Most Seventh-day Adventist English teachers who use literature in the classroom—and possibly narrative film—have faced variations of the following scenarios:

- Sarah, after the first day of class, says, “In my family, we don’t read fiction. Mrs. White said you shouldn’t read fiction, so I can’t read the Nathaniel Hawthorne story you assigned us.”
- The principal says that Jason’s mother read the story assigned for English and is concerned about what’s going on in the classroom.
- A seminary student decides that some films selected for class use are inappropriate for student access in the library and writes a note of concern to the university president with a copy to the union president.

As Seventh-day Adventist teachers, we take such concerns seriously. English professionals must think through the pedagogical value of teaching fictional narratives in the classroom, anticipate some of the most common objections to such use, and beyond that, consider the appropriate use of material that may be somewhat challenging, controversial, or mature, in addition to its fictional nature. In this article, we first discuss reasons for teaching fiction—primarily addressing literature, although some of the arguments also apply to film.

1. Narratives form a significant part of the literary legacy (a text’s and/or author’s cultural, aesthetic, ideological, and linguistic influence across time) of the best American, British, and world writers, be it Geoffrey Chaucer’s poetry, the dramas of William Shakespeare, short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Flannery O’Connor, and more recent authors such as Alice Walker, Tim O’Brien, Jamaica Kincaid, and Jhumpa Lahiri, or novelists such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Zadie Smith, and Kazuo Ishiguro. These writers and many others around the world have created works of significant intellectual and artistic merit, as well as lasting cultural impact that repays diligent study.

2. Narratives are inherently interesting. They capture students’ attention, and while this might also be true of amusement park rides, stories have a bigger learning upside as they draw students in and make complex ideas more accessible. Christ’s use of narrative—the parable of the prodigal son, for example—serves as a helpful reminder of the way that stories speak to a broad audience and make sophisticated ideas understandable.

3. Stories allow us to empathize, to enter the perspective of another. As Christians, we are commanded to have compassion for others and to understand the ways others think. Entering and examining the points of view provided in stories, as well as the implied point of view of the author, are basic skills developed by studying narratives. For instance, Zora Neale Hurston’s strong use of accents and dialect in the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) immerses readers in African-American culture in Florida during the early 20th century. Moreover, by focusing on the African-American woman Janie Crawford, Hurston makes readers confront the particular difficulties facing an independent woman of color during this era.

4. Stories present conflict, which leads to consideration of choices and values, not as abstractions but in compelling, concrete contexts. Furthermore, stories allow students to consider situations, behaviors, and ethical concerns with a certain salutary amount of distance. They will be freer to discuss situations
 involving “characters” than ones in their own lives, and more engaged than if they are discussing mere abstract principles. Thus, a discussion of the conflicting depiction of war in Homer’s *The Iliad* (ca. 8th century B.C.)—where martial prowess is both celebrated and yet shown to cause unspeakable suffering—opens up a discussion about our own current attitudes toward the valorization of violence.

5. **Stories can help students improve their interpretive skills, develop subtlety, and deal with ambiguity.** Often, the best stories are those on which we have to meditate and return to because they challenge our comfortable way of thinking or allow us to consider a particular idea or issue in a new way. Like *The Iliad*, the film *The Hunger Games* (United States, 2012) presents a trenchant commentary on violence, specifically as a means of entertainment. Upon further consideration, however, students discern that the film also explores questions of gender, such as what it means for a young woman to be considered a hero, as well as questions of class, as seen in its representation of the way that the “haves” callously determine the fates of the “have nots.”

6. **Narratives help students develop critical thinking** by encouraging them to go beyond their initial emotional reaction to a text in order to assess various facets of the narrative, including its structure, content, depiction of characters, and overall message. Students may thus initially champion Hamlet’s quest for revenge in Shakespeare’s eponymous tragedy (ca. 1603), but after considering the entire play, especially the depiction in a performance or film of Hamlet’s murder of Polonius and his influence in causing Ophelia’s madness, they may be led to question Renaissance attitudes toward revenge.

### Teaching Controversial Material

Additional concerns arise, however, when these narratives—whether in literature or in film—have challenging, controversial, or “difficult” content. One of the great values of narrative, as noted above, is that it introduces us in a captivating way to others’ perspectives (both through authors and characters), their voices, and their points of view. Yet as our everyday lives demonstrate, others’ experiences do not always neatly mesh with our own and can easily take us out of our comfort zones. The articulation of these experiences and points of view through narrative may thus involve coarse language, emotionally challenging imagery, interactions of a sexual nature, immoral behavior, or other facets that make the content of a text discomfiting. In fact, for some readers, anything that does not end on a positive note is troublesome. Furthermore, the issue resides not only with a book’s or film’s content, but also with the fact that what may prove quite comfortable for one reader or viewer may seriously offend another.

For some, the answer is simple: Do not teach narratives containing controversial content. Yet such an approach, we think, proves too limiting. The Bible itself holds in tension stories of people due to God’s command⁶; and Christ’s redemptive, selfless sacrifice with Lucifer’s cunning, selfish deception.⁷ Ellen White reminds us that human history is comprised of a Great Controversy, and just as the Bible manifests this controversy, so do our human-made narratives.⁸

We must remember that when an author includes difficult content within his or her work, he or she may not be doing so with an uncritical eye. It is quite possible that the author will frame a negative example, an example of human failing or frailty, in a critical light that helps the reader to see its folly. In the movie *The Help* (2011), for example, director Tate Taylor depicts racism in 1960s Mississippi but is clearly critical of those who espouse racist ideas. On the other hand, the writer may present a perspective with which readers only partly agree or which they reject, or which they haven’t really considered before. All of these cases present us with an opportunity to learn significantly if we and our students apply critical thinking to the text.

That is not to say, however, that every book, television show, or film has inherent pedagogical value. As educators, we must thoughtfully and prayerfully use our judgment. As Francis Bacon says in his essay “Of Studies,” “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.”⁹

The same selective process can be applied to television shows and films. For example, it may not be appropriate to show students an entire episode of a World War II miniseries due to its graphic imagery. But a short clip may help communicate the loneliness and moral difficulties with which soldiers grappled, an emotion-laden concept not as accessible through a history textbook. Likewise, excluding the works of the important Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros from a global literature course because of sensitive, mature content may be difficult; however, Cisneros’s most well-known works are collections of vignettes or short stories from which individual readings may be selected. Thus, a teacher may choose to assign a short story exploring a young woman’s emotional distance from her Mexican family rather than one about a mature woman’s affair.

Sometimes, however, because of specific pedagogical opportunities inherent to particular texts and films, we choose to use narratives that will include difficult content. In these cases, Bacon’s words are especially helpful, and we can expand on them for further insight. These narratives must be read, taught, and discussed with diligence and attention.

Conversations between teacher and students are crucial, for the value of narrative texts, whether literary or televisual, lies in the fact that they provide a low-stakes site for students to grapple with the personal, social, political, and spiritual issues they (or their friends) will inevitably face. The Bible itself presents these tensions; they are omnipresent in the information that bombards students on a daily basis, from music to advertisements to the ideas held by their peers. Narratives allow for Christian educators to help mentor and shepherd their students as they confront new ideas, perspectives, and topics that will shape their worldviews. For maximum effectiveness in teaching literature, we need not avoid these topics but rather discuss them first in a Christian environment so that students are prepared to face them in a less-spiritual, at-times-combative en-
Take time to build respect and a rapport with students so that when challenging material is presented, they will be more likely to exhibit trust and respect the teacher’s judgment.

Tips for Selecting Fictional Materials

1. Consider the literary value of the material. Returning to Bacon’s metaphor, is this a book one should chew, digest, or spit out? Is the author or text itself well-respected? Is it a required part of the curriculum? Evaluate the tradeoffs of mixed content, and be confident that the text adds value and depth to the course.

2. Be comfortable, confident, and unapologetic when teaching the material. A teacher does not have to agree with everything the author says, but if there is discomfort with the subject matter, students will sense this and be affected by it. Approach the text confidently, and students are more likely to trust that there is a thoughtful purpose behind the inclusion of a particular text or film, even if it is not apparent immediately.

3. Take the students’ maturity into account. Educators at the secondary level are well aware that seniors may be able to handle a text that freshmen cannot. At the tertiary level, it would be wise to consider what might appeal to and be appropriate for the general-education student as compared to English majors. The latter typically have more training as textual interpreters and need additional opportunities to apply their skills; for this reason, they tend to be more flexible about reading and viewing assigned narratives.

4. Be thoughtful about when in the term to assign text with difficult content. Take time to build respect and a rapport with students so that when challenging material is presented, they will be more likely to exhibit trust and respect the teacher’s judgment. For instance, in an introduction to film class, I [Moncrieff] might begin with something like the excellent Road Home (China, 1998) and use something also excellent but more mature, like Monsoon Wedding (India, 2001) or Goodbye Lenin (Germany, 2003), later in the semester.

5. Consider talking with a fellow teacher or your department chair about a potentially difficult text, the reasons for choosing it, and any concerns. We have done this on several occasions and profited by the feedback we have received. Of course, this only works when you have a collegial, open, and respectful relationship with your colleagues.

Tips for Teaching Difficult Content

1. Prayerfully and thoughtfully read and vet the texts. Even if a text is part of a mandated curriculum, do not depend on word of mouth or another person’s point of view. This may seem basic, but we have known teachers who failed to fully read a text, assigned it, and then were surprised by the content. Furthermore, when considering using a potentially difficult text read several years ago without a class in mind, have a fresh look at it. A text or film looks different when one is thinking about it in regard to a specific class context.

2. Consider addressing the tough issues head on. I [Corredera] am ambivalent about this because at times I think I risk bringing attention to an issue that my students did not identify as a concern. But I have found it very helpful to share with students that some of the texts in class may have difficult content. For example, when I introduced my New Global Literature course, I told students that global texts, particularly postcolonial texts, often confront the personal, psychological, and social aftermath of oppression, which means that they are not always the easiest to read. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) addresses the Nigerian civil war and Nigerian independence and thus depicts the horrors of genocide. I found it better to be upfront about these issues so that students could be prepared mentally and emotionally.

3. Prepare a thoughtful explanation for the texts chosen. Be able to articulate whether they address themes crucial to the course, whether they are authored by prominent and respected writers, whether they are considered an established part of a curriculum, etc. For example, I [Corredera] chose Half of a Yellow Sun because Adichie is a well-respected, award-winning author whose works are widely taught in global literature courses.
and because this highly lauded, Orange Prize-winning, thought-
ful novel perfectly encapsulated themes that were central to the
course while adding a new text to our departmental curriculum.

4. Address the difficult content directly. Students often be-
come frustrated if they are made to read difficult content and
are not given an opportunity to discuss it. Thus, when my [Corredore’s] students read Khaled Hosseini’s A Thousand
Splendid Suns (2007), a novel portraying the suffering of women
in Afghanistan pre- and post-Taliban, I made sure to discuss the
depiction of domestic violence and abuse against the two female
protagonists, Laila and Mariam. In fact, I specifically asked stu-
dents whether, if by reading this text, which frankly depicts the
misogynistic brutality against Afghan women, we were partici-
pating in making violence against women a form of entertain-
ment. This led to an incredibly productive, thoughtful conver-
sation about the ethics of content and reading.

5. Last but not least, be prepared to address and discuss how
we consider difficult content as Christians. Guiding questions
include: Is this text/film’s content gratuitous or justifiable?
How might a Christian perspective allow us to approach this
text differently, with a unique point of view? What social, eth-
cial issues might difficult content raise for us as Christians?
These types of conversations allow students to begin develop-
ing their own approaches toward worrisome content found
across a wide range of narratives.12

Tips for Discussing Difficult Content With
Administrators and/or Parents

1. If at all possible, begin conversations with prayer. A con-
frontation over content runs the risk of feeling personal, as if
one is being judged for the content selected. Prayer, in addition
to invoking the ever-needful guidance of the Holy Spirit, helps
defuse the situation and sets the appropriate tone and context
for the ensuing conversation.

2. Be ready to explain your rationale. Just as a teacher should
be able to communicate to students why a specific text has been
selected, a teacher should be able to do the same for administra-
tors and parents. Consider not only addressing the value of the
text itself, but also how the particular challenging material (ma-
ture content, for example) can promote students’ intellectual, per-
sonal, and spiritual growth.

3. Be prepared to address how the difficult content furthers
the aims of Christian education. Point to the ethical value of a
particular narrative; address how a story exposes students to the
less-privileged experiences of others around the world; explain
how a film forces students to confront problematic stereotypes
about those considered Other; or explain how a text or film pro-
motes equality or social justice. While the explanations may vary,
be prepared to articulate the Christian value of a text just as read-
ily as its intellectual or artistic value.

4. Be open minded and open hearted. Again, prayer goes a long
way in helping create a productive dialogue about content. It is all
too easy to dismiss those with concerns as too narrow-minded or
ignorant. Instead, consider various ways to strike a balance be-
tween pushing a student to expand his or her thinking while at the
same time being sensitive to individual concerns. Perhaps this will
take the form of further one-on-one conversations, or it might

mean an alternate assignment. These options can likewise be com-
municated to an administrator or parent. As mentioned earlier,
colleagues or a departmental chair can be excellent resources for
considering how to handle any confrontation over course material.

5. At the same time, be prepared to defend the decision to
strongly encourage a student to read or engage with a partic-
ular text. Perhaps the text is crucial for the curriculum or
necessary for anyone who has aspirations for graduate school.
Perhaps not reading a particular text may compromise the stu-
dent’s ability to participate in and understand future assign-
ments. Whatever the case may be, have a rationale for encour-
gaing a student to complete the reading or viewing, or for
suggesting (at the tertiary level) another section or course.

In conclusion, let us share with you what some of our stu-
dents see as the value of reading potentially controversial ma-
terial (keeping in mind that they were not aware of our article’s
points when we solicited these comments). Here are some of
their responses:

• “Reading difficult texts has given me the ability to approach
subjects which I previously may have felt uncomfortable dis-
cussing or been unable to discuss.”

• “Christ’s call to ‘do unto others as you would have them do
unto you’ necessitates an experiential understanding of whomever
that other may be. In order for me to understand how I would
wish to be treated were I another, I must first understand my

A Bibliography of Helpful Books and Articles for
the Christian Teacher and Literature Professional

Barrs, Jerram. Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and
Guide to the Teaching of Literature in Seventh-day Adventist Schools
Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, General Conference of
Seventh-day Adventists, n.d. A pamphlet from the 1970s.
McEntyre, Marilyn Chandler. Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies. Grand
crief_e.htm.
O’Connor, Flannery. Mystery and Manner: Occasional Prose. New York:
Ryken, Leland, Editor. The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in
Literature and Writing. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Shaw Books,
Ryken, Leland. Windows to the World: Literature in a Christian Perspec-
Veith, Gene Edward. Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Lit-
Other’s perspective—a daunting task. . . . For me, literature helps fill in that epistemic gap. Reading controversial or difficult texts . . . grants me the gift of seeing the world from many perspectives.”

• “I’ve benefited greatly by reading ‘difficult’ or controversial texts. As responsible, educated, and loving individuals, having certain exposure to the trials people experience allows us to be more empathetic. Literature can create awareness for those abused and marginalized, allowing us to shift our thinking for the better.”

• “So much of the content that many deem ‘objectionable’ is present because it provides a more honest picture of a situation, experience, or person. Often, certain content is required to maintain the accuracy, impact, even poignancy of works—whether factual or literary fiction reflective of truth. We are called to engage with and witness to the world, and we can’t do that from a safe and sanitized bubble.”

Clearly, these students see reading difficult texts as not only improving their perspectives on the world around them, but also as part of their individual, Christian growth and mission. As educators, it is our responsibility to continue encouraging this development in the English classroom through the texts we choose to teach and discuss.13

This article has been peer reviewed.

Scott Moncrieff, Ph.D., is a Professor of English at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He earned his doctorate at the University of California in Riverside, California, and is a specialist in Victorian literature with publications/presentations on the novelists Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope. Dr. Moncrieff has dealt with difficult content in the novel as well as in his Understanding Movies class. He has also written on Adventist attitudes toward fiction and reviewed many Adventist novels for the Adventist Review®.

Vanessa Corredera, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of English at Andrews University. She earned her doctorate at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Her research explores how physiognomy shaped representations of social identity in Renaissance drama. She also studies depictions and intersections of race and gender in Renaissance drama and its modern adaptations. Her courses expand on these interests with their focus on gender, race, and class across Renaissance and modern texts. She has presented to both Andrews faculty and students about confronting difficult content in the classroom.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. The names used in these scenarios are pseudonyms.
2. For those interested in reading more about this subject, see Scott Moncrieff’s article in Dialogue or Keith Clouten’s article in the April/May 2014 issue of The Journal of Adventist Education (which includes a helpful additional bib-

liography on the issue). Both articles are listed in the bibliography.
3. See Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; and Romans 12:15.
5. Take the mutuality expressed in the following verse, as well as the typological reference to Christ: “I am my beloved’s / And my beloved is mine. / He feeds his flock among the lilies” (Song of Solomon 6:3). For the story of Lot and his daughters, see Genesis 19:30-36. All Bible references in this article are quoted from the NIV. Texts credited to NIV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
6. For the story of Rahab, see Joshua 2:1-24. God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the most well-known examples of God’s condemnation of a city. See Genesis 19:1-29.
7. Matthew 27:32-56 provides one example of Christ’s sacrifice. For Satan’s deception of Eve as the snake in the Garden of Eden, see Genesis 3:1-24.
11. Ibid.
13. We must acknowledge that while we have intended this advice to appeal to a broad audience, it may be complicated by the grade level a teacher instructs or the location where a teacher is employed. For example, a grade school teacher will most likely have to grapple with greater parental concerns and more varied maturity levels among students. Moreover, texts may be “difficult” in the more common sense of the word. Student A may be able to read Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and understand it (or at least, most of it), while Student B’s reading level may preclude even the most cursory engagement with this famous tragedy. For teachers in certain parts of the world, issues may likewise differ. Without trying to overgeneralize, complex topics regarding Otherness, gender, class, and spirituality take on different dimensions across cultures. Moreover, if we return to the Romeo and Juliet example, a teacher may not simply have to confront the text, but he or she may also have to discuss with students the way that Shakespeare historically has been used as a pedagogical tool in the Colonial project of assimilation. We cannot address these nuances here, but we do hope that some of this advice can be helpful if even applied in the broadest way possible.