

INVESTIGATING THE LITERARY CANON

What makes a novel or play a timeless classic?

Abby Mauldin

“The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has no pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid” (Austen 86). Since before the invention of writing, humanity has taken pleasure in enjoying a good story: stories of pirates out on the dangerous seas, princesses falling in love with princes, or superheroes saving the day. People love a good story - they would be stupid not to, as stated in the quote above from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*.

But what determines if a story is good? How has humanity, over the course of centuries, decided what books are worth reading and preserving? The answer is even more complicated than the question. Ultimately, the literary canon is determined by the academics, author demographics, and the cultural stigma of which books to read. However, there is a problem with how the literary canon is decided: it does not reflect the people reading the canon.

To figure out how the literary canon is made, one first must understand what it is. The literary canon is made up of a larger canon filled with art, music, literature, and philosophy dating back to the Ancient Greeks (TCK Publishing *Why the Literary Canon Matters*). According to the discussion article, “‘What is a Classic?’:

International Literary Criticism and the Classic Question,” a canon is “the formation of a corpus, the making up of a list of books requested for a literary education, and the formation of an exclusive club” (Mukherjee 1029). However, a classic novel is not the same as the canon. According to the same discussion article, a classic “is a book that is read long after it was written, and demands rereading. They offer a polymorphous textuality that literary cultures value” (“What is a Classic?”). In short, a classic can be part of a canon, but is not directly the canon.

It is also important to note that there are different types of canons: the personal canon, the selective canon, and the critical canon. The personal canon is decided by the individual. Someone may include *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins within their personal canon, while others may not—it is all up to the reader’s personal preference and experiences. The selective canon is one that has been decided by an institution, mainly academics. These works are often what you read and discuss in schools today. The critical canon is limited by the area of study. There is a different canon of literature for young adult novels than classic novels, for example. This essay will mainly focus on the selective canon: how and why academics choose the novels and plays they do to teach and school and preserve throughout history.

There are many novels and plays within the selective canon. Most notable works include *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, or *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. According to the *Britannica Encyclopedia*, the top twelve books ever written include novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. However, some novels are ones that few have ever heard of, including *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy (author of *War and Peace*), and *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes (Hogeback “12 Novels”).

Something important to note is that the literary canon is always

being added on, but not subtracted from. The ever-increasing canonical list is largely due to what the academics consider part of the canon. Most academics will agree that a canonical work of literature must imply continuity and tradition and the transmission of tradition (Mukerjee 1029). According to the list of novels used on the College Board Advanced Placement Literature and Composition (AP Literature) Exam, there have been approximately 413 novels used on the AP Literature exam from 1970 to 2022, most of which have been repeated multiple times.

The majority of the books that have been cited on the AP Literature exam have not been read in classrooms in recent years. According to a poll done by Stacker.com, the top three books read in most high school English classrooms are *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (Wignton “50 Classics from (Almost) Everyone’s High School Reading List”). However, out of the list of 50 novels and plays read in most high school classrooms, only 32 of those works have been used for past exams. Not every novel on this list, and within the canon, can be read in classrooms. Not everyone even knows that the book *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe exists, a novel that was used in the 2013 exam.

A novel or play cannot truly be called a selective literary canonical work if not everyone at least knows the title. In short, what is meant to be a selective literary canon is actually a critical one—it is not suited for the general public, just a niche group of people. The canon that is meant for everyone is determined by the niche and is not filtered throughout history.

The books used on the AP Literature exam have authors that are largely of the same demographic: white men. Looking at all the novels that have been cited in the past exams, 313 of those works have been written by men, while 99 have been written by women, with the epic poem *Beowulf* having an unknown author.

To put that into numbers, approximately 76% of the novels and plays on the AP Literature exam have been written by men, and approximately 24% of the novels and plays have been written by women. The ratio is extremely unbalanced.

The same can be said regarding race. Taking a look at the fifteen most cited novels used on the AP Literature exam from 1970 to 2022, only three are black. The other twelve most cited authors are white, with no authors of Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, or Pacific Islander descent.

The canon that is determined by the niche does not accurately represent the society we have today. “We as humans are multifaceted, complex beings, and we deserve a Classic Canon reflecting that aspect of our lives”, said Jenna Glover, a speculative fiction writer with a deep love for reading. “In my view, a classic is a story that has been analyzed and determined to be of high quality and valuable to society and culture, and I think many of us can agree such stories don’t have to be 100-year-old literary tales to fulfill that requirement” (Glover “The Classic Canon”). The majority of the works included in the canon are outdated, and are not a reflection of our modern-day society. The canon should be updated.

And it has been. The canon is also determined by cultural pressure. In recent years, there has been a rise in the diversity of works used in the AP Literature exam. Looking from the years 2013 to 2022, there has been a significant increase in the number of female and non-white authors added to the list. In 2021 alone, 7.7% of the authors were Asian, 25.2% were Black, 8.9% were Latinx, 3.6% were Indigenous, and 60.1% were white. Furthermore, 50.8% of the authors were females, while 49.2% were male (College Board “2021 Results”). While these numbers are still largely unbalanced, it is a start. These minority voices that have long been ignored are beginning to be heard. This change aligns with the cultural upheaval that began in the wake of the pandemic in 2020 and

the death of George Floyd. While the niche make a canon that is critical, even though it is meant to be selective, they do listen to the general public when their voices become loud enough.

There is still a problem with the canon: it is not accessible to education today. The reason these novels are taught in schools is to help students develop critical thinking about themselves and the world around them. “Stories are about communication,” said John Green in the CrashCourse YouTube video *How and Why we Read*. In this video, he lists three reasons why we read critically: to “have a fuller understanding of lives other than our own”, to “be more empathetic”, and to have “the linguistic tools to share your own story with more precision” (John Green, *How and Why We Read*).

Here is the problem with these novels: they do not reflect the student body reading them in the United States today. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are a total of 49.5 million students enrolled in the public school system for the 2022 through 2023 school year in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Of those 49.5 million students, 22.4 million are white, 14.1 million are hispanic, 7.4 million are black, 2.7 million are asian, 2.3 million are students of two or more races, 0.5 million are American Indian/Alaska Native, and 0.2 million are Pacific Islander (NCES) . As shown earlier, the novels used in the AP Literature exam, while improving, still do not reflect the students required to read them. These students do not see themselves in these stories, and the students that do see characters and authors like them in schools and exams aren’t being culturally enriched by reading stories coming from different experiences than them.

These stories that are also being taught in schools are also simply hard to understand, and students complain about reading them. Often, students will look up the summary and analysis of these novels on Sparknotes because they can’t understand them. With Shakespeare, students often have to go to NoFearShakespeare to understand his plays. According to “Promoting Young Adult

Literature: The Other ‘Real’ Literature”, an article about promoting young adult literature in classrooms, “novels have been traditionally used in English language arts classrooms because of a belief in their timelessness” (Santoli page 2). However, these novels often don’t address adolescent concern and the problems of today’s world, so students find difficulty relating to them. Arguably, the closest novel that does this is *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. As stated earlier in the quote by John Green, stories are supposed to enable us to have a fuller understanding of ourselves and the world around us. One cannot have a fuller understanding if one cannot relate or truly be challenged by an idea that has been deemed correct by society.

Instead, the article written by Santoli argues that young adult literature should be taught in classrooms and should be added to the canon. Contrary to popular belief, these young adult novels engage in universal themes that the canon engages in. The novels that make up the literary canon often consist of themes regarding race, feminism, mental health, politics, and so much more. In short, they often challenge the world view of the author’s time. For example, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* challenges the societal hierarchy of men and women during the 19th century. Young adult novels today do just that—novels such as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, which discusses what it is like being black in today’s world, or *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, which dives into the topic of mental health and suicide. These novels challenge readers just as much, if not more, than the works taught in schools while better reflecting the students being required to read them.

In conclusion, the literary canon is decided by a niche group of people that does not reflect the readers who are reading these novels today, especially in schools. The canon also discusses topics that are radical for the time that they are written in. Most importantly, the literary canon is mostly outdated and needs to be revised to take away the novels not taught in schools, while adding

young adult novels that reflect the students being required to read them. These students need reading material that is engaging and challenging, and most importantly, entertaining. As Sarah J. Maas said in her novel *Throne of Glass*: “I can survive well enough on my own—if given the proper reading material” (Maas 146).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. Montlake Romance, 2012.
- “AP English Literature and Composition: 2021 Results.” *AP English Literature and Composition: 2021 Results – All Access* | College Board, College Board, 2021, <https://allaccess.collegeboard.org/ap-english-literature-and-composition-2021-results>.
- Hogeback, Jonathan. “12 Novels Considered the “Greatest Book Ever Written””. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 12 Jul. 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/list/12-novels-considered-the-greatest-book-ever-written>. Accessed 5 April 2023.
- Effinger, Sandra. “MsEffie’s List of Titles from Open Response Questions for Advanced ...” *Just for Advanced Placement Teachers*, Sandra Effinger, 9 Sept. 2022, <http://www.mseffie.com/AP/AP%20Lit%20Titles.pdf>.
- Glover, Jenna. “The Classic Canon.” *Jenna Glover*, 2 Aug. 2021, <https://jennaglover.com/the-classic-canon/>. Accessed 17 Mar. 2023.
- Green, John, et al. *How and Why We Read: Crash Course English Literature #1. YouTube*, John Green, 15 Nov. 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSYw502dJNY>. Accessed 17 Mar. 2023.
- Maas, Sarah J. *Throne of Glass: A Throne of Glass Novel #1*. Bloomsbury, 2012.
- MUKHERJEE, ANKHI. ““What Is a Classic?”: International Literary Criticism and the Classic Question.” *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 4, 2010, pp. 1026–42. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41058302>. Accessed 8 Mar. 2023.
- “The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics).” *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page*,

a Part of the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Education, 2022, [https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372#:~:text=Preliminary%20data%20for%20fall%202021,students%20\(source%2C%20source\).](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372#:~:text=Preliminary%20data%20for%20fall%202021,students%20(source%2C%20source).)

Santoli, Susan P., and Mary Elaine Wagner. "Promoting Young Adult Literature: The Other 'Real' Literature." *American Secondary Education*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2004, pp. 65–75. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064624>. Accessed 14 Mar. 2023.

Wiginton, Keri. "50 Classics from (Almost) Everyone's High School Reading List." *Stacker*, Stacker, 27 Dec. 2022, <https://stacker.com/art-culture/50-classics-almost-everyones-high-school-reading-list>.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is the literary canon? What kinds of books would you feature in your personal canon?
2. A large section of this essay is dedicated to the idea of literature as “classic.” How would you define the word “classic”? How does the author define “classic” in a literary sense?
3. The opening Austen quote of the essay suggests a connection between canon and pleasure. What part does pleasure play in determining literature’s place in the canon?
4. The author states that the literary canon “is always being added on, but not subtracted from.” How is this true?
5. Towards the end of the essay, the author draws connections between the literary canon and race. Why is it important for a canon to include entries from many different heritages?