

# Historical Connections with Literature in Improving Flawed Literature Curriculums

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## Abstract:

This paper will analyze historical patterns among literary eras and their respective societal contexts to provide insights to educators and students when creating or picking high school literature curriculums, ensuring they are the most optimal for the modern and future world. By examining the relationship between literature and society, this research aims to offer a framework for developing literature curriculums that address key flaws in current educational practices.

**Keywords:** Literature Curriculum; Historical Contextualization; Interdisciplinary Learning; Power Structures in Literature; Thematic Progression

## Introduction

Literature has been one of the biggest forms of written expression since the advent of written language, serving as a medium to convey ideas, emotions, and opinions. With the world literacy rate being a high 86% today, literature is one of the most accessible and universal ways to share knowledge, express values, and reflect on the struggles of society. Ever since the earliest forms of literature, it has served as a reflection of the societal values and cultural shifts of their respective eras. From ancient epics like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to modern novels like *The Kite Runner* and *Wonder*, literature provides a glimpse of the society they originated from.

Research shows a deep connection between literature and the societal values and cultural shifts of its time, with both influencing each other. While much research has explored this complex relationship, there is a limited understanding of how historical patterns and recurring themes in literature can inform high school curriculum design. This study will provide an overview of popular themes and significant works

from major literary eras, analyzed through the lens of their societal values and cultural shifts, to ultimately propose insights for creating optimized high school literature curriculums.

## Methodology

The data used in this research will mostly consist of literary texts originating from each major literary era. Texts include *Metamorphosis*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Inferno*, *Frankenstein*, *Waiting for Godot*, 1984, *The Giver*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *The Kite Runner*, and *Wonder*. In addition, online book summary and analytical frameworks such as Litcharts.com and Sparknotes.com will be used. Most data from literary texts will be obtained through these online summary sources, and important books or parts of books will be read and analyzed manually. Analytic frameworks such as “The Influence of Literature on the Society” by Eqbal, Ins and A. Alfarhan and “Literature and Society: how Literature Reflects Society” by Keerthika and English Literature will be used. These frameworks provide lenses

through which to analyze the relationship between literature and society, informing the development of curriculum recommendations. By utilizing the combination of data collection methods of internet research, manual reading, and established analytic frameworks, this research provides a comprehensive and well-rounded analysis of the relationship between society and literature, and how it can be studied and analyzed to make more informed decisions when creating high school literature curriculums. For my curriculum critique, I will be using the “California ELA/ELD Framework for Grades 9-12” (referred to as “ELA/ELD framework”) curriculum framework. This curriculum is issued by the California Department of Education and approved by the California State Board of Education, implemented in all California high schools, including charter schools that follow state standards. This framework is used when designing English Language Arts (ELA) and English Language Development (ELD) courses. This framework is suitable for use in this research as it is a widely implemented guide that is representative of literature curriculums in the United States.

## Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted on the relationship between literary works and the cultural values from their respective eras. I used a 2024 study by Ins.Eqbal A Alfahhan titled “The Influence of Literature on the Society” as a framework due to the comprehensive context it provides as well as its similarity to my topic. This study found that literature is a mirror that captures the realities of people’s lives, emotions, and experiences, reflecting societal norms and challenges. In addition, literature also shapes cultural norms through portrayals of characters that encourage values such as social hierarchies or political messages. Another framework, “Literature and Society: How Literature reflects society”, by Keerthhika and English Literature states that literature impacts society through shaping the thoughts of individuals and groups both positively and negatively. In addition, the interplay between literature and society can be studied and analyzed to gain valuable insight when crafting or choosing high school literature curriculums. Blikstad-Balas et al. (2018)’s “The role of literature in the classroom” emphasizes the importance of aligning literature curriculums to real-world experiences of students, selecting texts that reflect the societal conditions of today’s world. However, it is still crucial to also include texts from other eras that offer insight into societal conditions during those times, providing students with a more well-rounded understanding of human and literary history.

## Literary Eras and Key Concepts

Philosophical ideas, cultural changes, and societal ideals have all always been reflected and influenced by literature. Various literary movements have developed over time, each of which has responded to the issues, values, and changes of its period. Gaining knowledge of these literary eras and the fundamental ideas that influenced them helps one to understand how themes like isolation, romance, humanism, and fate have changed with society.

During the Ancient Literature (Before the 5th Century CE), oral traditions, mythology, and early intellectual ideas were all major influences. Heroism, fate, and honor are major themes in works from this era, including *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. These themes are frequently connected to the Greek ideas of *kleos* (glory attained via heroic deeds) and *time* (honor and acknowledgment bestowed by society). In addition to providing entertainment, these tales served to uphold social norms by outlining moral principles and ideal conduct within their own cultural contexts. It’s important for a curriculum to explore not just the stories, but also how these values functioned in Ancient Greek society.

During the Renaissance and Early Modern periods (15th to 17th centuries), classical concepts were revived along with fresh insights into human potential. As evidenced by the writings of Shakespeare and Milton, this humanist era praised individual success, rationality, and artistic expression. The printing press, religious reformations, and exploration all contributed to the period’s societal changes and stoked debates about morality, identity, and the nature of power. A curriculum should highlight how these shifts challenged medieval norms and laid the groundwork for modern thought.

The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the rise of romanticism as a response to the Enlightenment’s rationality and the industrialization of society. Romantic authors frequently explored themes of solitude and the sublime while emphasizing emotion, nature, and human experience. Individual passion and intuition were emphasized over inflexible social systems, reflecting a change in societal standards represented in the movement. A precursor to later philosophical advances in existentialism, existential concerns regarding human purpose also gained traction at this time. A curriculum could examine how Romanticism both reflected and fueled social changes.

Through its embrace of fragmentation, subjectivity, and creativity, modernism (late 19th to mid-20th century) questioned established literary traditions. Modernist authors like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce aimed to capture the complexity of human awareness in response to international conflicts, fast industrialization, and changing cultural landscapes. The movement questioned the valid-

ity of great narratives, embraced diverse interpretations of reality, and demonstrated a profound mistrust toward established cultural ideals and conventions. A curriculum should explore how these modernist concepts reflect the societal upheaval of the early 20th century.

Many modernist concepts are expanded upon in contemporary literature from the 20th century to the present, which also embraces diversity, uncertainty, and introspection. Contemporary writing, which blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, is frequently linked to post-modernism and questions absolute truths. This time frame highlights a time of globalization, digital revolution, and changing social dynamics, where literature is shaped in ever-more-complex ways by a variety of viewpoints and voices. It is clear how literature both reflects and shapes societal values when these literary periods are examined with cultural changes. As recurrent themes develop, they provide a more profound comprehension of how literature may influence and be influenced by its surroundings. A curriculum should encourage students to analyze how contemporary literature grapples with current social issues.

## Notable Literary Works

The Iliad by Homer is an epic poem concerning the Trojan War, detailing the anger of Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior, after a conflict with King Agamemnon. The poem focuses on the Greek concept of *kleos*, or glory through heroic deeds, while still considering other major themes such as honor, fate, and mortality. The story highlights the stark reality of battle while reinforcing the values of bravery, loyalty, and the consequences of pride. When teaching this text, it's crucial to connect these themes to the social and political structures of Ancient Greece.

The Odyssey is the sequel to The Iliad by Homer, and it describes the aftermath of the Trojan War and the painfully perilous journey of Odysseus as he tries to get back home. By using Odysseus's journey, his personal struggle, divine interference, and encounters with mythological beasts, it portrays the spirit of persistence, adopting guile instead of brute strength, and love for one's home and family. This work also deals with Greek guest-friendship, fate, and heroism in the face of adversity. Teachers should emphasize how The Odyssey reflects evolving Greek values after the war.

The Roman poet Virgil guides the poet Dante through the nine circles of Hell in the first part of The Divine Comedy, known as Inferno. The work confronts the question of divine justice, sin, and redemption but at the same time functions as a religious allegory and a critique of contemporary society. Vastly disturbing images of punishment depicted by Dante question human nature and the conse-

quences of one's actions in life, but also echo medieval ideas on morality. Instruction should link Dante's work to the power of the medieval church and its influence on societal norms.

1984, a dystopian novel written by George Orwell, depicts the risks of governmental overreach, mass surveillance, and loss of freedom for human beings in a totalitarian regime at the hands of the Party, led by Big Brother. Winston Smith, the protagonist, fights against this repressive authority and distortion of reality but is overcome by the system. In the face of propaganda, the novel tells a story of the dangers of authoritarianism and the brittleness of liberty. Classroom discussions can connect Orwell's warnings to historical and contemporary examples of totalitarianism.

The post-apocalyptic science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick follows the story of a bounty hunter named Rick Deckard in pursuit of rogue androids who are almost indistinguishable from humans. Throughout this book, a number of philosophical questions are raised about identity, empathy, and what it means to be human. It also criticizes the dehumanizing implications of technology in a world where artificial beings display human emotions and the boundaries that separate the real from the artificial have been blurred. Teachers can use this text to explore ethical questions surrounding technology and its impact on society.

## Analysis

As previously stated, I will be analyzing the California ELA/ELD Framework for Grades 9-12 for potential flaws that this research can address and improve on.

Firstly, the ELA/ELD framework lacks emphasis on historical contextualization of literary themes. Just like many curriculums, this framework emphasizes close reading, critical analysis, and meaning-making, but often frames texts or novels as standalone objects of analysis, rather than as products of their cultural, social and political environments. For example, the use of isolated passages on standardized tests promotes the idea that literary texts are only meant to be used for academic skills rather than reflected on more deeply. The isolation of literary works from their historical eras limits students' understanding of the author's intent, societal influence, or evolution of themes across time in literary works. This results in students who over-analyze syntax and language in works without grappling with its deeper societal and historical meaning.

In addition, the ELA/ELD framework underutilizes the power of literature in exploring power structures. This framework promotes important skills such as critical thinking and engagement, shaping students to be pow-

erful thinkers. However, it does not encourage students to ponder important issues like how literature reflects or challenges systems of power, privilege, or injustice in the past and present. While some outstanding issues such as racism and sexism are beginning to have more exposure in literature classrooms, countless other issues such as classism and human rights issues go unnoticed and unstudied. The lack of a connection between literature and power structures results in students developing thinking and analytical skills that don't question inequality or advocate for justice. In addition, literary curriculums such as this often treat literary themes as apolitical, reinforcing dominant ideologies as "neutral". However, literature is deeply tied with political and social unrest, and glaring themes resulting from these contexts must not be ignored or dismissed. This, perhaps intentional, gap parallels reluctance on a larger societal scale to address institutional bias or lack of awareness.

In addition, this framework leads to fragmentation across disciplines. Despite brief mentions of interdisciplinary learning, the proposed curriculums generally discourage collaboration or overlap between subjects such as history and literature. This is a result of rigid subject boundaries and lack of coordination between departments present in almost all schools today. As a result, students miss out on thematic connections that enrich understanding of both literature in history. In addition, this encouraged isolated and compartmentalized thinking, weakening a students' abilities to think holistically. The separation between closely related subjects such as these two lead to undermine the value of aligning literary themes with historical developments as well as student's abilities to think holistically.

Lastly, the ELA/ELD framework lacks thematic continuity across grade levels. Despite a rich course with many skills, themes and texts covered, there is little structured progression of content across years, such as by literary theme or historical time period. Without thematic or historical continuations between years, students often revisit similar skills without diving deeper into content. This leads to a surface-level understanding of literature by the end of the curriculum, rather than a deep literary passion and understanding. This also results in literature courses feeling repetitive, disconnected, and boring due to the lack of relevance and progression. The discrete structure over-emphasizes standardized achievement and immediate outcomes, undervaluing long-term intellectual growth in literary and historical skills.

While the California ELA/ELD Framework for Grades 9-12 is a great foundation for literary curriculums that foster critical thinking and academic readiness, it also represents the flawed nature that virtually all literary curriculums have. Curriculums created based on this framework can lack important aspects of literature such as its

connection with historical contexts, relevance to societal developments, and overlap with subjects such as history.

## Discussion

This research aims to identify and improve upon key flaws in current high school literature curriculums using a historically grounded approach to literary research. Because of wide adoption and high representation of high school English curricula, the California ELA/ELD Framework for Grades 9-12 has been analyzed for areas of improvement that this research brings.

One major flaw the ELA/ELD framework has is its lack of historical contextualization on literary themes and texts. Through this research on the deep connection between literary themes and their historical eras, this issue can be addressed and improved in current curriculums. For example, when studying *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, exploration of Greek values such as kleos and time can be paired with a study on Ancient Greek honor culture, deepening meaning and comprehension. In addition, in 1984, the historical contexts of the Cold War, propaganda, and the post-WWII geopolitical world can be used to strike deeper impact than the superficial critique on totalitarianism from the text alone. Through pairing literary texts with relevant historical contexts, curriculums can illuminate deeper meaning, creating historically informed and considerate students.

In addition, curriculums based on frameworks like the ELA/ELD framework often avoid or oversimplify literature's potential to explore glaring social issues such as race, class, and gender. For example, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* can be studied for raising questions about technological power, identity politics, and dehumanization, rather than just as a work of science fiction. In addition, 1984 continues to directly critique surveillance and authoritarianism, which can be seen through the frame of existing political and power system issues. Curriculums should aim to encourage focus on how literature exposes, reinforces, or challenges power systems and social issues, pushing students to critically examine historical and modern power structures.

The lack of interdisciplinary learning between literature and history is also an issue almost all literature and history curriculums face. Through providing an overlap between two such closely-related subjects, students take a more holistic and well-rounded approach to studying both literature and history. For example, *The Divine Comedy* is difficult to fully understand without historical knowledge of the medieval church and Dante's political context. However, this can be easily addressed by merging or coordinating lessons with history sessions, providing students with the sufficient historical background to fully compre-



hend the text. In addition, works from the Renaissance such as Shakespeare and Milton benefit from historical context when exploring themes of humanism, secularism, and intellectual reform. Through structurally aligning history and literature units, students can make better thematic and historical connections.

Modern curriculums, like those based on the ELA/ELD framework, also lack progressive development of themes or historical era, limiting students' understanding of literature and history as a bigger picture. For example, a curriculum structured around the progression of literary eras, from ancient, medieval, modern to postmodern, show both historical progression and thematic evolution, from heroism to morality to control to identity. A deeper understanding of connections between literature, history, and society is impossible without such structured thematic continuity. Using this research, educators can build a theme progression-based curriculum rooted in literary eras and thematic evolution, emphasizing scaffolding concepts through time to deepen understanding.

## Conclusion

The flaws found in the ELA/ELD framework as well as countless existing curriculums reflect broader systematic and social issues such as standardization and avoidance of controversy or change. This research aims to address these glaring issues by enhancing curriculums to ground literature deep within the roots of history, power structures, and thematic progression. An improved curriculum model, based off existing frameworks with added meaningful improvements, can offer a more dynamic, inclusive, and critically engaged approach to literature education, raising a generation of students that are not only academically proficient but also empathetic and culturally and historically aware.

The flaws present in the California ELA/ELD Framework reflect broader systemic issues within the education system such as the prioritization of standardization over

depth and reluctance to engage with controversial or political subject matter. These limitations do not exist in isolation; they are directly correlated with larger cultural and institutional tendencies to favor comfort, tradition, and familiarity over critical engagement, diversity, and transformation.

This research does not seek to discard the current framework entirely. Rather, it aims to demonstrate that meaningful improvements can be made by rethinking how literature is positioned within education. By reconnecting texts to their historical contexts, illuminating their relationships to systems of power, and building thematic continuity across grade levels, high school literature curricula can evolve into platforms for deeper inquiry, personal connection, and social awareness.

Ultimately, reimagining literature education is not just about enriching students' academic experience - it is about empowering them to engage with the world more critically, empathetically, and historically.

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