

Should the subject English Literature be replaced by Global Literatures?

By technicality, I would define English literature to be the study of exceptional and influential Literature written by those who identify as English people, from a culturally English lens, whereas Global literature is the study of exceptional and influential literature irrespective of origin and cultural lens, with the texts chosen with the belief that the diversity of one's reading is of benefit to them. The study of English Literature is relatively new, with the first real records of English Literature being lectured about being in 18th century Scotland¹. One would assume the study of Global Literatures to be much newer, but it was birthed only 100 years after, when in 1827 Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe coined the term "Weltliteratur"² or World Literature, in response to the increase of availability and consumption of texts from other Nations. Global Literatures were even taught in 20th Century America, so Global Literature is more established than one would think, especially when posed as a contender to English Literature.

Irving Babbitt asks "in what way one may justify the study of English on cultural and disciplinary, and not merely on sentimental or utilitarian, grounds"³ and goes on to define the study of English Literature as a "cultural discipline". When separating the study of English Literature from the study of English Language as far as possible and thus eliminating the learning outcomes concerning functional literacy, I believe this is what remains, a cultural discipline. This is what I define the purpose of the subject English Literature as, a study of culture - the beliefs, morals, customs and behaviour of humans in society⁴ with the intention of developing a righteous person that understands how to function in that society. Through this definition of purpose the subject may be held to account against Global Literatures. This also helps to explain why the study of English literature is seen as a core part of the education system, by teaching English culture it allows the population to better assimilate into it. This likely an evolution of Plato's philosophy of education that

¹ Where Did English Studies Come From? : Thomas P. Miller (1990)

² <https://isupress.org/books/detail/the-idea-of-world-literature/>

³ Irving Babbitt : "English and the Discipline of Ideas" (1920)

⁴ Edward Burnett Tylor : "Primitive Culture" (1871)

Should the subject English Literature be replaced by Global Literatures?

“True education is the turning around of the soul from shadows and visible objects to true understanding of the Forms”⁵, explaining that the vital goal of education is the instilling of values and allowing perception of the world beyond its physical attributes, which culture falls under.

This assertion of the purpose of English Literature initially appears to make a case for the focus on English Literary works. If the purpose of teaching English Literature at its core is to educate people about morality and culture, surely it is more useful and relevant if English students learn about English morality and culture to allow them to flourish in their own society? As Kelly K. Wissman writes “a reader may reject a global text because of its presentation of different value systems and social practices”⁶. Every society has different moral codes and cultural beliefs, so what use is teaching a British person, especially a child, about Japanese collectivism, for example, when they are likely going to be trying to find their way in an individualist British Society?

“Global literature, like multicultural literature, encourages learners to respect and accept people who are different than themselves and break attitudes that are oppressive and prejudicial”⁷ – Prisca Martens

⁵ <https://iep.utm.edu/republic/#SH1c> Plato’s Republic Book VII

⁶Teaching Global Literature to “Disturb the Waters”: A Case Study : Kelly K. Wissman, pg 18, (2018)

⁷ BUILDING INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS THROUGH GLOBAL LITERATURE : Prisca Martens, Ray Martens, Michelle Hassay Doyle, Jenna Loomis, Laura Fuhrman, Christie Furnari, Elizabeth Soper, Robbie Stout

Should the subject English Literature be replaced by Global Literatures?

Cameron R. McCarthy writes “As we enter the new millennium, old lines of solidarity fragment and ever new dynamic, hybrid and combustible identities proliferate”⁸. If our goal of teaching literature is to educate about our culture and morality, limiting ourselves to “English culture” does not suffice in modern day England. Fundamentally, English culture is no longer “English”, per se. Due to the diminishing of physical borders by the advancement of technology, we have been seeing cultures blend and merge at an exponential rate, and this has only been bolstered by social media. The rise of cultural appropriation, good or bad, and the discourse surrounding it is a sign that now more than ever, cultures can’t exist in isolation of each other. This is particularly relevant for the UK as the 2021 census showed that only 74.4% of the population of England and Wales identified as Scottish, Welsh, English, Northern Irish or British. The incredible mix of origins and ethnicities has deeply altered the way that we as an English population behave.

The town of Maycomb in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is American Literature mind you, captures the essence of my argument and re-contextualises it in Great Depression America. In the text we see characters struggle with the presence of black people in the town and the slow merging of their culture with black culture, due to their narrow nationalist and one-sided education.

Monocultural fish out of water, now, on a multicultural landscape. This manifests in characters like Bob Ewell, who has a seemingly irrational racial prejudice. This is then contrasted with characters like Scout and Atticus Finch who, through positive exposure to different cultures are able to show reason and empathy, irrespective of the type of people they interact with.

For many students, until they leave their primary or even secondary schools they will not have been exposed to, or maybe even heard of, different ethnicities, or at least not in such a way that would be representative of the English population and it’s culture. These children will typically find themselves

⁸ Chapter Two: Bend[ing] it Like Beckham: Stylish Hybridity in Popular British Culture : Michael G. Giardina (2005)

Should the subject English Literature be replaced by Global Literatures?

struggling to acclimatise and appearing ignorant and insensitive, almost like foreigners in their own country, inspecting this “abnormal” human being with bewilderment, not quite aware of how to act or what to say. This is hugely symptomatic of the narrow focus on white British culture in schools. Most circumstances like this are simply due to false preconceptions and a lack of exposure breeding a lack of empathy and respect for different kinds of people. As written in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view” “until you climb into his skin and walk in it”⁹. Global Literature presents a wonderful opportunity for youth to walk in the skin of others. There are incredible texts, old and new which have educated me personally, about the experiences of people from different worlds to me, like *Don Quixote*, *Metamorphosis*, *Confessions of a Mask* or *Things Fall Apart*. Von Goethe argues that “those who have devoted themselves to higher and more fruitful endeavours will become more easily and more intimately acquainted”¹⁰ when writing about the value of studying Global Literature. These varied texts have well prepared me for interacting with a variety of people and have taught me a range of virtues while remaining high quality pieces of literature and this wider education is untouched by many due to the constraints of the English Literature course. If we were to listen to Von Goethe, perhaps we would even see a decline in the amount of hate speech and hate crime in the country, and an increase in virtue and openness.

Even from its conception it seems strange that the study of literature has been limited and restricted to English literature, when great pieces of global literature have been revered and appreciated by English people for their quality and value in developing thought long before the 18th century, when English Literature first began to be taught, but it’s reasoning lies in England’s colonial history.

Historians argue that English Literature only became a serious discipline when it began to be used to

⁹ *To Kill a Mockingbird* – Harper Lee Page 33

¹⁰ *Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe’s Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 227

Should the subject English Literature be replaced by Global Literatures?

colonise foreign countries¹¹. In Thomas Macaulay's "Indian Education: Minute of the 2nd of February, 1835" he writes "We must ... form ... a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect". The study of English Literature in isolation from the rest of the world was born from the belief that English "morals", culture and knowledge are not only superior to all others but the only thing worth knowing, to the extent that any other should be eradicated and only the English should remain.

This outdated and colonialist perception that anything English is the greatest by virtue of simply being English still persists to this day, albeit to a lesser extent. Many brought up in the English education system believe English Literature is unrivalled in its quality, however most lists of the greatest pieces of Literature will only have a handful of English Literatures, a testament to the quality of the world's literature. Von Goethe writes "It is to be hoped that people will soon be convinced that there is no such thing as patriotic art or patriotic science. Both belong, like all good things, to the whole world"¹². There are vast amounts of wisdom to be gained from the world's works and many domestic issues such as classism and sexism are warned of and tackled in foreign texts like the One Hundred Years of Solitude and the Handmaid's Tale and which have been made free to us and "belong to the world", but this privilege is overlooked due to a colonialist belief that has overstayed its welcome.

¹¹ <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/decolonising-education-from-theory-to-practice/0/steps/189478>

¹² Fritz Strich. Goethe and World Literature