

A Place for the Cannon

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Abstract

Those involved in secondary English and language arts classrooms often wonder how to increase student interest and learning. Some suggest that teaching primarily from more recent texts, such as young adult literature, would increase student engagement. If this were the case, canonical texts would be used less often. This author suggests that canonical texts should be of first importance and that different types and genres of literature should all be used in classrooms instead of being pitted against each other.

Keywords

canonical literature, English instruction, High school ED, student learning, student interest.

Introduction

In the context of the secondary language arts classroom, controversial topics abound. Teachers wonder if they should teach books that have been banned in the past. Some might worry that, in the era of technology, learning grammar rules and the difference between a protagonist and an antagonist are obsolete. Among these controversies stands the disagreement about the literary canon: should the canon be kept as it is, should room be made for new texts, or should it be thrown out altogether? The literary canon is, according to Wilczek (2012), "... authors and works that either used to be included in literature syllabi or textbooks, or those works that repeatedly appear in standard volumes of the history of literature, bibliographies, and literary criticism" (p. 1687). Canonical texts are often viewed as outdated and of secondary importance in English language arts classrooms. While teachers should implement a variety of texts and media, the canon is still of first importance. This author would suggest using texts in the following order of importance: canonical texts, modern and nonfictional texts, and other media. Teaching texts with this order in mind will be likely to challenge students, to engage students, and to prepare students to function in the workplace, while still using the existing education system as a base.

Discussion

In order to properly understand the literature debate, it is necessary to first understand the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The Common Core State Standards Initiative states that the CCSS "... were drafted by experts and teachers from across the country and are designed to ensure students are prepared for today's entry-level careers, freshman-level college courses, and workforce training programs" ("About the Standards"). Forty-one states have adopted the CCSS, as well as the District of Columbia and four territories. The standards for English and Language arts are overviewed on the website as follows:

The Common Core asks students to read stories and literature, as well as more complex texts that provide facts and background knowledge in areas such as science and social studies. Students will be challenged and asked questions that push them to refer back to what they've read. This stresses critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills that are required for success in college, career, and life. ("English Language Arts Standards")

The purpose of education is to challenge students and help them grow. Challenges abound in canonical texts. It cannot be denied that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is more challenging to read than Chboski's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and this language complexity is an extremely useful learning tool, as may be seen in a simple comparison. Take the following lines from *Hamlet*: "To be, or not to be—that is the question: / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them" (Shakespeare, ll. 1-5). Most readers would find it difficult to arrive at the conclusion that *Hamlet* is contemplating suicide. Compare this with a similar passage from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*: "I don't know if you've ever felt like that. That you wanted to sleep for a thousand years. Or just not exist. Or just not be aware that you do exist" (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). No critical thinking skills are required to determine that Charlie, the main character, is struggling with depression and, perhaps, suicidal thoughts. Such a brief analysis is all that is necessary to prove that, as a general rule, canonical texts are more difficult to read than modern texts. Since the

primary goal of education is to challenge students to learn, the canon should be prioritized over young adult literature.

Those who support the canon point out the "... beautiful prose, timeless themes, and simpatico characters..." (Chiariello, 2017, p. 27). Chiariello (2017) also states that reading the canon is important exposure to history: "Learning about the past gives us a deeper understanding of our present day, and authors like Hawthorne and Twain help teach those lessons" (p. 27). Though Chiariello provides support for using canonical texts, she does not forget the opposing view, first listing some general views in favor of young adult literature—cultural relevance, similar writing quality, and a more multicultural group of authors that corresponds to an increasingly multicultural audience—then digging deeper into reasons for and against using both kinds of literature in the classroom. Of the two views listed above, the most popular is to increase the amount of young adult literature used in the classroom and cut out some of the canon.

Aston (2017) espouses this view. His opinion is that the authorship of the canon, as well as who prescribes it reveals power. In the case of the Western canon, that power belongs primarily to white males (Aston, 2017). While the Common Core Standards leave room for literature outside of the canon, Aston (2017) notes that "... teachers may be inclined to continue using the familiar texts of the canon out of comfort, tradition, or district textbook adoptions" (p. 41). The adopting of a literary canon is not a new practice, and the canon is always selected by those in power (Aston, 2017, pp. 41-42). This power belongs to the education system (p. 42), but more importantly, it belongs to a white culture: "The canon has burrowed into culture and curriculum, perpetuating narratives that misrepresent the cultures of non-White people and, more broadly, misrepresent our society, which is more complex and diverse than it portrays" (Aston, 2017, p. 50). Aston (2017) suggests that changes need begin "...with teachers and their students, not with a universal, generic formula or pre-packed curriculum" (p. 50). Stated differently, the power needs to be taken from the education system and given to individual teachers and students who will be able to decide what literature, as well as other media, will best fit their needs.

Young adult literature should be included in the classroom. After all, learning requires that students be engaged; however, according to Hazlett, Johnson, and Hayn (2009), those who advocate for the use of young adult literature in the classroom are often ridiculed. They suggest that the contempt for young adult literature is because of the flashy marketing of low-quality works and uncertainty about what young adult literature actually is (Hazlett, Johnson, & Hayn, 2009, p. 48-49). No matter how much contempt some educators and adults have for young adult literature, the undeniable fact is that most middle school and high school students prefer reading modern young adult fiction to reading canonical texts. As Chiariello (2017) states, “Young readers crave stories that reflect their lived experiences, tackle controversies and dramas they live out daily, and push the boundaries of social norms” (p. 28). Chiariello, like others, suggests a middle-ground approach to literature choices: use both.

Rybakova and Roccanti (2016) also support this approach to the issue. They state that “... these two categories of texts are most powerful when they are connected rather than when pitted against one another” (p. 31). They suggest using young adult literature to scaffold up to canonical literature, and though scaffolding implies that the material with which the students begins is easier, Rybakova and Roccanti do not think that this is the case with young adult literature: “This isn’t to say that young adult literature is simpler than the canon-- but, as Lesesne suggested, the best way to begin to scaffold is by using a book that ‘has already found a connection to a student’” (Rybakova and Roccanti, 2016, p. 34). They suggest books to pair with canonical texts, showing that the connections would not necessarily be difficult. Some examples of their choices are pairing *The Book Thief* with Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*, since they both deal with Nazi Germany (Rybakova and Roccanti, 2016, p. 36).

According to Taylor (2015), the CCSS requires that students read nonfictional literature. Though this does require cutting down on some of the classics, many people see this as beneficial. Those who promote this point out that most of the texts that students will read in college, as well as their future careers will probably be nonfictional. Though schools generally are able to pick the texts used in the classroom, the CCSS stipulates several nonfictional texts to be read “... including the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of

Rights, the Gettysburg Address and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Letter From Birmingham Jail'" (Taylor, 2015). Though the inclusion of nonfictional texts does limit the amount of canonical literature that can be taught, Taylor shows that benefits of including nonfiction include relevance to students and increasing students' academic vocabulary.

A high school education is supposed to help prepare students for their future, whether that future be a job right after graduation or continuing their education. Most people agree on this point, but many do not agree on what is necessary for future generations. Miller and Bruce (2017) do not spend much time addressed the types of literature that should be used in schools. Their main point is best expressed in their own words: "... it is now clear that using images, sounds, gestures, space, and movement to represent meanings is becoming the new human condition in the digital age" (Miller & Bruce, 2017, par. 1).

With this in mind, Miller and Bruce explain how using one modern technology, digital video (DV), could be used in the English classroom and what the benefits of using DV would be. They point out that the CCSS "emphasize learning for the 21st century when most of the standards could be taught with MacGuffey readers and seat-based slateboards" (Miller & Bruce, 2017, p. 15). Technology should not be used merely for technology's sake, but it has the potential to become a very useful tool in the English classroom (Miller & Bruce, 2017, p. 15): "Whether they are writing/researching with video or critiquing media, they become makers (Rosenfeld Halverson and Sheridan), an important identity for their current and future roles in workplace and civic spaces" (Miller & Bruce, 2017, p. 18). Miller and Bruce are right in addressing the future in their article. In an increasingly technology-based environment, students should not be sent out into the world without knowing how to use technology constructively.

Deciding what literature to teach in an ELA classroom can be a difficult task. As can be seen with the relatively few sources for this paper, differing opinions abound. As many suggest, the canon should not be removed from schools, only changed to fit the requirements of individual classrooms. Learning is an individual, as well as a corporate, experience. Teachers should select the texts that they believe are best for their students, keeping this

order of importance in mind. Canonical texts should be of first importance because of their historical significance and their existence as the current base of English education. Young adult literature should be of second importance because students find it enjoyable and relevant, and it can be used to scaffold to the canon. Nonfiction should be of third importance because of the context it provides for all literature. Other media, such as digital video, should be of last importance. Life in a digital age requires its presence in the classroom, but it should not take the place of literature in a literature classroom.

Conclusion

The suggested order is not a guarantee of success. There will be students who will not be interested in difficult reading, but the school system will never be without students who lack interest in education through no fault of the teacher or the curriculum. Leaving the canon behind in the name of relevance would be both an abandonment of a treasure and an acceptance of the foolish hope that, if education could just be made fun enough, everyone could succeed. The education system is flawed, but it cannot be fixed by relevance and fun alone.

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