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The delusion of the great American novel: A study of texts and contexts

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*All American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called* Huckleberry Finn*. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.*

— Ernest Hemingway (1953)

The concept of the Great American Novel (GAN) is one of the most highly debated concepts in western literature (Hume, 2002). Is it a delusion to accept what Hemingway so confidently posits, that all American literature is defined in one novel? Or does the ‘delusion’ stem from the plot and content of American novels in which the characters forever wrestle with hope, struggle for identity, and lack a definitive sense of place? Is there a delusion in thinking that our next generation of readers will automatically pick up the classics without a hesitation and commence an engaged and informed reading? Regardless of the surrounding ideologies, one cannot debate the significant impact of GANs on shaping curriculum, reading lists, and pedagogical practices in our English classrooms around NSW.

A ‘classic’ here is broadly defined as a written work which continues to be widely read outside its original historical and cultural context, or which has had a profound influence on subsequent written works. Krish (2015) posits that the more deeply a novel lays bare the darkness in American society and the American soul, the more likely it is to become a classic.

While it is a NSW *English Syllabus* (2012, p. 19) requirement that students study texts ‘from other countries and times’, close studies of classic American novels in the junior years are only the beginning of their use in our classrooms. These novels are also poured over by our top senior students as related material for the HSC examinations or constitute critical pieces for English Extension 2 Major Works. Our Advanced English students make comparisons in Module A with *Gatsby* while the opening paragraph of *Catcher in the Rye* is used in another classroom to teach creative writing in Stage 5. In other English classrooms, extracts and slivers of these novels that capture just enough of the readers’ imagination are scattered throughout conceptual units of work such as those in English Extension 1 considering ‘The Great American Dream’. If the use of GANs in our classrooms is alive and well, then how we can we better support teachers (and in turn students) in their love, learning and study of these novels? This question was the genesis for this study – a needed to journey to the birthplaces, settings, and worlds of these GANs and by doing so, truly bringing them to life.

Focus of the study

The *NSW* English K–10 Syllabus (2012, p. 19)emphasises the need for students to ‘engage with and explore texts that include the literature of past and contemporary societies’. The relevance of this project is therefore embodied in the fact that there is not one school around NSW that does not in some way teach the American classics to achieve the above expectation. Further evidence to suggest the prominence of American literature in our classrooms is found in the list of Stage 4 and 5 fiction ‘classics’ listed in the NSW BOSTES English Suggested Texts(2012, p. 6)document, five of which are American and ‘can be made relevant to contemporary concerns’.

Eight classic American novels that are widely used in secondary English classrooms around NSW formed the framework of this study:

* 1. Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck
  2. Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck
  3. The Wizard of Oz by Frank L. Baum
  4. The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain
  5. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain
  6. To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee
  7. The Great Gatsbyby F. Scott Fitzgerald
  8. Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger

The scope of my project ranged across the entire United States of America and involved research starting at the hilly Californian west coast, then led to the flattest of plains in mid-west Missouri, down to small-town Alabama and concluded with the towering skyscrapers of New York City. The itinerary was shaped around visits to the writer’s homes and places of inspiration, something reflected so clearly in each of the settings and characters in the novels (Premoli-Droulers & Lennard 1995). Interspersed with learning about time and place, I conducted research and interviews with teachers, book clubs, academics, librarians, publishers, curriculum experts, museum curators, professional association representatives, government departments, historians, and school-age students.

I visited the following key locations:

* + California
    - National Steinbeck Centre
    - Steinbeck House
    - San Francisco Book Club
    - Salinas Public Library
  + Oklahoma
    - Deer Creek High School
    - Classen School of Advanced Studies
    - Oklahoma Department of Education
    - Historic Route 66
    - Oklahoma Historical Society
  + Kansas
    - University of Kansas
    - Wizard of Oz Museum,
    - Yellow Brick Road
  + Missouri
    - Saint Louis Public Library
    - Mark Twain Boyhood Home
    - Mark Twain Boyhood Museum
    - Mark Twain Cave
    - Missouri State University
    - Shakespeare’s Pizzeria
  + Alabama
    - Museum of Mobile
    - Monroeville County Courthouse
    - Monroeville County Museum
    - Southern Alabama Community College
  + New York
    - New York University
    - Metropolitan Museum of Ar
    - Penguin Random House
    - Nightingale-Bamford School
    - The Gatsby Mansion
    - Grand Central Terminal

Significant Learning Experiences

*Wide Audience Appeal*

From Shakespeare onward, most classics gained popularity because they appealed to wide audiences. One manifestation of this is the Charles Lamb epigraph in *To Kill a Mockingbird* which reminds us that even lawyers were children once. Indeed, some of the greatest books in American literature are children’s books (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Wizard of Oz*) and they resonate powerfully amongst readers of all ages and stages (both academic and recreational readers) due to their multi-layered exploration of the human condition.

The GAN is used explicitly in many schools to ‘teach social and moral responsibility’. The core of human behaviour is revealed in the truth of what is in these novels. This unfailing relevance should be more explicitly communicated to students and teachers, who in turn develop a greater appreciation for these novels. It is the timeless themes explored in GANs that was the most common reason cited by English teachers in the USA as to why these classic novels are still being taught in classrooms. These texts are a large-scale metaphor for the human condition.

*Storytelling Technique and Form*

Writers of the GANs are classic storytellers. Anthony Locono, Head Librarian of Salinas Public Library, reflected that, ‘Young people can benefit from these stories. The classics have stood the test of time and include some of the best examples of writing and storytelling in the English language. The sheer beauty of literature is found completely in these novels … and it is a reminder that great writing is worth studying. It is magic.’

Penguin-Random House reports that *Mockingbird* alone sells one million copies each year, and has sold over 40 million copies worldwide since its publication. A cultural resurgence in GANs has been reflected in different textual forms, including a very successful Broadway show, *Of Mice and Men*, starring celebrity James Franco. The story telling technique and form may change (graphic novel, Broadway show, e-book) but the universal themes do not.

Now more than ever, readers are looking for guidance in a world that is becoming increasingly challenging to navigate. And the GAN is one of the constants amidst this change-obsessed culture. Some of these books are now passing out of copyright, so publishers are able to publish e-books and abridged versions, or publish classics with new covers and title art, giving them (and their readers) more freedom to create and renew interest. 2014 was the first year in six years that hard cover novels outsold e-books in the publishing industry, and the GAN was a significant seller in all of this.

*Significance of the Texts*

These classics represent the finest writing of the English language. This is repeatedly reaffirmed by generations of readers, who continue to purchase and read the works despite the passage of time.

Putting the literary contributions aside, one cannot underestimate the cultural significance of the works. Many of them have also become an important part of Western culture, and have profoundly influenced the English language and other literature. Mark Twain is the most obvious example of this; his works popularised scores of words and phrases that have since become standard in the English language. They have also 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 by everyone from studying the classics. It is this relevance and significance which teachers should continue to emphasise in their teaching of these texts.

*Culture of Reading*

Displayed prominently on a classroom door of Oklahoma English teacher Miss Hunter, a whiteboard is mounted with the heading ‘What I’m reading at the moment’.

In many of the schools visited, teachers explicitly modelled a wide diet of reading and were intentionally exposing their students to quality literature. Some of these were whole-school approaches to literacy improvement, often working in conjunction with micro-level systems (libraries, classes, wall displays). Specific strategies used to promote this culture of reading ranged from a required reading programme of age/text appropriate selections; school book and creative writing clubs; novels on library shelves that had been categorised with a readability number, and book talks in which students present their reviews books at whole-school assemblies, in parent newsletters and in the classroom.

In many American schools, not only was there a strong reading culture of classic and contemporary literature, but student writing was alive and well. Deer Creek High School’s annual student publication was a pastiche of student (and teacher) writing, aptly titled *The Red Line* (the red line coming from the writing that Microsoft Word rejects and puts a red line under). In that publication, students publish the best of their critical and creative responses to literature in a textual form of their choice.

Library regeneration is taking place in many parts of the USA. The Saint Louis Public Library (first opened in 1912) undertook a multi-million dollar renovation to move in into the 21st century; and is now one of America’s best public libraries with a future generation focus. Furthermore, many local government libraries include a separate collection of the GANs in their own section of the library to promote the reading of those texts. Some libraries even went so far as obtaining reading lists from local schools to ensure they stocked a number of the prescribed and supporting texts studied by students in school, reflecting a true form of collaboration.

*Implications for Creative Writing*

Greater consideration should be given to the physical space where the act of writing takes place. Writers are content makers. And the content comes from their surroundings and the world around them.

Writers’ houses are places of both creation and inspiration. Steinbeck had a view of the Gabilan Mountains (a setting for his novels), whilst Twain grew up on the banks of the Mississippi River and played in the caves that became the setting for his novels.

Furthermore, students need to be continually encouraged to write from what they know. Steinbeck spent years researching perspectives to present in *Of* *Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck’s writing was a ‘connection to people and stories of [his] agricultural region’. These texts are so much more than just fiction. These stories show us real people, real experiences, real places. Students should be inspired to look afresh at the world around them and write a story from their world, for that is what the authors of these GANs did.

*Responding to Literature*

Regardless of whether in the USA or NSW, students will still find challenges in responding to classic American literature. Finding new ways of helping them formulate a response to a timeless text was made possible for some American students I encountered because their English teachers took the time to unpack key images and extracts in the texts. They talked about the images that the writer was putting forward. Teachers recognised that if their students found that reading a particular book was a struggle, then it generally was not a pleasant reading experience.

Nonetheless, there is a need to acknowledge that the English classroom can be a child’s only exposure to classic American literature, so it’s important to make it valuable. The paradox of adolescence is that teenagers love stories, yet it can be hard to find stories that they can relate to. Taking the time to unpack the plot and characters in the GAN is one way of doing that.

Context is king. Taking the time to explore the personal, social, historical and cultural context of the writers and the world in which they wrote is essential before commencing a literature study. This is even more important for GANs as these authors often remind us of what we have chosen to forget. There is a need for awareness in cultural literacy to know the past (the good, the bad and the ugly). These novels are micro stories on macro themes with whole-world dynamics. Using artworks to look at values of the time was a strategy used by a number of teachers I encountered to successfully introduce their students into the context of these novels.

*Passionate Teaching*

In an age when information is available at the click of a mouse, the inspired teacher is even more valuable. Each of my school and university visits that involved a meeting with a teacher or a lesson observation, involved teachers who were passionate about their subject area and how to teach it.

Passion is contagious. These teachers were continually challenging their students to make connections with society and contemporary texts. Some teachers intentionally sought connections with events in the student’s world. For example, a lesson on context teaching about the dustbowl which frames Steinbeck’s *Of Grapes of Wrath* could be connected with the Sydney dust storm of 2009 as a way of making connections between the texts and the students’ world.

We need young minds looking at these perspectives and asking, what can we do differently? Teachers I interviewed continually found ways to overcome barriers that students encountered in their study of a text (language use).

One way around that was when a teacher assigned each student a chapter of the novel in which they had to find three words they didn’t know and then teach those words to the class.Students were excited to teach the rich vocabulary and learnt so much in the process.

Another inspired teacher had students closing their eyes to conjure up an image. It was common that English teachers had regular meeting times as a whole faculty, as well as a year group with which to plan, collaborate, mark and share best practice. That investment of time was acknowledged by schools as necessary for good teaching.

*Teaching Australian Literature*

If part of the prominence of the GAN in schools is due to a teacher’s passion for the text, to what extent are NSW English teachers actively promoting, teaching and celebrating literature from Australia? Is there one definitive novel that captures the ‘Australian experience’?

If asked which iconic Australian writers are universally celebrated, is there clear agreement? My study found that there is a strong sense amongst English teachers and students in the USA that they really ‘own the history’. It’s a significant part of all aspects of their culture, which then filters into literature reflective of its context.

Conclusion

A literary classic is a work of significance to one’s cultural heritage, and the Great American Novels have impacted generations of writers, students and teachers who have come since they were written (Forrest, 2014). For as long as classic American literature is a core element in our NSW English classrooms, teachers have an obligation to not only continue to teach the Great American Novel, but we should aim to present these texts in a way that will engage our students.

My study will contribute to the improved learning outcomes of students as it equips students in their ability to value reading as a personal and social skill, whilst also enjoying literature as an individual, social and aesthetic experience (*K-10 English Syllabus*). Students will be better informed and engaged about studying texts that are now connected to their own contexts.

Though written in very different times and very different circumstances, the GANs remain classics precisely because they continue to connect to today’s audiences. There is something in classic literature that can appeal to anyone. These works are also useful as reflections of Western culture, as literary exemplars, and as a standard for ‘good’ literature and writing.

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Endnote

Blog – [The Delusion of the Great American Novel](http://www.delusionofthegreatamericannovel.wordpress.com/) — a blog updated daily which recorded experiences and findings from my study tour.