Stability and Change in the High-School Canon

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Stability and Change in the High-School Canon

Arthur N. Applebee

Recent years have been marked by renewed debate about the proper content for the English curriculum. Strong voices have argued that the English curriculum is white, male, and Eurocentric, marginalizing the contributions of women and of people from other cultural traditions. Equally strong voices have reasserted the values of a traditional liberal education, arguing that the curriculum in English has already been diluted too much (Bennett 1988; Hirsch 1987).

What is lacking most in such debates, however, is perspective on what is being taught in schools across the nation. What authors and titles are students actually being asked to read in their classes? What traditions and influences do those selections represent? How varied are the literary offerings in schools of different types and traditions?

Over the past few years, the National Center on Literature Teaching and Learning has conducted a series of studies that add needed perspective on these issues for English educators who would like to participate in the debates and contribute to the improvement of the teaching of literature. These studies were designed to describe the current state of literature instruction in American secondary schools. To do this, the studies have looked in turn at the book-length works that students are asked to read, at the selections of all types that teachers actually report using, and at the selections included in some of the most popular series of high-school literature anthologies.

Required Book-Length Works

In the first study, conducted in the spring of 1988, English department chairs in nationally representative samples of public, Catholic, and independent schools were asked to list all of the book-length works that were required reading in any class, grades seven through twelve (Applebee 1989); 488 schools participated in the study. The wording of the question and the structure of the survey replicated a survey conducted twenty-five years previously, in the spring of 1963 (Anderson 1964). The earlier study provides a point of comparison to highlight any changes that have occurred in the selections during the past twenty-five years.

The “top ten” titles in the three samples are listed in Table 1. Although the rank ordering of titles differs somewhat in the three samples, they are remarkable for their consistency more than their differences: the titles included in the top ten are identical in the public and Catholic school samples and nearly so in the independent schools.

It is noteworthy that in all three samples, the “top ten” include only one title by a female author (Harper Lee) and none by members of minority groups. When the responses are examined by author rather than by title, Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and Dickens lead the lists in all three samples.

Lists of “top ten” authors and titles can be misleading, however, particularly if there is less consensus about alternative texts than about the more traditional ones. To provide a better overview of the book-length works reported to us, each appearance of a title was coded for the gender, race/ethnicity, and national literary tradition of the author, as well as for date of publication. Examined in this way, the titles reported in this study were drawn from a relatively narrow tradition. Of the 11,579 individual selections reported in the public school sample, for example, 81% were by
male authors, 98% by white (non-Hispanic) authors, and 99% were written within the United States (63%), United Kingdom (28%), or Western European (8%) tradition.

Compared with Scarvia Anderson’s earlier study, the present results reflect a variety of changes in emphasis on specific titles but stability in the overall nature of the selections. Indeed, rather than the watering down of the curriculum that some have charged, the study suggests that there may have been some narrowing, with a larger number of titles cited rather consistently. In the spring of 1963, for example, only nine titles were required in at least some classes in 30% or more of the schools; this had tripled to twenty-seven titles by the spring of 1988. There was also a decline in the proportion of titles that were published in the thirty years previous to the survey, from 39% in 1963 to 28% in 1988.

In spite of efforts to broaden the canon over the past several decades, the study found only marginal increases in the percentage of selections written by women (from 17% in 1963 to 19% in 1988) or by writers from alternative cultural traditions (from 0.6% to 2%). At the same time, there was an increase in the percent of selections by US authors (from 49% to 63%), with a corresponding decline in the percent from the United Kingdom (from 39% to 28%).

The narrowness of the selections in this first Literature-Center study was surprising, and as a result later studies continued to examine the characteristics of the authors and titles being taught. Three factors in particular seemed possible sources of distortion in the study of book-length works: the emphasis on "required" texts nominated by department chairs, which might miss greater variation introduced by individual teachers in their own classrooms; the emphasis on book-length works, which could miss a greater variety in shorter works, including stories and poems; and the request for a list of all titles at each grade, which again might have led to some under-representation of less widely taught individual works that might have come less quickly to mind. Even with these caveats, however, the results suggest that in most schools, few book-length works from alternative traditions seem to have entered the canon of required texts, despite the changes that individual teachers may have made in their assigned readings.

### Titles Taught in the Past Five Days

To provide a second perspective, the Center examined teachers’ choices as part of a survey of the teaching of literature in 650 junior- and senior-high schools in the spring of 1989 (Applebee 1990). The survey included nationally representative samples of public schools, Catholic schools, and independent schools, as well as a sample of award-winning schools. In one series of questions, teachers were asked to identify a specific class which was “representative” of their teaching of literature, and to list all of the selections that students had studied (for homework or in class) during the previous five school days. Teachers were prompted separately for novels, short stories, plays,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Schools</th>
<th>Title and Percent of Schools</th>
<th>Catholic Schools</th>
<th>Independent Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romeo and Juliet 84%</td>
<td>Huckleberry Finn 76%</td>
<td>Macbeth 74%</td>
<td>Romeo and Juliet 66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth 81</td>
<td>Scarlet Letter 70</td>
<td>Huckleberry Finn 56</td>
<td>Huckleberry Finn 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huckleberry Finn 70</td>
<td>Macbeth 70</td>
<td>Scarlet Letter 52</td>
<td>Scarlet Letter 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius Caesar 70</td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird 67</td>
<td>Hamlet 51</td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird 47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird 69</td>
<td>Great Gatsby 64</td>
<td>Great Gatsby 49</td>
<td>Great Gatsby 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarlet Letter 62</td>
<td>Romeo and Juliet 63*</td>
<td>Hamlet 60</td>
<td>Julius Caesar 42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of Mice and Men 56</td>
<td>Of Mice and Men 56</td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird 47*</td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird 47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet 55</td>
<td>Lord of the Flies 52</td>
<td>Odyssey 39</td>
<td>Odyssey 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Gatsby 54</td>
<td>Lord of the Flies 52</td>
<td>Lord of the Flies 34</td>
<td>Lord of the Flies 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord of the Flies 54</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentage significantly different from public school sample, p < .05.

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poetry, nonfiction, film or video, and “any other”
types of literature.

Approached in this way, teachers’ selections
were still very narrow. Across genres, only 16% of
the works taught during the previous five days were
written by women (compared with 19% in the
study of book-length works), but 7% were by non-
white authors (compared with 2% in the study of
book-length works). Much of the increase in non-
white authors was due to better representation of
alternative traditions in the poetry that was taught;
indeed, in this particular sample Langston Hughes
emerged as the individual poet who had been
taught most frequently in the previous five days.

The Importance of Book-length Texts

Literature is a somewhat ambiguous concept in the
teaching of English, including in different class-
rooms a range of genres and media. One way to
gain a sense of what “counts” most is to examine
the amount of time teachers devote to literature of
various types. Therefore, the national survey asked
teachers about the amount of literature-related
class time that had been devoted to particular
genres during the past five days, irrespective of the
source of the selections. Their responses reflected
the central role that book-length works play: in the
public schools, teachers reported an average of
31% of the time had been spent on novels and 20%
on plays. Attention to other types of literature in-
cluded 23% of class time devoted to short stories,
14% to poetry, 6% to nonfiction, and 5% to film or
video. Reports from teachers in other samples did
not differ significantly from these percentages.
The importance of book-length texts was empha-
sized in teachers’ responses to questions about how
they organized the curriculum for a specific class:
study of individual major works emerged as the
most frequently cited approach to structuring the
curriculum.

Sources of Literary Materials

In the national survey, for teachers in the random
sample of public schools, the literature anthology
was the most frequent source of materials (used
“regularly” by 66% of the teachers), followed by
class sets of book-length texts (52%) and dittoed or
photocopied supplementary materials (44%). The
biggest differences among the samples of schools
occurred for books students purchased, which
were common in Catholic and independent
schools and rare in public schools. Class sets of
book-length texts were also somewhat more readily
available in the award-winning schools (where they
ranked slightly higher than anthologies as sources
of literary materials).

The role of the anthology was highlighted in
another series of questions when teachers were
asked about the extent to which they used them: 63%
of the public-school teachers reported an an-
thology was their “main source” of selections, and
another 28% reported using an anthology for sup-
plementary readings. Overall, teachers were quite
pleased with the quality of the materials available
in the anthologies they used: 41% rated the selec-
tions as “excellent” and another 51% rated them at
least “adequate”; only 8% rated the selections in
the anthologies as “poor” in the context of the
needs of a specific class.

Selections Included in Popular Anthologies

Because the study of teachers’ day-to-day choices of
works to teach indicated that many teachers used
anthologies as a mainstay of their literature pro-
grams, the Literature Center also studied the au-
thors and titles presented in those anthologies.

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The 1989 editions of the seven anthology series that were used most frequently in the schools in the national survey were examined in order to characterize the nature of the selections included (Applebee 1991). The complete high-school course, grades seven through twelve, was analyzed. Results were compared with the last major analysis of high-school English textbooks (Lynch and Evans 1963), which examined the literature anthologies in use in the late 1950s. The study compiled a master list of authors and titles and identified the gender, race/ethnicity, national tradition within which the author wrote, and date of composition of each anthologized selection.

Across grade levels, some 21% of the anthology selections were written by women, and 14% were by nonwhite authors, proportions that suggest somewhat more variety in representation than was the case in either of the previous studies.

To examine this further, Table 2 summarizes results across the three studies, separately for the major genres that were examined in each study. In this table, it is clear that nonwhite authors are better represented in the selections of poetry and nonfiction than they are in other genres, while women are least well represented in the plays that are taught (in part because Shakespeare has such a dominant role). The anthologies seem to have a somewhat broader range of selections than teachers report using, but this is so only for the shorter selections (which are included in reasonable num-

The results suggest that the curriculum as a whole remains relatively traditional in its emphases.

bers in each anthology volume); selections of long fiction included in the anthologies are particularly narrow.

There were some other interesting trends in the nature of the selections. In general, there was more variety in authors and titles in the selections used in grades seven through ten and the least variety in the selections chosen for United States and British literature. The chronologically organized British literature anthologies were by far the narrowest, with only 8% of the selections by women, and 1% by nonwhite authors. (The narrowness of the British-literature selections extended even to selections published in the past thirty years.)

Compared with James Lynch and Bertrand Evans’ study of the contents of anthologies available in 1961, the 1989 anthologies show more consensus on the authors and titles included, fewer selections published in the previous 60 years, and less variety from one publisher to another in degree of emphasis on each genre. In light of Lynch and Evans’ critique, the 1989 anthologies seem to include selections of better quality, with less of the “ephemera” and “miscellany” of which those researchers had complained. At the same time, women and minority authors figure more prominently in the 1989 editions, particularly in the poetry and nonfiction selections.

Influences on Teachers’ Choices

The results, then, suggest that the curriculum as a whole remains relatively traditional in its emphases. Most teachers in the Center’s surveys reported they had considerable leeway in selecting the literature they taught; only five percent claimed to have little or none. Asked what influenced their selections for a specific class, they cited literary merit,
Table 2
Comparison Between Selections Anthologized, Taught, and Required

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Long Fiction</th>
<th>Plays</th>
<th>Short Fiction</th>
<th>Poetry</th>
<th>Non-Fiction</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female Authors (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthologizeda</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taughtb</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiredc</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-white Authors (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthologizeda</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taughtb</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiredc</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aApplebee (1991)
bApplebee (1990)
cApplebee (1989)

personal familiarity with the selection, and likely appeal to students as the three most important influences. Departmental policies and possible community reaction to specific titles also played a part.

Looking at teachers' responses as a whole, there seem to be three reasons why relatively few selections from alternative traditions have yet to be included in the curriculum:

1. Teachers remain personally unfamiliar with specific titles.
2. Teachers are uncertain about the literary merit and appeal to students.
3. Teachers are worried about possible community reactions.

At the same time, the majority of teachers report that they have been successful in teaching "great works of the Western tradition"—titles of assured literary merit that are less likely to provoke community reaction and that scholars and critics (if not always students) find interesting and worthwhile. Given these tensions, change in the nature of the selections has been slow.

Conclusion

When literature emerged at the core of English studies at the end of the nineteenth century, it coalesced around a particular vision of the values of literature and of texts that were important to read and to teach (Applebee 1974). That tradition has usually been defined rather broadly, around important authors and traditions rather than around a few essential texts. When specific texts have been singled out for special attention, as they have been at times as part of college entrance requirements, the texts have changed from year to year rather than being elevated into the content of the curriculum.

Hence, for most of the history of the teaching of English, the high-school canon has been a sampling out of a broader tradition: some plays by Shakespeare, some poems from the Augustans, some contemporary works of "good" authors, some classical myths and legends, some prose and poetry of the romantic era, and some selections from the United States tradition. When John E. Stout (1921), for example, compiled a list of specific titles taught in English courses in the North Central region before 1900, he found fourteen that were taught in more than 25% of the schools, but over 200 more titles that were taught in some of the schools in the region.

Studying selections sixty years later, Lynch and Evans complained that the selections that were being sampled from these traditions had become too broad, including many selections chosen simply because they related to a topic of study rather than because of any inherent literary merit.

Boosted by the concerns of the New Critics with the integrity of the text, the reassertion of literary values which Lynch and Evans represented seems to have had some effect. In the Literature Center's studies of selections being taught thirty years later, the curriculum seems to have narrowed again. Although there remains a great deal of variety, there is more consensus about particular texts, and especially about particular authors, both in the anthologized selections and in the book-length works required by high-school departments of English.

Even as the curriculum has tightened around works of acknowledged quality, authors from alter-
native traditions have been added. Works by women seem in particular to be better represented than they were twenty-five or thirty years ago, particularly among the anthologized selections. Authors from other racial or ethnic traditions are also better represented.

As long as these texts remain unchanged, "canonicity" is likely to elude nonwhite authors and women.

Yet with these gains, the most striking feature of these analyses is how narrow much of the curriculum remains. Works by women still make up only 16% of the reading students are asked to do for their English courses in grades seven through twelve, and works by nonwhite authors less than 7%. Representation is even less balanced when novels and plays are considered separately—the major works that are for many teachers the heart of the curriculum. As long as these texts remain unchanged, "canonicity" is likely to elude nonwhite authors and women; they will continue to be at the margins of a culture that is legitimized by its place in the school.

The issue, of course, is not simply one of insuring that students read works from their own heritage. It is an issue of finding the proper balance among the many traditions, separate and intertwined, that make up the complex fabric of society in the United States. In their instruction, teachers need to find better ways to insure that programs are culturally relevant as well as culturally fair—that no group is privileged while others are marginalized by the selections schools choose to teach. At the same time, teachers must also be wary of a curriculum that becomes too "particularized" (Ravitch 1990), polarizing the separate traditions which contribute to America's diversity rather than increasing students' understanding of and respect for traditions other than their own.

Resolving the tensions between diverse traditions and a common heritage poses difficult philosophical as well as educational questions. The particular solutions that schools and teachers adopt are likely to be closely tailored to the history and values of their local community, at least to the extent that that is possible within the restrictions of available textbooks and limited budgets. The Literature Center studies do not provide answers about what the ideal curriculum will be in any particular situation, but they at least provide a common, comprehensive base of information within which those debates can be grounded.

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