

The Green Light Symbolizes Hope

Fixing High School English

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The curriculum of high school English is in desperate need of a makeover, namely in terms of the way literature is taught. School boards and educators have a responsibility to keep the curriculum evolving and changing with the times even when it seems like classic literature doesn't call for it. For at least fifty years, the teaching of classic literature has been stuck in the mud with an endless feedback loop of the same authors and books over and over. So many great novels never even get mentioned. So many have the potential to be suitable for classroom use, but are glossed over in order to stay faithful to the same laundry list of novels that have been in use for half a century.

Instead of this mindless fidelity, the teaching of literature requires the same evolution and upkeep that other subjects do. There needs to be the

integration of diverse literature, more difficult texts, the use of poetry and short stories that are seldom acknowledged, and a lesser emphasis on analysis and literary devices. The curriculum should promote the enjoyment of these works, not hinder it.

An important aspect of teaching literature is teaching a diverse array of literature, allowing many options for students to identify with and see themselves in. There are so many options for literature of every demographic in the classroom. One cannot rely on only white American classic literature with a sparse inclusion of African American authors. Students deserve the option of Asian authors, Middle Eastern authors, Latin American authors, any demographic that is underrepresented by the current curriculum.

Of course, when implementing diverse pieces of literature in the classroom, students must also have choices in what they read. Forcing every student in a class to read the same book when not all of them identify with it or enjoy it is hard. The goal of an English teacher should be to encourage students to enjoy reading books. Not every student wants to read *The Scarlet Letter*. Not every student wants to read *The Catcher In The Rye*.

Offer books by people of color. Offer books by women. Offer books by queer authors. The English curriculum is stuck as a broken record of the same books by the same white male authors, with a small selection of authors who *don't* fit that demographic. Even refreshing the choice of books by certain authors could have an impact. Instead of *The Grapes of Wrath*, teach *East Of Eden*. Instead of *The Great Gatsby*, teach *This Side Of Paradise*.

Why can't Asian students read books by greats such as Osamu Dazai or Jun'ichirou Tanizaki? Why can't Latin American students read books from those like Gabriel García Márquez or Isabel Allende? Why should queer students always be forced to read books about straight people? Why can't they read classic novels like *Maurice* by E.M. Forster instead? Or even stories simply *by* queer authors, like Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, or James Baldwin?

Even the list of female authors whose books are used in curriculum is tragically small. Harper Lee, Zora Neal Hurston, Maya Angelou, S.E. Hinton, and if there's luck, maybe Mary Shelley or the Brontë sisters. It's a loop of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, and maybe, just maybe, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or *The Outsiders*.

Where is the representation for other female greats? Where is Louisa May Alcott? Toni Morrison? Margaret Mitchell? L.M. Montgomery? Of course, *Gone With The Wind* may be too much to ask of a high school English class schedule, but this still goes to show that there are so many options for female authors who simply don't get taught as much as they should.

Allowing students choices in what they read is just as important as making sure they read. Allowing choices makes it more likely that students will actually read the books they choose. Many schools implement reading groups and the like, so it is entirely possible to create assignments that tie in with several books, especially if the choice list is predetermined but still diverse.

However, even with this, students should also be encouraged to read novels by and about people unlike themselves. It's good for them to read stories from other perspectives and not be caught in a literary echo chamber. High-income students should read novels by and about low-income or impoverished people, like *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner or anything by John Steinbeck. White students should be reading novels by people of color, like *Go Tell It On The Mountain* by James Baldwin or *The Makioka Sisters* by Jun'ichirou Tanizaki. Straight, cisgender students

should be reading novels by queer authors and about queer people, like *Maurice* by E.M. Forster or even *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* by Tennessee Williams.

Even with this, and as always when discussing international literature, some people argue against teaching works that weren't originally written in English because they always say *the translation is not the same as the original*. As André Lefevere wrote for the journal *Comparative Literature*, "Conservatives, it would seem, do not like translation, precisely because they see translation as a potential threat to what they are trying to conserve, rather than as a potential enrichment of it" (3). Lefevere argues that translations support the original texts in their original languages rather than overshadow them. As he states later in the same article, "Even if produced by the most skillful translator, word for word translations will, by their very nature, retain a certain measure of agrammaticality, which is exactly what is needed if one wants to prevent the translation from actually replacing the text, and point to the fact that the translation should be read next to, not instead of, the original" (3-4). *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, for example, has been translated and taught and translated again countless times, and although the original Russian cannot be *truly*

emulated by a translation, it still stands on its own. It is not meant to replace Dostoevsky's original. The argument also falls flat when one takes into consideration the amount of ancient classics that are taught, like *The Iliad* or even *Beowulf*, none of which were written in modern English. So many iconic texts would be unknown or inaccessible if not for the work of translators.

Attempts at diversity in English curriculum have been made in the past, but sometimes they're odd, or just plain unsuccessful. In an article for the *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, Robert Burroughs of the University of Cincinnati chronicled the attempts of a high school teacher named Tony Harrison to diversify lessons by putting emphasis on Native American, African American, and European American literature all at once, but the execution of this was strange to say the least. The lesson plan was based on historical eras, going from the precolonial era to the Harlem Renaissance, but the books chosen were an odd bunch. For European American literature (which they continuously referred to as only "European," even though that is objectively not correct) the only real books they chose were *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The only real analysis mentioned of *The*

Great Gatsby, which was used for the Harlem Renaissance era, was about how Tom Buchanan's character was simply an emblem of racist attitudes in the 1920s (Burroughs 146-149). Using that angle for *The Great Gatsby* is strange, considering that while, yes, Tom Buchanan is portrayed as fairly racist, that is not the point of his character. At one point, Burroughs includes the feedback of students from the class, where he notes, "Other students echoed these sentiments: 'I have learned more about various cultures and the ways in which they have interacted in the past than ever before. It is very riveting to see how literature changes with society ... in this half year we have gotten a taste of literature from all cultures'" (148). This feedback from students is curious, as the statement "we have gotten a taste of literature from all cultures" makes it seem as if this attempt at multiculturalism narrowed students' view of literature rather than expanded it. While it could just be poor wording from the student, it could also indicate that only using three general cultures while teaching that class had the opposite effect than what was intended. There were not only European Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans in the United States during the span of the precolonial era to the Harlem Renaissance, and it seems like a disservice to almost portray the opposite in the curriculum.

Tony Harrison's curriculum was certainly an attempt at broadening the curriculum, and it's clear to see what he was trying to accomplish, but it is just as easy to poke holes into it and see that it does not hold up.

Perhaps the most glaring issue with the way everything is taught is the complete overemphasis on literary devices and analysis. No one wants to read something for the sole purpose of analyzing its themes and motifs. Instructors can teach literary devices and acknowledge their existence and meaning without driving the text into the ground; it's a rather fine line, but it is possible. The theme of the hollowness and hopelessness of the American Dream is so important to the understanding of *The Great Gatsby*, but it doesn't help anyone to hound the green light or T.J. Eckleburg's eyes for class upon class. It is exhausting at best and downright dreadful at worst. Not many want to write a full analysis of motifs in *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury for a high school English class. It cannot be overstated how much enjoyment gets overshadowed by analysis and giving the right answer on assignments. Analysis is fine, and it's vital in understanding most literary works, but the way most schools push it changes it from analysis for the sake of understanding to analysis for the sake of analysis. There is a difference between analyzing a work like *East Of Eden* in order

to map out all of the religious allusions and truly understand it as a partial retelling of the Book of Genesis and analyzing something like *1984* in order to answer test questions about the themes of totalitarianism and the meaning behind Big Brother as a concept. All of this overemphasis breeds a resentment towards classic literature that cannot be allowed to fester if we want great literature to be respected and enjoyed in the future by younger generations. It's a lot harder to let go of resentment than it is to never have it in the first place.

Another issue is that sometimes schools deem books too advanced for students to comprehend, so they offer simpler adaptations with modern language. As Michael LoMonico wrote in *The English Journal*, "If we want students to actually read assigned books, we have to go beyond that and have students look closely at the author's actual words. We have to allow students to discover the idiosyncratic way in which Melville arranges his words, the precision of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and the narrative technique of Virginia Woolf" (14). Students won't understand Shakespeare the same if they've only read his works using *No Fear Shakespeare*. With certain books, especially ones that are from the 19th century or earlier, it can be hard to decipher the language. However, that doesn't mean that

students are incapable of doing so. Providing proper help and guidance with vocabulary and syntax must be included when teaching arguably difficult texts like *The Scarlet Letter*. Letting students ask for help with reading texts fends off any sense of inferiority they may feel when they don't automatically understand what's written. Teachers have a duty to refrain from condescension, because there is nothing worse than students asking for help and being looked at as if they are stupid. This is not to say that students need their hands to be held all throughout a book, especially at a high school level, but help has to be provided if needed.

Some English classes also have a tendency only to teach excerpts from books, rather than the entire book. In my own freshman-year English class, we used only bits and pieces of *The Scarlet Letter*, rather than read the full text, which is insanely counterproductive to the purpose of using these books in class. I know people whose teachers skipped over the supposed boring parts of books, namely *Crime and Punishment*, which, depending on your opinion of Russian literature, can be considered the entire book. In *The English Journal*, Michael LoMonico addresses English teachers themselves with, "I'd venture to say that most of us fell in love with the art of literature well before we considered the themes, the characters,

or the plots. But somewhere along the line, many of us put those aesthetics on the back burner in favor of the more ‘teachable’ aspects of a literary work” (14). It is unfair to both students and the works of literature themselves to review only excerpts and bits and pieces. It simply does not do the original works justice. Choosing only to use the easy aspects of novels is both counterproductive and often comes off as if the teacher believes their students are *stupid* and cannot handle the full text. If it’s a time-management issue, why not use short stories instead? So many of these authors also penned a multitude of short stories that are never covered. Why not?

Something that is not often discussed when speaking on classic literature curriculum in school is the role of poetry and short stories. Since class schedules don’t allow for more than maybe two or three books per semester, intermingling short stories and poetry is important to both time management and a well-rounded education. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot has been talked to death, and Edgar Allan Poe is practically rolling in his grave from the overuse of both his stories and poetry. Most students, especially those with an interest in literature, have that *one* short story that has never left their memory after they read it in

class. There are many options for this one, like “Lamb To The Slaughter” by Roald Dahl or “A Rose For Emily” by William Faulkner. Short stories have such an opportunity to make an impact, and the most memorable ones are often the ones that tend to delve into the grotesque or have incredibly unsettling plot twists, like “The Box Social” by James Reaney or even “Diary of a Madman” by Nikolai Gogol. That isn’t a *rule*, per se, but it definitely helps. With poetry, it’s much harder to hold readers’ attention, as so many students perceive it as pretentious or even just uninteresting. Relying on Shakespeare’s sonnets can only go so far. There is such an untapped wealth of poetry just outside the realm of average lesson plans. Instead of relentlessly hawking Robert Frost and Walt Whitman, teachers could use Arthur Rimbaud or Chuuya Nakahara. There are so many greats in the realm of short stories and poetry that it’s a disservice never to expand the horizons of what is used in a classroom.

With novels, short stories, and poetry, teaching the history behind the writing in tandem is vital. There is no way for there to be a proper level of understanding nuance and context without teaching backstories as well.

Anything by F. Scott Fitzgerald deserves the courtesy of an explanation of the interwar era and the dazzling facade put forth by the

Roaring '20s. Discussions of both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck have to include education about the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, and the culture of Christianity and the Bible in rural areas of the United States. *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne demands knowledge of Puritanism and Hawthorne's own personal hatred towards it. Even more modern works like *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey warrant discussion about the inherent malpractice of mid-twentieth century psychiatry.

Teaching this cultural history provides context for the era in which the piece was written. The world looks a lot different today than it did a century or two ago. Students of the Twenty-First Century don't have the same understanding of social norms and societal expectations utilized in, for example, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen that someone of Regency era England would already inherently have.

Even the lives of the authors themselves are incredibly important to certain works of literature. The author's personal history provides a crucial key to understanding their writing, and this rings especially true for poetry. With works like *A Season In Hell* by Arthur Rimbaud, the author's life *is* the story. *A Season In Hell* would not exist if not for Arthur Rimbaud's toxic,

scandalous, whirlwind love affair with fellow writer Paul Verlaine in the 1870s, but a student cannot pick up that bit of context from the poems alone.

The longevity of these books is dependent on the ability to understand them. We will never truly understand these novels like the people around when they were written could, as we view everything distantly and through retrospect, but we can understand enough to make this venture worthwhile.

All in all, it would be difficult to completely overhaul the 9-12 English curriculum. It's not something that can be done quickly and efficiently; as everyone knows, Rome wasn't built in a day. The best strategy would be a paced introduction of new books, stories, and poems in lessons. Teachers should set aside units where all three are taught in tandem with a common theme, be it a nationality, culture, era, or even just a certain literary movement. They should teach the histories behind the words. Teaching classic literature requires patience and understanding with students. It's important to make sure students of all reading levels and paces are able to comprehend the books offered, something that cannot be achieved through condescension. Literature in the English curriculum needs a lot of work, but

there is room for improvement, and it is not a cause that teachers should give up on. With a little patience and planning, we can assure that younger generations respect and enjoy classic literature the way that older generations have in the past. Not every student is going to like every book, but there is almost always a book that can appeal to each student. We just have to help them find it.

Works Cited

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