

# Teaching Classic Literature in Culturally Relevant Ways

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**Abstract:** Teaching classic literature comes with many challenges. Students today have a difficult time relating to century old texts that mostly reflect white male Euro-centric heteronormative values, yet English language arts teachers are required to teach classic literature at every grade level for high school students. This paper demonstrates how teachers can use culturally relevant teaching practices, including restory and critical literacy, to help students, particularly students of color and minorities, to engage with and create meaning from classic literature.

## Introduction

Teaching classic literature has been happening across high schools for decades, if not centuries, and is a required staple in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Imagine that you are introducing your freshman English class to a new unit on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. You introduce this by sharing with students a famous line from the play, "O, Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?" (Shakespeare, 1879, p. 60). Loud moans and groans ensue and one student shouts out, "Man, who talks like that," while another answers, "For real! What does that even mean?". Before you even have a chance to speak, another student says, "I know what that's from. It's a stupid story about some white kids that fall in love and kill themselves. This has NOTHING to do with us. You seriously gonna make us read this?". This scenario is not far removed from what high school ELA teachers across the nation hear from their students when it comes time to teach classic literature. So, what can we as English Language Arts educators do to teach classic literature in a way that turns moans and groans into engaging discourse and learning experiences for our students?

Freshman students are often required to read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or Homer's *The Odyssey*. These texts are considered classics; however, they were written centuries ago, and have difficult to decipher old English language. Students are not often naturally drawn to this type of literature. While I enjoy classic literature, I can see how reading it can be difficult for students today. The struggles to connect to the classics can be significant for many students. Classic literature, for the most part, does not include people of color, it can be difficult to understand, and students have a hard time relating to centuries old content. Teachers today must find ways for their students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and abilities to connect their lives and lived experiences with required content in the English language arts classroom.

Dyches (2017) mentions that classics, and specifically Shakespearean classics, are required reading in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) at every grade band for high school English (p.302). The challenge for teachers is not what to teach, but rather how to teach the classics. The difficulties involved in teaching classic literature include old English language, relatability for students, and students

not being able to see themselves reflected in the texts. Culturally relevant teaching practices will help ELA educators to teach classic literature in ways that increase student interest and engagement and overcome the challenges inherent in teaching classic literature.

## Definitions

Classic literature is often referred to as the “canon” and includes literature typically over a century old. Brooks et al. (2014) suggest that classic literature has longevity and is beneficial across time because of the notable writing and innovation of the writers. While this is a great definition, the authors also note that classics mostly exclude authors of color. This lack of diversity in authorship, as well as content, adds difficulty in teaching the classics, particularly for minority students who do not see themselves reflected in the texts of classic literature. With increasingly diverse student body populations, teaching classic literature in ways that pertain to all students is even more imperative because it is required reading for all high school students.

Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) is best defined by Ladson-Billings, a founding leader and promoter of culturally relevant teaching practices. She states:

I have defined culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition . . . specifically committed to collective, not merely individual empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (Ladson-Billings, 1995a p. 160)

CRT allows educators to teach in ways that honor student’s background, culture, and lived experiences and sees all of these things not as deficits, but rather as added benefits that can enhance learning. Even the U.S. Department of Education promotes CRT and states, “Teachers who utilize CRT practices value students’ cultural and linguistic resources and view this knowledge as capital to build upon rather than as a barrier to learning” (Aceves & Orosco, 2014, p. 7).

## Classic Literature

Teaching classic literature is a requirement in secondary education. The importance and emphasis of reading and studying the classics for American high school students is nationwide and upheld by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Speaking specifically about Shakespeare, Dyches Bissonnette & Glazier (2016) states, “In fact, the Common Core requires the teaching of Shakespeare at every installment of secondary English” (p. 686). Additionally, the old English language of Shakespeare can seem convoluted and difficult to understand. Even with significant help from the teacher to convey meaning, students may often feel the texts are irrelevant to their lives today; and the reading, study, and exploration of these classic texts are often dreaded by students and teachers alike. The value placed on classic literature is not likely to change, so ELA educators must develop teaching practices that allow their students to relate to the literature.

## ***Benefits of Classic Literature***

The classics are required reading for high school students today and while it may be challenging, there are still significant benefits for all students in reading classic literature. Pike (2002) states, “A text’s indeterminacy requires a reader to bring personal experiences, cultural background, imagination, predisposition, and even idiosyncratic knowledge with him or her so that a co-construction of meaning with its author is achieved” (p. 358). Pike promotes the idea that because classic literature is more difficult to understand and different from modern texts, it allows students to engage in deeper and more meaningful ways than more traditional literature. The fact that the text is difficult to read or understand allows students to imagine and create as they are reading, so their experience becomes part of the text. Meaning is created by both author and reader.

Classic literature can provide additional benefits to students. “As students move from adolescence into young adulthood, literature gives them a greater sense of history, provides them with increased knowledge of the world, and allows them an opportunity to reflect upon their place within it” (Connor et al., 2009, p. 3). This sense of history and their place within it can provide students with a sense of belonging. Herold (2017) elaborates on this by suggesting that the study of classical literature like *Macbeth* can be used by teachers to challenge students to examine a form of language different than their own and investigate themes and characters they may be familiar with in a different setting. While classics, such as Shakespeare, are challenging to readers, they also provide them with an opportunity to explore their identities and the communities they live in.

## ***Difficulties with Classic Literature***

We know that teaching classic literature can be as challenging for teachers as it is difficult for students to read. As Yousseff (2010) states, “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 the present and past experiences not just by decade, but by centuries” (p. 28). ELA educators must develop teaching practices that help bridge these gaps from old literature to the modern-day student.

Many experts explain the problematic nature of canonical texts. “Oftentimes, these canonical texts perpetuate ideologies that are also dominant – about Whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, Christianity, and physical and mental ability . . .” (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014 p. 123). This can cause minority students to feel marginalized, as they are noticeably excluded from these texts. Problematic or not, classic literature is a powerful currency in society. The prevalence and expectations for using classic literature is embedded in the American framework for literacy education and comes with inherent messages about power and authority. Pike (2002) states, “Canonicity is inextricably bound up with notions of power” (p. 356). Even though classic literature does create definite challenges for educators, its value outweighs the disadvantages. Chiariello (2017) states:

Defenders hold that the value of such works – beautiful prose, timeless theses, simpatico characters – is undeniable. . . 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. (p. 27)

This currency is something that minority students can use to empower themselves as full participants in society and continuing to teach classic literature benefits students today.

## Culturally Relevant Teaching

Teaching classic literature in culturally responsive ways to diverse students today centers around culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billing (1995b) defines the benefits of using culturally relevant pedagogy. She states, “A next step for positing effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). Students being given the authority to challenge the classics they are required to read can be incredibly empowering. Dyches (2017) shares this about a teacher’s experience using CRT, “Sam’s British literature classroom acted as a powerful space in which to disrupt bias and prejudice . . .” (p. 315). CRT further encourages students to engage with a text in a new way, by challenging the content and analyzing the inherent inequities within the text.

Culturally relevant teaching practices focus on the student, believing that all students can succeed, and finding ways to help them make connections or bridges from their culture and prior knowledge to these classics. Integrating culturally responsive teaching may require a change in thinking and practices for most teachers. Educators need to be able to expand their conceptions “regarding self and other, social relations, and knowledge. . . Knowledge is not static; it is shared, recycled, and constructed. Knowledge must be viewed critically. . . Teachers must scaffold or build bridges, to facilitate learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 481). CRT encourages educators to rethink not only their role in the classroom, but student’s place in education, not as mere bystanders, but as active participants in their education. Students and teachers together create a warm and inviting learning community within the classroom through CRT. “Culturally responsive teaching reverses these trends by dealing directly with controversy; studying a wide range of ethnic individuals and groups; contextualizing issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender; and including multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives” (Gay, 2002, p. 108).

To teach in culturally responsive ways, educators need to be willing to step outside of their comfort zones and examine not only the literature, or the students, but also themselves critically. Gay (2002) establishes that “Teachers need to thoroughly understand existing obstacles to culturally responsive teaching before they can successfully remove them” (p. 108). Part of being able to use culturally responsive teaching is knowing and understanding these obstacles that students face in education, such as poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, family, and cultural differences to name a few. Teachers must know their students, their background and culture. Another essential element in CRT is establishing connections with students. “School literacies flourished when teachers connected students’ lives and lived ex-

periences with those offered by classical and canonical texts; teachers were able to make these academic connections by first forging relationships with their students” (Dyches Bissonnette & Glazier, 2016, p. 692). These relationships of trust help students to be willing to wade through the discomfort they may experience while examining classic literature, themselves, and the world around them.

## Culturally Responsive Teaching in Action

Culturally responsive teaching can be practiced in a variety of ways. One teaching approach focuses on allowing students to create a new story of their own based on the original classic story. This is often called restory or counterstory. “Counterstories push these canonical boundaries. . . When counterstorytelling as an instructional practice is implemented, secondary literacy practitioners create a bridge between canonical texts and their students and provide a meaningful opportunity for students to engage with the texts” (Dyches Bissonnette & Glazier, 2016 p. 688). This allows the students to place themselves within the story and shape it in a new way to reflect their lives, values, and experiences. Dyches (2017) shares some of the benefits of restory by stating, “By granting students multimodal opportunities to restory the required canonical curriculum, Sam afforded them with iterative, discursive opportunities to disrupt textual erasure and instead ‘see’ themselves in the texts” (p. 314). This practice gives students the power to change the narrative and to counteract the messages within the text.

Another teaching method that aligns with CRT is critical literacy. Critical literacy is a theoretical approach that allows students to critically examine a text, and is often explained as an approach that, “also teaches students to read and write against the texts: to identify and understand that language and texts are not neutral and always ideological” (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014, p. 123). This method enables students and teachers to talk about controversial issues resulting from reading classic literature and provides a means to raise awareness of the problematic nature inherent in some texts. It also allows teachers to incorporate discourse about difficult topics in easy ways. Borsheim-Black et al., (2014) explains how critical literacy works by stating:

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 . . . make about dominant cultural values and ideologies? (p. 124)

Using critical literacy is a way for teachers to create discourse around the controversial issues surrounding classic literature and work those very things into the curriculum. While these teaching methods may be viewed simply as a best teaching practice, culturally relevant teaching seeks to include students in the discussion. When students are able to engage with an old text in new ways, they become more engaged, and they are able to see why reading classics can be important for their education.

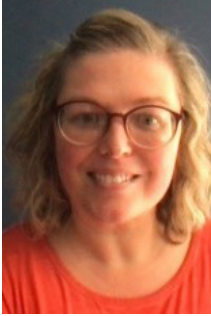
## Conclusions

Teaching classic literature is not going away and will be a requirement for ELA teachers for years to come. Dyches Bissonnette & Glazier (2016) states, “Given the curriculum’s pervasiveness and obstinacy to reform, teachers must generate new ways to engage their increasingly diverse student bodies with this static curriculum” (p. 686). Using CRT allows students to engage with classic literature in new and meaningful ways. It gives them the power to challenge authority in ways that do not typically happen in school. Even though teaching classic literature comes with a set of challenges, using CRT enables teachers and students to reshape classic literature into something that is both meaningful and reflective of their lives and experiences.

Research shows that using culturally relevant teaching practices can overcome the barriers students face while reading classic literature. Using culturally responsive teaching (CRT) to teach classic literature can increase engagement, help students develop connections to the texts, as well as provide a safe setting to discuss the controversies these texts bring with them, and make links to the social and political injustices students face today.

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**About the Author**

Janey Allen Dunford received a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Brigham Young University – Hawaii in 1999. Her passion for literature and teaching led her to the University of Toledo where she received her Master of Education in Secondary Education with a focus on English language arts in 2021.