

# “These words are not mine”: Are We Still Teaching Literature When We Use Adaptations?



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Before I answer the question in my title, I want you to read these passages aloud (and I emphasize, ALOUD):

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.

And this passage:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

And this:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter were its only victims.

And this:

If music be the food of love, play on.

And this:

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by any-

body else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

And finally, this:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

Pretty good opening lines and a devious way to begin an article for English teachers.

Besides being simply “famous,” these opening passages have something else going for them. They are all beautifully written, and with the exception of J. D. Salinger's parody of Dickens, they are all strikingly original. You could look at the opening paragraph of *Moby Dick*, *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Jane Eyre* and find equally wonderful words.

So why do we teach literature? I think we can hear the answer in the voice of Huckleberry Finn and David Copperfield and Holden Caulfield and the omniscient narrator in *Beloved*. It's the wonderful sound of those words, the gorgeous flow of those well-crafted sentences, and the marvelous way Twain and Dickens and Morrison and Shakespeare and Salinger choose just the right words. And for some odd reason, we want students to see the aesthetic beauty in those words and sentences. That's one of the major reasons that we teach literature.

I’d venture to say that most of us fell in love with the art of literature well before we considered the themes, the characters, or the plots. But somewhere along the line, many of us put those aesthetics on the back burner in favor of the more “teachable” aspects of a literary work. And frankly, discussing the beauty of language with reluctant adolescents isn’t always easy. But it can be done and it is really worth the effort.

What’s wrong with teaching plot, character, and theme? Nothing, really, as long as teachers work with students to look closely at the text and the writer’s style and word choice. After all, the audience for those writers certainly wasn’t our sixth-period class. What worries me is that sometimes, in teaching all the elements of a literary work and the author’s life, we end up teaching **about** the novel instead of teaching the novel itself.

### Teaching the Real Stuff

As English teachers, our role is to change students’ perceptions about the value of literature. We want them to love literature as much as we do. We won’t do that by just getting our students to create vocabulary lists from *The Scarlet Letter*, or to identify the major characters in *Lord of the Flies* and create a Venn diagram with them, or to keep a journal listing the major themes of *The Great Gatsby*, or answer lots of plot-related questions about *Macbeth*. If that were enough, we could skip reading completely (something that many students already do) and just pass out plot summaries, character sketches, and lists of themes. If we want students to actually read assigned books, we have to go beyond that and have students look closely at the author’s actual words. We have to allow students to discover the idiosyncratic way in which Melville arranges his words, the precision of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, and the narrative technique of Virginia Woolf.

But often this doesn’t happen. I’ve noticed a disturbing trend that more and more well-meaning teachers are substituting “modern translations” for the real stuff. You can find those books online, in bookstores, and, sadly, throughout the exhibition hall at an NCTE Annual Convention. Amazon sales for many of these adaptations far outweigh the actual texts. I’ve been seeing class sets of them in classrooms across the country. And when I meet teachers who use them, they are often apologetic

and say things like, “You don’t know my students.” Actually, I do.

So here’s my simple reaction to this trend: If you really think you need to use those translations to teach a play or novel, just teach something else.

We know why the opening lines of *Romeo and Juliet*, “Two households, both alike in dignity/ In fair Verona where we lay our scene,” sound infinitely better than the Shakespeare Made Easy version, “The play is set in beautiful Verona in Italy.” Or why Shakespeare’s “From forth the fatal loins of these two foes/A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life” sounds better than the No Fear version, “Two unlucky children of these enemy families become lovers and commit suicide.” Or *Macbeth*’s “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” becomes “I have never seen a day that was so good and bad at the same time” in the No Fear version.

There’s also a series of Shakespeare Novels by Paul Illidge. Here’s the opening line from his *Macbeth*: “A summer storm moves on over the barren and deserted countryside of Scotland during the Middle Ages, leaving the rain-soaked fields cloaked in clouds of fog.”

Shakespeare is not the only one who is modernized. There are “translated” versions of *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Heart of Darkness*, *Great Expectations*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *Jane Eyre*. Fortunately, US copyright laws protect books written after 1923 or else we’d also be seeing modern versions of *A Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



John Worley (Romeo), Holly Twyford (Juliet), *Romeo and Juliet*, Folger Theatre, 1997. Directed by Joe Banno. Ken Cobb. Used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

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**FIGURE 1.** Shakespeare vs. No Fear *Romeo and Juliet*

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**Shakespeare:** Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

**No Fear:** Oh, she shows the torches how to burn bright!

**Shakespeare:** It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

**No Fear:** She stands out against the darkness

**Shakespeare:** Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear,

**No Fear:** like a jeweled earring hanging against the cheek of an African.

**Shakespeare:** Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.

**No Fear:** Her beauty is too good for this world; she's too beautiful to die and be buried.

**Shakespeare:** So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.

**No Fear:** She outshines the other women like a white dove in the middle of a flock of crows.

**Shakespeare:** The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,

**No Fear:** When this dance is over, I'll see where she stands

**Shakespeare:** And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.

**No Fear:** and then I'll touch her hand with my rough and ugly one.

**Shakespeare:** Did my heart love till now?

**No Fear:** Did my heart ever love anyone before this moment?

**Shakespeare:** Forswear it, sight!

**No Fear:** My eyes were liars, then

**Shakespeare:** For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

**No Fear:** because I never saw true beauty before tonight.

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For Shakespeare, there are those very popular parallel-text editions that have Shakespeare on the left page and the “translation” on the right. In working with teachers, my experience is that they mostly rely on the right pages. One of my graduate students at Stony Brook University observed a class doing an oral reading of *Hamlet* with that edition. When a student decided to read Shakespeare, her teacher stopped her and said, “No, read the other page.” Another Methods student observed a teacher having his

students take a passage from the “modern” version of *Macbeth* and rewrite it in an even *more* simplified way!

When students are given a “modern” version of a play or novel, are they even aware that they are not reading what the author wrote? When a ninth grader tells her parents that they are reading *Romeo and Juliet* in class, does she even know that it's someone else's version? Do teachers tell them that the real stuff is too hard?


What prompted this rant was a conversation I had with a colleague who teaches Shakespeare in many New York City schools. Seeing mostly modern adaptations prompted her to tell me, “Every child deserves Shakespeare.”

I agree.

As a simple exercise to illustrate my point, select two students to read the handout in Figure 1, which includes lines from Shakespeare and from the No Fear “translation.” One reads Shakespeare's lines and the other reads the No Fear lines. Then let the class talk about the differences.

I'll be sneaky again and end with inspiring last lines from two of my favorite novels:

And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything.

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. 

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