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August Nagro '15

Illinois Maatics and Science Academythem

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Why 'Dead White Guys' Help Advance the Human Condition

Enlightenment often comes from unexpected sources. What English student, for example, could expect to be influenced by the works of a dead, blind author who yelled, “milk me! Milk me!” (Elfer), when calling his daughter to jot down his thoughts? While outlandish, John Milton (the author mentioned above) wrote persuasive literature that formed a snapshot of historical controversies of the time. English class should provide students with the critical thinking and writing skills necessary for their future, introduce students to philosophical controversy encouraging analytical analysis, and provide a historical basis for literature. These goals are only enhanced through the exploration of foundational British literature. Although controversial, teaching this western canon of dead, white, British authors helps give students the tools and insights needed to advance the human condition.

English class should provide students with reading, writing, and speaking skills essential for their future careers, a goal reinforced through the teaching of foundational British literature. Works like *Beowulf*, while translated, present a challenge to the modern reader and require significant analysis for proper understanding. Saying, “So avenged I their fiendish deeds / death-fall of Danes, as was due and right. / And this is my hest, that in Heorot now / safe thou canst sleep with thy soldier band” (Slade 341), *Beowulf* describes his victory over Grendel, and the resultant safety of the Danish mead hall. By using unfamiliar and complex language, foundational British literature forges critical thinking through analysis. Modern studies back foundational British literature as useful in cognitive development, “[finding] that the reading of difficult texts account[s] for a substantial proportion of variance in the composite measure of [critical] reading knowledge” (Cunningham, Stanovich 144). Language used by ‘dead white guys’ in western canon also serves to inspire creativity by introducing students to grammar and

structure otherwise unencountered. Characters in *Beowulf*, for example, employs kennings, or metaphors in the form of complex nouns. Saying, “That war-sword then / all burned, bright blade, when the blood gushed o’er it, / battle-sweat hot; but the hilt I brought back / from my foes” (Slade 546), Beowulf describes his killing of Grendel’s mother with the blade of a giant, making his victims bleed (battle-sweat). Introducing grammatical structures unfamiliar to modern readers, *Beowulf* and other works of foundational British literature promote analysis and critical thinking contemporary works struggle to provide.

Learning standards support the teaching of foundational literature, as the analysis of text promoted by such works help “Students ... acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace” (“NCTE / IRA Standards for the English Language Arts”). Gifted students can similarly benefit from the application of foundational literature; heightened investigation (promoted by analysis of the western canon) aid “Students [in] find[ing] and analyz[ing] ambiguities inherent within any set of textual, social, physical, or theoretical circumstances” (“Learning Standards SSLs”). Newly made Common Core standards seek to modernize the ‘restrictive’ western canon and employ a scientific analysis of literature based to word choice, sentence length, and a variety of other factors to determine complexity. Although well intended, Common Core standards often fail in their comparison of modern and foundational literature. While the evaluation of literature to determine quality is controversial, very few would agree that the magazine *Sports Illustrated for Kids’ Awesome Athletes!* is embedded with greater literary quality than *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *Jane Eyre*, a conclusion supported by Common Core Language Art standards (“Federal Bureaucrats Declare ‘Hunger Games’ More Complex Than ‘The Grapes of Wrath’”). Providing students with

speaking, reading, and writing skills necessary for their future careers, foundational British literature serves a role unmatched by contemporary literature.

The works of 'dead white' guys engage students with foundational philosophical thought, prompting analytical analysis. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Lucifer loses his position at the right hand of God and is cast to hell because of his disobedience. Reasonably disagreeing with God's decision to give the impure man his undivided love, Lucifer tries to make the best of his exile in Hell, reasoning, "One who brings / A mind not to be changed by place or time. / The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (Milton 253-255). By remaining faithful to his beliefs, readers question the justice in exiling Lucifer, simply for his refusal to serve an inferior power. Lucifer is a dynamic leader, and encourages his followers to continue the resistance against Heaven by saying, "[It's] better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heaven" (263). It's not until book nine that Lucifer's reasoning abilities desert him in the absence of god, and a more negative characterization of Lucifer is revealed. In awe of the purity of eve, Lucifer takes "pleasure ... to behold / this flowery plat, the sweet recess of Eve / Thus early, thus alone: Her heavenly form / Angelic, but more soft, and feminine" (455-460). Eve's purity is able to tame Lucifer, "overaw[ing] / his malice" (460-461). Although his greatest strength, Lucifer's reason reminds him of his motive, as the "hot Hell that always in him burns, though in mid Heaven, soon ended his delight, And tortures him now more" (467-469). In contrary to his previous reason, Lucifer becomes trapped in a revengeful state of mind that has become his own hell, caused by his separation from God. By questioning the righteousness of Lucifer's exile from Heaven, Milton's *Paradise Lost* promotes investigative thought. While contemporary works similarly present philosophical debate, foundational British literature provides a base of understanding crucial for the development of analytical reasoning. Scientific

studies support this statement, arguing, “Students having read foundational literature ... scored higher on reasoning tests than their peers with equal reading volume” (Cunningham, Stanovich 142). Through understanding and questioning moral constructs debated in foundational British literature, students’ reasoning and ethical abilities are more quickly developed; imparting necessary tools for the advancement of the human condition.

The Language Arts should also impart a historical understanding of literature to students, an objective directly supported through the teaching of foundational British literature. Although criticized for lacking diversity, the dominance of British white males in western canon represents their influential role in historical society. John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, for instance, serves not only a philosophical basis but also represents the author’s political bias of the English Civil war and the rule of Cromwell. Modern anthologies similarly seek to develop reader’s historical basis of events influencing literature. The Oxford Anthology of English Literature states, “its method [of determining included literary works] is historical, in the broadest sense” (Price 1). A historical basis for understanding literature provides unique benefits, “allow[ing] both student and instructor to come to terms with the manner in which English literature has generated its own [influence]” (1). Teaching literature directly linked to the time period studied (as opposed to more diverse, multicultural writings) provides a better understanding of the people and time connected to it. Foundational British literature serves not only to preserve the literature of the past, but also the social and historical significance within.

An English class’ purpose is to provide students with the critical thinking and writing skills necessary for their future, promote investigative analysis through moral debate, and provide a historical basis and understanding of literature. Foundational British literature powerfully contributes to these goals through the medium of highly regarded, well studied

literature. Although older works are thought to disengage students, the ideas they stand for are timeless, and support a development of self that support social progress. Without the works of dead white guys (as well as charitable young daughters answering cries for milking) society as we know it would truly be unrecognizable.

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