

Developing canadian culture: literature in a grade 12 classroom

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While good writers exist in all cultures, it is important to have a knowledge of one's national literature. In a Grade 12 English course, Ontario students should focus on Canadian writers. This is arguably more difficult in Canada, as it is a melting pot of nations and is surrounded by many cultures, each with its own rich literature. Incorporating Canadian literature in the Grade 12 curriculum would, in turn, promote Canadian writers and encourage younger Canadian authors. Hence, this essay will argue that graduating Ontario students should only study Canadian literature to support and establish Canadian writers.

As Canada's history is rooted with English and French colonies, it is difficult to distinguish a culture uniquely its own. Influence from external sources continues today, as Canada is routinely surrounded by American identity. To promote the development of an indistinguishable, Canadian identity in an English class, it is important to focus on Canadian literature. The curriculum should include but not be limited to studying other non-Canadian writers such as Shakespeare and Fitzgerald. Yet, many schools commonly limit a student's exposure to Canadian novels to ISP reading lists. In this sense, Canada is akin to an attic that mainly stores American, British, and other foreign literature (Davies 426). As the Ontario curriculum is limited to Canadian literature, Canadian students, as a result, are unable to appreciate their culture.

If Canadian literature is studied, it often works that are not modern. This includes Mordecai Richler's *Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* or Margaret Lawrence's *Stone Angel*. Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business*, which was

published in 1970 – over 35 years ago – is still part of Gr. 12 classrooms. The most recent of these books, Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985 – over ten years ago. Again, while most teachers allow and may even encourage a student to focus on more modern Canadian books for their ISP, their classroom experience is typically limited to studying much older works of literature.

Studying more Canadian literature is not enough to expand a student's awareness of Canadian writers; it is also a question of what authors are reflective of Canada's modern multicultural society. Canadian literature does not “ have a national literature in the mode of...European lands where a long history has bound the people together, and where a homogeneous racial inheritance has given them a language, customs, and even a national dress of their own” (Davies 35). It is important to not only represent Canada, but also the student body; this can be accomplished by reading Canadian literature written by diverse authors.

Although reading a diverse range of Canadian writers is important to understanding Canadian identity, it begs the question of what defines a Canadian. An anonymous quote concisely describes the struggle to answer this question: “ What is a Canadian? A Canadian is a fellow wearing English tweeds, a Hong Kong shirt, and Spanish shoes, who sips Brazilian coffee sweetened with Philippine sugar from a Bavarian cup while nibbling Swiss cheese, sitting at a Danish desk over a Persian rug, after coming home in a German car from an Italian movie...” (Kucherawy). As Canadians, we are lost in a sea of international influences – we hardly know who we are. Margaret

Atwood's idea of the typical Canadian experience is that it is " a state of mind, as space [one] inhabit[s] not just with [one's] body but with [one's] head]. It [is] that kind of space in which [one] find[s] [them]selves lost" (18). In other words, the Canadian state of mind is unlike the typical definition of cultural identity.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize one's national literature to have a greater understanding of one's identity. Taking this approach allows Canadian students to value established Canadian writers - both new and old. Canadian classrooms must not be limited to merely foreign literature, such as American and British authors. It is important to be exposed to a variety of works, especially which of which represents Canada's own, unique identity.