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The Use and Acceptance of the English Canon in the High School Classroom

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The Use and Acceptance of the English Canon in the High School Classroom

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Abstract

The literary canon has been viewed in the high school ELA classroom for many generations. The works it contains are now somewhat dated and there are certain movements claiming it should be replaced with different types of modern literature. This paper seeks to address how the canon is viewed in the classroom, including what problems people associate with it, and what solutions to those problems are available. The literary canon is a staple in ELA education and will continue to be for some time to come.

Keywords: ELA, Canon

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Introduction

The literary canon is considered the great classics that are deemed important enough that they should be known well by everyone with a scholastic background. This literary canon is viewed as one of the main staples of English and literature classes throughout one's academic career. This literary canon is known to include many of the great classics, such as Shakespeare, Mary Shelley, and Charles Dickens. These well-known authors have been around for a very long time, and their influence is still seen in much of the current literature produced today. Their works are also still being studied and are remembered as works of art among those in the field of literature who study them (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014).

This literary canon has many impacts on the classroom and is viewed in a very different way by the students who are forced to study them and the teachers who use them in class. The general population of students have a very difficult time working with the classics for many different reasons, such as the difference in language. The English language has been very fluid over time and much of it has changed from the time these works were written. The changes in the English language vary from sentence structure to even the meaning of the individual words. The length and grammatical difficulty associated with these classic works of literature usually put them above the average high school student's area of comfort when reading (Goodwyn, 2018). These reasons cause the general student population to avoid reading the literary canon with much of the same distaste the general population is currently showing for Covid-19. While this might seem like an understatement it is a well-known fact that most current students avoid reading in general and usually cope with assignments on difficult books by using summarizing sites like sparknotes which break difficult works up into short, easy to read, easy to understand sections (Pike, 2003).

Teachers usually have a completely different view on the opposite end of the spectrum from their students. The general population of teachers see these works as the amazing works of art I mentioned earlier, and as an unquestionable building block in the foundation of a solid education (Goodwyn, 2018). These works are the type of material that teachers will spend an amazing amount of their very scarce time on due to the importance of these pieces in understanding older works and many of the references seen in a lot of more modern works.

The emphasis that teachers put on the classics of literature are usually met with a large amount of resistance from the student population. The difficulty of these works combined with a lack of understanding and a lack of time and proper technique to explain and ascertain that student completely understand this material make these works of literature very difficult units to cover in some classrooms. There are several ways teachers avoid the problems that are often associated in these lessons, although some of them can be as potentially detrimental in setting students up for bad habits as other techniques are helpful to the students.

The most important part of teaching the literary canon is the methods that teachers use to set up the classroom to learn these lessons. The initial impact is often mitigated by the associated difficulty, but teachers are able to stop this from happening by utilizing different methods to introduce these difficult works. Several different methods are used, such as beginning with scaffolding the particular language structure and vocabulary into an understandable format for the students before they actually begin working with the specific piece of literature in question is one proven method (Prinsen, 2017). The initial setup of the students to be able to completely comprehend the piece is more important than releasing them straight into the literature. Their ability to understand the difficult work makes them much more likely to process the piece correctly and take the time to study it.

There is a very strong semblance in the literary canon and the way it has been shaped in recent history. The lack of new works in this canon is a startling statement of the unchanging view of those who decide what is important enough to be taught. The entirety of the English canon faces several different problems with both the students and teachers, as well as a lack of diversity. The problems encountered by both groups can be managed and would be greatly lessened by a more inclusive canon which could be used to tie classical works into modern pieces of literature which would be more appropriate to grab the attention of younger students and could cause them to feel less anxiety when confronted with texts thought to be important.

Literature Review

The difficulties experienced by both student and teacher have led researchers to explore the pedagogy of critical literature. This has contributed to the development of different methods that can be used to teach them and the ideology associated with the canon affects student attitudes towards working with these pieces of literature. This multitude of approaches to teaching canonical literature has led to a great deal of more complicated problems and attempted solutions throughout their study.

Common Student Problems

There are many universal methods used by teachers when they begin a lesson about topics such as classical literature. A few of these methods can be harmful to the student's ability to break down and comprehend the material on their own. The methods shared by teachers vary widely, however the majority of the results are very similar when they are finished with these lessons.

Borsheim -Black et al. (2014) suggest one or several common problem in teaching critical literature. The traditional lens that canonical literature is taught through does not focus on the social issues that are paramount to our students' interests. *The Great Gatsby*, for example,

could be a powerful piece in addressing how masculinity could be toxic using Tom Buchanan. This type of tangent is frowned upon, however. Despite the possibilities for personal inflection and growth that could stem from this type of discussion, they generally will not happen because this is not an area that Common Core deems necessary or worthy of study.

Canonical works are generally studied in the same fashion that was deemed important when they were introduced into the curriculum. They all address the same fundamental questions that they were taught with, such as *Frankenstein* being used to foster the nature vs. nurture debate. This is an amazing piece to use for this debate, however it could also be spread out to address several other issues that the students would find interesting that could also enhance the nature vs nurture debate by adding in different aspects and making it a multi-faceted debate instead of a simple question with only two sides. Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 124) seek to remedy this mistake in their approach they call critical literature pedagogy which is to address all of the underlying themes in the work and the common concepts which make the work important enough to be considered canonical and taught throughout school. This approach grabs the interest of many students who could not care less about what an author who died centuries ago thought of the importance of the importance of money and materialism, such as in *The Great Gatsby*. If this work was analyzed in the way that Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) are proposing then the first several weeks of the unit would be used to analyze issues that are most important to the student body in today's society. They would study the themes of gender, underlying mental causes, and most likely discuss important problems people deal with on a day-to-day basis such as the potential P.T.S.D. Gatsby could be suffering from, caused by his participation in the war and how this could potentially change his personality to cope with any events which he deems unnecessary or unwelcome.

Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 124) states that their method of critical literature pedagogy is reading with and against a text. They continue to explain that most teachers stop with the first stance, reading with a text. As Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 124) states, “while sufficient for most traditional standards and assessments, does not call into question the ideologies of the text- those values or beliefs that help to frame and form the text and our reading and teaching of it.” This is very important because this is one of the main reasons why students show very little interest and have such tremendous difficulty with canonical works. These pieces of literature are usually very old, and their meaning is well documented, but they are never questioned. Students are always told, usually by powerpoint, that this text is important. The key points are as follows. They are not forced to think critically, which leads to absent mindedness during lectures, a loss of ability, and a lack of initiative.

The opportunity to be taught in a way to read against these concrete canonical works is an opportunity that students with any hint of an interest in literature, history, or even current social and political happenings. Borsheim-black et al. (2014) states, “reading against canonical literature means reading between the lines to expose and interrupt embedded, dominant narratives, power dynamics, and perceived normalcy espoused by and hidden in the text” (p. 125). This type of reading is exactly what the current student body needs to promote their critical thinking and increase their comprehension abilities, and the majority of them would find this genuinely interesting. In order to study canonical literature in this fashion they would have to get to know the times, the author, and what might have been acceptable then that is not today, or vice versa. This type of study is where the students see social constructs of today that were frowned upon in older times and how much differently people were treated for beliefs like homosexuality and it would also introduce them into the way that stereotypical masculinity is

introduced. *Of Mice and Men* could be an amazingly progressive piece if students were to read against this text and identify the underlying problems that people of that time were forced to endure because of their cognitive level, which is a stereotypical problem that today's progressive social agenda has made great strides towards eliminating.

Borsheim-black et al. (2014, p. 131) acknowledges one of the biggest problem's students have with any type of work, and that is a lack of understanding as to why it is important. The average student shows no interest in events like the great depression, or age-old ideas like the American dream. Teachers need a way to get students involved in conversations with these topics so that they can see how these ideologies affect the world around them. A good lesson has the potential to cause students to question everything down to their own position in life and how these ideas affect even them today. This type of question is necessary for students to become involved and to help reverse the commonly noted decay in students' reading abilities and initiative.

Hooley et al. (2013, p. 323) notes several different problems which emanate from teacher developed strategies which were developed to cope with their time problem. The first strategy noted is explaining the work of literature through lectures instead of assigning the work as reading. This decision boils down to not having sufficient class time to have students read the text. This sends the message that reading is not important if the students can retain the right information for the standardized assessments. These thought processes are commonly noted to add to students' distaste for reading assignments. From the student perspective, if a teacher can summarize one chapter and teach it through a lecture then the summaries students find on different websites should also be sufficient. Hooley et al. (2013, p. 323) also notes that this gives students very little practice in navigating difficult texts. This practice is essential to students who

are thrown into works they are not prepared for when they are finally given a reading assignment.

Canonical literature is very different from the modern literature that most high school students are familiar with today. The English language is an ever-evolving entity whose structure, phrases, and even definitions for specific words can vary greatly. There are many possible examples of words whose definitions are different depending on the person using them and where they are from. Phrases used two-hundred years ago are much different than what is used today. For example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* there is a scene where one character bites his thumb at another. This act is basically the equivalent of the modern day flipping of the bird, but many students without sufficient background knowledge would fail to understand the term.

This lack of reading practice is something to be expected of aging students for many different reasons. Several of which Hooley et al. (2013 p. 327) goes into details about. The number of students who read recreationally decreases greatly as they age and as technology develops. Reading is considered boring for most older kids in today's society. They have many different alternatives they can occupy their time with that they find more entertaining. Expansions on television and its availability are one cause. A person can now watch their television shows on just their phone thanks to all of the streaming services providing applications for them. This is much easier than carrying around a book, which could be five hundred pages and may even weigh a couple pounds. As prominent as television is, it is nowhere close to the deterrent that video games are. Video games are an interactive story where students can make their own choices and see what is going on without being forced to visualize it for themselves.

According to the survey given by Hooley et al. (2013, p. 327), two thirds of high school seniors admitted to having done no recreational reading in the last four months. This lack of recreational reading is very detrimental to one's literary growth because recreational reading is the reading that is the most engaging. When a student reads recreationally they are reading because they thoroughly enjoy the book. They spend the time they are reading, visualizing it, watching the scenes play out inside their head just like the movies most of their counterparts are probably watching at the same time. This is completely different from the analytical reading students do in class or are assigned at home. Assigned reading is usually done with a specific goal in mind. Students are expected to gain certain ideas from texts they are asked to read for class, and sometimes even have worksheets to accompany these texts.

A large portion of students do not read texts for many reasons. Hooley et al. (2013, p. 327) states that out of the students they interviewed only sixty four percent of students thought assigned reading was important, and not even that many admitted to reading any of their assignments. Only fifty four percent of students claimed to have read at least part of what they were assigned. This leads one to believe that the number of students who consider reading to actually be important could be even lower than the numbers in Hooley's survey show.

There are, however, many factors that contribute to why students do not read what they are assigned. One of these reasons is also addressed by the survey conducted by Hooley et (2013, p. 327) shows that fifty four percent of students show doubt that their teachers expect them to do the reading they assign, which would clear student ambitions of part of the blame. Human nature would lead most students to do work they do not enjoy, such as reading for class, when it is expected of them, in order to not disappoint. It is generally human nature to be agreeable or go along with most points to create a favorable atmosphere and keep everyone pleasant.

Hooley et al. (2013, p. 323) speaks about the impact teacher attitudes have on students. Students pick up on subtle messages from teachers, and these messages greatly influence how the students tend to their assignments as well as influence the students' expectations on how they can perform in the class. An excellent example of this is when *Beowulf* is being taught in the high school classroom. Very few instructors insist on trying to teach the old English version, and use an adapted version instead. This does not stop teachers from talking about the difficulty of the work in old English and how different the word meanings and sentence structure was. This type of talk sets the average student believing that they could not understand the text and it will hamper them throughout the unit as it causes them to second guess any information they infer on their own.

The next problem students face is a lack of time management skills and not having time specifically for reading. Generally, the assigned reading that does not get finished was meant to be completed as homework. This means that students are told to take home and read a text which most of them do not think they are actually expected to have read when they get back to class the next day. It seems like the simple answer would be to have students read in class, however then one runs into the lack of time to cover the curriculum that the teachers face. This is evident from the survey of Hooley et al. (2013, p. 328) when they mention that seventy four percent of the students that they surveyed stated they are not given time to do assigned reading in class.

Jogie (2014, p. 337) also notes a severe decay in reading initiative. In her work she states that it is a commonly proven fact among scholars in the area that a diverse range of texts from different types of backgrounds helps students improve reading proficiency because they do a better job of involving students of today's society in the discussion and analysis needed to help them improve. One of the main problems commonly acknowledged with the canon is that it is far

from a diverse selection. The general work from the canon comes from an upper- or middle-class white male, and this one-sided viewpoint robs students of the many different perspectives they should be given to see how the world processes. The strictness of the canon prevents most students from being introduced to contradictory viewpoints which could bring into question much of what they accept as the way of life at the time.

Jogie (2014, p. 342) notes that there is very little change in the prescribed texts available for the teachers she is studying to choose from. This specific study is centered in Australia, however the problem she identifies runs parallel to a very similar problem in the States. The texts that teachers are given to choose from have very little to no change in them. The same texts are used repeatedly throughout the years even when the concept they are supposed to be teaching changes. This applies to the different grade levels in the states as well. For example, *Romeo and Juliet* is commonly taught repeatedly throughout different grades. Several classes of students have already been forced to study these works before they ever see them in high school, which means they usually do not feel the need to interact with the text because they have already seen it before.

Pike (2002, p. 357) notes that there has been a slight change in direction in the types of literature taught in school today. According to Pike (2002, p. 357) the amount of pedagogical information known by most post-secondary graduates vary greatly depending on which university they have attended. This does not explicitly mention current high school students, but since the group that he is referring to is the incoming literature teachers, it does stand to have a very large impact on the student population. Pike (2002, p.357) also notes that the graduates with a less versatile knowledge of canonical texts are usually more well versed culturally.

The main problem which stems from this is that the choices the university decide to teach have no impact on the high school curriculum. English teachers should be well versed in many different types of literature, but the consensus among scholars is that the repeated canon will still make up the majority of what these teachers are given to teach, regardless of how varied their background. This means that the amount of knowledge they are taught about cultural literature can only have a small effect in their high school classroom, simply because they do not have the option to teach cultural literature in most situations.

Pike (2002, p.357) goes into the argument about the lack of diversity as well here. Like all of the other authors before him, he states that the only real way to decide how these pieces impact the students is through study of the students themselves. Pike (2002, p.358) states that the fact most students have not faced the same problems as the authors they are reading is irrelevant to their ability to understand and interpret the work, and states that “ I maintain that it is not only unnecessary but even harmful (to their reading as well as their health) for today’s readers to have had the same experiences as the writers they study.” This is a very astute point as any one well versed in the biographical history of most canonical authors can agree. It is surmised that many of the so-called “great” authors draw directly from their past experiences and viewpoints when they write these works. Edger Allen Poe, who was an alcoholic and was found dead in a ditch to end his life is a prime example of why students do not need to have faced the same troubles as authors for their works to be interpreted by them.

Pike (2002, p.358) expounds that, “My position is that, paradoxically, even the very difference (be it social, cultural, ethnic, religious, moral, or linguistic) between the world of the canonical texts and that of the reader can justify providing a canon of pre-20th-century works in the curriculum for ethnically and socially heterogeneous schools in the 21st century.” By this he

means that the canon of pre-20th-century works apply to the average student body because it introduces different perspectives and views of events that students have never faced. This allows students to evaluate how these different aspects of life could affect a person and their writing.

This leads Pike to the direct contention of one of the main student problems that many of the other authors have pointed out, that most students have never been affected by these types of events and feel that the unlikelihood they could ever possibly be put in a position to see where the authors of the canon are writing from keeps them distant from the canonical works and gives them little to no motivation to read the canonical works.

Common Teacher Problems

The average instructor of high school English faces many well noted and common problems when it comes to the works they teach and the depth of their study. One of the most commonly noted problems among this community is the lack of time they are given to teach important, lengthy works. This lack of time leads to a multitude of problems in other areas as well. The common core curriculum which teachers must abide by does not list an extremely in depth analysis of canonical works. It does specify certain works are to be taught, but common core also highlights the ideas they identify as important and what they expect students to learn from these pieces.

This leads teachers to the problem of having to summarize these lengthy texts and control the direction of the discussions while still covering the sparse information they deem necessary. This lack of time and the occurrence of the specific direction teachers are supposed to lead discussions leads to many methods that can be detrimental to student participation and future studying habits. Teachers are predisposed to use powerpoints and summarize large parts of canonical works. The problems that emanate from these choices are that it leaves students

without the necessary practice to be able to decipher these works on their own later in life. These methods set up students to believe that using the various summary resources that are available is a viable alternative to reading what little literature they are actually assigned to do.

Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p.124) acknowledge one of the main problems with the way canonical literature is taught when they state that “there is a surprising lack of scholarship geared towards the application of critical literacy to the teaching of *canonical* literacy specifically.” This is mainly due to the time crunch and the lack of its necessity in secondary education. This lack of critical application also contributes to the other problems which teachers are faced with, such as the lack of student involvement. This lack of involvement can be at least partially blamed on the lack of critical application. Students are not asked to do anything that requires thinking. They are simply asked to memorize and regurgitate the information that common core has deemed important enough to know. Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p.124) even acknowledges this fact as they state “Typically, however, literature instruction stops at this stance, which, while sufficient for most traditional standards and assessments, does not call into question ideologies of the text.” This highlights the lack of critical thinking involved in teaching most secondary classes simply for the fact that it is not relevant to the standards and assessments that are given to teachers.

Gardner (2020, p. 48) introduces another problem teachers face when trying to expand the types of literature they teach, and that is a lack of funds. It would certainly be a viable reason for some teachers to be teaching canonical works. The works they teach have been taught for quite sometime, and this means that teachers already have the resources necessary to teach them without needing additional budget approval for different classroom sets of books.

Gardner (2020, p. 49) also remarks that “teachers often have to spend a lot of time teaching test prep or reviewing for a test so that the time they could use teaching another text was

spent otherwise.” This follows closely with the remarks by several of the other authors on the lack of time teachers have to do everything that is expected of them. Generally, the other authors have been speaking about their expected curriculum but Gardner (2020) brings up another good example of how teachers’ time is stretched by reviewing for standardized assessments. Many of the local teachers spend several weeks reviewing concepts they will be expected to know during standardized testing that is controlled by the state.

Hooley et al.(2013, p. 323) also notes that secondary teachers must deal with time restrictions and that they have come up with many different strategies to deal with these restrictions. Many of these strategies are developed to summarize text so that students do not have to read it, or to be certain that students are looking for the questions the curriculum specifies are important as they are reading. There are several problems that stem from teachers using these methods to bypass having students do any actual reading for themselves. Summarizing material, be it by ordinary lecture, prezi, or the trustworthy powerpoint presentation, all give students the impression that if they do not read the material for themselves that it does not matter because it will be explained to them regardless. This sets teachers up for reduced involvement from their student body. Most high school teachers plan their lessons to be interactive to some degree in order to maintain the focus of the students. When students do not do their assigned reading, they are not prepared to participate in classroom discussions. This lack of participation can lead to disarray in teacher’s time schedules and sew chaos in their lesson plan. One thing to remember is that teachers do not always have straight time to teach their lesson uninterrupted. The majority of lesson plans are carefully created to keep them progressing at the rate desired by the teacher who usually allows for a specific period of time to be used for student discussion.

This lack of student involvement can be attributed to many problems, some of which are out of the teacher's control. One example of this is as Hooley et al. (2013, p. 328) states, that students do not like being forced to read from one single textbook and would prefer a variety of different sources to choose from. Teachers do not usually have the ability to procure different types of literature outside what is already designated, however. It is exactly as Gardener (2020) mentions. Schools have a very limited budget and teachers usually do not have the option or the available funds to attain new reading material. This lack of new material is detrimental to student behavior and, therefore, detrimental to the ability of the teacher to convince students to do assigned reading and interact with the class or the text.

Varying levels of student comprehension are yet another hurdle that teachers are faced with. They have a very limited amount of time to cover complex materials that may be beyond some students' understanding, and yet they are expected to find a common ground where they can prepare all of the students for the summative assessments that must accompany the literature according to the common core curriculum. Vocabulary is an excellent example that highlights the difference in the ability of the students. The majority of students do not know all of the same words and due to the lack of reading and the lack of freedom in what reading is required means that very few students have been forced to learn how to use context clues to determine the meaning of words they are unfamiliar with.

Youssef (2009) strikes upon another problem faced by anyone trying to teach the classics to modern day students in his opening statement which reads:

The real challenge, however, comes from bringing a classroom full of 21st century students from diverse backgrounds face to face with texts that are removed from their present and past experiences not just by decades, but by centuries. To such a group of

students, a world literature course is just an interruption to their life of text-messaging, Blackberries, iPods, and other communication technologies that I may not be aware of.

(p. 28)

This statement may have been made right over a decade ago, but it becomes even more relevant with every day that passes. Technology is always advancing onwards and it seems like every day new devices are invented and implemented which make classical texts seem even more like ancient relics, which they are in their own sense. The majority of texts which are taught are several hundred years old, if not older. Early published copies are rare collector's items if they are not stored away in a museum and yet teachers are expected to find a way to get students not only to read these archaic texts but to interact and try to learn from them. The lack of student interest in these works is to be expected with all of the time that has passed since they were written, but these works of literature still form the backbone of English Language Arts classrooms, as well as the base for all of the different types of literature that students see as relevant today, from the newest novella to the script of the movie they just went to see in theaters.

Canonical literature is far removed from the current population. That is no stretch in reasoning and it is easy to see why students today would have trouble understanding or getting interested in these older works of literature. This does, however, lead to a conundrum for the majority of teachers. This conundrum is figuring out which texts students have the most difficulty connecting with and which ones they do not have as much difficulty becoming involved with. Youssef (2009, p. 29) remarks on this difficulty when he states, "it was easier to assume that the more the temporal, spatial, cultural, and linguistic distance between the text and its audience, the more incomprehensible and, therefore, alien it would be. Yet, this assumption

was inadequate.” This statement is followed closely by several different examples of units in which his students had an easier time connecting to and were more active in the discussion of the older texts written by people of different origins. The common assumption would be that the more recent or more culturally related work would be the most discussed but that was not the case with these classes according to Youssef (2009, p. 29).

The ability of students to understand a text has been highlighted as a problem area by many different researchers throughout the last couple decades of study. Youssef (2009, p. 29) approaches this from a different angle than the majority of these researchers. The majority of these researchers stood by as an outside entity seeking to alienate the distinguishing factor among the texts that students have the most problems with. Youssef took a different perspective on this challenge and is utilizing his position as an instructor to view it from that perspective.

Youssef (2009, p. 29) iterates that it was necessary to make his students understand “*what* the text was saying first before recognizing *how* the text was saying it.” This is a very basic concept, but it can be easy to miss as the students who do not always understand are usually the least vocal. Youssef (2009) is stating that it is important to make sure all students have a fundamental understanding of what a text is saying before trying to discuss and analyze the finer points of the text.

Youssef (2009, p. 310) explains “I have found that, for my students, there are no universal themes (that matter), only personal themes with (luckily) universal applications or interpretations.” This statement iterates how difficult it is to get students to engage with a text. The problem this exemplifies for teachers is that it shows that there is no one sure-fire way to involve any set of students with a particular text despite the cultural and chronological closeness that piece of literature may share with a specific student. This statement highlights the lack of

common themes utilized by students in order to make a work seem interesting or applicable to their life. This leaves the instructor with the problem of identifying personal themes among their students and then finding a way to unite these students' personal themes with the universal themes of literature. These universal themes are widely acknowledged among those who study advances in literature.

Youssef (2009, p. 29) believes he has found the key to maximizing student interaction with classical literature. He details a three-step plan he has begun implementing in his classroom which he claims ensures maximum engagement in the classroom activities. Youssef (2009, p. 29) states his three-step procedure, "involved approximation, thematic relevance, and application." This could objectively be an answer to the question posed by multitudes of literature teachers everywhere. The first step, approximation, utilizes several different approaches including youtube videos, paraphrasing activities, and many more to help students obtain a baseline understanding of the text which is indispensable for anyone who needs to discuss the nuances of a work in depth (Youssef, 2009, p. 29).

This model of Youssef (2009, p. 30) states that the next step is establishing thematic relevance. Youssef addresses the issue of bringing modern day students closer to the text and the problem of getting them to interact with the text in this next step of his strategy for teaching canonical literature. Youssef (2009, p. 30) states that it is "necessary to establish intra thematic relevance before inter-thematic relevance could be evaluated." This statement means that before a student can be expected to study the themes inside the work and the intricacies of their interactions the student must first be shown how the themes could be related to modern day, or their own life in order to establish a baseline of how these themes work. This is an extremely delicate subject as it addresses the most pervasive problem that teachers are faced with when

teaching canonical literature, and that is the inability to form connections between modern day students and these older texts. The formation of these connections would allow teachers to bypass common student ideas about how displaced these texts are and how they do not relate to the student or their life. These connections are what students need to be interested in works of literature and by finding the means of connecting them Youssef transcends the normal boundaries that prevent teachers from forming solid interactive lessons with students who are not usually interested in these works. The third stage of Youssef's (2009, p. 30) model is the application of this method. This step would be where the teachers begin their interactive lessons and discussions since the first two steps took students through understanding the work and making connections which would help them find the text as interesting. This third step drives home the connections that students have made, and is the part where teachers begin making progress with many of their problems, including a lack of enthusiasm and can begin teaching their students to address these works critically and with confidence.

Shelley (1998, p. 386) states, "Because of a proliferating body of young adult fiction, growing appreciation for the literature of minority voices, and an increasingly diverse population of high school students, choosing an appropriate curriculum for English classes is no simple matter." This problem of reaching high school students with classical literature is only the beginning. Inquiries by Shelley (1998, p. 386) show that there are some teachers who "advocate abandoning some or all of the classics and choosing current young adult fiction whose language, characters, and themes are particularly relevant to today's adolescent." Abandoning the classical canon for modern day literature would also face many of the same problems teachers must deal with when they attempt to change what they teach, including the universal lack of funds.

Shelley (1998, p. 386) also found most teachers she spoke to personally “contend that the themes of the classics are so universal, and the books, short stories, plays, and poetry so integral to a "good education," that keeping the canon is nonnegotiable.” This is a very common belief among seasoned teachers or veterans of the field of literature who believe the classics form a very solid basis which must be understood in order for one to progress in learning throughout the world of literature, both ancient and modern. This belief prompts teachers to deal with another problem Shelley (1998) also addresses. Like many of the other researchers who have been mentioned, Shelley (1998 p. 386) realizes that the biggest hurdle to getting students to understand and interact with canonical literature is making connections the students can follow to the canonical texts and making them seem like a work that students can learn from and be interested in.

Shelley (1998 p. 386) notes, “The language of the classics frequently intimidates today's students and generates negative attitudes and immediate resistance. The vocabulary is obscure and the syntax daunting.” These are common problems students have with canonical literature and cause the greatest amounts of dissent from students who have trouble understanding these works. It is a commonly noted problem and Shelley (1998) expounds further on it when she iterates, “Lengthy descriptive passages characteristic of Dickens as well as other authors in the traditional canon discourage many students who are accustomed to the instant visualization provided by all kinds of technology (386).” She also accompanies this with a passage from *Great Expectations* which shows exactly what she means. The vast difference in language used can be a large deterrence to the average high school student who does not usually see this type of descriptive language. These students usually do not press on to try and understand these works

but switch off to the simplified versions or one of the many available summary options available, such as SparkNotes.

A lack of understanding of the culture is also a problem that deters students from reading such works. Shelley (1998, p. 386) notes that many different types of background knowledge are missing from students that would make the classics much less threatening. This lack of background knowledge is addressed by her first strategy that she endorses to introduce canonical works. Scaffolding is the primary method Shelley (1998, p. 387) recommends for teaching the classics at the high school level. This scaffolding method she endorses begins with background knowledge, followed by vocabulary (Shelley, 1998, p. 387) before she ever recommends beginning reading the actual text and this process forms a very solid basis. This scaffold method addresses the main problems that deter students from these works before they are ever actually exposed to them. This has great potential to completely alleviate the initial dread inspired by the classics which should increase the chances of getting students to actually read the text.

Canonical Problems

There are several theories that address the canon as a problem, however there are also several different viewpoints that consider the canon as the epitome of grand literature. The majority of these problems stem from the lack of diversity in the canon. The majority of the literary works which are considered important enough to be considered canon extend from decades to centuries old, and usually come from the same type of author. These works are distant from the technological times we are in and vary greatly in sentence structure, wording, and as far as most novels are concerned, length as well. One prime example of this difference is the novel *Moby Dick*, which is known not only as an amazing work of literature but also for the incredible length and detail this novel delves into.

Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 342) illustrates one of the main problems with the rigidity of the literary canon when it comes to deciding what should be in the canon. The majority of texts are repeated year after year even when the area of study changes. Students are given the same texts to work with repeatedly even though they have already studied them repeatedly. This leads to many different problems from the student's viewpoint, including a lack of enthusiasm for these works and a disconnection from the subject as a whole.

Canonical literature is generally old literature and once it is declared canonical its position on the list is virtually inarguable. Once a text is canon it is always canon. Shelley (1998, p. 387) iterates the difficulty of the canon when she discusses the types of different problems students have when working with canonical texts. The majority of these problems stem from the distance from the texts most students are faced with both chronologically and culturally. The majority of the canon does not contain much cultural diversity (Shelley, 1998, p. 387). These works are generally known to come from the same demographic type and the common debate is that they are becoming generally less appropriate due to the coarse language that was appropriate during the times they were written and their lack of representation for different cultures.

Prinsen (2017, p. 6) states, "The language in these literary works may be outdated and too complex for students." This is one of his introductory statements on the material and students' ability to handle this literature on their own. Prinsen (2017, p. 6) however, believes that when teachers approach traditional canonical literature with sufficient background knowledge and scaffold these works to support students that they are a very valuable asset which can support increased vocabulary and understanding of the times and culture.

Pike (2002, p.356) states, "Modernizers are often keen to point out that the identities of women, ethnic minorities, and the working classes are not found to any great degree in many

canonical texts.” when he attempts to point out some of the problems which can be associated with the traditional literary canon. This lack of different experiences is widely acknowledged as a problem within the canon, although there are also several different methodologies which use this lack of presence as a way to read against the text and allow for more in-depth discussions.

There are many ways to approach the differences in cultures of some of the potential readers in today’s diverse high school environment and the traditionally white upper to middle class authors of the main literary canon. Pike (2002) contends:

My position is that, paradoxically, even the very difference (be it social, cultural, ethnic, religious, moral, or linguistic) between the world of the canonical texts and that of the reader can justify providing a canon of pre-20th-century works in the curriculum for ethnically and socially heterogeneous schools in the 21st century. (p. 358)

Which is a concept that can generally be agreed upon by many of the different types of people who support the literary canon. The differences in experience of the authors with the students who read them is a stark juxtaposition to the challenges faced by children today and the cultural references of their times. Most students, including those of the same area within the same type of class as canonical authors, have seen a very different world than the authors they read. These differences are the reason which Pike (2002) believes makes these literary works worth teaching in the high school classroom. Literary texts open up new paths and perspectives for students to view their world which has the potential to change the very way in which they view their own experiences.

Pike (2002, p. 358) states that the most common argument against canonical works is their lack of moral, ethical, and cultural rightness. Most people who disagree with teaching the literary canon in high school are under the impression that the literary works which are discussed

in the classroom should exemplify morale and ethical decision-making. Pike (2002, p. 358) responds to this argument by stating this view “may be questioned when the nature of literature and of readers is adequately understood.” This argument means that literature exists outside of this straight-cut realm due to its own timelessness and the way that reading literature can be approached. Literature is not usually meant as a straightforward piece and is usually full of different literary devices which give these works much more depth underneath any callous exterior. The entire point of studying canonical literature is to start a conversation about a multitude of different subjects.

Literature is a statement and is not meant to be viewed as a hard truth about how the world should work, although sometimes it does show the hard truth about how reality functions. This does not mean that literature is meant to be a model of how the world should be. It is meant to highlight differences and tell stories which expand a person’s viewpoints and this is most easily done when a person can step into a position and see how the world works from that different perspective. Canonical literature lets people see how the world was back in the days it was written and then allows them to form their own opinions of how today has changed and can continue to go forward.

Pike (2002, p. 360) maintains that despite the difficulty of canonical literature, they are essential to the growth of a student’s literary abilities. According to Pike (2002, p. 360) these works broaden the viewpoints of students by challenging what they consider to be reality and introducing them to more diverse perspectives. The perspectives these students are introduced to serve to broaden the intellectual experiences which allows the student to think more critically about how these texts and the themes within them can be applied to their current lives. Numerous people claim that the distance between a reader and the literary work they are reading causes

gaps in understanding and makes the work almost impossible to understand. Pike (2002, p. 360) maintains that this distance is what allows a reader to enhance their reading and understanding with these works. This distance, according to Pike (2002, p. 360) substantiates the difference between reading for education and reading for entertainment. Analyzing these gaps between the reader and the work is what allows them to dig deeper into a work and see more than what is on the surface. Pike (2002, p. 360), as well as several other researchers, state that this difference in the horizon is what gives a text the potential to enrapture the students instead of making it stale or boring as they maintain works that are too close to students' personal lives are. The idea is that texts that do not make students try to see different viewpoints are going to be tedious to try and analyze because they feel like they already know where the text is coming from and are not learning anything from it.

While some claim that the distance between when a work was written and when it was read makes it more difficult for the reader to understand. Advocates of the literary canon maintain that there is no correlation between literary age and student understanding when the work is taught correctly. Pike (2002, p. 365) maintains that the ability of a piece to be studied is proportionate to the indeterminacy of the work. This indeterminacy of a text is basically how open the text is for interpretation.

Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 124) refers to several of the commonly referred to problems of the literary canon as excellent reasons to teach them as analytical pieces. Traditionally teachers are forced to a cookie cutter approach to teach canonical literature as the majority of what they are teaching is dictated by Common Core and standardized testing checks at the end of the year to make certain that students are getting the ideas which are most important as dictated by the curriculum. These texts are not generally analyzed in depth, with the exception

of discussions which are steered towards the ideas propagated by the curriculum. These lessons which the curriculum warrants do not typically address the problem which are generally pointed to as objections to the canon. These problems people claim should unsubstantiate the canon usually refer to a lack of cultural diversity, racist and sexist undertones. Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 125) suggests that all of these problems could be addressed as ways to start in depth discussions of societal problems inherent to the times and then related to today's society. Generally canonical works are simply accepted as great literature and are read in a specific fashion. Borsheim-black et al. (2014, p. 125) suggests that readers should question these works and what merits they have that make them great literature worthy of being taught. Beyond this, Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 125) encourages readers to analyze these texts in search of the problems that can be found inside of them. These include searching these texts for instances of sexism or racism and then using what they find inside these texts to discuss what is not mentioned and how these texts leave out about the societies of the time.

Findings

There are a series of pervasive problems throughout several aspects of the modern literary canon as it is taught in the English Language Arts classroom at the secondary education classroom. These problems affect everyone involved as well as the canon itself. These problems sound as if they should be serious enough to cause pause before introducing canonical works as an important part of the curriculum, yet it seems that the literary canon is a solidly rooted foundation to the ELA curriculum. This is the preference of most teachers in this content area. The heated debate on the relativity of the literary canon stems from outside sources, who, as Pike (2002, p. 358) do not understand what it truly means for a reader to interact with a text. Texts exist outside of the normal spectrum of time and cannot be held to the rigid moral code and

changing social constructs that constitute what is considered acceptable in today's overly polite society. All of the literary canon has been considered the most prominent works of merit for centuries and are amazing representations of what those societies were founded upon.

These representations of past societies are monuments of history unworthy of the scorn and harassment that the current society has set upon them. These works are of great historical importance and can be used throughout the coming generations to highlight the advancements that have been made in all aspects of our society, much the same as they are capable of being used today. The failure to realize that these works are masters of flexibility which can be used to teach students a multitude of different subjects depending on which way the teacher chooses to lead the discussion is a failure to understand literature in general.

The main problem these students face when dealing with canonical literature is a disconnect caused by the inherent difficulty of the literature (Borsheim-Black et al. 2014, p.124; Hooley et al. 2013, p. 323;& Jogie, 2014, p. 327). The researchers who deal with this major student objection to the teaching of the classics all have a few common factors which are said to result in this problem. These common factors can vary anywhere from a lack of teacher expectation (Hooley et al. 2013, p. 323), to the absence of practice dealing with these difficult works of literature (Borsheim-Black et al. 2014, p. 124). This diverse series of factors affecting student practice have a very detrimental effect on these students. The inherent difficulty of canonical literature ensures that students must give these works of literature their utmost attention if they wish to perceive many of the underlying themes of these works which make them interesting to read. The majority of these underlying themes are universal and could be applied to today's society. The surface of the nearly limitless potential of these works and their underlying themes to begin conversations among the class on some of the most prominent social

issues facing the world today, and the way these issues were portrayed back in the time which these works were written is a gross underutilization of canonical texts and their applicability (Borsheim-Black et al. 2014, p. 123; Pike, 2003, p. 360).

This diverse series of possibilities only serves to highlight the relevance of canonical works which many people who advocate for their removal fail to see. Literature is a world filled with unique possibilities and almost any work contains the possibility to interpret the perspectives of the time on different aspects of society. This great multitude of different topics lies just underneath the surface and requires only the effort of the teacher and the cooperation of the students to bring important sociological concepts into debate based off of a book that very few students expect to find relative information from when the dated canonical work is introduced.

There is also another major problem which stops students from making the potential growth these literary works could provide, and that is the lack of students who actually read the work in question. There are many ways students get around reading these works. Some students will visit one of the many summary websites that are available, other students will skim for what sounds like the important parts, but startlingly, a large portion of students just flat out make no attempt to read or research the text (Borsheim-Black, 2014, p. 124; Hooley et al., 2013, p. 327). This is very common among high school students who do not seem to consider canonical literature as important. It is a very small percentage of students who enjoy reading and complete their reading assignments in their entirety. The availability of all of these numerous resources which the average student considers to be a faster or more practical way to find the information that they are expected to have found before class the next day makes it seem like even more trouble than they believe it is worth for them to read these long, complicated texts. The

prevalence of these sites is a detriment because it is only through the actual reading and analyzing of these works that students stand to gain any advancements in their literacy skills from them.

There are many factors which incite students to avoid completing any of their assigned readings. Time can be an important aspect for students as well. With all of the prevalent technology from video games to cell phones it seems to these students that they have other activities that they find much more stimulating and entertaining than reading century old literature from which they draw no connections to their current lives or places in society. The fact that students are also asked to complete these readings in their own free time after school should also be considered when analyzing why such a large percentage of students do not complete assigned readings. Seventy four percent of students, according to Hooley et al. (2013, p. 328), are not given any time in class for their assigned readings.

Teacher attitudes also contribute to a large percentage of students who do not consider their assigned readings of canonical literature as important (Borsheim-Black, 2014, p. 123; Hooley et al., 2013, p. 324). Teachers have several different ways in which they exhibit attitudes that cause students to avoid reading. Some of these activities that exhibit a lack of regard for the reading of canonical literature include teachers providing students with powerpoint and summaries of different sections of canonical works when covering them in the classroom. When teachers give students examples of where to find summaries and highlights, they cannot expect students to do reading because they have shown them where to get these main ideas explained easily in modern terminology. Most students, fifty four percent according to (Hooley et al., 2013, p. 328), do not feel that teachers expect their students to actually complete the reading assignments they are given. The positivity of teachers and their teaching strategies could make

great bounds towards getting students to complete their reading assignments as they are given to them. If a teacher set clear expectations and boundaries concerning paraphrasing websites and the completion of assigned reading this alone would make that reading more likely to be done.

The different types of powerpoints teachers utilize to bypass readings are considered to be part of the reason why students do not think reading is important (Hooley et al., 2013, p. 324). These methods are utilized by teachers due to the insufficient amounts of time that they are given to cover the large areas of content that the curriculum expects them to (Hooley et al., 2013, p. 324; Gardener, 2020, p. 49). Teachers go through great lengths to save instructional time, including preparing these powerpoints. If teachers could relay the importance of canonical works and show students how the themes inside these works could be applied to today's society, they could convince students that these works were worth looking into during their outside time, when they are expected to complete their reading assignments.

Teachers are given very few choices as far as what literature they can use to cover the concepts they are supposed to teach. These few choices mainly consist of canonical works, as they are generally regarded as works of great merit and worthy of study. The problem that stems from this is that canonical literature is generally well removed from today's society. This removal coupled with the inherent difficulty of many of these works has been known to cause great resistance from the student body when these works are introduced (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 124; Pike, 2002, p. 358). These researchers maintain that there are several different methods which could be used to remedy this situation. Borsheim-Black (2014, p. 124) states that these works, when taught properly, can cause tremendous bounds in the literary abilities of students. These works are full of under-discussed nuances which could make for very interesting in-class discussions on topics that are very closely followed by today's society. Introducing these

types of discussions would lead students to read these works of literature in order to better understand the way that those societies viewed topics which have only recently become openly acceptable.

The differences between the societies that were written about and ours today create a stark juxtaposition on several topics that are seemingly always at the center of everyone's attention today. The discussion of these topics and the study of whose story is left out in canonical literature could enamor students with their endless possibilities of discussion (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014). The breadth of these discussions should peak student interests in these works.

Many students have no background knowledge of the social structure that was prominent during the time most canonical works were being written, be they twentieth century or even earlier. Students also have a scattered understanding of the references, vocabulary, and sentence structure inside canonical works (Shelley, 1998, p. 386). This makes it difficult on teachers as they have to teach to the bottom of the class to make sure everyone is able to understand what is going on. This means teachers are addressing some things that other students are already aware of and understand, which leaves teachers in another predicament. They must cover mater without losing the more advanced students or else their participation will be difficult to obtain throughout the rest of the unit. Teachers can accomplish this by scaffolding instruction and involving activities which require more student participation (Borsheim-Black, 2014).

Certain sources claim that the literary canon is not diverse enough to capture the participation and enthusiasm of today's student body. Supposedly, the vast amounts of new and different emerging genres make the canons much less relatable than they used to be. One major argument speaks out against the canon and claims that it should be replaced with a greater

variety of multicultural literature in different genres which they claim would be more efficient in maintaining student participation. There are several problems which prevent the spread of these works as primary teaching resources, one of which is a lack of funds. Teachers simply are not given the budget to buy entire classroom sets of new novels to redo their methods, even if the curriculum would allow it (Gardener, 2020, p. 49). There is nothing significant to be done as far as the lack of funding and time goes. Teachers are finding ways to make the utmost out of what they have available. Teachers are becoming adept at working around these problems and will continue to teach classes what they need to know despite these problems.

When the literary canon is in question, the vast majority of teachers inside the content area find the lack of funding to be irrelevant. Most ELA teachers believe that canonical literature is irreplaceable and should be taught regardless of these complaints (Shelley, 1998, p. 386; Pike, 2002, p. 360). These teachers promote canonical literature for several reasons. Works of canonical literature are deemed as works of great merit. These works show limitless potential for discussion and are extremely well-written. They are the classics which have shaped the writing of literature for as long as we have the ability to see.

Canonical literature is considered by many teachers to be an indispensable asset. This literature had concrete, well-documented topics which mark the depth these works are capable of. This depth marks these works as extraordinary subject matter for classroom discussions. The themes which are included in these discussions are universal and can be applied to aspects of everyday life. The universality of these themes makes it possible for them to capture the interests of students today, despite the varying chronological gaps (Pike, 2002, p. 360). The chronological difference in these timelines is considered irrelevant by the majority of ELA teachers. These works of literature have been recognized as the best of the best for decades and most teachers

agree with this analysis whole-heartedly. These works have limitless applications to modern life and society (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 125). The multitude of directions that study of canonical literature can possibly take when it is read against is one of the key aspects of its importance. There are limitless levels of analysis possible with these works. Generally, these works are read as they are written and used to teach the most documented lessons, such as *Frankenstein* being used to teach Nature VS. Nurture.

The real value in the classical literary canon lies in the other lessons that can be learned from it, however. The literary canon has several different layers. Most usually it is only the top layer of these works that is scratched to teach what the curriculum entails. These layers contain many different universal themes that can be used to connect to the lives of the student body (Youssef, 2009, p. 29). This connection to the personal lives of students and their society is how the canon becomes meaningful and can be read and analyzed in the way which they deserve to be. Connecting these works to students' lives will capture student interest once again, which solves the majority of teacher problems. By utilizing under taught themes that are found throughout the layers of canonical works teachers can get students interested in concepts of the work that summary sites fail to capture. The wide variety of subjects which can relate to students and are not commonly taught is the incentive needed to get students reading again. This incentive, coupled with the various methods covered by these researchers to form the background that students need to understand these works give them both the ability and the initiative to read and analyze canonical literature.

This leaves several commonly noted problems regarding the canon themselves, which have been known to overlap into other categories. The classical works which compromise the canon are notorious for the difficulty of their comprehension by the average reader. The student

body which these books are being taught to have one distinct advantage over the average recreational reader, and that advantage is the teacher. Most recreational readers have very little background information on the books they read. The student, however, is guided by a teacher who introduces the work and covers all materials that are necessary for the student to reach a deeper understanding of these works. The scaffolding method of Shelley (1998, p. 387) is an amazing method for covering all aspects of the work that students could have difficulties with, while still allowing the rest of the student body to be involved.

This still leaves the problem of distance from canonical works. These works are usually held upon a pedestal as the great works of literature. They are typically idealized as being beyond normal criticism, but the analysis of why these works have been able to reach this esteem makes them seem much more manageable by the reader (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 125), as it removes the pedestal from the equation which leaves the reader with just another book, to be thought of like any other. Removing the deterrents from canonical works is almost as important as the work itself. When teachers behave in a way that shows they believe students can analyze these works and have the potential to realize new and interesting themes for discussion within canonical works, students will begin to look for these things to discuss. Students look to teachers for examples of what they could possibly accomplish with each assignment, and a positive, supportive attitude had tremendous benefits to student self-confidence as well as the level of effort they choose to put forth.

This increase in effort and depth of study is the answer to what most people view as the leading problem with canonical literature. The depth of study is the antipathy of the complaint that the canon lacks diversity. There is a multitude of views to be examined for a plethora of reasons inside these works. As Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) states:

A critical literacy approach to canonical literature interrupts dominant ideologies that are so often taken for granted, promoting inquiry rooted in questions such as: What and whose stories do(n't) these canonized texts tell? What assumptions do these texts, and by extension, secondary literature curricula, make about dominant cultural values and ideologies? (p. 124)

Borsheim-Black et al. (2014, p. 124) cover virtually every possible divergent discussion topic to be found inside canonical works, as well as the reasoning behind following the rhetoric of these discussions. This statement shows exactly what we should be examining when we look at canonical literature. These questions get everyone involved and will show the entire class that the canon is more than just a story to be read from a pedestal. It has many unique aspects to analyze and discuss which make them extremely informative and influential pieces in more ways than most people will ever realize.

Recommendations

There are a multitude of problems which have been used when discussing the viability of the literary canon in the modern-day secondary education classroom. These problems have covered many different perspectives surrounding the canon. Each perspective the canon is viewed from has some very different problems, while some of the problems it contains overlap throughout all groups who interact with it.

These problems have been known to stem from the canon itself, although a few of them originate in dealing with one of the other groups when the canon is involved. Most canonical problems are closer to problems with how the canon is perceived than problems with the actual canon itself. For instance, the canon is generally portrayed as extremely difficult works which makes reading them an achievement of its own, even without any discussion or analysis. This is

a perspective problem. The canon can be difficult, but it is not too difficult to read. With the proper background canonical works can be fascinating and entertaining stories with immense bursts of humor that one would not expect from any source that is reputed to be as serious of an undertaking as reading the classical literature that the canon consists of.

Student Solutions

When classical literature is being discussed, it is the student body reading this literature that has the largest number of problems with the interaction. These problems have been known to stem from many sources but the most prominent is a lack of understanding where the canon is concerned. To help students with their lack of understanding, a teacher must first find out what is fueling this problem. The canon is a multifaceted work and misunderstandings can stem from many different aspects of it. The work itself may have some sentence structures students find difficult to understand, words could be carrying meanings students are not familiar with due to the older connotations, or maybe students do not understand the background of the story. Many stories, canonical literature included, expect the reader to bring a certain level of background knowledge and understanding with them when they begin. Reading a work written decades ago could mean that students do not have the proper level of understanding for the literary work to be comprehensible.

The most common way that this lack of background knowledge is dealt with is through lectures and powerpoints. Generally, students are expected to take notes as teachers review information, they perceive to be relevant to understanding the story. If these lectures are done properly, they can give every student the tools they will need to confidently read and analyze any work of literature from a novel to a haiku. Lectures and powerpoints coupled with notes not only

share knowledge, which is important to comprehending the literature, but it allows students to go back and review this knowledge any time they are having difficulty.

Teachers must be careful when using lectures and powerpoints, however. Students are easily influenced by teachers due to their respective status levels. This means that if a teacher overuses lectures when making sure students understand the text students are liable to quit reading the text and instead wait on the concise and easy to understand summary that they know will be given to them on the following day by the teacher.

This has the possibility to incite students into complacency, which must be addressed immediately. The maturity level of the average high school student is not very high. Students tend to take advantage of situations unless they are given sufficient reasons not to. It can be difficult to convince a student that reading an aging text could have connections and benefits for them when they would rather be playing video games, watching television, or doing one of the other many technological activities they have to entertain themselves in their free time. Some teachers have started giving pop quizzes the following day or sending worksheets home with assigned readings to try and force students to read but this practice can be just as detrimental to the students reading habits. Worksheets distract students from what they are reading, so instead of comprehending and analyzing information students are simply scanning for the answers they need while quizzes usually have them reading summaries to get by. These types of assignments show students that they are not expected to have the discipline to read the assignment by itself without another extrinsic motivator such as a grade to go along with the reading.

Teachers are better benefited by laying out a clear and concise outline of their expectations in regard to reading assignments and reassuring students that they are capable of handling these reading assignments. When a teacher exhibits perceivable faith in their students

and the students' abilities it creates a psychological factor which pressures students to complete their assignment. The perception of these expectations and beliefs sets the student up to complete assignments both for the intrinsic value of feeling like they accomplished something and because they do not wish to let down a teacher who has shown that they have faith in their students. It is a commonly acknowledged fact of human nature that it is easier to please people than it is to disappoint.

Teacher Solutions

Many of the problems faced by teachers of the literary canon are not directly related to the canon itself. The majority of their problems lies with convincing students to interact with the canon and enabling them to do so. Students are not typically thrilled by the idea of reading and discussing books, but this aversion goes to an even greater extent when those books change from the modern works they are familiar with to the dated works that constitute the literary canon. These classical works are reputed as difficult to understand and are not even applicable to the student or their current society, at least on the surface.

The first thing that a teacher must accomplish is to enable every student to comprehend and discuss the multiple layers that dwell within classical literature. The prime starting point for this preparation is the scaffolding concept, where teachers build their way up to the literary work going one distinct layer at a time. The most efficient way to build this scaffold is with vocabulary as a base, followed by sentence structure with background information scattered throughout like struts to keep the entire scaffold completely stable.

Vocabulary is usually the most basic concept one must address with these works and must be addressed before sentence structure. If a student does not know the words in a sentence, they will not understand the meaning of it even if they can puzzle out the structure, which is why

the scaffold is leveled like this. The problem is that some students will understand much more vocabulary than others, and it is a possibility that they could become disinterested in the work while the teacher is covering material that they do not know. This is where the struts, or background information, comes into play. There are many different facts about culture and social structure which can be introduced with vocabulary or sentence structure and the introduction of these facts throughout the coverage of the basic literary concepts will help to keep the more advanced students' attention. This allows the teacher to keep all students interested in the work while enabling those at a lower level to understand the context of what they are going to be reading.

Teachers have also noted that a more diverse array of literature does a better job of keeping students captivated throughout the semester. The canon is not the most diverse source of literature to choose from, however it is the most readily recognized and available. Teachers do not have the funds ready to buy classroom sets of current novels to entertain their students. Budgets are a problem teachers cannot get around. The problem of diversity can be addressed from within the canon, however. There is a wide variety of themes and stories that are both told and left out of classical literature. The portrayal of other classes opens them up for discussion. The ideas that are propagated within classical literature shows what was prominent in that society and can be an excellent source for students to start a discussion about ideas that are not mentioned or were frowned upon in the days these works were written. A grand example of using an idea to discuss something not mentioned is sexuality. Most classical literature has the damsel in distress, or the female which the main character dreams about and chases. These pieces clearly promote heterosexuality, but this promotion opens the door to a discussion about homosexuality and its place in that social structure. This idea can be applied to everything from

race to religion and beyond. The discussions that teachers can use to keep students interested do not have to come strictly from the text, because there are volumes of information that can be inferred if students are pointed in the direction of what is not mentioned and whose perspective is not portrayed.

The universality of the many themes that are present in canonical works is a non-negotiable fact that is agreed upon by virtually the whole community. When anyone who has studied literature wishes to highlight any common theme they always revert to the classics. This does not matter if they wish to talk about greed, jealousy, respect, laziness, or any of the other possible themes. The classics contain perfect examples of all of these messages which authors try to bring attention to. The problem teachers face is that the modern-day student does not see how the majority of these themes could apply to their everyday life or their advanced society. This creates a distance which teachers must seek to overcome. It only takes one sound example of how these themes relate to student life to get them on board in the discussion. The introduction of these themes then grants teachers a much greater amount of student interaction than they usually get.

Canonical Solutions

Those outside of the literary domain point several fingers at the literary canon. Its accusations are almost as common as the statement that video games promote violence. The canon is always talked about as old and close minded by those who are not intimately familiar with it. The canon is judged for the rhetoric it includes about different lifestyles than what were considered to be acceptable in those times. These accusations about the coarseness of the literary canon do not come from people who understand the nuances within it, or even the true nature of literature.

The literary canon is not a moral guideline. Classical literature contains words and phrases which are frowned upon today. It definitely frowns on lifestyles people accept and enjoy in today's progressive society. There are a few people who are unable to see past these stances and push for the removal of the canon from today's curriculum due to claims of it being outdated. These people do not realize the worth of the literary canon. Classical works did not gain their esteem by some spout of luck or chance. The literary canon is a compilation of amazing works that has been amassed throughout history, and it only contains the best of the best. These works are esteemed because they are full of complicated nuances which make these pieces progressive masterpieces which can be opened for endless hours of discussion. The true greatness of literature is that it exists outside of time. Literature is a snapshot of time that can always be returned to. A good work of literature has the ability to transport the reader into the shoes of the protagonist. It highlights an era and documents the way in which those societies function.

The morals and prejudices which can be found inside canonical works are not the universal properties which are often spoken of. Classical literature is an abundant source of important life lessons which could help readers in all stages of their life. The canon does not need to be changed, what needs to be changed is the way people outside view the canon. It cannot be taken at face value, as the majority try to do. The true value of canonical literature can only be found when one dives deep inside the text in order to spot all of the nuances at work. Literature may only specify a few perspectives, but when a good reader begins to analyze the text, they see just as much information from what is not mentioned, and whose view is not being taught. Literature is essentially an open portal to an older world. An appropriate analysis of any solid literary work will grant you the perspective of the author on a multitude of different

subjects, many of which they will never address directly. This ability to hide meaning inside of so many different works make the classics into a multifaceted jewel which takes the utmost talented craftsman to truly appreciate. The canon is a solid foundation for ELA education, and with proper teaching, should continue to be so for many generations to come.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of problems which could be found inside the high school ELA classroom. The diversity of these problems covers several different perspectives and are universally apparent. Several of these problems overlap throughout the different perspectives and affect all of the parties involved with the literary canon. There are very few problems which are actually caused by the canon, although the way it is viewed does cause some of these problems.

The literary canon has been an integral part of education in the ELA classroom for a very long time. It will remain an important aspect for some time to come, as well. There are several critics who disapprove of the continuity of the canon, but it has earned its place in education and consists of the most influential texts of all time. These texts have well earned their place in the educational curriculum. The classics are works of great merit which deserve this place. Thorough study of these classics and what they went through to earn their place in the literary canon stands to be incredibly beneficial for upcoming students as they show a multitude of nuances which place them above and beyond the average work. The growth potential that abides within the classics is an iceberg which has barely had the top scraped.

The students usually resist the teaching of the classics due to their reputation of being incredibly difficult works. An effective teacher can scaffold instruction up to the reading of the classics which will allow all of the students in the class to comprehend and discuss these works in great depth. The involvement in these works is dependent on the teacher's ability to draw

similarities between the universal themes that are found throughout these works and the lives of the students. The more that these works seem like they can be applied to the students' lives, the greater interest the students will show in them. This enhanced interest generates great opportunities to analyze the canon from many different perspectives which is where the potential for growth is most abundant.

The canon has an amazing potential to produce growth in the literacy skills of the students who address them. It comes with several challenges, which range from simple vocabulary to reading through what information is mentioned to determine how those societies viewed topics that are not mentioned. That is the amazing thing about the canon. It has so many possibilities that it can address all levels of students and introduce them to worlds of literature that some might never imagine.

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