

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CLASSICAL LITERATURE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Emily Grant, Grand Canyon University

---

## ABSTRACT

*The inclusion and representation of Classical Literature in secondary education have been a highly debated topic. Teachers and students struggle to find the value and importance of classical texts and authors in the curriculum. This literature review explores the value of English language arts, how literature fits into that, and how to choose and use the right canonical classical texts. It questions the definition of canon and classic and how classical works that fit these descriptions benefit students. Developing these ideas will help teachers make learning the classics more relevant and applicable for their students. The goal of this review is to synthesize academic concepts regarding not only teaching literature but also Classical Literature as a whole to put the necessity of Classical Literature into perspective and encourage the inclusion of these texts in the secondary English classroom setting.*

**Keywords:** *Classical Literature, Secondary Education, English, Canon, Education, Language Arts, Teaching*

English is an essential course that secondary students take to increase their understanding of the language and improve literacy and develop knowledge beyond what can be proven on tests. Understanding that English is more than simply reading and writing is the first step to getting the most out of the course. Reading comprehension and coherent literacy are formed and built upon within English classrooms. An essential aspect of the English curriculum is the literature that accompanies it and what these texts can teach students. As more literature is published and new standards are created, the presence of Classical Literature has decreased in the classroom.

Teachers and students alike are beginning to reject what is considered canonical Classical Literature to bring in more modern, recent readings. While newer genres, such as young adult literature, can enhance learning and should be studied,

the classics should not be pushed aside. Societal changes and cultural shifts have led to the rejection of many classical writers and their books. Authors such as Shakespeare, Austen, and Dickens were considered the greatest writers of their time, and today, people write them off. Looking away from controversy and politics, classical authors' writings remain impactful and relevant to society today. Students should be exposed to stories and authors that shaped literature as it is known today, as well as the messages they were trying to teach.

Classical Literature holds an essential place in the English curriculum and world culture. Reading classical texts such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Pride and Prejudice*, or *The Great Gatsby* improves a student's reading comprehension and provides a more well-rounded, sensible grasp of literature, granting them insight into common, worldly knowledge. Teachers should embrace what these texts can

offer their students beyond reading passively, but instead actively pursuing each author's themes and purpose behind each piece of Classical Literature.

Studying the effects of literature, classical or not, in the classroom and the benefits of teaching the classics will help solidify reasoning to keep them in the curriculum. This literature review will dive into different perspectives on English in the secondary education setting through teaching literature, and the importance of Classical Literature as well as some classical texts themselves. The study will then put the research into play in an applicable, practical classroom setting that provides data on real students reading canonically Classical Literature.

### TEACHING LITERATURE

Teaching literature extends far beyond assigning reading and testing students on said reading. Teaching literature is an ongoing process of guiding students to understand everything a book provides through the words on the pages. Themes, historical context, and characters all teach students life lessons and portray the author's true purpose behind the writing. In "The Ethics of Teaching Literature," Booth (1998) writes, "to teach reading that is both engaged and actively critical is central because it is in stories, in narratives large and small rather than in coded commandments, that students absorb lessons in how to confront ethical complexity" (p. 48). Booth (1998) discusses the ethical concerns of teachers and how to properly teach literature to best benefit the students, as well as why teaching this way is of utmost importance. He finds that ethically teaching literature answers the question: "If I'm changing students, how do I change them in ways that I feel are most useful to them?" (Booth, 1998, p. 54). A hidden curriculum is waiting to be discovered in the pages of literature that impact students' lives in school and after.

### LITERATURE AND ENGLISH CURRICULUM

English curriculum, standards, and methods constantly shift and vary from state to state and school to school. One aspect that endures this trend of change, however, is the presence of literature in the curriculum map. Goodwyn (2012) discusses the place literature has in the national curriculum and its consistent need for it in all grade levels. His study polled teachers of all experience levels regarding their feelings towards "the framework for English on literature teaching" (Goodwyn, 2012, p.

220). Results show that teachers are frustrated with the strict regime and "scripted" (Goodwyn, 2012, p. 220) nature of teaching literature. Regulation of the curriculum framework within a classroom often takes out the opportunity for creativity and personalization for teachers and students alike. More than half of the teachers who commented on Goodwyn's (2012) study "expressed extreme frustration at the lack of opportunity to study a whole text in any detail or depth" (Goodwyn, 2012, p. 220). These teachers understand what it is like to be in the classroom, actively teaching, but are restricted by standards limiting literature exploration. Literature remains in the classroom, but the ability to use it to its full potential must be expanded and encouraged.

Teachers, better than anyone, understand and embrace the crucial need for literature to be present in the classroom. Regarding Shakespeare, a classical author taught in many schools, Goodwyn (2012) found that, while teachers want to teach his plays, they desire the freedom of which plays to teach and, consequently, how to teach them. Many of the teachers in Goodwyn's (2012) research "felt that the real qualities of Shakespeare, such as dramatic power and poetry of the language were being obscured" (p. 221). These same teachers, therefore, are those who are fighting against the way literature is being restricted and limited, which is making the richness of what literature provides to the classroom much duller.

### IMPORTANCE OF CLASSICAL LITERATURE

Classical Literature teaches more than just what the author is trying to convey, but rather offers insight into the time period, the life of the author, and perceptions of reality from when the book was written. Zerkina et al. (2015), experts on social and behavioral sciences, discuss the role Classical Literature plays in the modern educational discourse and have found that "Classical English Literature has always been a useful resource for history and historians" (Zerkina et al., 2015, p. 461). These women study the importance of Classical Literature in the English language as a whole from the perspective of learning and teaching English as a second language.

This perspective is extremely valuable, as it shows that Classical Literature is at the root of English. Zerkina et al. (2015), have found that "Classi-

cal English Literature is an important component of a total language arts, and it provides a language model for those who hear and read it, supports all areas of the language arts curriculum” (Zerkina et al., 2015, p. 461). As a result, having native English speakers and those who are learning the language read these texts is crucial to their understanding of the language. While there is evidence that the way English is spoken and written has changed and adapted over time, “Classical English Literature saves the English language from irreversible changes” (Zerkina et al. 2015, p. 461). By understanding not only the knowledge of history, these novels provide but also the history of the English language, readers of Classical Literature have a better grasp on history and language arts simultaneously.

In 1995, teaching Shakespeare, a classical author often included in the English curriculum, was highly controversial and difficult to accomplish (O’Brien, 1995). Many teachers did not want to teach Shakespeare in the face of this challenge. However, because of the nature of the plays and the way studying them seemed to propel students forward intellectually, there was a substantial educational shift to keep Shakespeare in the classroom. O’Brien (1995) writes about the research and effort that went into perfecting teaching Shakespeare in order to keep the influential texts in the classroom. O’Brien (1995) addresses that exposure to Shakespeare in school is essential to scholarly development, even nearly three decades ago.

The value of classical texts and authors has been studied and has remained a prevalent issue in education for many years. These works enhance the knowledge gained in the English courses students take and gives them a better perspective on history, arts, and culture over time. Although the curriculum is constantly changing, the English language and its foundations are not. The consistency that is keeping these texts in the classroom creates a baseline in English education.

### WHAT IS CANON?

To fully understand classics and their value, the definition of *classic* and *canon* must be explored. Difficulty with categorizing literature and authors into strictly agreed-upon groups stems from the fact that it truly depends on who is asked. There is an academic difference between the official

canon and the personal canon, but the two exist internally in an indecipherable way. One’s literary taste and preferences may affect what they believe to be *classic* and *canon*. Individuals may disagree on the requirements for these categories, why they belong there, etc. Personal input becomes a significant factor in literature discussion. Despite this, “the official canon is institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism” (Fowler, 1979, p. 98). Canon, and the classical canon specifically, has been debated, refined, and perfected over time to provide scholars and academics with a general grouping of texts that have been reviewed and debated to earn this prestige.

### OFFICIAL CANON VS. PERSONAL CANON

Acknowledging that literary canon is established based on academic factors, one of those being education specifically, helps scholars to realize just how much literature and education go hand in hand. Fowler (1979) writes to define canon and genre and how they relate to readers, authors, and the books themselves. Fowler (1979) discusses the critical difference between official and personal canon so that people may be able to utilize these classifications (Fowler, 1979). However, it must also be known that the concepts of canon and classic are flexible and changing. Fowler uses the example that “the biblical canon was arrived at only after many vicissitudes and over a period of many centuries” (Fowler, 1979, p. 98) to clarify that there are some texts that are not considered canon yet that may be one day. Moving forward in education, the current canon must be recognized and built upon, as it is important and influential to education and culture.

### EDUCATIONAL CANON

Fine-tuning the classical canon to fit into the scope of English education and language arts further considers the academic value and richness of each text as it pertains to students. Identifying the literary canon appropriate for the classroom is extensive and, of course, highly contested. There are constant changes to different banned book lists and books that are accepted and taught in schools. It is reassuring to know that “the term ‘canon,’ as used in reference to the literary canon, connotes legitimacy, authority, and truth” (Macaluso & Macaluso, 2018, p. xi).

Macaluso and Macaluso (2018) use their efforts of defining canon to support the pedagogy behind teaching canonical texts. As a result of the ambiguous nature of canon determination, these authors agree that canon is “less of a list or fixed body of texts, and more of an ideology” (Macaluso & Macaluso, 2018, p. xi). Regardless, there is merit and value behind the label of canon that provides an elevated view of books deemed to be so. Embracing the literary canon as a pillar of the English language, literature, and education pushes for the representation these texts deserve on the reading lists of secondary students.

### EXAMPLES OF CLASSICAL TEXTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Choosing texts to build curriculum around or to read in an individual classroom can be challenging. Looking toward classical canon allows educators to find texts that can meet their needs while also exemplifying great literature and the best of the English language. There are many ideas and lesson plans centered around Classical Literature that make reading engaging and applicable for students.

#### *The Great Gatsby*

One text that is read in almost every public high school in the United States is *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. This novel is short, entertaining, and provides an excellent historical perspective on the Jazz Age of America. Combining Fitzgerald’s inspiring writing with “questions of identity and the power of love—two issues with which nearly all teens struggle” (Connor et al., 2009, p. 5) makes *The Great Gatsby* an applicable and relatable text for students in secondary education. The story is entertaining and easy to read without being too simple, and “students quickly make connections with the text and, with teacher guidance, learn to build their appreciation of the poetic descriptions” (Connor et al., 2009, p. 5). Teaching about topics, plots, and characterization comes naturally with a story such as this. Alongside this text being a classic, it is rich with relevant themes that can enhance students’ lives.

#### *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen and all of her work serve as great historical insight as well as Classic Literature. *Pride and Prejudice* is a text that is almost universally accepted as a classic, yet some people have never read it. Shelley (1998) writes about break-

ing classical texts down or scaffolding them into teachable parts that students can enjoy. *Pride and Prejudice* serves as a wonderful source of vocabulary and character development. For difficult-to-read texts, Shelley (1998) recommends following a “Direct Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) format by dividing the text into chunks” (p. 387) and seeking out specific information. Using this strategy, *Pride and Prejudice* would be best read in class with guidance from the teacher. Austen’s lessons on the themes of identity, forgiveness, and growth reflected in the main character, Elizabeth, make the novel a great piece for young adults. Gaining background information and using it to apply *Pride and Prejudice* to today’s society can provide students with relevant knowledge rooted in Classical Literature.

### SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS

Shakespeare is one of the most studied authors of the English language, and most people are exposed to his works for the first time in high school. Studying plays and Old English simultaneously can be complicated for students and teachers alike. O’Brien (1995) wrote about college students’ reflections on their experience with Shakespeare in secondary education. Their responses had more to do with how the author was taught rather than the actual content. For example, one student wrote, “teachers kill Shakespeare by line-to-line explanation” (O’Brien, 1995, p. 167). Shakespeare has a lot to offer but overdoing it can diminish the value in the classroom. While Shakespeare can be difficult to read and follow, there are opportunities to make it fun and manageable for students. Shakespeare wrote plays; it seems obvious, therefore, how it would be beneficial to incorporate performing these plays as well as reading them. O’Brien (1995) discusses the practicality and effectiveness of reading Shakespeare aloud and even in a “stage-centered study” (O’Brien, 1995, p. 167) of his works. Shakespeare does not need to incite fear in educators and their students. His plays should be something to enjoy and look forward to in the classroom and simultaneously respected as a lens that magnifies playwrights and Old English literature.

### CONCLUSION

Being an English teacher extends far beyond teaching students how to read and write. English in



secondary education delves into morals, rhetoric, humanity, and history, all through literature. When considering the English curriculum, it is difficult to imagine coursework without literature in high school. With that, the classics often come to mind when one thinks of literature. Classical canon and educational canon are drifting further and further apart when they should be more overlapped than ever. As reviewed and considered by experts, Classical Literature provides a deeper understanding of English as a language and literature as an art.

Teaching classics can be intimidating for teachers, especially when students are not excited either. It is important to remember that “enthusiasm is contagious” (Shelley, 1998, p. 387) regarding classics in the classroom. As educators and curriculum developers move forward, bringing classics into current culture and society is essential for youth development. Secondary English education is the ideal setting to utilize and educate on what the classic authors wanted to leave behind.

## References

- Booth, W. C. (1998). The ethics of teaching literature. *College English*, 61(1), 41-55.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/379057>
- Connor, D. J., Bickens, S., & Bittman, F. (2009). Combining classic literature with creative teaching for essay building in an inclusive urban high school classroom. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 5(6), 2-25. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ967756.pdf>
- Fowler, A. (1979). Genre and the literary canon. *New Literary History*, 11(1), 97-119. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468873>
- Goodwyn, A. (2012). The status of literature: English teaching and the condition of literature teaching in schools. *English in Education*, 46(3), 212-227. <https://doi.org/10.1111/17548845.2012.11912468>
- Macaluso, K., & Macaluso, M. (2018). Challenging the canonical genre. *Teaching the Canon in 21st Century Classrooms: Challenging Genres*. pp. ix-xx.
- O'Brien, P. (1995). "And gladly teach": Books, articles, and a bibliography on the teaching of Shakespeare. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 46(2), 165-172. <https://lopes.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/gladly-teach-books-articles-bibliography-on/docview/195949675/se-2>
- Shelley, A. C. (1998). Teaching the classics in high school. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 41(5), 386-388. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40016942>
- Zerkina, N., Lomakina, Y., & Kostina, N. (2015). Place and role of English classical literature in modern educational discourse. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 199, 459-463. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.532>