forward by some prominent economists and economic historians: Is there a pervasive anti-market, anti-economics, or at least anti-business “literary point of view”? My answer to that, as reflected in my selection of passages for *The Literary Book of Economics*, is that there is no one pervasive literary point of view. Instead, I find that literary authors come from just as wide a spectrum in things economic and political as, say, economists. There is Bertolt Brecht on the one hand, and Ayn Rand on the other – both of whom, interestingly, have had the literary merits of their writing criticized because it is apodictical, in one direction or the other. Similar charges have been raised against some of the more strident and not so representative writings by Shaw and Ibsen. (See Winter, 1986, and Fletcher, 1974.) But in any case, most literary works and writers fall someplace well between these endpoints.

While accepting Lionel Trilling’s claim that there has been a rise of an “adversary culture” since the later half of the nineteenth century, and after reviewing hundreds of works by literary authors from many different centuries, the literary historian McKendrick (1986, p. 108) disagrees with many claims about the nature, timing, and significance of the role of literary works in creating and heightening that adversarial culture. Instead, he concludes “the apparent unanimity of the adversary culture’s response to businessmen owes more to the influential critics [most notably Ruskin, Snowden, Sidney Webb, and William Morris] than it does to the record of imaginative writing alone.”

That idea was also supported in a review of my anthology by an atypical Professor of Economics at the University of Virginia who “dabbled in economics” as a graduate student, attended Ludwig Von Mises’ seminar at NYU, and has published many articles dealing with economic themes in great literature and drama. Paul Cantor (2003, 64-65) wrote:

Economists would do well to consider incorporating Watts's book into their teaching—it might help them to make their theoretical points come alive for their students. But I still think that this book would be more useful to English professors (even though I suspect that they are less likely to pick it up). To my knowledge, economists do not generally go around professing to be experts on literature. But it is the scandal of my profession that literary critics today have no qualms about pontificating about economic issues, even though they usually are completely ignorant of economics. Contemporary literary criticism is dominated by various forms of Marxism and quasi-Marxism, from Cultural Materialism to New Historicism. Literature professors are thus constantly passing negative judgments on capitalism and the operations of the market economy, presuming to analyze such complicated economic issues as free trade and globalization. And yet they seem unconcerned that the Marxist economics they trot out is a relic of the 19th century, predating the marginalist revolution that is the basis of all modern economics and, moreover, that Marxism has been decisively refuted by the course of economic history in the 20th century.

I have seen my colleagues become nervous about their ignorance of economics only when the matter of their personal finances has come up (Marxists are very well-paid in literature departments and, after all, they have to invest their surplus value somewhere). I once had the honor of explaining the difference between a stock and a bond to one of the most distinguished New Historicists of our day (it took awhile). I wish the students who have complete faith in this critic's ability to analyze a capitalist economy could have seen the look on his face when I pointed out to him that the price of a bond goes down when interest rates go up. He stared at me as if I had just told him that the sun revolves around the earth. I believe I finally got through to him on this point, but decided to skip the difference between a "put" and a "call" for that day. And yet, as a literary critic, this man thinks he knows enough about economics to be certain that socialism is superior to capitalism.

Literary critics write for an influential but much narrower audience than most authors of great, near-great, and even not-so-great works of literature and drama are trying to reach. To a large extent the critics write for other literary critics in peer-reviewed outlets—just like academic economists, though economists are drawn from a different distribution on many innate and acquired traits. The result, as Adam Smith predicted, and Alexander Pope half a century earlier, is that while this academic specialization increases productivity it also makes it harder for specialists from the two fields to talk with each other. And at least in some cases, as Cantor notes, it can also make it harder for the specialists to see eye-to-eye even when their work deals with similar topics.

Returning to writings in literature and drama, as distinct from writings in literary criticism, there are several important differences in how literature and drama are written and read, compared to academic economics, that also help to explain some of the tensions that seem to have developed between the fields. One point, noted by McKendrick (1986), is the attitude that literature (and presumably, though by extension, literary criticism) represents a higher calling than economics because it deals with a wider range of topics, including some that are in some sense more fundamental to the human condition. While it is not clear that all or even most modern economists would accept that claim, as late as a century ago it generally was, for example by Philip Wicksteed in his *The Commonsense of Political Economy* (1910, 123-24): “The prophet and the poet may regenerate the world without the economist, but the economist cannot regenerate it without them. . . . The man who can make his fellows desire more worthily and wisely is doubtless performing a higher task than the one who enables them more amply to satisfy whatever desires they have.” Of course Wicksteed believed the economist, too, has an important role to play:

He may help to guide if he cannot inspire. If he can give no strength, he may save strength from being wasted. It is his misery that he cannot glorify the purposes to which he ministers, but it is his triumph that he can be glorified by them. He works in faith, for he knows that his work is barren unless others greater than he are working too, but he believes that wherever they are he can serve them. If he can give sight to some blind reforming Samson he too has served.

This discussion suggests another difference between economics and literature and drama, concerning the positive-normative distinction. Literary authors are, naturally enough, far more likely to include and even base their works on normative ideas and ideals than economists. While some economists explore these issues and see them as an integral part of discussions on economic issues and policies (for example, Jonathan Wight's 2002 novel, *Saving Adam Smith: A Tale of Wealth, Transformation, and Virtue*), over the past century economics is certainly known primarily, and perhaps almost exclusively, for the positive analysis (and in some highly publicized areas, the competing and contradictory analyses) that it has brought to these forums.

The final methodological difference between economics and literature and drama that I want to mention here is this: Economists have a comparative advantage in, and therefore a predilection to, marginal analysis. Literary authors, while they must also capture the ordinary business of life in many of their works, are frequently drawn to epic, life-altering events and "moments." As noted above, the decisions faced in these moments often concern fundamental normative and ethical questions, faced in situations that lie outside the "ordinary business of life," but which nevertheless help to establish and explore the individual and social frameworks for economic decisions and activity.

Despite the widespread interest and importance of the questions they raise, literary authors are most likely to develop and present these ideas in the form of individual characterizations. While journalists are known for their use of human interest stories dealing with current issues and policies, and frequently develop stories about business and economic issues from that approach, literary authors – and especially the great literary authors – have an even stronger claim to developing and portraying human interests and insights from the perspective of individual. Sometimes those characters are representative individuals, in essentially the same sense that economists mean by that phrase; but in other cases a contrast is developed by using exceptional and intentionally unrepresentative people – for example, Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*.

Literary authors have the potential advantage, and risk, of being able to create their own characters and situations, and then to mine their own data. But once they have developed a situation and characters facing it they are constrained to write something that is "true" and believable to readers, and because of that they are really not so different from economic theorists trying to model the forces affecting choices faced by a consumer, producer, or voter.

The range of choices economists typically consider are admittedly narrower and less epic, but the process is similar, and the insights into human behavior that have helped both economists and literary authors over the centuries are frequently similar, or even identical. Even the problems considered and the kinds of examples used can be the same: to give just one more example, compare the discussion about building and mending walls and fences in Robert Frost's famous poem to the examples presented in Ronald Coase's most famous paper. Frost's poem considers a fence between apple trees on one side and pine trees on the other, where there is no immediate financial rationale for building or maintaining a wall to clearly define and maintain property rights. In the opening lines of

the poem, the ideas that property is a natural right, or something that all people will respect, are quickly dismissed: “Something there is in nature that doesn’t love a wall,” and hunters and dogs are described tearing down walls to find rabbits or other game. The neighbor in the poem, who offers a rote, uncritical defense of property by mindlessly repeating his father’s saying, “Good fences make good neighbors,” is described as moving in “darkness” like an “old stone savage.” The narrator, in sharp contrast, says that before he built a wall he’d want to know what he was walling in or out, and notes that there is clearly no direct financial justification for a wall between these two stands of trees. From this, some critics have declared the poem to be Frost’s rejection of property rights. But that ignores the fact that it is the narrator, not the unthinking neighbor, who calls each year to set the date to mend the wall. And that the narrator says he only keeps asking his neighbor why they work so hard to repair this “unneeded” wall each year in a spirit of Spring-induced “mischief”—hardly the spirit or tone of Proudhon or a devout Marxist. Thus the overall picture we see in the poem is that, even for these two neighbors who are so different in temperament and intellect, mending this “unneeded” fence every year does make good neighbors, and comes to represent an important form of social capital between the two of them, and by extension for society as a whole. In short, we have a prudential – rather than a natural rights – defense of private property. It also bears noting that, once again, and as with such topics as Gresham’s law, specialization and division of labor, the demand for safety increasing with income levels, and uncountable examples of supply and demand forces affecting prices, Frost’s poem on property was published years before the first seminal article on the topic in economics—in this case by Coase, who considered similar kinds of examples and issues.

Having heard me present these and other examples for a number of years, my good friend and frequent co-author, Bill Becker at Indiana University, once asked an audience of economists: “If these literary geniuses can figure this stuff out without us, what’s so special about economics?” That’s a very good question, easily answered in some respects, but not so easily in others. First, I should make it clear that, like Wicksteed, who “maintained from first to last that the laws of Economics are the laws of life” (vol. 2, p. 404) despite his deference to the higher calling of poetry and prophecy, I am not seeking to replace economics and economists with literary works and authors. The theoretical and empirical analysis that represents the bread and butter if not also the heart and soul of modern economics is not something that literary writers can or will provide.

On the other hand, the insights that drive economic and literary analysis can, at times, lead to similar conclusions, examples, and presentations, or at other times to similar kinds of disagreements between different writers in each of the fields. Those frequent similarities, both in areas of agreements and disagreements, do lead me to ask whether the economic way of thinking is really as unique or at least as different as most economists would like to believe. Perhaps instead what is different is first the way economists like to frame the questions they ask, and then simply the methods they use to try to develop answers to those questions. That may not lead to different decisions or behaviors than those reached and exhibited by people who have to deal with the same questions and problems using some other kind of analytical framework, even if that

means only common sense and experience.<sup>1</sup> But after all, we don't assume that market forces only work if people have taken formal coursework in economics, so perhaps we have assumed all along that the economic way of thinking isn't unique in terms of basic economic behavior and decisions, though it almost certainly is as an academic approach to investigating and explaining that behavior.

To the extent that is true – and with the caveat that there are some clear differences in how economists and literary authors are likely to approach the same issues, as discussed above – there is a stronger rationale for arguing that it is possible and frequently desirable to use literary passages in economics teaching and writing. But actually the issue isn't really whether that is possible or not, because as I have shown in earlier works (2002, for example) a fairly large number (though a decidedly small percentage) of economists have been doing that for quite some time. For those who are not yet doing so, the real question is what can they gain from it, on net. I will ignore the costs entailed, here, which are relatively obvious and straightforward – and also recently reduced by the publication of a notable anthology providing over 70 excerpts from a wide range of literature and drama.

## II. What Economists Can Gain by Using Literature and Drama

While some research in economics has used or even derived from literary works, I believe that by far the largest gains for economists in using passages from literature and drama come in the area of their teaching. It is quite possible, of course, to teach economics effectively without using passages from literature and drama. And I do not propose that we should teach most economics courses, including most classes in principles courses, using literature and drama. Instead, when I am teaching such courses I rarely devote more than 10-20 minutes in a handful of classes to passages from literature and drama, simply because there is so much basic economic content and method/technique to be covered. I have previously (1999) recommended that sort of time allocation and limitation to other economics instructors.

On rare occasions I have also taught full (elective) courses on economics in literature and drama, and one reason for putting together the anthology of passages was to make it easier for me or others to do that. But my remarks here are not based on that kind of very specialized course. Instead, the key questions discussed are: 1) What can most teachers of regular economics courses gain by using some passages from literature and drama? and 2) What can economists gain from literature and drama in their writing and speaking engagements—especially those aimed at non-economists?

I believe the first and largest benefit is simply that many of the literary passages are far more memorable and engaging for most students and audiences than most writing by economists, including especially economics textbooks and journal articles. In partial defense of authors of economics textbooks and journal articles, including myself, it must be admitted that the goals of those kinds of writing are different in some key respects. But precisely because the goals and writing are so different, there are opportunities for complementarities and reinforcement.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent research on the long-term effects of studying economics (see Allgood, Bosshardt, van der Klaauw, and Watts, 2004), including decisions made by economics, business, and other majors as consumers, savers, investors, workers, and voters, has been leading me toward this same conclusion.

A second benefit for economics teachers is that many literary passages dealing with economic concepts and themes, including basically all such passages from drama but also many poems and prose passages, lend themselves to “reader’s theatre,” role playing, or improvisational skits that represent a form of active learning. Other passages are shown in movies or plays based on literary works, so you can let James Dean explain how futures markets work in a scene from John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*.<sup>2</sup> Those formats bring variety in teaching styles to a class, thereby appealing to a wider range of student learning styles. They also help to break up long lectures (especially in 90-minute or longer classes that many professors prefer) into more palatable and memorable segments. Learning theory offers no panaceas or easy fixes for economics (or other) teachers, and for that matter not a particularly long list of hard and fast rules or guidelines. But it is clear that student memory spans are short rather than long, capable of processing only a handful (or fewer) “bits” or “chunks” of information at a time, and that students (instructors) have different preferred learning (teaching) styles, with some styles more prevalent among certain majors than others.

Despite that, it is now well established that economists are notably reluctant to use any teaching methods beyond lectures and graphs, including literary works and other kinds and instructional materials and formats. Instead, textbooks are the only widely assigned resource in all kinds of undergraduate economics courses (including upper-level field courses), at all five Carnegie classifications of colleges and universities (Becker and Watts, 1996 and 2001). Workbooks run a distant second in terms of other written materials provided to or required of students.

Given the long-term average of only about two percent of all U.S. undergraduates majoring in economics (Siegfried, 2004), and that the vast majority of students taking undergraduate economics courses are *not* majoring in economics, assuming that our students (especially non-majors) prefer the chalk, talk, and graphical teaching methods that are so dominant in economics courses takes a heroic assumption on the one hand, and a high degree of insensitivity to comments and complaints from current and past students (see Allgood, Bosshardt, van der Klaauw, and Watts, 2004) on the other. Using passages from literature and drama is one step toward meeting these objections, but certainly other steps and methods can and should be used as well, for example a judicious use of classroom simulations and experiments.

It isn’t yet practical to match individual students’ preferred learning styles to instructors who teach most of their classes using those methods; but given a random assignment of students with different interests and learning styles – at least in courses that include a large percentage of non-majors – using a variety of different teaching methods seems only prudent for the vast majority of economics instructors. Admittedly, a few exceptional lecturers could and probably should only lecture. If you have to ask yourself if you are one of them, however, you almost certainly are not. And if you don’t ask yourself the question, there is a good chance you should.

The third benefit I find in using passages from literature and drama to teach economics is that there are some topics in undergraduate economics courses, and especially principles courses, for which most textbooks provide too little coverage, with what coverage there is too sketchy and simplistic. Therefore, when I want to teach property rights I use Frost’s “Mending Wall,” as noted above, in part to fill in a content gap. To

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<sup>2</sup> Or, if you prefer, Eddie Murphy, Dan Aykroyd, Ralph Bellamy, and Don Ameche in *Trading Places*.

teach opportunity cost I use Frost's famous poem about the traveler who comes to a fork in the road and, with a sigh that comes from knowing he cannot travel down both roads even though they are both appealing, chooses "the road less traveled by." Actually, however, earlier in the same poem, in a line that isn't so famous or well remembered, Frost notes that the roads were actually worn "about the same." That line lets me introduce (or at least foreshadow) the idea of equalized (risk-adjusted) returns in competitive markets. In principles classes, that happens in the first or second class, thereby providing a "hook" or "teachable moment" that I refer back to in several later classes, on the topics of market equilibria, normal profits, etc.

In his essay on Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnston wrote that what good poetry tries to do is make old ideas seem fresh and new, and new ideas understandable by relating them to things that are familiar. Good teaching is much the same, and so when you find good poetry, drama, and other literary writings dealing with the topics you want to teach anyway, the literature can help you teach more effectively, if only because the literary writing is more memorable and eloquent.

Using literary passages can also signal students the importance of knowing how to communicate economic ideas verbally, and demonstrate how to do that effectively using non-technical language. Good verbal communication of economic ideas is important for several reasons—perhaps most important because it emphasizes the intuition that underlies economic concepts, models, and findings, and in that way helps to teach content more effectively. On pragmatic and administrative grounds, many universities have called for developing spoken and written communications skills in all subject areas, as with "Writing Across the Curriculum" initiatives (e.g., see Hansen, 1993). And over the past decade the move to team and flexible scheduling and production methods in many businesses has increased the demand for stronger communications skills, written and spoken. Using a handful of literary passages in a course certainly is not sufficient to develop those skills; but it helps in those efforts because reading good literature often plays a key role in helping people learn how and why to speak and write more effectively. Just seeing the importance of those skills acknowledged in courses on business and economics is itself a meaningful signal to students, and to our sometimes distant colleagues in English, speech, and other language departments.

Finally, as Cantor noted, I find that using some literary passages in economics courses helps to broaden and humanize the subject for many students. Put differently, it helps to avoid, or at least minimize, complaints to the effect that economists are automatons teaching others to make lightning-like calculations of pleasure and pain, and that the modern world is the age of economists, sophisters, and calculators, with the age of chivalry – and its attendant court of philosophers and poets – irrevocably past.

There are, of course, a lot of calculations and analytical methods in modern economics, which students have to see, learn, or at least learn about in economics courses. There is no reason to apologize for that, and I don't. (I sympathize on occasion, but never apologize.) But neither, I believe, is there any reason to suggest that economic calculations and analytical methods will or should always be accepted as the most important part of either individual and public policy decisions, even if it is economists' designated and chosen role to provide that analysis as part of the social debate or decision-making process. Sometimes other kinds of issues are just more fundamental. For example, while we might well design and operate effective market structures for

buying and selling people as slaves, or buying and selling legal proxies for casting votes on election days, with the sum of buyers and sellers' consumer surpluses in those markets maximized to achieve the highest possible level of economic efficiency, we don't do that.<sup>3</sup> As a teacher *and* economist, I find that acknowledging we don't do it because that would violate what are today accepted – on normative grounds – as basic human and political rights is not only received by students as a sensible and highly appropriate form of disciplinary modesty, but also seen as a way to fit economics into a larger, more complete, and more humane framework that encompasses all academic fields of study, and for that matter all dimensions of life.

Because many literary passages on economic concepts and issues raise these normative issues explicitly, and depict characters explicitly considering normative questions as well as narrower financial and economic concerns, they help show the more complete and more humane picture of the world, and set economic discussions in that broader framework. I don't suggest to students that economics offers any special insights to help develop normative answers or conclusions to these questions and problems. Nor do I let students get away with thinking that normative concerns always take precedence over economic considerations, or can be met without incurring financial costs. One way I do that is to have them first consider Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal . . .," a satire of cost-benefit analysis, and then present the following question: "Why don't we avoid the infrequent but all too regular cases in which a speeding train crashes into a school bus, killing and injuring young children, by building overpasses or underpasses at every railroad crossing in the country?" After all, we have the technology and at least in wealthy nations such as the United States probably even the resources to build the overpasses, and then it would be impossible for bus crashes to be caused by impatient, inept, or drug-impaired bus drivers, or by mechanical breakdowns of busses or crossing signals and gates. (Most years I can find a current newspaper article documenting just that kind of crash someplace in the United States.)

So what makes the answer to Swift's "Modest Proposal," from which we quickly agree that it is only reasonable to prohibit the breeding and sale of infants as food, different from the answer to the overpass and school bus problem, in which we can be statistically certain that if we don't build the overpasses somewhere, someplace, a train is going to hit a bus, and children will be killed and injured? Is it the normative issue about human rights to life, liberty, and property or the pursuit of happiness, or is it the difference in the costs of saving lives in the two situations? And if it is the latter, then aren't we putting an economic value on life and limb? That leads to a discussion of how, inevitably, many different workplace, transportation, energy, and health policies, and laws passed by federal, state, and local legislative bodies, must assign an economic value to life and limb if they are to make sensible and efficient decisions about what kinds of programs, regulations, and laws to offer and enforce. Self-evident human rights have to exist side by side with the economic value of life and limb, which is not always easy to do, in practice. How it will be done is often decided through political means (or even military means, as with the U.S. Civil War), not by economic estimations of costs and benefits (though those are tried, too, as with Lincoln's repeated calls for federal

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<sup>3</sup> Most economists agree, of course, that we should not. These examples, for example, are taken from Arthur Okun's (1975) *Equality vs. Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff*.

compensation to Southern slaveholders, which he suggested before and during the Civil War, and even after signing and releasing the Emancipation Proclamation).

Students still find parts of this discussion unsettling, morbid, and distasteful, even after bringing in the literature and drama—or in the case of Swift’s “Modest Proposal” *because* of using the literature and drama. Well, after all, it is the dismal science, thanks again to some prominent literary critics,<sup>4</sup> and you can’t have everything you want even if you believe that life, liberty, and “one person, one vote” are basic human and political rights, because those rights don’t come free. Nor does the idea of a natural right to life and liberty become a personal entitlement to protection or compensation in all of the situations we may face in daily life, and in many cases choose to put ourselves into for reasons that run the full gamut from sane, sober, and routine to foolish, thrill seeking, short-sighted, and dangerous. As depressing as that kind of discussion can be to some students, I find that most of them feel better about the scope and role of economics, as a field of study and in public policy debates in particular, because they have considered situations in which the human rights can be and are elevated above direct economic considerations, and other cases where the economic constraints make it impractical and imprudent to suggest that all individuals have a inviolable right to life at any cost.

This can be done without using the passages from literature and drama, of course, and sometimes is. I simply find that using the literary passages makes it easier and more certain that these issues will be considered, and that the discussion is set in the broader, normative, and humane context. The conclusion of those class discussions usually run something like this: There’s an important place for the market in our society, but it is also important to keep the market in its place, which is not always first. The same general summary works pretty well, I believe, for Lionel Robbin’s book, *The Theory of Economic Policy in English Classical Political Economy*, and was suggested in Okun’s *Equality vs. Efficiency*, Blinder’s *Hard Head vs. Soft Hearts*, and many other works by prominent economists.

### III. What Teachers of Literature and Drama Can Gain Using Readings on Economic Concepts and Issues

So what can we do for the literature professors in return? One thing is to point out the passages in literature and drama that deal with basic economic concepts and ideas, and provide the names and brief explanations of those concepts for them to use in teaching the passages. Otherwise, my typical, and frequently repeated experience in asking English and other literature professors to suggest passages dealing with economic concepts is silence or mumbling, perhaps after mentioning Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (if they are from the United States). More responses come if you can describe several examples, which means of course that the problem they have is not related to what literature and drama they have or haven’t read, but rather goes back to the rigid specialization and division of academic labor. Literature professors have little or no formal training in economics, and given the dry graphical format of most introductory textbooks on economics they aren’t likely to get very far if they should try to pick up some information on the subject on their own.

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<sup>4</sup> Levy (2001) shows that the history of this phrase is not what most people, including most economists, came to think that it was.

It turns out that many literature teachers and their students are very interested in these passages and the economic ideas presented there, with some students (especially those in required rather than elective courses) perhaps more interested than they are in passages on romantic love, the duty of princes, or other commonly studied themes in literature and drama. That means the passages on economics can add depth, breadth, and especially relevance to an English or other literature course, with little or no cost in terms of crowding out any of the discussion on literary techniques an instructor may want to cover – such as imagery, characterization, symbolism, etc. – because those techniques are used in these passages, too.

Finally, just as economists who use these passages are sending an important signal about the importance of good written and verbal communication in the areas of business and economics, English and other literature professors can use these passages to send the same signal, and may have even more reason than economics professors to do so.

#### IV. Conclusions

There are mutual benefits from trade, not autarky. Presumably that holds across academic disciplines and markets for ideas as well as in other kinds of industries and markets. The status quo between economics and literature and drama has often approached autarky, punctuated at times by periods of open hostility—though that mainly between literary critics and economists or businesspeople, rather than between economists and leading poets or novelists.

There are some risks and, as always, costs associated with more exchange of ideas and material from these fields; but I believe there are important benefits to be reaped, too. There are risks in failing to open a wider exchange of ideas. As Cantor notes, over the past two decades the rise in prominence of new types and generations of literary critics who are still frequently hostile to the market system, business, and perhaps even economics suggests that a unilateral incursion may not be ideal, either. One edited volume on this “new economic criticism” recently appeared (Woodmansee and Osteen, 1999) featuring 20 articles by literary critics and philosophers, and four authors written or coauthored by economists, though mostly “heterodox” economists. It would be wise for more mainstream economists to claim (or reclaim) some of this material and academic territory, both as scholars and teachers.

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