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Wanted dead or alive: Canonical authors for literature in English curricula

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Abstract:

Our study explored 250 international teachers' definitions of the English-language literary canon. Questionnaire respondents defined the literary canon, rated the aesthetic value of 22 prose texts, and gave the 22 texts a "canon rating" to indicate the extent to which they thought the text was canonical. We found that teachers find some value in the literary canon, as defined by them, whereas others called for the canon to be expanded or disbanded. We report that perceived aesthetic quality appears to be a dimension of canon, and that authors seem to be admitted to the canon posthumously. The work provides a rare insight into teachers' definitions of canon – information that helps those who set curricula, and those in the wider education ecosystem, to understand the complex meanings underpinning requests for students to study more or fewer canonical texts.

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Wanted dead or alive: Canonical authors for literature in English curricula

Jude Brady (Education Futures), **Dominika Majewska** (Research Division) and **Jackie Greateorex** (Research Division)

Introduction

The literature that children study in school is a contentious topic (Boakye, 2023). It is often a key concern in curriculum reforms because literature has the capacity to shape students' world views, their sense of citizenship, and their relationships with themselves and others (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Sundorph, 2020). Given the transformative potential of literature, it is important to reflect on which texts are presented in schools, and to ask who selects them and why they are chosen. Oftentimes these decisions are made or constrained by national-level policymakers, or as has been the case recently in Florida (USA), political lobbyists and parents might wield influence over what is set for study (Marcus, 2023; Salam, 2023). Ideas about which texts should be included in curricula are frequently framed by discussions about literary merit, cultural importance, or the ability of a text to open up new worlds to readers – and these may be dimensions of what it means to be “canonical” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Our research sought to understand the definitions of the canon of literature in English as held by teachers across the world to identify commonalities and divergences in these perspectives. We explore how teachers' evaluations of the notion of the literary canon might shape their work, their students' experiences, and affect the work of other actors in the education ecosystem including exam boards, curriculum developers, and publishers.

History of canon

The canon of literature in English is a concept that has its origins in Western history. From its earliest mentions, canon was an aesthetic concept (Deksen & Hick, 2018). The term *Kanon* – meaning measuring rod, standard, and later “list” – finds its earliest uses in Classical antiquity (Kolbas, 2018a; Ross, 1998). The idea of the literary canon as a collection of acclaimed works originates from Alexandrian scholars who compiled lists of bards, writers, and scholars whose work they considered exemplary (Kolbas, 2018a). Homer, Ovid, Plato, and other figures regarded as “great” in their genre or style featured on these early lists (ibid). The Alexandrian lists converge both meanings of canon as a “collection” and of texts

with high aesthetic merit. Expert nomination also comes in as another dimension to the idea of canon because these lists were compiled by scholars with cultural authority, and their judgements influenced scholarly studies for successive centuries. Heinzkill (1990) suggests that today, anthologies – such as those published by Norton, Oxford, and Cambridge – present the equivalent of these lists and “help determine who are the acceptable authors and what are the most highly regarded texts” (p. 54).

Revering the canon

In later centuries, the idea of “canon” assumed a more overtly religious association. Around the 4th century CE, the Church distinguished between apocrypha and scripture (Ross, 1998; Sarna et al., 1993). Apocrypha are biblical or religious texts that are not considered to be sacred. Scripture, on the other hand, refers to texts that are believed to hold divine authority, and the list of documents accepted as scripture is the “canon” (Becerra, 2019). This canon of scripture, based on Church approval, was fixed. As Ross (1998) explains, the canon (i.e., the list of religious documents accepted as scripture) “was perceived to be suprahistorical, impervious to internal change as much as to changes in human affairs, and constructed with an eye oriented towards the afterlife rather than earthly posterity” (p. 30). The Church’s view of canon was that it was a binary classification and immutable because texts were either inspired by and imbued with divine authority or they were not. The categorisation of a text as “scripture” was absolute because scripture forms the bedrock of the norms of Christian life. Therefore, the Church’s canon became perceived as holding eternal value. In the Roman Catholic Church, there is also the canon of saints. *Canonisation* is the process of admitting a deceased person into sainthood. There is a clear link here with literary canons where authors are often posthumously venerated for their life’s works by literary experts.

Canons and the nation

As shown by the centrality of canons to religious understandings of a virtuous life, canons can shape and inform identity. Grabes (2010), for example, suggests that in British history, literary canons were intended to “foster national unity and identity” as well as “disseminate moral values” (p. 314). This understanding of the role of canons in national identity formation endured into the 20th century. The USA’s National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association (1996), for example, defined the literary canon as:

“[B]ody of literary or other artistic works that a given culture defines as important at a given time; that is, works perceived by that culture to express significant values and to exemplify artistic excellence.” (National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, 1996, p. 47)

In contrast to the transcendent view that canonical texts contain an appeal or morality that transcends space and time, the above definition suggests that a canon’s aesthetic appeal and significance are relative to a “given time” or “culture”. The view presents in more recent studies; for instance, a study of teachers in Norway found that some of the interviewees saw the “preservation of the cultural canon of Norwegian classics” as one of their aims as teachers

(Halvorsen et al., 2019, p. 1036). The perception suggests that the canon is part of a country's culture but that both culture and canon may need to be deliberately maintained through the inclusion of specific texts on programmes of study.

Although canons may be mutable as values and cultures change over time, Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) note the role of canons in upholding and perpetuating social norms. They identify that “canonical texts perpetuate ideologies that are also dominant – about whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, Christianity and physical and mental ability” (p. 123). When texts are understood through this lens, Truman et al. (2022), exploring the canon of texts taught in Australian high schools, find that works such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* emerge as complex teaching choices. In the case of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the novel tells a story of racism through the lens of a white protagonist and thus has a tendency to “centre white experience” (Truman et al., 2022, p. 20). Depending on how the text is taught, its teaching may perpetuate dominant perspectives and ideologies. There is also the option, however, of teaching the novel through a critical lens which invites challenge and discussion of the different aspects of its social and contemporary context, such as race, gender or social class (Jogie, 2015).

Classics and curricula

Novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* might also be termed “classics”. These are texts that survive the ages (Mukherjee, 2010). Although “classics” and “canon” are often used interchangeably, Mukherjee (2010) makes the distinction that a classic is “a singular act of literature”, whereas “canonicity implies the formation of a corpus” and “the making up of a list of books requisite for a literary education” (p. 1029). This definition of “canon” resonates with understandings from the classical world that canon is a collection. Furthermore, the suggestion that canons are created through a process of “making up” implies that the nomination of a text as “canonical” results from a subjective human judgement, rather than being an essential quality of the text.

Canon wars

As indicated, canons and the making of canons is contentious. “Canon wars” erupted in the 1980s with a debate between those who perceived the canon as an exclusive reflection of the taste of the elite and those who saw it as a collection of the best works in history (Hamer, 2019). Those who perceived the canon as containing the best works in history argued that it was not by accident or conspiracy that a text or author, drawn from the vast pool of the totality of literature that has ever been scribed, should be elevated to a place on the list of the canonical and endure there for centuries. They perceived that texts are canonised because they are of such remarkable quality and appeal that they withstand the centuries (Bloom, 1994; Shaw, 1994). According to Shaw, those who challenge the contents of the canon overlook the central component of canonical works: aesthetic quality. However, others perceive that canons reflect wider power dynamics that exclude some voices and groups from representation, and thus reinforce monocultural and dominant ways of thinking and perceiving.

More recently, debates about the canon and curricula have been led by grassroots movements seeking to decolonise the curriculum. In England, the

student-led campaign “Why is my curriculum white?” (Richards, 2014) shows that matters of canon, which authors’ texts are taught and why, are unresolved. However, the views expressed in the canon debates of the 1980s and 1990s differed to the decolonisation movements. Previous calls to “open up” the canon were primarily focused on diversification and ensuring that works by a range of authors were taught, recognised, and valued. Diversification is defined as the act of designing and delivering curricula and resources that, in the case of literature, offer a range of topics, texts, authors and supporting resources which represent “the multitude of perspectives and backgrounds” of the world population (Sundorph, 2020, p. 6). Decolonisation movements, however, are concerned with redressing colonial influences in curricula and challenging the perspectives through which texts are critiqued (Greatorex & Coleman, 2021). The process involves moving beyond “simply adding” authors to curricula and invites a transformative interrogation of the dominant power structures that underpin existing knowledge systems (Greatorex & Coleman, 2021, p. 7).

Methodology

Research aims and questions

This study aimed to better understand the range of meanings that underpin discourses around the literary canon. Firstly, we hoped to gain a clearer understanding of teachers’ meanings when they request more or fewer canonical works on syllabuses. Secondly, the research aimed to identify generalities in conceptualisations of the canonical and to ascertain if there are some prose texts written in English that have featured on international high-school level curricula which are widely regarded as more canonical than others. Therefore, in conducting this study, we adopted a position whereby we sought to identify teacher consensus or divergence over what is canonical and in this respect, we positioned teachers as the canon-makers. From here, we also explored why some texts are regarded as canonical and others are not, and whether teachers hold the canonical texts in high esteem. With these findings we considered the implications for a range of stakeholders in the education ecology. The aims are captured in the research question:

RQ. How do international teachers of literature in English define the canon of literature in English?

Questionnaire

Recruitment

The research question was addressed through a questionnaire which was distributed through Cambridge University Press & Assessment’s social media channels and mailing lists in September and October 2022.

Ethical approval

The research study was compliant with the policy requirements of the Research Ethics Committee at Cambridge University Press & Assessment. Approved consent forms and detailed study information were provided to participants as per

organisational policy and no personal data (i.e., information which could be used to identify an individual) were collected from participants.

Design

The first section of the questionnaire established participants' informed consent, eligibility, information about the level at which they taught literature in English, and the country in which they taught. As we wanted to survey the views of teachers of literature in English at high-school level and above, respondents needed to teach literature in English to students aged 12 or over to be eligible for participation.

Aesthetic value

Teachers were asked to rate the aesthetic value of 22 prose texts on a Likert scale of 1 to 3 (where 3 = high aesthetic value and 1 = low aesthetic value) featuring on syllabuses for students at secondary school GCSE level or equivalent. There was an option for "not familiar with text". "Aesthetic value" was defined for respondents as "the extent to which a text is pleasurable or moving to read because of the way in which it is written and structured." The 22 texts were selected from secondary level international syllabuses. Prose texts featuring on the Literature in English qualifications for Cambridge IGCSE, Pearson Edexcel International, Oxford AQA and texts recommended for study for the International Baccalaureate (IB) in 2020 were included in a long list of 139 texts. The Excel RAND function was then used to assign a random number to the IB texts and seven were selected for inclusion, and all the Cambridge IGCSE, Pearson Edexcel International, and Oxford AQA prose texts were included. This selection method gave a list of 22 texts, with some texts such as *Great Expectations* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* featuring on the syllabus of more than one exam board.

Canon definition

The next question asked: 'Please tell us in your own words what you understand by the term "literary canon".' This required an open text answer and participants needed to provide a response to progress to the next question.

Canon rating

Teachers rated the texts with which they were familiar as "definitely canonical", "possibly canonical", and "not canonical". A maximum of 22 texts were pulled through from the "aesthetic rating" question. Only items with which respondents were familiar appeared as options for sorting into canonical boxes. For example, if a respondent had stated in the "aesthetic value" question that they were "not familiar with [a] text", this text would not be pulled through to the canon rating question.

Data analysis

Correlations were calculated between canon scores (3 = definitely canonical, 2 = possibly canonical, and 1 = not canonical), aesthetic value scores (3 = high aesthetic value, 2 = moderate aesthetic value, 1 = low aesthetic value), and a binary dead / alive variable. For the dead / alive variable, texts that were written by now deceased authors were given a value of "1" and if the author was still living at the time of data collection, the text was given a value of "0". We also

added variables to describe whether an author was located in the Global South or Global North (1 = Global South, 2 = Global North), and the author's gender (1 = female, 2 = male).

The open text responses to the question which asked teachers to define “canon” were coded iteratively and thematically. In the first instance, the researchers individually reviewed responses and suggested overarching themes. These were then agreed on by the team. Each of the three researchers then coded one third of the responses individually using the agreed codes; these were then coded again by a second researcher who did not see the first coding. The researchers then met to compare the coding and to evaluate the suitability of the coding categories. Categories were adapted, dropped or amended as appropriate, and the coding practice was repeated. Any discrepancies were discussed in a meeting until the final coding was agreed by consensus.

Respondents

The questionnaire attracted responses from 365 teachers of literature in English. Of these, 308 (84 per cent) of teachers proceeded to answer the question about the aesthetic value of texts and 250 (68 per cent of the initial 365 teachers) provided a definition of the literary canon. These 250 responses were carried forward for analysis. Many of the eligible teachers taught literature in English across multiple levels with 88 per cent teaching the subject at upper secondary level (n = 219) and 66 per cent teaching at lower secondary level (n = 164).

Respondents were based in schools across the world, as shown in Table I.

Table I: Respondents by region

Region	N	% of responses
Europe	55	22%
Sub-Saharan Africa	43	17%
Southeast Asia and Pacific	42	17%
North America	37	15%
South Asia	29	12%
Latin America	25	10%
Central and Eastern Asia	10	4%
Middle East and North Africa	7	3%
Unspecified	2	1%
Total	250	

The largest number of respondents taught in the USA (n = 36), United Kingdom (n = 25), India (n = 24), Malaysia (n = 15), New Zealand (n = 15), and Argentina (n = 12). There were nine or fewer respondents from other countries.

It is important to point out that when a teacher indicated that they were not familiar with a text, their response was not included in calculations of the mean aesthetic value or canon rating. Although the approach avoids confounding the variables of interest with fame / popularity or including views on the aesthetics of a text that are not based on teachers' own reading or knowledge, it means that

the sample sizes for each text vary. Doreen Baingana’s short story collection was the least well-known with 39 teachers stating that they were familiar with *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe*. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen was the most well-known text with 240 participants responding to the related questions.

Findings

Thematic codes

After thematically coding the respondents’ definitions of the canon of literature in English, we arrived at 12 major codes, as displayed in Figure I.

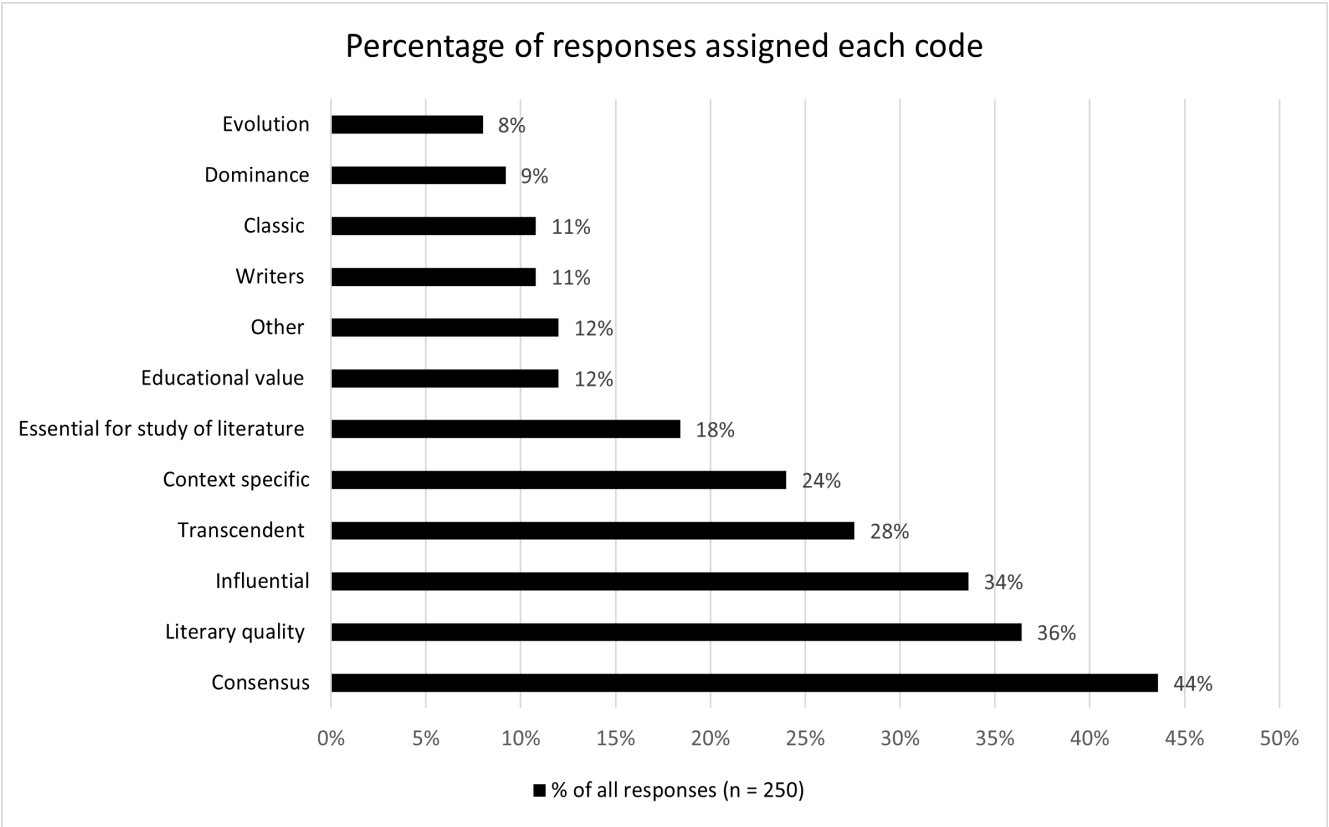


Figure I: Summary of code frequencies and percentage of responses (n = 250) that were assigned each code

Consensus

Consensus was the most assigned code with 44 per cent (110 /250) of respondents defining the literary canon as the product of a consensus. The code covered references to texts as “sets” or “collections” of texts. Responses that suggested that the canon was a “widely agreed on” list or group of authors or texts were also coded as “consensus”. Example responses include:

- “A set of literary text that somehow comprise the ‘must reads’ for a specific culture / nation.”
- “A body of work over which there is widespread agreement on the quality of the writing and that the text has important or relevant things to say beyond entertainment.”
- “It is related to the widely accepted texts as literary works [...]”

As the examples indicate, the respondents typically identified that canons relied upon consensus, but the agents of its making were unseen or unknown. In the first example, the teacher acknowledges the obscurity of the process of canon making suggesting that “somehow” a “set” of texts become endowed with importance for specific contexts.

There were occasional references to academics or experts as the consensus-makers alongside less precise suggestions that consensus is arrived at from general popularity or critical accolade:

- “They are often ‘accepted’ by university professors as worth deep study and reflection.”
- “Texts that are known to be well liked by a large group of society.”

Some of the comments that were coded as “consensus” suggested that texts were agreed on as canonical because of their literary quality (an additional code). For example, this is apparent in the comment that “university professors” (consensus) accept texts as canonical because they are “worth deep study and reflection” (literary quality).

Transcendent

The “transcendent” code captured references to the idea that the appeal or importance of canonical texts transcends people, place, and time. In this view, canonical texts have universal and enduring appeal:

- “Literature that endures, has a universal truth and is aesthetically significant.”
- “[...] Like Shakespeare, all readers have to relate to the characters and situation. Beautifully crafted but most of all accessible and inspiring. These are the texts that provide life lessons.”
- “Books that stand the test of time and do conform to the political views of a particular time. A canon is a selection of global texts that add invaluable insight into the field of literature.”
- “These texts are held in high regard as they bring about nuanced ideas. They are relevant and important throughout history and considered timeless.”

There were many suggestions that canonical texts had “universal” qualities which could be aesthetic or moral. As seen above, many positioned these texts as works of art that provided “life lessons” that were relevant “universally” regardless of a reader’s context or culture.

Context specific

This code encapsulated responses suggesting that canonical works were imbued with meaning by or for a particular country, cultural or historical context:

- “A group of texts which are considered representative, influential, important, definitive within a time/place/genre.”
- “The most significant and influential texts from a specific culture or era.”

These respondents perceived canons as national treasures or collections that define or encapsulate something about the time or people for whom the texts were authored. It was often implied by our respondents that the canon texts are important because they form part of a national identity or cultural memory – a finding that resonates with Grabes (2010).

Evolution

Some responses suggested that the boundaries of canon were permeable:

- “An (evolving) list of works of cultural, aesthetic, and moral significance”
- “[...] I believe this set of texts is not fixed, but changes over time [...].”
- “[...] I believe it is changing to be more inclusive and diverse.”

The code was named “evolution” to indicate that canon could change. Some respondents described it as “not fixed” or “changing”. Sometimes this was seemingly a neutral belief, and teachers simply stated that they thought canon was an adaptive category, and other respondents suggested that the canon was becoming “more inclusive and diverse”, as stated above.

Essential for literary study

Examples of responses coded under this category include:

- “[...] essential reading for any serious student of literature”
- “[...] mandatory for all students of literature to appreciate the literary conventions”
- “[...] worthy of study”

The code encompasses the idea that canonical texts are essential reading for students of literature in that they are “worthy” of inclusion in curricula. Comments categorised under the “essential for literary study” code often also remarked that texts were worthy of study because of their outstanding literary qualities.

Literary quality

This code was applied when teachers mentioned the aesthetic quality of canonical texts or the “greatness” of the text or author. The code was also applied when respondents identified canonical texts as those that are crafted in a way that makes them exemplary works – this view resonates with earlier conceptualisations of “kanon” (Kolbas, 2018a; Ross, 1998):

- “Well written texts that are worth exploring”
- “Books that are objectively strong in the essentials of good writing including word choice, metaphors, characterization, and plot [...].”
- “Literary canon are literary text considered to have aesthetic value that makes them worthy of study [*sic*]”

Although respondents did not always suggest who nominated texts as high “quality”, many explained what they thought made a text suitable for study. These comments typically related to the technical features of writing such as the inclusion of “metaphors” or other language features, plot devices, or the writer’s skill at developing characters with subtlety and depth – some of which were suggested by Bloom (1994) as canonical criteria.

Influential

The “influential” code was applied to definitions which explicitly defined the canon or its constituent texts as influential (e.g., on the literature field), shaping cultural understandings, or as respected, prestigious, inspiring, valued or important.

- “Important influential works”

- “A literary canon is the classic works produced by eminent writers which have shaped literary movements and have defined a culture or period in history.”
- “A work of literature that is important/meaningful [...]”

In line with Deksen and Hick (2018), the respondents above considered the canon to be comprised of works that are influential or important. Often the object affected by canon was not suggested (as shown in the first example above), whereas other definitions explained that canon impacted on the course of literary history, cultures, or historical periods.

Educational value

Example responses with this code include:

- “Literature that develops empathy and understanding [...]”
- “[...] help you open your mind to different perspectives”
- “Works which express truths about the human condition. Psychological insights, understanding of the effects of social and historical cultures [...]”

More than one in ten (12 per cent) teachers defined the literary canon as having educational value. They wrote that the canon could “open your mind to different perspectives” or reveal “truths about the human condition”. Other definitions suggested that the canon taught social or emotional skills such as “empathy and understanding”. These respondents perceived that students can take valuable lessons from the canon even if the texts are, as Pike (2003) suggests, remote from their own experiences.

Dominance

The “dominance” code was used to categorise definitions that implied that the canon was dominated by writers (or texts) with specific characteristics, such as gender, nationality, or ethnicity. For example, the canon of literature in English is sometimes perceived as including works written primarily by English, white male authors (Jogie, 2015). This code was applied to 23 responses (9 per cent) that suggested a lack of inclusivity, or references to the under-representation of groups or voices. Below are examples of definitions coded with the code “dominance”:

- “In University it was dead white males usually [...]”
- “[...] unfairly heavily influenced by white, male, Euro-centric ideology”
- “[...] predominantly British authors”

Some of the responses assigned the “dominance” code implied that the canon should be opened up to a wider range of writers. The teacher who defined canon as “unfairly heavily influenced by white, male, Euro-centric ideology”, for example, perceives an “unfair” bias in the canon selection process, intimating that it would be fairer if the canon contained more diverse authors and perspectives.

Classic

Many respondents wrote that canonical texts are those that are regarded as “classics”. Heinzkill (1990) defines “classics” as timeless texts that are characterised by their high literary quality. We chose to code each strand of this definition separately and so we developed distinct codes for “literary quality”

and “transcendence” or timelessness. The code “classics” was only applied if respondents specifically mentioned the word “classic” in their definition of the literary canon:

- “Works of literature be it novels, poetry and plays that are considered classics. Also, enjoyed by people around the world at all times.”
- “Books that can be termed as classic and those that are held in high regard for their work.”

More than one code was applied to most of the responses that suggested canonical texts were classic texts. In the first example shown above, the teachers implied that classics are universally enjoyable, and their appeal is timeless. As such, the response was coded as “classic” and “transcendent”. In the second example, the teacher did not define the features of a classic text, but they suggest in a new clause that canonical texts are “highly regarded”, meaning that the response was coded as both “classic” and “influential”.

Writers

This code was applied when respondents mentioned either specific authors or “writers” / “authors” as being canonical or as examples that epitomise the canon. The code was also applied when the response defined the canon as the works of a single writer or a group of writers:

- “[...] [W]orld classics that have universal appeal. Like Shakespeare [...]”
- “Prolific writers”
- “A group of texts/writers that others with literary/cultural status believe are of a higher quality artistically”

The first response was coded as “writers” because the teacher uses “Shakespeare” as an example to support their definition of “canon” as “world classics” with “universal appeal”. The response was also coded as “classic” and “transcendent”. The second example suggests that canon is comprised of “prolific writers”. This response suggests that the canon is comprised of people (writers) rather than their texts per se. The final example given here perceives that the canon is a mix of “writers” and their “texts”. The response was also coded as “dominance” because it suggests that one group of writers may be elevated into the canon by those with “literary/cultural status”.

Other

The “other” code was mostly applied in situations where the respondent’s meaning was unclear. In other cases, respondents made comments that were unique and so did not fit into any other category:

- “Style of appreciation”
- “The way the text can be explained by the teacher and understood by the students [...]”
- “An entirely subjective term which is entirely irrelevant today.”
- “This is a semantic expansion of the sense of biblical canon, applied to literature.”

In the first example, where canon is defined as a “style of appreciation”, we coded it as “other” because we were not clear on the respondent’s intended meaning. The second definition conceptualised canon as a process of teaching and learning; as this was a unique definition, it was coded as “other”. The third example defines canon as “entirely subjective” and “irrelevant”. Other negative comments about the canon were coded as “dominance” because they were related to ideas of exclusion and marginalisation. However, this response was coded as “other” because it did not fit into the dominance category. Additionally, it did not explain why canon was “entirely irrelevant” and in suggesting that canon was “entirely subjective”, the teacher indicated that it was not possible to define canon. The final example recognised the links between the “biblical canon” and the literary canon. This was the only response that defined canon by explaining the development of the term and so it was coded as “other”.

Relationship between variables

Table 2 provides the sample size, and mean values and standard deviations for each text’s canon score and the aesthetic value ratings. The table is based on the unscaled values where 3 = high and 1 = low.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for each prose text

Author	Canon		Aesthetic value		N
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
George Orwell: <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	2.88	0.38	2.55	0.57	235
Jane Austen: <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	2.83	0.45	2.52	0.65	240
Charles Dickens: <i>Great Expectations</i>	2.82	0.47	2.40	0.71	232
Harper Lee: <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	2.74	0.50	2.49	0.62	235
John Steinbeck: <i>Of Mice and Men</i>	2.72	0.53	2.46	0.66	205
Nathaniel Hawthorne: <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	2.69	0.56	2.31	0.73	199
Chinua Achebe: <i>Things Fall Apart</i>	2.64	0.57	2.52	0.65	206
George Eliot: <i>Middlemarch</i>	2.57	0.62	2.32	0.74	171
Zora Neale Hurston: <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	2.47	0.67	2.46	0.63	125
Alan Paton: <i>Cry, The Beloved Country</i>	2.39	0.70	2.33	0.64	132
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: <i>Americanah</i>	2.32	0.68	2.62	0.57	142
Kazuo Ishiguro: <i>Never Let Me Go</i>	2.24	0.71	2.53	0.60	171
Truman Capote: <i>In Cold Blood</i>	2.23	0.63	2.21	0.63	138
Tsitsi Dangarembga: <i>Nervous Conditions</i>	2.22	0.70	2.45	0.63	69
Zadie Smith: <i>White Teeth</i>	2.13	0.69	2.37	0.70	117
Markus Zusak: <i>The Book Thief</i>	2.03	0.72	2.45	0.66	172
John Knowles: <i>A Separate Peace</i>	2.03	0.70	2.04	0.72	117
Amy Tan: <i>The Joy Luck Club</i>	2.01	0.74	2.28	0.59	147
Doreen Baingana: <i>Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe</i>	2.00	0.65	2.05	0.72	39
Anita Desai: <i>In Custody</i>	1.99	0.74	2.22	0.72	95
Louise Erdrich: <i>The Round House</i>	1.98	0.53	2.15	0.60	62
Witi Ihimaera: <i>The Whale Rider</i>	1.94	0.66	2.09	0.63	90

As indicated by Table 2, there was little variability in the view that Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was canonical, but there was more divergence in the scoring of the novel's aesthetic value. The larger standard deviation for some of the other texts indicates more variability in the responses. *The Joy Luck Club*, for instance, attracted very varied opinions on whether or not it was canonical, but there was less variability regarding its middling aesthetic value relative to the other texts. *White Teeth*, *In Custody*, and *A Separate Peace* all attracted moderate to high variability in canon scores and aesthetic ratings, which indicates that views on whether these texts were canonical and aesthetically pleasing to read were far from uniform.

Table 3 displays the correlations between canon and aesthetic value, and the other variables of interest: dead / alive, gender and Global South / North. The instances where the correlations were significant are identified by asterisks.

Table3: Spearman correlations between variables

Variable	Canon	Aesthetic value	Dead / alive	Gender	Global
Canon	1				
Aesthetic value	0.701***	1			
Dead / alive	0.758***	0.201	1		
Gender	0.194	0.007	—	1	
Global	0.197	0.180	—	—	1

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$

As indicated, there is a significant and strong positive correlation between canon rating and aesthetic score where a higher score indicates a higher canonical rating and a higher aesthetic value score ($r(20) = 0.701$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, canon rating is significantly positively correlated with an author being dead when “dead” is coded as “1” and “alive” as “0” ($r(20) = 0.758$, $p < 0.001$). Aesthetic value and dead / alive were not significantly correlated ($r(20) = 0.201$, $p = 0.369$) indicating that there was no notable relationship between the aesthetic value teachers ascribe to a text and whether the text’s author is alive or not. In addition, our sample showed that there was no significant relationship between an author’s gender and / or their location in the Global South / North and how likely they were to be classed as “canonical” or as producing work of a high aesthetic value.

Figure 2 visualises the relationship between teachers’ canon rating and their perceived aesthetic value of the texts. Each of the 22 texts is named, and a red cross denotes a text written by a deceased author, and a blue circle shows a text written by an author who was still living when the questionnaire was conducted.

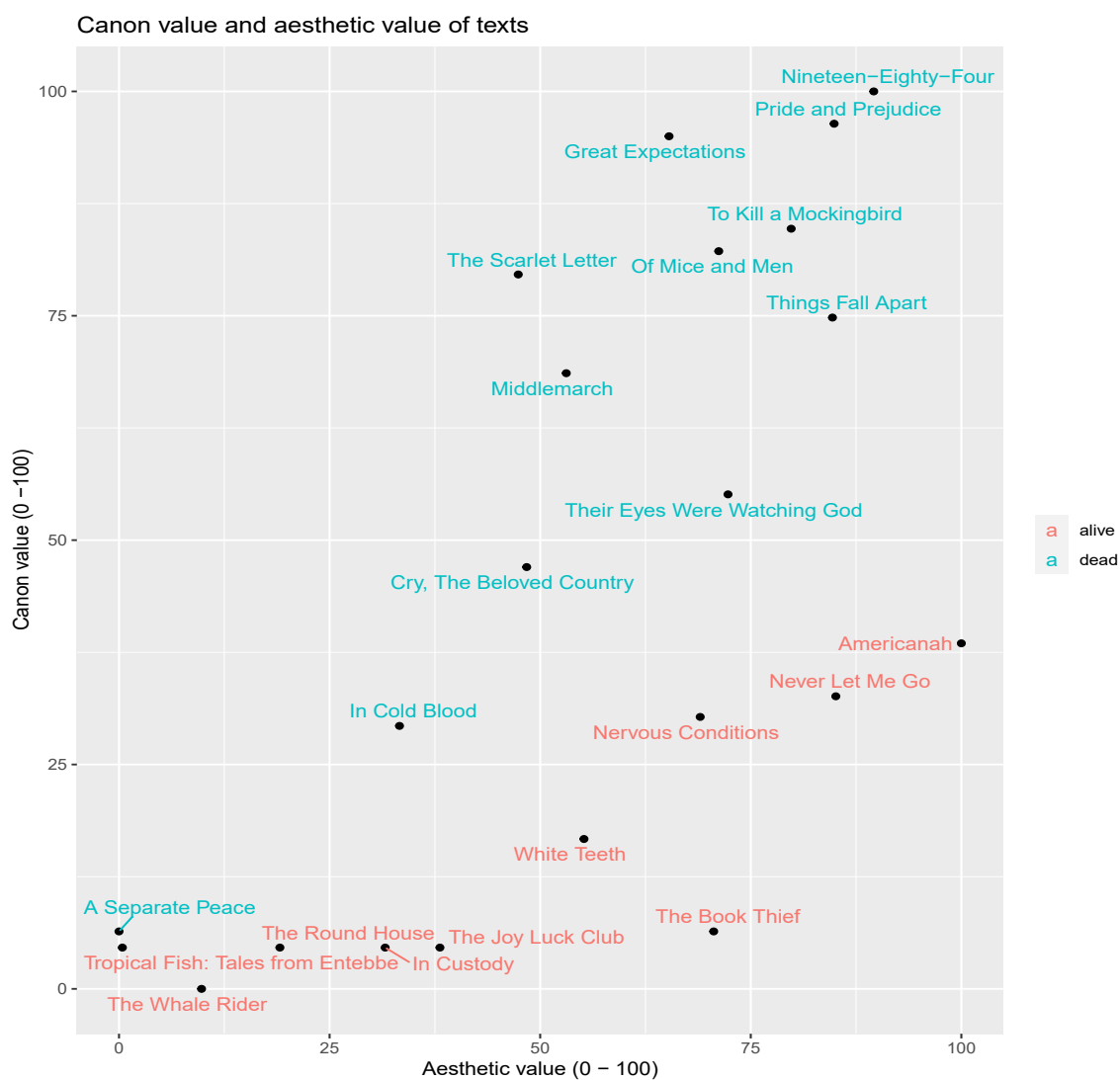


Figure 2: Texts' aesthetic value and canon rating. ($r = 0.701$, $p < 0.001$. Canon value and aesthetic value rescaled 0–100.)

To make the differences between texts easier to interpret in Figure 2, the canon value and aesthetic value were rescaled (0 to 100) using the “rescale” function in the *dplyr* R package. This function simply rescales values (in this case, values from 1 to 3) onto the new scale, while maintaining their order and relative position. As stated, there is a moderate to strong positive correlation between a text's canon value and its perceived aesthetic rating ($r = 0.701$, $p < 0.001$): the more aesthetic a text is considered, the higher its canon rating. Also, the 10 most canonical texts were all written by deceased authors with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Great Expectations* respectively rated as the top three most canonical texts.

Although living authors struggled to be recognised as highly canonical, their works can be identified as having a high aesthetic value. For example, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was the most highly rated text for aesthetic value, but it was seen as less canonical than most of the texts written by now deceased authors. The finding suggests that being dead is a condition of being classed as canonical.

Discussion and conclusion

The study intended to survey how international teachers understand the literary canon to better comprehend what is meant by their requests for more or fewer canonical texts on Cambridge International's literature syllabuses. After discussing the limitations of the work and the definitions of literary canon, we consider the wider implications of the research. In our consideration of the implications, we identify five different viewpoints that were common among teachers, within and across codes, and we discuss how this might affect exam boards, publishers, curriculum developers, teachers and learners.

Limitations

When interpreting the work, there are limitations to consider. Due to the survey's promotion strategy, the sample is likely to have attracted teachers in schools with a link to Cambridge University Press & Assessment. While teachers from a range of countries participated, as we did not collect personal data, we do not know about the demographics of the respondents (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, gender, or age). Linked to this, as pointed out in the methodology, the number of teachers who had knowledge of the texts varied for each text. This difficulty, however, was unavoidable. Another option would have been to ask participants to rate a text that they had never read by an author who they might never have encountered, and therefore it would be more difficult to identify on which criteria they were basing their judgements. It may be the case that the teachers who have knowledge of the lesser-known texts differ in their characteristics to those who were familiar with these texts.

Defining the canon

In terms of key findings, our study indicates that the surveyed teachers' definitions of canon mirror those of Classical antiquity. Dominant among these views was the understanding of aesthetic value as a dimension of "canon" (as also evidenced in the significant correlation between "canon rating" and "aesthetic value"). Additionally, we identified that many teachers perceive the canon of literature in English as a collection or set of texts nominated through consensus. This finding was consistent with prior literature (Deksen & Hick, 2018; Kolbas, 2018a; Ross, 1998). The quantitative aspect of the study also provided an insight that was not strongly apparent in the teachers' canon definitions: being dead is associated with canonisation. This finding reflects the Roman Catholic religion's use of the term "canonisation", whereby exemplary individuals are admitted into sainthood after death.

Although the definition of the literary canon per se may have remained largely consistent over time, the teachers expressed differing views on whether canon was mutable. Eight per cent of respondents wrote that they perceived the literature in English canon as evolving. Even among those views, teachers perceived that the rate of change might be slow. One teacher remarked that the canon "has begun to slowly shift to include more works by female and BIPOC authors and works that fall outside the 'Western tradition'". This teacher perceived that the canon was "slowly" opening up to admit a wider range of

authors, including women, Black people, Indigenous Peoples and People of Colour (BIPOC). These definitions exemplified Kolbas' (2018b) claim that the concept of literary canon has evolved in such a way that it is "no longer thought of as timeless and universal" (p. 1). Further to this, some of our respondents remarked that the canon was gradually becoming more diverse despite traditionally favouring white, Western, and male authors.

A larger proportion of teachers defined canon as "universal". Many of these definitions explicitly described the canon as "fixed". Among these responses, some were critical of a "fixed" canon, finding it exclusive and poorly representative of the vast diversity of authors, readers, and texts from across the world. Most of these comments were also coded as "dominance" because they wrote of societal power structures and their manifestations in the process and product of canon-making. As previously quoted, one respondent wrote that canon was "unfairly heavily influenced by white, male, Euro-centric ideology", whereas another wrote:

"Literary canon consists of a compendium of literature that was primarily Euro-centric and written by male authors. However, it can also [be] said to be texts that are highlighted through the context of power, fabricated aura and circumstances of publishing."

This respondent commented explicitly on the power structures that facilitate the elevation of some texts into the canon. They suggested that the idea of what is worthy of canonisation is based on a "fabricated aura" and that the publishing industry too is shaped by power structures. The response was noteworthy because respondents rarely identified the people who make texts canonical; perhaps indicating that canon-making remains a nebulous process. Comments on the closed and static nature of canon indicate that some teachers perceived that efforts to "open up" the canon have been unsuccessful to date. Our study, however, found no significant relationship between an author's gender, their location in the Global South / North, and the canon rating or aesthetic value of their texts. The finding suggests that for the texts that we presented to our sampled teachers, gender and Global South / North were not significant dimensions of their judgements.

Other respondents stated that the canon provided a "yardstick" by which to measure all other works or that it set the "standard" for literature. Again canon in this form proves problematic because it becomes difficult for marginalised texts to be recognised on their own terms if they are continually measured against an existing "standard". One of the teachers wrote that the literary canon was a:

"substantial body of texts [that] are produced and originate from the centre, meaning the erstwhile colonial or imperial nation e.g. the U.K. In line with this, America, deemed a powerful nation, also produces a great body of texts, hence authors such as Mark Twain, Melville, Steinbeck, etc are [...] considered canonical."

This perspective appears critical of the model where canon originates from a (Western) "centre". An alternative perspective, such as a rhizomatic approach, rejects any hierarchy or model of texts and influence, and instead invites multiple

points of entry into literary study (Colebrook, 2021). The approach, deriving from the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, recognises that influence moves in many directions, and it does not simply grow or cascade from Western canonical works, rather it allows texts to be understood and appreciated on their own terms.

Implications

Given that teachers around the world hold a range of views on the literary canon, it is important to consider, at a high level, how each perspective might play out across the global education ecosystem. The following paragraphs explore how four key views of the explored canon of literature in English could influence the actions of publishers, curriculum developers, examination boards, teachers, and learners. The comments are inexhaustive.

One view sees the canon as a stable collection of widely recognised and culturally significant texts. This view prevails in the remarks coded as “consensus”, “transcendent”, “essential for study of literature”, “influential”, “classics”, “writers”, and / or “literary quality”. For publishers, this means continuing to prioritise established authors and classic works, ensuring a steady stream of reprints and academic editions. Curriculum developers, in turn, may build programmes around these enduring texts, maintaining consistency and comparability over time and across contexts. Examination boards also have stability due to the consistent use of well-known texts. Teachers are provided with a clear framework, reducing the potential workload of constant innovation and allowing them to focus on deepening learners’ understanding of literary tradition. Learners, regardless of location, engage with texts that may enhance their cultural capital and offer a shared literary experience across generations and geographies.

A further view held by teachers is that canon is mutable. This perspective was apparent in comments that we coded as “evolution” and “educational value”. Such comments suggested that literary value is not fixed and should evolve to reflect changing societal values and demographics. For publishers, this opens opportunities to promote diverse and contemporary voices, broadening cultural relevance. Curriculum developers who adopt this view regularly review and revise reading lists, ensuring the curriculum remains inclusive and responsive. Examination boards may update set texts frequently. Teachers can introduce new voices and genres, arguably making literature more relevant to learners. Learners may encounter texts that reflect their own experiences and offer insights into a wide range of cultures and perspectives.

Other teachers look at the canon as an entity which needs to be decolonialised. This viewpoint was reflected in comments we coded as “dominance”. This requires a fundamental rethinking of whose knowledge is valued and how it is represented. It requires every section of the education ecosystem, involving significant leadership from Indigenous and Black communities as well as people of colour, in terms of determining the canon and judgements about the canon. It involves the aforementioned communities working alongside other publishers, curriculum developers, assessors, and teachers, for example as suggested by Smith (2013) regarding Indigenous communities. For publishers, decolonising incorporates

actively seeking and promoting works by Indigenous, Black, and Global South authors. It requires disseminating oral and multilingual traditions. For curriculum developers it includes ensuring works from the above-mentioned communities are in the curriculum. Additionally the curriculum should be offered in a language familiar to learners as suggested by the Institute of Education Sciences (n.d.). It might also offer teachers the autonomy to bring local community-orientated learning into the classroom. For examination boards, decolonising the canon involves assessing responses to these texts, using holistic and culturally responsive methods (Claypool & Preston, 2014; Marule, 2012). Teachers work alongside elders and community leaders, using pedagogies rooted in the associated communities; such an approach is explored by Johnston and Claypool (2010) and Acharibasam and McVittie (2021). Learners are recognised as knowledge holders and are encouraged to bring their own cultural references into the learning (Naidu, 2022).

Turning to another teacher perspective – the canon as a yardstick of quality. This perspective sees the canon as a benchmark for literary excellence, focusing on texts that demonstrate high artistic and intellectual standards. Corresponding comments were typically coded as “literary quality”. Following this view, publishers maintain a catalogue of works deemed to possess enduring literary merit. Curriculum developers prioritise these texts to reinforce a shared understanding of quality. Examination boards design assessments that reflect these standards. Teachers help learners identify and understand these qualities in literary works. Learners are challenged by complex texts and are provided with models for their own writing and critical thinking.

Each actor in the global education ecosystem must carefully consider the advantages and challenges of aligning with each of these perspectives. They might choose one or they might work with several, holding them all in tension and using pre-determined principles to guide judgements in all aspects of their work. As part of this reflection, it is recommended that all stakeholders explore how they can work together to create coherent and cohesive education systems and learning experiences in relation to literary canon.

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