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## Queering the English Canon

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# Queering the English Canon

by Swati Dontamsetti

Indian author Arundhati Roy wrote, “There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” Most media articles today report on the whitewashing in Hollywood, the Twitter hashtag campaigns to queer characters, the call to stop killing LGBTQ\* characters and characters-of-color. We are reminded daily of all the not white, cisgender, straight, male stories that are never given voice to. We are reminded of the stories and people that are preferably unheard. Popular media is showing our students constantly the voices we'd rather not hear as a society. So as educators, we need to queer the English canon and bring varied characters to our students' attention.

A majority of the curriculum we present to our students is centered on stories of dead white men. Through this we tell our students implicitly what stories are worth hearing. By focusing on the traditional canon, so many of our students' voices are left preferably unheard. Instead, we should start pairing all the literature we present our students with modern and inclusive stories that either retell the same story or share the same general theme. In her article “Why Queer Retellings of Classic Stories Are So Necessary,” Lindsay King-Miller described a new Young Adult (YA)-novel *As I Descended* by author Robin Talley “an all-too-familiar story of potential outmatched by destructive ambition. It's recognizable as *Macbeth*, but the anti-hero this time is a bisexual teenager named Maria, nudged along the path toward success and then disaster by her closeted girlfriend Lily” (Vice.com). In this story, we have the same general premise and themes of *Macbeth*, but the struggle revolves around the characters-of-color and the fear of coming out as not straight. If the goal is to inspire students through reading and storytelling, then we need to meet them where they are. We need to meet them as they are. We need to show our students that we hear and respect all their voices and experiences.

The importance of bringing racially, sexually, and gender queer stories into the classroom lies in the fact that we use stories to perceive our world. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, wrote “Language and reality are dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context” (5). The stories we read play every part in the way we see the world, and in seeing the world, we read our stories through different lenses. And when what we read and what we understand about the world are so intrinsically connected to each other, it's imperative that we bring as many perspectives as possible into our students' lives. Bringing diverse stories that queer the English canon into our classrooms shows students that there are numerous ways a story can be universal. It shows students that we have space for their stories in our classroom. And when students are seen, when their experiences are validated and normalized, they can feel safe enough to engage with the literature in inspiring ways.

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**Swati Dontamsetti** is a student at Rutgers Graduate School of Education who wants her future students to recognize that everyone contains multitudes.



Photo by Sarah Cesario