



The Fall Of Literature

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Until the 1970s, it was expected that Australian students should read classic literature over the course of several years at school. Since then, the classics have increasingly been pushed out of curricula, with many of them crudely dismissed by teachers as 'too hard'. Tragically, the rich Western literary tradition is being neglected in our schools.

A 'classic' here is defined broadly as a written or performed work which continues to be widely read or viewed outside its original historical and cultural context, or which has had a profound influence on subsequent written works. Put differently, a literary classic is a work significant to our cultural heritage, and the best examples have impacted generations of writers who have come since. They might include anything from more historical classics, including Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Dickens' *Great Expectations*, to more recent ones, including Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.



Classic literature should be a core element in an English course. In the first place, the classics represent the finest writing of the English language. This is repeatedly reaffirmed by generations of readers, who continue to purchase and read these works despite the passage of time since the original publishing date. Indeed, that these works continue to be seen on the shelves of standard bookshops surely says something of their value.

This is not to mention the cultural significance of these works. Many of them have also become an important part of Western culture, and have profoundly influenced the English language and its literature. Shakespeare is an obvious example. His works popularised scores of words and phrases that have since become standard in the English language, have inspired many adaptations, and have formed the basis of plot lines in a multitude of later literary works. There is therefore much to be gained from reading the classics—not for some perceived ‘cultural elite’, but for absolutely everyone and especially those with an interest in literature, reading and, indeed, writing.

For much of the twentieth century, teachers recognised this, and it was standard for school-age students to read the classics. In the 1940s, the Victorian Readers provided the staple readings for all school-age students in Victoria. The sixth book, which was intended for upperprimary school, included extracts from Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Ugly Duckling*, Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and *The Odyssey* of Homer.

Likewise, in 1960 the revised reading lists in the Victorian Primary school curriculum— *Course of Study for Primary Schools* —listed a number of children’s classics for Year 6, including *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Magic Pudding*, and *Aesop’s Fables*.

Fast-forward to 2014. We now have a national curriculum for English, and from the Foundation Year to Year 10, it contains scant mention of any Western literature.

True: there are a few references to *Cinderella* and *Jack in the Beanstalk* over the years, and there are also a few uncited quotations of the romantic poets Burns, Tennyson and Blake. But the curriculum does not even give a guide as to which classics should be read and at what level.

Even Shakespeare is mentioned only once, in an example sentence in the glossary. The example is: ‘because I am reading Shakespeare, my time is limited’.

In general, the English curriculum —that is, a curriculum that should arguably be concerned with teaching students to read, write, speak fluent English, understand grammar, and read literature—is far more concerned that students should become ‘ethical, thoughtful, informed and active members of society’.

Despite its silence on literature, it has no shortage of content relating to ‘social studies’. More than half of the content in the curriculum relates to themes of ‘perspective’, ‘culture’, and ‘difference’.

The curriculum also frequently alludes to lessons relating to ‘ethics’—particularly relating to the

notorious cross-curriculum priorities: ‘sustainability’, ‘Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia’, and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures’.

In Year 2, for example, the curriculum suggests ‘exploring in stories, everyday and media texts moral and social dilemmas’; in Year 5 it suggests examining ‘how we should care for the Earth’, and suggests ‘investigating the qualities of contemporary protest songs, for example those about Indigenous peoples and those about the environment’.

But alas, the curriculum is utterly unhelpful when it comes to providing guidelines for the reading of classic literature. Indeed, it steers clear of the word ‘classic’ altogether.

It is a fruitless exercise, however, to try to lay the blame of these shortcomings on the English curriculum advisory committee, or any of the educational bodies that have risen in the curriculum’s defence. As the first of its kind, Australia’s existing national curriculum has naturally inspired controversy; but in reality, it is only the latest in a long line of State curricula that have shared largely the same issues.

After the 1970s, postmodernism, poststructuralism, child-centred learning theory, and other similar philosophies took hold in the education sphere across the English-speaking world.

Postmodernism—a series of philosophical movements which emerged from continental Europe in the 1960s—is generally characterised by extreme subjectivism and the suspicion or rejection of societal norms. With respect to literature, postmodernists and their kin quickly called into question what exactly literature was, whether a defined body of literature existed beyond as more than social construct, and—absurdly—whether there is as much to be gained from studying a contemporary novel that nobody will remember in fifty years as there is from studying Dickens. Postmodernism, and its ilk, therefore called into question the very value of our literary heritage.

Likewise, child-centred learning theory shifted the focus from ‘content’ to abstract ‘learning skills’. Since child-centred learning theorists are particularly concerned about engaging the interests of the students (even if it should be at the cost of covering content), child-centred learning apparently also made the prospect of tackling Dickens unappealing to many teachers. Instead, readings are supposed to be chosen to reflect the perceived ‘interests’ of the students, or else to promote their ‘ethical’ development.

Since the 1960s, therefore, all Australian states—with the sole exception of New South Wales—have all but abandoned the mandated study of classic literature in schools. To many teachers, the prospect of teaching Dickens or Homer (or the Bible) to students simply cannot be entertained, since apparently students consider them boring. In a response to an IPA opinion piece published in June this year, a representative of a prominent teachers’ organisation summed up the contemporary attitude of many educationalists to classic literature with the following words: ‘I could never have successfully sold it to the majority of teenagers.’

Also symbolic of this attitude is that the 2014 *Victorian Premier’s Reading Challenge* reading list for years 5 and 6—which lists more than 1700 books—only included about twenty books that can be identified as ‘classics’ by any measure. This is a dramatic change from the sixth book of the



1940s *Victorian Readers* mentioned above, in which many—if not the majority—of the excerpts were derived from classic literature.

In short, the focus of school English has shifted away from classic literature in favour of abstract learning skills and social studies. As a result, there is no saying whether students in Australian schools will ever come across Shakespeare in English classes, let alone Dickens or Chaucer. But they might well study gender perspectives and environment movements.

That school English is being degraded by an alliance of extreme child-centred learning theory and postmodernism is becoming increasingly clear. It is emblematic of a change that has been occurring deep in the roots of the education sphere across the English-speaking world over an extended period of time. It reflects ambivalence in certain academic circles about the origins of our society and Western Civilisation as much as it does developments in educational theory.

How and whether this can be changed remains to be seen. One thing is for certain: simply reviewing the English curriculum—as Christopher Pyne seeks to do—is only a surface effort and is not a permanent solution. It will not solve the problem at its root. Until that is addressed, we can expect that Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer and our other greats will increasingly be locked out of our classrooms.