

# A CLASSIC DEBATE

**With an infusion of choice reading and more culturally relevant options in today's classrooms, what place do "the classics" have?**

By **Emily Chiariello**

**t**he year is 1989. The *Jeopardy* category, "The Classics."

The clue reads: "*The Great Gatsby*, *Hamlet*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Julius Caesar*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Macbeth*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*."

The correct response: "What are the 10 most commonly taught books in high school?"

In a study of titles taught in high school English classes that year, the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature noted that the list, which had only marginally changed in 25 years, reflected "what schools explicitly value as the foundation of students' literary experience."

The authors' hope was that educators would use the data to better ground debates about what should be taught to whom and why, debates that "involve fundamental questions about the nature of the literary and cultural experiences that students could share, as well as the degree of differentiation that is necessary if all students are to be able to claim a place and an identity within the works that they read."

So, how much has the literary canon changed since then? What place do classic works have in today's classroom?

### A classic case

English teachers have long been in a league of their own among lovers of classic literature, faithfully introducing the likes of Steinbeck and Dickens year in and year out. And in that vein, textbooks, standards, and curriculum have been developed and organized around this remarkably static set of titles and authors.

What makes these *classics*, you ask? Defenders hold that the value of such works—beautiful prose, timeless themes, simpatico characters—is undeniable. Students may moan and stumble on archaic words and awkward phrasing, but good instructors use that tension to highlight the way language changes over time. It's important that students know about a time other than their own. Learning about the past gives us a deeper understanding of our present day, and authors like Hawthorne and Twain help teach those lessons.

Educators who would challenge the canon point to a plethora of contenders whose writing possesses just as much literary quality, but whose identities reflect those of their students better than the mostly dead, white male authors found in the canon do. But putting form aside, there's a strong

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case to be made for the way classic literature functions in society.

Hoyt Phillips, manager of Teaching and Learning at Teaching Tolerance, says, "Students without at least a surface-level understanding of classic texts run the risk of missing social and cultural references made to these works."

Specific kinds of knowledge act as cultural currency in society, and some educators are concerned that removing classics from the curriculum could further exclude already marginalized student groups. "All one has to do is keep track for a day or two of how many times a character, story, or author is referred to from a classic text in a news story, in another published work, or in passing conversation. Without a knowledge of these references, students run the risk of not being able to fully participate in these conversations," says Phillips.

But educational consultant Sara Wicht argues that the canonical and culturally specific nature of the literature still taught in many schools—Eurocentric, male-dominated, and heteronormative—is problematic and deserves greater scrutiny. "The inclusion of knowledge about the classics is grounded in systems of oppression that have established educational goals and environments with very narrow identity groups in mind," she says.

Like most complex questions, the answer most likely lies somewhere in

between. In terms of cultural literacy, it can both be true that the classics are lacking in diversity *and* that a basic understanding of such texts is required in a balanced education.

Seventh-grade English teacher Darnell Fine of Atlanta, GA, says, "Much of students' survival, in particular students of color from low-income backgrounds, depends on their ability to navigate worlds that push them to the margins. By not teaching them about the culture of power, it makes it harder for students to gain power and control over their own lives."

### Out with the old

Although the reasons for teaching what we do are complex and varied, sometimes it boils down to tradition. Wicht says this leaves teachers "married" to particular titles they may have been teaching their entire careers. They've developed lessons around these books and don't invest the time to recenter their curriculum around alternate titles or contemporary literature. But "that's the way it's always been" doesn't provide a strong pedagogical basis, and many teachers are swapping out the classics for more diverse and contemporary titles like *The Kite Runner*, *Life of Pi*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Unwind*.

For many, the choice to lessen the emphasis on classic literature has to do, in part, with students' difficulty



**Emily Chiariello** ([emily.chiariello@gmail.com](mailto:emily.chiariello@gmail.com)) is an educational equity consultant, working at the intersection of culturally responsive and academically rigorous educational practices. She has nearly two decades of experience as a classroom teacher, professional developer, curriculum designer, and education writer.

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navigating older forms of English. They question if spending so much time focused on language at the expense of comprehension, enjoyment, and appreciation is worth it. Some literacy experts have found that when reading more archaic texts, a significant amount of instructional time can be spent with the teacher essentially reading *for* students.

If a purpose of reading is to help develop language skills, some wonder how practical it is to expose students to syntax and idiomatic expressions that are all but useless in conversational English today, particularly if working with English learners.

A related argument made in defense of dropping the classics has to do with relevance. Young readers crave stories that reflect their lived experiences, tackle controversies and dramas they live out daily, and push the boundaries of social norms. As Phillips puts it, “Students need and demand relevance. Teaching classic texts at the expense of more current texts can further alienate students, thus causing them to disengage.”

Michigan high school students on the *Kalamazoo Gazette’s* Young Editorial Staff agree. Patrick

Sutherland-Alway writes, “Literary history does not end with *The Great Gatsby*, and students need to learn that.”

### Reading the world

What is the cultural impact of decreasing the role that classics play in curriculum? Will a decentering of those books result in a loss of values expressed by their literary themes?

According to Fine, “As individuals in the Western world, one is already well aware of the culture expressed in classic works of literature. We are bombarded with messages from churches, media, legal systems, and many other institutions that reinforce the themes found in the classics. So why focus so much on understanding such messages when we are already socialized to understand them in every other aspect of life?”

He questions how universal such themes are anyway, arguing that critical educators know “themes deemed universal are often grounded in Eurocentric, patriarchal, white experiences.” His point underscores the importance of a “windows and mirrors” approach to text selection, where literature provides mirrors—in

which readers see their own identities and experiences reflected—and windows through which they learn about people different from them.

In a review of 3,200 books published for children and teens in 2013, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center found that African American and Latino authors wrote only 116. More and more attention is being paid to this lack of diversity in children’s and young adult literature, as evidenced by a groundswell of interest in books written by and about women, people of color, and other traditionally underrepresented groups and communities.

More than half of the students attending public schools today in the United States alone are nonwhite. Within this context, where still too few mirror texts are being provided, how should educators weigh the merits of including classic literature?

### You don’t have to choose

The choice between teaching classic literature and more contemporary or multicultural texts is an unnecessary one; teachers can, and should, do both. In Fine’s view, “Multicultural reading lists aren’t about displacing classic works of literature from the canon, but making room for marginalized voices and authors that have been routinely excluded from the core curriculum.”

Lee & Low Books, the largest publisher of multicultural books for pre-K to 12th grade, helps schools broaden the range of stories they expose students to. “Classic works of literature are incredibly valuable and still sought after in many classrooms and curriculum,” says Jill Eisenberg, Lee & Low literacy expert. “It’s exciting, though, to be a part of a time where educators, parents, and students themselves are pushing and innovating for more ways to connect to modern events and adolescent interests.”

A key question is not *if* educators should keep teaching the classics, but which titles to keep and which to retire. Monita K. Bell, senior editor of *Teaching Tolerance* magazine, says for starters, “If the only reason it’s on the list is simply because it’s in the *canon*—

because it's a traditional must-read—then it should go.”

Wicht suggests two questions to ask when considering whether to include a title: What are my learning objectives? Can those learning objectives be met with a variety of texts, or do they depend on inclusion of this classic work?

Let's say the goal is to introduce students to the dystopian genre and engage them in thinking about related themes. Traditionally, you may turn to *Fahrenheit 451*, *1984*, or *Brave New World*, but with a critical lens you would notice that these were all written more than 60 years ago and have white, male protagonists. With Wicht's questions in mind, you may search for alternate dystopias that address the same themes but include a milieu more relevant and engaging to your students. *Diverse Energies*, for example, is an anthology of dystopian short stories that present projections of a future in which the world's diversity is reflected through protagonists of different ages, ethnicities, and sexual orientations.

## Remixing the classics

Rather than a rigid attachment to classic works or a radical rejection, meaningful literature instruction invites students into the debate, exposing them to a variety of texts, and developing their ability to analyze and evaluate whatever they read.

Try these strategies to freshen up the way you teach a classic:

- **Teach critical literacy skills.** Include questions like, Whose voice is privileged in this text and whose is missing? Challenge students to identify gaps and silences and to critically examine the way stereotypes may be reinforced within classic literature. Fine says in doing this, he's equipping his students with the skills to critique media they come across in their daily lives.
- **Examine literature through multiple lenses.** Teaching Tolerance's lesson "Let's Talk About Lula" offers a great example of

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approaching a classic text like *To Kill a Mockingbird* in a fresh way. Instead of focusing on the perspectives of the white protagonists, the lesson highlights how African American characters respond to racial injustice, something old ways of teaching the book failed to do. The educational organization Facing History and Ourselves also offers a resource, "Teaching *Mockingbird*," that helps students explore the book's themes through its African American characters.

- **Integrate different forms of media.** Use podcasts, film, social media, music, and visual art to introduce, supplement, and reinforce the themes in classic works of literature. Check out the Book Riot website for ideas.
- **Focus on important excerpts.** Rather than read full-length novels, many teachers choose to have students do close reading of shorter excerpts. Identify famous scenes, important moments, or sections that help teach a theme (e.g., loyalty) or a literary device (e.g., foreshadowing). The anti-bias curriculum *Perspectives for a Diverse America* from Teaching Tolerance includes an online anthology of more than 300 texts, many of which are excerpts from well-known novels.
- **Study the relationship between texts.** Intertextuality refers to the relationship that exists between texts in the ways they reference, replay, inspire, or influence each other. Examples of this literary device can be found in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *The Odyssey* as well as in the feminist recasting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. A more recent example is the comedic replaying of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

- **Pair young adult with classic literature.** Eisenberg recommends educators create pairings with more contemporary stories, diverse voices, and perspectives around the themes of a classic text. For example, she says some districts pair *The Odyssey* with *Summer of the Mariposas* by Guadalupe Garcia McCall, a modern-day retelling set in Mexico with five sisters embarking on their own hero's journey. Other pairings include *The Scarlet Letter* with Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with Sharon Draper's *Romiette and Julio*.

- **Connect classic novels to current events.** Students bring their questions and concerns about current events into the classroom every day. This, along with expectations found in today's standards of increased exposure to nonfiction, has inspired the pairing of news articles with classic literature. Whether it's teaching about the unrest in Ferguson, MO, with *Macbeth* or using *The Outsiders* to address gang violence, The Learning Network from *The New York Times* has come up with dozens of such pairings in their "Text to Text" lessons.

## Get a jump on it

Questioning the place of classic works does not mean asking whether to teach them, but *why* we include the titles we do, *how* we teach them, and *when*. Rather than stay rigidly attached or radically throw out the classics, create an authentic context for reading by inviting students into the discussion.

When you do, just like teenager Catey Koch of the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, they're bound to have an interesting take: "The classics all had to start somewhere. What's considered contemporary literature today may very well be classic in a hundred years. We might as well get a jump on it." ■