

# The Analysis of Selecting Materials and Suggesting Ways to Compile British and American Literature Textbook

**Dr. Yonggang Zhao (Ph.D)<sup>1</sup>**

School of Foreign Languages  
China West Normal University  
E-mail: zhyg007@163.com

**Jianying Li<sup>2</sup>**

School of Foreign Languages  
China West Normal University  
E-mail: 1140247591@qq.com

## **Corresponding Author:**

Yonggang Zhao  
School of Foreign Languages,  
China West Normal University,  
No. 1 Shi Da Road, Nanchong, 637009,  
Sichuan, China

## **Abstract**

*The status of teaching British and American literature requires that teaching adaptation should follow the idea of “fewer but better”. Thus, the selection of writers and their works must be based on the primary principle: “classical”. The way to recognize classic can depend on multidimensional criteria such as its circulating time, innovative, universal values, reception and repetition. In some else specific cases, the selection of materials should refer to other more principles flexibly.*

**Key words:** materials' adaptation; the analysis of situation; the selection of material; classic; ways.

## **1. Introduction**

Currently, one of the prominent questions in British and American Literature class for university English majors of our country' is that it has more content but less class hour. Most domestic English majors in colleges and universities have less than 160 hours for the British and American literature class, or even less than 100 hours. This kind of courses is generally offered less than four semesters and a lot of Colleges and

universities have only two semesters. Therefore, this situation requires that the materials' adaptation of British and American literature must hold the concept of "fewer but better" when selecting works. However, it is difficult to "seek less" and "get better" in the large number of good works. This paper argues that in the process of materials' adaptation, writers and works should regard "selecting a classic" as the primary principle. For many good works, some classics should be selected through a specific standard. Moreover, for classics, "the classic of classics" or a representative of the "special classics" should be selected.

## 2. The status quo of selecting materials in four popular British and American textbooks

What kind of work should be considered to be a classic? To some extent, it belongs to a matter of opinion, which can be learnt from domestic dozens of British and American literature textbooks. Although their content has a roughly convergent tendency in the selection of writers and works, it does have some obvious differences. We'll analyze it taking the content about Victorian novels and plays in four kinds of British literature textbooks for example. These four are popular in most colleges and universities of China including Wu Weiren's *History of English Literature and Selected Readings*, Wang Shouren's *Selected Readings of British Literature*, Lu Jingguo's *Selected Readings of New English Literature* and Liu Bingshan's *Selected Readings of British Literature*.

Name of textbook	Selected major writers	Selected major works
<i>Selected Readings of British Literature</i> (Wang's version)	Charlotte Bronte; Charles Dickens; Thomas Hardy; Oscar Wilde; George Bernard Shaw	<i>Jane Eyre</i> ; <i>Great Expectations</i> ; <i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i> ; <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> ; <i>Pygmalion</i>
<i>Selected Readings of New English Literature</i>	Charles Dickens; William Makepeace Thackeray; Emily Bronte; Thomas Carlyle; Thomas Hardy; Oscar Wilde; George Bernard Shaw	<i>Dombey and Son</i> ; <i>Bleak House</i> ; <i>Vanity Fair</i> ; <i>Wuthering Heights</i> ; <i>Past and Present</i> ; <i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i> ; <i>Portrait of Dorian Gray</i> ; <i>Major Barbara</i>
<i>History of English Literature and Selected Readings</i>	Charles Dickens; George Eliot; William Makepeace Thackeray; Charlotte Bronte; Emily Bronte; Thomas Hardy; Oscar Wilde; John Galsworthy; George Bernard Shaw;	<i>Pickwick Papers</i> ; <i>Oliver Twist</i> ; <i>Vanity Fair</i> ; <i>Adam-Bader</i> ; <i>Jane Eyre</i> ; <i>Wuthering Heights</i> ; <i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i> ; <i>Portrait of Dorian Gray</i> ; <i>The Man of Property</i> ; <i>Mrs. Warren's Profession</i>
<i>Selected Readings of British Literature</i> (Liu's version)	Charles Dickens; William Makepeace Thackeray; Charlotte Bronte; Emily Bronte; George Eliot; Thomas Carlyle Oscar Wilde; Thomas Hardy; John Galsworthy; George Bernard Shaw	<i>David Copperfield</i> ; <i>Oliver Twist</i> ; <i>Tale of Two Cities</i> ; <i>Vanity Fair</i> ; <i>Jane Eyre</i> ; <i>Wuthering Heights</i> ; <i>The Mill on the Floss</i> ; <i>A Hero in the History of the Hero Worship and Heroic</i> ; <i>The Happy Prince</i> ; <i>Loyal Friend</i> ; <i>Tess</i> ; <i>The Man of Property</i> ; <i>Joan of Arc</i>

The data above reveals two key facts: Firstly, the author listed in the table, whose four kinds of textbooks are listed as key materials are Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde; three kinds of textbooks that are given much attention, which are Thackeray and Bronte sisters' works; for Eliot, Galsworthy and Carlyle, their works only appear two times. Secondly, for the works listed above, all the four kinds of textbooks have chosen *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; three kinds of materials have chosen *Vanity Fair*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*; two kinds of materials have chosen *Portrait of Dorian Gray*, *The Man of Property* and *Oliver Twist*; Most of the rest including *Pickwick Papers*, *Adam • Bader*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Past and Present*, *Major Barbara*, *Great Expectations*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Pygmalion*, *David Copperfield*, *Tale of Two Cities*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *A Hero in the History of the Hero Worship and Heroic*, *The Happy Prince*, *Loyal Friend* and *Joan of Arc* have been chosen only one time.

In the four kinds of textbooks that mentioned above, Wu Weiren's *History of English Literature and Selected Readings* has been repeatedly printed since the first edition in 1988, and it has a great influence in China. The other three are national planning textbooks of ordinary higher education according to the both 10th and 11th "five-year plan" and their utilization rate is very high. However, the data shows that even for the editors of these excellent textbooks, they have only achieved a relative consensus on material selection. On the one hand, for many classical writers, only Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde are common in choice. And George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde are selected mainly as dramatists. The number of great dramatists in the 19th century is much less than novelist. Therefore, when selecting materials, if the balance of the genre is considered, the identity of the two writers will affect the selection. In this way, only Dickens and Hardy are considered as the novelist's identity. Although Thackeray and Dickens are equally famous, Wang Shouren still excludes the former. The reasons for this may be related to both the length of the relevant materials and the result of subjective choice of editors. On the other hand, for the classical writers' masterpiece choice, the identity differences are more obvious. Hardy and his novel *Tess* are the only common choice of the four textbooks which shows that all the editors regard him and *Tess* as the most representative works in Victorian era. Besides, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*; Bronte sisters' *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* are separately selected by three textbooks. These works, as their respective representatives, have also been highly recognized by the editors. For many Dickens' classics, such as *Pickwick Paper*, *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, *David Copperfield*, *Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations* and *Dombey and Son*, all these works have formed a "squandering charming eyes" situation. Which one can stand out as the most representative work, different editors have different ideas. In addition to *Oliver Twist*, other works are only adopted by certain textbooks. Just like Dickens, editors have shown their preference to George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde's works. Although all the four kinds of textbooks regard George Bernard Shaw as the leader of British dramatists in 19th century, they still disagree on the choice of representatives. *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Major Barbara*, *Pygmalion* and *Joan of Arc* are only favored by individual teaching material. The choice of the works of Oscar Wilde is more interesting. Although he has many identities such as playwright, novelist, poet and writer of fairy tales, his drama is the most prestigious. Two of the four textbooks have selected his novel *Portrait of Dorian Gray* as a template, while *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Loyal Friend* and *The Happy Prince* are only selected by one textbook..

### 3. Reasons that creating the differences of selecting materials in editing the four textbooks

Why there is such a big gap among editors on selecting materials? In general, editors' choice and selection of materials are related to their concept. In this regard, the editors of four books have clear instructions in the preface (or foreword):

Name of textbook	Concept of selecting materials
<i>Selected Readings of British Literature</i> (Wang's second edition)	Selecting the most influential and representative writers' works in British literature history
<i>Selected Readings of New English Literature</i> (the second edition)	Materials have not only withstood the test of time, but also have been repeatedly chosen both at home and abroad
<i>History of English Literature and Selected Readings</i> (the 2nd edition)	Trying to select the important writers and works in literature history
<i>Selected Readings of British Literature</i> (Liu's second edition)	Choosing those major writers' acknowledged masterpieces that can affect the history of English literature

The data shows that those four editors have attached great importance to writers and their representative works, which is the consensus of many other textbooks written in principle, and also is generally regarded as the first principle. Why should those materials choose classics, there is no need to give too much reasons. For example, they can make readers "fondle admiringly after reading", "never tired of reading", "every reading all has new discovery", "forget worldly troubles when reading" and so forth. The problem is that, since the 19th century, the above-mentioned writers and works still enjoy a high reputation after at least a century's scholars and readers' receiving process, in this sense, there is a little doubt that classics owe some characteristics. Then, what factors lead to the different choices of editors? Understandably, the reason is that they have not fully consistent with the classical criteria. Thus, selecting the common standard for classics is very necessary.

### 4. What is a classic?

However, the concept of "classic" itself is controversial, and to set standards for it should be questioned. Especially since the 1970s, the discussion about classic has never ceased. There are not only "canon faction" such as Harold Bloom who resolutely defend traditional classic, but also "non-canon faction", which are future-oriented modern classics and set off the wave against classics. Although the latter cite many facts to prove that external forces, particularly favorable social conditions are beneficial to the literature works, thus questioning the impartiality of the classic choice, scholars generally believe that most of the works passed down from a historical cultural heritage that have withstood the test of time and got the readers' favor of all ages, which have enjoyed a good reputation with their own intrinsic aesthetic value, unique creative style and universal values. Therefore, a negative view of the classic is radical while facing the classic is more realistic. We'll illustrate the typical characteristics of classic possessed by taking an example from the above mentioned *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* that favored by many textbook writers.

Firstly, it conforms to the theory of "time test" or "historical inspection", and it belongs to the cultural heritage, moreover, a masterpiece. As Gadamer puts it, "it is this experience that leads to such a concept in the study of history. Namely, only from a historical distance can people achieve the objective understanding".

① Time is the sole criterion for testing the truth. Any classic works must undergo the unofficial acceptance process repeatedly and then gradually reach a consensus, which is actually the process of “fighting” with time, and it is the time to dominate the ups and downs of works and writers. The British Romantic Period’s renowned laureate poet Southey and his works haven’t withstood the test of times and have now gone past glory. After the death of John Donne, he got little attention in several generations, but to the late 19th and the early 20th century, he was regarded as the trapped underground treasures, and even more, he entered the classic palace by the highly praise of Eliot, which was a persuasive example.

*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* was written in 1891, it has more than 120 years. It has experienced a complicated process, including questioning, attacking, recognizing and praising, but never fade out the attention of people. Such an inspection process is sufficient to prove the vitality of classic works and ultra-times.

Secondly, from the dimensions of space, although it is a British literature, it has been recognized by many different ideologies, different nationalities, different regions, different genders, different languages and different ethnic groups. This indicates that the works must contain some kind of universal values of human society, the common thought and culture. *Tess* demonstrates the pursuit of truth, the hatred of false, the yearning for freedom, the reaction against oppression, the longing for love and the fear of marriage. It is these that convey universal value and significance that beyond geographical and ethnic.

Thirdly, it has a substantial creativity. In the narrative of the love story-one woman and two men- it is not built into the overall framework of the struggle for a woman and two men carried swords at a simple “duel” mode, but tells the story of a weak woman who is brave enough to defend her true love after a complex ideological struggle. According to this way of dealing with the familiar subjects is unheard of in the traditional works before the 19th-century, “endowed the familiar content and form with a mysterious and uncanny power”, “let the reader feel unfamiliar familiar”, which is the advocated selected scale of Bloom.

Fourthly, it is a meeting point with many contemporary readers to communicate with the soul. Any materials are addressed to the contemporary readers; therefore, a good classic is not only a thing of the past, but also should always be present, and should be connected to the contemporary readers’ mind. If “Tess” is interpreted as a “split” story, a revenge story, a story that has to make a choice among family, friendship and love that modern people are familiar with, even on a story about “a village girl with two legends of the fall of rich second generation” is not difficult, because in the book, people can always find the relevance with modern people.

Finally, it has unlimited readability and repeated readability. Practice has proved that it can withstand a repeated reading. It is not only liked by readers in an ear, but is liked by multiple times’ readers; it is not only favored by a few bookman, but is favored by the public. It has been made into many movies’ versions, which is the proof. It can enlighten education, edify sentiment and provoke thought. It makes people never forget once read the book and can find new feelings whenever read it. It is these achievements that make *Tess* an immortal classic status, and it becomes the favored choosing materials for multitudinous textbook editors. The selected works in the above table are masterpieces, but not fully meet these criteria.

### **5. How to compile a textbook on basis of “classic” principle**

After the initial screening of the classic, you need to arrange in accordance with the overall system of dispersed materials. As British and American literature textbooks, they must demonstrate the overall profile

of the mainstream literature in Britain and the United States as much as possible. A good English literature teaching material should cover the most outstanding writers and works of the middle ancient, medieval, Renaissance, the 17-th century, the 18-th century, romanticism, Victoria and modernism period in the history of British literature. A good American literature textbook should cover the most distinguished writers and their works in the colonial period, rational revolution period, the romantic period, the period of realism and modernism. Therefore, when choosing materials, different periods should be considered.

Much more attention should be paid in booming period of literature development because of the emerged great amount of literary classic. For those writers and works which have roughly similar styles, people should select the most classic from the classics and select the most representative classic from the most classics. If the classics and representatives are strong, it is necessary to select from the readers' ability to accept, the length of articles or the purposes of editors. For example, the previously mentioned Dickens and Thackeray, those two are the most distinguished writers in the British realist critique of period, but space is limited, only one can be chosen and Wang Shouren has chosen Dickens and his work *Great Expectations*. Learning from his preface, he made this kind of choice based on the consideration that he increased the female writer Charlotte and her *Jane Eyre* passage in the revised edition, which belongs to "Bildungsroman" together with *Great Expectations* and therefore, these two can be contrasted. Whether Wang Shouren's choice was reasonable or not, he at least described the classic choice is inseparable from a flexible approach. To fully reflect the mainstream of national literature overview, the selecting materials should consider the articles' genre, and at least to involve poetry, fiction, drama, essays and other common genre. Moreover, considering the classic formation and inevitable injustice factors in the process of inheriting, it should also be appropriate to listen to some critics' voice of "classic diversification", for example, giving much attention to women writers who are blinded by history factors, minority writers and their works. All the classic choices of course have to consider the students' ability to accept. Some writers prefer to use obscure vocabulary and complex sentence structures, some works may involve extensive background knowledge of history, religion, philosophy, culture, etc., which are likely to affect the readability of the selected text. When choosing materials, the acceptable level of students should be considered, and those selected works should be understood by most students, which is the precondition.

The arranging order of the chosen materials may be gradual, from shallow and deep especially for the Middle English period or Medieval English literature classics. For example, Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales", the content of the information involved is very strange to modern readers, and it is written in the Old English, so the difficulty is even greater, which is necessary to convert it to modern English. After all, the main purposes of undergraduate students are to experience the beauty of literature, to accept the edification of beauty, to improve the aesthetic and critical capacity rather than academic research.

It should be noted that British and American literature in the twentieth-century is a colorful world and various genres and thought emerge one after another. It is too difficult to find some kind of "certainty" in the theories of modern or postmodern of "doubting everything" and "challenging everything". In other words, it is hard to pick a recognized classic by the public. However, this does not mean that compiling literature of the period should give up the principle of "Classic First". In various schools, after all, there are relatively recognized representatives and representative works. While selecting materials, all the major genres should be taken into account as much as possible, so as to show different genres and representative works to the

readers. All in all, the compiling process should always consider “selecting classic” as the first principle, and under this premise, adopting other ways flexibly.

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