

A Classic and a Contemporary: Entering the Conversation

Quite frequently, academia is compared to having a conversation, but not a conversation as we think of it denotatively. The ideas you share with a community of learners--through writing, respectful debate, and (literal) discussions--all contribute to this large conversation that helps shape our culture. Thus, this conversation is broad and can have a far-reaching impact. Your voice is not only valued, but crucial in the scholarly conversation and in this class. We will start our year of AP Literature entering into this academic conversation.

Before we begin our exploration of ideas, it is imperative to understand that the nature of academic conversation is changing. Curricula, course offerings, and the books we read all reflect these changes. This year, we will begin by addressing a key aspect of change in academics. To do so, we must understand the idea of what is called the literary canon:

Originally, the Greeks used a *kanôn* ('straight rod') as a tool in surveying and construction projects to keep things straight and level. Over time, its use as a measuring device was adapted to apply to keeping literary works straight, as well. Through the years, 'canon' has been employed in various ways to classify literature: from assigning works to a particular tradition (i.e. Biblical canon) to attributing them to a specific author (i.e. Shakespearean canon).

The primary usage discussed in this lesson, though, refers to the canon as a yardstick for measuring the value and validity of the world's literature. Many members of the American academic community in the 1980's revolted against this idea of what was then often called the **Western canon**, which was claimed to be a collection of the world's highest and most influential literature. They felt that there were many other examples of great literature to be found in the world and that the current collection was not as inclusive as it should be. For instance, some of these protestors' central arguments focused on the underrepresentation of women and minorities among the ranks of authors whose works were considered important enough to be part of the literary canon.

Since the 80's, the literary canon has expanded considerably, now including many female authors and people from all walks of life. ([Literary Canon: Definition & Authors - Video & Lesson Transcript | Study.com](#))

What does this have to do with us? The literary canon, especially as defined in AP Literature, has been shaped by older works that have not always been representative of all voices. We will begin our academic conversation by determining if some of the classic works in the AP Literature canon can still hold truths that apply to our world today, to see if they transcend time. In other words, are they still culturally relevant? Then, we will see if you find some of these classics to be as valuable as acclaimed works that have been published recently.

To enter this conversation as the year begins, you will read two books this summer and write a bit about each. These assignments will be due the second Friday after the school year begins. At that time, you will have your own AP Literature Google Classroom and will be able to submit the assignments to it. The rubrics with which you will be scored are linked below.

[AP English Literature and Composition Scoring Rubrics, Effective Fall 2019](#)

Task One: A Classic

Part A: Read a classic novel.

Use the links and list below to guide you in choosing a novel that is part of the traditional literary canon. Since these books are older, it is typically easy to find a free pdf copy of them online. Please note, some of the works listed in the links may be children's literature. Be sure you pick a novel for adults. As you read the book you choose, look for the development of themes central to the story. As a reminder, "a theme is a universal idea, lesson, or message explored throughout a work of literature. One key characteristic of literary themes is their universality, which is to say that themes are ideas that not only apply to the specific characters and events of a book or play, but also express broader truths about human experience that readers can apply to their own lives" ([Theme - Definition and Examples | LitCharts](#)). Remember, a theme is not expressed in a single word or topic, but rather in a statement.

[50 Books to Read Before You Die by Barnes and Noble](#)

[100 Must-Read Classic Books, As Chosen By Our Readers | Fiction, Novels & More](#)

Suggested Classics: I have listed some titles from the above links for your consideration because past students have found them to be of interest. You do not need to adhere to these, however, and if you read them, feel free to take a negative stance in your writing assignment as long as it is defended.

- *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley
- *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen
- *The Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston
- *1984*, George Orwell
- *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley
- *The Stranger*, Albert Camus
- *Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka
- *Catcher in the Rye*, JD Salinger

Part B: 2-3 page essay, MLA format, typed double spaced

Does this classic share truths or themes with the reader that transcend time and remain relevant today? To answer this question, look beyond time, place, and plot. Identify what you see as the primary theme, and take a stance as to its relevance today. Remember, this is an analysis of ideas, not style.

12 points, AP rubric number three

Task Two: A Contemporary

Part A: Read a book of your choice following the parameters below. Pay close attention to the merits of the book's style and content. For this assignment, an author's style will be defined as the way an author uses building blocks of language to create literary traits (conventions), such as characterization or tone. (Think about the way style builds ethos, pathos, and logos; it's the same idea.) The aspects of style are: diction, imagery, syntax, figurative language, and detail.

To choose your book, consider the paragraph below and use the link provided to help you in your search.

What interests you? Whose voices do you want to "hear" that you haven't heard in your high school English classes thus far? What type, or genres, of stories do you like? Go to the link above and search for a novel that piques your interest and that has won The National Book Award or that has been a finalist for that award. Please do not choose a young adult novel as this is a college-level course. These books are popular and should be available at the library, or if you prefer, can be bought used and for little money on sites like thriftbooks.com. (The books on thriftbooks.com are usually less expensive than their shipping fees.)

[National Book Foundation, Presenter of the National Book Awards](#)

Part B: Choose a passage from your novel, from a lengthy paragraph to a page. Copy it at the top of a Google doc. Analyze and evaluate the way the primary way style gets across the passage's main idea. As part of your evaluation, sum up in your conclusion whether or not this passage proves this book should be included in the evolving literary canon.

(2 pages MLA format).

This assignment will serve as your baseline assessment for the course. It will be scored using rubric two of those posted above.

Feel free to email Ms. Gerent for help. Please allow her a few days time to respond to any queries.