



## The True 'Common Core' of English Literature

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Dr Terrence Moore's book, *The Story-Killers: A common-sense case against the Common Core*, reveals how the teaching of the Western literary canon is being eroded in the United States by progressive educationalists. The Common Core—a government funded school curriculum—is currently operational in 46 American states.

Moore is deeply concerned that the truly great stories of Western Civilisation—Homer, Shakespeare, and the rest—may cease to be read or studied as whole works in schools across America. Even now, a twelfth grade 'Literature' textbook produced by major publisher Pearson/Prentice Hall teaches Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* without setting it as a reading text.

The textbook provides students with page after glossy page of photographs, modern anecdotes and personal reflections on the *Frankenstein* mythos, but offers no excerpts from the original work or any suggestion that the students should actually read the classic novel.

Is this the future of literature in American schools? Under the Common Core it might well be.

In a similar vein to the Australian Curriculum for English, the Common Core documents are written in dense educational jargon, and emphasise the development of skills over the acquisition of knowledge. They provide little useful instruction to teachers, fail to mention many great works of the Western literary canon, and even impede good teaching practices.

In *The Story-Killers*, Moore proposes an alternative curriculum with classical literature at its core, in place of the progressive paradigm. In plain language, Moore offers a clear outline of what a solid, classical, liberal curriculum for literature should contain. He is eminently qualified for the task, having founded a classical charter school for K-12 students in Colorado. Moore is now principal of the Atlanta Classical Academy, and acts as an advisor to several other classical charter schools via the Hillsdale College Barney Charter School Initiative.

According to Moore, literature should be treated, first and foremost, as a means to study human nature through investigating the thoughts and actions of seemingly real characters. The motives, ambitions, faults and virtues of human characters are brought to the fore through careful observation and analysis.

The teacher should not be overly preoccupied with structural features in the text (such as its setting and plot trajectory), as these draw attention away from the study of characters and ruin the suspension of disbelief which allows students to truly lose themselves in good literature, as the author intended.

In the final chapter, Dr Moore presents his high school curriculum—a curriculum which has been successfully implemented in classical charter schools across the US for years. In essence, it consists of a list of books set for each semester from ninth to twelfth grade. Arranged in chronological order, this list begins with the foundations of Western literature. The whole of Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* are read in ninth grade, along with other Greek and Roman literature.

The tenth grade is devoted to British literature, including the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Austen and Dickens.

Classic American literature is studied in eleventh grade, requiring students to read the *Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn* among other works. The final year introduces the most recent works of the literary canon, including Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In all, Moore's literature curriculum is a sweeping overview of the greatest literary works of the Western Civilisation.

Moore provides extensive examples and commentary on progressive failures, but *The Story-Killers* goes far beyond exposing the intellectual bankruptcy and ideological underpinnings of progressive literature teaching in the United States.

Moore provides viable, positive instruction on how to create a true 'Common Core' for literature. The greatest literary works of our Western heritage should be at the heart of any literature



curriculum that claims to provide the best education for young people.

These insights are particularly critical for us in Australia, as we likewise face up to the astounding neglect of literature in the Australian Curriculum for English.