

Name: _____ Class: _____

Can Television Be Considered Literature and Taught in English Classes?

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Movie days in the classroom are infrequent and far between, but what if teachers used television as a means of teaching? Shelby Ostergaard discusses whether or not television can be considered a form of literature and the benefits and disadvantages of teaching it in the classroom. As you read, take notes on the benefits and disadvantages of teaching television in the classroom.

[1] We have always had stories. They were first told orally as fairy tales, folklore, and epic poems, and were eventually written down. And for as long as we have had stories, we've had literature. Stories are usually considered literature when they have long-lasting artistic or social value. Epic poems like *The Odyssey* or novels like *To Kill a Mockingbird* are considered literature because they have deeper meanings that go beyond the story. Both stories are meant to do more than just amuse the reader. A pop novel, like a James Patterson book you can buy at the airport, would not traditionally be considered literature because it is not meant to do much more than entertain the reader.



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As we've transitioned from hearing stories to reading them, our ideas have changed about what kinds of stories have merit. We have always made a point to pass on the stories we value to next generation, regardless of their form. Therefore, it should not be so outrageous to declare that a new form of literature has been forged and needs to be passed on: television shows.

Television shows can be as complex as novels and can provide students with opportunities to learn that novels do not. Yet, there are legitimate concerns about using classroom time to dissect¹ television. One issue is that complex television shows tend to have adult or graphic themes not suitable for the classroom. Another concern involves how much time students spend on television. Plenty of students already watch and discuss television in their own time, so is television needed in the classroom, too? Finally, the written word teaches cognitive² skills that television cannot.

The idea of television as a form of literature that should be taught in classrooms remains controversial.³ How many times have you heard the phrase "television rots your brain"? If television is literature, should it be taught in English class the same way traditional literature is taught?

1. **Dissect (verb):** to analyze something
 2. **Cognitive (adjective):** relating to mental processes
 3. **Controversial (adjective):** giving rise or likely to give rise to public disagreement

The Golden Era of Television

- [5] We are now living in the golden era of television. The term “golden era” is what television and media critics call the collection of TV shows from the late 1990s to present day. Commercial television shows have existed since the early 20th century, but as Jason Mitchell notes in his book *Complex TV*, technological development in the late 1990s led to three drastic changes in television. First, TV shows started to look better and showcase more interesting camera work. Second, the growth of more available channels led to an increase in the number of shows being produced. And third, technology allowed users to record, pause, and rewind the shows they were watching. Together, these three changes ushered in the golden era of television, allowing TV shows to tell more complex stories.

There isn't a clear-cut division between a complex plot and a simple one, but in general, simple plots exist in shows where every episode begins as if the one before it hasn't happened (known as stand-alone episodes). Complex plots, on the other hand, exist in shows where each episode depends on what happens before (known as serialized episodes). Stories with plots that are artistically and socially relevant are considered complex and literary by scholars, critics, and fans alike. A television show that uses social, political, or highly-personal issues in its plots is complex.

Until the golden era of television shows, TV plots and characters tended to be simple. They had to be; television shows were designed to appeal to as broad an audience as possible and to be easy to catch up on. Technology changed all of that. Now, television shows have as many complex characters and plotlines as novels do. As Thomas Doherty put it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, golden era television shows are ones “like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *Downton Abbey*, *Homeland*, *Dexter*, *Boardwalk Empire*, and *Game of Thrones*... where the talent, the prestige,⁴ and the cultural buzz now swirl.”

Talent, prestige, and cultural buzz are all pretty good reasons to study a work of art, but the shows Doherty listed are adult entertainment that deal with sexual and violent themes. When novels deal with similar themes, they are not visual. TV shows place those themes directly before the viewer.

Movies and plays also have visual elements, and plays with adult themes like *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* are frequently taught in schools. But whereas plays and cinema are visual, they do not tend to be as graphic as golden era TV shows. Propriety⁵ and censorship⁶ laws prevented Shakespeare from showing overtly visual elements related to his mature themes. Trying to teach a “golden era” television show in an English class ushers in the possibility that students will be exposed to overtly mature themes and images no one would be comfortable discussing in a classroom.

Closing Cultural Divides

- [10] Nevertheless, cultural buzz is why studying television shows in English class might be unavoidable.

4. **Prestige** (*noun*): widespread respect gained through success or excellence
5. the state or quality of conforming to accepted standards of behavior or morals
6. the system or practice of examining writings or movies and taking out things considered offensive or immoral

Books used to be one of the major ways to bind a culture together. Classic American novels, such as *The Scarlet Letter*, helped shed light on American culture and values. In the later half of the twentieth century, television and movies began to fill that role. TV shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* have come to define American culture far more than any novel has been able to do in recent years. Both sitcoms have been dubbed and translated around the world, making the characters and their lives synonymous with the American experience to people everywhere. Unless students begin to study television in school, some younger Americans may never see the TV shows that other cultures find quintessentially⁷ American.

Across the country, Americans watch different television shows. For example, the TV shows *Girls* and *Duck Dynasty* both premiered in 2009. *Girls* was a critical darling, producing reviews and discussions across the web. It averaged just over a million viewers per episode, most of whom lived in cities. *Duck Dynasty*, on the other hand, had record-breaking numbers of viewers for many episodes, largely from rural areas. Critics and reviewers ignored it. Both shows were hits in different ways, and both say something relevant about the U.S. today.

These trends in television exemplify a cultural, urban-rural divide in the U.S. According to research gathered in 2016 by *The New York Times*, shows like *NCIS* and *Duck Dynasty* have nearly all of their viewership in rural areas, while shows like *Girls* and *The Daily Show* have viewership in urban areas. Americans are no longer watching and discussing the same things. Teaching television shows in school can help to bridge that gap by providing a common cultural ground in the way novels once did.

The Importance of Reading

Bridging that gap is important. Luckily, the conversations needed to bridge that gap — about television and the way it functions for Americans — are already happening. Notably, they are happening everywhere outside of the classroom. Websites like the A.V. Club recap TV shows daily, and conversations about current TV fill popular websites like Reddit and Tumblr.

- [15] As this discussion of TV surges, enthusiasm for traditional, written literature wanes. The National Endowment for the Arts found that in 1982, 56.9% of adults reported having read a work of literature in the past year. In 2015, only 43.1% of adults had. And further research by the National Endowment for the Arts found that literary reading has dropped across age, race, and educational levels among adults. As literary reading rates drop, one might argue that traditional literary reading needs to be preserved in the classroom, not to be replaced by conversations about television that are happening everywhere else in the U.S. It may be important to unite what rural and urban Americans watch; it may be more important for schools to keep young Americans reading.

Novels teach writing skills. Although a TV show comes from a script, it is watched, not read. A TV show doesn't offer students the chance to diagram sentences or to dig deeply into how paragraphs function. A 2013 study done at Tohoku University in Japan found that the more TV children watched, the lower their verbal test scores became. In the same year, a study at Emory University found that college students had increased connectivity in the parts of the brain associated with language while reading a novel.

7. **Quintessential** (*adjective*): representing the most perfect example of a quality or class

Conclusion

Should television shows be taught in schools? Maybe. There are merits to the idea — namely that TV has reached a golden era of wonderful, complex stories — but there are also challenges, such the graphic content of current TV shows and the communication skills that television fails to teach students. At the end of the day, teachers and principals will have to decide for themselves.

There is a middle ground. Television shows are becoming increasingly culturally relevant, and this is not just because more people are watching them. More people are also writing about them. The Internet is filled with recaps, reviews, and thousands of cultural critics discussing how relevant themes in television shows interact with our society today. Using these written materials, television can be taught in schools without sacrificing reading and writing skills or exposing students to graphic images. Reading about television can help preserve the best parts of English classes while ensuring they are not permanently stuck in yesterday. When it comes to television in class, it might be possible for teachers to have their cake and eat it too.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies the author's main claim in the text?
 - A. Schools can use written materials about television to explore its place in today's culture and to teach reading, writing, and thinking skills.
 - B. Even though watching television provides students with the same advantages as reading literature, it should not be considered as a legitimate school subject.
 - C. English curriculums should incorporate watching television because it benefits students more than reading pop novels and literature.
 - D. Watching television does not meet the requirements that determine if something is literature, but it's likely to develop more comprehensively in the future.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "The idea of television as a form of literature that should be taught in classrooms remains controversial." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "Together, these three changes ushered in the golden era of television, allowing TV shows to tell more complex stories." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "When novels deal with similar themes, they are not visual. TV shows place those themes directly before the viewer." (Paragraph 8)
 - D. "Using these written materials, television can be taught in schools without sacrificing reading and writing skills or exposing students to graphic images." (Paragraph 18)

3. PART A: How do the benefits of television compare to reading literature?
 - A. Television engages students more directly, while reading literature helps develop students' imaginations.
 - B. Television can expose students to different types of stories and cultures, while reading literature develops their mental processes.
 - C. Television teaches students more modern and relevant storylines, while reading literature allows students to better understand the past.
 - D. Television more quickly develops students' mental processes, while reading literature teaches students patience and hard work.

4. PART B: Which TWO sections from the text best support the answer to Part A?
- A. "They were first told orally as fairy tales, folklore, and epic poems, and were eventually written down." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "First, TV shows started to look better and showcase more interesting camera work." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "the shows Doherty listed are adult entertainment that deal with sexual and violent themes." (Paragraph 8)
 - D. "Teaching television shows in school can help to bridge that gap by providing a common cultural ground in the way novels once did." (Paragraph 13)
 - E. "As this discussion of TV surges, enthusiasm for traditional, written literature wanes." (Paragraph 15)
 - F. "a study at Emory University found that college students had increased connectivity in the parts of the brain associated with language while reading a novel." (Paragraph 16)

5. How does the author introduce the debate surrounding teaching televisions in the classroom?
