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# THE KANSAS LITERARY CANON: A STUDY OF TEXTS TAUGHT IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH COURSES

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## Abstract

Selecting diverse texts is vital for creating culturally inclusive and responsive literacy classrooms. However, despite growing student diversity and a push for multicultural literature curricular adoption, little impact has been made on secondary teacher multicultural text selection. This text selection stagnation begs further examination amidst the alarming context of a marked reading decline in U.S. classrooms wherein fewer than one-third of students entered high school as proficient readers this year (Nation’s Report Card, 2022). This study uses data from recent high school graduates to unfurl text selection practices in Kansas high school English classrooms. Study results detail Kansas's most frequently taught texts, compare these texts to two previous studies, and suggest a continued homogeneity in text selection. These results demonstrate the need to understand the factors influencing text selection practices and the impact of traditional text selection on students’ engagement, motivation, and learning.

**Keywords:** English curriculum, text selection practices, diversifying curriculum, high schools, literary canon

## Introduction & Literature Review

Literacy is often positioned as the nexus of learning across disciplines. The mainstay of literacy, reading, is frequently cited as a litmus test for prosperity and societal progress worldwide. Alarming, recent U.S. National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) reports indicate only 32% of fourth graders and 29% of eighth graders performed at or above reading proficiency levels (Nation’s Report Card [NRC], 2022). Unfortunately, Kansas NAEP data reflects this dismal trend, with only 28% scoring at or above proficient and a designation “significantly lower than National public” (NRC, 2022). More concerning, these scores show a statewide four percentage point reading decline since 2019, disquieting educators, families, and policymakers alike (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2022).

Abysmal reading comprehension scores, which demarcate only one-third of entering ninth graders as proficient readers, demand a closer look at reading instructional practices and materials. Reading comprehension involves three central elements: a reader, a text, and an activity/purpose for reading (RAND, 2002). Texts and selecting such texts are pivotal to reading instruction (Hiebert, 2017) and can impact literacy learner identity (Carter, 2007; Lee, 1993) and success (Alvermann & Commeyras, 1994; Applebee, 1993). Selecting instructional texts has long been established as one of English teachers' most important instructional decisions (Freire, 1970; Hunt, 1996; Northrop et al., 2019). Now more than ever, the selection of diverse and multicultural texts has been lauded as a pedagogical gateway to multicultural education and a high-leverage instructional practice for

underserved and striving readers (Bishop, 1990; Boyd, 2017; Flores et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2011; Jogie, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021).

However, even as the PK-12 U.S. student population grows increasingly diverse, the teaching force has remained stagnant regarding cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity (Egalite et al., 2015), wherein 80% of teachers are white (NCES, 2019) compared to less than 50% of U.S. students (NCES, 2019; Schaeffer, 2021). Bolstered by mounting evidence that this teacher/student cultural mismatch contributes to gaps in academic achievement for diverse students, the proximate need to develop teachers who are culturally responsive and agentive has never been greater (Carter Andrews, 2021; Gershenson et al., 2022; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2018). Though culturally responsive literacy teaching, centering students' varied and intersecting cultural identities as classroom assets to embolden literacy and academic success (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995), is a promising pedagogical practice, literacy teachers must be intentionally trained in and implement humanizing, asset-based pedagogies to realize the positive impacts of this work (Kwok et al., 2020, 2022; Rios et al., 2024). Without intentional, immersive training and tools that center diverse identities and cultures across teaching and curriculum, continued negative impacts on student outcomes and teacher success are likely (Egalite et al., 2015; Souto-Manning, 2021; Villegas & Irvine, 2010;).

Despite increasing student diversity and a three-decade push for multicultural literature curricular adoption (Bishop, 1990), little impact has been made on the texts teachers select for classroom use in over a hundred years (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). In fact, in direct contrast to the diverse learners they serve, most titles teachers select for instruction are written by white men from an Anglo-Saxon tradition, the same texts they likely read as students (Darragh & Boyd, 2019; Hale & Crowe, 2001). And, while there has been some reported growth in diverse text selection practices by novice educators, the traditional canon still holds the greatest sway in curriculum, especially with experienced teachers (Applebee, 1992; Ervin, 2022; Perry, 2013). Indeed, calls for large-scale curricular book reform and diversification have gone long unanswered, likely due to such barriers as (1) limitations of standardized curriculum and high-stakes state assessments (Avalos et al., 2020); (2) teachers' limited knowledge of diverse texts and those outside of those within their own educational experiences (Friese et al., 2008); (3) resource limitations present (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015); and (4) sociopolitical tensions from communities and families (Ervin, 2022).

Despite increasing student diversity and a three-decade push for multicultural literature curricular adoption (Bishop, 1990), little impact has been made on the texts teachers select for classroom use in over a hundred years (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015).

Text selection in Kansas high school English classrooms is complicated by the “reemergence of concern with content and approaches” for teaching literature in K-12 schools (Applebee, 1989, p. 1). While secondary schools have not been explicitly or exclusively targeted by sweeping national and state-wide book bans, high school English classrooms often feature book-length texts rich with characters, plots, and circumstances rich with complexity, nuance, and challenges demanding reflection, debate, or empathy (Rehn, 2023; Perrillo & Newman, 2023). This curricular complexity makes high school English classrooms the perfect setting for sociopolitical culture wars and positions high school English teachers as unwilling subjects of “educational intimidation” and “educational gag orders”, resulting in a record high of 3,362 book bans in the past year (Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009; PEN America, 2023). In Kansas particularly, PEN America reports seven official book bans to 94 distinct titles within cities such as Gardner, Goddard, Leavenworth, Topeka, and Wichita, most frequently citing inappropriate sexually explicit content and offensive language as

reasons for bans (PEN America, 2023). Disproportionately, these bans target books on race or racism, feature characters of color, experiences of LGBTQ+ characters, topics of abuse, health, and wellbeing, and/or themes of grief and death (PEN America, 2023). Though the resurgence of widespread bans is relatively new, the chilling effects of these practices on curricular decision-making, like teacher book-length text selection, cannot be overstated.

Though strategic book bans from coordinated groups like *Moms for Liberty* make it seem that full-length texts in high school English classrooms are wholly salacious and avant-garde, previous studies on full-length texts in high school English classrooms tell a different story. Applebee's (1989) national survey of book-length high school English works reflects a homogenous canon in his description of the top 10 taught titles, most frequently taught authors, and grade levels in which the texts were taught. The titles and authors remained the same across public, private, and independent school settings. Additionally, there was a considerable range in the grade levels in which the titles were taught, wherein many texts were taught across multiple grades. Finally, the top titles were compared with a study conducted in 1963 (Anderson, 1964), which established canon continuity, Shakespeare's dominance, and the alarming lack of female and multicultural authorship. Notably, Applebee (1989) described a canonical shift to incorporate more contemporary texts but also countered that these dubbed "contemporary texts" were at least 40 years old.

Positioned in the current political context as a three-decades-later follow-up to Applebee's (1989) inquiry, this study seeks to understand what book-length texts are taught in Kansas high schools. This work is of merit due to the lack of statewide information about text-selection practices and the established connection between text selection and student interest and motivation for reading (Guthrie, 2002; Robertson & Padesky, 2020; Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2021). Specifically, the study is notable as it focuses on the results of teacher text selection decisions in practice rather than merely on the criteria and guidelines for doing so (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). Moreover, reporting statewide book-length text selection practices and comparing these with historical data holds practical and policy development potential. This study seeks to portray the top texts taught in Kansas and the types of texts selected (e.g. multicultural, contemporary, traditional), and compare these with previous book-length text reporting from the past thirty years. We examine this concept with two research questions: What are current book-length text selection practices in Kansas high school English classrooms? How do these practices compare with reported text selection practices from decades past?

## Methods

### Data Selection and Collection

Survey data was collected from a recruitment pool of recent high school graduates enrolled as university students within a sizeable Kansas land-grant institution. The survey was delivered electronically using university bulk email lists of college Kansas students representing various communities from across the state to inquire about their experiences with book-length, whole-class texts in their high school English classrooms. Responses were solicited from college-aged Kansas students instead of Kansas teachers or school districts to protect Kansas English teachers from experiencing possible or additional feelings of educational surveillance and intimidation.

Researchers collected data via an anonymous electronic survey in Qualtrics distributed via student listserv in alignment with IRB approval. Participation was encouraged with randomized prize drawings of student-friendly incentives with contact information entered via a separate secondary survey platform connected only by a link. The survey was designed to take less than 10 minutes to reduce participant fatigue and encourage persistence. In total, 147 participant responses were collected, and 136 were completed and included for final analysis.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative descriptive analyses were conducted to describe, summarize, and establish patterns within the collected text selection data (Loeb et al., 2017). First, mirroring Applebee's (1989) previous analyses, the lists of taught titles and author information frequencies were used to describe and summarize current book-length texts and compare trends and differences against previous findings. Listed text frequency data were further compared to Applebee's (1989) and Anderson's (1964) previous text frequency research using two-proportion z-tests to determine the statistical significance of changes in text frequency at a  $p < .05$  significance level.

Second, to extend these analyses, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade texts were coded according to four categories: traditional (published before World War II); contemporary (after World War II), diverse text (both author and characters are from multicultural backgrounds), or diverse characters (white author but characters are from multicultural background). For our purposes, diverse texts are described as texts about or by individuals who have been marginalized and are considered outside the mainstream of society, including individuals from diverse cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds (Salas et al., 2002; Yokota, 2001).

## Findings

The findings of the study are displayed in two sections. The first section describes text and authorship frequencies and compares two previous studies. The second section investigates and portrays text type categorization in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades.

### Book-Length Text Frequencies and Trends

Findings suggest a continued need for more diversity in text selection. Across 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade, participants listed 483 total and 203 discrete book-length texts. An evaluation of the top 20 texts assigned suggests a continued homogeneity of text selection: 100% were written by white authors, with 90% being from American or British lineage. Men wrote eighty-five percent of the top-taught texts, but a female author wrote the most frequently taught text, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, listed by 93 (68%) of participants. Shakespeare was the most taught author, and dramas of *Romeo and Juliet* (91, 67%), *Macbeth* (31, 23%), *Hamlet* (21, 18%), and *Julius Caesar* (12, 9%) comprised 158 (33%) of the total taught texts. Texts centering diverse authors, characters, and/or geographically diverse settings were fully absent from the top 20 texts assigned, save Elie Wiesel's *Night*, which portrays the real-life horrors of the Holocaust. Multiple texts were listed and read across grade levels, especially *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Macbeth*. The full list of the top 20 texts across grade levels is detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Top 20 most assigned texts in Kansas 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade high school English classrooms**

Top 20 Most Popular (in descending order)	Frequency (instances, overall percentage)	Text Title	Author race/ethnicity	Author gender	Author geographic heritage
1	93 (68%)	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	White	Female	American
2	91 (67%)	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	White	Male	British
3	62 (46%)	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	White	Male	American
4	42 (31%)	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	White	Male	American

Top 20 Most Popular (in descending order)	Frequency (instances, overall percentage)	Text Title	Author race/ethnicity	Author gender	Author geographic heritage
5	38 (28%)	<i>Lord of the Flies</i>	White	Male	British
6	38 (28%)	<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	White	Male	American
7	31 (23%)	<i>Macbeth</i>	White	Male	British
8	29 (21%)	<i>The Crucible</i>	White	Male	American
9	24 (18%)	<i>Hamlet</i>	White	Male	British
10	23 (17%)	<i>1984</i>	White	Male	British
11	21 (15%)	<i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	White	Male	American
12	20 (15%)	<i>Animal Farm</i>	White	Male	British
13	18 (13%)	<i>The Odyssey</i>	White	Male	Greek
14	14 (10%)	<i>Night</i>	White	Male	Romanian American
15	13 (10%)	<i>Frankenstein</i>	White	Female	British
16	12 (9%)	<i>Julius Caesar</i>	White	Male	British
17	9 (7%)	<i>Speak</i>	White	Female	American
18	8 (6%)	<i>Huckleberry Finn</i>	White	Male	American
19	7 (5%)	<i>Hatchet</i>	White	Male	American
20	7 (5%)	<i>Grapes of Wrath</i>	White	Male	American

*n* (total participants) =136

The data from this study affords noteworthy comparisons to the results of Applebee's (1989) and Anderson's (1964) most frequently listed high school text results. For example, as shown in Table 2, all but two texts, *Fahrenheit 451* and *1984* appear on all three top-10 lists. These two texts were likely not included in the earlier two studies due to their relative recency in publication, respectively, in 1959 and 1949. Of the eight texts on all three lists, only *Hamlet* was taught at a frequency that was not statistically significant from 1964 to 2023. Five listed texts, annotated with the asterisk (\*) and addition (+) symbols, were listed at a percentage significantly different from the 1989 and 1964 samples. Marked declines in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* and marked increases in teaching *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Crucible* were observed from 1964 to 2023. Statistically significant differences in frequency between 1989 and 2023 were seen in the decreased reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, along with the uptake of *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Remarkably, two texts that made the 2023 top-20 list, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, were among the top 10 most widely taught texts at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tanner, 1907).



**Table 2. Frequency comparison of 2023 top taught Kansas texts to Applebee (1989) & Anderson’s (1964) national evaluations**

<b>Top 10</b> <i>(in descending order)</i>	<b>Text Title</b>	<b>Rios (2023)</b> <b>Frequency</b> <i>(overall percentage)</i>	<b>Applebee (1989)</b> <b>Frequency</b> <i>(overall percentage)</i>	<b>Anderson (1964)</b> <b>Frequency</b> <i>(overall percentage)</i>
1	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	68%*+	74%	8%
2	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	67%*+	90%	14%
3	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	46%*+	54%	<5%
4	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	31%*+	Not listed	Not listed
5	<i>Lord of the Flies</i>	28%+	56%	<5%
6	<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	28%+	60%	<5%
7	<i>Macbeth</i>	23%+	81%	90%
8	<i>The Crucible</i>	21%+	47%	<5%
9	<i>Hamlet</i>	18%	56%	33%
10	<i>1984</i>	17%*+	Not listed	Not listed

*n* (2023) = 136 participants

*n* (1988) = 322 participants

*n* (1963) = 222 participants

\*Percentage significantly different from 1988 sample,  $p < .05$

+Percentage significantly different from 1963 sample,  $p < .05$

### **Text Categorization of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade texts**

Categorically, listed texts were grouped into two distinct codes and two cross-cutting codes. The first code, traditional texts, describe texts written before World War II (Rybaokva & Roccanti, 2016). The second code, contemporary, describes texts written after World War II. The first cross-cutting code, diverse texts, describes texts (contemporary or traditional) written by multicultural authors about multicultural characters, places, or experiences. The second cross-cutting code, diverse characters, describes texts (contemporary or traditional) featuring multicultural characters written by white authors. Categorically, the top-20 texts are 60% traditional and 40% contemporary. As for the cross-cutting codes, one contemporary text (5%) of the top-20 could be described as a “diverse text” as it was written by a multicultural author and centered on a diverse character perspective and experience.

Featuring largely American literature and authors, the 269 reported 11<sup>th</sup>-grade texts follow similar trends, with 181 (67%) categorized as traditional, 88 (33%) as contemporary, 17 (6%) as diverse texts, and 4 (1%) as featuring diverse characters. The 223 reported 12<sup>th</sup> grade text categories most closely mirror the ratios of the top-20 wherein 137 (61%) of texts are traditional, 86 (39%) are contemporary, 17 (8%) are diverse texts, and 5 (2%) center diverse characters. Both between grade levels and compared to the top 20 overall, text ratios are consistent across categories. Moreover, there needs to be more representation of diverse authors, characters, and perspectives must be

represented in every grouping or grade level. Finally, though over one-third of texts were coded as contemporary, less than 10% of the top 20 texts were written in the last thirty years, with none written in the previous two decades.

**Table 3. Categories of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade texts**

Grade Level	Distinct Codes		Cross-Cutting Codes	
	Traditional <i>(frequency and percentage)</i>	Contemporary <i>(frequency and percentage)</i>	Diverse text <i>(frequency and percentage)</i>	Diverse characters <i>(frequency and percentage)</i>
11 <sup>th</sup>	181 (67%)	88 (33%)	17 (6%)	4 (1%)
12 <sup>th</sup>	137 (61%)	86 (39%)	17 (8%)	5 (2%)

*n* (11<sup>th</sup> grade responses) = 269

*n* (12<sup>th</sup> grade responses) = 223

### Discussion

Results from this study depict a high school literary landscape replete with text stagnation and canonical monoculturalism. Yet again, most reported texts are well over fifty years old and written by white men from an Anglo-Saxon tradition in the United States or Great Britain. Beyond this, the reported canon was primarily written for an adult audience, evidenced by their centering on adult main characters. Secondary English texts should be attentive to and representative of students’ diverse identities, and they should also be responsive to adolescent students’ interests and motivations (Bishop, 1990).

Lee’s (1993) research suggests monocultural and racially exclusive text selection disadvantages diverse and marginalized students because their cultural, social, and linguistic identities are at odds with the texts they are required to read. Furthermore, additional research describes the negative impacts of a too-heavy reliance on British literature—termed “all that crazy White stuff” by student participants—on racially marginalized students’ identities, voices, and success in a high school English classroom (Carter, 2007). Dyches’s (2017) work proposes cultivating and creating a canonical counter-curriculum that develops students’ sociopolitical consciousness, affords ways to talk back to traditional canonical literature, and engenders culturally responsive instruction. Especially amidst an ever-diversifying Kansas state student population, marked shifts must occur to diversify the Kansas high school canon to make it more representative of the students in our classroom and their interests and identities (Robertson & Padesky, 2020; Yang, 2022).

Moreover, while diversifying teachers’ text selection is necessary, as previously cited, time, finances, resources, and support barriers exist to realize this effort. Especially within an unprecedented teacher shortage and the overabundance of novice educators with less teacher preparation (Nguyen, 2022; Redding & Henry, 2018), additional curricular and pedagogical resources are needed to aid teachers in diversifying their curriculum and teaching practices (Kwok, 2022; Pak et al., 2020). Additionally, while the selection of diverse texts is one facet of engaging in curricular diversification (Henderson et al., 2020) and culturally responsive literacy instruction, the act of selecting a multicultural text itself may not correlate to widespread instructional shifts toward equity and diversity in the English classroom (Farinde-Wu, 2017; Gere, 2009). Thus, to better facilitate a

teacher's uptake of a culturally responsive stance, teachers must be provided with tangible support and resources to empower widespread curricular and instructional shifts (Ladson-Billings, 2023; Rios et al., 2024; Sharma & Christ, 2017).

The results of this study are limited by the survey results' self-reported nature, the participant pool's relative size, and the singular location of the data collection. Future research should broaden participant recruitment and gather additional responses to offer greater reliability and credibility of the findings. Further research should include teachers' perspectives on text selection practices and explore students' considerations of these texts in high school classrooms. Better understanding students' responses to text selection can help teachers and future teachers make better-informed decisions to nurture student engagement and interest in literacy, thereby cultivating student achievement.

### Implications

The need to diversify the high school literature canon holds many implications for stakeholders in English teacher education, teaching, and learning. To begin, teacher preparation programs should consider the opportunity that young adult literature courses provide to infuse issues of diverse text selection. Including diverse texts within these courses is standard, but including information about diverse text selection processes, such as publishing industry diversification information, equity bookshelf audits, principles for selecting diverse texts, and text censorship information, is critical. Second, teachers need access to free and valuable resources to choose and teach diverse texts within our current fraught sociopolitical context. The following resources might hold promise for classroom English teachers on topics of text selection and censorship: (1) National Council of Teachers of English's [Intellectual Freedom Center](#) with resources about text selection and censorship; (2) [#DisruptTexts guides](#) that challenge the traditional canon; (3) Teaching Books [Diverse Books Toolkit](#), which includes lists of diverse books by cultural identity, subject, genre, grade level, and more; (4) [DiverseBook Finder](#) for a book search database focused solely on multicultural children's books; (5) [Pen America's resources](#) to challenge book bans and legislation. Together, we can encourage text diversification efforts in our high school English classrooms to impact student learning motivation and humanize spaces for each student in Kansas.

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