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### The Generation of Relevant Literary Standards

I recently listened to a 17-year-old male acquaintance describe the text *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquevel, a contemporary book that he studied in his advanced high school English class. Although the book contains more adult subject matter than typically offered to a class of minors his perspective was mature and he communicated it eloquently. He followed his commentary with a list of additional significant books from the class including Leo Tolstoy's *Crime and Punishment* and Euripedes' *Medea*. I was impressed by his literary critiquing skills and compelled to investigate what aspects of these books motivated his teacher to include this combination of literature in the same curriculum.

At the very basic level, educators should aspire to teach the rules of communicating through the English language, the construction of grammatically correct sentences that articulate thoughts and the comprehension of other people's alphabetically and verbally expressed knowledge. What is the value of those tools if students do not apply them to the practice of sharing something meaningful with each other? It would be nearly impossible to teach foundational communication skills without the coexistent socially relevant information in their texts. Rarely do high school students read a textbook containing the rules for the act of reading alone in the same way that they might read the instructions for an experiment in chemistry class. Instead they are immersed in a deluge of literature that inevitably carries social, historical, political and existential connotations within the words the students practice reading. "Literature is concerned with our conceptions, interpretations and experiences of the world," (Roberts 4). Studying literature therefore can produce not only academic progress but significant enlightenment to the human experience.

Respecting the potential influence of the words teachers require their students to read, what texts merit such an endorsement? The intellectual community has actively debated teaching well trusted canonical literature versus contemporary writings for the last couple of decades. Ms. Jacobs, the teacher responsible for introducing *Like Water for Chocolate* to my teenage friend, testified that "the common human experience is a significant element in literature that students can collect from a multicultural range of texts that includes work from both ends of the spectrum. In fact, the opposing sides actually reinforce the effectiveness of the other."

According to Jan Pridmore of [Literaryhistory.com](http://Literaryhistory.com), points of contention circle around "what is taught in schools" and "what is judged as great literature of lasting value." The value of a creative work is highly subjective to argument and opinion and will never be definitively quantified. Although time has not yet afforded current worthy literature the accolades of numerous appearances in anthologies, doctoral dissertations or prestigious literary awards like many pieces in the recognized canon, we must believe that our contemporaries along with us are striving to and succeeding at creating brilliant new writings. Without confidence that new authors can produce high quality literature equal to that of the accepted canon we labor to write and educate future writers in vain.

A blend of the highest quality literature from both pools is a reasonable resolution to the dilemma.

By what standards should we evaluate and select new books for high school classrooms to develop this idealistic harmonized curricula? The American Library Association posted on their website the criterion by which they grant Printz Awards along with the acknowledgement, “A great book can redefine what we mean by quality.” Suggesting that we can accomplish the task of creating a complete list of criterion that can satisfy the arbitrary question of quality literature is foolish. Conceding that this list is malleable as literature and students evolve over time, the following is a collection of suggested considerations to help teacher’s assess what pieces of modern literature may be effective educating tools alongside the canon.

### Aestheticism

Critics in the same school of thought as Harold Bloom, author, authority on literary criticism and professor at Yale University adamantly protect the exclusivity of the canon partly based on aestheticism. In conjunction with it’s Greek root word “aistheta” which means “things perceptible by the senses,” aesthetics labels that which is concerned only with beauty and taste (Cuddon 11). Aestheticism denounces the act of evaluating the utility of literature with regards to “moral, social, political or economic considerations,” (Shaw 8). The movement argues that art by its very existence functions to the fullest extent necessary; it portrays no meaning pertinent to life and therefore can not be assessed based on humanitarian ideologies.

In contrast, within the context of a modern secondary English class the non-aesthetic characteristics of literature are nearly indivisible from its beauty. Adolescents concentrate on conceptualizing their roles within society. Any observation of a human experience, either direct or via narrative, is automatically subject to juxtaposition with their personal view of self. In a class I observed in February of 2005, a student testified “This book was worth my time and effort because it introduced me to an unfamiliar culture and challenged me to try reasoning from a new perspective.” Although not the sole basis for a book’s worth, vivid imagery and affective language enrich the reader’s experience of the story and help justify the teacher’s selection.

### Multiculturalism

The phenomenon of literature is that it recreates the sensations of living. Through imagination readers convert arbitrary letters into visions of each setting and character, emotions from love to rage or humiliation to ecstasy and connections to a different reality. Does a student’s cultural frame of reference effect his or her ability to participate in this miracle? Is a young Asian female going to share enough common ground to be able to construct the perspective of an Danish male monarch who sees ghosts and sword-fights like in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*?

Of course I can not declare that any demographic in particular will fail to transport themselves into a Shakespearian masterpiece. Bloom argues that Shakespeare is a fine example of a writer who is able to make readers “at home” in new places, (Bloom 3). In a curriculum that rightfully challenges students to comprehend Shakespeare, educators can serve students well by adding multicultural texts for balance. Including writings from both majority and minority demographics allows teachers to engage more students and encourage them to develop numerous perspectives. Linda Christensen, a teacher with almost 30 years of experience, wrote “I choose literature the

intentionally makes students look beyond their own world,” (Christensen 6). During my observation of Ms. Jacob’s class one of her students claimed she considered their text at the time *Lost in Translation* by Eva Hoffman, a story about a Polish immigrant to North America, worthy of her attention because it allowed her the opportunity to share a cultural experience she would otherwise never have the ability to encounter because of the time and place in which she was born.

It is also important that teachers introduce minority students in their classes to literature that accurately acknowledges the history and creative work of people from similar culture and protagonists with whom they can identify. Christensen quoted a Puerto Rican and Haitian acquaintance, “I went through school wondering if anyone like me had ever done anything worthwhile or important. We kept reading and hearing about all of these famous people. I remember thinking, ‘Don’t we have anyone?’ I walked out of school that day feeling tiny, invisible, unimportant,” (qtd. in Christensen 102).

Another group deserving of consideration is women. Virginia Woolf, who is one of the rare women accepted along with men, “found herself intrigued by what she called ‘the lives of the obscure’, the forgotten lives, mostly of women, who had been marginalized by the *Dictionary’s* selection of ‘great men,’” (Anderson 95). An education that does not include a female perspective is one that regresses to displace gifted women back in the kitchens and nurseries that at one time tragically muted their voices

From the African American feminist perspective, Gloria Joseph claims that the dually oppressive hardships of being both Black and female in America can be fought by reading the tragic stories of group. “In order for students, male and female, to understand and be prepared to change this patriarchal capitalist society, they must learn the history of women’s experiences in this land... not as interpreted from a perspective based on Eurocentric ideological constructs and values,” (Joseph 466-467). This information is overwhelmingly missing in the majority of history classes but can be found in libraries mixed in with the African American literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Moral Values

As suggested by the tone of Joseph’s words above, people can be passionate about with they decide is right. The process of young people discovering their beliefs about the differentiation between right and wrong and taking ownership of those morals is an imperative part of non-academic learning. They will become the next generation of decision makers about social standards. Moral themes are rampant in literature from the ancient philosophers of the canon to *The Chocolate War* today. Students, in the middle of personal character construction, will have to wrestle with the conflicts of the literary characters that escort them through this maze. The books they read at this time can be hugely influential to the frame of reference with which they choose their morals.

The trepidation with which I approach this topic is the result of the indefinable nature of right and wrong. Who gets to decide what morals teachers encourage their students to value? Teaching English Today states, “Presumably, departments of education still expect teachers to choose books appropriate to the moral principles and social values of their local communities,” (Barrell 9). What happens when a teacher and the community in which he or she teaches disagree on the moral values in question or when only one student’s family opposes the selection?

Even canonical authors have moral dilemmas from Sylvia Plath, who attempted suicide, to Euridipes who animated a character who killed her own children. It may be

easy for a teacher to take a stand against suicide and murder with the full support of parents; however, he or she may encounter a more complicated consort of opinion when leading a discuss on *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne when the tenth grade class has a pregnant young lady in the second row. Considering the moral implications of literature in the classroom, this is a delicate and significant step that can help teachers support students as they ponder choices that effect them for the rest of their lives.

### Language

Developing reading comprehension and writing skills is a central goal of literature classes. The English language is very dynamic, changing and reflecting the people who speak it. Several different dialects exist across America with respect to the uniqueness of the human experience in each environment. For purposes of this essay, I refer to the standard English vernacular as that which is used in business and academia and has been historically taught in American schools. Teachers must look at the style of the language and the technique the author implements when considering a book for his students.

Is a book well written? Is it grammatically correct? Does it contain vocabulary new to my students? And if not, is it meeting a literary purpose with the omission? Students benefit greatly from such works as *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Mark Twain's avante ganrde use of non-traditional language was so realistic is merited controversy. However, students looking for those phonetic spellings on college entrance exams will have difficulty achieving a score that will provide them with any opportunity. In addition to authors that employ special devices like Twain, students need to read the standard English vernacular to reinforce their own mastery of it.

This is not to discredit or belittle other dialects. But schools have an obligation to empower students with a command of the version of the language that reaches the "gate keepers" to further education and economic possibility. Christensen argues that Standard English is "the language of power in this country, and I would be cheating him if I pretended otherwise... because they are the ones without power and, for the moment, have to use the language of the powerful to be heard," (Christensen 103, 104). It is through the critical evaluation of the negative connotation of a other versions of English, recognizing where fallacious reasoning has lead to inaccurate judgments and stereotypes, that teachers can empower students with the skills they need and not insult their culture of conversation at home.

### What about the book is original?

Another of Harold Bloom's answers to the question, "...what makes the author and the works canonical? The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange," (Bloom 3). Although he passionately argues against teaching non-canonical literature, ironically his standard is a logical measuring device for the new literature flooding the population. To his credit he has applied this ruler to the work of Toni Morrison and listed her among the American canonical authors of the Chaotic Age (Bloom 565). What other authors are inventing methods of writing and in so capturing with words the very essence of humanity?

### Colleague Recommendations

Having conferred with Ms. Jacobs, observed her class in session and witnessed the fruit of her teaching in her student's ability to engage in polite literary conversation, I am more inclined to accept the validity of the book *Like Water for Chocolate* as a teachable piece of literature to mature, upper level high school students.

If a busy schedule place limitations on an educator's ability to do similar first hand research, trusted publications such as the *English Journal* can be another fertile resource of colleague recommendations. In the January 2005 issue, Professor Ted Hipple published the results of a survey he and a graduate student conducted among English teachers, college professors of young adult literature, librarians, publishers and even some authors of young adult novels revealing what works they would classify as the "best young adult novels of all time" (Hipple 94: 99). *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier, published in 1974, topped the list as the most frequently selected piece, noted for being realistic, addressing serious subject matter and deserving repetitious readings (Hipple 94:100-101). J.D. Sanlinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* also earned a places among the 22 favorites.

In all fairness, one can attribute the lack of books from the canon to the boundaries the heading "young adult novels" implies. The surveyors and contributors focused on literature that in most cases but not all, authors composed for pre-teen and teenage readers. By nature of inclusion in the canon, such works arguably exclude themselves from the collection above.

### Entertainment

After the bell rang dismissing the class I observed, Ms. Jacobs and I agreed on another element with which to be concerned. In most cases, reading literature should be fun. If students enjoy reading they are more likely to become intrinsically motivated to continue picking up new books after the assignments are graded. It is difficult for a thick stack of papers to compete with the technologically advanced video games and computers on which students spend their time. Finding a book that will tap into the vast creative power of imagination and emotion tips the scales back in favor of reading. Playing video games seems like a very limited way of playing out a story in comparison to what the brain could generate from the lines of a book. The key is getting students interested initially and guiding them to discover what they love to read.

### Student Involvement

A common hope among teachers it that students will become so enthusiastic about literature and what they learned about it that they will want to maintain the skills they obtained in class throughout adulthood and be lifelong readers. One way to get students to take ownership of the literature they read in school is to allow them the freedom to select it. Given the expectations of the teacher, requirements of the assignment and possibly an understanding of the criteria above, what titles would students choose if given the opportunity? What new books can additional critically thinking minds with numerous backgrounds and perspectives add to the pool of resources? In this scenario, preparing tests for each separate book is not practical, but when individual projects are appropriate so would be the individual rationales for the books of interest.

Nancie Atwell, author and teacher, preaches the rewards of student focused class content. Students do not have to wait until they completed the less attractive pieces of literature to start reading novels that excite them and reach them. The ones that take a personal interest in the target of a project build a greater sense of commitment to it and

gain a longer lasting impression of the material. They will also generate more thought that is pertinent to the lives they are living. “Genuine, independent reading and writing are not the icing on the cake, the reward we proffer gifted twelfth graders who’ve survived the curriculum. Reading writing are the cake. Given what we know about adolescents’ lives and priorities, can we afford to continue to sacrifice literate school environments for skills environments?” (Atwell).

Time is the greatest enemy when looking at the immense volumes of literature available to students in America today. People simply can not read everything that has been written in one lifetime and study each work enough to evaluate it all. The four years young adults spend in the inimitable environment of a high school English class could not pass more quickly. The question of what deserves their sparsely available attention is crucial.

Thankfully, there is not one concrete best answer. Passion for literature and what it gives to people spurs scholars to argue as if there was, but science still is limited on measuring intangible agents like quality. A plethora of combinations of canonical, multicultural and current literature can be a provide students opportunities for genuine growth and success. As they are ever changing, so can the resources teachers collect for them.

Based on the combination of information gathered above, teachers should be selecting literature that on some level can bond with students, provoking thought through masterfully combined words that engage the senses in order to elevate their awareness of the world and improve their quality of life and ability to manage life in relation to those that share it. Can all of that be found in one book? Probably not. The task of defining and accumulating quality literature is a life long pursuit, ever growing and changing with the reader who pursues it.

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