

“Similar Literary Quality”: Demystifying the AP English Literature and Composition Open Question

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We share with many of our peers a love and passion for teaching young adult (YA) literature in AP (Advanced Placement) English Literature courses—where teachers tend to teach canonical texts. We echo Gallo’s (2001) concern when he writes: “It bothers me a great deal when high school English teachers or university professors condemn YA books because they believe they are shallow and poorly written. Those people are ignorant elitists who haven’t done their homework, haven’t read an adequate sampling of the novels, short stories, nonfiction, and poetry for teens that is available for classroom use and independent reading” (37). As experienced high school classroom AP English literature teachers, we have experienced the merit of teaching YA literature and encouraged students to write about it on question 3 of the AP English literature exam, the open question.

As experienced high school classroom AP English literature teachers, we have experienced the merit of teaching YA literature and encouraged students to write about it on question 3 of the AP English literature exam, the open question.

The value we place on YA literature, however, is not a commonly held value in all classrooms, or even amongst readers at the AP level, which led us to question the phrasing of question 3 on the AP Literature and Composition exam when the prompt reads: “You may choose a work below or another appropriate novel or play of similar literary quality.” The testing community and those it serves will benefit from a more clearly refined annotation about what similar literary quality means. The purpose of this article is to: (1) illuminate some of the controversy about the meaning of similar literary quality and how that meaning has changed over the years; (2) describe the importance of regarding YA literature as similar literary quality to the canon; and (3) offer suggestions to The College Board about creating an addendum about the meaning of similar literary quality on the exam.

Defining Literary Quality

Voices from the Front Lines of Education

We contacted a number of people from various parts of the country, including those from rural, suburban, and urban settings who represent a wide demographic, in order to gain a holistic view on similar literary merit. Among those contacted was a representative from the American Library Association, who explained that literary merit is often displayed by award-winning texts (see <http://ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/outstandingbooks/policiesprocedures.cfm>). Some qualifying YA titles were suggested, such as *Monster*, *Feed*, *Push*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*; also mentioned was the graphic novel, *Persepolis*.¹ Similarly, a librarian in the Midwest echoed this sentiment and added that they should also be well written, using prescriptive forms of grammar; she added, “[A] quality story will appeal to more than one of the many categories we use to divide ourselves; for example, race, age, gender, or class.”

Unlike librarians who considered literary merit based on prestige, grammar, and writing style, English professors stressed the importance of layered texts that allowed for various levels of interpretation (see Figure 1 for tips on choosing titles for AP courses). The only level of consensus amongst these voices was that literary merit means that texts must be layered—including multiple narratives, themes, and levels of interpretation. Don Zancanella, past chair of the Conference on English Education, says that:

It's that merit [emphasis added] has been socially constructed in and around the English classroom and that AP classes draw upon that construction in a way that (because of the tests and AP's tracking role) is especially conservative. For the AP test, most students (and teachers) try to reduce the amount of unpredictability, so they avoid selecting texts that aren't obviously part of the category—Heart of Darkness rather than a YA novel by Crutcher (Email communication, July 22, 2008).

We agree with Zancanella that “merit” is socially constructed, but point to the research that suggests that literary merit can also include texts from YA literature (Gallo, 2001; Spencer, 1989), graphic novels (Mooney, 2002; Schwarz, 2006; Weiner, 2002), and multigenre literature (multiple narrators, multiple voices, multiple points of view) (Christenbury, 2000; Gillis, 2002; Ruggieri, 2002).² These YA texts contain multiple narratives and themes and provide levels of interpretation.

The College Board Weighs In

The College Board (through its AP Services) replied to our query about what similar literary quality means by stating: “The primary purpose of including the ‘literary merit’ wording in the open question is to encourage students to select works that are rich and complex enough to provide them with the best opportunity to show how well they have developed the skills emphasized in their AP English course” (Email communication, July 26, 2008).³ In fact, the English Literature and Composition Course Description (College Board, 2008) claims that “the actual choice is the responsibility of the AP teacher, who should consider previous courses in the school’s curriculum” (52). The AP Literature Test Development Committee provides a descriptive, not a prescriptive, list of culturally diverse authors in The Course Description in the genres of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama, and reminds teachers that they “may select authors from the names below or may choose others of comparable quality and complexity” (54). But the list they provide is so broad that the idea of literary merit remains vague.

From the moment teachers begin to consider what texts best fit an AP English Literature and Composition course, and therefore which books will best prepare their students for the accompanying exam, they enter undefined territory. The College Board’s own AP website (AP Central) and its most recent English Literature and Composition Course Description (2008) illustrate this point: The reading should build from previous English courses; it should encompass works from “several genres and periods—from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century” (51). Further, The College Board states that although most works in the course are originally written in English (even if they were written by authors of non-English-speaking countries), pieces in translation are readily acceptable for the course, too. However, what teachers seem to miss altogether is that YA literature can and does also qualify as quality literature.

1. Check the ALA website for the Michael L. Printz Award, The Alex Award, the Margaret A. Edwards Award, or the top ten books each year: <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/bestbooksya/09topten.cfm>
2. Scan for content appropriate for your students that provokes layered readings on several topics at once, such as but not limited to: gender, social class, ethnicity, weight, sexuality, gender expression, religion, national origin, (dis)ability, eating disorders, cutting, drug/alcohol abuse, divorce, violence, hate crimes, sexual/physical/emotional abuse, and oppression/discrimination.
3. Scan for variety of genres, such as: graphic novels (Persepolis, American Born Chinese), poetry (Poet Slave of Cuba), prose (Crank, Cut), multigenre (Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian).

4. Look for pairings of books based on similar themes or that consider different points of view (for suggestions, see sidebar, p. 9).
5. Talk with peers and academics in the field for their recommendations.

Figure 1. Tips on choosing YA novels for AP courses

Potential Pairings for AP Literature Study	
Annie on My Mind	Keeping You a Secret
The House You Pass along the Way	
Black Boy	Monster
To Kill a Mockingbird	
Catcher in the Rye	Looking for Alaska
	Nothing but the Truth: A Documentary Novel
	Perks of Being a Wallflower
The Chocolate War	Boy Meets Boy
	The Geography Club
	Rainbow Boys
Crime and Punishment	Shattering Glass
Diary of Anne Frank	The Book Thief
	Maus
Go Ask Alice	Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes
	Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida
	We All Fall Down
Hamlet	Jellicoe Road
	Killing Mr. Griffin
Heart of Darkness	Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Volumes I and II
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings	Speak
The Color Purple	Inexcusable
	Push
Love Medicine	The Absolute True Story of a Part Time Indian
The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven	
1984	Feed
Anthem	

The Handmaid's Tale	
Obason	American Born Chinese
The Outsiders	Chinese Handcuffs
	Whale Talk
Native Son	Tyrell
Written on the Body	Luna
	Define Normal

“Great Books” and the Concept of Literary Quality

Perhaps this representative list results from the concept of a literary canon—a collection of works that best represents and has helped shape what we teach and how we teach. [Applebee \(1996\)](#) provides an insightful history of how the English curricula, based on the notion of a literary canon, developed and where it has led us as educators. He finds that the English curriculum arose in the 19th century when literature was justified as a “reservoir of cultured values” and a “source of moral strength” (pp. 22–23). Indeed, it was Harvard University that helped to popularize the notion of an English department in 1872. Harvard, and then other universities, began to provide lists of “required reading” for its incoming college freshmen. Applebee adds that “authors and titles that formed the high school curricula were soon determined by college entrance exams” (26). He notes that from 1874–1883, American colleges required students to have a reading knowledge of authors like William Shakespeare, Lord Byron, William Thackeray, Samuel Johnson, John Milton, George Eliot, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (26).

These selections became an almost hegemonic force as this list helped to standardize high school curricula over the next 120 years. [Applebee \(1996\)](#) notes a sense of stability in how high schools have created English curricula over that time. He references two studies, one from Smith in [1932](#) and his own in 1992/1993. Smith found that over 50% of all schools in the United States had English curricula that merely listed the “classics” as required reading (27). In fact, she noted in a later study ([1941](#)) that students in New York schools were more familiar with these classics than with any works of the “present century” (27). Applebee’s own study found similar results. At the end of the twentieth century, high school English classes were still “defined by tradition,” with texts like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Hamlet* topping the lists of required readings. In fact, these lists showed that 98% of the authors were white, 81% male, and 99% of European stock (28). Although several of these texts still remain as part of the dominant choices on question 3, we have seen a shift to include more multicultural texts.

[Bloom \(1994\)](#) notes that “The Canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival,” no matter how that choice is being made (19). These are books that someone, somewhere, somehow decreed as important and contained a sense of “quality” that other texts did not possess. Of course, Bloom is a defender of the notion of the Western Canon, which he notes “exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set a standard measurement that is anything but political or moral” (33). He claims that academics have politicized the notion, bringing these time-tested texts “founded upon severely artistic criteria” (21) into a battle that he believes has no place in our society or our schools. Bloom believes that there must be a canon—better books among lesser titles. A quick look at his list of texts reveals *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare’s tragedies, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Divine Comedy*, the Torah, the Gospels, *Don Quixote*, and Homer’s epics to be the most important works in Western literature, works that all others may be placed against when defining what comprises a literary canon.

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Adler (1988), one of the founders of the Great Books program at the University of Chicago, provides an expansive definition of what makes a book truly “great.” In fact, he uses Scott Buchanan’s 1937 definition of “great books” as being 1) largely read, 2) have a wide variety of interpretations, 3) contain unanswerable questions, 4) are considered fine art, 5) are masterpieces of the liberal arts, and then adds that great books must also 6) deal with basic ideas, 7) be read many times to be fully understood, 8) “be written by a generalist and written for the curious,” 9) are from all literary genres, and 10) can still be written by white Europeans (qtd. in Adler 333). Although many of the above features appear mostly objective in nature, teachers may begin to ask what constitutes “fine art,” what makes a book a “masterpiece of the liberal arts,” and what defines Adler’s “basic ideas”?

This is exactly the problem that classroom teachers have with deciding how to prepare their students for the AP exam in Literature and Composition. We are left with a choice of 1) time-tested titles that may or may not still hold social relevance to our students or 2) contemporary authors whose work may not yet be placed in the academic canon of good literature. A quick look around the Web showed us that schools that have posted their AP English Literature and Composition curricula online are still caught up in the exact same kind of reliance on the classics that both Smith and Applebee found in their studies. After viewing online course descriptions for a variety of schools—including those in Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania—we noticed that the same texts kept appearing on the lists.⁴ In these states, the most popular “great books” included the following titles: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Crime and Punishment*, the Homeric epics, and selections of poetry from various Modernist and Romantic writers. It was only when schools provided independent reading lists that we found more contemporary and less “classic” choices, including *Invisible Man*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Life of Pi*, *Sophie’s World*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Angela’s Ashes*. It seems that schools (and perhaps school districts) cannot escape the hegemonic forces of 19th-century values that helped to shape our educational systems. Classic texts remain good for in-class discussions, while contemporary literature, no matter how good, remains marginalized on independent reading lists.

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Perhaps Adler’s (1988) reference to Mark Twain’s comment that “Great books are the books that everyone wishes he had read but that no one wants to read” (332) is the most relevant description of the notion of literary merit or quality. One look at the sample texts The College Board includes on the Open prompt for the English Literature and Composition AP Exam seems to reflect this very notion. We reviewed the Open prompts for exams from 1999–2008, which included Form B exams, and seventeen different prompts (these are the examples that are available on The College Board’s AP Central website). After inspecting the “data” that The College Board provides its educators, it becomes evident that we might begin to view the notion of “literary quality” or “merit” with a slightly biased perspective.

An initial look at the list of 216 titles shows that The College Board has put quite a variety of literature out there as examples for students to write about. Indeed, there are titles from all over the world, from ancient Greece to modern-day Africa, from writers of Asian heritage to those of Eastern European ancestry. There are a good number of female authors listed, too. Students have had a chance to write on both popular (canonical) titles as well as some that have been marginalized or that appeal to a specific type of reader. In fact, there were a number of texts that coauthor Josh Slifkin had to research; even as a former English major who likes to keep up with contemporary and sometimes post-modern fiction, he had no idea who wrote the book or its publication information.

Still, in the 10 years of exams (and 17 prompts), we found that 10 texts appeared on the list 7 or more times out of a possible 216 total titles that the AP provided students. These texts were: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (8 times), *Crime and Punishment* (9 times), *Great Expectations* (9 times), *The Great Gatsby* (7 times), *Heart of Darkness* (9 times), *Jane Eyre* (7 times), *King Lear* (7 times), *The Scarlet Letter* (8 times), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (8 times), and *Wuthering Heights* (7 times). Although there were a wide range of other titles, including both classic and contemporary, these texts consistently showed up as texts on which students could write.

What kinds of literary messages are we sending to our students, teachers, and the public when these titles show up almost every year on the Open prompt for the AP English Literature and Composition Exam? Of these ten titles, seven were written by white men, two by white women, and one was authored by an African American woman. Even more telling is the publication dates for these texts. From this sample, six were published in the nineteenth century (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Great Expectations*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Wuthering Heights*), one was published in the seventeenth century (*King Lear*), one was published at the turn of the twentieth century (*Heart of Darkness*), and two were published in the early part of the twentieth century (*The Great Gatsby* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). Finally, of the ten most popular titles, five authors are British (including Conrad, who became a British citizen), four are American, and one is Russian. We believe that seeing these same titles over and over again on the AP exam may lead to their being prioritized over other comparable and deserving texts. Many teachers new to teaching AP Literature or those who have not updated their AP Literature courses accept the preferences of the exam as a template for teaching the course. We would posit, however, that unless the exam is revised based on careful research, the continued emphasis on these same time-valued texts—the ones that have left an indelible stamp on the traditional fabric of what translates into success on the exam—may actually devolve the notion of what constitutes literary merit.

It's no wonder, then, that most AP courses list these very titles as required reading. One understands that these texts contain "literary quality" or "merit," but the hidden side-effect is the exclusion of other texts. Although the likes of *Invisible Man*, *Catch-22*, and *Beloved*, relatively recent novels, show on various AP reading lists for high school classrooms, more often than not they appear as independent reading choices. The same goes for some of the more "controversial" titles that were only listed once or twice, like *Brave New World*, *All the King's Men*, *A Gathering of Old Men*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Kite Runner*. Some of these seem to show up as a kind of "flavor of the month" listing (*Push*, for example), while others may appear to fit some kind of unwritten quota (*The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior* each appeared once and were the only evidence of Asian American literature.)

We have no doubt that The College Board means well when it provides teachers and students with these lists. In fact, they definitely tend to help writers as they try to connect that year's prompt with a title appropriate for analysis. Unfortunately, these lists also provide an unspoken bias as to what is good literature. One might ascertain that literary "quality" or "merit" may have something to do with a text's ability to stay in the canon, or at least join the canon without much fuss. It appears that the notion of literary quality does reflect a very traditional sense of "great books" that we all know so well. Indeed, this list of "masterpieces of the liberal arts" (as Adler noted above) is, for the most part, a collection of worthwhile texts. Yet, we can't help but think that The College Board has provided teachers and the students who take the English Literature and Composition Exam a kind of biased approach when the lists of suggested texts always focus on a certain kind of literature—mostly pre-twentieth century, white, European, and more than half of the time, written by a man.

The AP Literature and Composition Exam

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After sj's recent return from scoring the 2008 AP literature exam in Louisville, KY, the question about what "similar literary quality" means and how YA literature might be used to answer question 3 remained fresh. As a reader for the AP literature exam for seven years, and a table leader for two, sj noticed other readers struggle with this same question. sj discovered that most high school AP literature teachers who are also readers and table leaders for scoring the exam did not deem YA or graphic novels as examples of "similar literary quality." Yet these teachers did use such texts in the classroom, often pairing them with "classic" literature. Many of their students who took the exam revealed that notions of "similar literary quality" stem from how they had been taught to think and read. While some students appeared aware of the social construction of "similar literary quality," others still noted that "similar literary merit" was reflective of a text's genre, which once again reflects their schooling.

Unfortunately, this disparity carries through to the scoring of AP exam and the conversations that circulate amongst

readers. At the reading, readers are told to score students based on what they do well, and if they are able to effectively write a sustained analytical essay, then it should be awarded a 5 or higher. In keeping with that instruction, sj has given students 5's and higher for writing competent and sustained essays using YA texts and graphic novels. The issue at hand is that we as readers, and indeed, as members of the profession, lack a common definition for "similar literary quality." In failing to articulate one (for both exam readers and students who would be taking the exam), The College Board has abdicated responsibility for that definition, which in turn has led some table leaders to instruct readers to use the leader's definition—a role that is beyond the scope of their responsibilities. The unfortunate outcome is that students' essays are not given the fair assessment they deserve and their scores suffer.

Reading and assessing the AP Literature and Composition Exam is a fascinating and rigorous, yet highly exhausting experience. The College Board, the organization that is responsible for overseeing the exam (Educational Testing Services calculates the scores), invites readers to score the written portion of the exam. This past year, over one million essays were scored (including the overseas exams), which accounts for 330,000+ exams, so over 1200 readers were invited to score. The reading is quite hierarchical. There is a chief reader over the entire exam, who is appointed by The College Board, three questions leaders (selected by the chief reader) for each of the three primary questions on the exam, an overseas question leader, and a question leader for the alternate question. Approximately eight readers and a table leader, who also reads, are then placed at tables in any of the five different rooms. Typically, there are eight tables to a quadrant to which a quadrant leader, who also serves as one of the table leaders, is assigned. At each table, there are four college English professors and four high school English teachers who are purposefully placed at tables based on their geographical region, gender, years reading, ethnicity, and teaching level.

There are three primary questions on the AP Literature and Composition Exam. Students have two hours to write—about forty minutes to compose each essay. Question 1 is the poetry passage, question 2 is the prose passage, and question 3 is the Open. There is also a multiple-choice section that lasts for one hour and is scored through computers at a location separate from the reading site. The chief reader, quadrant leaders, and table leaders travel to the reading site prior to the reading; this allows them to engage in calibration—the process by which readers assimilate and come to understand how the scoring guide aligns with student essays.

How Essays Are Scored

Readers are coached to understand that they are not graders, but readers, which coaxes them to adjust their thinking so as to align with a predetermined scoring guide that is distributed at the reading site. There are three separate scoring guides, one per question, each of which is developed by a select pool of readers prior to the exam. Essays are scored on a—(dash) to 9 scale (see <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jpf>): each score has a well-articulated criteria that explains why a paper should be assigned a specific score (papers in the 5–9 range are considered upper-half or passing papers that have successfully answered the prompt with varying degrees of analysis, while dash to 4 are considered lower half papers and tend to rely on plot summary and lack the development of upper-half papers). Readers and table leaders carefully review the scoring guide a number of times and revisit it throughout the week.⁵

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Student sample essays are chosen by a select pool of readers prior to the reading. This pool of readers searches out what is called an "anchor set." The anchor sets are then used to train table leaders and readers. Table leaders need to be able to understand and clearly articulate and help their readers see papers through the criteria of the scoring guide. Should any discrepancies arise—and they always do—table leaders are responsible for redirecting any misreadings and for answering questions.

Question 3, the open question, has some particular elements that make it unique unto itself. Unlike questions 1 and 2, which each have text provided in the exam and are textually driven, question 3 asks students to tap into their

memories and recall a text that is most suitable to the prompt. A common criticism of the essays shared at the exam is that students retell the plot of the text rather than carefully address the prompt itself. Unlike the other two questions, this question always asks, in one way or another, how some element of the text contributes or illuminates the text as a whole. The prompt also admonishes students to avoid plot summary and to select a novel or play of “similar literary merit.” The latter is what we, the authors, challenge, because students are not given any directive about what “comparable literary merit” or the like means.

A common question among test-takers and readers stems from the ambiguous nature of the paragraph directly following the Open prompt. On the Open passage, students are to reflect on the question in the prompt and then, depending on the wording of the sentence directly after, select a text, play, or sometimes even a novella in order to best answer the question (see Figure 2).

In a literary work, a minor character, often known as a foil, possesses traits that emphasize, by contrast or comparison, the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the main character. For example, the ideas or behavior of the minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character.

Choose a novel or play in which a minor character serves as a foil to a main character. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the relation between the minor character and the major character illuminates the meaning of the work.

You may choose a work from the list below or another appropriate novel or play of similar literary quality. Do not merely summarize the plot.

- The Age of Innocence
- Alias Grace
- All the King’s Men
- All the Pretty Horses
- Anna Karenina
- Billy Budd
- The Brothers Karamazov
- Catch-22
- Cold Mountain
- The Color Purple
- Don Quixote
- Emma
- Equus
- Frankenstein
- Glass Menagerie
- Henry IV, Part I
- Huckleberry Finn
- Invisible Man
- King Lear

- The Kite Runner
- The Misanthrope
- The Piano Lesson
- Pride and Prejudice
- Pygmalion
- Reservation Blues
- The Sound and the Fury
- A Streetcar Named Desire
- Sula
- A Tale of Two Cities
- Their Eyes Were Watching God
- Tom Jones
- Wuthering Heights

*(taken from the 2008 English Literature and Composition Exam)

Figure 2. An example of a prompt from question 3

Examinees may infer that what The College Board means when the prompt reads, “You may choose a work from the list below or another appropriate novel or play of similar literary quality,” is that most novels and plays are deemed appropriate. What isn’t listed are YA literature texts, graphic novels, and novellas, let alone other multigenre texts. However, students do write using these texts, although it is not specifically stated that they may select from these other genres.

Recommendations to The College Board

Based on our research, we would like to offer suggestions to The College Board for the Open question.

- John Beynon, the one university English professor who participated in our survey, said, “Get rid of the loaded terms ‘quality’ and ‘merit,’ especially as these terms have the potential to disqualify already marginalized works of literature” (email communication, July 24, 2008).
- Barring that, we think it would benefit all parties involved if a disclaimer, denoted by an asterisk, spells out what is meant by “similar literary quality” or “similar literary merit.”
- Finally, The College Board must acknowledge research in the English language arts that reveals that literature is more expansive and includes new genres. The NCTE and IRA Standards 1 and 2 (1996) recommend that “Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world”; they also suggest that “Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience” (3).

Since teachers have great influence over the ways students read and come to interpret texts, we take issue with the notion that a text’s “similar literary quality” is even the heart of the matter. After all, students are evaluated on their ability to interpret a text, not on whether or not the text has literary merit. It seems to us that when we “blame” a text or critique its merit that the heart of the critique should lie within the pedagogy of how teachers are approaching literature. There are myriad ways to teach literary analysis that include lessons about critical lenses and levels of allusion. On this, Gallo (2001) concurs, “[T]each the same literary concepts and develop the same analytical skills . . .

[and] there are still too many teachers who kill any [sic] book by the way they teach it . . . ” (18). From our students’ voices, we infer that when our students are really reading, it is when they are reading about situations and characters to whom they can best relate. Happily, the literary canon continues to expand as genres evolve and morph, changing our definition of classic literature. We owe it to our students to question the ambiguous meaning (and recognize the social construction) of the phrase “comparable literary merit.”

We are aware that using some of these suggested genres may pose concerns for classroom teachers because they have yet to be included in standardized tests. However, we are not suggesting that we should abandon classic texts, but rather that we should supplement classroom materials with YA texts. In this way, we hope that as students and teachers read more diverse texts, our community will demonstrate the value of an evolving canon, and The College Board will recognize the inherent merit in these emerging literacies and include such voices and genres on the AP Literature and Composition exam.

Notes

¹ There are a six known types of graphic novels: superhero stories, human-interest stories, adaptations or spinoffs, manga, satire, and nonfiction (Weiner, 2002). We do not suggest that all of those texts be included in every curriculum, but we do advocate that nonfiction graphic novels and some manga texts should be, as they may offer important stories about actual events through layered narratives. Teachers should always review texts before using, as some contain examples of profanity and may not be classroom-appropriate.

² Several others with doctorates corroborated Zancanella’s comments, while those without terminal degrees aligned more with the librarians’ views.

³ In an email to the authors, The College Board notes that one of the first uses of “literary merit” was on the 1969 exam—“by one of the authors listed below or by an author of comparable literary excellence.” Other wordings used over the years included: “any work of comparable literary excellence, acknowledged literary merit, work of recognized literary merit, work of literary merit, distinguished novel or play, acknowledged literary merit, comparable literary quality, comparable quality, comparable literary merit, comparable merit, similar literary quality, [and] similar literary merit”—all phrases that we feel remain vague and undefined.

⁴ We found these examples from Google search of “AP English Literature and Composition Syllabus.” Many other examples shared similar results.

⁵ Generally speaking, if a student earns a 5 on each of the three essays and earns fifty percent correct on the multiple choice, the student will receive a 3 overall, which most colleges and universities accept in lieu of freshman composition (check www.apcentral.collegeboard.com to determine which schools accept what score).

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