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# Literary canon use

within Swedish EFL teaching

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## Abstract

This literary review aims to examine possible changes in usage of literary canon in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) within the Swedish school system. Literary canon discussions surface from time to time in the public debate, however, the discussion of what English canonical works are used in Swedish classrooms and why is largely unexplored. Even though EFL teachers are most likely well aware of what works could be considered canonical, the using of and approaches to these works is not as clear. By reviewing the discussions of English literary canon, the aesthetic/romantic viewpoint contra critical analysis is examined. The Swedish curriculae and syllabi are studied from a (canonical) literature angle. Since there has not been any broader political discussion concerning the EFL canon, propositions and motions about Swedish canon teaching are explored, in order to touch on what opinions there are on the canon in a broader educational context. Finally, there is a concluding discussion of what change in canon usage has occurred and what underlying reasons there may have been for such a change.

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# 1 Introduction

“Teacher, why can’t we read a new book instead of this old and boring one?” “I don’t get this story.” “I want to read X or Y instead.” For a language teacher of both first and second languages, these three quotes may be hauntingly familiar. You have picked a book for a school project or learning exercise that has not gained the interest of your students, and now you either have to stick to your choice or cave in under the pressure of your students and let them be a part of the book-choosing procedure. But does the language teacher take a step back and ask him- or herself why that particular book was chosen in the first place? Enter, the concept of literary canon.

When choosing literature for EFL teaching, there is a certain number of factors that influences those choices even before commencing a lesson plan. What books has the teacher encountered in his or her own EFL learning? What books are available in greater numbers at that particular school? What do the curriculum and syllabus say about what books to read and how to work with those books?

The discussion of what literature to use in language teaching is an ongoing debate, as ongoing as the production of new literature. Terms like “popular literature”, “classics” and “canonical works” occur frequently. Those books labelled “classic” or “canon” have a tendency to linger in schools even though their actual classroom usage is largely undocumented. Is Shakespeare used in EFL classrooms today or has he been forced to step aside for the benefit of other authors?

In this paper I intend to survey the discussion of canon usage within the ELF classroom today and what direction this discussion has taken in the past. To do so, four areas have been included: the debate on what the canon is and how to make use of it, what steering documents for Swedish upper secondary school have to say on the matter, what political suggestions have been put forth concerning the literary canon, and finally a brief look at some examples of practical use of the literary canon in teaching.

The study of the literary canon within Swedish EFL teaching is of great significance since texts carry message and meaning of their own. Literature may convey values and opinions put forth by the authors of the past (and present), which in turn, contribute to what views students form about English society and its past. Student motivation depends on the present-time connection and relevance of the literature used, whether students feel connected to the text or not. Additionally, the way in which the teacher instructs the student to approach

a text is also a key element when it comes to using literature as a means to expand student knowledge of the English society and language.

What role does the literary canon play in Swedish EFL classrooms of today and what of the past? What (if anything) does the concept as a whole entail about language learning that other literature does not? Where is the debate on the literary canon at (both philosophically and politically) today?

To make any sense of the literary canon use in EFL teaching one must apply a wide-angle perspective. How is the literary canon used today? How has it been used in times past? If changes have occurred over time one must also ask how and why? Attitudes towards and debates on the concept of canon in general may also change over time. The canon debate is a multifaceted one, which can only be touched upon in broad strokes within this essay, yet certain aspects are vital to the discussion and will therefore be explored in greater detail.

This review will start off by presenting the method used for acquiring the articles and books needed for the writing of this essay. Results relevant to the topic will then be presented under separate subheadings. Following the results there will be a discussion based on the subheadings of the Results section. The discussion will also bring in some thoughts on the literary canon beyond the written form, followed by suggestions for further empirical research. Lastly, there will be a short concluding section, summarizing the literature review.

## **2 Method**

When assembling this literature review, writings on the area of the literary canon in connection with EFL teaching were examined. To connect this to a Swedish context, steering documents for upper secondary school were also analysed. A search at Gothenburg University Library yielded a handful of documents, in their separate ways relevant to the topic. A couple of C-essays dealt with the canon in relation to the steering documents and education (Frid & Schnell 2008, Edwards 2008), others with use of certain canonical works within teaching (Bengtsson 2012 & Hansson 2010). A C-essay examining political propositions concerning literary canon and teaching (Andersson 2006) from recent years was also included, as well as an article on canonical exclusion (West 1987). From reading these texts and their reference lists, books deemed relevant for the topic were chosen and added for the basis for this study. Beyond essays, articles and books, the current and two previous curriculae for Swedish upper secondary school were also reviewed in those parts relating to EFL teaching.

The keywords when searching for this material include “canon”, “literature”, “classic”, “culture”, “English”, “education”, “EFL”, “teaching” and “learning” to name a few. Corresponding search words in Swedish were utilised to find articles written in Swedish. When searching for material on which to base this survey, there were difficulties finding a large array of material linking Swedish ELF teaching and the canon. Therefore material on the literary canon and EFL in a slightly more separate sense has been analysed. Had only writings on the Swedish EFL been used, this task would have been even more difficult due to an apparent lack of active debate.

Due to time constraints, the lack of own empirical research and the problem of finding empirical research performed by others, trust is put into the reliability of the chosen material and the ability to interpret and interlink this material in a critical and scientific manner.

## **3 Results**

### **3.1 Views on the Canon**

The debate on the literary canon is polarized, basically divided into two general schools of thought, one being Aestheticism/Romanticism, the other being Critical Theory. These will be described so as to give a better understanding of the ensuing discussion.

Aestheticism/Romanticism puts a hard focus on the aesthetic “value” of a text. The literary critic Harold Bloom (Bloom 2000 p. 29) argues that it is a practical possibility to objectively recognize or experience the aesthetic value and the greatness of certain written works. However, it is not possible to impart on those not able to perceive what others sense or realize through aesthetics. These high quality features allow for literature to be and remain a part of the literary canon (Bloom 2000 p. 34 and Kolbas 2001 p. 114). Bloom talks about a “canonical strangeness” (Bloom 2000 p. 13) that occurs in the mind of the first-time reader of a canonical text. This is the smallest common denominator for all works of art that make up the literary canon. In addition, literature of such a high standard calls for re-reading as opposed to other forms of “lesser” literature (p. 44). This view of the literary canon is “closed” since it ascribes high value to works already in the canon, effectively using the canon itself as a standard for high culture, making additions and changes difficult (Kolbas 2001 p. 122). Lee Morrissey agrees in part, meaning that canons are closed yet interpretation of them is not. Along with new additions and rediscoveries, these revisions may actually be interpreted as an “opening” of and a vital injection in the canon (Morrissey 2005 p. 12). As a sort of “absorption and appreciation” method, aestheticism/romanticism views literary

criticism as an elitist phenomenon (Bloom 2000 p. 28). Although Bloom (p. 47) does not deny the fact that the literary canon contains various social messages, he considers the challengers of the canon to suffer from an upper-class sense of guilt over social inequalities, which would suggest literary criticism being an activity exclusive to the socially advantaged.

Critical Theory, as described by Max Horkheimer, attempts “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer 1982 p. 244). As part of this school of thought, Literary Criticism attempts to “open up” the literary canon and analyze the works within it, debating what hidden ideologies and opinions can be found at various points in time (Morrissey 2005 p. 10). Literary Criticism is a very broad practice with many different approaches. Focus on ethnicity, class or gender (or combinations of them) are the most common when taking a critical standpoint when reading. Literature, according to E. Dean Kolbas, is not made in a social vacuum (Kolbas 2001 p. 140), but is always dependent on factors such as where, when and by whom it was written, and even where, when and by whom it is read. The interpretation of literature is always relative to its context (Andersson 2006 p. 15). Canonical works could, via critical theory, be a source for discussion beyond simple aesthetics (for example West 1987, Hansson 2010 and Bengtsson 2012). The construction of the canon through the politics of the time justifies its current deconstruction via critical theory (Kolbas 2001 p. 37), being a tool aiming to help understanding underlying meanings and messages when reading canonical works (p. 80).

Frank Kermode argues that canonical texts may change semantically when reworked for release of new editions, due to subtle editorial alterations (Kermode 2004 p. 44). He connects such alterations to bias, which all people utilize (more or less subconsciously) when making sense of a text (p. 37). This may result in a different choice of words when modernizing the language in older texts, which thus may lead to small slips of meaning. Such changes, he argues, are often for the good of the text, to maintain relevance for the here and now (p. 32) and the ever-changing persona of readers (p. 46). In addition, van Peer (quoted in Andersson 2006 p. 27) points to the importance of a certain timelessness connected to the ideas of a written text, thus rendering it a relevant read long after its creation, this view being shared with Collie & Slater (1987 p. 3). But canonical texts can also fill a function as monuments frozen in time, giving an insight into historical values (Bengtsson 2012 p. 7).

## 3.2 Swedish Curriculae and Syllabi

English became a compulsory subject in the past equivalent to the current upper secondary school in 1856 along with earlier compulsory language studies in German and French. Later on, in 1946, English replaced German as the first foreign language in Swedish schools as a whole. By this time, the English language had spread globally through new media and popular culture, appearing to be the obvious choice within modern language teaching and of increasing importance to more and more people (Frid & Schnell 2008 pp. 21-22).

Curriculae from the time of a complete adoption of the comprehensive school system in 1972 will now be analysed from the first one (Lgy 70) up to the present (Gy 2011).

### 3.2.1 Lgy 70 – Curriculum for upper secondary school

Even if the Swedish school system at this point was fully comprehensive to the extent of being a school for all, there were still two different study plans, one for the two-year programmes (Skolöverstyrelsen 1971), and one for the three- and four-year programmes (Skolöverstyrelsen 1973). Both documents are identical to a large extent, yet some important differences occur on several occasions.

Under the heading “Treatment of text(s)”<sup>1</sup> one can read that the teaching of English through texts should be varied for the sake of not just different educational purposes such as language analysis and skill(s) exercises, information on facts, but also the aesthetic side of emotions and experience. The specific goal for the treatment of fiction and literary texts is to “attain an experience” (1971 p. 156 and 1973 p. 16). Beyond this, the study plan for the longer three- and four-year programmes suggests making a lot of room for fiction, ranging from “simple entertainment literature” to “classic fiction” followed by a suggestion to use “high literature”, yet sparingly due to its higher difficulty. Examples of such high literature should be works by “important authors from various times” (1973 p. 17).

Later, under the subheading “Treatment of fiction/prose”, the subject syllabus again emphasises the experience of “artful fiction” and discourage work on and analysis of linguistic features so as to not hinder this experience. When discussing fiction, the plans list the following aspects to follow: “Subject matter and plot”, “Point of View”, “Setting”, “Character”, “Style” and “Theme”. In addition, selected shorter passages are suggested for close reading (1971 p. 162 and 1973 pp. 22-24). At the beginning of the two-year plan, the reader (in this case the teacher) is alerted to the higher challenge of fiction in general so as not

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<sup>1</sup> My translation.



to use too difficult or too many of them when teaching (1971 p. 162), this alert is entirely absent from the longer programmes.

The section “Cultural orientation” (1971 p. 169 and 1973 p. 34) suggests cooperation between English and other school subjects (such as History, Social Sciences and Swedish) “not to help students obtain an overall view of the English-speaking world’s cultures and communities” but rather to observe and discuss their day-to-day encounters with English texts, papers, television and radio, the importance of broadening horizons and international aspects are also mentioned.

### **3.2.2 Lpf 94 – Curriculum for the voluntary school forms**

The following curriculum, Lpf 94, was implemented in the fall of 1994 and was in effect up until the fall of 2011. English as a subject was now divided into three subsequent courses (A, B and C), of which the first two were needed for higher studies at university level (course plans are revised versions from 2000) (Skolverket 2000). An additional course (D) was offered at selected schools, but seems to have lacked a uniform course plan and will therefore be excluded from this study.

Under the main header “Subject – English”, the first sentence emphasizes the cultural diversity of English as a mother tongue or official language and its global significance (p. 84), and further, among the goals, is to obtain a deeper understanding of various global English variations (p. 84). Another goal for the subject is to “increase one’s skill to with benefit read English fiction and reflect upon those texts from different perspectives”<sup>2</sup> (p. 85). Additionally, students should also learn to reflect upon various global English-speaking cultures and gain a “deepened understanding and tolerance” of them and their respective communities (p. 85).

The English language is described as culturally diverse and easily accessible with great variation outside of school, through television, movies, music, Internet and computer games, by reading written texts and through encounters with native speakers (p. 85). Finally, the text returns to the field of the understanding of global English cultures and adds “intercultural competence” (p. 85) as an additional skill to strive for in the courses.

Goals for the first course, English A (EN1201), include the ability to read and understand easily accessible fiction and thereby acquire knowledge of global English culture, as previously stated in the “Subject – English” section. Also, this knowledge of culture, social sciences and ways of life is to be utilised to compare cultures (p. 87). For grades, the student

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<sup>2</sup> My translation.

is to show the ability to acquire the main content of fiction and assimilate details through close reading. The skills and difficulties of texts increase for higher grades, but the demands are basically the same (pp. 88-89).

For the second course, English B (EN1202), students should be able to read, summarize and comment on the content of longer fictional texts and have a basic knowledge of English language literature from different epochs (p. 90). Additional knowledge of contemporary situations, history and culture in English-speaking countries is also part of the goal. The grading section mentions the acquisition of content from contemporary and parts of older fiction, and the ability to put the content acquired into the same contexts as the previous course (EN1201) (pp. 91-92).

The third and final course, English C (EN1203), further stresses the abilities to read, reflect and analyse fiction from different epochs, genres and cultures (p. 93). For the higher grades, students are to put texts into social, political and literal context, and analyse content, purpose and language (pp. 94-95).

### **3.2.3 GY 2011 – Curriculum, graduation goals, and common subjects for upper secondary school 2011**

The latest (and current) curriculum, GY 2011 (Skolverket 2011) for the Swedish upper secondary school is goal-oriented in terms of specifying what abilities the student is supposed to have obtained at the end of each course, which it has in common with the previous curriculum (Lpf 94). Because of the lack of strict teaching directives, the descriptions for subject and courses are significantly shorter than Lgy 70.

Under the subheading “Knowledges” in Chapter 2, “Overarching goals and guidelines”, one can read that it is the school’s responsibility that each student “is able to find [...] fiction and other cultural outlets as sources for knowledge, self-awareness and delight.” (p. 9). Further, the student should possess “knowledge of and insight in the [...] occidental cultural heritage” and “skills for critical analysis and assessment of what he or she [...] reads in order to discuss and take a stand in various life and social issues” (p. 10)<sup>3</sup>.

Moving on to the specifics of English, the stated purpose for the subject echoes the Lpf 94, namely that it should include knowledge in English global diversity, along with a developed curiosity in the language and culture (p. 53). The “Central content” for the course “English 5” further specifies a use of fiction during the course, but does not specify the canonical or “high culture” books. The second course, “English 6” is a compulsory part of

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<sup>3</sup> My translation.

programmes preparing students for higher studies such as university and has some significant additions beyond what English 5 has to offer. Students are to work with “themes, motifs and content in [...] fiction, authorship and literary epochs” (p. 60) and “current and older fiction, poems, drama and songs.” This sentence is the only one in all three curriculae to mention older fiction alongside poems, drama and songs.

### 3.3 Political Propositions

Searching for political propositions on the literary canon combined with EFL teaching yielded no results when assembling material for this review. However, there were several propositions on the literary canon in combination with the teaching of Swedish as a mother tongue. These will be analysed to show what general arguments are brought forth in the Swedish political debate on the literary canon and its role in schools. Olov Andersson’s degree essay (Andersson 2006) on a 2006 proposition by Folkpartiet will also be reviewed.

#### 3.3.1 Folkpartiet 2006 – A Swedish literary canon

In 2006, Folkpartiet the Liberals brought up a proposition on how to reintegrate the literary canon in the Swedish school system, which had been absent since before the 1960s (Andersson 2006 p. 39). Olov Andersson lists in his essay (pp. 9-12) three major points in this proposition: language proficiency, collective cultural and social heritage, and an overall problem with reduced interest and ability in reading.

The proposition claims that obligatory reading of certain authors would strengthen language proficiency; therefore a list of canonical literature should be implemented. Additionally, the more basic need of being able to communicate within society as a whole is highlighted as the reason for such proficiency.

The next claim states that the literary canon helps form and maintains “cultural heritage, social unity and common frames of reference”<sup>4</sup>, and therefore reduces the risk of citizens being excluded from the cultural community as an adult. Integrated in this claim is also the reasoning that the common cultural heritage was part of the process of reducing social differences in twentieth century Sweden.

The third and final claim links the absence of an explicit literary canon to decreasing reading abilities, the increased need for special support and reduced interest in reading for

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<sup>4</sup> My translation.

Swedish students. Hence, according to Folkpartiet, a reintroduction would strengthen results in these areas.

### **3.3.2 Folkpartiet 2010 – National strategy for reading and a literary canon**

Another proposition on the subject of reading and literary canon appeared from Folkpartiet a few years later, echoing much of the previous proposition (which received a fair amount of criticism) but also adding statistics on reading habits based on both gender and class so as to support the need for a literary canon. The proposition commences by presenting Sweden as a country of readers and good reading traditions, yet with the following statistics, claiming that reading habits decreases along with decreasing social status, especially among males. There is, at one point, a mention of “good examples” of successful projects for increased reading skills. Yet these specific projects are neither named nor implied to be using the literary canon as a means to achieve said success.

### **3.3.3 Kristdemokraterna 2013 – Classics list in school**

In 2013, another proposition on the subject of the literary canon was written, this time by a member of Kristdemokraterna. While it retains the main ideas of the previous proposition, it is the first to suggest the implementation of a list of classics. The proposition also suggests that such a list should be compiled by joint efforts from Skolverket, the Swedish Academy and the institutions of history of ideas and literature at universities, along with individual and organisational contributions.

## **3.4 Classroom Application and Challenges**

In all of the articles and books examined for this specific literature review, the canon and literature usage presented and discussed is solely done from a critical theory standpoint. This fact may hint that teachers find literary criticism favourable when working with literature in the classroom, and as previously mentioned, critical theory adopts many different viewpoints. This flexibility allows for critics to read and analyse from their own area of interest; ethnic minorities analysing ethnic aspects, women analysing gender aspects and working class people analysing class aspects. Bias is always a factor to take into account when reading critical theory, but will be brought up in the later discussion sections.

Martha J. Cutter explains her aim when using canonical literature in teaching being “to uncover the hidden ideologies of the canon and bring less enfranchised perspectives into a

more meaningful dialogue with “classic” texts” (Cutter 1995 p. 123). She is also careful to point out her own non-authoritative view of herself as an expert of the canon in the classroom, instead inviting students to discussion and interpretation (p. 126). Her opposed view to Harold Bloom’s romantic canon approach is apparent: “...our choices are based on thematic usefulness [...] rather than on some inherent, transcendent, value-neutral standard” (p. 133).

Renny Christopher argues that choice of literature is of major importance when enabling students to connect with the text. One working-class student, Mardi, had a hard time relating to literature set in middle-class milieu. Yet, as soon she was introduced to working-class literature, she was able to understand and identify with the text (Christopher 1995 p. 49). Christopher goes on to draw the conclusion that the canonical works are not universally aimed at all people, and may, as a consequence, exclude students from learning due to feelings of alienation from the world described in canonical works (p. 51). The aspect of interest levels and relevance to students’ lives are also emphasized by Scott Edwards (Edwards 2008 p. 7). A book surrounded by controversy can, to some degree, also help as it may offer a multitude of vantage points for analysis (p. 9).

Books written in older times yield opportunities for comparative studies, as Bengtsson (2012) and Hansson (2010) suggest in their respective papers. Bengtsson, when analysing R.M. Ballantyne’s “children’s classic” *The Coral Island*, finds views of non-European ethnic groups, religion and man’s attitude to nature that greatly deviate from many contemporary ones (Bengtsson 2012 pp. 11-12). She concludes that the book is useful as a subject for active critical analysis, but due to its dated views and historical ideas, it is highly inappropriate as a mere fictional experience, especially among children of younger ages (p. 26). Much like Bengtsson, Hansson’s project of highlighting feminism and gender roles through Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, aims to help students understand the differences in society, gender roles and ethics of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, compared to contemporary life conditions (Hansson p. 4).

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Problems with Literature Selection and Approaches

When reading Bloom’s view on the literary canon, I cannot resist admiring him a little. He is so passionate for the canonical works, especially those of Shakespeare (Bloom 2000 p. 37). When it comes to art, it is certainly easy to be carried away by a deep sense of awe and inspiration. And yes, I agree that the aesthetic experience of literature is a major factor when

it comes to choosing what books to reread and recommend to others. What I do object to is his strong belief in some objectively measurable quality traits of such an experience (p. 29). One can objectively analyse grammatical correctness or level of formality, yet these aspects are neither necessities for aesthetic experience, nor is it in any way what Harold Bloom is after when he grades the artistic qualities of literature. I would also argue that he contradicts himself when he says these objective qualities are impossible to explain to the uninitiated of high literature (p. 29). He goes on to call critical analysis an elitist phenomenon (p. 47), while to a degree he holds elitist views on the literary canon himself. If someone does not see the (same) qualities in literature as Bloom does, one has automatically failed either analytically or mentally. He elevates his own experience to a normative fact without hesitation and much self-reflection, a common result when having a conservative view of the canon (Kolbas 2001 pp. 56-57). When it comes to opinions about culture, the simple matter of taste takes you a long way, but it never ceases to be subjective. Another downside to the aesthetic/romantic view is the unwillingness to attach the text to anything beyond the written text itself. The message is not open for interpretation; safe in its own microcosm, never changing over time, or through the eyes of different readers (p. 140). If one does not allow literature to interact and change with the ever changing “outside” world, the debate about literary works would become stale and obtuse (Kermode 2004 p. 44).

If one instead reads canonical literature through the eyes of critical analysis, there seems to be a plethora of different paths to go. As previously mentioned, gender, ethnicity and class are probably the three most prevalent categories, but the combinations and additions are likely so diverse that no one person could name them all. In this way, critical analysis mirrors the complexity of society and its role as a sounding board for literary analysis. When reading and rereading a book from various critical viewpoints, one is likely to have a different experience every time.

With the rise of democratic movements, human rights and schooling for the masses, the possibility for the common man to understand, enjoy and partake in culture became a reality. The earlier upper-class monopoly on culture was undone in the wake of industrialisation, and today, a conservative and fragmented phalanx that argues for an untainted western canon is all that remains. Critical analysis allows for the masses to be a part of and add to the ever-expanding cultural heritage. Since many classics of the western canon were written before the rise of the common man (or woman), it is a mere fragment of historical documentation, often representing the everyday dilemmas of writers fortunate enough to have the time to spare for writing plays and books, while not having to worry about whether there would be food on the

table come supper time. However, despite the fact that the canon of literature does not or could ever represent every part of any collective in full, and that this is always something for the critics to analyse and dissect from every angle possible (Bengtsson 2012 p. 7), we as human beings must not forget to also enjoy culture from an aesthetic perspective. After all, literature without aesthetics, emotion and intricate formulations of words and phrases would be very dry and dull and, in a sense, would cease to be literature.

## 4.2 Interpreting the Syllabi and Curriculae

The steering documents for the English subject in the Swedish upper secondary school system reflect both the debate about the literary canon and the democratisation of Swedish society. A conservative aesthetic/romantic view can still be found in the oldest of the curriculae analysed in this review (Lgy 70) (Skolöverstyrelsen 1971 p. 156 and 1973 p. 16). The two syllabi never mention the word canon, but instead terms like “classic fiction” and “high literature” are used, but specific examples are not listed, only that this type of literature is written by the important authors of their time (1973 p. 17). Again, examples of such authors are not included in the syllabi. The syllabi are very detailed and lengthy as a whole; therefore a list of authors and books to read seems to be the only item missing. One can only guess that this omission was recent. Had I had access to older curriculae when preparing this review, this statement could have been confirmed. The goal for reading clearly echoes what Harold Bloom and the conservative guard promote; to induce emotions and attain experience (Bloom 2000 p. 13) (Skolöverstyrelsen 1971 p. 157 and 1973 p. 17). Beyond these rather vague goals, students should also focus on linguistic form (1971 p. 162 and 1973 pp. 23-24), but any demands for critical analysis are completely absent, in essence narrowing the tasks performed on literature to be of a descriptive nature.

The difference between the two older syllabi is also interesting. The entries concerning fiction and literature are extended for the three and four year programmes (1973 p. 17 and p. 23), implicitly this signals that deeper knowledge of literature is a matter for those who have ambitions for higher studies since these programmes were university preparatory.

In 1994, the Lpf 94 curriculum was implemented in the upper secondary school system; along with new grades this was a major restructuring. The syllabi for the three courses now clearly state an end goal of acquired reflective skills through different perspectives (Skolverket 2000 p. 85), basically replacing the older aesthetic/romantic focus with critical analysis. The new media of the time has been added along with the older ones and

global/intercultural aspects are emphasized (p. 85). The steering documents now more clearly describe the English language and culture as globally diverse and the students are to be made aware of this (p. 84). The analytical demands increase with each course, and so does the difficulty of literature to be used along, yet words like “canon”, “classics”, “high literature” are nowhere to be found in the course descriptions, nor is there any mention of authors of any kind. There is a focus on different eras (pp. 92-93), but this is in connection with the historical and social analysis that students are expected to carry out as part of the course.

The current curriculum, GY 2011, actually specifies a geographical focus on “occidental cultural heritage” (Skolverket 2011 p. 10), which would clash with the later global focus expressed in the English courses’ syllabi (p. 53). English is a western European language, but is also an official language in countries in other parts of the world. But beyond this slight inconsistency, this curriculum takes up where the previous one left off, with a focus on critical analysis (p. 55), but also mentioning the joyful aspects of reading (p. 9), which could be linked to the aesthetic focus of Lgy 70. It does not, however, go into greater detail other than to clarify the duality of reading, the analytical part and the aesthetic part.

When read in order from least to most recent, the curriculae show a clear pattern. They shrink in size, with less detailed descriptions of what literature to use while at the same time opening up for many more ways on how to work with it. This leads me into the next subchapter.

### 4.3 Politics and the Teacher’s Role

As mentioned above, the curriculae seemingly loosen the reins on the teacher, in essence allowing for increased teacher autonomy. Books used within the classroom are supposed to cover a longer time span of English culture, and indirectly that does narrow the options down the further back in time you look. For practical reasons, sometimes it is easier to find some old anthology on British poets that the school has large quantities of, than to let each student search the Internet for their own choices. Moreover depending on what knowledge the teacher has of non-canonical literature from different eras, eventually students are left with choosing from the classics anyway. Since most teachers of today have gone through either the Lgy 70 or Lpf 94 themselves, and teachers using even older curriculae in turn have taught them, the heritage of the literary canon through education comes into play. Each teacher is a child of its time and curriculum, so even if steering documents change, perhaps the less canon-focused literature teaching is delayed due to the teacher’s own learning experiences in school?



In a time where the general consensus about the teaching profession is one of urgent reevaluation and increased attraction for teacher education at universities, the political propositions examined here do not seem to rhyme well with this debate. The three propositions all suggest that teachers have difficulties teaching cultural heritage and the literary canon to students. Does this imply incompetence within a whole profession so that politicians need to pass a law regulating specific educational ingredients? Additionally, these propositions ascribe positive side effects to the teaching of canonical literature (Andersson 2006 p. 39) (Motion 2010/11) (Motion 2013/14), backed up by no proof whatsoever. Interestingly enough, Folkpartiet chooses to credit the literary canon for the advances of social equality in Sweden (Motion 2010/11), not mentioning public education and enlightenment of the masses in general or the class struggle as possible agents in the democratisation process for the last 150 years.

The expressed aspiration towards social and cultural unity (Motion 2013/14) raises an additional question when applied to a society with such diversity as Sweden. Is this diversity not a healthy sign of how many different cultures and groupings can live together in harmony? Is it not a good example of the liberal values Folkpartiet the Liberals promote? Forcing all teachers to teach students the same books would likely create a more homogeneous society, and there are plenty of worldwide examples of such societies and their lack of liberties, civil, cultural and otherwise.

#### 4.4 Canon Beyond Books and Further Research

When speaking about the literary canon, the obvious medium, at first thought, is books. But I would like to think that canonical works are also present in classrooms around the country in film or even cartoon adaptations. Throughout popular culture there are numerous references to canonical works, rendering them impossible to count, the same goes for movie adaptations. In my research on the role of the western canon within EFL teaching, these modern takes on the classics seemed either shunned by conservatives or overlooked by critical analysts and the few examples of classroom tasks including literary canon were all book based. I agree that the need for reading skills is important, but teachers must also take heed when it comes to archaic language and levels of difficulty. You would not want to scare the students away, and older works may therefore sometimes be better presented via more modern media.

The area of popular culture adaptation of literary canon would be a very interesting field for future studies, either as a separate study or integrated in a larger empirical study on EFL

teachers' use of the literary canon in the classroom. This field of research could shed some complementary light on the importance of canon today, something I had difficulties finding for this research review. Such studies may perhaps also calm anxious politicians in their crusade to have the literary canon use specifically written into the curriculum, since I doubt they have done any such research before writing their propositions on the matter.

## **5 Conclusion**

When commencing work on this research review, the aim was to discover trends in the use of the literary canon in Swedish EFL teaching. There has been a general shift from the aesthetic/romantic view of literature where students are passive receivers of (supposed) artistic greatness (Skolöverstyrelsen 1971 and 1973) to the critical analysis of literature where students actively discuss and reflect on the content of fiction (Skolverket 2011). This historical shift is clearly mirrored in the Swedish curriculae over the past 40 years, and the concerns raised by (conservative) politicians have regularly appeared in the school debate in recent years. As to whether these concerned parties are right remains to be seen and researched further. To these concerned politicians, a unified literary canon is a mark of quality and a powerful tool to unite and educate, something they feel has been lacking of late. But there has been no proper research into how much or little the use of literary canon has changed, and it is therefore hard to determine either way at this point. Independently of what types of books are chosen as a basis for teaching, the curriculum-based instructions on how to work with the literature have changed. Assuming teaching changes accordingly, there has been a shift in how teachers use the literary canon in the EFL classroom. But as the saying goes, "You can not teach an old dog new tricks", even such an assumption ought to be taken with a pinch of salt.

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