

Old Words MODERN minds

Why classic literature in education needs to be considered from a present day perspective

From Shakespeare to “Lord of the Flies,” the books students read in English classes have been published over hundreds of years but contain few differing perspectives. English curriculums have been carefully constructed to relay important messages and life lessons, intending to leave lasting impacts on teens who read the assigned texts.

However, what is less often discussed are the perspectives that have been left out of these narratives. While not necessarily intentional, many valuable perspectives and stories have been forgotten beneath piles of household-name books. So, who wrote these classics, and how are they still writing the future so many years later? What important lessons can be learned from them today while acknowledging they aren't the only important ones?

Palo Alto High School senior Sarina Grewal believes that some old books are not fully applicable to modern society, especially regarding the antiquarian representation of minority groups.

“The books in our English curriculum are very stuck in the society that they were written in,” Grewal said. “There are a lot of values and issues that are very anachronistic [belonging to an earlier period] and feel out of place in a modern curriculum, especially given how some of the authors describe or treat characters

who are female or who are people of color. A lot of underrepresented people are not described well in English curriculums, and that's an issue.”

On the other hand, Paly librarian Sima Thomas thinks that older books can reveal important themes and ideas just as relevant today as they were when they were published. One example of this is Chinua Achebe's “Things Fall Apart” (1958).

“Thematic ideas continue to resonate with us as a culture,” Thomas said. “The settings and experiences don't necessarily need to be modern or immediately relatable. The pre and post-exposure of the Igbo people to British colonial invasion in Chinua Achebe's ‘Things Fall Apart’ is probably a totally foreign experience to most of us, yet the novel takes us into the world of Okonkwo, the protagonist, and gives us another perspective to reflect on.”

New perspectives are gained from every work of literature a reader comes across, old and new. It's a matter of what these perspectives are, who created them and

how influential they are in shaping our worldview. Thomas believes that literature creates social realities and perceptions about the world, which can change and evolve based on how a reader digests the material in books.

“Literature gives us common stories that mirror our society back to us, holding it up for our inspection and for our questioning,” Thomas said. “Great novelists have a way of seeing our shared world and reflecting it back to us critically. Having these shared stories to use in our discussions of society and how we want to improve it ... give common language.”

After leaving school, many adults remember the media they consumed as a student that helped them form their worldviews. If the media presented to teenagers relays only a specific aspect of society and the world in which they live, then teenagers' opinions will be created solely based on that small sliver of the world exposed to them.

“As teenagers, we are in a position where our worldview is very influenced by the con-



tent that we consume,” Grewal said. “This is a critical time for that worldview to be developed, and it's really important to make sure our ideals represent everything and are not based on a biased perception of what the world looks like.”

It's important for teenagers to see their worldviews represented in books, as well as a broad variety of diverse perspectives, to understand that the world doesn't consist of just one narrative.

“Ultimately, everyone deserves to see themselves, at somepoint, portrayed in complex and positive ways,” Thomas said. “It's important to show students that humanity is in all races, cultures or ethnicities and that these ideas about serious or canonical literature coming only out of Western or European traditions are false.”

In addition, Megan Baxter, author of “Farm Girl” and “Twenty Square Feet of Skin” and creative writing mentor, believes that reading literature should be done with an awareness of the broader historical context in which the text was written, regardless of one's opinion.

“Literature certainly reflects the values, dreams, fears and everyday life of the culture from which it was composed, but we also have to remember that these ideas were those of an individual artist,” Baxter said. “A robust understanding of historical context is crucial, and sometimes that means engaging with values that we don't necessarily hold.”

Paly junior Rena Kim views new per-

spectives and understandings of society and culture as something to be gained from older literature despite its level of representation.

“Literature won't always have an accurate depiction of society, but reading it gives you perspective,” Kim said. “Even if it's not accurate or something you agree with — it still gives you perspective.”

A wide variety of books and authors, as well as an understanding of the context in which they were published, is necessary to uphold an effective curriculum that accurately portrays all aspects of the world.

“When a text challenges our contemporary standards, it's important to have a discussion about why it is being taught and what it adds to the curriculum,” Baxter said. “This dialogue should be open and inclusive, and literature shouldn't [always] be placed on a pedestal.”

Sometimes, it can be challenging to create a curriculum that marries important representation with classic texts and ideas. Richard Rodriguez, a Paly English teacher and the Instructional Lead of the English De-

partment, emphasizes the importance of research while planning a curriculum.

“It takes a lot of work to teach literature critically,” Rodriguez said. “You have to read secondary sources, literary criticism, historical studies and a lot of different things. You have to practice and take chances with discussion and know that you might make mistakes. The big thing is listening to students and new voices to impose new ideas on people.”

Many Paly students hope to see some form of change enacted in the books they read in class. While a few are content with the current structure, Grewal argues that it's imperative to start the shift toward a more diverse book selection early on.

“The English curriculum should focus more on putting diverse books in the lower-grade English classes,” Grewal said. “There's less ability to integrate that diverse perspective later on, so adding them to English 9A and 10A would reinforce these broader perspectives early on. This would be the best way to adapt our curriculum and make it more diverse [than it is].”

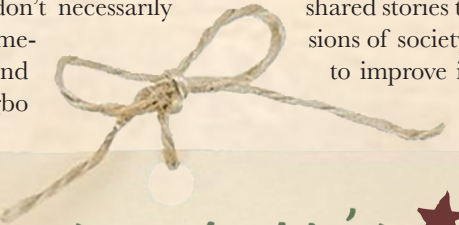
The goal when it comes to creating an effective curriculum is for the students to take away ideas from the literature. Every piece is intentionally placed to help students understand their world a bit better than they used to.

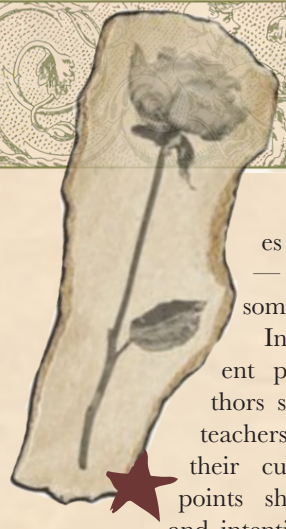
“It [literature] is supposed to help us understand norms,” Rodriguez said. “There are piec-

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Sima Thomas, Paly Librarian

“Literature shouldn't [always] be placed on a pedestal.” Megan Baxter, author & teacher

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Sarina Grewal, 12





es of text that are didactic — they're meant to teach us something."

In terms of adding different perspectives, diverse authors should not be a box for teachers to check while designing their curriculum. These viewpoints should be commonplace and intentionally integrated into a meaningful syllabus.

"As educators, we need to be mindful not to cherry-pick books that solely represent our own ideas," Baxter said. "Diversity in authors, content, style and genre needs to be the norm, not sprinkled in or relegated to a specific month or unit."

From a curriculum viewpoint, teachers might be drawn towards assigning easily understandable books specifically about teenagers, such as Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," where the premise and themes are clearly discernible. However, Thomas believes that this style of assigning literature is not productive in growing a teenager's worldview.

"I view teenagers as these amazing beings on the cusp of adulthood who are grappling with so many big issues and starting to see their place in the world," Thomas said. "I think you [teenagers] are capable of reading heavy stories and thinking and working through them. The stories don't necessarily have to be about other teens."

Additionally, many books in a "typical" high school English class do not accurately reflect teenage life today. Contemporary books about teenagers are inherently different from classic books about teens, not just in the mannerisms indicative of the time period, but also in the setting and the narratives that take place.

"Teenagers in mainstream books often have much more power

and agency than in books like "To Kill a Mockingbird," Baxter said. "I don't think there are any teenage characters in the books I remember reading that resemble today's teenagers — even the idea of teenage life has changed since the composition of 'Little Women' or 'To Kill a Mockingbird.' The portrayal of teenagers in literature is not static, and it can be influenced by the cultural and social context in which the literature is produced."

An age-old cultural question that analyzers of art find themselves asking is: "Does art influence society, or does society influence art?" While there is no straightforward answer, this question can also be seen in how literature shapes our world, or vice versa.

"Society influences the books we read," Kim said. "I don't think the books we read are going to change our lives forever, but they definitely change us."

While literature might not change people as a whole, reading a story about an event unfamiliar to the reader inherently changes the reader's opinion on the topic.

"I've learned a lot from the literature that I've read," Grewal said. "I've learned a lot about life situations I'm not personally familiar with, and it taught me to empathize and understand these struggles."

Many big social changes come about through large-scale movements and protests, but sometimes, the simple act of reading a book can be enough to incite change.

Some examples of this sensation include Thomas Paine's "Common Sense," which helped ignite the American Revolution, and "The Feminine Mystique" by Betty Friedan, which aided in widespread activism for gender equality in the 1960s.

"I firmly believe that literature has the power to enact meaningful change," Baxter said. "While there may be other forms of media today that hold more influence than a book, the potential of literature to shape our understanding of social norms and issues should not be underestimated."

The idea that change can occur from just reading a book greatly influences a reader's understanding of the simple act of reading. A book is not merely words on a page; it is a window into the era in which it was written, the author's life surrounding

its creation and the values held by society at that time.

"The books we read influence us and we can potentially go on to influence society," Thomas said. "Everyone can benefit from discovering the power of stories that help hold a mirror up to our world."

Text, design and art by ALICE SHEFFER and ELLIS SHYAMJI

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Rena Kim, 11



Gatsby believes green light future that needs be added as the