

THE CHANGING LITERARY CANON

Perhaps the best reading creates some kind of change in us: we see more clearly; we're alert to nuances; we ask questions that previously didn't occur to us. Henry David Thoreau had that sort of reading in mind when he remarked in *Walden* (1854) that the books he valued most were those that caused him to date "a new era in his life from the reading." Readers are sometimes changed by literature, but it is also worth noting that the life of a literary work can also be affected by the ways books are distributed, reviewed, and recommended (as well as assigned in courses like the one you are taking). Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, really achieved the status of an accepted classic not when it was first published, but a quarter-century later during World War II, when the American military distributed tens of thousands of copies of the book to G.I.s who needed to pass the time. This is not to take away from the book's greatness, but rather to suggest that a huge number of readers help a book's reputation. Around the turn of the twenty-first century Oprah Winfrey's televised book club could instantly turn an obscure writer into a household name. Today book reviews on Amazon or on social media sites such as Goodreads have weakened the power of traditional professional literary reviewers in venues like the *New York Times Book Review* or the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Such changes have steadily accelerated as the literary **canon** — those works considered by scholars, critics, and teachers to be the most important to read and study — has undergone a significant series of shifts. The importance of certain canonical writers such as William Shakespeare or Charles Dickens has rarely been questioned, but other writers that your great-grandparents would likely have heard of such as Anthony Trollope or Sherwood Anderson are probably not in your field of reference. There has also been a widespread effort to scrutinize whether the establishment of an agreed-upon list of “great books” excluded writers whose voices, perspectives, and backgrounds were marginal to society’s mainstream. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the people who established the canon were almost uniformly wealthy, educated, white, and male, and the authors they canonized were as well. Writers who previously were overlooked, undervalued, neglected, or studiously ignored have been brought into focus in an effort to create a more diverse literary canon, one that recognizes the contributions of many cultures and a wide range of individual perspectives. In the 1980s, for example, the famous novelist Alice Walker argued convincingly that American readers had been neglecting the work of Zora Neale Hurston, a folklorist and fiction writer who died in poverty and obscurity in 1960 after achieving some fame during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. Walker argued that Hurston was neglected partially because of her race, gender, and refusal to conform to standard literary tastes. Walker’s argument was convincing: at least for a time, Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was

widely taught in high schools and colleges alongside canonical works like J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). This kind of enlargement of the canon resulted from reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The civil rights, feminist, and gay pride movements of that era sensitized literary critics to the political, moral, and esthetic necessity of reevaluating women writers and African American literature. More recently, LGBTQ+, Native American, Asian, and Latinx writers have been making their way into the American literary canon. Moreover, on a broader scale, the canon is being revised and enlarged to include the works of writers from parts of the world other than the West, a development that reflects the changing values, concerns, and complexities of recent decades, when literary landscapes have shifted as dramatically as the political boundaries of much of the world.

No semester's reading list — or anthology — can adequately or accurately echo all the new voices competing to be heard as part of the mainstream literary canon, but recent efforts to open up the canon attempt to sensitize readers to a plurality of writers from all over the world. This development has not occurred without its urgent advocates or passionate dissenters. It's no surprise that issues about race, gender, and class often get people off the fence and on their feet. (These controversies are discussed further in [Chapter 42](#), "Critical Strategies for Reading.") Although what we regard as literature — whether it's called great, classic, or canonical — continues to generate debate, there is no question that such

controversy will continue to reflect readers' values as well as the writers they admire.