Advocacy in Literary Studies

1. Problems.

Scholarly disciplines exist to provide new insights and accurate information for others to use. Policymakers rely on the results of research. If the research is conducted with a fixed pre-ordained outcome designed to justify a particular policy in advance, then the very purpose of it is lost. What purports to be a new insight is really an intellectual short circuit.

We expect editorial writers and politicians to advocate; scholars should be devoted primarily to the best, unbiased information and should follow results wherever they lead. Only in that way can scholarship support a given approach. "Studies show X" only works if the studies are conducted in such a way that they leave it open at the start whether X is true. Conducted with integrity, scholarship adds something important. That is a key reason society supports scholarship.

We can trust research results if they have been subjected to vigorous criticism. If criticism is discouraged, our confidence in results will be, and should be, severely compromised. When a line of questioning is regarded as a political challenge, censorship or self-censorship will inhibit it. To the extent that a discipline has been politicized, and to the extent that its practitioners understand their role as activists, the discipline can no longer be trusted.

2. Literary education.

That much is true of all disciplines. Activism in literary studies entails other problems as well.

Literary scholarship is closely connected with literary education in a way that physics, biology, and economics are not. One goal of literary interpretation, for instance, is to make works accessible to a given readership. Today's readers may have a different prior education and different concerns from their predecessors, so reinterpretation is important both for scholarship per se and for education. Textual editing also serves both functions.

One purpose of literary education is to pass on the heritage of great works. The past is essential to the reasons we have literary education (and scholarship) at all.

By contrast, mathematicians and physicists do not instruct students in the history of their disciplines. What is old is outdated. That is not true of great literature. As William Hazlitt pointed out in his essay "Why the Arts Are Not Progressive?" literature, unlike the hard sciences, does not progress.[1] Aristotle's Poetics is still relevant in a way that his physics is not. Any first-year physics student knows more physics than Aristotle, but no dramatist has surpassed Shakespeare. Novelists of the present have not created works as significant as War and Peace and Anna Karenina. To be sure, the canon of great works changes, and unjustly neglected works are added. Still, some works survive numerous shifts. The monuments of the past are usually more impressive than those of the present.

One source of the greatness of literary works is their inexhaustible capacity to enter into dialogue with readers from different cultures and epochs. One does not have to locate them in their particular originating context to appreciate their greatness. Indeed, the distinction between literature and other documents may be that literature is designed to be meaningful without reconstructing the original context (although it is often enlightening to do so). Hamlet has something to say to those with no interest in Renaissance England, and Crime and Punishment to those with no interest in tsarist Russia. These works may resonate with readers whom their authors never imagined and with people from lands they never considered.

Activism, especially as it is now sometimes practiced, not only impedes the passing on of a heritage but often rejects it as a proper purpose. As shown below, many courses given in English and language/literature departments often do not teach literature at all. The very idea of "great literature" is often regarded as suspect.

Courses in literary studies traditionally provide students with the skills needed to read great literature. Reading Paradise Lost is hard, and recognizing why Dostoevsky's understanding of human nature is so profound may require practice in reading novels and grasping how they work. If activism replaces the teaching of those skills, students do not learn to appreciate and understand masterpieces. Activists may decry this traditional purpose as a focus on "aesthetics" or "intrinsic" properties which, it is argued, do not exist.

If literature and literary studies do not progress in the way the sciences do, why does anyone expend resources to support them? The answer is that society appreciates the value of keeping a

1 William Hazlitt, "Why the Arts Are Not Progressive?" (1814), in *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (London: J. M. Dent, 1902–06), 9:489.

heritage alive and available. The wisdom of the past, based on timeless aspects of human nature, may save us from the blindness of reigning prejudices. It may free us from the prison house of the present moment and of the cultural norms we take for granted. Not only is culture not guaranteed to progress, but it often regresses, especially when people imagine that present wisdom is bound to be right. Understanding past geniuses may guard against presentism.

Great literature poses ultimate questions: Does existence have a meaning? What is a flourishing life? How shall we regard other people? What is love, and does it come in kinds? Such questions should be a part of college education. This is the time and place for those questions to be asked. If they are replaced with political activism, one purpose of college education is lost. Education becomes stunted.

3. Studying masterpieces.

The rise of activism in scholarship has severely weakened the ability of both scholarship and teaching to perform these functions. New orthodoxies, which have been accumulating for the past three decades or so, have insisted that there is no such thing as great literature. Not everyone agrees, of course, but those who do not have long been on the defensive. Predominant opinion usually holds that greatness is entirely relative, and there are no "intrinsic" qualities to make a work superior. There are no great works per se, only those *called* great by "hegemonic" oppressive powers.

If so, there is no pressing need to teach the supposedly great works of the past, and they may be appropriately replaced, either by recent popular literary works more in agreement with current prejudices or by nonliterary works of political and social theory. As we will see below, courses offered by literature departments often do not teach literature at all. There is never a shortage of issues felt to be more urgent than preserving and understanding past masterpieces. But if literature departments do not teach literature, why do we need them? Why should society support them?

One may also ask: why does training in literary studies enable scholars to pronounce on pressing current issues (such as climate change)? Philosophers and scholars from the social and hard sciences often marvel at the confident ignorance with which literary scholars discuss topics without knowledge of the disciplines long devoted to them.

It is important not to confuse a defense of literary greatness with a refusal to expand the

canon of great works. On the contrary, a belief in greatness may lead one to include the masterpieces of non-Western culture, such as The Tale of Genji, the Bhagavad-Gita, and The Dream of the Red Chamber. Indeed, if one accepts a relativist or politicized view of canonicity, however, there is no good way to acknowledge such masterpieces; instead, one is likely to include lesser, more contemporary works that seem more useful in confronting our current political concerns. Other cultures are examined insofar as they are useful in attacking the shortcomings of ours. It's rather like the joke about the person who tells her friend: "That's enough about me; let's talk about you. What do you think of me?"

4. From "Literary Theory" to "Theory."

"Theory" once meant "theory of literature," which asked questions like: What is a genre? Through the 1970s (or later), a theoretician might ask: In interpreting a literary work, should we consider the author's intention or only the text itself? Is the reader a passive decoder of the work, or is the reader's role more active? Is there a sort of dialogue between the text and the reader? Why does literature change over time? Do new genres and movements reflect social needs or are they generated from the internal dynamics of literature itself? If both, how do the two interact? What, if anything, distinguishes literary works from nonliterary ones, and one genre from another? How do plots in different narrative genres work? What is the relation of literature to the other arts?

These are no longer the sort of questions "theorists" usually ask. Instead, they more often consider topics that are essentially social and political and may have little or nothing to do with literary works. Hence, "literary theory" has been replaced by "theory" (or "critical theory").

Research and courses on topics such as climate change, racism, prison reform, and imperialism indicate that theorists in (formerly) literature departments have expanded their domain to include topics previously addressed by other disciplines. That is why such "theorists" can make sociological, political, economic, and anthropological observations without training in or knowledge of those disciplines. On what basis? The answer is "theory" itself, a collection of now canonical texts for such theorists.

One may roughly describe the process like this: literary critics moved from ascribing meaning to authors or texts to claiming that meaning is entirely the property of readers. Since readers differ, this move opened the door to radical relativism. The next step was to attribute authority not to specific readers but to "interpretive communities," which made the relativism

not individual but social in nature. From there it was a short step to focusing on questions that are essentially social, and then to ones that are political in nature. Culture (broadly understood) and society (understood in terms of "social justice") often became the main areas of concern. If "social science" disciplines considering such topics arrive at different conclusions, they may be impugned for devotion to the discredited ideas of impartiality, objectivity, or other forms of naivete about language and meaning exposed by the canonical texts of "theory."

Sometimes this approach takes the form of "cultural studies." In his article, "Theory with a Capital T: Cultural Studies' Assault on Popular Art," James Seaton pointed to cultural studies' "implicit promise that adepts gain the ability to make authoritative pronouncements about all aspects of human life without going to the trouble of learning the rudiments of any particular discipline." Seaton explained: "According to [cultural theorist] Douglas Kellner, 'A critical cultural studies will thus overcome the boundaries of academic disciplines and will combine political economy, social theory and research, and cultural criticism in its project which aims at critique of domination and social transformation.'"[2]

How far can such thinking go? Occasionally, it reaches as far as the sciences, which are downgraded to just one of many forms of knowledge, no better than "indigenous" ones. Relativism does not stop at the laboratory door. Traditional science is sometimes said to endorse the naïve idea of "scientific," "objective," or "disinterested" approaches. Since the sciences depend on such approaches, can they, too, be subjected to the scrutiny of literary scholars? Now mainstream (though by no means universal) is the view expressed in the description of Stanford's French 254, "Animism, Gaia, and Alternative Approaches to the Environment":

> Indigenous knowledges have been traditionally treated as a field of research for anthropologists and as mistaken epistemologies, i.e., un-scientific and irrational folklore. However, within the framework of environmental humanities, current interest in non-anthropocentric approaches and epistemic injustice, animism emerged as a critique of modern epistemology and an alternative to the Western worldview. Treating native thought as an equivalent to Western knowledge will be presented as a (potentially) decolonizing and liberating practice.[3]

2 James Seaton, "Theory with a Capital T: Cultural Studies' Assault on Popular Art," *Academic Questions* 23, no. 4 (2010): 469–80 (quotations at 476).

3 Stanford University, "FRENCH 254 / REES 254: Animism, Gaia, and Alternative Approaches to the Environment" (course description), https://explorecourses.stanford.edu/search?q=REES+254%3A+Animism%2C+Gaia%2C+and+Alternative+Approaches+to+the+Environment (archived at https://archive.is/yr87a).

To "privilege" science is to endorse "epistemic injustice." This approach grows out of the premises of scholarly activism. Can those premises be extended indefinitely?

5. When masterpieces are themselves political.

To be clear: to appreciate masterpieces, it is by no means necessary to ban political questions. Literature, after all, can be about anything, including politics. Some works — say, Dostoevsky's The Possessed, Turgenev's Fathers and Children, and Conrad's Under Western Eyes — focus on politics. To examine such works on their own terms, therefore, one can hardly avoid considering politics.

But not all works are political in this way. To insist on treating all works from a political standpoint means not taking some of them on their own terms. When that happens, whatever wisdom those works may contain remains obscured by interpretive anachronism.

Even to appreciate works like Dostoevsky's The Possessed, and to understand the political wisdom they contain, one must first read them in their own terms. Only then does it make sense to ask whether the book runs counter to today's political assumptions. If it does, the work invites us not only to question it in our terms but also to hold our beliefs up to scrutiny in light of Dostoevsky's (or some other author's) political insights.

6. Some examples of an activist understanding of scholarship.

a) The American Comparative Literature Association.

Consider, for instance, Shu-mei Shih's 2022 presidential address to the American Comparative Literature Association, the leading organization in the field. In a section of her talk entitled "Depoliticization, Area Studies, and the Rise of Literary Theory," the president objects to how, after World War II, the discipline of literary studies "scrupulously dissociated itself from the US reality" and sought to establish academic legitimacy by turning itself into an apolitical science that pledged "disinterestedness" and focused on the "intrinsic" qualities of literature:

> I argue that comparative literature practitioners intentionally dissociated their work from the political and ideological exigencies of the time . . . . In the process of professionalizing the field, they continued earlier scientism in a different form, turning the study of literature into a kind of science, focusing on its intrinsic qualities, that is, its "literariness," leading to

> the increasing significance of literary criticism, and later, literary theory . . ., and professionalization also became synonymous with disinterestedness, which is "the pledge of the nonpolitical nature of academic inquiry."[4]

The president relies on the audience presuming that contemporary theory has rejected the very existence of "intrinsic" qualities as "essentialism," while viewing claims of "disinterestedness" as a tool for ruling powers to maintain their position.

In 2020, in response to the incidents following the killing of George Floyd, the ACLA stated: "As intellectuals we reject all rhetorical and legalistic strategies being deployed to delegitimize and divide an uprising. . . . We urge Universities to defund police on campuses nationwide."[5]

The ACLA went further in its statement on critical race theory: "The ACLA takes this opportunity to . . . pledge our strong support to everything associated with 'critical race theory'. . . . There is no study worthy of the name that dispenses with 'critical race theory'; there can be no study of the United States to which slavery and settler colonialism are not central."[6]

Inasmuch as critical race theory and "settler colonialism" presume a number of contentious theses, committing oneself to them in advance seems to preclude the possibility of testing them against evidence. What is especially noteworthy in this statement is that "there is no study worthy of the name that dispenses with 'critical race theory.'" This statement seems to suggest that scholarly activism of a particular sort must be considered an essential part of the field.

b) The Modern Language Association.

The MLA is the largest organization of literary scholars in the country (with about 20,000

4 Shu-mei Shih, "Decolonizing US Comparative Literature: The 2022 ACLA Presidential Address," *Comparative Literature* 75, no. 3 (2023): 237–65, https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-10475380; the block quotation is at 249, and the phrase "scrupulously dissociated itself from the US reality" is from the abstract (237).

5 American Comparative Literature Association, statement on the killing of George Floyd, 2020, https://www.acla.org/sites/default/files/files/ACLA%20Letter%20-%20George%20Floyd.pdf (archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20250108141019/https://www.acla.org/sites/default/files/files/ACLA%20Letter%20-%20George%20Floyd.pdf).

6 American Comparative Literature Association, "Statement Responding to White House Statement on 'Critical Race Theory,'" 24 September 2020, https://www.acla.org/sites/default/files/files/Statement%20Responding%20to%20White%20House%20Statement%20on%20Critical%20Race%20Theory%2009_24_2020.pdf (archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20250601081942/https://www.acla.org/sites/default/files/files/Statement%20Responding%20to%20White%20House%20Statement%20on%20Critical%20Race%20Theory%2009_24_2020.pdf).

members), and its journal PMLA is especially prestigious and influential.

Consider Christopher John Newfield's 2023 presidential address to the MLA.[7] Like Shu-mei Shih, Newfield begins by contrasting what the profession used to do with what it now should do. The old way is characterized as resulting from the pressure of "a numerical minority [of Americans] that enjoys a powerful media system" in opposition to the "popular counterdemands" of "the rest of society."

Traditional scholarship and teaching are characterized not as traditional scholars actually characterized them, but by what Newfield takes to be their political effect and underlying political motive. If so, then what is happening now is not politicizing the discipline, which was "always already" political, but the adoption of a different (and superior) politics. The argument depends on the idea developed over previous decades by "theory" that everything is political.

According to Newfield, traditional scholarship is not (as claimed) about conveying and deepening our understanding of great literary works, but about four political purposes:

1) "Since World War II, the first expectation for university knowledge has been that it develop ideas and technology leading to US economic preeminence and geopolitical dominance."

2) Next was the demand to "form human capital according to the needs of the private sector ... Criticism would use its intellectual freedom to negotiate internecine emotional conflicts rather than *hammer away at the power structure*" (italics added).

3) Third was the attempt to create a private sector "managerial democracy. An informed and active citizenry was to be reconciled to top-down authority structures in the private sector, where executive power was said to guarantee the free enterprise system and social order."

4) Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, another purpose became to fit "multicultural population into existing social hierarchies." While the literary canon was broadened to make it less Eurocentric, more inclusive of women writers in all periods, more queer, and more multiracial or multicultural, as the term was used. ... [a]t the same time, criticism was to help ensure that the widening of identity norms would not involve a displacement of European

7 Christopher Newfield, "Criticism After This Crisis: Toward a National Strategy for Literary and Cultural Study," *Representations* 164, no. 1 (2023): 1–22; the quotations that follow are drawn from 8–14.

cultures from their central place—and would not lead to cultural equality."

These purposes should be replaced by new ones:

1) Because a large part of the population does not believe in American superpower, it properly demands challenges to "anti-Black police violence, anti-Asian racism, border incarceration, transphobia, the jailing of water protectors, the suppression of nonsuburban voters, among many other issues. Criticism enables the recentering of formal cultural knowledge creation on what many of us came to call subaltern knowledges emerging within the United States as well as in the Global South."

It is not explained why English or foreign language scholars are especially adapted to this role, but the implicit answer may be that they are steeped primarily in a type of theory focusing not so much on literature as on social justice.

2) Literary scholars should devote themselves to "a future not centered on wage work, a future of abundance without systemic exploitation and multiple forms of bondage, even a future without work as such. Poetry, fiction, essays, theater articulate the endless nonpecuniary forms of life that cannot or must not be reduced to economy." Here literary works are read in order to forward a utopian politics of abundance without "wage work" or even "without work as such."

3) Literature should also be used to create an "industrial democracy, in which unions would share power with corporate management in setting company policy. It includes direct community power, in which racialized, immigrant, working-class communities would associate in the polity as equals. Criticism's roles would include the unearthing of artistic and cultural practices that enable interpersonal behaviors not rooted in coercion."

4) "A fourth demand has been for academic knowledge that would explore how to have—how to feel, to embody, to realize—egalitarian acceptance of all peoples in society. How do we rewrite the discourses of structural racism in all its intersectional forms? What artistic forms show how to decolonize US culture on the level of public policy?"

Not only is there little or no place here for the study of literature as literature or of masterpieces as great works of art and thought, but there is no acknowledgment in the address that this has ever been (or could be) the case.

c) Other professional associations.

In much the same spirit, the Society for Classical Studies urged activism on the part of classical scholars: "We also strongly urge white and non-black members to take action by advocating for racial justice and reform of the police and criminal justice system. . . . and addressing teaching, research, and public engagement through the lens of anti-racism."[8] "Anti-racism," of course, is a particular approach to race that presumes controversial theses. The possibility of examining those theses is not admitted. Nor is it explained why classical scholars are equipped to address these issues.

Societies devoted to the study of particular writers have issued similar statements. For example, the Shakespeare Association of America declared:

> We all have a role to play in combating racism, white supremacy, and police brutality, and in building a more just and inclusive society. As educators, we are poised to play a leading role in working actively to eradicate racism and prejudice in all spaces of teaching and learning. . . . When we do not actively teach and practice anti-racism in our curriculum and policies, we are complicit in perpetuating racism.[9]

"When we do not actively teach and practice anti-racism in our curriculum and policies, we are complicit in perpetuating racism": Statements like these seem to go from demanding activism toward ruling out anything else.

In the 2022 presidential address to the Shakespeare Association of America, Farah Karim-Cooper recounted telling a student that one did not have to be an activist to be a scholar: "The world needs thinkers. . . . people who advance ideas and do so through the arts, like theater, and through the humanities."[10] But the president would no longer say that. The world is now full of injustice: "War crimes are happening in places like Yemen, Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan. The backlash against anti-racism and gender equality is not just harming education; it is also hurting many of our colleagues in schools and universities around the country, not least in the state of

8 Society for Classical Studies, "Statement on Police Brutality, Systemic Racism, and the Death of George Floyd," 2020, https://classicalstudies.org/scs-news/statement-police-brutality-systemic-racism-and-death-george-floyd (archived at https://archive.is/Ngun5).

9 Shakespeare Association of America, "SAA Statement on Racial Justice," 4 June 2020. The statement has since been removed from the SAA website; archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20250405140930/https://shakespeareassociation.org/about/advocacy-and-statement/.

10 Farah Karim-Cooper, Presidential Address, 50th Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, Jacksonville, FL, 8 April 2022. No published transcript; video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2CTYgjj2wU.

Florida." So the question is no longer how to be better thinkers but "how should we ask for change? Should we just ask for it—or help make it by directly engaging with the discomfort of action?"

The president explains that "with colleagues at the Globe and King's College London . . . we're not just creating a new research center for research's sake; we hope to create a vision for Shakespeare studies that embodies a scholar-activist approach to inclusive pedagogy, research, and scholarship."

The president concludes this section of the address by celebrating that "the program is packed with a range of seminars, panels, and workshops that would make Florida state legislators wet themselves with panic."

It isn't clear how these scholars could object when legislators say that the disciplines have become thoroughly politicized. They provide ammunition for those who would abolish the humanities altogether.

7. Corruption of argument and critical thinking.

It is not accurate to say that when political conclusions are given in advance, such theorists are shielded from criticism. They are shielded only from non-activist criticism. Activist scholars do engage in controversy with each other.

What is notable are the *grounds* on which criticisms are often advanced. What counts as a good argument when political goals are the purpose of scholarly activity?

The introduction to the widely used Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism cites a debate among feminist critics. "One of the main flash points among feminist critics has been identity politics, by which is meant a politics of difference firmly based on some fixed or definable feature(s) of identity (as a middle-class white woman, a working-class black woman, a third world brown woman, and so on)."[11] Some feminist critics object that:

> an emphasis on the multiplicity of female identities undermines the solidarity and united front of feminists. Advocates of the politics of difference respond, in turn, that the act of herding all women into one homogeneous category (Woman) is . . . very unlikely to disturb

11 *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al., 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 26.

the dominant order.[12]

What counts as an argument here? The appeal is not to evidence, fact, or logical coherence, but to political effectiveness. Is solidarity or multiplicity better at disturbing "the dominant order"? If scholarship were devoted to finding out what most coincides with reality, what would matter would be accuracy, not what is most politically useful to say.

On the next page, the Norton editor explains: "Like other movements and schools of thought grounded in identity, queer theory grapples with internal disputes over politics and activism. Such disputes take various forms – for example, street protest versus ivory tower theory, queer separatism versus assimilation."[13] Apparently, what counts as a good argument is what form of opposition to a known enemy is best.

8. Job ads.

By now, many English and "language and literature" departments often consist mainly of scholars working on politicized topics. It is therefore not surprising that job ads name politicized specialties that virtually exclude traditional scholars.

The study of medieval literature, apparently so remote from today's issues, long seemed to escape politicization, but no longer, as we see from the Trinity English department's job ad: "The English Department at Trinity University seeks to hire a tenure-track Assistant Professor in medieval literature and culture. Teaching and research specialties may include the *Global Middle Ages, premodern critical race studies, gender and sexuality studies, disability studies, ecocritical studies*, book or manuscript studies, or other theoretical or interdisciplinary approaches which focus on the period before ca 1450." (italics added).[14]

In its ad for a scholar in ancient Greek cultures and literatures, the Program in Classical and Medieval Studies at Bates College explains: "*We envision a scholar whose research and teaching focus on the construction of alterity—therefore race, power, privilege, and colonialism in ancient Greek texts* across genres such as medicine, drama, poetry, political and forensic oratory, ethnography, and philosophy. The successful candidate considers post-classical and contemporary receptions of ancient Greek cultures and literatures as they are mediated through texts, broadly conceived, and

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 27.
14 Trinity University, Department of English, tenure-track position in medieval literature and culture (job advertisement, 2024), archived at https://archive.is/tsKdT.

screens, including film and television narratives and/or digital media, with a view to these same questions." (italics added).[15]

The English department at Illinois Wesleyan seeks "a scholar-teacher whose work in global/postcolonial Englishes [sic] explores class, gender, race, ethnicity, migration/diaspora, and/or queer/trans identities."[16]

The English department at Texas A&M Corpus Christi seeks "applicants with expertise in British or non-U.S. Anglophone literature (Long Eighteenth Century, Victorian, or Modernist), with demonstrated fluency in queer theory and/or the histories and literary representation of gender and sexuality."[17]

Is it any wonder that the range of views among humanities professors seems narrow?

9. Mission and curricula.

a) Department mission statements.

Not only research but also curricula are committed to activism. This is hardly surprising, since scholars naturally seek to teach what they work on and know best.

The Michigan State English department explains: "*Our teaching, scholarship, and service are explicitly committed to advancing equity and justice and questioning established power structures. [...] Our aim is to foster an educational experience that is wholly informed by upholding equity and justice.*"[18]

The mission statement of Comparative Literature at Hobart and William Smith College proclaims: "Our mission is to train the creative, culturally aware, and well-read change makers of the immediate future." Making "the immediate future" entails learning about "the survival of the planet, the best ways to address injustice, how to approach entrenched oppression, and make new paths in what can resemble intractable moral, cultural, and geopolitical chaos."[19] Does it also

15 Bates College, Program in Classical and Medieval Studies (with the Department of Rhetoric, Film, and Screen Studies), tenure-track position in ancient Greek cultures and literatures (job advertisement, 2024), https://apply.interfolio.com/153478 (archived at https://archive.is/JDfS2).

16 Illinois Wesleyan University, Department of English, tenure-track position in global/postcolonial Englishes (job advertisement, 2026), archived at https://archive.is/8OWE5.

17 Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, Department of English, position in British and Anglophone literature (job advertisement, 2025), archived at https://archive.is/4vOOG.

18 Michigan State University, Department of English, "Equity and Justice Mission," https://english.msu.edu/equity-justice-mission/ (archived at https://archive.is/hOoMy).

19 Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Comparative Literature program, mission statement, https://www.hws.edu/catalogue/comparative-literature.aspx (archived at https://archive.is/ukkUS#selection-

involve understanding world literature?

Saint Louis University's Department of English statement goes a step further: *"The English department engages issues of economic justice, racial and gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and ecological thought at every level of our curriculum. . . . . Our courses often include advocacy projects and service-learning components that connect students with issues of social justice in our city and region."*[20] Students are not just urged toward activism, but also encouraged to engage in "advocacy projects" as part of the courses themselves.

b) Major requirements.

Courses required for the major in English at various colleges demand courses in "social justice" or politicized topics. Majors in English at Penn State "*must fulfill a departmental diversity requirement for a course related to race, gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, and/or postcolonial issues.*"[21] At Fordham, they must satisfy a one-course "race and social justice requirement."[22] This requirement is now common.

c) Course content.

What is actually taught in literature courses? Consider Stanford. Comparative Literature 316, "Scholarship and Activism for Justice," "will center on scholarship that addresses issues of social inequity and ways to act for change."[23] It is explicitly a course to train activists.

Comp Lit 207B, "Emergent Thinking: Abolition and Climate Change," "asks us to think in the most radical and imaginative ways possible about two systemic failures . . . the police, and climate change. We will look at both the material aspects of police and prison abolition, and climate change and environmental justice. . . our texts put the imagination and the political will to work."[24]

1039.0-1039.17).

20 Saint Louis University, Department of English, departmental statement, https://www.slu.edu/arts-and-sciences/english/index.php (archived at https://archive.is/bZDAn).

21 Pennsylvania State University, Department of English, "Majors" (departmental diversity requirement), https://english.la.psu.edu/undergraduate/majors/ (archived at https://archive.is/uLxMR#selection-1641.0-1644.0).

22 Fordham University, Department of English, "English Major" (Race and Social Justice requirement), https://bulletin.fordham.edu/undergraduate/english/major/ (archived at https://archive.is/wZlBS#selection-1085.0-1085.35).

23 Stanford University, "COMPLIT 316: Scholarship and Activism for Justice" (course description, 2018–19), https://explorecourses.stanford.edu/search?q=COMPLIT+316%3A+Scholarship+and+Activism+for+Justice&academicYear=20182019 (archived at https://archive.is/KoozS).

24 Stanford University, "COMPLIT 207B: Emergent Thinking: Abolition and Climate Change" (course description), https://explorecourses.stanford.edu/search?q=COMPLIT+207B%3A+Emergent+Thinking%3A+Abolition+

Stanford's Comp Lit 207 ("Why Is Climate Change Un-believable? Interdisciplinary Approaches to Environmental Action") is framed as a course designed to train more effective activists. "One of the primary goals of this course is to not only understand the problem of climate change, but also how to best act upon it. Thus the required final assignment for this class can be a recommendation for action based on a critical review of the topic of climate change and already existing activism."[25]

As professional associations studying literature have adopted political advocacy, rather than the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, as their goal, curricula also reflect this change.

10. What is omitted or downgraded.

Advocacy teaches students to presume rather than discover answers. As we have seen, it often fails at what literature departments are presumed to do — teach the heritage of great literature and how to appreciate it.

When outsiders consider whether study of the literature is worthwhile, and whether they or the government should support it, they have usually presumed that transmitting the heritage of great works of the past is important. What outsiders often fail to realize is that the very notion of "great literature" has over the past few decades become suspect. What happens when they do?

Consider the approach called "cultural studies." This term does not mean (as it might seem to) the study of major cultural works. On the contrary, it dispenses with the distinction between major and popular works. In its explanation of cultural studies, the influential Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism explains:

> Literary texts, like other artworks, are neither more nor less important than any other cultural artifact or practice. Keeping the emphasis on how cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and consumed, the investigator will focus on art or literature insofar as such works connect with broader social factors, not because they possess some intrinsic interest or special aesthetic value.[26]

If literary works are no more important than other cultural practices, why study them? While this

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and+Climate+Change (archived at https://archive.is/EOPvR).

25 Stanford University, "COMPLIT 207: Why Is Climate Change Un-believable? Interdisciplinary Approaches to Environmental Action" (course description), https://bulletin.stanford.edu/departments/COMPARLIT/courses (archived at https://archive.is/c2ZGM).

26 *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed., 2478.

approach does not rule out the study of great works, neither does it accord them any special privilege or attention. For cultural studies, literature is studied only "insofar as" it connects with broader social factors, not because literary works "possess some intrinsic interest or special aesthetic value."

Insofar as this perspective is adopted, students will not learn to appreciate great literary works. Since major works, should they be read, are not approached in an "aesthetic" manner, students will not learn the skills to read masterpieces on their own. And they will not understand why Shakespeare, Dante, or Tolstoy have been regarded as great in the first place. They will be deprived of what one would expect courses in literature to teach, while the culture as a whole will lose its connection to its (no longer appreciated or understood) literary tradition.

11. What is taught. Four types of courses.

Shaped by political goals, the dominant perspective has changed the curriculum. One may identify four types of courses. All are common, and further work would be needed to ascertain the relative proportion of each.

a) There are courses that do not consider major — or any — literary works at all. (Or, occasionally, a contemporary work is included for its political usefulness). Stanford's English 142, "Environmental Justice and Literature" reads "texts by foundational scholar-activists such as Kyle Whyte, Ashley Dawson and the Combahee River Collective."[27]

Often, the focus of the courses almost does not even mention major literary works. They resemble the University of Pennsylvania's English 1300.401, "Queer Politics, Queer Communities": "What is sexuality? Does it exist in the body or in the mind? Is it a collection of actions, desires, and fantasies, or is it rather a disposition, a way of seeing oneself, an identity? Does what we want depend on who we are? Does what we do define who we are? This course will address such questions by introducing students to several classic texts in the history and theory of sexuality and by looking at key moments in the struggle for sexual and gender freedom. The history we trace will focus on the effects of the 'invention of homosexuality' in the late-nineteenth century; the history of butch/femme community; the cultural moment of Stonewall

27 Stanford University, "ENGLISH 142: Environmental Justice and Literature" (course description), https://explorecourses.stanford.edu/search?q=ENGLISH+142%3A+Environmental+Justice+and+Literature (archived at https://archive.is/Z7ApK).

and gay liberation; the 'Sex Wars' of the 1980s; women of color feminism and queer of color critiques; responses to HIV/AIDS; and transgender politics."[28]

When dealing with ethnic (or "postcolonial") literatures, the focus is usually on oppression and resistance, as if that were the only reason to read them. Typical is Brown's English course "Migration and Its Discontents: Asian American Literature and Culture":

> This course explores the literature of Asian diasporas in the Americas, with special attention to the global forces that shape migration and the vexed questions of settlement and belonging that ensue. By contextualizing Asian American literature in the longer histories of the nineteenth-century "coolie" trade from China and India to the Americas, we will examine how Asian indentured labor shaped Asian American culture and aesthetics. What might be the relationship among race, representation, literary form, and political economy? How might studying Asian American literature produce new knowledge about concepts such as globalization, freedom, resistance, labor, identity, and belonging? Readings include testimonial and protest literature, experimental prose, site-specific poetry, graphic novels, and speculative autobiographies written by authors ranging from indentured workers to refugees, exiles to economic migrants from South, Southeast, and East Asia.[29]

Or Cornell's English 2400 "Introduction to U.S. Latinx Literature," which deals with a series of political topics, such as "colonization, discrimination . . . revolution, and ongoing organizing for resistance":

> Latina/os have always been part of U.S. history, yet the media often represents Latinx as only recent immigrants or as stereotypes that reduce rich cultures into a single, unified category or group of people. This practice hides the many unique and varied voices, stories, experiences, and ideas produced by Latinx expressive practices in forms ranging from novels and poetry to podcasts, tiktoks, films, theater, comics, memoirs, visual arts, and dance. This course will sample all of these forms while considering how artists meditate on their experiences of home, friendship, languages, love, migration, education, racialization, within the contexts of histories of colonization, discrimination, war, invasion, revolution, and ongoing activist organizing for resistance, sustainability, and thriving futures. In addition to common material, students will also have the chance to explore specific

28 University of Pennsylvania, Department of English, "ENGL 1300.401: Queer Politics, Queer Communities" (course description), https://www.english.upenn.edu/courses/undergraduate/2025/spring/engl1300.401 (archived at https://archive.is/mbKER).

29 Brown University, Department of English, course inventory (archived 15 November 2024), https://web.archive.org/web/20241115003604/https://bulletin.brown.edu/english/#courseinventory.

> expressive practices that interest them.[30]

Stanford's Comp Lit 255, "Black Feminism and Anti-Carceral Resistance," is thoroughly political, apparently with no consideration of literature:

> Black feminists throughout the Western Hemisphere have long resisted carcerality, a system that emerged as a response to antebellum Black fugitivity. In this course, we will review Black feminist theory and abolitionist activism, focusing on how the carceral state affects Black women in particular. We will draw from the work of academic scholars such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Angela Davis as well as the work of abolitionist activists and community leaders such as Mariame Kaba. Participants in this course will be introduced in depth to contemporary abolitionist demands and to the Black feminist theorists working in tandem with the abolitionist movement.[31]

It is hard to see why Cornell's English 2604, "What Is Decolonization," belongs in an English department:

> What do recent calls to decolonize the university mean? This course considers this imperative from a historical perspective by tracing the economic, psychological, and cultural significance of decolonization in twentieth and twenty-first century literature and theory. We will begin by examining resistance to colonialism and imperialism in the early twentieth century, before turning to mid-century independence movements. We will then ask how the failures of these movements precipitated what we now call postcolonial studies, the academic analysis of empires and their aftermaths, with an array of related historical topics addressing nation, class, and gender. We will follow these lines of inquiry into our so-called age of globalization to see how they have prompted a further set of questions about race, diaspora, indigeneity, and the environment.[32]

Cornell's English 1125, "Climate Change and Communications," is also a political, not literary course, designed to show "what forms of communication will convince a broad public . . . to take collective action, beyond simply raising awareness or changing individual behavior":

> What stories should we tell about climate change, and how should we tell them? What

30 Cornell University, "ENGL 2400: Introduction to U.S. Latinx Literature" (course description), https://classes.cornell.edu/browse/roster/FA25/class/ENGL/2400 (archived at https://archive.is/3dPIy).

31 Stanford University, "COMPLIT 255: Black Feminism and Anti-Carceral Resistance" (course description), https://explorecourses.stanford.edu/search?q=COMPLIT+255%3A+Black+Feminism+and+Anti-Carceral+Resistance (archived at https://archive.is/Hlmpe).

32 Cornell University, "ENGL 2604: What Is Decolonization?" (course description), https://classes.cornell.edu/browse/roster/FA25/class/ENGL/2604 (archived at https://archive.is/Aswg7).

> forms of communication will convince a broad public to accept scientific consensus, to overcome cynicism or apathy, and to take collective action, beyond simply raising awareness or changing individual behavior? We will examine and practice with the powers (and limits) of selected media and types of data, both textual and visual, qualitative and quantitative, such as: human-interest narratives, photographs, tables and graphs, journalistic and technical writing, social-media posts, public performances. Such strategies can engage our imagination as well as our reason, provoking not only fear or despair but also optimism and hope. Assignments may include syntheses of articles and analyses of media artifacts; public-facing documents or exhibits; and research presentations.[33]

Cornell's English 1130, "Writing and the Environment," is a writing course that "enables students to read, write, and design forms of communication that engage with the environment" in order to "inform" and "advocate."[34]

The description of Cornell's English 1160, "Intersections: Race, Writing, and Power," is saturated with language drawn from a politicized vocabulary. It promises to be a course in political topics:

> How does race inform the way we understand the world around us? How do writers explore their experiences of race and colonialism to challenge conventional notions of nation, citizenship, knowledge, and self? In this class, we engage materials that complicate our ideas of race in order to imagine new forms of identity, social life, and political possibility. We engage with creators who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, People of Color, or from the Global South. The works we study may include podcasts, graphic novels, memoirs, poetry, plays, or films. Writing projects may be critical, creative, or research-based, as we develop our understanding of race and identity and by extension our capacities as writers.[35]

b) Other courses consider some major works but do so from a politicized perspective. They may resemble the University of Pennsylvania's English 2300.401 "Queer Poetry from Homer to Hughes":

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33 Cornell University, "ENGL 1125: Climate Change and Communications" (course description), https://classes.cornell.edu/browse/roster/FA25/class/ENGL/1125 (archived at https://archive.is/SNdBC).

34 Cornell University, "ENGL 1130: Writing and the Environment" (course description), https://classes.cornell.edu/browse/roster/SP26/class/ENGL/1130 (archived at https://archive.is/u6Jp1).

35 Cornell University, "ENGL 1160: Intersections: Race, Writing, and Power" (course description), https://classes.cornell.edu/browse/roster/FA25/class/ENGL/1160 (archived at https://archive.is/Da3Uj).

> This course will offer students a preview of the first anthology of queer poetry available in English, "All The World in Thee": An Historical Book of Queer Poems, edited by Stephanie Burt, Drew Daniel, and Melissa E. Sanchez (forthcoming from Columbia University Press in 2025). Reading selections of poetry from the classics through the early twentieth century, we will consider how this work makes visible a long history of queer desire and gender nonconformity right at the center of the Western canon. Students will conduct research projects on the poem of their choice, with research results to be presented at a final conference and celebration.[36]

Or one may discover a course on a major author interrogated from a perspective of current theory.

There would not be a problem if some such courses were simply added to a curriculum devoted to the study of the classics. The problem is when such courses replace the study of great literary works with a perspective not adapted to appreciating them as great literary works.

c) Especially telling: There are courses that at first seem to be political but in fact, if one looks closely, do consider great works from a literary (aesthetic) perspective.

It is as if their instructors were saying: **yes, we do our job, but only when the boss isn't looking.**

In the University of Pennsylvania's English 2841.401, "Mourning and Sexuality in the English Elegy":

> All of the elegies we'll read raise challenging questions about desire, identification, reproduction, gender, and sexuality. Elegy's traditional male-centeredness will encourage us to pay special attention not only to the work of female poets but also to the male homoerotics of elegy. And we'll consider the erotics of form and the gendering of poetic language. We'll also encounter some extreme conjunctions of mourning and sexuality, such as Sylvia Plath's sadomasochism and Edgar Allan Poe's necrophilia. To help enrich and extend our discussion of the poems, we'll read some accounts of mourning and sexuality from the fields of psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and literary

36 University of Pennsylvania, Department of English, "ENGL 2300.401: Queer Poetry from Homer to Hughes" (course description, Spring 2025), https://www.english.upenn.edu/courses/undergraduate/2025/spring/engl2300.401 (archived at https://archive.is/j6qDt).

> criticism, by authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Peter Sacks, Vicki Hearne, Douglas Crimp, Zygmunt Bauman, Lauren Berlant, Dagmawi Woubshet, David Eng, and Judith Butler.[37]

Although much of the reading in this course includes gender theorists, the reading also lists many works one might expect in a traditional course on the elegy: "John Milton, Andrew Marvell, John Donne, Alexander Pope, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes, W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, Allen Ginsberg, Michael Harper, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Stuart Hemphill, Thom Gunn, Marilyn Hacker, Rigoberto González, Mary Jo Bang, and Elizabeth Alexander."

By the same token, courses that consider Jane Austen or Shakespeare primarily from a postcolonial perspective do not necessarily exclude considering them as great literature. Penn's English 1045.001, "Romantic Poetry," situates Romantic poetry in "an era marked by political uprisings and visions of emancipation as well as counterrevolutionary reaction, the shock of industrialization, environmental crisis, imperialism, and war," but also: "paying attention to poetic form as well as context, we will explore the work of William Blake, Anna Barbauld, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charlotte Smith, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats, among others."[38]

d) There are still a significant number of courses (depending on the college or university) that seem to address major works on their own terms, as one might hope. For example, the Brown English department offers a number of such courses.

A Shakespeare course:

> We will read a representative selection of Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, histories, and romances, considering their historical contexts and their cultural afterlife in terms of belief, doubt, language, feeling, politics, and form.[39]

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37 University of Pennsylvania, Department of English, "ENGL 2841.401: Mourning and Sexuality in the English Elegy" (course description, Spring 2023), https://www.english.upenn.edu/courses/undergraduate/2023/spring/engl2841.401 (archived at https://archive.is/HVmSS).

38 University of Pennsylvania, Department of English, "ENGL 1045.001: Romantic Poetry" (course description, Fall 2024), https://www.english.upenn.edu/courses/undergraduate/2024/fall/engl1045.001 (archived at https://archive.is/b3RCh).

39 Brown University, Department of English, course inventory (archived 15 November 2024), https://web.archive.org/web/20241115003604/https://bulletin.brown.edu/english/#courseinventory.

And "Literature of the American Renaissance":

> A survey of the major figures of mid-19th-century American literature, with a particular emphasis on how the writers of the period engaged the political and legal issues informing the sectional conflict on the eve of the Civil War. Authors to be considered include Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, Stowe, Douglass, Brown, Jacobs, and Whitman.[40]

Also: "Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads":

> An introduction to and close reading of the *Lyrical Ballads*, one of the most radical and innovative volumes in British Romantic literature. We will pay special attention to the aesthetic, historical, ethical, and political dimensions of the text, patiently working through the poems and prefaces, as well as reading antecedent texts, in order to understand why the book was an experiment for its authors, and what are its enduring effects on our contemporary moment.[41]

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Do those who finance universities know what passes for education in literature departments? Is it surprising that when they find out, they are ready to let those departments die?

We hope that does not happen. Literary studies is an essential part of a liberal education and important for passing on cultural heritage.

Whether we are speaking of scholarship or curricula, the picture is not entirely bleak. The study of great literature is under siege, but survives. Who knows what the future will bring?

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.