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# Why English? A Defense of the Humanities in the Midst of STEM Promotion

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**Why English?**

**A Defense of the Humanities in the Midst of STEM Promotion**

Madison Elmenhurst

## **STEM Promotion: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math**

*“America needs a world-class STEM workforce to address the grand challenges of the twenty-first century.” –John Holdren, Science Advisor to President Obama, Director of White House Office of Science and Technology Policy*

Living in a world of ever-changing technologies and scientific discoveries raises questions about our very existence: what are humans capable of, what is beyond the world that we know, and how can we get there? With this fast-paced world has come an increase in promotion for science, technology, engineering, and math in particular, especially by the government, as well as a pressure to pursue these fields as a student.

I am far from the only student who has felt societal pressure to choose a STEM field to study or teach. As a non-STEM student, this pressure often arises with the question, “What are you going to do with that?” Everywhere the modern student looks, except perhaps in the humanities, someone else is telling us the importance of STEM.

The promotion of STEM fields has reached far and wide. Locally, in the state of Washington, STEM promotion, including the aim to increase the number of women and minorities in these fields, is evident in the state government. Washington Senator Patty Murray recently proposed federal legislation for “15 million dollars a year from 2017 to 2021 for grants to fund mentoring and professional development programs encouraging women and minorities to enter STEM fields” (Hunt). It is also clear that many people across the state agree with efforts such as these to promote STEM fields. In the small *Walla Walla Union Bulletin* newspaper from my hometown, for example, an editorial column published in March supported Senator Murray’s proposal. Senator Murray promotes her efforts by saying that “STEM fields are so important for

Washington state's economy," and additionally that she hopes to inspire women and minorities to pursue these fields with governmental support (Hunt). Editors of the newspaper support her proposal as it "seems to be a good way to help women and minorities see options for themselves they might have ignored in the past" (Hunt).

The promotion of STEM fields, of course, has a much larger impact globally, and our leaders have prioritized keeping STEM at the forefront of educators' minds. In the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education held by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, STEM was addressed as an area in need of improvement. One of the Conference's agendas stated that "greater emphasis on the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics as well as Social and Human Sciences is vital for all our societies" (2009 World Conference). The humanities is not even mentioned in this statement.

In 2009, President Obama launched his initiative, "Educate to Innovate," with three goals in mind for STEM education: "increasing STEM literacy so all students can think critically in science, math, engineering and technology; improving the quality of math and science teaching so American students are no longer outperformed by those in other nations; and expanding STEM education and career opportunities for underrepresented groups, including women and minorities" (President Obama, Educate to Innovate). Believing that improvement solely in STEM education will address the issues of tomorrow, and promoting the idea that America needs to excel in STEM to succeed in the global economy, the administration committed over \$260 million dollars, making "the improvement of STEM education over the next decade a national priority" (President Obama, Educate to Innovate).

A few years later, in 2012, President Obama announced his STEM Master Teacher Corps plan to create better STEM educators. The Teacher Corps is a way to support STEM educators

and a way to incentivize excellence in education for teachers (President Obama, Master Teacher Corps).

In 2015, at the White House Science Fair, President Obama announced new private-sector commitments to promote STEM for kids. With this announcement, “the President’s ‘Educate to Innovate’ campaign [had] resulted in over one billion dollars in financial and in-kind support for STEM programs” (Fact Sheet). Over one billion dollars through this campaign alone. The promotion of STEM goes beyond just the work of the administration; multi-sector and CEO coalitions additionally have launched campaigns and created programs for STEM education and opportunities. President Obama reiterated the priority “to train an army of new teachers in these subject areas, and to make sure that all of us as a country are lifting up these subjects for the respect that they deserve” (STEM for All). Most recently, plans have been made for the 2017 Budget, which include prioritizing investment for improving, once again, STEM education (STEM for All).

The STEM areas of education have been funded and promoted to greater lengths by our government than non-STEM areas such as the humanities, despite the fact that students have not excelled any more in those areas than in the STEM subjects. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, at grade four, only 40% of students performed proficiently on assessments in mathematics, and only 33% at grade eight. Unfortunately, only 36% performed proficiently on reading assessments at grade four, and 34% at grade eight (NAEP). If we are to take these data seriously, it is clear that not only STEM education begs for improvement. But despite these gaps in achievement, STEM has been brought to the forefront of the government’s efforts to improve education; these efforts by President Obama’s administration –while they are, again, important for improving education –create a narrow focus

for what it will take to not only create a better education system for the students of the United States, but what the country as a whole will need in the future to come.

The humanities and STEM fields have equal value and importance in education, but it is the STEM fields that gain the attention and the funding. At the very least, the question should be considered: how do we improve education as a whole? STEM has been made priority in our nation's goals for education, despite the need for larger education reform.

### **Reasons for STEM Promotion**

Before stepping into the need for education in the humanities, it is important to understand historically why STEM has become so heavily promoted. Understanding these reasons so often given for this promotion help to further defend the humanities because they, too, are reasons for the promotion and value of the humanities.

First, STEM fields are cost-intensive. The sheer demand for and cost of the equipment necessary to study, teach, or practice in these fields sometimes makes it seem more important in and of itself. Equipment for science laboratories and scientific research, for example, demands external and large funds. However, while STEM does require money, the humanities and social sciences also require funds for research and projects; educators in the study of literature, for example, incessantly face the struggle to find money to offer new texts for students. However, these fields are offered significantly fewer funds for such projects. For example, at Western Washington University, of the current grants from external foundations and organizations awarded to the various colleges for research and projects, the College of Science and Engineering has been awarded over 15.5 million dollars in grants, and Huxley College of the Environment additionally has been awarded about three million dollars. The College of

Humanities and Social Sciences have only been awarded a total of about 4.5 million dollars (Current Grants at Western).

The reasons that have largely led to such promotion of the STEM fields are interdependent: globalization, economic success, and the competitive nature of our country.

There is an incredible competitive mentality that has inundated America since World War II and that has lingered with continued advances made in science and technology, a mentality evident continuously in politics, in which our motivation for improving education is the need to be first in the world, as evidenced by Obama's goals for education in which "American students are no longer outperformed by those in other nations" (President Obama, Education to Innovate). Education has become a competition, and this mentality is influencing national policy, education, and those in non-STEM fields who are left behind.

As a country, the industries within the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math have been "inextricably tied to economic development and success" (Padró). The STEM fields have proven to provide jobs, provide a space for innovation, and produce products and new technologies that allow us to advance in the twenty-first century. The STEM fields are far from the only fields responsible for these advancements, but the industries within these fields allow for the space to do so, and so STEM and economic success are typically perceived as interconnected.

The United States, however, is struggling to recruit students of their own to study the STEM fields. According to the Spellings Commission Report in 2006, "Foreign-born students represent[ed] about half of all graduate students in computer sciences, and over half of the doctorate degrees awarded in engineering, [and represented] [a]lmost 30 percent of the actively employed science and engineering doctorate holders" (Miller). According to the belief that the

economic success of our country is tied to these fields, the United States have been forced to take larger steps that result in the funding and promotion of STEM in order to recruit American students into the fields.

### **A Defense of the Humanities**

The government's position on and promotion of the STEM fields, relative to the promotion of the humanities, is essentially a misconceived one. STEM promotion and its value is not truly what is at stake here. We need STEM, but that is not going to be enough. The humanities do not receive the same kind of promotion, attention, or funding as STEM despite its equal importance to better our global world.

Despite this recent national and local promotion, the humanities are still both very clearly valued and valuable as evidenced by career success and the educational merit of the humanities. Many of the reasons given for the promotion and prioritizing of STEM are actually incredibly good reasons that we so greatly need the humanities. The "grand challenges" that we will face are going to take a lot more than just STEM skills. Cultural understanding, empathy, and an understanding of human relationships will also be absolutely crucial in facing these challenges.

Thinking back to that question asked of college students, "what are you going to do with that?" –there is certainly a common belief that an English major will leave college without the hope of a good job. This belief, however, don't recognize that there is evidence that the humanities are valued in the workplace.

For example, in 2011 Google underwent massive growth. In that year alone, they predicted that they would hire close to 6,000 people, many of whom would come from the



humanities and arts (Reisz). For Google, there was not an irrelevant degree, and the humanities were of particular interest. Marissa Mayer, vice president of consumer products, believes that “developing user interfaces, for example, [is] at least as much about knowing how to observe and understand people as about pure technological skill” (Reisz). Google was searching for intelligent employees, in which intelligence was not measured by technological skills alone. Rather, they found it additionally necessary to have workers who had a sense of how people interacted and who were effective communicators. Dr. Damon Horowitz, director of Engineering at Google, claimed that pursuing the humanities actually makes someone “a desired commodity for industry” (Reisz).

There are also plenty of examples of successful men and women who studied the humanities in college. Eric Shinseki, former Secretary of the Department of Veteran’s Affairs, received a Master’s in English Literature at Duke University. Michael Eisner, former Disney CEO, studied English and Theatre at Denison University. Sheila Bair, former Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation Chairman and current President of Washington College in Maryland, studied Philosophy at the University of Kansas (30 People with “Soft” College Majors). No doubt Shinseki’s ability to empathize enabled him to work in Veteran’s Affairs; Eisner’s exploration of stories and storytelling would be invaluable at the heart of a business dedicated to just that; and Bair’s background in philosophy would give her the critical thinking skills necessary for her career.

If the direct evidence of the success of humanities majors isn’t enough, employers have also directly addressed their desire to hire them. According to a study done in 2014 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, “Four out of five employers agree that all students should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences” (Liberal Arts).

Additionally, the study showed that “93%...agree that candidates’ demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major” (Liberal Arts). It is clear from this study and the opinions of employers themselves that employers are looking for much more than just a background in STEM. What they are looking for –critical thinking, communication skills, and problem solving abilities –can be found through an education that includes a study of the humanities.

Notably, at the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, despite the emphasis on the importance of STEM education, there was also an emphasis on the importance of a larger scope of education that includes, although implicitly, the importance of the humanities; UNESCO acknowledged that “faced with the complexity of current and future global challenges, higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues, which involve social, economic, scientific, and cultural dimensions and our ability to respond to them. It should lead society in generating global knowledge to address global challenges” (2009 World Conference). This acknowledgement of such “multifaceted issues” suggests a need for the humanities as a vital piece of education. While the emphasis on STEM knowledge has been cited various times by the World Conference, there is actually great emphasis on the importance of a broader education that allows for more than just scientific understanding.

Indeed, many of the reasons given for the promotion of STEM are actually great defenses of the need for the humanities. Globalization, the spread of ideas, people, and products within a larger global community, is one reason why so many people, especially our leaders, seem so concerned about promoting STEM for the sake of the country as a part of the global community. However, in a world that continues to become more intertwined and interdependent, we need people who can work effectively and empathetically with people of various cultures and

backgrounds, people who understand and care about the history of the regions they are interacting with, and people who have a humanistic understanding of how to interact with the people living different experiences than themselves.

Is STEM alone really going to allow us to face those “grand challenges?” President Obama and his administration seem to believe that STEM is all we need to reach these goals and have publicly made increasing STEM a national priority. However, aren’t those challenges going to require critical thinking skills along with communication and humanistic skills to solve such large and important issues? This is of course not to say that STEM is not needed or will not be needed in the future –it will. But it will not be enough. We will need STEM *and* the humanities and the social sciences.

In her book, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Martha Nussbaum explores the importance of the humanities in global terms. She defines and explores what are called “citizens of the world” and argues that studying the humanities, including literature, can help students prepare for the lives ahead of them in which people of various cultures and lives exist and in which we connect to other humans through empathy and compassion.

The Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, Nussbaum explains, “insisted that to become world citizens we must not simply amass knowledge; we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us” (Nussbaum, 85). If we can see citizens across the world –across all differences –as a part of a global community in which we share similarities as humans, we can become a citizen of the world.

According to Nussbaum, a citizen of the world is one whose community and identity exists beyond a local or national one. Becoming a citizen of the world involves a greater understanding of the world beyond our own, and a greater appreciation for the rest of humanity, finding those things we have in common despite all differences. Literature is particularly effective in cultivating these kinds of citizens; for example, reading tragedies “acquaint[s] the young citizen with the bad things that may happen in a human life, long before life itself does so” (Nussbaum, 93). Beyond becoming acquainted with these tragedies of life, reading a piece of literature helps readers connect to other humans through the compassion and empathy that they feel, as well as what they learn from the compassion and empathy, or lack thereof, of characters within the text. When reading a piece of literature and applying it to the reality of the world, “to respond with compassion, I must be willing to entertain the thought that this suffering person might be me” (Nussbaum, 91). While reading a tragedy, for example, a reader may connect with a character experiencing loss, realizing “that could be me,” or even “that is me.” Even fictional characters and stories, then, imitate life and develop empathetic responses.

### **Bridging the Gap**

In the midst of STEM promotion, the humanities have maintained their value and importance, but STEM has maintained the focus and the promotion. While our government’s concern may be to better our country and our educational system and to prosper, they are missing an essential element of the equation when they so disproportionately promote and fund STEM. The question then must be not whether one set of fields is more important than the other, but rather how they can both work, and even work together, to create well-rounded, empathetic, and critical thinking students and citizens.

In a speech at the University of Illinois, Jim Leach, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, spoke about the “false dichotomy” between the STEM fields and the humanities, saying that “the humanities and fields of inquiry related to science, technology, engineering and math are complementary rather than competitive” (Leach). He emphasizes the need for “humanistic understanding” in addition to STEM for the sake of society.

Leach goes on to defend the humanities’ role in job creation and competitiveness in America, the importance of understanding one’s own culture and the cultures of others, and applying knowledge to decision-making. He also emphasizes the way that “the deeper our understanding of the past, the greater our capacity to cope with the present and mold the future” (Leach). This understanding of history is a key role of the humanities, as I will demonstrate in an exploration of Arundhati Roy’s novel, *The God of Small Things*. Within the story is interwoven the effects of the history of India, as well as the history and pasts of the characters in the novel. And through the diverse relationships in the novel, Roy teaches the complexity of love and hate and what they mean in human relationships and within the reality of a society as well as within the global world. Leach also argues that a “balance of concern should be sought that recognizes that the humanities and areas of study included in STEM are intertwined” (Leach). Essentially, why is there this dichotomy between them?

Within universities as well, deans and professors across fields are coming together to bridge the gap between the STEM and humanities fields, finding ways that they can work together. Julio Ottino, dean of the Engineering School at Northwestern University, and Gary Saul Morson, professor of Slavic Languages and Literature, together authored a recent article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. They claim that there should be a bridge built between the STEM and humanities fields, that “the two areas are not separate but are essential to each other”

(Ottino). They explore the “artistic and humanistic abilities” and how engineering in and of itself is “creative and directed to human uses” (Ottino). Engineering cannot truly be drawn apart from the humanities, they argue, although it often is in academia and in society. President Obama’s administration has reminded us that science, technology, engineering, and math are what we will need to face our challenges and to make for ourselves a better future. However, this narrow focus and large emphasis on STEM is dangerous because it eliminates the possibility that it will take much more than that, as well as the idea that what we need is a holistic approach for improving education.

In finding ways to reconcile these currently discrete fields, Ottino and Morson address the role of empathy in both engineering and the humanities. Because design is human-centered, it requires for empathetic people, they argue, and literature is a way that we can learn empathy. They claim that with empathy, learned from experiences like reading good literature, engineering and design can be bettered. They also agree upon the danger of the promotion of STEM alone, and that improving and promoting the humanities as well will make better innovators (Ottino). The gap in the promotion of value between STEM and the humanities needs to be bridged.

Bringing together STEM and the humanities has become a goal of more than just college educators, however. Gene Luen Yang, graphic novelist and the current National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, as well as one of the speakers at this last year’s Children’s Literature Conference at Western, created a platform for his time as ambassador based on what he calls “Reading Without Walls.” He promotes the idea that people, and young people in particular, should pick up a book about someone different from themselves: “Books can be ambassadors for you...Books can help you understand people from other cultures, religions, and ways of living. Books can help you understand topics that you find intimidating” (Yang). He also promotes the

way that STEM does not need to be so separate from literature, evidenced by his own life experience as a computer scientist, and by some of his graphic novels whose stories focus on computer science.

Literature has proven itself time and again to explore the meaning of being human, to expand our understandings of the large, yet interconnected world we live in. *The God of Small Things* was Arundhati Roy's first novel published in 1997, and with international acclaim and success, it won the Man Booker Prize the same year. This novel is one model example of the way in which literature cultivates cultural and historical understanding and empathy.

### **The God of Small Things**

*The God of Small Things* opens in Ayemenem, India, with a set of twins, Rahel and Estha. They are 31 years old, the same age that their mother, Ammu, was when she died. Looking back, they reveal the ways their lives had been plagued with separation, corruption, and loss.

The narrative alternates between the story of their childhood at age seven and the way events of that year affect their life now. At the age of seven, their cousin from England, Sophie Mol, visits Ayamenem for the first time. This visit opens up an interesting relationship between the family in India and the family in England, and is a reminder of the imperialist and even racist tensions between them. The twins' uncle, Chacko, tells the twins that "they were a *family* of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (52). To the twins, their cousin's visit is strange, new, and exciting; however, their family's relationship with Sophie Mol and her mother is tense and uncomfortable and wrapped up in a history that their countries share.

During Sophie Mol's visit, the children decide to take a trip across a river by their home on a boat; they hit a log in the water, capsizing their small boat. Rahel and Estha make it to the shore, but Sophie's body is later found in the water by a fisherman. Sophie Mol's death becomes a central plot point for the story, representative of the many forms of injustice in the novel, and her death –and the deaths and consequences that follow –haunt the twins into adulthood.

Ammu had, during this time, developed a secret relationship with Velutha, a paravan, or Untouchable, whom the family had known for years. Velutha has always had a calm and kind presence in the family's life, but in society, he is not considered a part of the Caste system. He has known the family for years, and now to Rahel and Estha, Velutha is a friend, and almost a father-like figure to them.

Before the children try to venture across the river, Ammu's affair with Velutha is revealed to her mother, Mammachi, and her aunt, Baby Kochamma. Deeply ashamed of her daughter, Mammachi locks Ammu in her room. Baby Kochamma then, in a bout of pride over Ammu's distress, goes to the police to report inaccurately that Velutha had raped Ammu, and makes him out to be a criminal. After the children's disappearance, she accuses Velutha of kidnapping as well.

Following Sophie Mol's death, the children are found near a house across the river where they had been hiding out after the accident, and Velutha is found there as well. The police find and brutally beat Velutha and arrest him, accusing him of kidnapping the twins and Sophie Mol's murder, neither of which are true. The children tell the police that they were with Velutha at their own will, but this does not match Baby Kochamma's original story. She threatens the children, convincing them to lie for the sake of saving their mother and her reputation. Because of their lie, Velutha dies in jail that night.



Due to the shame that Ammu had brought on her family, she is sent away. Estha, too, is separated from his twin, and is sent to live with their father. He does not see his sister again until adulthood. Upon Estha and Rahel's return to Ayamenem at the age of 31, the twins, haunted by their long-ago past, make love –a love forbidden much like the love of their mother and Velutha years before. Their actions consummate their reunion after their separation as they return to being one person like they had as children. The twins are the only two who share this story and this history.

Roy offers this poignant example of a piece of literature that has a great deal to teach the world about humanity. Looking at both the world within the text and the text within the world, readers get a glimpse into the need for empathy between humans, a greater cultural understanding of the larger world we live in, and the importance of history and how our past affects our present which affects our future. The injustices evident in the story and which are representative of reality show the effects of a lack of empathy and lack of learning from one's mistakes, and can expand readers' knowledge of a world beyond their own –especially from a western perspective.

Within the text, most of the conflict is driven by a lack of empathy and rather selfish motivations. An excellent example of this lack of empathy is in the character of Baby Kochamma. Her backstory is explained early in the novel regarding how she fell in love with a priest who, of course, she could never be with. She goes so far as to join a convent simply to be near him, knowing full well that she could not be with him romantically. Her bitterness from never getting the one thing that she wants makes her essentially believe that no one else in her life deserves that happiness either. Later in her story, it is discovered that Father Mulligan had eventually left the priesthood, but not for Baby Kochamma's sake, only to convert to a different

religion. She was greatly offended: “It was like welcoming someone with open arms, only to have him walk straight past into someone else’s” (298). And upon discovering Ammu’s affair with Velutha, she is pleased rather than upset, because “she saw it as God’s Way of punishing Ammu for her sins and simultaneously avenging her (Baby Kochamma’s) humiliation at the hands of Velutha and the men in the march,” where she had been embarrassed by the men in a Communist Party gathering early in the novel (257). While driving through the crowd of people in their car, the men slammed their hands against the car as they chanted. Baby Kochamma is reminded here of her “fear of being dispossessed,” of losing her position or her power (70). When she exacts revenge against Velutha, who had been involved in the march, she acts selfishly and out of the anger at the world that she takes out on those less powerful than herself, and seeing others’ pain and putting them in the position she believes they belong in brings her pleasure.

Baby Kochamma’s greatest act of cruelty is toward her own niece, Ammu, and subsequently Ammu’s lover Velutha. She is the one to accuse Velutha of raping Ammu; she tells the untrue tale to the police herself and “as [she] told her story, she began to believe it” (Roy, 259). When she lies to the Inspector about Ammu and Velutha’s relationship, she does so “not for Ammu’s sake, but to contain the scandal and salvage the family reputation” (259). Especially within the societal, hierarchical system they lived within, and through the Love Laws that “lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much,” crossing these boundaries is shameful (33). To cross these laws are to have a love that is forbidden, and Ammu explicitly breaks these laws.

Essentially, the characters in this novel are plagued by loss –death, unrequited love, divorce, separation. Ammu tries to impart a lesson on her children, telling them, “Do you know

what happens when you hurt people? When you hurt people, they begin to love you less. That's what careless words do. They make people love you a little less" (112) This is a lesson her children remember consistently throughout the rest of the story. This lesson at a smaller familial level is representative of the effects of cruelty and oppression that take place at the larger level of society by those in power. Ammu poignantly points out this destruction that follows when you hurt someone, yet contrarily, her love for Velutha leads to destruction as well.

The story is narrated in third person omniscient perspective, largely through the eyes of Rahel and Estha. The twins are the only two characters in the story who truly disregard and question the binaries and power structures in place around them. They are able to accept and love their cousin Sophie Mol, an outsider to the rest of their family as well as their culture, and to accept and love Velutha without hesitation, all despite the laws and expectations put in place. It is for this reason that the twins are able to come together at the end of the novel, as they are the only two that understand their story as they do and who reject these binaries and boundaries.

Through the eyes of two young children, readers are able to better see the inequalities in the story. Through these relationships that the twins build unreservedly, and through the way they cross these boundaries and lack the understanding of why those boundaries are set as they are, they point out the way that they don't particularly make sense. And empathetically, readers are able to both understand the perspective of Rahel and Estha as well as the adults in the story, especially Ammu. When Ammu tells Rahel that "when you hurt people, they begin to love you less," this lesson is of course jarring, particularly to a child. Because of what Rahel said, she realizes "a little less her Ammu loved her" (112). While Ammu is trying to impart a lesson to her daughter about life, Rahel fears what this lesson means for her mother's love. What a haunting realization. Yet knowing the cruelty in the reality of Ammu's life, the idea that cruel words make

people love less and hurt more is a well-known lesson, one that we experience often in life. Seeing and understanding both perspectives in the story through the narrative choice illuminates just how terrifying the truth of the situation is, as well as how the simple comment Rahel made – one that made her realize that her mother would now love her a little less – is emblematic of the larger cruelties and injustices that ultimately tear their family apart.

The decision to write the narrative through omniscient third person perspective largely through the thoughts and actions of the two children is a tactful authorial choice. Seeing the world through the eyes of children, who have inherited the history and story of their family, helps readers to understand the faults and injustices in the world we live in; Rahel and Estha don't understand the power structures and the violence they experience, and through this perspective, neither should we accept it.

The text itself also plays a role in the world that we live in. *The God of Small Things* is a piece of literature written about the second most populous country in the world, one that has been affected by English imperialism, unique political structures and political responses – Communism in the particular state this story takes place in – and the Caste System, all of which are evident within this text.

The divide between Touchables and Untouchables is particularly evident within the lives of the characters. Especially within Western culture, even being familiar with what the Caste system entails historically and socially in India does not have the same effect as becoming a part of the stories of those within that culture. The fact that Velutha is an Untouchable and that he and Ammu have a relationship is one of the primary conflicts in the story and is what leads to destruction. An Untouchable, as the name would suggest, is not to be even touched by a member of the Caste system; the Untouchables, who are born into this group within the social

stratification, are not considered a part of the system at all. This forces the two to keep their relationship completely private, and once it has been revealed, their lives fall to pieces. To continue with Baby Kochamma's story-telling at the police station regarding Velutha's supposed act of rape, Baby Kochamma tells the officer that she is concerned for her family's reputation. Inspector Thomas Mathew "understood perfectly. He had a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters –whole Touchable generations waiting in their Touchable wombs..." (259). Baby Kochamma's actions are not only determined by her own selfishness and loathing, but largely by what is expected of her by the system in place. The officer understands completely Baby Kochamma's concerns for her family's reputation, as he too would not want his own to be tainted. This is evidence of the long-lasting effects of this system, as each generation is born into their class. The officer saw in his family's future generations of Touchable children, while Velutha and other Untouchables have no chance to free themselves of their position in society. The constant oppression is passed on generation to generation, and those oppressed have no way out.

Within the text and beyond, there is also a running theme of the importance of history and the past. Both within the text and the larger world in which it exists, *The God of Small Things* is an example of how the past affects the future. One strain of the text is the lasting effects of imperialism; English influence in India is evident in the lives of the characters. Outside the text, this story in which historical events are still evident imparts several things: the history of the country itself, which is a history worth knowing, how that history continues to impact the country, and what we can learn from that history as we move forward.

The characters tell us a story in which their pasts, their history, dictate their future. Similarly in our lives, history still has a say in what happens. But we cannot be blind to what we

can learn from history in order to move onward. Velutha in the text is considered by Ammu the God of Small Things and the God of Loss. Despite great oppression upon those like Velutha, and despite the tensions felt within the family, “only the Small Things are ever said. Big Things lurk unsaid inside” (142). Because of their forbidden love, Velutha and Ammu focus on the Small Things, the moments that they spend together and the way they feel about each other, rather than the love laws that restrict them.

Velutha, representative of so many like him, is trapped in oppression, patriarchal violence, a government still affected by imperialism, and a tumultuous political environment. And yet these Big Things, the important things, are left unsaid- rather they are covered up through deceit and violence, and thus loss follows, and change does not occur. This is a lesson to be learned from this novel- Roy addresses, through the Big Things left unsaid, as well as through the characters breaking the love laws, the issues and structures that must be unraveled. It is a reminder of the power history still holds over us, but is a challenge to learn from the past, rather than to follow in its footsteps.

## **Conclusion**

*The God of Small Things* is an excellent example of how literature can be an ambassador for a reader. For a young adult in the United States, a complex story taking place in India can both expose the reader to a culture far different from her own, as well as help develop a sense of familiarity through the writer’s representation of relatable family struggles and loss. The presence of novels such as *The God of Small Things* are so vital –to be ambassadors, to illumine history and the present, and to help foster empathetic and understanding human beings.

In this project, I have argued that we need to be able to look past the promotion of STEM that is happening on a daily basis and into the value of the humanities in addition to STEM. I have uncovered why this is a misconceived idea about what is valuable, and how the humanities still play a large, vital role in education and the future of our country and our world. And, as a part of my growth as an English student, I have come to feel proud of the path I have chosen to take as I have discovered the value of my field of study.

This project has not only allowed me to give others this defense of the humanities, but it has allowed me individually to rediscover and uncover my own experiences and my own understanding of the field of English. I have found it valuable just as a person to understand why I am doing what I am doing, but especially valuable to be confidently going into the field of education with everything I have learned in mind. As a teacher, I have the unique and important opportunity to bring literature into the lives of my students, to help them learn about history, to help them develop empathy, and to give them a bridge through which they can explore the world.

Adam Gopnik, a writer for the *New Yorker*, responded to the same question as I have asked in his article, “Why Teach English?” “The reason we need the humanities,” he says, “is because we’re human. That’s enough” (Gopnik). Maybe that isn’t enough, and maybe that only begs to question what he means when he speaks of being human. But maybe *that* is why we need the humanities. Not just because we *are* human, but because we have an incessant desire to understand what being human really means.

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