

# The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

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Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 7

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2001

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### Recommended Citation

McFeaters, Amy; Smith, Sara; Chen, Lucy; and Thoma, Rose (2001) "Multicultural Literature: A Study of a Berks County, PA High School," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol3/iss1/7>

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# Multicultural Literature: A Study of a Berks County, PA High School

## **Keywords**

Multicultural Literature

**Multicultural Literature:  
A Study of a Berks County, PA High School**

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**T**he following story, related by Howard M. Miller in his article "Teaching and Learning about Cultural Diversity," illustrates a difficulty in the teaching of multicultural literature. Ruth Sherman, a third-grade teacher, read aloud one of her favorite multicultural children's books in her classroom one day. All the students present on that occasion seemed to like the story, but when word reached their parents, there was a very different reaction. The parents stormed the school and Ms. Sherman, upset as any good-intentioned teacher would be, resigned her position and found work elsewhere (Miller 1). Is this really how teachers and parents should respond when children, often identified as the future of our country, are learning other cultures? There are many points

of view about the inclusion of multicultural literature in the curriculum. With each different viewpoint comes yet another question. What determines good literature? How much of that should be multicultural? Of that, what should we be teaching in schools? How should we be teaching this other literature in the classroom? Should we just leave the canon as it is? The list of questions goes on. These are some of the major issues we are facing today.

For a full semester, the authors of this article (female first-year students) examined these questions in a class called "Alternative Voices in American Literature." Although we all come from different high schools, we have all come across issues involved in the quest for diversity in the literary curriculum. Some of us have had more experience with multicultural literature than others. While some schools stick to traditional literature, one of our group members had the opportunity for a more diverse experience, which we will discuss later in this article.

The "Alternative Voices" class was structured to provide a strong foundation in multicultural literature in America. For one class project, we evaluated a high school in Berks County, Pennsylvania for its literature content. For many reasons, we are in disagreement with the high school's literature curriculum. This high school tends to stick to the traditional canon of literature and shy away from the addition of multicultural literature. Our research indicates that the school is not moving to a more well rounded curriculum.

## Background Research

First, we need to clarify why we think multicultural literature is important. Lara Hillard writes that multicultural literature is a way of accepting, acknowledging, and affirming human differences and similarities related to gender, class, handicap, race, and other ideas (Hillard 2). She goes on to say that it “emphasizes respect for the different historical perspectives and cultures in human society”(Hillard 2). What she means is that without multicultural literature, different cultures may not be understanding of each other. We cannot truly understand each other if we do not know what everyone is all about. For example, we can try to imagine what different religions mean to their followers, but without reading about them, or participating in services, how can we know for sure?

Why, then, should schools include multicultural literature? One response is that the inclusion of multicultural texts will enable children to understand the cultural diversity around them. Kids gain respect for others, and learn not to subscribe to prejudiced views around them. Jim Barta, in “Exploring Bias Using Multicultural Literature for Children,” adds to this insight by saying that children also learn to understand the way people speak, act, celebrate, and mourn as well as learning to acknowledge the contributions of minorities (2). Generally, people who study texts outside of the traditional canon will gain a better understanding of lives that are not their own.

For many people that is the primary reason to study multicultural literature; for others, the rationale of including such texts is to appeal to minorities in the classroom. Soon, however, the term "minority" will be of no use since, according to Yvonne Siu-Runyan, it has been estimated that by the year 2010, those currently designated minorities will constitute 46% of the school population (3). She also mentions that teachers include works by minority writers in order to give a sense of self-worth to members of a less-represented culture. This is a good idea, although it has drawbacks. Howard M. Miller, for example, asserts that "we cannot allow multiculturalism to be turned into a game of blame, shame, and guilt" (667). To expand on his ideas, we have decided that with the wrong rationale, our society may be trying to use multicultural literature to make the dominant cultures guilt-free. Thus, a very important reason for including multicultural literature in the canon, to create awareness and understanding of others by the dominant cultures and ethnic groups, may be subverted. Multicultural literature should be taught for the purpose of enlightening people about the world, and may, at the same time, entertain them with rich stories.

The inclusion of multicultural literature is a difficult decision for a school to make, but if the issues are understood, it is also the right decision to make. We, as a whole society, have to put aside our prejudices; we must learn to work together to create balance in what our schools offer their students. If we are all human, if we all feel the

same emotions and see the same things, then why should the things some people write be classified as being worth reading and the things others write be classified as not being worth reading? We agree with Miller, who states, "all of us together have a story to tell. It is a story with many chapters and verses, told in many different voices in many different points of view- the magnificent, awe-inspiring story of humanity" (667).

### **Taking a Position**

In order to complete the assignment, we had to decide on our position regarding multiculturalism. After debating and hearing various views, we decided that multicultural literature should definitely be included in the high school curriculum. The issue really has become how much of it to include.

We feel that a school should not include multicultural texts just because they have been written by a minority author or by a woman. We agree that these texts should be put in the curriculum if the work deserves to be taught because of its content or message and its artistic merit, but not just to fill a quota. We also support the retention of traditional, canonical works. The cultural and artistic merit of traditional classics is great. Certainly they do deserve to be taught; but they are not the only works to deserve this treatment. The value of multicultural literature is great as well, since it provides a cultural learning experience and also has artistic merit..

There is room in the curriculum to add more works by minorities and women. From the articles we have read and the research we have gathered from the high school, we have concluded that the main problem with adding multicultural texts to the curriculum is that some teachers don't know how to teach them and may not want to learn a new method of teaching. Rather than challenge themselves and their students, these teachers stick to the traditional works that are taught every year over and over again. It should be mentioned that in some schools there are courses that students can take to study multicultural literature, but then they miss out on the classics taught in the regular English classes. We feel that students should have access to a classroom that teaches both classic and multicultural literature.

### **The Study**

For "Alternative Voices in American Literature" our group did a study of the curriculum of one Berks County high school. We brought our understanding of the issues related to multicultural literature to this study in order to evaluate the type of literature that is being studied in this high school. Our research methods included surveys and interviews with some teachers and a few students. It should be noted that the student population is mostly Caucasian. In the long run, this should have nothing to do with the inclusion of different works, but we think that some bias

may have occurred anyway. Our reasoning is that the curriculum, which includes no works outside of the standard, European-white-male-focused canon, reflects the fact that the school is deeply rooted in tradition. Unless something changes, the curriculum will not be touched in any significant way by multicultural literature.

After deciding how we wanted to obtain our data, we sent out surveys to all of the teachers in the English department. After about two weeks, we received back 13 of the 20 surveys we had distributed, all with helpful information. The teachers who took the time to fill out these surveys really helped us to understand why certain literature was taught in this school. This survey was to be the basis for our research. We also interviewed ten students in a wide range of classes to get a sense of how they felt about the literature they were currently reading in their classes. Among the teachers, the students, and one member of our group who had some experience with the same high school, we had a strong understanding of the curriculum. We believe that this provided a good base of information, because it put us on a more personal level than if we had just looked up everything in a database.

The high school curriculum is designed by the members of the English department and approved by the department head and the Director of Secondary Education. The English teachers are given a set list of works that must be taught for the year. After these are taught, there is a some space for an instructor to add appropriate

works of his or her choice. The curriculum is reviewed and revised everyevery four to five years. Currently, canonical works of literature such as *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (Harper Lee), *Julius Caesar* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (William Shakespeare), *A Separate Peace* (John Knowles), *The Good Earth* (Pearl Buck), *Les Miserables* (Victor Hugo) and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Victor Hugo) are studied in tenth grade. In eleventh grade, works of a slightly higher degree of difficulty are taught: *The Crucible* (Arthur Miller), *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald), *The Old Man and The Sea* (Ernest Hemingway), *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (Anne Tyler), *The Catcher in The Rye* (J.D. Salinger), and *Of Mice and Men* (John Steinbeck). Finally, the senior year focuses on *Macbeth* (William Shakespeare), *Gulliver's Travels* (Jonathan Swift), *Beowulf* (anonymous), *Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer), *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelly), *The Fountainhead* (Ayn Rand), and *The Iliad* (Homer).

The English department teaches these works in this sequence because the teachers feel that these works provide a good basis for the development of reading skills and literary analysis. Additionally, these works present the literature that the creators of the canon feel is some of the best and most important literature for students to experience. Our argument is that students will become more well-rounded if they read about other cultures, and will still develop the appropriate reading and analytical skills.

Basing our conclusions on the information we had gathered, we deduced that this curriculum is very traditional, focused mostly on works by European white males, of which only the “greats” are being taught. However, there is a bit of a multicultural twist here. There is not enough change for us to consider the curriculum truly multicultural, but there is some indication that teachers are waking up to the presence of women writers. For instance, Mary Shelly is being taught in some 12th grade classrooms. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (written by a woman, Harper Lee) is an interesting selection also. Though it is a traditional novel, within the story is a battle against prejudiced views of African Americans. Perhaps this will help people understand other cultures as well. These texts are not enough, but perhaps their inclusion will begin to bring about change. Because these texts are authored by women, and because one of them confronts racial prejudice, they do not fit what students think of as “the mold.”

One question on the survey we used asked if the English department members at the high school were aware of the movement calling for the inclusion of more multicultural literature in the high school curriculum. The responses came back with a resounding yes. One English/humanities instructor responded by saying, “I am open to just about anything if the material will help our students learn and genuinely reflects the culture.” However, this does not address the issue of whether multicultural literature is appropriate with regard to the ethnicity of students

attending the school. This teacher is willing to teach whatever needs to be taught, but we do not know how concerned he or she is with the issues that determine what is needed. Additionally, many works of multicultural literature fail to represent the culture that is being written about completely and accurately because it is impossible to create a completely unbiased work of literature. About twenty percent of the responding teachers, however, add that they feel that they need to be more knowledgeable about multicultural literature.

As far as the question of female writers goes, teachers are much more aware. One educator remarked that he or she would love to include works by Maya Angelou, a respected African American writer and poet. The remainder of the responding teachers simply answered "yes" for that question on the survey.

Though not widely taught throughout the school, when literature by a minority or a woman is introduced to a class, it is taught in the same manner as any other piece of literature. One survey response indicated that the teacher always taught the cultural background of any text. Another instructor wrote that the elements remain the same as in any other piece of literature, so the same method is applied to all the literature taught. This is the general consensus among the department personnel.

The final survey question asked about debates and disagreements that have arisen as a result of the issue of multicultural literature. These debates and disagreements

could have been with the school board or the school's external community. Some teachers went into detail about debates by mentioning relevance, approach, necessity, and the fact that teachers want to hold onto the "classics." One individual wrote that multicultural literature is "very difficult to teach in our relatively homogenous class." Perhaps the best way to sum up the issue of multiculturalism and the debates that go along with it can be found in the word of the humanities instructor who wrote on the survey sheet:

Education is organic. Multicultural studies are in response to a variety of influences both past and present. In short, they certainly have a great deal of value and will make the world a better place. However, if we wipe out the icons of Western culture simply because they were created by dead white males, our educational landscape will suffer.

After discovering this information about the high school, we concluded that its English curriculum does not fit our idea of a sound multicultural curriculum. We noted that some teachers are willing to add some non-canonical literature or that they really would like to incorporate some multicultural texts, but that is not sufficient. One or two novels is not going to change the entire curriculum, and even then, not all students will get to read the "multicultural novel" if it is offered only in certain classes. We think that

schools need to include multicultural literature in all levels of the curriculum, though it need not dominate the curriculum.

Additionally, we feel that there is some difficulty with the manner in which the works are selected for use in English classes. According to the information we received, it seems that the head of the department and perhaps the school board must approve all texts to be used in classes. In itself, this is fine. The problem is that the people who design the curriculum seem to be very set in their ways and only want to include "classic" literature. As mentioned before, some teachers want to include more multicultural literature, but they are not able to get these inclusions approved.

The literature of women and minorities is not being taught effectively. Only one or two works by women are being taught in the school under discussion, and no works by minorities. In this, the school is well below the norm of most schools whose anthologies are apt to include works by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Frederick Douglass, among others. Perhaps things will change once the curriculum has been reviewed, but for now, it is unacceptable. Unfortunately, a student may graduate from this school without a sound understanding of the rest of the literary world. On a positive note, however, some teachers seem eager to learn about more about multicultural literature in the hope of forming a well-rounded curriculum.

## Conclusion: Hope for a Diverse Future

As a point of contrast, our group took a look at another high school nearby to show a different view on multicultural literature in the classroom. Not too far from Berks County, there is a school that incorporates multicultural literature into its regular English curriculum. In the regular levels of Freshman and Sophomore English, students in this high school study several texts by minorities and women. The section is emphasized effectively due to the new content. Days are spent introducing each text to be studied. Two books among many read by the students are *Kaffir Boy* and *Cry the Beloved Country*, both by male Afrikaners. The concern with teaching minority and women writers and poets is very high. The school's English department is very aware of the need for multicultural texts and shows this by including them in the regular curriculum.

Not only can a student attending this school study multicultural texts in regular English classes, but he/she can also enroll in an optional class that teaches only multicultural literature. This is a very popular option even though this school's student body is also predominantly white. If all schools employed such a curriculum, students would have a broader range of knowledge by the time they graduate. Having the choice of a class involving multicultural literature in conjunction with regular literature classes will help students understand minorities and women far better than they could without expo-

exposure to such works.

Up to this point, the Berks County high school we evaluated seems to have been lacking in sound multicultural education. Though students may excel in the literature they are taught, they have not been introduced to new ideas present in other literatures. Perhaps the school should exchange a few of its more traditional texts for some multicultural ones. Since this is the year of curriculum review and revision for the school, a later analysis might indicate a more positive situation.

Because this paper was a project for the entire class, other groups enrolled in "Alternative Voices in American English" reported their findings about many other schools within the county and the way those schools treat multicultural literature. Most of the findings were very similar to ours in that the schools are stuck in the rut of traditional literature. We hope that school boards nationwide will take a second look at their current curriculums and make the necessary changes.

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