

Dr. Daves and the Canon of Meritocracy

There is a remarkable sense of mutual understanding that comes from the reading lists of American institutions; indeed, we seem to be able to seek each other out based solely on whether we had to read *The Great Gatsby* or *Of Mice and Men*. My junior year, I took the Advanced Placement course, colloquially known as an “AP,” for English Language and Composition, of which my school had divided into two classes. Traditionally, though it depends on the school, their public or private status, and a number of other factors, AP classes are taught specifically with the exam in mind—this means reading texts for specific themes, weekly timed essay practice, and an endless barrage of multiple-choice drills, but it also means that teachers are left to construct reading lists for their classes, as opposed to being assigned a set syllabus.

As it happened, I was placed into the class taught by Dr. Daves. As his title implies, he was remarkably overqualified to be handing out timed essay questions and lecturing on the strategies of multiple-choice decisions, and subsequently we did very little explicit exam prep, favoring instead critical thinking essays on topics such as the nature of institutions like the College Board. While we did read the texts set by our school, *Othello* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* among them, we explored an entirely different catalog of texts from our peers in the other class, who studied specifically to the test, and intensely. If memory serves, our class outperformed them with our final exam scores, but it wasn’t the numerical outcome which has remained important to me (though the bragging rights are a benefit). Rather, that I still find the material we covered relevant to my life and education says a lot (read: everything) about the reading list he chose to teach us.

Dr. Daves’ big theme was the meritocracy, and a bunch of privileged, private-school kids who were applying to college needed the wake-up call. We read excerpts from J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* and chapters from *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Essays on Michelle Obama’s college experience and Asian perspectives at Brown University came into conversation with *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Twilight of the Elites*. Even sections of Anderson Cooper’s *Dispatches from the Edge* made it in, along with tens of others. Social class structure and critical race theory permeated our every conversation, often revolving around how these elements influenced college application and acceptance projections, a strikingly relevant subject for high school juniors.

For four years I have kept a screenshot on my desktop of every book, essay, and opinion piece from that list, some of which I have read in full and others which I have yet to approach. It has become a canon that I look to in order to further understand the society that I live in, the politics I practice, and my actions as they pertain to those around me. Dr. Daves’ canon is not only important for the works contained within it, but for the cultural memory and necessity from which it stemmed, which I have only

now begun to consider after analyzing the implications of canonicity and the role canons play in educational institutions and beyond.

The modern formation of canons is a complex process. The origins of texts become increasingly murkier as authors write about each other, borrow forms and themes, craft anthologies, criticisms and adaptations; the cultural memory contained in canons is not formed by one singular person, but instead by many different agents of literature and culture.¹ In Dr. Daves' canon, the works are all borne out of similar thematic threads, yet cast a wide net over elements of authorship, readership, location, and language. If one was to seek out this canon, they would be doing so because it provides a comprehensive scope of voices and opinions on a niche yet relevant topic, that of the meritocracy and its relationship with education in the United States specifically.

To consider these works as a canon elevates them to a new level of relevancy, one I believe to be deserved considering their wider implications. According to John Guillory, "the process of canonical selection is always also a process of social exclusion, specifically the exclusion of female, black, ethnic, or working-class authors from the literary canon," but the reading list for this class was not confined by such norms.² The time periods covered span from the 1800s to the present, authorship makes the jump from James Baldwin to Michelle Obama, and it is applicable to topics of class, education, and decolonization; it is flexible, yet makes its purpose clear. It is suitable as a canon of texts that shed further light on the meritocracy and class structure of the present, while acting as a lens through which we can form criticism on literary works of the past. Criticism is an essential method of understanding presented in these works, namely the supplementary reading which Dr. Daves supplied.

In American educational institutions, canons are exceedingly more regulated than in Europe, and there is almost guaranteed to be overlap in the works students read between their freshman and senior years.³ The reading lists diverge only when one proceeds to differentiate honors and regular English classes, and eventually Advanced Placement. The canon shifts slightly in these instances to incorporate texts which are still pulled from the Western Canon, though perhaps with more variety in terms of genre (plays, memoirs, short stories), or authorship (non-Americans, women, minorities). While Dr. Daves' canon comes into focus as something I began reading in an educational institution, part of the point was to expose us to authors and literature that existed outside of the traditional syllabi provided by our institution.

¹ Herbert Grabes, "Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (De Gruyter, 2008), 311–21, pp. 313-314.

² John Guillory, "Canonical and Noncanonical," in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (The University of Chicago Press, c1993), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb05714.0001.001>, p 7.

³ Ibid, p. 315.

Schools often teach contained, singular norms which the majority of students are subsequently trained to recognize as “universal,” when in reality universality is not as far reaching as we are taught to believe, and this particular canon was built around disassembling that stereotype.⁴ Bell Hooks speaks on the disassociation between politics and more archaic canonized works, “We found again and again that almost everyone, especially the old guard, were more disturbed by their overt recognition of the role our political perspectives play in shaping pedagogy than by their passive acceptance of ways of teaching and learning that reflect biases, particularly a white supremacist standpoint.”⁵ From Hooks’ perspective, one might go so far as to say that many reading lists rely so heavily on an outdated version of the Western canon because it is researched, criticized, and set in stone to the point that there are few new political arguments to be made. The stagnant nature of traditional reading lists and canons appears akin to a security measure.

To many critics, canons function as “a vehicle or medium for the transmission of a fixed set of orthodox values and responses,” and are therefore outdated and ill-suited to a world of academia where very little is off the discussion table anymore.⁶ But I would argue that Dr. Daves’ canon utilized what might be considered an old and outdated method to become a vehicle for introducing and appreciating works that have historically gone unnoticed and undervalued. In preserving even a slice of these works as a canon, small as it may be and applicable to a niche group, in this case a junior-year English class, it perpetuates the consistent introduction of these texts into student’s lives.

Building a canon has previously been based on compiling a collection of texts that have taken years, sometimes centuries, to become an aggregate of criticism, supplemental content, and academic discourse.⁷ Without completely subverting those expectations, it is difficult to formulate a clear plan to update canons, especially as topics like decolonization become exceedingly analyzed. How can we improve the scope of our literary representation while still respecting texts that have been traditionally esteemed and studied, and for good reason? How do we attribute and assign value to texts that may be underappreciated, without making it a competition?

If the canon is so successful, then it begs interrogation as to why teachers often find it necessary to supplement their classes with auxiliary texts they deem essential. I am curious as to what the responsibilities of schools are, to their students and educators, in supporting new proposals for reading lists, and more specifically how that can make its way up the chain to influence corporations (which is what they are, lest we forget the influences of capitalism, sponsorship, and economics on college-

⁴ Bell Hooks, *Teaching To Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700280>, p. 35.

⁵ Ibid, p. 37.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

preparatory companies, and universities themselves, in the US) like the College Board. These are questions lacking definitive answers, which is why the burden has fallen largely on educators and students, though both parties have pushed the barriers on established practice. Canonizing texts that a teacher brings to the table, like Dr. Daves did, is in my opinion a valid and necessitated response—if works within a canon receive greater traction, then it may be the best way to make those voices heard.

In a *Guardian* article discussing the merits of decolonizing the classroom, specifically through the inclusion and examination of literary context, Gopal comments on the pushback for such canon restructuring, “It is telling that efforts to inject some breadth and variety into teaching are being dismissed as ‘artificial balance’.”⁸ The idea that re-formatting the canon to include works that go beyond our traditional understanding is merely superficial in terms of contemporary culture, and not a necessary tool for reevaluating history and literature, is an indication of just how imperative these canons are. Daves’ canon has the potential to be successful not only because it encourages inclusion of new voices, but provides context and lenses with which we can assess ‘traditional’ canon texts.

Much of canonicity and the longevity of canons has to do with the way they come into conversation with cultural memory. Referring to the American canon debate, Grabes writes, “What this debate has revealed is the considerable degree to which the assessment of canons depends on and is limited by personal experience and culturally determined professional practice.”⁹ The creation of Dr. Daves’ canon stems directly from his experience as an educator in primarily private and East Coast institutions. Canons rely heavily on professional and academic culture, as well as response to culture, in order to gain stature; in this vein, we may consider Dr. Daves’ canon to be legitimized by its proximity to contemporary issues, while simultaneously preserving narratives that have been historically silenced, and coming from someone with authority in these areas.

Dr. Daves’ canon consists of comprehensive works on meritocracy, class culture, minority issues, and the very nature of the American educational system, in turn influencing my own perception of myself, my peers, and the institutions I am still a part of. Especially at a university like St Andrews, where the majority of my American peers have significant privilege and unique circumstances that have led them to seek an education here, I find these discussions and topics to be especially poignant. These are not discussions we have over pints at the pub or sprawled on the lawn of the quad; these are the conversations that happen in comparative literature classes where we are encouraged to question the very nature of the books we read and the institutions who instruct us to read them. Dr. Daves’ canon is essential reading in

⁸ Priyamvada Gopal, “Yes, We Must Decolonise: Our Teaching Has to Go beyond Elite White Men,” *The Guardian*, October 27, 2017, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/27/decolonise-elite-white-men-decolonising-cambridge-university-english-curriculum-literature>.

⁹ Grabes, “Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon,” p. 315.

our current climate, and although particularly suited to the US, reinforces the importance of modern narratives and context by advocating for understanding and action, in the meritocracy and beyond.

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