CLASSIC NOVELS IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSES TODAY

by

Samantha Mitchem

An Abstract
of a research paper presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Library Science and Information Services
in the Department of Educational Leadership and Human Development
University of Central Missouri

May, 2013
ABSTRACT

by

Samantha Mitchem

Classic novels have been assigned in high school English classes since the beginning of the American education system. Many English teachers view classic novels as great literature and continue to assign such novels even though many students find classic novels hard to read and have difficulty relate to the characters and themes. This is because classic novels fulfill the Common Core State Standard requiring students to be aware of the classic allusions that are a part of our culture. Can young adult novels, which teens tend to enjoy more, be used instead of or in addition to classic novels to help students learn to these skills? The results of this review of the research literature show that students read more when assigned young adult novels and will thus learn literary elements more effectively. The research also suggests ideas for teachers that incorporate both classic and young adult novels.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my mom, Susan, for being my personal editor throughout the writing of this research paper. Thank you for your support, encouragement, and reading the paper one hundred times making sure I had all my commas where they needed to be. I appreciate you being there to bounce ideas off and to babysit when I needed a quiet house. I would also like to thank my husband, Kenny, for his continuous support and encouragement and for taking care of our family while I worked. And thank you to Dr. Robins who has helped me through the research process and given me feedback when my writing was not clear. Without the support and help from you three people I would not have been able to finish this paper.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Classic novels have been used in high school English classes since the American education system began. Many high school English teachers consider classic novels as great literature and texts that students need to know in order to understand references made to classic novels in other areas of the student’s life (Porteus 16). English teachers assign classic novels to students as reading assignments but often find the students choose not to do the assigned readings.

Students find classic novels difficult to read because many are above the students’ Lexile reading scores, and many students find it hard to relate to the characters and themes of classic novels. Many of the classic novels were written by adults for adults with leisure time to read them (Gallo 33-34). Students have a hard time finding classic novels interesting when they are unable to relate to the story (Bright 39). For some classic novels students would need background knowledge on the time frame or geography in order to fully understand the text (Santoli and Wagner 71). There are several ways teachers can help students understand the difficult text and become more interested in the novels. Teachers can use scaffolding to help students with difficult literary elements or link classic novels with art projects or with other texts in order to gain the students interest (Bright 39; Carlson 155; Connor, Bickens and Bittman 6).

Some researchers argue young adult novels should be used in high school English classes instead of classic novels because students will relate to the text more and enjoy reading. Young adult novels are written with teens in mind and are about real life issues high school students face. These novels have the same literary elements as classic novels and can be used to teach
the same skills, but students might enjoy the young adult novels more and read more.

Teachers can focus on helping students learn literary elements instead of taking time to teach the students the background knowledge they would need to know for some classic novels.

For teachers who consider it necessary to teach classic novels in high school English classes, researchers suggest classic novels and young adult novels be used together. Young adult novels that reference classic novels may encourage students to read the classic novel that was mentioned to help the student fully understand the young adult novel (Bright 39). Pairing classic and young adult novels also helps students relate to classic literature so the students are more interested while reading (Porteus 17). Young adult novels also help students learn the reading skills needed to comprehend the classic novels (Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth 53).

**Statement of Problem**

High school English teachers still assign students classic novels to read even though these novels can be too difficult for students and are often irrelevant to them. Many students choose not to read the novels at all rather than attempting the difficult challenge. Instead of learning new reading skills and enjoying reading, students view reading as boring and their grades drop from not doing the assigned readings. Young adult novels have the same literary elements as classic novels and encourage student reading because students can relate to the text and comprehend the novels.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to review literature to understand why classic literature is still assigned in high school English classes and if there are better alternatives to classic novels to encourage student reading. Literature was reviewed regarding the benefits and limitations
of using classic novels for assigned reading in high school English classes. Literature was also reviewed regarding other types of literature that may be more beneficial for student readers. Particular attention is paid to how young adult literature helps teach students literary skills while sustaining their interest. The result of this study demonstrated that young adult novels encourage students to read and also teach students literary elements more effectively than classic novels.

**Research Questions**

Classic novels are still assigned as reading material in high school English classes today regardless of whether students choose to read them. There are alternative reading materials English teachers can assign in order to encourage students to read the assigned texts. This study examines the use of classic novels in high school English classes by answering the following questions.

1. What are the benefits and limitations of using classic novels in English classes?
2. How can classic novels be taught to help students better comprehend the text?
3. How are young adult novels more beneficial to student learning?
4. How can classic and young adult novels be used together to aide in student learning?

**Limitations of Study**

The limitations of this study include the limited availability of peer-reviewed journals on the subject and the limited timeframe of two semesters. The study included journals and articles pertaining to the topics of classic novels and young adult novels in high school English classes. The broad definitions of the words ‘classic’ and ‘young adult’ as pertaining to literature were also a limitation. This study used the terms as consistently as possible as pertaining to
high school English classes. This study also has the limitation of generalizing students’ interests without a direct survey. The result of this study provides the reader with the generalized view that young adult novels will interest students more than classic novels.

**Definition of Terms**

Classic novel – A novel that has stood the test of time, is usually representative of the time period it was written, and merits recognition.

Common Core State Standards – National standards that provide a consistent, clear understanding of what K-12 students need to know by the time the students graduate from high school to be career and college ready.

Intertext – The use of well-known works of literature in a second work of literature.

Lexile – A scale used to measure an individual’s reading ability or a text’s readability.

Young adult novel – Literature which is written, published, and marketed to adolescents and young adults.

**Research Design**

This research study collected previously published information pertaining to the use of classic novels and young adult novels in high school English classes. No research was conducted. Instead, existing literature on this topic was collected and reviewed for this study.

Articles were retrieved from the following databases: *Education Journal; Education Research Complete; Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts;* and *Library Literature and Information Science Full Text*. Search terms included “classic novels,” “classic novels in high school,” “classic literature,” “young adult novels,” “young adult literature,” “young adult novels in high school,” “Common Core State Standards,” “Lexile,” “Lexile levels,” and “classic novels
versus young adult novels.” In reading through the articles the researcher found additional keywords and authors to search, enabling a deeper understanding of the topic.

Conclusion

This study includes three chapters discussing the use of classic and young adult novels in high school English classes. Chapter 1 introduces the topic covered in this paper and provides a glossary of terms located throughout the paper. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature. Chapter 3 contains answers to the research questions posed in chapter 1.
CHAPTER 2:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of the study is to determine whether an analysis of current research concludes that classic literature should be a required component of the high school English language arts curriculum. The debate on whether or not classic literature should be required reading in high school English classes continues. High school English teachers in many schools still require students to read select classics to teach literary elements. Research suggests that, while the classics are considered great literature that teaches students literary elements, contemporary young adult literature also teaches the same literary elements; but students will be more engaged while reading the young adult literature. Some researchers suggest that English teachers combine both classic literature and contemporary young adult literature so that students are exposed to a variety of genres.

Classic Literature in High School English Classes

Classic literature is required reading in many high school English classes today even though research suggests students struggle reading such literature. Gilmore has found that the required reading list in many English classes today include the same classic novels found on lists from 1928 (48). Throughout this paper classic literature, novels, or classics refers to novels that are traditionally used in high school classrooms based on the belief that they are timeless pieces of “real” literature. This refers to novels such as Great Expectations and Huckleberry Finn and authors such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain (Santoli and Wagner 66). Many English teachers continue to use traditional classic novels to fulfill their curriculum because of their belief that these novels are timeless and are “great” literature (Bright 39;
Many English teachers believe students need to be exposed to such books so that they can appreciate “Austen’s satirical diction, Dickens’s poignant themes, Twain’s marvelous wit, and Cather’s remarkable imagery” (Santoli and Wagner 66).

**Classic literature teaches literary elements.**

Santoli and Wagner argues that teachers use classics to expose students to the mainstream culture and the ethical values of the Western world that provide students with a well-rounded education that prepares them for college (67). Porteus agrees that many English teachers use classic literature in the belief that students will be more prepared for the rigorous reading in college by expanding the students’ vocabulary and helping them recognize famous quotes from classics such as “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times” from *Tale of Two Cities* (16). Contrary to this belief Casement has shown that colleges are not prioritizing teaching classic literature in their English courses as much as they had prior to the 1960s. In a study done by UCLA Higher Education Research Institute in 1998-99, it was revealed that faculty members did not believe teaching classic novels prepared students for employment after college or to be responsible citizens (37).

In a study done by the National Assessment of Educational Progress it was shown that even though schools are continuing to teach classic literature in high school English classes, students are failing assessments on classic literature. Hess reports on a study where 1,200 seventeen year-old students were given an eleven question assessment to determine how well they knew classic literature. As a whole the responses were poor. On the assessment the students’ average scores were: a ‘C’ on three of the questions, a ‘D’ on one question, and a ‘F’ on the other seven questions. For example only 38% of those assessed knew that “Geoffrey
Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales*, a poem written in the Middle English and containing stories told by people on a pilgrimage” correctly. In contrast 79% of the students did know “*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee is about two children who were affected by the conflict in their community when their father defended a black man.” Hess argues the assessment shows high school graduates will be at a disadvantage during public debates that incorporate quotes from classic literature. Hess also points out students may not fully understand magazine and newspaper articles that refer to classic literature. According to Hess’s research, schools are devoting more time to English and language arts, but most of the additional time is spent on basic reading skills, not on literature. Hess states that if students do not read classic literature in school, it is about 95% certain they will not have read the text on their own by the time they graduate high school. Hess wonders if schools are assigning classic literature, but students are not reading it. Hess’s study did not include the information to answer the question (11-15).

**Classic literature is too mature.**

Researchers argue that classic literature in high school is not appropriate because the content of classic novels is too mature for the students, and they are not able to relate to the adult themes. Gallo argues that he enjoyed reading the classics, just not until he was an adult. He points out that classic novels are about adult issues written for educated adults who had leisure time to read them (33-34) and are dominated by white, male, European or American authors (Gilmore 48; Santoli and Wagner 67). Students do not find classics interesting because they are unable to relate to the stories (Bright 39). Shelley reports that the language of classic literature can be intimidating to many students and that the vocabulary and syntax are also very difficult for students to understand (386). Santoli and Wagner agree and note that
students are unable to relate to the unfamiliar geographical settings and obscure historical references (71). Shelley has found that students will often resort to plot summaries and published notes instead of reading the assigned classic novel. Shelley also pointed out that today’s students are used to the instant visualization produced from the different types of technology available and may have trouble with the lengthy descriptive passages found in many classic novels (386-88).

**Classic literature is at higher reading level.**

Classic literature is at a higher reading level than many high school students possess which is why some students are not able to read and understand the classics. In her study Archer found that in high-poverty, urban schools half of the ninth graders were reading three or more years below grade level. These students have a difficult time with word fluency and meanings and interpreting the text content. To measure students’ reading ability Archer used a developmental scale called the Lexile Scale. The Lexile Scale shows the growth of a student’s reading ability over the course of time by taking reading tests throughout a school year, or even over multiple school years. The Lexile Scale ranges from a low of 0 Lexiles to a high of 2000 Lexiles. According to her findings, ninth grade students should be reading at a Lexile range of 855L to 1165L, and twelfth graders should be reading at a Lexile range of 940L and 1210L. Lexiles are derived from a mathematical algorithm of syntactic and semantic measures. Syntactic measure is the mean sentence length of a sample sentence in a passage while the semantic component is derived based on a word’s relative frequency to other words in a database (283-84).
Hiebert notes that the problem with this formula is that short sentences and frequent words that could designate a text as less challenging to read does not necessarily take into account the high levels of literary comprehension needed. Another criticism Hiebert has of using Lexiles is the potential increase of informational text difficulty and decrease of narrative text difficulty. Texts such as classic novels may receive lower Lexile scores because they have more dialog that typically uses shorter sentences. One such example that Hiebert noted was the classic *Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway which has a Lexile score of 940, a fourth or fifth grade reading level. Hiebert pointed out that text such as *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen is given a Lexile of 1100, which is between an eighth and tenth grade reading level, but within a single chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* excerpts of text ranged from 670 to 1310, third grade to college level (“Beyond Single Readability” 34-35).

Research continues to show a further discrepancy between high school Lexiles and classic literature. Archer’s research has shown that the typical eleventh and twelfth grade students should be reading at a Lexile range of 940L to 1210L. Archer’s research has also shown that many students are reading at least three grade levels below average at a Lexile range of 805L to 1100L (283). According to Wilkins et al., research indicates students are not going to be able to read and comprehend *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, at least not without help, since the book has a Lexile of 1140. Jane Austen’s book *Sense and Sensibility* is also higher than many students’ level with a Lexile of 1180. Wilkins et al. explains “the student Lexile measure is based on the level of text (measured in Lexiles) that a student can read with approximately 75 percent comprehension” (3). At this level students should be able to use context clues and comprehension strategies to understand unknown words and what the text is saying. Even
students with an on grade level Lexile range would have a difficult time reading William Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*, which has a Lexile of 1300 according to Wilkins et al. research (4).

**Teaching strategies.**

English teachers who continue to teach classic literature can utilize several teaching strategies to help students comprehend literary elements and relate to the novels even though the text might be too advanced for students. Jago informs teachers that they need to give the students the tools necessary to understand the challenging text of classics. One tool is telling the students how the story works, and reminding the students to pay attention to who is narrating the story. Jago also suggests using scaffolding to teach students diction and syntax (Jago n. pag). Ideas for scaffolding include developing vocabulary of unfamiliar words, building background knowledge, facilitating reading of the text or having students listen to audiotapes, and enrich or extend the text (Shelley 387). Carlson suggests that, when possible, teachers pair the study of classic novels with the study of the time period in history class. An example Carlson gave was pairing Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* with learning about King Alfred and the church in global history class. In doing this Carlson stated that his students understood the context and content of both classes even more, and the students were able to relate to the time period better. Another way Carlson suggested that teachers help students connect with characters in classic literature is through art. Carlson has used the novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse in one such lesson, instructing the students to create a collage of their own personal paradise to help the students relate to what the character Siddhartha was experiencing in the book. As the students read how Siddhartha gains wealth and pleasures only to be nauseated with them later, the students reflect on their own personal paradise collages
and reflect on how they would feel. He argues that when students are able to visualize what they are reading, they can comprehend better, connect with the characters, access prior knowledge, and make more predictions about what is going to happen (155-57).

Connor, Bickens, and Bittman suggest that teachers can also help students learn effective reading strategies through the study of classical literature. Teachers can start by explaining the purpose of the strategy, model it by thinking out loud, and then practice the strategy by leading the students through different exercises. Another technique to teach the classics is to have students work in groups so they can discuss the novels together. Creating essential questions to go along with classic novels helps students relate to “real world” issues and understand why they are being asked to read certain books. Connor, Bickens, and Bittman report that using essential questions also helps students with learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) stay focused on the bigger themes. The authors suggest having students use sticky notes to mark main ideas, important points, key places, and confusing parts. After the students are done reading they can use the sticky notes to fill in graphic organizers, ask questions, or as aids in writing essays. Another idea Connor, Bickens, and Bittman had is to help students understand passages of detailed descriptive language by having students draw the scenes they are reading about. This helps students realize how imagery and figurative language can be used to paint pictures in readers’ minds. The authors also suggest having some sort of activity or project at the end of the novels to help the novels “stick” with the readers. There should be a variety of choices that the students can pick from to allow for differentiation. Connor, Bickens, and Bittman point out that the more the readers
remember the novels the better they will be able to use the text on state exams and guidance in life (6-7, 12-13).

Young Adult Literature Teaches Literary Elements

English teachers who continue to teach classics do so based on the argument that they are fulfilling the requirements of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), but young adult literature can fulfill the same requirements. The Common Core is a set of rigorous, research based, K-12 standards adopted by most states across the nation. They were developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Morris explains that these standards do not mandate teaching methods (8). Moustafa points out the Common Core State Standards describe what students are expected to know, not how to teach the material (9). Individual states and teachers still retain flexibility in how they implement the Common Core Standards (Morris 8-9). The Common Core was developed to teach students the skills to be mastered to be college and career ready by the time they graduated high school, such as how to independently comprehend the complex texts that are found in college courses and career preparation courses (Moustafa 8-9, 11). According to the Common Core State Standards, for students to become college and career ready, they should read text which “offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students’ own thinking and writing” (“Reading: Literature” 35). To become independent and proficient readers of complex text, the Common Core Appendix A states students must read numerous ‘complex’ texts that offer new language, knowledge, and modes of thought (4).

The Common Core State Standards emphasize the need to increase text complexity. According to “Text Complexity,” the complexity of text has been declining over the past few
decades. The Common Core has developed a three-part model to help educators examine text complexity to ensure the higher CCSS standards are met (9). Kern agrees with the article “Text Complexity,” and goes on to explain the Common Core requires an even more in-depth analysis of the rigor for the text used by students in English classes. The Common Core requires educators to analyze text based on three equal parts: qualitative dimensions of text complexity, quantitative dimensions of text complexity, and reader and task consideration (101).

According to “Common Core State Standard Appendix A” qualitative dimensions of text complexity entail the levels of meaning, text structure, language clarity and conventionality, and demands of knowledge. Literary texts with multiple levels of meaning such as satires are harder to understand than those with a single level of meaning. Additionally unconventional structures, flashbacks, flash-forwards, and hidden or obscure purposes make the text complexity more challenging for readers (4).

“Common Core State Standards Appendix A” defines quantitative dimensions of text complexity as the readability measures of text that include looking at the word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion (4). According to Kern, determining the quantitative dimensions of text complexity is difficult or impossible for human readers, and are typically measured by computer software programs such as Lexile Framework (101-02) discussed earlier. The “Common Core State Standards Appendix A” states that the assumption behind the quantitative formula is that longer words and sentences are harder to read, as is having numerous unfamiliar words in the text. The biggest complaint against this formula is that longer, less familiar words and longer sentences are not necessarily harder to read. Short,
choppy sentences can be difficult for readers because the sentences lack cohesive devices that help establish links between ideas (7).

Matching the reader to the text and task is the last, but equally important component of analyzing the rigor of text. “Text Complexity” states determining students’ interest and background knowledge in relation to the text selection is an important component for the teacher to consider (9). “Common Core State Standards Appendix A” explains harder texts may be appropriate for highly skilled readers, while struggling readers may still require easier texts to help them build up to the reading skill level the Common Core requires (8). Kern suggests allowing students read text they choose along with the text the teachers select to help the student build subject specific knowledge (102).

The Common Core State Standards Initiative does suggest teachers use American classics to teach such text, but they also suggest using contemporary works. By grades 11 and 12 students should be able to determine the meaning of words and phrases used in text, determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text, and analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to the overall structure (“Reading: Literature” 35-38). All of these literary elements can be taught using young adult literature (Santoli and Wagner 66). Hiebert urges teachers and librarians to use a variety of textual information to help students increase their ability to read more complex text as they mature, such as pairing different genres on the same topic together. As an example the fable *The Treasure* by Uri Shulevitz can be paired with *Tops and Bottoms* by Janet Stevens, where the underdog outwits a powerful character, along with an informational text that describes the features of an animal (“The Common Core” 13-14). Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth argue
contemporary young adult novels heighten students’ engagement, which increases lively, rich
discussion and writing skills and keeps students reading after the required novels are finished,
thus improving their reading skills (53). This is also part of the CCSS goals.

“Common Core State Standards Appendix B” provides educators with an Exemplar Text
List on the level of complexity and quality that are required of all students at their grade level.
The compliers of “Common Core State Standards Appendix B” state the list is a guidepost to
help select texts of similar quality, and does not represent a complete or even partial reading
list. The list compilers selected text based on qualitative and quantitative components; it is up
to the individual educators to match the text to the individual reader. To start the Exemplar
Text List, the compilers collected recommendations from teachers, educational leaders, and
researchers who have had experience working with students in each of the grade levels on text
they had successfully used. From those recommendations the compilers looked at the quality
of the texts. The group selected classic or historically significant and contemporary texts which
had “literary merit, cultural significance, and rich content.” (“Common Core State Standards
Appendix B” 2) The compilers also tried to represent a large range of texts in each group on the
list by looking at the text’s initial publication date, authorship, and subject matter (2).

Lesesne was disappointed after reading the texts on the Common Core Standards
Exemplar Text List. According to Lesesne there were not enough texts on the list, and the texts
that were listed were either developmentally inappropriate for the grade level or out of print.
Lesesne was also concerned that the list did not represent the diversity of students’ needs.
Lesesne suggests alternative sources for teachers to find exemplar texts instead of using the
Common Core Exemplar Text List. Lesesne suggests using the Young Adult Library Services
Association (YALSA) of the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Reading Association’s Young Adult Choices annual lists. The YALSA list is compiled of favorite teen books that have been voted on by teens, while the Young Adult Choice list is preselected text that the teens then vote on for their favorites. Lesesne explains that by using books from these lists, especially books that are on both lists, educators can select texts which both include high quality writing and are relevant to high school students. Lesesne also suggests educators use texts from the Michael L. Printz Award, awarded for distinguished contributions to literature for young adults and the newest award from YASLA, Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults Award (13-14).

Lesesne also lists several resources to help educators connect high school readers to classics. The Herz and Gallo’s “From Hinton to Hamlet” list helps educators build thematically from Young Adult literature to the classics. The Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics by Joan Kaywell and Carol Jago’s Classics in the Classroom are additional guides to help educators choose contemporary readings and related classics and make them meaningful to students. In addition to awards lists and guides Lesesne also suggests educators use Twitter, Face Book, blogs, and wikis for examples of quality text to use in high school English classes and to talk to their students about what they are reading. Lesesne cautions against thinking there is one book every student will enjoy, but instead to make sure there is an ample supply of high quality texts for the individual student to choose from (13-15).

**Young adult literature has same elements as classical literature.**

Many researchers urge English teachers to use young adult literature in the classrooms instead of classics. Santoli and Wagner argue young adult novels support the development of
literary understanding by actively engaging students in analytical reading and writing. Santoli and Wagner advocate that young adult literature has the same literary elements as classic novels but also has the ability to create life-long readers out of poor and reluctant readers. Santoli and Wagner’s research states young adult novels contain very complex issues such as themes of love, death, loss, racism, and friendship that can bridge the gap between a student’s home and school life and be self affirming to many students. Along with complex issues young adult literature also provides readers with the same literary elements as classics: “character and characterization, setting, conflict, theme, point of view, plot, style, crisis, climax, foreshadowing, flashback, figurative language, and so forth”. Unlike classic literature, Santoli and Wagner argue, young adult novels contain everyday vocabulary, shorter plots, fewer characters, and elements that students understand and comprehend more easily. Young adult novels focus on young protagonists who have issues that engage and are relatable to modern students. Santoli and Wagner report classrooms that read young adult novels instead of classics have students with more positive attitudes and who want to read and discuss what is being read (65-70).

Stallworth also argues for young adult novels to be used in classrooms instead of traditional classic novels. Stallworth confirms Santoli and Wagner’s research stating young adult novels contain themes, plots, language, and characters that students can relate to, which helps students become more engaged in reading. According to Stallworth, contemporary young adult literature contains themes and content that many students face in their own lives. Reading this literature helps students tackle tough questions and can help young students transition into the next developmental stage in their lives. Stallworth suggests students benefit
from reading young adult literature which provides them with a wider perspective on life and helps students increase their awareness of the world around them (59-62).

Ostenson and Wadham believe the Common Core State Standards provide a framework where young adult literature can fulfill the English and language arts standards in high school classrooms. Many young adult texts meet the qualitative and quantitative needs of exemplar texts. The novel *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech is an example of how young adult novels meet the CCSS.; the novel features a challenging structure using a story within a story, and multiple levels of meanings embedded in the two stories. The novel *I Am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier features text complexity, as it is told through a mixture of therapy interview transcripts. Young adult texts also meet the needs of the readers by reflecting issues and conflicts relevant to young people, motivating teens to read more because they connect to the characters and themes of the novels (7). The more they enjoy reading, the more the student will read, and the better the student’s reading skills will become.

**Young adult literature is beneficial to students.**

Gallo is another advocate of using young adult novels instead of classic literature in high school English classes. Gallo confirms what Stallworth and Santoli and Wagner claim: young adult literature has the same literary elements as classical literature, but the symbolism and vocabulary are usually not as difficult, making young adult literature easier to read and understand. Gallo argues that young adult novels have plots that students can chart, important settings, and characters whose personalities, actions, and interactions can be analyzed in class. Gallo states the value of contemporary young adult literature is the feeling of normalcy, comfortableness, and understanding that the novels give to students. The main characters of
young adult novels are young kids and teens which help students relate to the characters and become more engaged in the writing.

The “Common Core State Standards Appendix A” states that in order for students to grow they must read numerous texts (2), while Ostenson and Wadham point out young adult literature motivates students to read extensively and make connections to what they are reading. Research shows reader motivation matters; the more the student is interested in a text, the more likely the student will use their metacognitive knowledge and strategies to comprehend what they are reading. Ostenson and Wadham explain that students are able to make stronger connections to characters and events in books when they read young adult literature while still encountering the high quality themes and characters required by the Common Core. Students are able to read young adult literature more independently than classic literature as other demands of the text are more manageable, allowing teacher support to concentrate on helping with the complex structure of the text instead of background knowledge (11).

Ostenson and Wadham argue that young adult literature is equal to or better than the classic titles listed in the Common Core State Standard Exemplar List of Texts. Ostenson and Wadham point out that while *The Odyssey* may fulfill the standard of complexity, the text requires significant scaffolding and teacher intervention for the students to comprehend and appreciate the text. The students would also need to have an understanding of the historical background of the Trojan War and knowledge of Greek gods and culture to make sense of the setting and conflicts throughout the poem. In comparison it would be easier for students to understand the contemporary novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson because the students
already have the background knowledge they need to connect with the main character who is a teenage girl labeled as a social outcast in high school who is learning to speak for herself through her artwork (9-10).

**Classic and Young Adult Literature Combined**

High school English teachers who want to continue to teach classic literature can pair classic literature with young adult literature to help students become more engaged readers. Santoli and Wagner reports students have a better appreciation for classic novels when read either after or in conjunction with related young adult novels. The young adult novels help students understand the values and culture of classic novels (Santoli and Wagner 72). Gallo concurs and suggests that teachers who do not want to stop teaching classic literature or who cannot completely change the curriculum start by substituting a few young adult novels for classic novels (39).

Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth suggest having students read young adult literature to gain the reading skills needed to read and enjoy classic literature. Gibbons Dail, and Stallworth note young adult literature holds students’ attention with their fast paced, technology driven age. Students, especially struggling readers, are engaged in reading young adult literature so they read more (53-56).

Knickerbocker and Brueggeman argue that students gain reading skills through reading contemporary young adult novels. Knickerbocker and Brueggeman also argue students learn inference through young adult literature because the text requires students to connect personal experiences and knowledge with the information the author has written about or has left out. Knickerbocker and Brueggeman also suggest students’ reading skills increase because
of the way some young adult literature is presented in a nonlinear format. The narrative text of some young adult novels is interrupted in different directions instead of following a straightforward series of events. Some young adult literature also uses multiple perspectives with different voices throughout the text. Knickerbocker and Brueggeman also point out that the nontraditional design layout of some contemporary novels also helps the reader’s skill level develop. By discussing the literary elements in the contemporary young adult literature students learn about style, plot, and character development which can then help the students appreciate all classic literature (68-71).

Blending contemporary young adult literature with classic novels through a process called intertext encourages students to read classic novels. Bright describes intertext as using a well known piece of literature in a more contemporary novel that can prepare students for the classical literature they may be asked to read in high school and hopefully encourages students to read classical novels on their own for pleasure. Bright explains how classic and contemporary young adult novels can then be compared helping students develop and understand critical ways of reading the two types of books together. The intertextual relationship between the classic and young adult novels help develop a dialogue about different forms of knowledge that aid in comprehension, thought, and individual experiences. According to Bright, the recommendation of including *Wuthering Heights* in the book series *The Twilight Saga* encourages more high school students to read *Wuthering Heights* than if an English teacher had assigned just the classic novel. Bright points out that students seek the connections between the two types of text, which expands the reader’s horizons. Intertext
encourages critical thinking in students as the readers comprehend the relationships between classic and young adult novels (39, 45).

In her article, “Easing the Pain of the Classics,” Katie Porteus connects several classic novels with young adult novels to help students read and enjoy classic literature. To help students understand and get excited about reading *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, Porteus suggests having students read *Dating Hamlet: Ophelia’s Story* by Lisa Fiedler, which takes on an alternate viewpoint from the original classic. Porteus also suggests reading “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson with *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, which resets the classic into a futuristic time period. Porteus notes that the key to helping students better understand classic literature and become more engaged readers is to connect classic literature with modern novels. For example pair *Bloodline* and *Bloodline: the Reckoning* by Kate Cary with *Dracula* by Bram Stoker to help students connect with the classic novel *Dracula*. (17).

To help teachers incorporate young adult and classic literature, Scherff and Wright offer teachers a lesson plan idea. Scherff and Wright suggest teachers have students pair a recent, award winning young adult novel with a classic novel and then have the students create a lesson to teach the literary element that is the same in each text. The students must read with attention to the stories’ themes, and use higher order thinking skills to combine the two texts. The task helps students make predictions during reading and to take a stance on the text the students are reading. Scherff and Wright agree with previous researchers stating young adult literature is a natural scaffold to classics. Young adult novels that are paired with classics can show students that classics still have relevance in their life (51-52).
Conclusion

Classic novels are being used in English high school classes today even though researchers have concluded that students struggle reading such literature. Research has shown that students struggle to relate to adult issues from centuries ago. It has also found Lexile levels are higher than many high school students’ Lexile range making it difficult for the students to comprehend the text. As a result some might turn to published notes instead of reading the assigned classic novels.

There are many teaching strategies for English teachers to incorporate when choosing to continue teaching difficult classics that help students comprehend the text. Researchers have found young adult literature teaches the same literary elements as classic literature while engaging student more. Researchers have found combining the two types of literature, classic and young adult, helps students relate and connect to the classics and, eventually, to seek and read them on their own.
CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Classic literature has been used in high school English classes to teach literary elements since the beginning of American education. While some English teachers argue classic novels are timeless pieces of “great” literature that teach students literary elements such as vocabulary, satirical diction, and imagery; students tend to find classic novels difficult to read and hard to relate to, so they tend not to the read the classic novels assigned. Contemporary young adult novels have been shown to not only teach the same literary elements as classic novels, but to hold the attention of students and encourage the students to want to read more. This research explored whether problems occur when classic literature is assigned in high school English classes. Other questions explored are, “How are reading young adult novels more beneficial to students?” and, “What are some ways to incorporate using both classic and young adult novels in English classes?”

Problems with Classic Literature

Classic literature is difficult for many high school students to read. Classic novels were generally written for adults by adults making the content too mature for high school readers. Students have a difficult time comprehending books they cannot relate to, so they tend to either not read the text, or if they read the text, they do not gleam the literary elements the text is supposed to portray. Students that are accustomed to the instant visualization technology produces today have a difficult time reading lengthy descriptive passages found in many classic novels. Unfamiliar geographical settings and obscure historical references also make it hard for students to understand classics.
Classic novels are written at a Lexile range higher than many students can read fluently. These high school students are reading at Lexile levels three grade levels below their current grade, thus making it extremely difficult to read text on or above their grade level. Students will have a difficult time with the word fluency and meanings and interpreting the text content. Even 12th grade students with an on grade level Lexile of 1210 will have difficulties reading Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* without assistance, which has a Lexile of 1300. Instead of reading the difficult classic novels that are assigned in high school English classes many students choose to either turn to published notes or not read at all.

**Young Adult Literature in High School English**

Young adult literature is written for teens about the lives of other teens. Young adult novels contain complex issues such as themes of love, death, loss, racism, and friendship that bridge the gap between the students’ home and school life, which can be self affirming to many students. Students gain a feeling of normalcy, comfortableness, and understanding when reading young adult novels. Young adult novels also provide students with a wider perspective on life and help them increase their awareness of the world around them. Students enjoy young adult literature and are encouraged to read even more which helps them become lifelong readers.

High school students can relate to the issues discussed in young adult novels, aiding in their comprehension of the text. Many contemporary young adult novels have the same literary elements as the classics. They also fulfill the requirements of the Common Core State Standards. In addition, they hold the attention of high school students, helping them learn the literary elements. Young adult novels can be used to teach setting, conflict, theme, point of
view, plot, style, figurative language, and so forth, but use everyday vocabulary, shorter plots, fewer characters, and elements that students understand and comprehend more effectively. High school English classes that read young adult novels are reported to have students with more positive attitudes toward reading and who become involved in book discussions as well.

Young adult literature does not require the significant scaffolding that classic literature needs in order for high school students to understand the text. The poem *The Odyssey* requires students to have an understanding of the historical background on the Trojan War and knowledge of Greek gods and culture in order to understand the conflicts and setting. Students could read a young adult novel such as *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson more independently because they would not need any additional scaffolding to understand the contemporary high school setting of the book where the protagonist is a social outcast. When students are able to read young adult literature more independently, teachers can concentrate on helping the students with the complex structure of the text instead of teaching background knowledge.

**Combining Classic and Young Adult Literature**

Young adult novels can be used to gain the skills needed to read and enjoy classic novels. Students who read young adult novels are more engaged and tend to read more, which helps them become stronger, more skilled readers. These students are then more prepared to read and comprehend the difficult classic literature. Students who relate to the contemporary young adult literature, and are able to connect their personal experiences and knowledge with that of the text, develop better inference skills that help them later when they read classic literature. Students also develop reading skills as they read young adult literature that is written in nonlinear formats. Some young adult novels use flashbacks and multiple
perspectives, which again help students develop stronger reading skills. Students learn to appreciate all types of literature by discussing the literary elements of young adult novels such as style, plot, and character development.

Reading young adult novels which include intertext help students become interested in classic novels and encourages the student to read them. Intertext is described as one or more texts the reader must previously know in order to understand the current text selection. An example of this is the young adult novel Twilight which refers to the classic novel Wuthering Heights. In order to fully understand the text selection in the novel Twilight the reader first must know the storyline of Wuthering Heights. After reading Twilight the reader might be encouraged to read Wuthering Heights to fully understand the passage.

Another way classic and young adult novels can be combined is to pair them together to help the students understand the context of the classic novel. The young adult novel The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins and “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson can be paired together as both are set in a futuristic time period. Students might understand and get more excited about reading Hamlet by William Shakespeare if the book is paired with Lisa Fiedler’s Dating Hamlet: Ophelia’s Story, which takes on an alternative point of view from the original classic. By connecting the two types of literature, students are able to understand the original classic better and become more engaged readers.
Works Cited


