Secondary schools in England are once more grappling with a revised National Curriculum for English and revised examinations at 16 and 18. However, the rationale for the compulsory study of English as a subject, and specifically literature, as dictated by the Department for Education [July 2014] contains the familiar statements ‘Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development.’ One stated aim of the curriculum is that all students will ‘appreciate our rich and varied literary heritage’. Although there is some attention to the idea of ‘world literature’ the overall aim, expressed in Key Stage Four, is that students should ‘read and appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage’, making it clear what ‘our’ means above, it is a nationalistic project for England.

Empirical studies of literary reading have begun to accumulate over the last 25 years although the ‘Scientific Study’ of literature is relatively new. This paper will draw on empirical studies but also review recent developments in 'Literary Darwinism', specifically their implications for teaching literature in schools. It will draw on several small scale studies with teachers and with students, to provide some additional evidence for the theory that literature is a specialised form of knowledge and may be considered an outcome of the ‘adaptive mind’, a complex and controversial concept, one element of its definition, from an evolutionary psychological perspective, is that our minds have highly developed ‘domain specific’ mechanisms for dealing with our environment. This paper will argue that literature, its production and consumption, form a kind of human ‘domain’.

This theoretical stance provides a very different justification for ensuring that students have an experience of literary reading and should develop some understanding of the way that literature provides a very special set of resources that support an enhanced understanding of human motivation and behaviour. Literature, which is often conceptualised and justified in the curriculum, as a form of nationalistic heritage [especially in secondary schools], can then be seen as a means to help students understand that literature is, in fact, a universalist project, one that is inflected, sometimes dominated, by notions of national identity and survival. Literature therefore should be studied by all students but its teaching should lead to both understanding the tribal nature of nationalism but also the universality of literary knowledge.