

## HUMANITIES IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

By [Diana Norton](#) On 5 August 2013 In [Main](#)

In a recent [article](#) hailing the downfall of the humanities in college study, Lee Siegel praises the decline of majors in the humanities and lambasts the scholarly study of literature as being overly scientific, claiming that literature needs no 'specialized knowledge' or 'mastery of skills', but rather simply that one has a heart.

He states: "I am against taking these startling epiphanies of the irrational, unspoken, unthought-of side of human life [AKA: Great Literature] into the college classroom and turning them into the bland exercises in competition, hierarchy and information-accumulation that are these works' mortal enemies." His criticism of the science of the study of literature is excellent advice for the aspiring humanities professor: The only way to truly connect your students with these works is not through the rote memorization of facts, but rather by facilitating interactions with the work and relating its message not just to the age in which it was written, but also to the world of today. But it fails to take into account that competition and hierarchy are unavoidable in the current educational environment of GPAs and test scores.

Siegel claims that "if there is any hand-wringing to do, it should be over the disappearance of what used to be a staple of every high-school education: the literature survey course, where books were not academically taught but intimately introduced—an experience impervious to inane commentary and sterile testing. Restore and strengthen that ground-shifting encounter and the newly graduated pilgrims will continue to read and seek out the transfiguring literary works of the past the way they will be drawn to love". A wonderful suggestion, but also a highly sentimental endeavor in schools under the pressures of state testing and No Child Left Behind.

He praises students desires to focus on the quantitative thinking skills demanded by the digital age, while claiming that the ubiquity of digital culture no longer allows for the quiet solitude required to connect with literature. Yet he promotes the idea that coming generations will somehow prefer to tackle these works on their own. In spite of all the information available on the internet, this is an incredibly difficult task. I can train to run a marathon on my own, but if it were my first, wouldn't I rather join an organization where I can have a coach guide me through the process?

Reading and fully comprehending a work by any of the authors that Siegel mentions (Chekhov, Lawrence, Yeats, Shakespeare, Homer, among others) is very much like running a marathon, and while these works may touch me in incomprehensible and unexplainable ways, penetrating study (such as can only be found in the university setting) opens my eyes, my brain and yes, my heart, to aspects of the work that I would never have understood on my own.

Maybe he's right, and the college classroom is no place for the study of literature. If this is so, then I ache for the world that we live in—precisely because it so narrowly defines the definition of a college education.

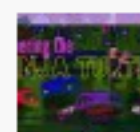
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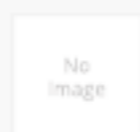
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