

## Rebecca Dark

### “Classic” Canons and Inclusion: Preparing Candidates for the TExES ELA 8-12

#### Test and the Classroom

Preparing students for teaching literature in the secondary classroom is a tricky process. As we all know, for too long the much maligned dead white men of literature held undisputed sovereignty over the literary curricula of the secondary public school. During my many years of high school teaching experience, I saw significant advances toward inclusion of non-traditional literatures in the classroom. Adopted anthologies increasingly included selections from previously ignored women and authors of color. For instance, as a sonnet by Pablo Neruda was offered in the senior literature book alongside those by Shakespeare and Sidney, A Separate Peace and The Great Gatsby were replaced by The House on Mango Street and Their Eyes were Watching God as required novels at the sophomore and junior levels. Nevertheless, the curricular requirements of the school district and of the state, while acknowledging the importance of multicultural and non-canonical literature, continue to call for all students to have a working knowledge of and easy familiarity with the traditional canon. Julius Caesar, Huckleberry Finn, and Beowulf, among many others traditionally canonical works, remain important components of many regular high school curricula.

During those years I also saw the dramatic rise of high stakes standardized testing that has come to dominate public education and public perception of education in this state. The high school seniors with whom I student taught were the first class to have to pass the TEAMS test, later replaced by the TAAS and then the TAKS, in order to graduate, and I was one of the first groups of teaching candidates to have to pass standardized competency tests, in my case the ExCET, in order to receive certification.

While high stakes standardized testing for students has, for better or for worse, led to highly standardized curricula in the public school system, it seems that standardized testing for teachers has not had the same result in the university. In fact, the diversity of university curricula for aspiring English teachers is a heartening testimony to the continued academic freedom enjoyed by those of us in higher education, a freedom woefully absent in the teaching possibilities open to many of our peers in the public schools. On the other hand, this diversity may also present a serious challenge for those students we are preparing for the public schools because of the testing required by the state for certification and the standardization of curricula in the public schools.

These days, one of the courses that I teach at Dallas Baptist University involves preparing teaching candidates for the current state mandated secondary English competency test known as the TExES ELA 8-12 Test. Preparing students for this test and their secondary teaching experience is demanding because of the startling breadth of knowledge required on this exam. The Domains and Competencies for which Texas secondary English teaching candidates are responsible include requirements that these students know both pedagogical theory and practice for the English classroom and rhetoric and composition theory and practice. In addition, the requirements state that candidates must "Demonstrate knowledge of a substantial body of classic and contemporary" American, British and world literatures and "Demonstrate knowledge of major literary movements in American, British, and world literature, including their characteristics, the historical contexts from which they emerged, major authors and their impact on literature, and representative works and their themes" (TExES Preparation Manual 131, 16). Clearly, beyond all of the other material on which they will be tested, our students are expected to thoroughly know both the "classic" canon and the "inclusive" canon. As I tell my students, the test isn't hard at all - for the person who knows everything.

Although disagreements would certainly emerge were we as English department faculty required to create a complete list of works that unequivocally belong in the "classic" canon, we would certainly be able to come up with at least a core on which we could concur. However, a definition of what literature actually makes up the "inclusive" canon is somewhat more slippery; indeed, such a list might be impossible to create. I submit that variability and indeterminacy are, in fact, what prevent inclusion from fossilizing into an equally prescriptive and limited alternative to our old list of dead white men's writings. Perhaps because of this variability or perhaps because old habits are hard to break, much of the literary portion of the candidate's testing (and, indeed, much of what the teacher will actually teach in the secondary public school) is drawn from the traditionally canonical literature that the TEA calls "classic," and I have found that many students feel that their knowledge of the "classics" is lacking even when they feel fairly comfortable with their experience with non-traditional texts.

In fact, when confronting rigorous TEA expectations and in spite of receiving a rich and varied education in English language literature, some candidates experience great anxiety over their lack of familiarity with a wide range of literature from both canons, but especially from the traditional canon. This anxiety could come from many sources. Some of these students may be overwhelmed and intimidated by the battery of tests they will have to pass, while others may have neglected to learn many of the basics of literature as freshmen and sophomores and are now feeling the sting of their earlier inattention. For some, though, the gap between the college coursework they have actually taken and the vast *range* of content knowledge required by the Domains and Competencies of the TEA is the source of their anxiety. I do not mean to suggest that large numbers of our students are failing the tests or that we are not teaching them the "right" things, but many are aware that they lack certain kinds of knowledge and experience, and that this lack might hurt their scores on the literary portions of the test

and leave them scrambling in their first years of teaching for help with teaching literature they have never read before from literary periods they know little or nothing about.

Further, it is not just the students facing upcoming certification tests who express uncertainty regarding the helpfulness of their college coursework. In interviews conducted both in person and by e-mail with a small group of recently certified English teachers, I learned that few of these new teachers, who had earned from nine to thirty-six university English hours, felt even moderately confident that the courses and topics they had studied for their English degrees had prepared them for the test or for what they actually found themselves teaching once they had a job. In fact, the only respondent from this group who expressed confidence in her preparation for the test or her teaching was also the only one who reported having taken a course specifically designed to prepare her for the TExES test.

In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, I tried an experiment with undergraduate degree plans for English majors at four universities. I chose to examine degree plans from two private universities and two public universities of varying sizes. I used internet published degree plans and course descriptions to see what I might learn at each one if I were seeking an English degree with the intent to teach in public secondary schools. Because of my small sample and the wide variability in the level of detail available from each university, my information is anecdotally, rather than scientifically, valid. Additionally, I have not included the quite varied writing components required for each degree in my analysis because my focus here is on the literature requirements and opportunities a student might find at each school. This data, therefore, is not intended to suggest that any of these universities is not preparing students well. These sample degree plans do reveal a great deal, however, about the difference in what it means to earn a Bachelor's degree in English from various institutions in Texas.

At university one I would have taken a one semester class simply called English Literature, the nature of which I could not determine. I also would have taken surveys of world literature since 1500 and American literature since the Civil War, as well as classes on satire, romanticism, Shakespeare, Milton, African-American literature, and Science Fiction.

University two had the most complete course descriptions among the four schools as well as the most possible options for different classes. Here I was able to put together a degree plan that allowed me to take a one semester class on the "western" novel (as in novels about the American West such as those by Larry McMurtry), a one semester class on literary criticism in which we would also read Larry McMurtry as well as Scott Momaday and a slave narrative, one semester each of surveys of American literature, British literature, and world literature since 1500, a one semester course on women's literature, one semester of linguistics, one semester of critical theory, and one semester each on Scott Momaday, modern African drama, and Eighteenth Century German philosophy.

At university three I would have taken a freshman genre studies course, a one year sophomore world literature survey, a one year upper level American literature survey, a one year upper level British literature survey, one semester on Milton and Bunyan, one semester on Shakespeare, and one semester on Pope, Dryden and Grey. Finally, at university four I would have taken a one semester British literature survey, a one semester world literature survey, one semester on the modern American novel, and one class through the Education department designed to prepare me for teaching English in public schools.

The wide variety of possibilities for an English major at each of these universities clearly demonstrates the variety of emphases Texas university English departments place on literature in general, and especially on the "classic" canon versus the

"inclusive" canon. Notably, only university four's online information specifically listed a credit requirement designed to address the needs of an English major who plans to teach in the secondary school, and it is the education department in partnership with the English department that actually attempts to fulfill that need. It is possible, of course, that the other schools have some method in place such as what I do at DBU to help these students with test preparation. At any rate, with the wide divergence among these programs, it no longer seems odd to me that test candidates and new teachers suffer anxiety regarding their literary preparedness. They are required to pass a test that assumes standardization in their educational backgrounds and that is given by an agency dedicated to ensuring a certain amount of standardization in their future teaching assignments, but they have not experienced any standardization in their class work.

The choices offered at most schools that might seem designed to satisfy the needs of our teaching candidates, such as student teaching and survey courses, are insufficient for various reasons. While student teaching does offer students real interaction with secondary curricula, this experience is usually (and necessarily) narrow in literary focus. Also, students are often far too consumed with the intricacies of mastering classroom dynamics and the anxieties of pleasing a variety of supervisors to find student teaching a time to really learn literature they have not encountered before. Similarly, survey courses such as those offered at all of the universities I examined are, in my experience, too variable in content based on the interests and emphases of the instructor to be counted on to give students the kind of comprehensive knowledge of either the "classic" or the "inclusive" canon that they need for secondary teaching. For example, I had the opportunity to examine syllabi for several sophomore survey courses from university two. Most were heavily geared to the non-traditional canon. One American literature survey syllabus only listed novels by African-American, women, and Hispanic authors for the class readings. While this course would no doubt have been

fascinating and worthwhile, a student in need of a balanced selection of traditional and non-traditional works, not to mention other genres such as drama and poetry, would not find this course his or her best choice. One other alternative for students seeking secondary certification in English is a private test preparation course or package.

However, I do not believe that the interests of these students are best served by such “for profit” test prep courses because these programs are almost exclusively aimed at “beating the test” and not at giving the students any sort of literary foundations.

The question of how best to help future secondary English teachers as they prepare for certification testing and the classroom remains. I would never suggest that our students would be best served by standardizing our curricula to align with the requirements of the TEA, but I do believe that it is important that we acknowledge the fact that many, probably most, of our English graduates are planning to teach in public secondary schools and could benefit from a course or two specifically designed to address those needs. Such courses might take a variety of forms, perhaps including a course designed to study actual literature curricula from various public school districts or a survey course specifically designated for future public school teachers and geared to the texts and literary concepts taught in the public schools. Whether the exact literature they actually encounter on the test or in their own job situation is traditional or inclusive, if students have a strong background in literary movements and literary history as well as a thorough understanding of specific genres and literary techniques they will at least have a starting point for understanding how any piece of literature either fits into or challenges dominant ideologies and forms. It would be in the best interests of our students that all of our departments examine how well we are preparing our future secondary English teachers and seek ways to help them to enter the field with the confidence and knowledge that will ensure success both on the TExES test and in the classroom.