

Standing on Merit: The Role of Quality and Choice in Student Reading

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It's the start of the year in 12th-grade AP English Literature and Composition, and the students are furiously scribbling their responses to an essay prompt from the 2002 AP Exam:

Often in literature a character's success in achieving goals depends on keeping a secret and divulging it only at the right moment, if at all. Choose a novel or play of literary merit that requires a character to keep a secret. In a well-organized essay, briefly explain the necessity for secrecy and how the character's choice to reveal or keep the secret affects the plot and contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

The assignment serves as a formative assessment in more than one way. It's useful, of course, to see the quality of essays the students produce right off the bat with this sort of prompt and limited time; much of our work throughout the course focuses on improving this sort of essay with sophisticated syntax, smoothly incorporated evidence and thorough analysis. Because of my addendum that the students must write about one of three texts from their summer reading, the essay serves as a way to check that students have completed the summer assignment. And the essays are also an immediate, if limited, gauge of the creativity and depth of thought students bring with them to the study of literature.

But I'm conducting another assessment, too, one that many students don't even realize is a part of the assignment: When I read the essays, I'm as interested in what texts students choose as I am in how they discuss those texts. I want to see, in other words, how they handle that one part of the instructions which may seem to them most tangential, the injunction to choose a work "of literary merit."

It's worth discussing why and how students are allowed to choose texts on which to focus; below, I'll address the extent to which students need latitude in their reading choices. For now, suffice it to say that in this case the students have considerable autonomy in choosing texts, as they do on the actual AP Exam. So what constitutes a work of literary merit? In this particular year, one student writes about Sebald's *The Lovely Bones*. Another chooses Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*. Some of the choices seem in line with the canonical works commonly taught in high schools: Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, all good choices for this particular question. Others are contemporary choices and might raise some eyebrows: Settenfield's *Prep*, Albom's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, even Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

It's a broad list, and once I've collected the essays I often write all of the titles students have chosen on the board so that the whole class can see the range of works under discussion. Then I ask the students what they think.

"I'm not sure *The Da Vinci Code* is really a work of literary merit," says one student, frowning at the list.

A boy on the other side of the classroom raises his hand immediately. "I didn't write about it, but that was one of the best books I've ever read," he says.

"What makes you say that?" I ask.

"I stayed up all night just to finish it. I couldn't put it down. It wasn't just action. There was all this history and philosophy and character description. I thought it was great."

"That just means it's a page-turner," says another student. "It doesn't mean it's *literature*."

And there it is, in a single word: the gulf between what a student might choose to read and what he or she is told to read, the sense that there is one set of texts that belongs in the classroom and another that belongs in the bookstore and the backpack. It's not the word *literature* but the pronunciation of it, with its implied hierarchy and judgments, that drives home to me the contradictory truths with which every English teacher grapples: On the one hand, students need teachers to guide them through challenging, difficult and canonical texts that they might not approach on their own; while on the other hand, the very act of assigning those texts may seem to invalidate the reading choices that students make on their own.

"So," I say to the class, "here's your homework: What makes a novel or play a work of literary merit?"

Defining Moments

The search for a common definition of literary merit is not a new one. An article in *The English Journal* (1928), for instance, described a survey conducted nationwide among librarians to determine literary merit based on a 100-point scale; in this case, 100 represented the quality of "Shakespeare's writings" and zero represented the composition of "an average 6-year-old child just learning to read and write" (Graves 1928, 328). The small sample of around 60 librarians ranked *The Scarlet Letter* at 86.7, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* at 57.9. A 1992 article by Arthur N. Applebee in the same publication attacked the issue from a different angle: Applebee evaluated studies that "looked in turn at the book-length studies that students are asked to read" and "at the selections of all types that teachers actually report using" (Applebee 1992, 27).

Both authors approach the subject with the notion that literary merit is determined by those in the know; teachers and librarians are the arbiters of quality, and canonical works such as a Shakespearean play (also at the top of Applebee's resulting list) set the standard for literary merit because they are, well, canonical: If the English teachers and librarians like them, they must be the best. I'm partial to the choices of English teachers myself,

I admit, but before I assault students with works that *I* consider to be of merit, or even before I try to justify my approach to choosing works for study, I find it worthwhile to hear what the students themselves think our working definition of the term should be. They, after all, have to live with our choices as much as, if not more than, I do. Even in 1928, Graves was aware that works can't be divided easily into two columns; one doesn't quickly sort through titles and emerge with one list of worthy texts and another list of pulp. Students generally come to the same conclusion pretty quickly.

The day after making the assignment, once the students shuffle into class and nervously take out their homework (thinking to themselves, I'm certain, "Do I have to turn this in? How will he *grade* this? What if I'm *wrong*?"), I ask for a volunteer to give me a first criterion for our definition. I write the response on the board, we discuss it, haggle a bit, possibly modify or erase or add, and then move on to a new criterion. The exercise takes most of the class period, at the end of which I take up the original responses for a completion grade, and when it's over we have usually come to a consensus (or nearly to one) that looks like this one from the class I've been describing:

A Definition of Literary Merit

The work of literature:

1. Entertains the reader and is interesting to read.
2. Does not merely conform to the expectations of a single genre or formula.
3. Has been judged to have artistic quality by the literary community (teachers, students, librarians, critics, other writers, the reading public).
4. Has stood the test of time in some way, regardless of the date of publication.
5. Shows thematic depth: The themes merit revisiting and study because they are complex and nuanced.
6. Demonstrates innovation in style, voice, structure, characterization, plot and/or description.
7. May have a social, political or ideological impact on society during the lifetime of the author or afterward.
8. Does not fall into the traps of "pulp" fiction such as clichéd or derivative descriptions and plot devices, or sentimentality rather than "earned" emotion.
9. Is intended by the author to communicate in an artistic manner.
10. Is universal in its appeal (i.e., the themes and insights are not only accessible to one culture or time period).

Certainly, there are arguable points on this list. How, for instance, does one judge the intent of the author? In a sense, however, arguable points are exactly what I'm after. While I feel that literary merit is fairly easy to agree on at the extremes — most people do, in fact, accept that *Hamlet* is a pretty darn good play — there's a lot of gray area in the middle that I want students to explore through thoughtful discussion and with the burden of proof.

When we finish our list, which is a little different every year but for the most part contains the same 10 or so criteria, I again offer the list of works students chose for the timed essay assignment. Here's where the going gets tough; not all students believe the criteria apply to all of the texts in the same way. Is *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* overly sentimental or insightful and thought provoking? Did Dan Brown write *The Da Vinci Code* with the intent to create great art or to keep readers turning pages, or both? Some texts, we all agree, meet only three or four of our criteria, others seven or eight; *Hamlet* meets all 10, we think, but what about a Shakespearean play like, say, *King John*? We have to ask, as well, whether or not all of the criteria count equally.

There's also an implicit argument students sometimes make that they — students — are not part of the “literary community” they cite in their definition. It's important to discuss the role of students, as a whole and as individuals, in the ongoing dialogue about how we judge quality in fiction. If we don't have this discussion, we could send the message that Michael R. Collings warned about in an essay in regard to teaching works by Stephen King: In telling students that an author like King is “too unsophisticated, too clumsy, too peripheral, too *common* to merit attention,” we also communicate that “student readers are themselves too unsophisticated, too clumsy, too peripheral, too *common* to merit attention” (Collings 1997, 120).

In the end, even if we're left in limbo about a few titles, the class agrees that the distinction of literary merit involves considering a spectrum of works, not a simple division. That's a good first step, and here's a second: The next assignment is for each student to take the work he or she wrote about on the essay assignment and provide some evidence for every item on our list. What do the critics say about *Prep*? What does the author say about it? Are there any particularly well-written passages that can serve as evidence of its quality? Some of the responses must still, of course, be subjective, but the exercise forces students to dive into a deeper level of consideration about some texts than they might have before.

“I get it,” says one student. “Some of the works we like to read aren't necessarily works of literary merit. So is your point that on the AP Exam we should just write about a Shakespeare play to be safe?”

Actually, that's not my point at all. In fact, I expect that AP Exam Readers see an awful lot of Shakespeare, and I know, as an acquaintance of mine who has evaluated the essays for many years told me, that AP Readers score the value of a student's open-ended essay according to the quality of writing. The Readers do not make a judgment on the title alone, though it factors in.

“For the purposes of the exam,” I tell my students, “I want you to make a thoughtful decision. But this discussion is about more than that: We're talking about what you read and why.”

Definition and Student Choice

One might take the easy way out and argue that a common definition of a term like “literary merit” is important precisely because of where and when it crops up. Besides appearing regularly on the AP English Literature and Composition Exam, the phrase appears in the language arts standards of dozens of states: New York, Vermont, North Dakota, Florida, Minnesota, et al. In Wisconsin, for instance, eighth-grade students should “develop criteria to evaluate literary merit and explain critical opinions about a text, either informally in conversation or formally in a well-organized speech or essay” (Wisconsin 2006). The argument, then, must go something like this: If every work a student reads to fulfill a school assignment is offered reverentially by the teacher as a paragon of literature — whether that work is *Romeo and Juliet* or *Charlotte’s Web* — how can that student ever develop a “critical opinion” about a work he or she picks up on his own, whether that work is *The Lovely Bones* or a Harlequin romance?

That’s not to say that there’s not a certain de facto exploration of the concept of literary merit going on in many, if not most, language arts classrooms. Teachers are apt to include a variety of texts in their syllabi and students tend to develop an ad hoc sense of what’s “good.” At the same time, many students, I believe, develop a sense of guilt or defensiveness about the works they like to read but aren’t “allowed” to read (think J. K. Rowling, James Patterson or Stephenie Meyer) and, at the worst, shut down in English classes because they feel no investment in works they’ve been assigned. More and more teachers are realizing the dangers of a top-down approach to making assignments; in the interest of cataloging the ongoing debate over the issue of literary merit, it’s worth noting yet a third article from *English Journal*, this one written in 2001 by Rocco Versaci as part of a defense of comic books in the classroom:

As teachers of literature, we should not strive to get students to accept without question our own judgments of what constitutes literary merit, for such acceptance inevitably positions students in the position of seeing literature as a “medicine” that will somehow make them better people, if only they learn to appreciate it. When students view literature in this light, they resent it, and literary works remain a mystery that they cannot solve.

Students need to tackle challenging texts they may never have heard of with the help of a passionate and informed teacher. They also need, for the act of reading for enjoyment, to be validated. They *also* need some tools to evaluate the novels and plays that they *choose* to read. An important step, then, is paying attention to student choice. Ultimately, we need to validate a student’s ability to choose texts of merit on his or her own (or at least to choose texts on his or her own and then evaluate the merit).

As differentiated instruction becomes standard pedagogical practice in more and more classrooms, student choice in reading assignments has become a subject of some discussion. Interestingly, one study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics concluded that although “students felt more positive about the experience when they were allowed to select a story, there were no differences between choice and

non-choice samples in students' reports of their motivation to perform well on the assessment" of that material (Campbell and Donahue 1997). But it's not necessarily improved reading comprehension on standardized tests that proponents of student choice seek to accomplish, although a better test score wouldn't be a bad side effect. Take, for instance, Alfie Kohn (1993, 8–20):

Every teacher who is told what material to cover, when to cover it, and how to evaluate children's performance is a teacher who knows that enthusiasm for one's work quickly evaporates in the face of being controlled. Not every teacher, however, realizes that exactly the same thing holds true for students: Deprive them of self-determination and you have likely deprived them of motivation.

The goal, in other words, is to produce lifelong readers, but also readers whose experiences with texts are rich and deep and have the capability to grow over time.

In the case of an AP English Literature and Composition teacher like myself, that goal is brought home by the very format of the exam I'm preparing students to take. The open-ended question on the AP Exam doesn't require students to write about particular works; it requires them to write about literary concepts. Some choices support some arguments better, but a student must have more than the works of Shakespeare in his or her arsenal to answer competently every possible question about characterization, structure, theme, plot or literary technique. The question, in other words, allows for choice, an argument in itself for syllabi that also make such allowances.

In the case of my own summer reading assignment, students read three novels or plays. The first I assign to the entire class; last year, this work was *The Importance of Being Earnest*. (I have my own reasons for making that assignment; they pertain to where and how I start my curriculum.) Students choose the second work from a list of 10 contemporary novels like *Life of Pi*, *The God of Small Things* and *The Kite Runner*. Through this list I accomplish a few goals simultaneously: I expose students to contemporary literature from around the world; I provide choice while at the same time ensuring that enough students will read each work that I can have them participate in small literature circles in class or online; and I offer, implicitly, one standard of literary merit — my own. In our class discussions I'll encourage students to question that standard, since it's as subjective as any other, but it's a starting place for their thinking about the matter.

The third work students read is a novel or play of their own choosing. Here's the actual assignment:

Choose one other novel or play of literary merit to read over the summer. This work may be contemporary or classic, but you will be required to defend your choice and to analyze and refer to it in class discussions and writing assignments. If you want a list of suggested titles, try asking friends, your parents, the local bookstore clerk, a librarian or other teachers — or even me.

Thus, I get *The Da Vinci Code* from one student, *Great Expectations* from another. Which student came out ahead? That depends on whom you ask.

Throughout my course, I try to offer students choice in their reading in a variety of ways. When we study *Hamlet*, I assign small groups to read other tragedies together and to present group projects. Instead of a standard research paper on the work of one writer, I ask students to focus their research on a thematic comparison of works by more than one author; the reading list is the toughest part of this assignment, and it usually takes consultation with more than one English teacher in our school for a student to put that list together. At other times, I ask students to choose outside reading from a list and complete dialectical journals or, sometimes, to sit down with me for an oral interview about the text. And sometimes (over the winter holiday break, for instance) I instruct them to read one book — any book — that they can tell the class about upon our return.

Along the way, I manage to teach a healthy number of canonical works: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Conrad, a whole slew of poets. And the discussion about literary merit doesn't end in the first week of school; it enriches our reading of, say, a sonnet by Milton in the same week as an epigram by Jonson, or Cummings's "since feeling is first" in the same class period as Catullus' poems to Lesbia. In this way, we create an ongoing discussion among readers: those in the class and those from throughout the centuries.

When the Discussion's Over: Further Strategies

I believe in the value of the philosophical discussion of the phrase "literary merit" with students, but I also value practical application of concepts and ideas raised in the classroom. Here, for instance, are a few ideas for capitalizing on an initial conversation about how we judge quality in the texts we read:

- As I mentioned above, the question of a work's merit offers avenues for research that are ultimately, I think, more interesting and meaningful than a simple encyclopedia-based report on an author's life. Send students looking for critical responses to a text from contemporary reviewers, other authors or the literary community. It's interesting to read, for example, the response of Steinbeck's own generation to *The Grapes of Wrath* through the lens of historical understanding.
- Many sample writing prompts, such as the one I quoted at the beginning of this article, are available to teachers at the College Board's AP Central® website and in other places on the Web; it's fairly easy to construct more of your own. Throughout the year, I periodically read several of these prompts to students and have them list titles they might use to answer each one. The exercise doesn't just prepare students for the actual AP Exam or other on-demand writing assignments like it; it also gets them talking to one another and as a class about what they've read, where there are gaps in their reading ("I've never read a work I'd classify as magical realism — have you?"), and how they as a group judge quality and merit. During these sessions, I encourage students to jot down titles, mentioned by classmates, that are unfamiliar or that they might like to add to their own personal reading lists.

- Often, the criteria included in a class definition of literary merit compel students to value close reading and careful analysis. If, for instance, a work that fits the definition includes “innovation in style” or “voice,” as the class definition provided above suggests, then surely it’s incumbent upon a group of students studying *Pride and Prejudice* to find examples of innovative style or to identify the characteristics of the narrator’s voice. Pointing to the criteria on the class definition, I sometimes place the responsibility on small groups of students to decide which passages in a text we most need to discuss as a class; this approach has the added benefit of making it certain that *someone* in the class will have an opinion to add to the discussion of a given passage.
- The process of applying a definition of merit to specific texts does not only lend itself to better discussion, it also provokes just the sort of thoughtful response I’m looking for in analytical essays. One might use parts of the definition to make an essay assignment (there’s value in writing about specific passages that demonstrate innovation, for instance), but the definition might also be helpful in the revision process. Many student essays not only fail to show the sort of thematic depth specified on the list above, they actively try to excise depth out of themes of novels and plays in their essays, summing up an argument with a neat, tidy conclusion that fails to illustrate the nuances of the work’s meaning (“Macbeth fails because of his ambition . . .”). Revisiting the list is a good way to guide students closer to writing sophisticated thesis statements and final paragraphs.

At some point during the year I share this information with the class: The College Board itself is vague about the meaning of the phrase “literary merit.” It defines the term partly through comparison to a list of texts, partly by excluding “ephemeral works in popular genres” that “yield all (or nearly all) of their pleasures of thought and feeling the first time through,” and partly by referring to Thoreau’s injunction to “read the best books first” (College Board 2006, 45). It’s a disservice to students, I think, not to allow them an opportunity to examine such a term critically; to, in fact, enter into a dialogue that has been ongoing for perhaps as long as stories have been told; and to engage in that dialogue as equal members, not as mere recipients of others’ opinions. If we want students to value the works we respect enough to read and write about them with care, we need to respect the student’s right to value or not to value works of literature. We must let those works rest not on the weight of syllabi or traditional lists or teachers’ preferences but, in fact, on their own merits.

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