

“Hansen, Not Hamlet: The Benefits of Teaching Modern Literature in the Secondary English Classroom”

By: Muncie Canon

To teach, or not to teach modern literature — that is the question. In the United States, Common Core determines what skills educators must teach their students but not how they teach these skills. Therefore, secondary English teachers are required to teach certain concepts, but they are not required to teach certain books. Despite this, however, many secondary English teachers choose to teach the same books, which are mainly from the literary canon (a collection of popular classic literature that is held as the standard for quality literature). Teachers rarely choose to teach modern young adult (YA) literature, even though it is often preferred by their students. If teachers can choose any literature to teach, then why do they continue to pull from the Literary Canon?

Aside from being overdone, most books belonging to the literary canon were written before the year 2000, which means that they are older than the students currently in secondary schools. In a world that changes rapidly, these works of literature are becoming outdated. For clarification, I do not mean outdated in the sense that they are irrelevant, but rather that they are so old that today's students struggle to connect with a time that they were not a part of. Students would relate better to literature that is more modern, and therefore probably learn from it better. With this in mind, why do secondary teachers not update their courses to reflect this? Why do they continue to pull from the literary canon instead of switching some out for modern literature? The goal of secondary English teachers is to find the way their students learn the best and to foster an appreciation for literature amongst their students. To best do this, they must keep in mind the Reader Response Theory and teach literature that their students can relate to. Reader Response Theory discusses the reader's experience of a book and how it is at least as (if not more) important than the author's experience of their book or intended lessons for the reader. Taking Reader Response Theory into account, educators should examine classic literature and modern literature together to determine if some of the classic literature taught in the secondary English classroom could be updated/modernized to better help students learn from and appreciate literature. I will be exploring this idea throughout this paper.

Even though time and generations are ever changing and progressing, the literature that is taught in secondary schools is not. As Reader Response Theory highlights the importance of the readers' experience of a novel, educators must realize how this outdated material could be out of touch and negatively impacting modern readers. While some of the literature in the literary canon retains value and should continue to be taught, educators should add modern literature to the secondary English course load in order to foster students' interest in studying literature. This claim is demonstrated by analyzing two classic works of literature — William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" — in tandem with two modern works of literature — Val Emmich's *Dear Evan Hansen* and Nicola Yoon's *Everything, Everything* — from a Reader Response Theory perspective. This analysis relies on pieces of criticism pertaining to Reader Response Theory, the Literary Canon, secondary education, and others to aid in analysis of these works of literature.

Before diving into the literature analysis, it is important to understand Reader Response Theory. Louise Rosenblatt, late English professor and one of the main contributors to the development of Reader Response Theory, first began publishing her ideas on the theory in 1938 (Murfin and Ray 392). The theory strives to highlight the importance of the reader's reaction to a



text, rather than the author's intended meaning. As author Robert E. Probst explains, “[A] work may mean to a reader what it did not mean to its author. It may trigger responses, evoke memories, awaken emotions and thoughts that could not have been predicted by the writer” (38). According to Reader Response Theory, the reader’s ability to connect with a given work of literature, and the meaning the reader finds within that literature, is of greater value than any literary devices, techniques, or themes that the author attempts to convey.

Looking at Reader Response Theory as it applies to the secondary English classroom, choosing literature that is relatable and meaningful to students is just as important as choosing literature for its literary contents, such as figurative language or structure. Famous literary critic Harold Bloom shares his thoughts as a university educator in “The Dialectics of Literary Tradition” (about the history and impact of classical literature): “I recall also that I would solace myself by thinking that while a scholar-teacher of literature could do no good, at least he could do no harm...after more than twenty years I have come to understand that I underrated my profession as much in its capacity for doing harm as in its potential for good works” (530). The “harm” Bloom references is a negative impact on students. By neglecting to consider Reader Response Theory when choosing the literature for the secondary curriculum, educators are doing their students a huge disservice. Students’ learning and experience of literature is harmed if educators do not choose appropriate literature, and it is harmed if educators do not focus on the meaningful aspects of the literature. Students struggle to appreciate books that they cannot connect to, and struggle to learn from books that they do not appreciate.

Furthermore, middle and high school students do not read purely to learn about literary concepts; they learn a lot about life and human values through literature. In 2011, University of South Florida professors Michael DiCicco and Paula Taylor-Greathouse interviewed a dozen YA authors about morality in their literature. As part of this project, DiCicco and Taylor-Greathouse reference writer Carol Jones Collins as she discusses purpose in literature:

Collins suggests the original intention of literature was to teach moral values and provide moral lessons as frames of reference for personal growth—as seen through adult perspectives. She maintains YA literature produced in the last half of the 20th century has shifted in this purpose and as such, ‘treats problems in ways that reflect the concerns of young adults, as they struggle to become adults in a complex, technological society.’ (77)

At the time when students are in secondary school, they are beginning to develop into adults and finding their own perspective on the world. This newfound independence is difficult to manage, but reading about the characters in YA novels can help. The adolescent characters in the novels take on the struggles of real-life adolescents by dealing with themes such as identity, self-hate, bullying, familial struggles, and technology. Although teenagers might resist taking advice from adults, they will likely learn and take advice from the characters in the novels that the adults provide for them. The students read about how a favorite character manages a situation, relate to it, and apply that response to conflict in their own lives.

Unfortunately, DiCicco and Taylor-Greathouse also mention that Rosenblatt and fellow author Rita Manning “agree that YA literature contains the power to affect an adolescent’s sense of morality, but also recognize the use of YA literature to promote this developmental aspect of the adolescent is absent from our current classroom dialogue” (75). In other words, yes, YA literature helps adolescents with moral development, but educators must discuss the moral aspects of the literature with students for it to achieve the desired effect. YA novels sitting on the shelf of a classroom library are not sufficient to provide students with moral guidance. Teachers

must include the literature in the curriculum and discuss its significance with the students for it to make an impact.

This in mind, how can educators seamlessly integrate modern YA literature into their courses without losing the concepts and themes they regularly teach with classic literature? I have analyzed the following texts and paired two modern YA novels with two classic works of literature from the literary canon in order to illustrate the connections between the works in each pairing. By identifying the similarities between the classic works and modern works, educators can either replace teaching the classic works with the modern works and still teach the same concepts and themes, or they can teach the works together, using the modern works to help students better understand the classic works.

The first pairing is *Hamlet* (1603) and *Dear Evan Hansen* (2017). Both texts also have theatrical versions, so students can analyze their performances alongside the written works. The main character in each work must overcome an internal conflict that middle and high schoolers are all too familiar with: mental health struggles. For Hamlet, mental health struggles afflict him as he starts to become depressed and go mad after finding out his uncle murdered his father to begin a relationship with his mother. He explains his change in demeanor to his friends when they come to cheer him up: “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises” (Shakespeare II.ii.318-320). Hamlet’s friends and family notice that he begins acting strangely and watch him descend into madness until he becomes a murderer and, consequently, dies at the end of the play.

As for Evan, his mental health struggles take the form of depression and severe anxiety. He explains in the beginning of the novel, “There are a million and ten things from the subatomic to the cosmic that can rattle my nerves on a daily basis” (Emmich 6). Evan has struggled with generalized anxiety all his life, and like Hamlet, the other characters in the book, as well as the reader, watch him become depressed at times, draw into himself, lash out, and hurt those around him because of these struggles. However, unlike Hamlet, Evan does not die at the end; instead, he begins to confront his mental health problems and cope with them. For adolescent readers, who might be struggling with mental health themselves, reading about a character who overcomes these struggles (Evan) might be more beneficial than reading about a character who dies because of these struggles (Hamlet). It is important that struggling students see the light at the end of the tunnel and realize things can get better. If educators can still tackle the topic of mental health, while also inspiring students, then it might be best to teach *Dear Evan Hansen* rather than *Hamlet*, or to teach *Dear Evan Hansen* after teaching *Hamlet* to highlight this positive progression in managing mental health.

Keeping with the same two works and theme of mental health, both works discuss the difficult topic of suicide. Hamlet contemplates suicide with the famous line, “To be, or not to be — that is the question” (Shakespeare III.i.57), while Evan attempts suicide: “I just loosened my grip, unlocked my legs, and...I woke up on the ground...I was in shock that I’d actually done it, that I’d *tried* to do it, and that I’d failed so miserably” (Emmich 316). Each work also contains another character that actually commits suicide. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet’s lover, Ophelia, kills herself when her father dies. In *Dear Evan Hansen*, Evan’s classmate, Connor, kills himself when someone says he looks like a school shooter after he had already been bullied for years. However, both suicide are received differently by the characters in each work. When Ophelia kills herself, her gravediggers question whether she should receive a Christian burial since she committed a sin: “Is she to be buried in Christian burial, [she] that willfully seeks her own salvation?” (Shakespeare V.i.1-2). On the other hand, despite the fact that he was not as well

liked as Ophelia, when Connor kills himself the student body comes together to create a memorial community service project for him and share their own mental health stories: “Thank you, Evan Hansen, for giving us a space to remember Connor. To be together. To be found” (Emmich 206). In the twenty-first century, there is less stigma surrounding mental health than there was in the seventeenth century. Presently, society is more open to talking about depression and suicide than in Shakespeare’s time, which is why it is important to teach modern-day literature in place of, or alongside, classic literature that is insensitive to these topics.

Looking at the two works together, both center around themes of mental health and suicide, but *Hamlet* depicts them in a stigmatized way, while *Dear Evan Hansen* depicts them as common occurrences that there is hope for. When discussing literature read in the secondary English classroom, John H. Bushman writes, “An adolescent can better relate to the characters and plot of YA novels.... They offer hope to the young reader — hope that things can change, improve, succeed” (39). Young readers will respond better to *Dear Evan Hansen* because they can connect better without the barrier of Shakespearian language, and they will feel hopeful for victims of poor mental health without the previously established stigma. Therefore, *Dear Evan Hansen* should replace (or be taught alongside) *Hamlet* in the secondary English curriculum.

The second classic and modern literature pairing is “The Metamorphosis” (1915) and *Everything, Everything* (2015). Written a century apart, both works of literature focus on disabled protagonists who struggle with isolation. In “The Metamorphosis,” Gregor’s disability is that he has mysteriously transformed into an insect overnight: “When Gregor woke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed right there in his bed into some sort of monstrous insect” (Kafka 995). This causes him difficulty as he now struggles to move and is unable to talk or go to work. In *Everything, Everything*, Madeline’s disability is the disease SCID: “My disease is as rare as it is famous. It’s a form of Severe Combined Immunodeficiency, but you know it as ‘bubble baby disease.’ Basically, I’m allergic to the world” (Yoon 3). This causes her difficulty as she must sanitize everything in her life to keep from getting sick, and she is unable to go to school.

Aside from disability, the main theme in the two works is isolation. Gregor is isolated in his bedroom because his parents find his insect-form revolting. The only person that visits him is his sister, Grete, and even she eventually stops visiting. Similarly, Madeline is isolated in her house because going outside risks her getting sick. The only person that regularly visits Madeline (other than her mother) is her nurse, Carla, and she eventually stops visiting as well. Both characters wish they could shed their disabilities and enter a world outside of their confinement.

In both works, the reader sees the detriment of isolation. Gregor grows depressed as he sits alone, locked away. He longs to be with his family, even if they no longer want to associate with him: “As evening approached, the door to the living room...would always be open so as to permit him, lying in his own dark room and invisible from the living room, to watch the entire family sitting at the brightly lit table and listen to their conversations” (Kafka 1017). He grows sadder and lonelier until he eventually dies in the end of the novella: “[Gregor has] gone and croaked — just lying there, dead as a doornail!” (Kafka 1025). On the other hand, in *Everything, Everything*, Madeline grows restless and angry in her isolation. She longs to go outside her house, to meet other teenagers, and attend high school. On her birthday, she ruminates about her situation: “Another whole year of being sick, no hope for a cure on the horizon. Another year of missing all the normal teenagery things — learner’s permit, first kiss, prom, first heartbreak, first fender bender” (Yoon 10). Like Gregor, Madeline is miserable because she feels trapped inside of her house. Unlike Gregor, however, Madeline does not die at the end of her story. Instead, her

life improves: “ ‘I’ve never felt better in my life,’ [Madeline says]” (Yoon 218). Madeline is able to escape her isolation and rid herself of the loneliness and despair she had been experiencing.

Much like the case of *Hamlet* and *Dear Evan Hansen*, when comparing “The Metamorphosis” and *Everything, Everything*, the modern YA novel resolves positively, unlike the classic text. When thinking of how students might respond to these texts, they might find more hope when they read about how Madeline overcomes her isolation and finds a better life for herself, than when they read about Gregor excepting his isolation and succumbing to death. University professor Susan P. Santoli and high school teacher Mary Elaine Wagner write in their article “Promoting Young Adult Literature: The Other “Real” Literature” that “Young adult novels can also bridge the gap between school and students’ lives and affirm students, helping to make them feel less invisible, ignored, or ‘marginalized’” (68). Students relate to what they read and apply the messages in these stories to their own lives. Therefore, secondary English teachers should consider teaching *Everything, Everything* in place of “The Metamorphosis,” or teaching *Everything, Everything* after “The Metamorphosis” to leave the students with a hopeful outlook on overcoming tragic situations, rather than the bleak outlook of the classic text.

Nevertheless, some argue that modern YA novels should not be taught in classrooms, only classics from the literary canon. While it is largely agreed upon that classic literature has its place in English classes, YA literature should be taught alongside it, instead of restricting secondary English classes to solely classic works. The argument is not that YA literature should replace classic literature, but that they should be taught together to best reach the interests of students. Florida state university professor and doctoral student Katie Rybakova and Rikki Roccanti discuss teaching classic and modern literature together in their article “Connecting the Canon to Current Young Adult Literature.” They say that it is not about replacing classic novels with modern novels, it is instead about how “[C]onnecting [YA literature] to the canon can serve as a reading ladder for students which blends the benefits of both types of texts with the ultimate goal of developing literacy and creating lifelong readers and writers” (43). By pairing YA novels with classic novels, students can make connections between the novels that help make the classic works easier to comprehend. Once students can place the characters and themes of classic works into modern contexts, they will not seem so difficult to process.

Another reason to continue teaching classic literature while adding YA literature to the curriculum is to read against classic literature. Professors Carlin Borsheim-Black, Michael Macaluso, and Robert Petrone explain the significance of reading against literature from the canon: “We recognize the power canonical novels hold to reaffirm cultural capital....By reading *against* canonical literature, students might begin to see “canonical” messages around them and become more aware of the influence these messages *could* — as opposed to would or should — have on them” (132). Different from reading literature for its literary elements or plotline, the purpose of reading against classic literature is to identify all the flawed messages within the novels. Educators can emphasize the negative ideals in the classics, such as racism and sexism, to their students as a lesson in how they should not act in the modern day. The juxtaposition of classic and modern literature illustrates the shift in societal ideals between time periods. As discussed earlier, the shift between how mental health and suicide are depicted and reacted to in *Hamlet* versus in *Dear Evan Hansen* is an example of how reading the classic and modern works shows the progression in certain societal viewpoints.

In closing, secondary English teachers have two goals: first to discover how their students learn best, then to teach to that and to help their students find an appreciation for literature. By

applying Reader Response Theory and stressing the importance of the reader's connection with literature, teachers can discover how their students learn best. Students are most likely not going to connect to classic literature as much as modern YA literature because they can better relate to the time period and character ages of the latter. For that reason, teachers can help students learn by teaching them the YA literature with which they can connect. This works in two parts by having educators achieve the second goal, and fostering an appreciation of literature within students, as well. Students are not only going to learn best from literature they can connect to, but also appreciate it best. Unless they are avid readers and English enthusiasts, many secondary school students do not appreciate classic literature because the vocabulary and syntax are difficult to comprehend, the characters are much older than they are, and there are objects and ideas that might no longer exist in the modern day. YA literature is written using modern language, about current topics, containing relatable, young narrators that make the literature enjoyable to middle and high school students who then come to appreciate it.

All in all, if secondary English teachers incorporate YA literature into their curriculum, then not only would they potentially cultivate a generation of students who appreciate literature, but they would also potentially cultivate a generation of students who are better equipped to overcome the hardships that come with adolescence. Instead of primarily reading texts to learn about literature themes and concepts, students would also read for a sense of connection, support, and hope. Teaching YA literature does more than simply provide greater enjoyment to secondary students; it has the ability to guide their futures.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. "The Dialectics of Literary Tradition." *Boundary 2*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1974, pp. 528–38. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/302670>. Accessed 20 Feb. 2024.
- Borsheim-Black, Carlin, et al. "Critical Literature Pedagogy: Teaching Canonical Literature for Critical Literacy." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2014, pp. 123–33. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24034704>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.
- Bushman, John H. "Young Adult Literature in the Classroom--Or Is It?" *The English Journal*, vol. 86, no. 3, 1997, pp. 35–40. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/820642>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.
- DiCicco, Michael and Paula Taylor-Greathouse. "The Moral of the Story: Young Adult Authors Speak on Morality, Obligation, and Age Appropriateness." *The English Journal*, vol. 103, no. 5, 2014, pp. 75–80. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484251>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2024.
- Emmich, Val, et al. *Dear Evan Hansen*. Hachette Book Group, 2018.
- Kafka, Franz. "The Metamorphosis." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. Shorter 4th ed., vol. 2, edited by Martin Puchner et al., W.W. Norton & Company, 2019, pp. 995-1027.
- Murfin, Ross and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. 2nd ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003.
- Probst, Robert E. "Reader-Response Theory and the English Curriculum." *The English Journal*, vol. 83, no. 3, 1994, pp. 37–44. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/820925>. Accessed 20 Feb. 2024.
- Rybakova, Katie and Rikki Roccanti. "Connecting The Canon to Current Young Adult Literature." *American Secondary Education*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2016, pp. 31–45. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45147973>. Accessed 19 Mar. 2024.
- Santoli, Susan P. and Mary Elaine Wagner. "Promoting Young Adult Literature: The Other 'Real' Literature." *American Secondary Education*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2004, pp. 65–75. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064624>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2024.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. *myShakespeare*, Paradigm Education, LLC, 16 Jan. 2024, myshakespeare.com/hamlet/act-1-scene-1. Accessed 19 Feb. 2024.
Yoon, Nicola. *Everything, Everything*. Alloy Entertainment, 2015.

Muncie Canon '26 is an English Secondary Education major and Spanish Language and Culture minor from Sharpsville, PA.