

# LEADERSHIP: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE

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*The concept of leadership is versatile, and its interpretation varies in every field. For some, an example of a leader is a student who chooses to spend his or her time researching and addressing certain larger issues, such as the college mental health problem (Aller, 2017). For others, an individual might stand as a representation of the essence of leadership as Arthur Henry King does for Gardner and Christian(2017). Some aspects of these interpretations are consistent no matter the context, including the idea that a leader is inspirational. That being said, a few interpretations of the word "leadership" are accepted across the board. In this essay, I will discuss some people who possessed exemplary leadership qualities and how they changed history through their writing. It is my belief that the most influential leaders do not seek to attain followers, but to inspire conversation for change.*

**L**eaders come in all shapes and sizes, and someone who is considered a leader in one field may not be in another. Through their actions and writing, leaders build on those who went before them as they encourage conversation and ultimately change. This essay will explore various examples of authors in different time periods and with different goals who were able to build the meaning of leadership.

There are certain individuals who are more universally accepted as leaders. One of these is Martin Luther (1483-1546), a central figure in the history of religion. His writings and actions ultimately inspired the Protestant and Catholic Reformation. The great influence of this man's ideas is observable in the conversation that followed and the way common people interpret the scriptures and express their spirituality no matter their religion (or lack of) today. The question is, how did one man's concerns become the basis for an entire reformation and the inspiration for hundreds of new ideas previously unheard of, for centuries after?

We can attribute a large part of Luther's success to Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1400-1468), with his invention of the printing press in 1440 (*Treasures*, n.d.). By 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses to the door of Castle Church, the printing press was close to a century old and more developed and accessible. Luther was certainly not the first man to share ideas that could change the course of history, especially concerning matters of religion, but he was among the first with the available means to write and widely-distribute his ideas for people to read and discuss.

It was not solely Martin Luther's *ideas* that changed history, but how he made his concerns known. His success is a perfect demonstration of the power of written language. The written word contains the capacity to travel in a more unified way, and grants the reader and direct listener the freedom to interpret in a way that as an individual, he or she can relate to, therefore creating a more easily accepted and consistent message.

Literature written in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries introduced new ways of thinking and inspiring conversation through various forms and using different tactics. In her poem, *The Prologue*, Anne Bradstreet writes:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue  
 Who says my best hand a needle better fits  
 (...)  
 Let Greeks be Greeks, and Women what they are.  
 Men have precedency and still excel;  
 It is but vain unjustly to wage war.  
 Men can do best, and women know it well. (1650)

Bradstreet was among the first women in American history to write under her own name. In her time, women were generally considered incapable and irrational beings, and Bradstreet, through her poetry, raised what was a bold question for the time: Was it harmful to a man's dominance if he allowed a woman to write in her spare time? Bradstreet admits it is more her place to sew rather than to write, but in doing so points out the innocence in letting a woman write if she still knows her place and is aware of her inferiority to man. This is quite a clever tactic, especially considering that Bradstreet herself was female. The collective efforts of Bradstreet and women like her inspired conversation about female productivity, which in turn inspired change in the mentality surrounding the topic.

Modern day literature, no matter the genre, functions similarly in that it allows for conversation. Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel 1904-1991) is a name we all know well, and generally is not one that first comes to mind when we think of literature. However, Seuss calls to question the definition of literature through his own writing, and few of us (in the United States, at least) can say we were not influenced by his books. He introduced a new, playful kind of expression through words, by creating them when he could not find ones he liked. The word *silly* is commonly used to describe his style, and yet in almost all his books, no matter the absurdity, we can usually find some deeper meaning or moral. In his popular book *The Lorax*, Seuss writes "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." (Geisel, 1999, p. 57) In this instance Seuss is inspiring people to care about things and take responsibility because that is when an individual can make a real difference. Seuss's style of writing combined with these lessons is enough to even inspire conversation about the definition of literature itself. Whether it is the moral, style, or the question of literature, Seuss has inspired children, professionals, and authors alike, and continues to provoke conversation today.

It is not only the writers of the past who initiate and shape today's conversations. In the first edition of *The Journal of Student Leadership*, published in 2017, Aller, a scholar from Utah State University, identifies researchers as leaders. Gardner and Christian, authors of "The Influence

of an Authentic Individual: Arthur Henry King” (2017), describe an individual whose life helped expand the canon of leadership to include authenticity. For readers who were not previously familiar with Arthur Henry King, or had not considered him in this context, Gardner and Christian, through their writing, contribute a unique perspective to the ongoing conversation about what makes a leader and, along with Aller, follow in the footsteps of authors before them as they inspire change of perception and conversation through their literature.

All the authors previously discussed come from different times and with different causes. Despite this, all of them managed to alter or expand upon the definition of literature and leadership. We continue to do so today as we write and voice our ideas. It does not matter how much potential an idea has to change history if that idea is never shared. The written language provides a means to distribute ideas that inspire conversation and change, and those who take advantage of the power of writing represent the greatest examples of leadership.

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