Things Fall Apart: Deconstructing the Humanities Cannon

David Patrick Medansky
University of Colorado Boulder

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Things Fall Apart: Deconstructing the Humanities Canon

By

David Patrick Medansky

B.A. 2011: Humanities, Ethnic Studies
Certificates: Peace and Conflict Studies, Business

Defending in

Humanities

Thesis Advisor

Associate Professor Elisa Facio
Of the Ethnic Studies Department

Honors Committee

Professor David Ferris
Chair of the Department of Humanities
Senior Instructor Cathy Comstock
Associate Director of the Farrand Residential Academic Program

University of Colorado at Boulder

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The following thesis serves to critically address the overarching question, “Should *Things Fall Apart* be included in the Humanities canon (if it is not already)?” In examining this primary question, I discuss the canon itself, which includes: the origins of the canon, the canon maintenance, the different canon camps, and the criteria that merit a work of literature canonical. This work uses seven canonical criteria to evaluate *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, as a way of testing the work’s canonicity. In my research, I utilize the following lenses: new criticism, literary analysis, cultural studies, feminist theory, and postcolonialism in order to analyze both the construction of the canon and Achebe’s work as canonical. In addition to understanding the canon as a cultural artifact created through a series of players and ideologies, this thesis provides a concise list of criteria for scholars in the Humanities field to evaluate new texts as to their canonicity, as well as reevaluate works previously considered canonical. This thesis focuses solely on the Humanities literary canon.
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INTRODUCTION

My engineering friends at the University of Colorado at Boulder are currently completing their senior year “capstone projects.” Because completion of this project is required to graduate from the School of Engineering, many view their projects as simply another checkbox in their academic careers. I, on the other hand, have found that selecting to work on my own literary “capstone project,” per choice, has served as a cohesive conclusion to my undergraduate academic career; specifically because I have chosen to double major. Focusing my studies in both Humanities and Ethnic Studies has enriched my education; as each field complements the other. I have come to view the following thesis as a way to create a cohesive outcome from two polarizing fields. I have chosen to defend this thesis in the Humanities Department, because the subject of the canon is located inherently within this field. However, since Humanities, at its core, is an interdisciplinary field,¹ I am heavily influenced by my work in Ethnic Studies, which is also interdisciplinary. I have

¹ Johnnella Butler discusses the concept of interdisciplinarity in “Ethnic Studies and Interdisciplinarity.” She makes an important distinction between interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity. With multidisciplinarity, different disciplines work together in an additive model, with one field’s lens applied while subsuming another discipline. With interdisciplinarity, however, different disciplines work together not in an additive model but rather an intersectionality model, with multiple lenses fusing together. One cannot simply take away one lens and add another; they are linked together. The Humanities Department and the Ethnic Studies Department use the latter model, enabling my fluid use of both fields.
come to view my work in Humanities through an Ethnic Studies lens. My methodology and construction of this thesis are expanded upon further in a separate methodology section.

The driving force of this thesis is to critically examine and deconstruct the Humanities canon. In addition, I use Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as a vehicle to essentially “test” my theory on or of the canon. To guide my work, I created a series of questions to examine through my research and analysis. The questions I formed on the topic of canon are as follows (in no particular order):

- What is the canon?
- Who created the canon?
- What is the purpose of canon?
- How is the canon formed?
- What are the criteria for canonization?
- Who is included in the canon?
- Why are *they* included, and not others?
- Does the canon still exist?
- Is the canon still relevant today?
- Do we still need the canon?
- What is the future of the canon?

In considering Achebe’s work, I built upon my understanding of the canon by asking the overarching question: “Should *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe be included in the canon (if it is not already)?”

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, “canon,” is defined as follows:
1a: a regulation or dogma decreed by a church council.

1b: a provision of canon law.

2: the most solemn and unvarying part of the Mass including the consecration of the bread and wine.

3a: an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture.

3b: the authentic works of a writer.

3c: a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works <the *canon* of great literature>.

4a: an accepted principle or rule.

4b: a criterion or standard of judgment.

4c: a body of principles, rules, standards, or norms.

5: a contrapuntal musical composition in which each successively entering voice presents the initial theme usually transformed in a strictly consistent way. ("Canon")

At first, I was surprised to see the definition I had assumed to be the canon, was as far down as 3b and 3c.\(^2\) Through my research, I found that historically the “canon” was created and maintained by the Catholic Church (Buchsbaum). I wondered if what academia considers to be the “canon” today (definition 3c), is politically and socially constructed

\(^2\) Not even 3a!
Introduction

from the original canon, i.e. the Catholic Bible. Having the first two definitional options of “canon” adds to the weight of the power inherent in the Catholic Church’s shaping of the canon. A contrasting notion that in addition to, or simultaneously with, the Catholic idea of canon, is that the idea of canon also has roots stemming from an African tradition (Quinn).

This secondary notion of canon being an African ideology, furthered my interest in looking at Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe in relation to the canon. The modern canon today, as recognized by academia, consists mostly of writers who are: white, male, Anglo-European, and heterosexual, or the common phrase “dead white guys.” Why is this the case, especially if the origins of canon are supposedly African?

3 Throughout my text I have written “African” in a variety of way, most often to refer to Achebe’s choice of writing style. I have chosen to use “African” and not “Nigerian” for the most part, because most of the time the term is used to encompass a stylistic choice that the authors included in the literature review refer to as “African.” I include this footnote to clarify that Africa is an extremely diverse continent. Many times in conversation I catch “Africa” used as if it were one country with a homogenous identity. I find this to be extremely condescending, yet most people do so in an unconscious way. Africa is a continent with over 50 different countries, though many times there are regional similarities. It is with the regions in Africa that people superimpose as “African.” It has been quite difficult to decide whether to write “African” or “Nigerian,” as the authors within the literature review have used “African,” yet Achebe is writing from a Nigerian perspective. I do not wish to erase Nigeria into the abyss of the collective Africa, as I have written “Nigerian” whenever possible. However, the choices and styles used by Achebe are not limited to the geographical boundaries on a map of Africa, and are often seen in
Academia can be divided into three major camps based on their positions in regards to the canon. These are the Canon Purists, Canon Pluralists, and the Canon Anarchists (Quinn). The Canon Purists, advocate maintaining the canon in its current state, not allowing for the addition, or removal, of literature which has not previously been deemed “canonical.” Canon Pluralists support expanding the canon with additional literature (while not necessarily sacrificing the same criteria which Purists stand by). And Canon Anarchists, suggest completely dismantling and disregarding the canon, as it has grown outdated in its use.

In researching the canon, I set out looking for a set of criteria against which pieces of art (literature) could be measured against. Though there are no specific criteria carved in stone and housed in the Smithsonian, most authors writing on the topic agree to some extent on what is considered worthy of canonization. A combined list of criteria includes: enabling multiple readings with new information rising to the reader upon each subsequent reading, displaying signs of literary influence, displaying signs of universality and timelessness, displaying signs of superior craft, displaying signs of originality, having a real world effect, and remaining alive for at least three generations after it is written.

The formation of the canon proved, as expected, to be more complicated than a mere council sitting around a table voting “yea” or “nay.” Understanding the construction of many different places within the continent. I would hope a reader of my work takes the “African” adjective used with a grain of salt, knowing that it is an extremely fluid term and does not literally embody all of Africa, but rather has the essence of Nigeria and West Africa.
the canon was crucial in my work, as it would enable me to deconstruct the canon. Ideologies and physical actors perform the formation process or construction of the canon.

There are two ideologies active in current canon formation. Society,⁴ its political agenda, and its lenses are the other major factor in canon formation or the construction of canon. The term “political agenda” refers to the concept of maintaining the status quo, in terms of which art works are included within the canon, who is included in the canon, and why this is important. Several authors in the literature review who question the value of using one particular lens or perspective discuss the “societal lens” further. This argument correlates with the criterion of aesthetic beauty, which some authors argue should not be a criterion for canonization. These authors, who question the validity of aesthetic quality, tend to fall into the Canon Pluralist camp. Their stance is to deconstruct the validity of using one, mainly European, lens to evaluate the worthiness of non-European-Western art. The second ideology active in the current canon formation is economics, though this ideology is best described with the role that publishers play in canon formation.

The various authors within my literature review were not quite cohesive in pointing to one particular person or organization. Rather, most recognized that several actors are at play, each with a distinct role in the canon’s development. Anthologies, similar to a “mini-canon,” create a grouping of great works within one particular area. Not all works within

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⁴ I am aware that the term “Society” is a blanket statement that it almost negates its usefulness. I chose to simplify the argument for the sake of the introduction section, where only a general explanation is needed. Further, more acute explanations are given in the literature review as well as my analysis and conclusion.
Introduction

each anthology can be considered canonical, by focusing on great works from a particular area, anthologies can offer its best works towards canonization. Professors and teachers are responsible for choosing which material is included on a syllabus and, perhaps more importantly, which material is not chosen. Several of my professors have attested to the difficulty in selecting materials. In other words, selecting what not to include, proves challenging. Literary journals are peer reviewed by members of the academy who employ their expertise to judge a piece’s worthiness. An outcome of literary journals is the ability to critique great works of art, thus aiding in their canonization. Another major factor in canon formation, to my initial surprise is libraries. In the same way professors choose which material to include in a syllabus, libraries function on a much larger scale, deciding which pieces to include, or not include, in their collections. The mere act of housing certain authors’ works, adds to their credibility and usefulness within the academy. Authors themselves also play a critical role in the current formation of the canon. Because they are the individuals actually creating literature, how they go about their art can have a deep impact on the composition of the canon. Publishers add an economic element to the process by choosing which pieces to publish, and then which pieces to continue to publish and retain in print. Their decisions form a cycle wherein the pieces considered canonical, are continually reprinted, while those not considered canonical, fall out of publication, which hinders their readership and in turn affects their canonization.

The next major section of my thesis critically engages with Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. I analyze Things Fall Apart as a quasi–case study to test my findings on the

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5 For you Marxist lovers!
**Introduction**

canon; specifically addressing the social construction of the canon, in terms of the “dead white guys” argument. I also analyze canonical criteria to illustrate the novel’s relationship to the canon, whether it should be included, should not be included, or has it already been included? I chose to analyze this text for three reasons. The first reason is that it is an African (Nigerian) text. Researching the history of the canon and finding that it also has roots in Africa, I found myself asking why the majority of artists included in the canon are European and not African. Secondly, *Things Fall Apart* is not a typical (canonical) story of Africa. A novel generally regarded as canonical, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, depicts Africa as a primitive abyss needing European salvation. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* takes a completely different stance, by illustrating the inherent civility amongst the Igbo people not needing to be rescued by the “white European male.” The third reason stems from my initial interest in the topic of canonization. At my high school, Glenbrook North, we read my English classes which were filled with works from authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright, none of whom fit the description of a “dead white guy.” Yet, in my introductory Humanities class (HUMN 1020) there were no artists of color in the three fields covered: fine art, music, or literature. Having taken the introductory Ethnic Studies course (ETHN 2001), the semester prior to enrolling into the Humanities class, I found myself to be caught in a crisis, not knowing what should be considered “the best” works.

The remainder of my thesis is presented in the following order. First, I provide a methodology section where I expand further on how I came to my work, and how I went about my research and writing methods. This section also includes an exploration into my writing style, specifically the use of commas within my work. The second section is my
**Introduction**

literature review, in which I outline the research I have completed, and the authors I have analyzed. I have structured this section of my thesis as a quasi-discussion, with the authors arguing their own ideas about the canon including Achebe, and his work. The last section is my analysis and conclusion, where I enter the discussion presented in my literature review, and contribute my own voice and conclusions on the topic of canon with a specific focus on *Things Fall Apart.*
METHODOLOGY

In the spring of my sophomore year, I was enrolled in the department’s survey course, Humanities 1020. Needless to say, I was excited about beginning my Humanities degree. The class provided an introduction to, what seemed to be at the time, the best art, music, and literature the world has to offer. It was in the middle of this semester that I began to experience a personal academic crisis. In the previous semester, I had completed the Ethnic Studies Department’s introductory class, Foundations in Ethnic Studies. Comparing the foundations class between the two departments left me torn; I unsure as to which department held The Truth. It began to puzzle me as I read Racine, looked at Picasso, and listened to Beethoven. How could they be the epitome of art? These works of art are certainly extraordinary, but the selection for the art presented in this class was limited to Europe. Is there a lack of art that stands up to the same criteria and excellence that is demonstrated by these European artists before me? This question rang through my head as I attended more Humanities classes, focusing on European art, in parallel with taking more Ethnic Studies classes, focusing on artists, movements, and theories suppressed by Anglo-European ideologies.

I came to the ignorant conclusion that there must be something wrong with Humanities or Ethnic Studies for either one of them to claim to contain the absolute “Truth.” In reality this is not the case, nor so simple an accusation. There must be multiple “Truths” contained within this simple academic dichotomy. I chose ignorant as an adjective
Methodology

for my conclusion because this is what I quickly concluded about all that I had been learning in both departments.

Working on this thesis has given me additional tools, and a new perspective to study both departments critically, not viewing either as right or wrong, but seeing them both as crucial, yet polar opposites on an academic scale. The process of developing this thesis has allowed me to work through my ignorant conclusion, to develop an informed intellectual conclusion. This may or may not align with my original ignorant conclusion; yet is supported by an academically based thought process, more complex than something thought up waiting for a bus.

The goal of this thesis is to critically examine the Humanities canon, and deconstruct its makeup by utilizing lenses developed within both the Ethnic Studies and Humanities Departments. This thesis is neither a typical Humanities thesis, nor an Ethnic Studies thesis for that matter. Rather, it is a hybrid of the two, to aid in a solution to my personal academic crisis as previously stated.

The first part of my conclusion is a study and deconstruction of the humanities canon, bringing insight from authors who have written on the subject of canon. To my surprise, criticism on the canon is not a novel concept. My research was aided in having a substantial amount of literature. Using a literary analysis of these authors as my main tool, I developed a miniature discussion of the topic of canon, and its creation, continuation, and controversies. In the process, I developed my own ideas on the Humanities canon and its validity. The questions I posed to myself, which guided this section of the research
Methodology

included: What is the canon? Who created it? How is it constructed? Is it outdated? Should it be dismantled? What is the future of the humanities canon?

The second part of my conclusion focuses on Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In addition to focusing my own literary analysis on *Things Fall Apart*, I analyzed texts of authors writing about Achebe’s work to formulate my own conclusion about his text. This section of the conclusion is the vehicle for analysis of the canon itself using Achebe’s work as a quasi-dependent variable to test the validity of the Humanities canon.

The third portion of the conclusion is a cumulative analysis of the Humanities canon and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Here, I outline my examination of the Humanities canon to address the question of whether *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe should be included within the Humanities canon. Given the canon is a cultural artifact itself, I seek to understand why Achebe’s work is or is not included in the best works of art.

In my work I use the term lens when referring to a set of ideologies, or as Foucault would call, *discourses* (Bahoora). I prefer to use the term lenses as opposed to theories as I believe that lenses describe my research process more accurately. Multiple lenses enable me to view research differently depending on how I choose to interpret the results pending my desired outcome. I believe that theories are more stagnant and do not allow a sense of fluidity within academia. My methodology is best described by Barbara Christian, quoted in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, a book by Chela Sandoval; “My ‘method’ is not fixed … it is based on what I read and how it affects me, that is, on the surprise that comes from reading something that compels you to read differently … I therefore have no method, since every work suggests a new approach” (Sandoval 68).
Methodology

Though this work is influenced by several lenses, I purposefully shy away from listing them constantly within my work. I believe that too often authors list theoretical words to code their writing, making their work appear more worthy as if their writing is not strong enough to sustain criticism without such jargon. The use of jargon often prohibits a clear and concise message from being transmitted to the masses which, I believe, is the first and foremost important aspect of education, of which the academy seems to lose sight.

Thus the lenses that I frequently utilize throughout this thesis include: new criticism, literary analysis, cultural studies, feminist theory, and postcolonialism. My thesis is grounded in a cultural studies question on the validity of the canon, and its use in assessing postcolonial literature. Literary analysis is a main tool in my evaluation of texts.

One aspect of my writing that may bother some readers, is my over use of commas. Though my use of them is technically correct, they may not seem appropriate to some readers, from a purely written standpoint. I learned to read, at a somewhat later age, compared to my peers. When I was young, I participated in children’s theatre groups before I could read, and did not need to read a script. Yet, as I grew up continuing with theatre, I struggled during auditions where I needed to read a script because my reading level was

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6 A metaphorical academic phallus enlargement (stemming from my feminist lens?).

7 This topic of jargon and the academy could stem off and become an entirely separate thesis.

8 Much like the character Yoda from George Lucas’s Star Wars, Yoda technically speaks proper English, yet it seems somewhat off.
considered ‘substandard.’ In order to achieve proficiency in my reading skills, I would read scripts aloud to prepare for my auditions. That being said, I truly learned to read in an oral fashion.

From learning to read by speaking aloud, I also began writing with an oral mindset, composing and proofreading aloud. Normally, I would not include this personal background in my work, but I feel this thesis merits some explanation of my literary style. By explaining my reading and writing process, readers can acknowledge my standpoint. However, I am even more concerned with how my process relates directly to my work in this particular thesis.

The broader topic of this thesis is to examine what defines a piece of literature canon worthy, and what does not. Many critics examining Chinua Achebe’s work, have commented on his use of orality within Things Fall Apart, as well as his other texts. In addition, critics argue that his use of such a tradition within his writing adds to the strength of both his literature, as well as his own strength as a postcolonial author. Though I try to hide my personal opinions on the subject of both canon and Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, until my conclusion section, my use of commas is one exception that is threaded throughout my work. I consciously have chosen to not edit out all the commas within my writing. In doing so, I further support the idea of multiple lenses employed for looking at “superior craft,” a criterion for canonization. The criterion itself is subjective. Hence, by writing in a style that can be read aloud, I support the notion that orality as a literary style qualifies as a type of “superior craft.” As a note to the reader, my approach to writing is

Like Biodun Jeyifo.
Methodology

composed as if it were being read aloud. The abundance of commas aids in the oral presentation of my work, showing where to pause, and where to add stress within my sentence structures.

Another tool I use in my writing is footnotes. I try to condense the body of the text to solidify a main argument. However, just like in a conversation\textsuperscript{10} one can branch off into minor discussion points; so too, can my work. In an effort to consolidate the main argument of my work in the body of the text, I have included footnotes to accompany additional conversation that may branch out too far for the sake of my main argument, or add additional information and/or commentary that are best set aside. I much prefer the use of footnotes versus endnotes as it allows a reader to be accompanied by my commentary while reading the main text, aiding in a more colorful discussion, as opposed to keeping all of my notes hidden behind the body of my text for one to search after. I feel endnotes break up the conversation I have provided, rather than enhance it.

\textsuperscript{10} An additional testament to the validity of an oral method.
LITERATURE REVIEW

In a letter to Robert Hooke, Sir Isaac Newton writes, “... If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants” (“Standing on the Shoulders of Giants”). This quote is emblematic and embodies my literature review in two ways. First, I recognize that I am not alone in my work, nor am I the first to discuss the canon as well as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. It would have been ignorant of me to charge ahead, assuming I could answer my posed questions all alone. Rather, I am grateful to be able to “stand on the shoulders of Giants” and learn from work that has come before me. Secondly, Newton did not just write this quote down or randomly say it to himself while walking down the street. On the contrary, he composed it in a letter as part of a written conversation between Hooke and himself. Just as Newton engaged in a conversation, I too consider the following to be a conversation within the academic community that I have constructed. Merely reading a single author provides some insight, but the process of critical analysis of multiple authors adds tremendous significance and clarity.

After reading several authors and analyzing their work, this literature review began to really embody a conversation with authors “agreeing” or “disagreeing” among themselves within the literature review. My goal was to metaphorically observe the conversation before me, while not taking part at this time. I add my own voice to the already lengthy conversation in my analysis and conclusion.

Analyzing and categorizing the authors’ texts, proved harder than anticipated. For the most part, each author did not limit herself or himself to only one topic. Authors
Literature Review
discussed topics such as the formation of the canon (physically, historically, and socially),
the canon camps, the purpose of the/a canon, criteria of literature for canonization, and the
future of the canon. Authors writing on Chinua Achebe and/or Things Fall Apart
intertwined the topics of meeting the criteria of the canon, Achebe’s biases, Things Fall
Apart as an ethnography, the use of gender as well as the use of culture within the text are
all themes within several of the authors’ discussions.

Due to this overlap in topics, I have grouped the authors by categories, which are
not static by any means. They merely serve to add an element of organization to the
following literature review. I could have easily formed different titles and different
groupings. That being prefaced, there are two main sections categorized into further
subgroups.

The first section focuses on the topic of the canon and frames this thesis in its
entirety with multiple subgroups dealing with the canon. The first subgroup is the criteria
of the canon, where I found the majority of the authors’ discussion centering on the
question of “What makes a piece canonical?” The next subgroup deals with deconstructing
the canon through a cultural studies lens to address the question, “How is the canon
formed?” The last subgroup deals with authors whom I have not found to be critical and fall
to the peripheral area of the academic conversation, yet add some further insight into my
analysis.

The second section of the literature review focuses on Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall
Apart as the vehicle for my argument on adding works of literature into the canon. The first
subgroup located within this section deals with supporting Achebe and his work becoming
Literature Review

canonized, which proves to be critical in my final analysis in terms of analyzing the canon and if *Things Fall Apart* proves to be compatible. The next subgroup involves writings on the use of gender and culture within *Things Fall Apart* by focusing on the style Achebe used within his work, which in turn adds a deeper element to the question of *Things Fall Apart* being worthy of canonization. The following subgroup is on an essay Chinua Achebe wrote about Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, to give additional context to Achebe’s work. The last subgroup of this section discusses a case study with Scottish participants reading *Things Fall Apart*.

* * *
**Work on the [Humanities] Canon**

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**On the Criteria of the Canon**

Jon Avery takes the stance on the canon as an egalitarian, in his essay, “Plato’s Republic in the Core Curriculum: Multiculturalism and the Canon Debate.” Avery’s thesis of his work can be best summarized by his paraphrasing what Mortimer Adler has suggested makes a piece of literature canon worthy; “… books are great if they cause us to think about perennial issues that all human beings confront, regardless of race, sex, or ethnic origin” (Avery 236). Avery is not necessarily taking a strong stance about the origin of a canonical piece, in terms of it being from an Anglo-European artist, or an ethnic/multicultural artist. Rather, he is suggesting it is what the work *does*, how it will best serve the reader/student. He goes on to explain: “By learning how to identify, analyze, evaluate, and construct arguments from analogy, inductive generalizations, syllogisms of all kinds, fallacies, definitions, and functions of language, students are able to think for themselves rather than simply believe someone’s authority” (239). Avery advocates that the goal of a canon worthy piece should give students the skills they need to learn, “… *how* to think,” but, “… *what* to think,” rather than have thoughts thrust onto them (239).

When discussing the subject matter of canonical works and the artists themselves, Avery makes the claim that no one artist is more important than any other artist, “… the history and literature of white European males is important, but it is no more important
than the history and literature of different peoples of color and women,\textsuperscript{11} whether European or non-European” (237). Unlike other critics of the canon, Avery makes it very clear that the value of literature stems from what the literature does rather than the subject matter or the artist. He does advocate for the adding of non-European pieces to the canon but is adamant about the purpose of the new addition: “… quality works by women and people of color should be studied, but as vitally important as the educational goal of reducing racism, sexism, and elitism is, it does not take precedence over the educational goals of cultivating people who can think critically” (237). Avery makes it clear that using multicultural texts to reduce “isms” is an excellent tool. However, in order for them to be considered canon worthy they cannot solely stand on this lesson alone; they must possess the qualities that make a piece canon worthy.

Avery has three criteria for canonization: “… historical influence, excellent writing style, and whether or not they promote critical thinking and morally sensitive citizenship,”

\textsuperscript{11} Patricia Hill Collins’ work on intersectionality adds a deeper level to the complications of looking at “Other” authors besides “white European males.” In writing about other artists, Avery mentions “different peoples of color and women” (emphasis added). Within her piece, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” Collins discusses how people of color and women are not mutually exclusive categories. Women are subjected to intersectionality, or a system of multiple interlocking oppressions. This means that when looking at other artists besides the colloquial “dead white guys,” one must consider that women are included within people of color. They are not a separate category, unless one is looking at white women authors (Collins).
which he defines as, “... a person who knows his or her duties and is motivated to discharge them out of both a strong sense of community and a strong sense of good-will to all other citizens” (242). He uses these criteria to strengthen his argument that multicultural pieces can and are indeed canon worthy as long as they adhere to these criteria.

The latter half of his article is dedicated to the discussion of whether or not Plato’s *Republic* should or should not be taught in schools. Avery argues that to disvalue Plato’s *Republic* for being Eurocentric and elitist is a poor argument. Rather he substantiates his own argument by illustrating that the *Republic* meets all of his specified criteria. Avery argues that though Plato’s *Republic* does not promote an egalitarian society by discussing different classes of people and women, it can still be an excellent tool to develop critical thinking. He goes on to argue that even though most students will disagree with Plato’s position, it is far superior that they learn and discuss Plato’s work and then confidently disagree with him/his argument on their own terms, rather than disagree outright without proper analysis. The reason why Avery insists that Plato’s *Republic* should still be used, even if students disagree with Plato’s position, is that this work still meets his criteria of historical influence, excellent writing style, and critical thinking. In turn, students can see through Plato’s flaw and develop morally sensitive citizenship, by studying what *not* to do or think.

Brian Quinn briefly discusses libraries’ roles in the development of the canon. He discusses his views on the canon, and two different ways to canonize a piece of literature in his article, “Some Implications of the Canon Debate for Collection Development.” Quinn begins by discussing what he feels is the most influential force in creating and/or
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maintaining the literary canon. According to Quinn, libraries are the driving institution, which maintains the canon. It is the library that selects which pieces not to include in their collected works. This action further legitimizes included pieces, showing that they must have been chosen for one particular reason or another (e.g. literary quality). In addition, lists like the RLG Conspectus (Research Libraries Group)\(^\text{12}\) are used to further develop the canon by helping to define which literary works are worthy of collection and which are not (Quinn 2).

Quinn then explains the three different positions one may have in regards to the canon: the Canon Purists, Canon Pluralists, and Canon Anarchists (3). He dismisses the Canon Anarchists, whose position is to completely dismantle the canon as they feel it is no longer needed. His argument against this position is merely that because the canon itself is such a controversial topic, the discussion on the worthiness of a canon is proof that the canon is still needed. In addition, he also points out that a canon is essential for us to learn from our mistakes as well as not to think that an idea is new when it may have occurred hundreds of years ago. Therefore, he legitimizes the positions of the Canon Purists and Canon Pluralists.

\(^{12}\)“The Research Libraries Group developed a system of collecting levels, known as the RLG Conspectus, intended primarily for the uniform evaluation of collections in research libraries. The use of these collecting levels evolved from a tool for evaluation into a meaningful set of descriptors employed in library collection policy statements. These levels are used in the Library of Congress policy statements to define the extent of the Library's collections” (Collecting Levels).
The Canon Purists seek to maintain the canon in its current state, and restrict changes made to it. They see no value in adding ethnic literature or any other literature based on race, sexuality, class, etc. Their main criterion for canonization is quality, as defined by, “... superior craft, reasoning, and execution” (3).

On the other hand, the Canon Pluralists attack the canon (though in a constructive way, as opposed to the Canon Anarchists) based on, “... the content of the canon, the biases of certain authors as reflected in their work” (3). The Canon Pluralists wish to open up the canon to works and authors previously kept within the margins of literature. Here Quinn is not explicit on the views of the Canon Pluralists in terms of their criteria, and he leaves the argument slightly vague. Are these new marginalized ethnic works worthy of canonization for their ability to reduce the “isms,” as in Jon Avery’s argument, even though they may lack the literary quality previously needed, according to the Canon Purists? Or in fact do these new works contain high craftsmanship but also serve the purpose of reducing “isms”?

Quinn’s next point is very novel in regards to the canon debate: the idea of the canon, ironically, is not of western origin, but it “... is itself part of a much older and more encompassing non-Western tradition...” (4). He argues that the foundation of the canon, such as ancient Greco-Roman texts, actually embodied ideas that stemmed from African cultures. The irony is that if the concept of a canon is non-Western, why have non-Anglo-European authors been left out? The Canon Pluralists utilize this argument as a reason to open up the canon. They put forth the, “... notion that the understanding of one’s own culture is more important than the understanding of other cultures is not necessarily true ... the opposite is nearer the mark ... ethnic literature may help put European American
texts in perspective" (4). This notion of placing Anglo-European ideas into perspective may prove to be quite useful in unlocking the canon. This relates to the Canon Pluralists’ argument that the “old” pieces within the canon are not unneeded, when in fact adding newer ethnic works may in fact help one understand and value pieces of literature already within the canon. This point coincides well with one of Quinn’s other arguments about the criteria of canonization.

He discusses the inherent problems of using the same aesthetic lens for Anglo-European pieces of literature as well as ethnic non-Western literature,

... it may not be valid to evaluate the works of non-Western cultures using Western criteria. Aesthetic judgments are always relative to culture. The notion of a universally valid set of aesthetic criteria is not possible, because aesthetics are ultimately based on social consensus ... Gender, race, and class may also affect how people value certain works. (7)

This is an extremely important idea when choosing whether or not to introduce new works into the canon. This argument is used well against Canon Purists who do not see the value and craftsmanship of ethnic non-Western works of literature. They claim bringing in new pieces is a quasi “... literary affirmative action," while Quinn argues that it is unfair to judge two different styles of work through the same Western lens (7). He argues for an additional set of criteria to evaluate high quality ethnic non-Western work.

What is valuable is Quinn’s explanation of two distinct ways in which works of art can be added to the canon. The first is to trace influences. By looking at which artists are influencing other artists, one can see the development of a trend within literature. An
example is Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. By seeing the value and quality of Socrates’ work, one can trace his influence onto Plato, and in turn onto Aristotle, to see a development of high quality work meriting canonization.

The second way in which works of art can become added to the canon is by recognizing, “... its ability to yield new meanings or interpretations with each rereading” (6). This process removes the work from its origin; regardless of whether the work is Anglo-European based or ethnic non-Western. If it is able to develop new meanings each time it is studied, the piece is worthy of canonization. Overall, Quinn’s article is extremely helpful in identifying different stances on canon development as well as ways to add new pieces to the canon.

Julianne Buchsbaum discusses the complications libraries face when selecting which works to keep in their collection and which ones to disregard as well as the repercussions of those decisions in her essay entitled, “Academic Libraries and the Remaking of the Canon: Implications for Collection Development Librarians.” First Buchsbaum discusses the meaning of the canon. According to her:

Originally, the ‘canon’ signified the books of the Bible officially sanctioned by church authorities ... Later, the word ‘canon’ was used to denote the verified works of a particular author. In its most recent manifestation, ‘canon’ is used to refer to those texts which are passed on from generation to generation as being worthy of study, reflection, and admiration, those works which are believed in some way to be inherently superior to others. (Buchsbaum 1)
Defining the term “canon” helps to give perspective into its original formation. Buchsbaum then discusses Allan Bloom’s, *The Closing of the American Mind*, and how criteria of the canon appear as if it were hard and objectifiable. Yet, nowhere can there be found an official “list” of criteria which enables the canonization of art. Buchsbaum goes on to identify what she believes are the criteria for canonization; “… aesthetic beauty, timelessness, and universality. Literary works of superior quality were considered rich and intricate enough to sustain multiple readings … to find new information … no matter how many times it has been read” (2). This essentially is the same set of criteria that have been referenced before by other authors when defining how works are canonized. Yet she continues on by pointing out a counter argument of feminist and African American scholars on the flaws of these canonizing criteria. She states; “… these criteria serve the interests of the dominant culture … what is defined as ‘universal’ simply reflects the point of view of the gatekeepers of culture” (2). This argument helps to expose the formation of the canon.

Previously, works within the canon were likened to cream, where the best pieces of art naturally rose to the top (2). Yet as pointed out by Buchsbaum, on behalf of feminist and African American scholars, it was a conscious decision, which pieces to consider canon worthy and which ones not to. The “best” pieces are not naturally the best, rather they serve to maintain the status quo.

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13 One could argue that the original canon is not very different from its current day form. If the canon was originally formed by Church authorities based on the Gospels of Jesus Christ, one can see the connection to the canon today remaining highly Eurocentric, as Church authorities were maintaining the status quo of Eurocentric ideas.
Buchsbaum’s next major point focuses on who is responsible for the creation of the canon. She cites several sources: editors and publishers, professors, and librarians (2). What is significant about these people is that they, “… tend to already be members of economically and politically advantaged groups” (2). Having her point out their status further substantiates the argument that, “… the creation of the canon is very much a socially mediated process,” in which those in positions of power are creating the canon to best serve themselves by maintaining the status quo (2).

Buchsbaum’s last point is in regards to the lens librarians use in terms of selecting which works to maintain in their collections. She is careful to point out that a librarian choosing works not written in English, should be particular in obtaining the best possible translation available. This aids in enabling the author to get her or his original message across to those not fluent in the authors’ native tongue. In addition, Buchsbaum warns that when choosing these works to add to the library, one should “… be careful not to apply Western standards to non-Western works” (4). This coincides with what other critics have recommended on how to evaluate non-Western works. Her article does an excellent job of reinforcing what previous critics on the canon debate have articulated.

In *The Western Canon*,14 Harold Bloom discusses topics such as what the canon is, what are the criteria for canonization, what he terms “the School of Resentment,” as well as

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14 I have chosen to break up Bloom’s portion of the literature review into two sections. The first is a combination of the introduction section entitled “Preface and Prelude,” and the first chapter of his book entitled, “An Elegy for the Canon. The second section is composed of his conclusion,
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other topics. Bloom begins in a seemingly impartial manner. Yet as readers move further into his text, they realize he is anything but impartial, as his views have an apparent agenda. This is a distinct separation between how Bloom and other writers view the canon. More specifically, the other authors discussed in this literature review, provide fewer personal opinions and apply more of an analytical lens on the canon. Bloom writes from a very biased stance; to defend the canon. Though he does not name himself a classicist, a Canon Purist, or other titles attributed to this position, as many authors have named Bloom’s stance. It is quite apparent he is writing from a defensive position.

This can be seen through his use of the capitalization of “Canon” throughout his text, his choice of language to discuss the “opposing side,” as well as the arguments he puts forth within his book. Though Bloom does not explicitly explain why he capitalizes “Cataloging the Canon,” where I write on the subsections entitled “Elegiac Conclusion,” and “Appendixes.”

15 Bloom’s book is written with a blatant dichotomy. This will be addressed further in his conclusion section. As Bloom sees it there is his stance, defending the Canon, and the polar opposite, the School of Resentment who seeks to dismantle the Canon. There is not a third, or any other side described in his writing.

16 One issue I had in outlining Bloom’s section of the literature review is the contradictory arguments that he sets up (unknowingly?) throughout his text. I was torn between laying out the main sections of his arguments and having a last section with all of his contradictions, or including the contradictions within his arguments. I chose the latter as I believe it creates a better framework for reading his arguments. I was compelled to footnote the contradictions within
“Canon,”17 his choice in doing so, emphasizes its inherent elite status as a selective institution. The point of language choice as well as arguments will be expanded upon further.

Bloom’s first argument addresses the meaning of canon. He strategically explains how he cannot comment on the entirety of the canon, so he uses selected samples to outline the following argument; “... among the twenty-six authors18 under consideration; my purpose is to consider them as representatives of the entire Western canon ...” (Bloom 11). It is a logical, smart tactic to preface his work with certain authors representing specific points, as he is unable to comment on all authors and works in the canon.

His awkward contradiction is illuminated when he completely dismisses the idea of anyone having any authority to state what establishes the canon. “No one has the authority Bloom’s arguments as they became more apparent throughout his work, showing, in my opinion, weak arguments. If this was a randomly researched author writing on the subject of the canon, I would not be surprised. I am having a hard time understanding why it is that Harold Bloom, a well known Humanities professor at Yale, would publish *The Western Canon*, defending the canon from literary critics in the “Canon War,” without strengthening his arguments. Including such flagrant discrepancies within his work, merely allows his critics to pick apart and dismiss his work, rendering him valueless, as an authority on the subject.

17 He is the only author I have read to use such capitalization.
to tell us\textsuperscript{19} what the Western Canon is, certainly not from about 1800 to the present day. It is not, cannot be, precisely the list I gave” (37). It might seem modest of him to preface his book with this quote. However, it comes at the end of his conclusion where he has already tried to establish an authoritative character, as the author, and substantiate his arguments further within the chapters of his book. This leaves the reader wondering why he would dismantle his own argument of what the canon is, so early in his work, let alone at all.

The next argument Bloom puts forth, is the religious element, or lack thereof, in the canon.\textsuperscript{20} Bloom argues that the canon is a secular institution, its founding is unrelated to the church. “Originally the canon meant the choice of books in our teaching institutions …” (15). This is how most people would define the canon, with no ties to the church, unlike

\textsuperscript{19} Throughout Bloom’s book, he constantly uses the words, “us,” “we,” “you,” and “they” without ever prefacing who these people are. I see this as a further tactic to pit the reader of his work in the dichotomy against the School of Resentment. By using “we” and “you” (when he writes to his opposition) it forces the reader to mentally pick sides. The reader is either “with” Bloom, or against him. Bloom’s style of writing gives the reader little choice, but to unconsciously side with him.

\textsuperscript{20} Here I had the most trouble in organizing Bloom’s arguments on whether or not the canon is indeed secular or religious. His contradictions are written together, making it complicated to separate them within my literature. In his other arguments, where inconsistencies are placed in different sections, it was easier to pull the two opposing arguments out and lay them down together in my literature review.
Julianne Buchsbaum’s work. Yet he contradicts his own argument on the origin of the canon being purely secular:

The canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival, whether you interpret the choice as being made by dominant social groups, institutions of education, traditions of criticism, or, as I do, by late-coming authors who feel themselves chosen by particular ancestral figures. (20)

His argument brings up two points. The first is that the origin of the canon indeed stems from the church, in blatant juxtaposition to his initial argument on the canon’s secular beginnings. The second point, moving into a secular field, is that the institutions which have maintained the canon, are secular. This also aligns with other authors within this literature review in what they have described as the various forces aiding in the canon’s creation and maintenance.

Leaving the reader confused as to the actual origins of the canon being religious or not, Bloom continues on to describe the secular canon. He poses the following question:

Where did the idea of conceiving a literary work that the world would not willingly let die come from? It was not attached to the Scriptures by the Hebrews ... Jesus replaced the Torah for Christians ... at what date in the

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21 Academic Libraries and the Remaking of the Canon: Implications for Collection Development Librarians.”
history of secular writing did men begin to speak of poems or stories as being immortal? (19)

This complements Bloom stripping the notion of canon as religious, and illuminates his discussion on mortality and literature, discussed later. He answers his question, “The secular canon, with the word meaning a catalogue of approved authors,\textsuperscript{22} does not actually begin until the middle of the eighteenth century, during the literary period of Sensibility, Sentimentality, and the Sublime” (20). This definition places the creation of the secular canon into a historical context and makes the canon tangible by moving the canon beyond a temporal idea.

Though Bloom makes the case that the canon is a secular institution, his contradictory argument substantiates the idea that the canon is not secular and indeed religious in origin. He discusses the notion of how western society worshiping a higher cause, is the glorification of a literary character. “The ultimate shock implicit in this canon-making originality comes when we realize that the Western worship of God ... is the worship of a literary character ...” (6). Bloom draws the conclusion that religion is based around literature, making the case that the canon is a secular institution, difficult to sustain.

Bloom’s argument on whether or not the canon is secular or religious, becomes more complex with his discussion of Dante. Bloom argues that, “… Dante invented our modern idea of the canonical” (36). If the reader assumes at this point that Bloom is referring to “modern idea of the canonical” as the secular canon maintained by higher

\textsuperscript{22} And who exactly is doing this approving? The church? He has previously argued that no one has the authority to approve works within the Canon...
education, then one can deduce that Dante is the creator of the secular Canon. Yet, like most of Bloom’s arguments filled with opposing points, he contradicts Dante’s authority over a secular canon. He does this by demonstrating Dante’s religious ties, “Dante, who regarded himself as a prophet and so implicitly gave his Divine Comedy the status of a new Scripture” (36). There is no refuting Bloom’s new connection with the once argued “secular creator,” self-proclaimed prophet, as not being religious in nature. If Bloom were to maintain the secular connection with Dante, he could have called him a Secular prophet, but this is not the case; further commenting on Dante’s notion that his “Divine” Comedy should be regarded as a Scripture, repudiates Dante being considered the creator of a secular canon.

Proceeding from the previous quote about canonicity and immortality, Bloom argues that what makes a work of literature canonized is its own (im)mortality. Poorer works, which he later goes on to discuss, essentially die, rendering the best works of art (and their authors) immortal. Bloom even comments on the colloquial “dead white guys:”

... ‘all of the dead, white European males’ – that is to say, for a baker’s dozen, Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Montaigne, Milton, Goethe, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Kafka, and Proust. Livelier than you are, whoever you are, these authors were indubitably male, and I suppose ‘white.’ But they are not dead, compared to any living author whomsoever. (39)

23 Notice the capitalization of Scripture, referencing the Scriptures of religious origin.
Like most of Bloom’s arguments, there is not just one point to be made. Here, he furthers his point on the mortality of literary works and their authors by making the claim that these authors being canonical are immortal. His reference on the selected authors being “white” is to dismiss the importance of the color of their skin, and to make light of this argument against his “opponents.”

A series of arguments that Harold Bloom does substantiate well, with few contradictions, involves his perspective on the criteria of canonization, or as he writes, canonicity. His first well defined criterion of canonicity is the need for an author’s work to merit continual readings. “One ancient test for the canonical remains fiercely valid: unless it [a work of literature] demands rereading, the work does not qualify,” as worthy of canonization (30). Several authors have hinted at the correlation of repeated readings and canonicity. Bloom makes it clear that this is the first and foremost important criterion, which should not be sacrificed.

Another criterion of canonicity Bloom analyzes is art’s originality. Written clearly, Bloom articulates that “All strong literary originality becomes canonical,” which he defines: “… in strong writing there is always conflict, ambivalence, contradiction between subject

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24 Yet his “opponents” would use his own words against him in showing the problematics of a list of immortal authors; none of them are authors of color or women (and/or women of color).

25 I regard this as the strongest section of his book, his relatively impartial discussion of criteria. Most other arguments are heavily rooted in his defense of the canon, and offense to the School of Resentment, which leads me, to hold back and be somewhat more critical on his points compared to his neutral analysis on criteria.
and structure” (25, 27). This criterion of originality, though seemingly obvious as an aspect of the canon, is not as easy to apply as one may assume. Its complications are embedded within another criterion of the canon, as Bloom defines, literary influence.

Bloom claims that, “There can be no strong, canonical writing without the process of literary influence ... the strongest test for canonicity” (8, 25). Where the two criteria meet is explained by Bloom’s further analysis of what originality really means. “Great writing is always rewriting or revisionism ... to reopen old works to our fresh sufferings. The originals are not original, but that ... the inventor knows how to borrow” (11). Bloom’s analysis of originality helps shed light on how to achieve this specific criterion. This analysis also aids in the explanation of why so many great works are included within the canon, when there are obvious connections between different author’s works. Originality, not requiring each new canonized piece to be completely different from anything else, not only expands the number of books which are eligible for canonization, but also lends to a development of themes spanning across the entire canon. The idea then becomes not to “recreate the wheel,” but rather to tweak a previous idea with an author’s personal spin. It may not be a secret where the influence came from, but it still remains distinctly personal.

A subsection of originality that Bloom discusses early in his book, is the notion of strangeness, the author’s, “... ability to make you feel strange at home” (3). Though this sub-criterion is not as stringent as repeated readings, originality, or literary influence, it is generally a revealing sign of canonicity. Bloom explains, “... I have tried to confront greatness directly: to ask what makes the author and the works canonical. The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality ...” (3). Bloom
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goes on to clarify that this does not mean that works must contain three-eyed monsters or invisible people; rather it is something novel, something out of the ordinary. When thought of in this way, it makes much more sense. A good book is never without surprises, always exceeding expectations.

The next criterion is aesthetic quality, an idea which he addresses in the beginning of his book. This is also where readers initially become confused. He begins by stating, “‘Aesthetic value’ is sometimes regarded as a suggestion of Immanuel Kant’s ... but that has not been my experience during a lifetime of reading” (1). After discussing the purpose of his book, “... I seek to isolate the qualities that made these [twenty-six chosen] authors canonical ...” Bloom makes the case that aesthetic quality within a work of literature is not one of the criteria he deems worthy of canonization (1). This falls in line with several other authors writing within this literature review. The idea of aesthetic quality can be seen as far too subjective, too difficult to use as a “hard” criterion for canonicity. In the beginning of his book, Bloom strongly gives the impression that this is the route he is going to take. In regard to aesthetic quality, he even clarifies his perspective about its subjectivity, “… the aesthetic is, in my view, an individual rather than a societal concern” (16). However, from this point, he diverges blatantly into “… defending the autonomy of the aesthetic” (10).

Bloom makes an interesting argument in the defense of the aesthetic, by not merely defending it for its own sake. He begins by examining why others do not see aesthetic quality as a criterion of canonicity. He argues that critics have taken “flight from the aesthetic.” At first, the reader assumes he intends to simply move away from defining aesthetic quality as a criterion. Yet, Bloom substantiates his argument by discussing flight
in Freudian terms. “In Freud, flight is the metaphor for repression, for the unconscious yet purposeful forgetting. The purpose is clear enough in my profession’s flight: to assuage displaced guilt” (17). By incorporating Freud into his argument, Bloom places the dismissal of aesthetic quality into a political arena, in which he defines negotiating “displaced guilt.” Literate critics are caught up in the arguments made by the School of Resentment on how the canon is purely composed of “dead white guys.” Since a vast majority of literary scholars, Bloom included, seem to fall into the “white guys” category, they are, by association, at fault for the racial and gender composition of the canon. Bloom stands strong to call out this mindset and pushes forward the importance of aesthetic quality when evaluating literature.

Bloom firmly claims that, “One breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction” (29). What makes this particular assertion so strong is its quantifiable definition. Previous authors have skirted around the topic, claiming solely that aesthetic quality is purely too subjective, whereas Bloom objectifies aesthetic quality, making it a “hard” criterion. Bloom furthers his argument on the importance of the aesthetic, claiming that, “… aesthetic choice has always guided every secular aspect of the canon formation” (22). Bloom places the criterion into historical context, arguing that it has been integral in each literary work’s canonization, rather than having aesthetic quality applied after the fact to defend why works are part of the canon.

Another aspect of aesthetic quality that Bloom directs to the School of Resentment is, “The cardinal principle of the current School of Resentment can be stated with singular
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bluntness: what is called aesthetic value emanates from class struggle” (23). Bloom retaliates by claiming that aesthetic production is not associated with economics. “A Marxist or Foucault-inspired historicist can insist endlessly that the *production* of the aesthetic is a question of historical forces, but the production is not in itself the issue here ... the undeniable economics of literature ... do not determine questions of aesthetic supremacy” (24). Thomas Staley26 and Richard Heinzkill27 counter argue that economics does play a major role in canon formation. Though Bloom tries to clarify that the actual *production* of aesthetic quality is not influenced by economics, both Staley and Heinzkill counter this by pointing out the role publishers play, and how artists must create according to the desires of the publishers, rendering Bloom’s point a mere battle of semantics.

If Dante invented the canon (whether secular or not), according to Harold Bloom, “... Shakespeare is the secular canon, or even the secular scripture ...” (24). This theme is threaded and substantiated throughout *The Western Canon*. Bloom does not deny the mastery he sees in William Shakespeare’s work. He even begins his book by describing Shakespeare as, “... the central figure of the Western Canon ...” (2). For Bloom, Shakespeare is the benchmark against which any other author must measure up. Bloom uses Shakespeare’s work as an archetype for almost all criteria of canonization. Though it is not uncontested by other authors within this literature review, Bloom supports Shakespeare by pointing out that, “Shakespeare, whose aesthetic supremacy has been confirmed by the

26 “Literary Canons, Literary Studies, and Library Collections: A Retrospective on Collecting Twentieth-Century Writers.”

27 “The Literary Canon and Collection Building.”
universal judgment of four centuries” (23). The notion of universality of Shakespeare’s work will be discussed momentarily. Here, Bloom uses historical weight to add value to Shakespeare being the center of the canon in which every other author must work to his margins. Bloom argues with the School of Resentment about this weight by explaining just why Shakespeare and his work are so critical to the Canon:

Here they confront insurmountable difficulty in Shakespeare’s most idiosyncratic strength: he is always ahead of you, conceptually and imagistically, whoever and whenever you are. He renders you anachronistic because he contains you; you cannot subsume him. You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were: all of Freud that matters most is there in Shakespeare already, with the persuasive critique of Freud besides. The Freudian map of the mind is Shakespeare’s; Freud seems only to have prosified it. Or, to vary my point ... Coriolanus is a far more powerful reading of Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon than any Marxist reading of Coriolanus could hope to be.

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28 I am assuming he addresses the School of Resentment when he writes “they” and “you.”

29 Which I am assuming is some elitist insult? I looked up the definition of “Demanian system” and found: “a group of tubes near the anus of certain female nematodes that secrete a sticky substance which protects the eggs or functions during copulation” (“Demanian System”). So I can only assume that Bloom means a “less than good literary protection system?”
Shakespeare’s eminence is, I am certain, the rock upon which the School of Resentment must at last founder ... how much simpler to admit that there is a qualitative difference, a difference in kind, between Shakespeare and every other writer, even Chaucer, even Tolstoy, or whoever. Originality is the great scandal that resentment cannot accommodate, and Shakespeare remains the most original writer we will ever know. (25)

This steamroller explanation of Shakespeare’s centrality to the canon further substantiates Bloom’s view of Shakespeare as critical. He does not place Shakespeare at the center of the canon merely because he is Bloom’s favorite author, but rather because of the inherent originality seen in his work. In this particular quote, one can assume that Bloom is not even including literary influence within the definition of originality, but rather the layman’s definition of originality, where all canonical authors base their works around those of Shakespeare’s. This can be further seen in the body of The Western Canon where Shakespeare is used to address the “chosen twenty-six” several times throughout Bloom’s analysis.

What a reader might find interesting about Bloom directly addressing the School of Resentment, is just before the quoted passage, in which he claims that no one can argue with Shakespeare’s magnanimity. “And the openers-up of the canon and the traditionalist do not disagree much on where the supremacy is to be found: in Shakespeare” (24). Though this may be the case, it is a bold move of Bloom to speak on behalf of his “opposition.”
Bloom’s argument in support of Shakespeare’s work as universal, is where the reader can find a contradiction in his argument, as well as a counterargument from the postcolonial movement. The notion of universality plays a key role within the discussion of authors in this literature review. As previously noted, universality in an author’s work has been claimed to be another important criterion when looking at a work’s worth of canonization. Bloom expands on Shakespeare’s “universal judgment:”

If we could conceive of a universal canon, multicultural and multivalent, its one essential book would not be a scripture, whether Bible, Koran, or Eastern text, but rather Shakespeare, who is acted and read everywhere, in every language and circumstance ... Shakespeare for hundreds of millions who are not white Europeans is a signifier for their own pathos, their own sense of identity with the characters that Shakespeare fleshed out by his language. For them his universality is not historical but fundamental; he puts their lives upon his stage. In his characters they behold and confront their own anguish and their own fantasies, not the manifested social energies of early mercantile London. (38-39)

Bloom’s sweeping statement of Shakespeare being “acted and read everywhere, in every language and circumstance” can be seen as a weak argument via his over generalizations.30

An additional flaw within Bloom’s argument regarding Shakespeare’s universality, is seen through his own contradictions of “our” “inner city youth.” “Education founded upon

30 Has Harold Bloom been everywhere in the world, and found out that everyone is studying Shakespeare!?
the *Iliad*, the Bible, Plato, and Shakespeare remains, in some strained form, our ideal, though the relevance of these cultural monuments to life in our inner cities is inevitably rather remote” (32). This substantiates the argument against Bloom’s claim that Shakespeare is universal. Just because Shakespeare is being read in inner city schools, does not mean they identify with his literature, as Bloom mistakenly points out.\(^{31}\)

A counter argument to Bloom could be made from the School of Resentment. Even if Bloom is correct on Shakespeare’s infiltration throughout the world, and he is indeed “acted and read everywhere,” this does not mean that everyone’s encounter with his work resonates with them, thus challenging the universality of Shakespeare as a writer. Andrew

\(^{31}\) The interesting part of this point is that race is not factored into the demographics of Bloom’s “inner city schools.” I assume that he is not bold enough to reveal his personal thoughts, in text, that these students he refers to, are students of color. If Bloom would address this, or even thinks this, I assume that he would not factor in the intersectionality that race and class play in the inequality of education, which is discussed in great depth in Jonathan Kozol’s book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* (Kozol). Even if these inner city students are white, it still dismantles his argument as they are not connecting to the text. I also wonder, though this is not addressed in *The Western Canon*, how problems with the inequality of school funding feed into Bloom’s personal thoughts. Would Bloom also critique the exorbitant difference in the salaries of inner city teachers versus those in wealthy suburbs (like mine), as well as general school funding which leads to poorer quality of education? If there were more resources, or higher salaries, would the teachers be able to connect the students to Shakespeare’s work? This could play a major factor in Blooms argument in support of Shakespeare’s universality.
Smith\textsuperscript{32} would completely disagree with Harold Bloom. His Scottish students were required to read \textit{Things Fall Apart}, much like many people have to read Shakespeare’s work. However, his students did not have to identify themselves within Achebe’s work, but they did; showing why Achebe is a universal writer. He is not universal because he is Nigerian and Smith’s students were Scottish, like the claim Bloom makes with Shakespeare, but because the Scottish students were able to see themselves in (Nigerian) \textit{Things Fall Apart}.

An important argument against Bloom’s claim that Shakespeare’s work is universal, in addition to his own contradictions, comes from the postcolonial camp. The authors and critics, to address Bloom’s specific claim that:

\begin{quote}
Shakespeare for hundreds of millions who are not white Europeans is a signifier for their … own sense of identity with the characters that Shakespeare fleshed out … he puts their lives upon his stage. In his characters they behold and confront their own anguish and their own fantasies. (38-39)
\end{quote}

\textit{Season of Migration to the North} by postcolonial author Tayeb Salih, can be used to directly address this counter argument. In his novel, Salih writes of a Sudanese character, Mustafa Sa’eed, who in his “own anguish” speaks directly back to Shakespeare,\textsuperscript{33} “I am no Othello. Othello was a lie.” (Salih 79). This is a well-referenced quote employed to discuss the idea of postcolonialism. The “writing back” to authors, such as Shakespeare, who wrote for

\textsuperscript{32} “Working Class Scottish Readers and \textit{Things Fall Apart}.”

\textsuperscript{33} William Shakespeare is not actually a character in the novel; Salih addresses him through his reference.
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colonized peoples, is a main force behind the postcolonialism movement. This addresses Bloom's claim that Shakespeare has put “their lives upon his stage.” Tayeb Salih, through Mustafa Sa’eed, argues the contrary. Shakespeare has *incorrectly* put colonized peoples upon his stage, not truly representing who they are. This can be further seen in the postcolonial movement with the discussion of Caliban, Shakespeare’s Jewish characters, or any of his other non-white European characters that appear in his plays. This postcolonial argument further dismantles Bloom's case that Shakespeare is indeed a universal author.

Throughout *The Western Canon*, Bloom continually writes to his “opposition” in order to justify his arguments to those whom he calls “the School of Resentment.” The School, according to Bloom, is comprised of “… Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors …” (20). Harold Bloom coined the term “School of Resentment”, yet it has not been taken up by other literary critics, at least none in this literature review, as it is seemingly derogatory in its use. The School’s motives, as Bloom sees them, are to advance literary studies in a socially conscious way though sacrificing quality of work to do so. He claims they “… are destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences, in the name of social justice” (35). Bloom frames the school as a (not so) passing fad as he describes its motives as:

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34 From *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare.

35 This directly relates to the purpose of Ethnic Studies. A common term/idea used within the department is the “transformative process,” the idea that the academy can break away from an isolationist mindset where anything learned in the classroom, of a liberal arts education, stays in
... now the fashion in our schools and colleges, where all aesthetic and most intellectual standards are being abandoned in the name of social harmony and the remedying of historical injustice. Pragmatically, the ‘expansion of the Canon’ has meant the destruction of the Canon, since what is being taught includes by no means the best writers who happen to be woman, African, Hispanic, or Asian, but rather the writers who offer little but the resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity. There is no strangeness and no originality in such resentment ... great literature will insist upon its self-sufficiency in the face of the worthiest causes: feminism, African American culturism, and all other politically correct enterprises of our moment ... even if the object of devotion has been altered to the classroom and has no effect in the real world. Discussed in depth in Ethnic Studies Research: Approaches and Perspectives edited by Timothy P. Fong, a compilation of essays from professors and theorists in the field, is the notion of what the transformative process is and looks like. Discussed heavily in chapters 2, 7, 9, 13-15, and 18, the transformative process seeks to change academia, not leading to the breakdown of the aesthetic as Bloom claims, but rather as a way to bridge a gap between theory and practice; to bring what is learned in institutions of higher learning and apply these methods in the community for social change (Fong).

36 The authors that Bloom claims to be “Hispanic” would most likely not identify as being Hispanic. Rather they would claim to be Ch/Xicana/o or Latina/o. By using the term Hispanic, it serves to erase the indigeneity of these authors, continuing the status quo that Harold Bloom backs.
This passage from Bloom’s work illuminates several important points to address (“social harmony” will be discussed later). Bloom establishes his canon war with only two opposing sides: his “traditionalist’ view, defending the canon so that it remains intact, and the “expansionist” view, whose goal is to dismantle the canon. This does not coincide with the arguments displayed by several other authors here, specifically Brian Quinn.37 Whereas Bloom creates a dichotomy, Quinn would argue against him claiming that this is too simplistic of a view, and sees the Pluralist camp as a third side whose legitimacy Bloom dismisses. Bloom claims that the Pluralist camp, who seeks to expand the canon without its destruction, is lying. As Bloom views it, the Canon Pluralists are truly what Quinn describes as Canon Anarchists.

Another point to raise is Bloom’s patronizing and discrediting of “quaintly term[ed] ‘multiculturalists’” (7). Bloom makes the claim that the best authors cannot be multicultural. He does this by his syntax where women and people of color are set aside from “the best writers.” Continuing from this point, it appears as if Bloom is setting up a dichotomy where “great literature” cannot emanate from the field of: “feminism, African American culturism, and all other politically correct enterprises.” In addition, he claims that these authors do not contain any originality or strangeness, solely because these criteria cannot be found stemming from the writers personal identities. This may come off as elitist

37 “Some Implications of the Canon Debate for Collection Development.”
to his readers, especially since he does not substantiate this point. As a counter to his own argument, Bloom does include Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (as well as other works by Achebe) in his own list of “great books” within his “Appendixes.”

Bloom speaks on behalf of his opposition in describing the ideology behind the process of creating a canon. Bloom argues that canon formation is a more innocent process compared to what the School claims. “Those who oppose the Canon [the School of Resentment] insist that there is always an ideology involved in canon formation; indeed, they go farther and speak of the ideology of canon formation, suggesting that to make a canon (or to perpetuate one) is an ideological act in itself.” Yet Bloom previously wrote, “Nothing is so essential to the Western Canon as its principles of selectivity, which are elitist only to the extent that they are founded upon severely artistic criteria” (22).

Members of the School could make the case that Bloom’s true argument is concealed within the word “artistic.” They would argue that Bloom’s construction of “artistic” within his seemingly innocent defense, connotes the status quo of elitist material.

In *The Western Canon*, Bloom solidifies his argument against the School by clarifying tactics worthy of adding pieces of literature to the canon. He does this by arguing that the use of social causes as a way to deconstruct the canon is of little value:

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38 I also wonder if Harold Bloom is able to find any originality or strangeness in any “multicultural” text he reads, even if he wanted to, stemming from his jaded subjectivities that these texts intrinsically cannot contain the criteria of canonicity.

39 Though he prefaces that section by saying, “Not all of the works here can prove to be canonical …” (548).
You become a belated Gnostic, warring against Homer, Plato, and the Bible by mythologizing your misreading of tradition. Such a war can yield limited victories ... You may idealize endlessly about replacing aesthetic standards with ethnocentric and gender considerations, and your social aims may indeed be admirable. Yet only strength can join itself to strength. (33, 41)

This patronizing critique on the School of Resentment’s goal, after removing the toxic language from his passage, can prove to be quite insightful when measuring up new pieces of literature to gauge their worthiness of canonicity. This particular portion of Bloom’s argument will serve as a critical place within the conclusion of this thesis.

Referring back to Bloom’s point on the breakdown of the canon in the name of “social harmony,” brings Jon Avery’s work into the discussion. Bloom argues, “Whatever the Western Canon is, it is not a program for social salvation ... Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a more useful or more harmful citizen” (29-30). His point is that literature in the canon does not and/or cannot affect a person’s actions or mindset. Avery would completely disagree with Bloom’s argument. Avery’s paper deals specifically with Plato’s literature to make the case that it can affect individuals. Avery’s thesis is based on the value of a piece of literature not in terms of its author but of what the work does for an individual. He disagrees with Bloom in claiming that the canon can be used as a vehicle for social change. Despite what Bloom may believe, Avery is also not willing to sacrifice hard criteria for canonization. Avery does not view

40 “Plato’s Republic in the Core Curriculum: Multiculturalism and the Canon Debate.”

41 Which Bloom references throughout The Western Canon in support of his case.
social change and canonical literature as part of a dichotomy; he takes the stance that the
two can be one in the same.

One more point Bloom raises in his work is how the canon and its surrounding
controversy has become political. He writes, “The Western Canon ... exists precisely in
order to impose limits, to set a standard of measurement that is anything but political or
moral” (35). This notion of the canon being apolitical in its origin may have at one time
existed. Yet, Bloom recognizes a distinct shift, not necessarily one in which canon formation
has become political, but rather the Canon War has taken itself into the political arena; “... the
defense of the literary canon, like the assault against it, has become so heavily
 politicized” (22). Readers can become irritated with Bloom’s obnoxious way of writing. An
example of this, is apparent with his defense against the Canon War being political; “Why
stop with politicizing the study of literature? Let us replace sports writers with political
pundits as a first step toward reorganizing baseball, with the Republican League meeting
the Democratic League in the World Series” (32). Bloom’s idea is that making literary studies political, is overstepping politics’ boundaries.

Unlike other authors, a novel idea raised by Bloom is that there are some genres of
literature that lend themselves more to the canon than others do. Bloom attributes this

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42 Though some authors would argue that this has always been the case.

43 I am not quite sure that Bloom has taken a step back recently from his argument to look at the
path sports in America has taken; it is becoming more political every season. Though one could consider the notion that sports has been rooted in politics from its onset, i.e. does one really
believe that Jackie Robinson’s entry into the baseball was a purely apolitical event?
loosely to literary fashion of each particular time period, and almost likens canonical pieces to winning the lottery, being in the right place at the right time. “In each era, some genres are regarded as more canonical than others. In the earlier decades of our time, the American prose romance was exalted as a genre, which helped to establish Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald as our dominant twentieth-century writers of prose fiction” (20–21). Viewing fashionable genres as a soft criterion is an interesting take, adding to the complexity of canon formation. Bloom’s critics would claim he is again hiding behind his stance of canon formation being apolitical in his explanation of why a particular author was not deemed canon worthy:

The historical novel seems to have been permanently devalued. Gore Vidal once said to me, with bitter eloquence, that his outspoken sexual orientation had denied him canonical status. What seems likelier is that Vidal’s best fictions ... are distinguished historical novels ... and this subgenre is no longer available for canonization. (21)

This may simply be the case that Vidal’s work just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but a critical reader of Bloom could argue the contrary. Vidal’s sexuality would probably not be considered had he identified as “heterosexual.” Evidence of this argument

Gore Vidal must have been flirting with too many women at literary conferences to have his overt heterosexuality disqualify him from canonical status. This more likely than not, was not the case; especially since I looked up Gore Vidal and found him to be queer. I make this point to show how Bloom talks about Vidal’s sexuality, as if he just cannot bring himself to write “gay” or “queer.”
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can be seen by examining Gustave Flaubert’s *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour*, where page after page is filled with heterosexual encounters with the author himself, yet he is not disqualified from the canon because of his “outspoken sexual orientation” (Flaubert). In fact, Flaubert is referenced throughout Bloom’s book in terms of his canonicity. Bloom would argue that the decision to deem certain genres more fashionable over others in any given time period, is an apolitical process, because canon formation, as he claims, is apolitical. This is where Bloom’s critics can build a case against him, because fashionable genres is a “soft” criterion; it can be used as a political tactic to cover up bigoted motives.45

After substantiating his arguments in the body of *The Western Canon*, set forth in his introduction and first chapter, Bloom concludes his work by solidifying his stance on the School of Resentment, and the test of canonicity. Sounding as if he fears he is on the “losing” side of the brutal Canon War, Bloom glimpses into the dark future and relates what he feels is the future of literary studies as well as academia as a whole;

Finding myself now surrounded by professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited, I realize that the Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible. All of these Resenters of the aesthetic value of literature are not going to go away, and they will raise up institutional Resenters after them. (517-18)

45 As Harold Bloom is doing?
This is Bloom’s gloomy way of viewing the future of the academy based on, as he views it, a lost sense of value for the aesthetic. He fears that the university will “balkanize,” become fractured, and an over specialization will replace holistic literary departments who truly value the aesthetic greatness seen in authors such as Shakespeare and Dante. This quote is a flash back to his Yeatsian reference, seen as his thesis of *The Western Canon*, on the first page of his book, “Things have however fallen apart, the center has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called ‘the learned world’” (1). Bloom has shown in his work that it is the workings of the School of Resentment that have caused the breakdown of literary studies, as well as a general esteem held for great (literature) art.

Along with the general breakdown of the aesthetic stemming from the School’s work, Bloom continues to describe the repercussions of the balkanization of the academy. He sees a total shift in how individual departments function based on the material being taught;

What are now called ‘Departments of English’ will be renamed departments of ‘Cultural Studies’ where *Batman* comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens … the artifacts of popular culture replace the difficult artifacts of great writers as the material for instruction. (519-20)

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46 To *The Second Coming*. This Poem by Yeats also starts off Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. 
Bloom’s critics would continue their counter argument against Bloom’s dichotomy regarding the future of the academy. Members of the Film Department in particular, would pose a question back to Bloom, “Does a new medium necessarily warrant its incompatibility into the canon?” The idea of novelty will be discussed momentarily by Bloom, yet for the moment, Bloom’s argument on the incompatibility of new material/mediums continues. He furthers the idea that “pop culture” has no place in the academy. He considers the quality of students graduating from higher education diminishing because of the balkanization within departments as well as the materials being used to teach. He claims, “... students of literature have become amateur political scientists, uninformed sociologists, incompetent anthropologists, mediocre philosophers, and overdetermined cultural historians ...” (521). Though Bloom substantiates his argument, this may be the case where the School and Bloom are left only to “agree to disagree” on the future of the academy losing its potential.  

47 The biggest problem I see in this argument is that Harold Bloom is caught up in a dichotomy that his “Resenters” do not see, making this a difficult argument. He is firm in his belief that those who wish to “open the Canon” with new material, are doing so in blatant disregard to criteria that already canonical authors are held up to. the problem here is that his Resenters, as seen in several authors in this literature review, none of whom scream Marxist or feminist or any other member of the School, make the case that canonical criteria are still being held with high esteem, however there still must be other literary works that just so happen to come from School of Resentment writers, that follow said criteria. Within this literature review “discussion” Harold Bloom seems to be doing a lot of yelling his case, and not doing a good job of listening to others.
you believe that all value ascribed to poems or plays or novels and stories is only a manifestation in the service of the ruling class, then why should you read at all rather than go forth to serve the desperate needs of the exploited classes?” (522). Bloom is not shy about making the reader literally choose between, ascribing to the literary canon and working on social action in the community. For Bloom, helping others cannot be done through studying great works.

In his conclusion, Bloom solidifies his stance against the School of Resentment on the subject of aesthetics. He maintains that the canon is not grounded in any ideology to reinforce the “dead white guy” status quo. However, he retorts that once again the School and himself, will agree to disagree; “Ideology plays a considerable role in literary canon-formation if you want to insist that an aesthetic stance is itself an ideology, an insistence that is common to all six branches of the School of Resentment: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians” (527). In dismissing the six branches, he “admits” that ideology within the canon is solely limited to the concept of aesthetics, which he remains firm that this is not the case as he continues his argument. According to Bloom, the difference between the School and himself is that the School always views elements within a system. Bloom disagrees with this stance, and thinks that placing the canon within a political\textsuperscript{48} system is overstepping politics' boundaries and not true to how the canon is created. Bloom argues, “… the dogma of the School of Resentment … that aesthetic choices are masks for social and political overdeterminations,” as one way of viewing the inner workings of the Canon. Yet he argues to this idea that, “… the great

\footnote{\textsuperscript{48} Not necessarily “governmental” politics surrounding parties, but the general idea of politics.}
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writers, who are influenced by one another [are] without much regard for political resemblances and differences” (526). The notion that authors are not concerned with politics or maintaining the status quo becomes a stronger argument in Bloom’s final analysis on what he feels determines the canon.

Bloom solidifies his argument on what makes a work canonical by claiming that canon formation is done in a vacuum, without publishers’ economic motives, the academia’s critical analysis, or roles of politicians. Bloom settles on the criterion of literary influence: “Writers, artists, composers themselves determine canons, by bridging between strong precursors and strong successors” (522). It is the idea that only working from greatness can only determine greatness. Combined with his insistence on the “original” great writer, one could argue that Bloom claims all great work stems from Shakespeare’s work.

The way Bloom ‘tests’ whether a work has truly become canonical, is his insisting on a time element associated with each piece. This is a novel test of canonicity that only Richard Heinzkill and he have offered. Bloom argues, “Canonical prophecy needs to be tested about two generations after a writer dies ... it takes some time even to see influence accurately,” where as others have not even considered the necessity for such a restrictive measure (522). Bloom finds that waiting two generations allows the general body of readers and literary critics to separate genuine canonical works from a fashionable period piece. He argues that too often people are quick to judge a book’s strength because of its instantaneous popularity. Bloom’s “time will tell” method allows works to settle into their proper place. If a work truly is canonical, it will continue to maintain its positionality even
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after its initial popularity dwindles. The second reason why Bloom suggests two
generations is that it allows for time to distinguish if other authors are affected by a work
in, utilizing Bloom’s most important criteria, literary influence. If a work is not influential,
after two generations, then it certainly falls to the dregs.

Another distinction Harold Bloom makes between his criteria and that of other
authors is the necessity for an author to be universal. Most authors have vocalized the need
for a work to be universal, to resonate with a reader that would not immediately relate to
the characters or plot on a superficial level. On explaining how universality among great
works is not possible, he asks, “... but how can Paradise Lost or Faust, Part Two ever lend
themselves to universal access? The strongest poetry is cognitively and imaginatively too
difficult to be read deeply by more than a relative few of any social class, gender, race, or
ethnic origin” (520). The elitist formation of the canon is furthered by universality not
being a main criterion for canonicity, if works are not accessible to the masses. However,
Bloom defends this opinion in the name of keeping the canon a strict institution with high
regards to the aesthetic.

Bloom concludes his book by offering his own canonical list of books. He categorizes
the list into four sections based on selected time periods. He is confident in the canonicity
of the first three sections; however, he feels differently about the fourth section. “I am not
as confident about this list as the first three,” he prefaces (548). This list houses more
recent books as well as books from more diverse areas around the world (in addition to
France, England, Italy, etc.). His concluding remarks appeal to one who is still, after Bloom’s
somewhat depressing prophecy about the future of literature, thoroughly engaged with the
great authors listed in his book; “I turn to my lists, hoping that literate\textsuperscript{49} survivors will find some authors and books among them that they have not yet encountered and will garner the rewards that only canonical literature affords” (528).

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\textsuperscript{49} Here, I do not believe that he is referring to one who cannot read, but to a “literate survivor,” who is one of the last people who can truly \textit{read} great works, and recognize their inherent strength.
Richard Heinzkill discusses the different ways the canon is formed and influenced in his essay entitled, “The Literary Canon and Collection Building.” Heinzkill first mentions the two different camps he considers in regards to the canon: the classics view and the dismantle view. The classics camp views literature worthy of canonization if pieces of literature meet three criteria: “… literary quality, their timelessness, [and] their universality” (Heinzkill 52). According to Heinzkill, determining the first criterion, literary quality, is quite simple, “… if a work continues to be written about, it is in the canon” (52). This is a “time will tell” method of determining a piece canon worthy. If a work has slipped through the cracks and is not discussed within the academic community, the work is not of strong enough quality to merit canonization. The second criterion, timelessness, is indicated if, “The message, the situation, the themes, can without too much difficulty be found to be relevant to us today” (52). An example of this is Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet.” Just because the characters and setting are set (and written) some time ago, everything about the story can become relevant today, as seen by Bernstein and Sondheim’s adaption into “West Side Story.” The third criterion, universality, is where the second view on the canon comes in, the dismantling camp.

Heinzkill quotes Jill Dolan in explaining the triviality of universality in works within the canon, most of which are highly Anglo-European heterosexual male centered. Dolan comments on literature being universal, “… what chance does a play such as ‘Night Mother’ by Marsha Norman have to be taken seriously … its implications do not resonate enough to be considered tragedy by the generic male spectator” (qtd. in Heinzkill 53). This is where
the dismantle camp believes that there is no longer a use for the canon, as it does not represent everyone, and it is therefore no longer necessary, and should be dismantled. However, Heinzkill does not agree with this point, as he still sees merit in having a canon(s).

He goes onto discuss the discipline of cultural studies and how it is the root of looking at the canon, its criteria, and its formation. Heinzkill quotes the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to describe what cultural studies entails, “… they take their subject the intersection of culture and politics, examining such questions as how certain artifacts – works of literature, say are ‘produced’ and ‘consumed,’ or how and why some things come to be regarded as ‘high culture’ and some as ‘popular culture’” (qtd. in Heinzkill 58). This is where the Canon War begins; looking into what makes the canon what it is, why, and all of its historical implications. The subject of canon formation is a branch of this discussion.

Heinzkill goes onto describe what he means by canon formation, “… the study of how the canon changes. If the canon is the result of ideological and cultural forces, there is something to be learned by identifying these forces and exposing how they have operated and then to go on to revise literary history in light of present insights” (53). Heinzkill continues on to describe the different forces that determine whether pieces of literature are canon worthy.

He begins by discussing anthologies, and how they are a basic collection of pieces worthy of study. Next are schools and their class syllabi and reading lists. Teachers are forced to be selective and reduce these lists because classes are on a time restraint. There is a limit as to what can be covered in a single term. Heinzkill denotes that the commercial
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publisher is the worst in perpetuating the status quo. It is this institution which determines which pieces are to remain in print and which are to be discontinued, thereby creating a circle in which, “... texts are in print because they are canonical, a non-canonical text is not kept in print and therefore does not stand a chance of wider readership and the possibility of attaining canonical status” (55). Another force in determining canonization related to the commercial press is the university press. Though Heinzkill explains that they are far better than commercial presses, as they have a wider scope of available literature, as well as a wider readership, the university press is not as constrained in choosing which pieces to publish and which not to. The last force is literary journals. Because these are peer reviewed, they are quite critical in discussing which works of literature are of high quality (51, 54-56).

Heinzkill proposes two ways to expand the canon. The first, “Commonwealth Literature,” is not written in England by English citizens but rather by people all over the world writing in English. These works have a completely different take on great pieces of work, yet they relate to other Anglo-European works as they are written in English. “Commonwealth Literature” is a perfect example of how to address the criterion of universality as a prerequisite for canonization (59).

The second way to expand the canon is through the lens of the Marginalist: “There is only so much room in the center, which is what the canon represents, and therefore some things will always be marginal” (56). This is where Heinzkill draws his personal belief about the canon. Through the Marginalist view, Heinzkill concludes that the canon should
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not be dismantled. Rather, he sees previously marginal works forming their own canons of the greatest pieces within a subcategory.

Thomas Staley’s piece, “Literary Canons, Literary Studies, and Library Collections: A Retrospective On Collecting Twentieth-Century Writers,” focuses mainly on Harry Ransom, yet it does a nice job of discussing and reinforcing what previous authors within this literature review have described; the formation of canon. Staley begins by describing the forces responsible for the creation of canon, attributing equal power to artists, critics, and the academy; “… how artists reinforce the canon by the choice of styles or procedures, how critics construct canons, how canons govern curriculum and … how canons influence the critical research agenda and literary scholarship generally” (Staley 9). Staley argues that the artist must choose one’s “styles or procedures” (9). This relates directly to Richard Heinzkill’s work,50 in which he discusses the economic aspect of canon creation; how publishers play a large role in creating canon, as they decide what material is worthy of being published and republished. Staley discusses how artists must decide carefully how to go about their creation if they wish to appease the hierarchical forces in deciding whether their work is worthy of canonization. This illustrates how canon creation is much more complex than just creating fantastic art. There is an entire “game” to be played. If the goal is to become canonized, one must adhere to a set of guidelines which follow what has previously been deemed canon worthy in addition to the creative process.

Staley also addresses an important topic, namely the social constructions associated with canon creation. Selected players may individually help to create canon, but they are

50 “The Literary Canon and Collection Building.”
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working within a system which seeks to maintain a hierarchy. Staley calls for “... the recognition of social structures that created and continue to preserve it” (9). Within his work, Staley makes the claim that critics of the canon must begin to take, “... a more empirical view and have noted [note] the complex and changing shape of canons by examining the social and political forces as well as the historical process itself that extends, modifies, and dissolves literary hierarchies” (9). Staley’s argument directly addresses the framing of this thesis by discussing why the artists within the canon are included, given that the canonical lens does not extend much past Eurocentric, white, heterosexual, privileged, males. By taking a more empirical stance in observing the canon, one can begin to deconstruct the social hierarchies that serve to maintain the elitism found within the canon, argues Staley.

Staley then discusses what he believes to be the most influential player in the formation of canons, the research library. “Research libraries in the United States have played a crucial, and one could argue, an ultimately decisive role in the formulation and extension of this century’s literary canon”\textsuperscript{51} (9-10). He goes on to explain that the power which research libraries have to form the canon stems from, “... the post-war [World War II] expansion and development of American universities,” with the help of the,

\textsuperscript{51} Though Staley statement pertains to the twentieth century, I propose that this argument can be extended to the literary canon in its entirety and not just for the twentieth century, since his argument covers literature prior to the twentieth century. Research libraries are still responsible for maintaining works prior to the twentieth century which are still being used, studied, and researched, therefore maintaining their status as canonical.
“Establishment of federal agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities”\textsuperscript{52} (11). He furthers his argument by describing the following process:

The pressure was on librarians to acquire materials from the period on which the younger professors were teaching and writing. With the expansion of American universities there was an insatiable demand for research materials, and with this demand came keen competition among universities who were building collections from an infusion of state and federal dollars. \textsuperscript{(13)}

This demand for the best library collections stemmed from, “The major shifts in the way literature was taught in America after World War II, with the advent of New Criticism”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{52} “The National Endowment for the Humanities … is an independent federal agency created in 1965. It is one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the United States. The Endowment … [provides] grants for high-quality humanities projects in four funding areas: preserving and providing access to cultural resources, education, research, and public programs … The term 'humanities' includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life” (Overview).
This new way of viewing literature completely restructured the academy and how it functioned as a research institution. The other major component of the expanded role of American universities in the formation of the canon, was the competition that developed among universities. Curriculum was previously established as a player in creating and maintaining the canon (as discussed by Richard Heinzkill). The competition among universities to have the best library resources only furthered the process of deciding which pieces were considered “the best” and chosen for a university's collection; thus, cementing their place among other well established works of art.

The remainder of Staley’s work is dedicated to Harry Ransom from the University of Texas, describing his role in bringing that institution into the limelight as a major player among the already established libraries. With a superior collection, he helped to initiate the process of the expansion and competition of the American library collection.

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53 “New Criticism emphasizes explication, or "close reading," of "the work itself." It rejects old historicism's attention to biographical and sociological matters. Instead, the objective determination as to "how a piece works" can be found through close focus and analysis, rather than through extraneous and erudite special knowledge... [It] examines the relationships between a text's ideas and its form, between what a text says and the way it says it... New Criticism attempts to be a science of literature, with a technical vocabulary... Working with patterns of sound, imagery, narrative structure, point of view, and other techniques discernible on close reading of the text, they seek to determine the function and appropriateness of these to the self-contained work” (Delahoyde).

54 “The Literary Canon and Collection Building.”
Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon’s book entitled, *Introducing Cultural Studies*, provides a foundation upon which this thesis is built. At first, the comic book style set up of this text makes their work appear as if it is an easy read and not to be taken seriously. Yet as soon as a reader delves into Sardar and Loon’s pages, one is quickly taken by the “high” scholarship found beneath the cover. *Introducing Cultural Studies* eradicates superfluous explanations and uses a minimalist approach to quickly teach the foundation and elements of cultural studies.

They concisely outline the makeup of the field to address the question “What is cultural studies?” At first, cultural studies can seem confusing as it appears to have no “hard” boundaries. Sardar and Loon explain that, “… cultural studies is not a discipline. It is, in fact, a collective term for diverse and often contentious intellectual endeavors that address numerous questions, and consists of many different theoretical and political positions” (Sardar, Loon 8). The reason why cultural studies is not a distinct discipline is because it borrows anything and everything necessary to suit its needs. They add that, “Cultural studies functions by borrowing freely from social science disciplines and all branches of the humanities and the arts. It appropriates theories and methodologies from... Almost any method from textual analysis, ethnography and psychoanalysis to survey research ...” (7). In essence, cultural studies is like a telescope; it is built up of multiple lenses, none more powerful than the other, to add a holistic perspective on analyzing power structures. Cultural studies is not a hard discipline, nor an ideology, but rather a set of tools, “… to understand the mechanisms of cultural power ...” (170). Because cultural studies can be viewed as a set of tools, it bridges the gap of this thesis between the
influences of Ethnic Studies into a foundational Humanities project, looking as an object created out of cultural power; the canon.

What Sardar and Loon seek to show in their book is the different ways cultural studies can be used. Because of the way cultural studies functions, it can give the false impression that there are absolutely no boundaries to this “telescope.” Sardar and Loon help to explain the boundaries of cultural studies by showing how it can be applied, in turn giving the field a set of boundaries. They set out the following five characteristics of the field:

1. Cultural studies aims to examine its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power. Its constant goal is to expose power relationships and examine how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices.

2. Cultural studies is not simply the study of culture as though it was a discrete entity divorced from its social or political context. Its objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyse the social and political context within which it manifests itself.

3. Culture in cultural studies always performs two functions: it is both the object of study and the location of political criticism and action. Cultural studies aims to be both an intellectual and a pragmatic enterprise.

4. Cultural studies attempts to expose and reconcile the division of knowledge, to overcome the split between tactic (that is, intuitive knowledge
based on local cultures) and objective (so-called universal) forms of knowledge. It assumes a common identity and common interest between the knower and the known, between the observer and what is being observed.

5. Cultural studies is committed to a moral evaluation of modern society to a radical line of political action. The tradition of cultural studies is not one of value-free scholarship but one committed to social reconstruction by critical political involvement. Thus cultural studies aims to understand and change the structures of dominance everywhere, but in industrial capitalist societies in particular. (9)

These five characteristics of cultural studies help ground and guide the field by focusing on power structures, not in a Canon Anarchist means to destroy all systems of power, but by understanding the constructions of multiple relationships of power.

Though the foundation of cultural studies was heavily influence by a Marxist lens, looking at how economics played a major role in the power relationship between individuals, Sardar and Loon show that individuals are part of a system. “Culture is neither totally dependent on nor totally independent of economic conditions and relationships,” but is merely one part of a system in which individuals must navigate through power relationships (46). This “telescope” has expanded past its findings to include much more than a class lens, but also lenses to view the equal representation of, “… issues of race and gender, culture and consumerism, meaning and pleasure” (51).
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Where cultural studies adds additional value in deconstructing power relations, is by looking at “hard science.” Generally speaking, hard sciences (e.g. biology, chemistry, physics, etc.) are seen to be conducted in an entirely objective manner. However, Sardar and Loon show that in reality, this is not the case. All studies being done are subjective. It is with the process of choosing what to study, or even where the funding source to back a research project comes from, adds a subjective element; a political bias (90-91). The humanities, in contrast, are seen as inherently subjective. It is in recognizing one’s own subjectivities that allow a researcher to be conscious of her or his own biases, thus allowing for the most objective environment possible.

This thesis in particular, shifts away from a British cultural studies lens to a more diasporic cultural studies focus. The British cultural studies school is the founder of cultural studies. Since 1979, cultural studies has split into different fractions, resulting in the “cultural studies diaspora” (56). This dissolving of one homogeneous school, stems from critics of the British school which sees this particular school as far too Anglocentric, with, “... its overemphasis on class at the expense of race and gender ...” (52). In the diaspora, cultural studies has placed class in the backseat and focuses more on textual analysis and the aesthetic as well as, “... the plight of the marginalized and discourses of the periphery,” as well as incorporating feminisms and Queer theory (56, 140-47). In the diasporic cultural studies school, multiple lenses are used to deconstruct power

\[55\] And my friends within the hard science fields at the University of Colorado at Boulder, as well as other schools, attest to this as well.

\[56\] Including this one.
relationships, with class only aiding in understanding influence, not the only way of viewing relationships.

In *Introducing Cultural Studies*, Sardar and Loon further discuss each fraction of cultural studies as well as major players who have helped to create and shape the field. Where this book finds its relevancy within this thesis, is by showing the different tools and lenses available to deconstruct and understand the canon, and in turn, analyze Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* based off the analysis of the canon’s criteria.

*   *   *
On Additional Insight

Stanley Chodorow’s “Transformations in the Humanities” is an informative paper, but offers little to the development of the canon. Chodorow’s contribution is his discussion of feminism and how it has affected literary criticism in two ways. First, “… culture is based on power relationships within a society … the one identified as the culture of the society is the one produced by the dominant group” (Chodorow). This argument makes one aware that culture is not one homogenous entity. It is divided into smaller groups. It also recognizes that when one refers to the culture of society, it is not representative of everyone living within society, but rather reflective of the subgroup who maintains power; white males.

The second impact of feminism on literary criticism is, “… what a literary work is depends on who is reading it” (Chodorow). This brings up the notion of subjectivity in judging the worth of a piece of literature, which can be related to canonization. When proposing new pieces to add to the canon, one must be mindful of and keep in check her or his own personal preferences and subjectivities, and focus exclusively on what is on the page. Though the vast majority of Chodorow’s piece does not offer much to the canon debate, he does enlighten the reader on how feminism has affected literary criticism.

Alan Karass introduces the topic of knowledge and the canon in his piece entitled, “Canon, Cultural Memory, and Positive Knowledge in Humanities Education.” He starts off his piece and lays out three different types of intellectual material. He defines them as the canon: “… the body of literature, music, and art that functions as the foundation of
undergraduate and graduate coursework;” “material that is collected by libraries, archives, and museums;” and thirdly “positive knowledge,” which he describes as “... all knowledge that has been confirmed to exist” (Karass 118-19).

Karass goes on to discuss how knowledge transforms from infinite knowledge to positive knowledge. He defines infinite knowledge as, “... all knowledge and information. It includes all that is known and documented as well as all that exists but is unknown to mankind” (120). Where the canon relates to the two forms of knowledge is in the process of transforming from infinite to positive knowledge. According to Karass, “Once a book, a work of art, a piece of music, or any other intellectual material is experienced by anyone other than its original creator, it migrates from the infinite knowledge to the positive knowledge corpus” (122). This means that all pieces within the canon are positive knowledge as they are widely “read” by many people, which in turn transfers the knowledge inherent in the artwork to others who are receiving it.

To help frame the canon within his work, Karass defines the canon as, “... the body of works that is considered to be the most important or significant in a particular field” (121). His actual description of the canon is quite vague, since his main focus is the topic of knowledge formation and transformation. However, he raises many questions as to the criteria and parameters about the canon, such as:

Can the underlying values that dictate what is in canon change? Can the general public affect the canon ...? Can the marketplace, or marketing

57 For the purpose of this thesis, the “canon” will refer to the Humanities canon.
executives, influence the canon? Do all works by a major author get included in the canon even if several novels are great, but the rest are generally considered inferior? (123)

Karass shies away from actually addressing any of these issues and simply responds, “What is important for understanding knowledge migration is acknowledging that works can move in and out of the canon...” rendering his article of little value towards the research being conducted for this thesis, in terms of addressing how the canon is created and the criteria and parameters it entails (123). However, Karass does offer an affirmation that, “Research outside of the canon can prove to be rigorous and meaningful,” as it places both the canon and para-canonical art in context through their own juxtapositions (125).

Howard Bloch does his best to defend the subject of Humanities in, “What Words are Worth in Defense of the Humanities.” His article focuses on the subject of humanities and what the canon does, much like Jon Avery’s work, rather than touching on the canon debate about whether it should be expanded, remain as is, or be dismantled.

Bloch describes the humanities, and by association, the canon as its tool to, “... teach students to recognize a significant question, to make crucial distinctions in the articulation of its terms, to draw consequential conclusions, to assess conclusions in human terms, and to communicate the procedures and results of inquiry” (Bloch). According to Bloch, the humanities are the foundation of the academic system, though they are coming under

58 “Plato’s Republic in the Core Curriculum: Multiculturalism and the Canon Debate.”
attack in such ways as general apathy towards the subject, or budget cuts within the university or high school. Humanities are equally, if not more, important as hard sciences.

Bloch does admit to the narrow scope in which the canon is based: “... all great and enduring works offer a privileged view of the human condition” (Bloch). This quote directly follows a lengthy list of “great works,” all of whom are by Anglo-European writers. Though Bloch acknowledges that the list of “great works” comes from a privileged view, he does not hint that the canon should allow for a broader spectrum of art. One could easily argue that Bloch contradicts his own argument by saying how the humanities [canon] displays lessons of the human condition, yet all the pieces are from a narrow Anglo-European base which cannot speak to the condition in which all humans face.

* * *
Work on Things Fall Apart

* * *

On Support of the Canonization of Things Fall Apart

Carey Snyder carefully points out that while Things Fall Apart may be an excellent representation of Africa as well as a postcolonial novel, it is important to look closely at Chinua Achebe himself and, his own subjectivities in her piece entitled, “The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Ethnographic Readings: Narrative Complexity in Things Fall Apart.” Snyder starts off her piece by likening the Commissioner’s diary entry about Okonkwo to Things Fall Apart as a whole. According to Snyder,

... Okonkwo [is] stripped of his individual identity as he is transformed into a nameless African in a Western text ... the sophisticated Igbo culture ... are [is] also erased as they are lumped together in the essentialist category of primitive tribes,” yet the Commissioner, “… nonetheless passes as an African authority in the West. (Snyder 155)

Snyder claims that Achebe, “… works to redress the reductive and distorted representation of traditional African cultures emblematized by the commissioner's text” (155). Snyder goes on to discuss how Achebe’s Things Fall Apart is a response to the Western canon, which has previously, essentialized African art, much how the Commissioner does to Okonkwo.
Snyder comments on how *Things Fall Apart* can be seen as worthy of canonization. According to,

... the MLA’s\(^{59}\) *Approaches to Teaching Achebe’s Things Fall Apart* ... among the principal reasons for teaching this novel ... that it offers ‘an unusual opportunity to discover the foreign from within’: ‘Readers everywhere may enter Achebe’s Igbo worldview and see past and present African experiences from an indigenous perspective’. (qtd. Snyder 156)

This directly relates to at least two of the criteria for canonization discussed by previous authors within this literature review. The first criterion is universality, how “readers everywhere” can relate to Achebe’s work. The second criterion is the timelessness, of “past and present African experiences.” In addition, Snyder reiterates Keith Booker’s notion of why *Things Fall Apart* has traditionally not been included within the Western canon, “anthropological readings ... have sometimes prevented African novels from receiving serious critical attention as literature rather than simply as documentation of cultural practice” (qtd. in Snyder 156). Traditionally, Achebe’s work is read not for its literary quality, overlooking the criteria for canonization, but rather as a quasi-case study to show the world how the other half lives.

Snyder quotes Neil ten Kortenaar regarding Achebe’s use of the Commissioner’s essentialization, “... Achebe’s ‘appeal to an obviously fake authority deploys irony to establish Achebe’s own credentials as a historian of Igboland’” (qtd. in Snyder 155). By

\(^{59}\) Modern Language Association.
Using this irony, Achebe is able to take back African literature from an Anglo-European lens and write in a style which is self-representing, coming from a Nigerian author. From this point, Snyder springboards into her next set of arguments; to carefully look at Achebe’s subjectivity of *Things Fall Apart*, stemming from his own cultural background.

Snyder quotes Elizabeth Ferna in her definition of an ethnographic novel: “... the ‘ethnographic novel’ as one ‘written by an artist from within the culture,’ which presents an ‘authentic’ representation of that culture” (qtd. in Snyder 157). Snyder is careful to critique Achebe as an ethnographic novelist, as many times he is often essentialized to speak as an expert for the Igbo people. Snyder argues that one must read *Things Fall Apart*, “*meta-ethnographically* ... Such a reading restores Achebe’s text to the realm of the literary, by encouraging subtle attention to the narrative’s achievements as fiction, rather than as cultural documentation” (157). Snyder point outs the complications of reading *Things Fall Apart* as an ethnographic novel, which will be expanded upon further, and reading it for its literary value as an inherently superior piece of literature.

Snyder proposes that when one reads a piece of art as an ethnographic novel, one can easily fall into the trap of taking the words on the page as truth, and the author as the expert, when this is not necessarily the case. Though authors might be well versed in the subject (as Achebe is a member of the Igbo people), they are still liable to write with their own subjectivities. Snyder is quick to point out that though Achebe is Igbo, and grew up in Nigeria among the Igbo people, he was the son of one of the first Christian converts (growing up Christian himself) and, “... received a colonial education – meaning one calibrated to an English frame of reference...” (158). This means that though Achebe is
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native Igbo, growing up with Nigerian culture and frame of mind, at the same time he has been trained with a Western lens rendering him mentally, “... split between identifying with the white adventurer and with the savage, and though he consciously decides to take up the ‘savage’s cause, to tell ‘a different story,’ his experience suggests that ultimately it is not as simple as choosing sides” (159). This segues into Snyder talking about Achebe’s distance from the Igbo people, when one does a close reading of his text.

Achebe can be viewed as a narrator who speaks as an individual apart from his society. An example is this passage from Things Fall Apart, “‘Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest amongst them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits’” (qtd. in Snyder 164). Snyder goes on to explain that, “These remarks clearly install distance between the narrator – who presumably is not afraid of the dark, and likely does not believe in evil spirits – ‘these people,’ who are cowed by their fear of the night” (164). Distance between the Narrator, who claims to be part of the Igbo, and the people themselves, is apparent with the use of “these people,” stresses Snyder in her citation. To Achebe’s defense, Snyder incorporates his own comment on his “distance” to the Igbo people and how he feels it is an asset to at times appear objective, contrary to traditional African narrators:

I think it was easier for me to observe. Many of my contemporaries who went to school with me and came from heathen families ask me today: ‘How did you manage to know all these things?’ You see, for them these old ways were just part of life. I could look at them from a certain distance, and I was struck by them. (qtd. in Snyder 161)
In order to balance Achebe’s predicament of being both an insider and an outsider of his own culture, he follows what Malinowski suggests that ethnographers,

... should incorporate native phrases into their texts as a means of establishing authority, by demonstrating their supposed mastery of the indigenous language;” by using, “... the native phrases woven into the largely English text of TFA [Things Fall Apart] serve to linguistically render the borderland from which Achebe writes. (162)

By using this ethnographic tool of intertwining languages within his literature, Snyder shows that Achebe is able to write a piece which pays homage to his own people while crafting eloquent work which some may claim is worthy of canonization.

One minor point which Snyder brings up that directly relates to Eugene McCarthy’s work60 is that Achebe, “... indigenizes the English language, reproducing attributes of African oral tradition in a written text” (162). This point, however, is better discussed in McCarthy’s explanation of the African oral tradition. Though the majority of Snyder’s analysis of Things Fall Apart is devoted to of how Achebe can be seen as an ethnographer, and the pros and the cons of doing so, her initial point is critical to this thesis which strives to look at Achebe’s work as worthy of canonization. This can be done if one reads Things Fall Apart not as an ethnographic novel to shed light on a culture, but focusing on the literary quality Achebe achieves.

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60 “Rhythm and Narrative Method in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart.”
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Diana Rhoads does a worthy job of discussing Achebe’s use of culture within Things Fall Apart, as well as bringing up the idea of universality by showing the relationship between the Igbo and the English in her piece entitled, “Culture in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart.” Rhoads touches on Achebe’s first challenge, which is to, “… dispel old images in order to create a true sense of his people’s dignity” (Rhoads 63). Prior to Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, there had been a plethora of literature about Africa, represented best (Rhoads points out) by Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness; “… see Africans as primitives representing Europeans at an earlier stage of civilization” (63). Africans were depicted as primal animals that had not evolved, unlike European civilizations (the English), “… from the tribal state through monarchy to parliamentary government” (63). By depicting Africans as primitive peoples, it ensured an erasure of their culture and value. Rhoads points out that, "... the Igbos as a whole reveal themselves more tolerant of other cultures than the Europeans, who merely see the Igbos as uncivilized ... the Igbo are in some ways superior to those who come to convert them” (63).

Rhoads goes on to elaborate about how in Things Fall Apart, the English were not necessarily justified in coming into the Igbo community, thinking that they were innately superior, merely because they were British. And by default, the Igbo, as Africans, were a primitive people. Rhoads shows three separate examples on how the Igbo are just as civilized, if not more than the English.

First, “The Igbos ... have developed a democratic system of government ... Further, as is appropriate in a democracy, each man is judged on his own merits, ‘according to his worth,’ not those of his father, as would be appropriate in an aristocracy or an oligarchy”
Rhoads makes the case that the Igbo are indeed “civilized” as they have a democratic system already in place, and indeed do not reside under what the British assumed to be an aristocracy, or an oligarchy, under a tribal system.

Rhoad’s next point is that the, “… Igbo have a highly developed system of religion which works as effectively as Christianity” (64). She argues that, “The Igbo religion and the Christian religion are equally irrational” (64-65). They both serve relatively the same purposes. Whereas the Christians think that the Igbo religion is impractical, the Igbos think that the Christian religion is equally impractical in many other ways. The English missionaries in *Things Fall Apart* add nothing to the Igbo community by bringing in an alternative religion, argues Rhoads.

She continues her point on the inherent civility by discussing the economic system found within the Igbo community: “… the Igbos have an economic system which redistributes wealth in a manner preventing any one tribesman from becoming supreme” (66). Here is a case in which the Igbos surpass the “civilized” English. The English have no system to prevent the ever enlarging gap of class inequality, the rich from getting richer and the poor from getting poorer. Whereas in the Igbo community, in order for a man to take on a title within the community, he is responsible for helping those who are less fortunate than himself, before he can achieve his desired title. This system is far more

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61 Again, this is another example which ties in directly with Jeyifo’s argument about how the Igbo community, and *Things Fall Apart* for that matter, are indeed gendered. The economic system set in place is for tribesmen not tribeswomen, where the women do not have such opportunities to gain titles.
advanced and "civilized" than what is seen in most parts of the world today. Rhoads cements her argument by pointing out that the English did not add anything to the Igbo community. They did not succeed in "civilizing the natives," rather they merely replaced one system with another (68).

Rhoads sheds light on Achebe as, "... he does not represent the Europeans as wholly evil" (69). In addition, "Achebe presents the [Igbo] past as admirable, but not without flaws which can be eliminated" (68). Rhoads discusses how Achebe does a very good job by balancing a fine line. He does not paint a false picture in which the Igbo are perfect, and the malevolent English come in to destroy their community. Rather, he depicts a realistic view within Things Fall Apart, where neither the Igbo, nor the English are perfect, both having their own flaws.

Rhoad's next point is critical to the work done within this thesis. Though she does not call it "universality," she backs up this main criterion for canonization as prescribed by previous authors within this literature review. Rhoads writes, "Things Fall Apart suggests that the perpetual human types recur in all cultures and that all effective civilizations must learn to deal with those types" (70). This is essential in adding support for Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, because this idea of universality, where the story is applicable to all people, has

62 Though I would argue most first world countries would never accept such a system as it looks too much like communism, and in addition to the “red scare” as a deterrent to adopting such a system as seen in the Igbo community, some might argue that it would aid in the dismantling of a capitalist society, again keeping with the theme of deconstructing the status quo.
been shown to connect both the English and the Igbo. Rhoads clarifies, “Both the Igbo and the British cultures are for Achebe a mixture of types of human beings” (69).

Rhoads continues by classifying the two main character types portrayed within *Things Fall Apart*. The first type is the warrior, “Okonkwo and Mr. Smith are warrior types who will not compromise when their own cultures are threatened” (69). Essentially Mr. Smith and Okonkwo act the same despite being from “different worlds.” Both of them refuse compromise and are adamant about protecting their own cultures. The second character type is represented by Mr. Brown and Akunna: “he [Mr. Brown] and Akunna are willing to learn about the other’s beliefs even if they are not converted to them;” they are the compromising type (69).

Rhoads brings up one last point that ties in well with what other authors have written on Achebe. It is what makes Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, an excellent piece of literature. The way he crafts his words in English, yet makes *Things Fall Apart* distinctly African; “…Achebe gives a sense of the beauty of Igbo art, poetry and music by showing how it is interwoven with the most important institutions of the clan and by creating a sense of the Igbo language through his own use of English” (67). This ties in well with what has been previously presented, how Achebe thoroughly crafts his sentence structure to show off the art found within the Igbo community.

*   *   *
Biodun Jeyifo’s paper entitled, “Okonkwo and His Mother: Things Fall Apart and Issues of Gender in the Constitution of African Postcolonial Discourse,” brings up how Okonkwo’s mother is only mentioned within Achebe’s Things Fall Apart one time, yet she still plays an important role within the story, and further goes on to discuss the gender politics within the Igbo community, taking a new feminist reading of Things Fall Apart.

Jeyifo starts off framing his paper by pointing out, “… the male-centeredness of Achebe in this novel” (Jeyifo 849). Jeyifo goes onto explain, not necessarily excusing Achebe, but rather explaining that African culture in general is quite gendered in its framing, which explains the male subjectivity of Things Fall Apart. Yet, he goes on to write that, “… Things Fall Apart not only has one of the most extensive and dense novelistic inscriptions of the genderization of [male] subjectivity” (851). This genderization can be seen through how Achebe writes his novel. Maleness seems to be the standard within Igbo society. Through Achebe’s character of Okonkwo, he is able to ascribe, “… femaleness, as Okonkwo encodes it, is the exact opposite [of maleness]: weakness, fecklessness, cowardice, irresoluteness, sentimentality” (850).

More concrete examples of how maleness and femaleness play a role within the text of Igbo society can be seen through daily ways of life, such as food eaten;

... Okonkwo’s representation of ‘femaleness’ as weakness and irresoluteness seems to have validation in the system of division of cognitive and perceptual categories in his society which ascribes the designation ‘female’ to smaller
crops like the cocoyam and the designation ‘male’ to bigger crops like the yam. (851)

This designation of gender to food is based on importance within the Igbo society, where the yam is praised as the most important food, whereas the cocoyam is a filler, a less important crop.

Jeyifo also takes a quasi-Freudian reading of Okonkwo’s tools with the, “... physical phallicism ... [of] the gun, the machete, and the cudgel (for wife beating and child beating), three over-literal extensions of an aggressive, neurotic masculinist identity ...” (850). As opposed to the yams, gendered in regards to their importance, Jeyifo point that Achebe ascribes maleness to these objects based off their phallic symbolism. From this framing of Things Fall Apart as a male centered, gendered piece of literature, Jeyifo takes a, “... feminist re-reading of the novel ... [to] relocate the ‘motherlore,’” found within Things Fall Apart (848).

This can be done, for example, by again looking at the foods eaten within the Igbo community. Though the yam is seen as the most important food, it is only eaten once throughout the day, whereas the cocoyam and other “female” foods are eaten three times a day, adding importance to their value held within the Igbo community. Though the cocoyam is a “female” food, it is extremely important as it is the staple of the Igbo diet and consumed far more often than the “male” yam. Another way Jeyifo takes a feminist re-reading of Things Fall Apart is by looking at the one time that Okonkwo’s mother is mentioned.
Jeyifo prefaces this point by showing Achebe’s masculinist framing of the novel. First, “… Okonkwo’s mother … is not named” (848). By stripping Okonkwo’s mother of a name, “… Okonkwo’s mother is assimilated into the neutral, abstract function of ‘mothers in general’” (849). This further adds to Okonkwo’s mother fading into the motherlore as more of a symbol of mothers, than actually having a space within the novel; much like Okonkwo holds, or any other named character for that matter. In discussing Okonkwo’s mother’s story, Jeyifo quotes the entire section which includes Okonkwo’s comment about his mother’s story, “But it was as silly as all women’s stories” (849).

Including stories and proverbs throughout Things Fall Apart makes it distinctly African, for which Achebe is often praised. Yet Okonkwo’s comment on his mother’s story as “silly as all women’s stories” seems to give the reader, at a first glance, the sense that women are held beneath men in Igbo society. Jeyifo does a beneficial job in taking a feminist re-reading of Okonkwo’s mother’s story of the Mosquito and the Ear, as told by Okonkwo. The basic story is that the Mosquito proposes to the Ear, and is rejected. It is the simple rejection that Jeyifo argues is a reversal of the gender hierarchy. He points out,

… the most arresting detail in the story is the structure of reversals of gender hierarchy between the respective female and male personae in the tale. Thus Ear, the female persona, is the dominant, supercilious agent in the conflict. Mosquito, the male suitor … as an atrophied, diminished, ‘inadequate’ phallus. (849)

Jeyifo discusses how Okonkwo assumes throughout the story that the Mosquito, being male, is by default the dominant character, and he cannot seem to wrap his head around
any other reading of the story. Jeyifo makes a well developed argument by demonstrating how the story turns into one of, “... the male's neurotic fear of female power as the nemesis of male potency and life-force” (849).

From here, Jeyifo takes his political stance based on Achebe's gendered *Things Fall Apart*, and states, “... an important *political* lesson: national liberation in Africa, as long as it remains a historic agenda enforced by neocolonial dependency and arrested decolonization ... must reconfigure its founding moment as not irredeemably marked by an inevitable, *natural* sexism” (848). Jeyifo's argument addresses Africa today. In order for African countries to move forward, away from their colonial past, they must also move towards being an egalitarian society. Jeyifo's point,

... is at the heart of one of the major issues in African critical discourse at the present time: the project of reclaiming a separate, distinct tradition of African female writing and criticism which ... its objective is not merely to 'correct' the stereotypes and misconceptions of the male-centered writers and critics ... but rather to reclaim 'women's stories' (herstory) from the void or repressed zones into which men and male-centeredness had consigned them.

(852)

Jeyifo proceeds to clarify that in order for this to happen, “... the postcolonial state, will not be content with how women are positively depicted by certain 'progressive' male writers ...” (853). A distinct African female space must be carved out by *women*. This directly applies to literature, in which Jeyifo tries to contain his argument. He sees this egalitarian movement within literature to be the real way for African nations to progress further from
their colonial past, by not editing what has already been written by male writers about women, but rather by women writing about themselves within their own space and to reclaim the motherlore as a positive aspect within postcolonial African discourse.

Kwadwo Osei-Nyame’s piece entitled “Chinua Achebe Writing Culture: Representations of Gender and Tradition in Things Fall Apart,” explores the role that gender plays in Things Fall Apart by explaining Igbo culture throughout the community. Osei-Nyame starts off his piece by describing, as he sees it, Achebe’s agenda of writing Things Fall Apart as an ethnographic work to challenge and displace, “… the narratives of colonialist writers like Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad meant for Achebe the appropriation of ethnographic modes of representation to prove that the communities of his African past were neither ‘primitive’ nor ‘without history’” (Osei-Nyame 149). What Osei-Nyame names as ethnographic, B. Eugene McCarthy⁶³ will show, later in this literature review, how Achebe uses an African oral tradition as a major component of his writing style. Osei-Nyame touches on this subject as well; “Representing an African worldview through narratives that speak for themselves meant that Achebe would draw upon Igbo oral traditions to narrate the stories of his communities …” (148). Letting the stories speak for themselves, Osei-Nyame argues, is critical in Achebe’s ethnographic work. Utilizing this traditional oral practice defines a separate African writing style. This style is marked in juxtaposition to an Anglo-European literary tradition, “… in utilizing oral traditions to engage the ‘canons of elite’ Western literary ‘traditions and texts’ …” (148).

⁶³ “Rhythm and Narrative Method in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart.”
Osei-Nyame’s use of the word “engage” can be read as a quasi-attack on the literary canon, in essence, showing that there are other texts worthy of canonization, and that Achebe’s African style of writing merits being included within the canon, flowing well into the topic of this thesis. Though Osei-Nyame warns not to take the oral tradition too simply,

... oral narrative must not be taken merely to be ‘the reflection of culture’ or ‘the cognitive arena for sorting out the logic of cultural codes’ in historical writing: instead, oral narratives must be utilized ‘contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning’. (qtd. in Osei-Nyame 148-49)

Osei-Nyame explains that using oral narratives for the sake of being “African” is far too simplistic. Rather, orality is engrained much deeper and is a vehicle for exploring African literature rather than just an element in itself.

Osei-Nyame continues on to discuss the importance of Achebe writing his ethnography as, “... ethnographic representation must be borne in mind by both ‘outsiders’ like Conrad and Cary writing about the Other and ‘insiders’ like Achebe writing about

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64 One must be critical of this take from Osei-Nyame in terms of his “insider” versus “outsider” perspective. As noted previously by Carey Snyder in, “The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Ethnographic Readings: Narrative Complexity in Things Fall Apart,” Achebe, though Nigerian himself, was trained in Western academies which in turn, blurs the lines that make him strictly an “insider.” Patricia Hill Collins’s piece, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” might be a better commentary on Osei-Nyame’s idea
themselves and their own cultures” (149). Osei-Nyame then proceeds to bring gender into the picture, first by framing *Things Fall Apart* as a masculine story. This dovetails well with Biodun Jeyifo's article,65 about how, on an initial reading of *Things Fall Apart*, it is quite apparent that the story is highly phallocentric, “... read in the first instance as the narration of an epic African masculine nationalist tradition,” Osei-Nyame continues on, “Masculine traditions operate as forms of consciousness that act foremostly to legitimize specific ideals and values and to distribute and restrict authority within Umuofia (150).

Osei-Nyame discusses his thoughts on Achebe’s masculine outlook,66 in terms of the framing of the story; "Okonkwo’s masculinity becomes a defensive resource and his adherence to a masculine philosophy will thenceforth order his world ... Okonkwo is in a way led to define himself and to apprehend his world negatively” (151). Osei-Nyame equates Okonkwo’s outlook on life to be representative of the way Umuofia structures its society, “... Umuofia’s authoritative discourse consciously omits other [feminine] representable values and ideals and Okonkwo’s own exclusion from his worldview of, among other things, ‘gentleness’ and ‘idleness,’ is a position that Umuofia’s fabricated traditions sanction” (151). Osei-Nyame’s association between Okonkwo’s outlook and the that Achebe can be seen as the “outsider within” or maybe in this case more appropriately, the “insider on the outside.”

65 “Okonkwo and His Mother: *Things Fall Apart* and Issues of Gender in the Constitution of African Postcolonial Discourse.”

66 To clarify, Osei-Nyame does not write about Achebe’s outlook on his own personal life, but rather in terms of him as an author.
way Umuofia is run clearly defines a masculine outlook as corrupt in terms of a world view. From this point on, Osei-Nyame moves from showing how *Things Fall Apart* is framed as a masculine gendered story to showing how one can take a reading from “the other side” and see through the masculine gendered writing to reveal strong feminine issues, much like Biodun Jeyifo does in his article (155).

As in a previous example from Jeyifo, one can read into the importance of female crops within the economic system in Umuofia. Seemingly female crops are considered less important than male crops such as the yam, but when read carefully, Osei-Nyame argues, one may see the true importance of female crops, and even see their superior importance within Igbo society (160). Another aspect within which Osei-Nyame takes a feminist re-reading deals with language, stories, and proverbs, much like Jeyifo’s discussion. Osei-Nyame writes,

> Language and proverbs in Achebe’s narrative provide significantly adjustable orders of interpretation and underscore the view of Umuofians themselves that ‘[a]mong the I[g]bo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs [and other forms of language] are the palm-oil with which words are eaten’. (qtd. in Osei-Nyame 152)

Agreeing with Jeyifo, by showing the importance of proverbs and stories within Igbo society, adds to the importance that they hold within this community.

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67 In terms of writing on the same topic, Osei-Nyame did not specifically address this author.
The key to the feminist re-reading of *Things Fall Apart* is to again quote Okonkwo, “as silly as all women’s stories,” to show the disconnect within Igbo society that Osei-Nyame points out. Igbo society cannot be phallocentric if stories are held so highly within Igbo society as, a feminine aspect of Igbo culture. Osei-Nyame’s primary argument about how underneath a first reading of *Things Fall Apart*’s masculine outlook, one can find powerful female images and stories is with the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter. Here Osei-Nyame strives to, “… locate it as an alternative Igbo nationalist tradition within which we can construct a specifically female-centered paradigm of resistance” (157). This is shown to be the case in a scene toward the end of the book where, “… Okonkwo finally appears with his machete in hand at the end, that his own masculinity has been both literally and symbolically violated.” Through the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter, the reader can now understand how this, “… story also creates processes of reconstruction through which we associate women with heroic values (158).

Osei-Nyame explains that it is Okonkwo’s displacement from this episode, that really shows off the highly read upset over gender found within *Things Fall Apart*, “… it is important to note also that in a very significant way, the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi episode evidently prefigures the displacement of Okonkwo and to a large degree masculine authority within the clan as a whole.” From here one may, “… read the story of the three women and the displaced Okonkwo with all its insistent re-orderings of signification of gender and authority as being of cardinal importance to Achebe’s construction of the contested nature of power and authority within the clan” (159). It is his unearthing of the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi episode in a feminist re-reading of *Things Fall Apart*, along with his
other examples, that makes Osei-Nyame’s piece on *Things Fall Apart* an excellent reference when looking at Achebe’s work through a gendered lens.

Dr. Shuchi Agrawal does a good job of showing the value inherent in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in his paper entitled, “A Post Colonial Study of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.” Agrawal describes *Things Fall Apart* as a postcolonial novel. He defines postcolonialism as, “... a diverse network of ideas and practices that seeks to make sense of, evaluate, critique, and rewrite a people’s colonial experience” (Agrawal 124). This type of literature serves to reconstruct colonized peoples histories, to change the “his” in *history* from the white, Anglo-Eurocentric, male, to the voice of the people who have been colonized to tell their story. Agrawal argues that Achebe’s strength in *Things Fall Apart* is the showcasing of “... indigenous Nigerian oral traditions ... impressive and beautiful artifacts in music, dance and above all ... meaningful proverbs” (122-23).

Agrawal discusses how Achebe demonstrates through *Things Fall Apart*, “... the importance of stories and their pedagogical value. Morals and values are described through these seemingly simple tales ...” (124). Stories and proverbs are the staple of African society, and as Agrawal points out, *Things Fall Apart* showcases this beautifully. Instead of reading a story of an African village through the lens of a European colonizer, “We are allowed to see the Igbo through their own eyes,” which adds to the value of the piece as a postcolonial artwork (123).

What makes *Things Fall Apart* a powerful yet accessible artwork is how Achebe wrote in English, yet without submitting to a western framework making his piece “... unmistakably African” (122). Agrawal goes on to discuss how, unlike previous Anglo-
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European art, "... the novel [Things Fall Apart] is a response and antidote to a large tradition of European literature in which Africans are depicted as primitive and mindless savages" (122).

Agrawal shows that Achebe’s work points out the irony of the European rhetoric, "... who often boast of bringing democratic institutions to the rest of the world" (122). This is done by showing the Igbo people before the missionaries come and describing the intricacies within their village including how they are ruled, not by a king, but rather a democracy (122). The theme of, "... the tragic consequence of the European encounter with African civilization," is lightly threaded throughout Things Fall Apart; how the "civilized" missionaries are not necessarily better than how the Igbo have been living for centuries (122).

Another strength Achebe demonstrates within his work, Agrawal points out, is his ability to brilliantly display the culture and value of the Nigerian people without forcing it onto the reader as a superior civilization. "He [Achebe] does not try to force Nigerian culture upon a European audience. This is exactly what he objects to in the colonial project – the forcing of European culture on a unwilling Nigerian clan" (123). Agrawal claims that Achebe merely displays the Igbo people with inherent value. This humbling tactic is successful in showing their inherent value without opposition to European culture, but rather showing how the Igbo can stand on their own.

B. Eugene McCarthy writes a piece which is entirely different from other critics’ writing on Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, focusing on Achebe’s writing style and how it makes Things Fall Apart distinctly African, stemming from an oral storytelling tradition. In
“Rhythm and Narrative Method in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart,*” McCarthy starts off by debunking a typical reader’s first thoughts about *Things Fall Apart:* “... readers are often struck by the simple mode of narration and equally simple prose style ...” (McCarthy 243). Yet McCarthy explains further that there is more behind this seemingly simple style of writing. “He [Achebe] reshapes English in order to imitate the ‘linguistic patterns of his mother tongue [quoting Ihechukwu Madubuike],’ Igbo” (243-44). By manipulating and being precise in word choice within *Things Fall Apart,* McCarthy argues that Achebe is able to, “... establish the narrative method as imitative of the African oral rather than the English ‘literary’ tradition. Indeed rhythm is a quality at the heart of African culture” (245).

McCarthy explains that the style in which Achebe writes, makes *Things Fall Apart* distinctly African; very similar to an oral storyteller. McCarthy does point out, however, that Achebe does depart very slightly from the oral storytelling method in how he places himself (or refrains from doing so) in relation to his characters,

... no doubt because the novel is written, not spoken. A more important departure from strict oral procedure is the narrator’s distance from his characters and his reluctance to intrude his views [citing Walter J. Ong] ... empathy and participation are elements of orality, objectivity a consequence of writing. (245)

Normally, an oral storyteller would place themselves within the story, or have a more active role within their story, yet Achebe breaks from this method to remain in the position of the “all knowing author.”
Besides the departure of the narrators place within the story, McCarthy notes that Achebe uses rhythm throughout the novel. “Rhythm ... thus can range from a stress within a phrase or sentence, to the structuring principle of a paragraph, to the form of an entire work” (256). By reading *Things Fall Apart* with a rhythmic lens, one is able to see the complexity of Achebe’s work beneath the deceivingly simple surface.

McCarthy offers three ways of reading into the rhythm of *Things Fall Apart*. The first way is through, “stress within a phrase or sentence.” McCarthy shows how the repetition of words adds to the oral technique within *Things Fall Apart*;

... the narrator’s [Achebe’s] repetition of words and phrases, both verbatim and synonymous, and his mode of emphasis and patterning suggest a deliberateness and complexity well beyond the surface simplicity ...

repetitions ... are a technique of the traditional oral storyteller, sitting talking to a group of listeners. (244)

McCarthy includes a passage selected from *Things Fall Apart* and marks different words to show the repetition themes within just two paragraphs. This enables the reader (of McCarthy’s paper) to easily find these repeating themes.

The second way in which McCarthy shows off rhythm within *Things Fall Apart* is by explaining the literal rhythm found in selected lines; “one may even discern a distinct metrical rhythm in some lines ... which could be marked, short, long, long; short, short,

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68 The selected passage is from the first two paragraphs of the story: “Okonkwo was well known ...” and “The drums beat ...” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 3).
long, long, and so on … the rhythmical quality of the prose, more markedly rhythmical than
traditional English prose, closer to an oral African quality” (247). McCarthy further explains
the secondary way of reading into the rhythm of *Things Fall Apart* as, “the structuring
principle of a paragraph.” Achebe achieves this by repeating themes within *Things Fall
Apart*,

Such primary devices [repetition] for memory (‘for rhythm aids recall’) and
communication simplify the story so that the listeners can grasp characters
and events graphically and surely. More specifically, oral expression is
‘additive’ … that is, ‘backlooping’ by means of ‘redundancy, repetition of the
just-said [quoting Walter J. Ong]’ … Once a name or event is introduced he
proceeds by moving forward, then reaching back to repeat and expand,
moving onward again, accumulating detail and elaborating. (245)

By repeating characters and events, rhythmically moving forwards and backwards, also
adds an element of the oral storytelling method which makes *Things Fall Apart* so distinct.

McCarthy explains the third way of reading rhythm in *Things Fall Apart* as, “the form
of an entire work.” This is seen through Achebe’s set up chapters. McCarthy cites Robert
Wren’s article “Achebe's World” in his explanation of the formatting of *Things Fall Apart*;

... the novel’s twenty-five chapters ‘are upon closer analysis divided into four
groups of six chapters each, with one pivotal chapter, XIII’ ... Part One
actually ‘has two six-chapter units plus the pivotal chapter.’ The stress then is
on Chapter Six, the drum chapter, as a center of this part ... so there is an
imbalance with Chapter Thirteen: the ‘alternating chapters show Okonkwo in
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crisis’: VII, IX, XI and XII ... Okonkwo’s eventual tragedy as a violation of this harmony. (251)

Achebe’s use of rhythm can be seen in the way the chapters are set up in regards to what they are about. “Crisis chapters” are purposely written in a specific order to maintain rhythm throughout Things Fall Apart, as well as add an even deeper level showing the eventual breakdown of the rhythm synced with the breakdown of the story’s hero Okonkwo.

McCarthy shows that Achebe has fully mastered his use of language and writing style to craft a superior piece of literature, “Achebe’s fiction established firmly that there is an African prose literature” (243). McCarthy goes on to discuss what makes Achebe’s work distinctly African, separate from a European literary tradition. Though McCarthy does not spend time pointing out Achebe’s European technical training as Carey Snyder69 does, he does show (quoting Janheinz Jahn), how Achebe takes the European technique of using a leitmotiv70 to advance his writing style, yet tweaking it (distinctly African) at the same time; “‘avoiding repetition as in European narrative ..., [but] is born of repetition: repetition of a fact, of a gesture, of words that form a leitmotiv. There is always the introduction of a new element, variation of the repetition, unity in diversity’” (246). Achebe’s use of the

69 “The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Ethnographic Readings: Narrative Complexity in Things Fall Apart.”

70 German Leitmotiv; 1: an associated melodic phrase or figure that accompanies the reappearance of an idea, person, or situation especially in a Wagnerian music drama. 2: a dominant recurring theme ("Leitmotiv").
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traditional European technique of a leitmotiv has been modified to make it distinctly
African in nature. Whereas traditionally, a leitmotiv is the same repeating theme, commonly
heard/used within music, Achebe transforms this technique by altering his repeating
“themes” ever so slightly to progress the story onward.

McCarthy continues to demonstrate how Achebe uses European techniques to mark
his own work as African. Towards the end of the book when the Commissioner writes in his
diary, Achebe ceases his personal (Nigerian) writing style that has previously filled Things
Fall Apart. McCarthy argues Achebe does this to mark a clear distinction between the Igbo
and the commissioner, by writing in a straightforward style, reminiscent of the European
writing style;

The rhythmic phrasing stands sharply against the closing words of the
Commissioner which are again logical and process-oriented, analytical,
unsuperfluous [sic], and non-African, with weight on verbs: he ‘arrived,’
‘found,’ ‘commanded ... and they obeyed.’ His arrogant dismissal of
Okonkwo’s story as deserving a bare paragraph in his book is mirrored in the
straightforward, one-dimensional prose. (255)

Purposefully writing the commissioner into Things Fall Apart via a European style of
writing, proves that Achebe was quite conscious of his effort to mark his own work African
through this juxtaposition.

Another element McCarthy touches on within his own piece is how Achebe’s writing
is gendered. Though he only touches briefly on this subject in how the gendered process of
Achebe’s writing further marks *Things Fall Apart* as an African piece, this subject is best discussed by other authors within this literature review, such as Biodun Jeyifo⁷¹ (249).

Achebe’s use of rhythm is seen as both simple on the surface and yet extremely complex. His multiple uses of rhythm throughout *Things Fall Apart*, “… is similar to African polymetric rhythms in which various meters are heard simultaneously” (248). The way in which Achebe sculpts his words so precisely and places them with such importance, McCarthy argues, proves that within *Things Fall Apart*, “Rhythm is central. We are to see this celebration as the focal dramatic act of the dramatic space which is the center of the people – harmonic life – as if we as visitors to the clan must see at least once what rhythm means in its fullest articulation …” (250).

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⁷¹ “Okonkwo and His Mother: *Things Fall Apart* and Issues of Gender in the Constitution of African Postcolonial Discourse.”
Chinua Achebe writes a scathing review and critique of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in his piece entitled, “An Image of Africa.” Achebe starts off his paper by placing Conrad’s work in context. He claims that he critiques Conrad from the standpoint of himself being a novelist when he discusses *Heart of Darkness*. He first admits that *Heart of Darkness* has become, “… permanent literature - read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics,” placing his work within the Western [Humanities] canon (Achebe, “An Image of Africa” 783).

Achebe’s critique is not based on finding the flaws within Conrad’s writing, or how the piece does not stand up to literary criteria meriting canonization, but rather showing that *Heart of Darkness* is an extremely backwards and racist piece of literature. He moves on to discuss how the problem of *Heart of Darkness* being canonized, continues to perpetuate, “… the image of Africa as ‘the other world’” and displaying “… Western desire and need …” (783). This is achieved by painting the picture of Africa and its “savages” as beneath Western society and culture, to juxtapose the greatness that is the West. Achebe goes on to explain various tools Conrad uses to maintain a supposed natural hierarchy between the West and Africa.

“For Conrad, things (and persons) being in their place is of the utmost importance” (785). Achebe frames this importance based on Western categorization, reaffirming Western dominance over Africa and its people. Conrad writes about an African woman who is a mistress to his [Western] character Mr. Kurtz, and how she plays an important role in
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continuing the dichotic placement of the Western versus the African. "First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval; and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story; she is a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman with whom the story will end" (786). By creating a “savage counterpart” to a European woman, Achebe argues that Conrad clearly makes the statement that to be European is far superior and more desirable than to be African, as seen through his characters.

Achebe furthers his point on Conrad’s usage of characters to maintain the dichotomy through the speech, or lack thereof, of the “savages.” For the majority of Heart of Darkness, Conrad’s Africans solely communicate by, “… short grunting phrases …” to each other (786). This helps to paint the primal savage picture in which Conrad implies that Africans are not sophisticated enough to have an eloquent language, like Europeans. However, he does depart briefly from this theme and bestow language upon them,

... Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them ... the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable\(^{72}\) craving in their hearts. (786)

The only other time in which the “savages” speak English, Achebe points out, is when the death of Mr. Kurtz is announced. Achebe dispels the myth that Conrad granting them

\(^{72}\) I personally find this to be extremely ironic, that the “unspeakable” craving must be spoken [in English] in order for the Westerners to understand.
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English speech is some form of charity, pity upon the Africans, when in reality, "... they constitute some of his best assaults" (786).

Not only does Conrad paint the picture of the savages as primal characters, communicating via grunts, but the times in which his characters speak English, stresses even more their primal savageness; to let the Westerners know about their plans to eat other humans. Achebe argues that this further places Africans lower on the mental hierarchy Conrad sets up of the Westerners versus the Africans.

From this point on, Achebe moves from focusing solely on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and narrows his critique more on Conrad himself. He starts this discussion off by exposing Conrad cushioning himself from the moral views the novel displays, from Conrad’s own personal views. Achebe criticizes Conrad as he buffers his views through two narrators as a ploy to establish his own objectivity from the writing, which Achebe does not buy; "... Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person" (787). Achebe finds this to be a poor defense against his degrading writing of the “savages” of Africa as Conrad, “... always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people” (787). This point is only a warm up of how furious Achebe gets within his paper.
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This last point is at least grounded within the novel. From here, Achebe launches his full blown tirade against Joseph Conrad.73 “... Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticism of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected” (788). This quote is particularly interesting, as on one hand Achebe blatantly calls Conrad a racist, and on the other he back handedly defends Conrad. His defense can be read as though it is not Conrad’s fault he is a racist, as he is merely a product of his environment. Being that the Western lens is naturally racist against Africa and Africans, it is only “normal” what Conrad writes about. As a counter argument against the notion that Conrad writes racist literature, Achebe relays a response from a Western English major; “… Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz” (788). Achebe clarifies his own argument, “… Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor ... there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind” (788). Achebe’s argument centers on the objectivity and dehumanization of Africa and its people. If the point of Heart of Darkness was to show the breakdown of Mr. Kurtz, Conrad could have easily set it in London, or any other European town. In setting his story in Africa, Conrad

73 It is a serious point that Chinua Achebe is making from here on out about how Joseph Conrad is a racist both in his writings as well as in his personal life. It is almost comical to read how Achebe is so furious with Conrad about Heart of Darkness; all the one-liners and personal stabs makes it seem as though he Achebe is blowing it out of proportion just to make a point. However, I am convinced that this is not the case, and Achebe’s rage is sincere.
completely disgraces all of which Africa and its people have to offer by belittling them in his writing, Achebe maintains.

At this point Achebe calls into question the worthiness of *Heart of Darkness* to be included within the Western canon;

... the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I would not call that man [Conrad] an artist ... such a man is no more a great artist than ... All those men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism whether in science, philosophy or the arts have generally and rightly been condemned for their perversions. (788-89)

Achebe claims that it does not matter whether *Heart of Darkness* meets the criteria of canonization,\footnote{Though I would venture to guess that if Chinua Achebe could separate his infuriation with Joseph Conrad’s racist implications towards his characters and the African land, he would agree that *Heart of Darkness* does indeed meet the criteria of canonization as discussed by the authors within this literature review.} whether Conrad’s writing is supreme, because it is so degrading and racist. It does not deserve to be considered “permanent literature,” as it would only perpetuate the normalizing of white racism against Africa and its people.

Achebe continues his point about Conrad being personally racist. He sets up the following passages much like the juxtaposition of the African mistress to the European
woman. Achebe relays Conrad’s own account of his first encounter with a black man, “A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fix my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards” (qtd. in Achebe 789). He then juxtaposes Conrad’s account of his first encounter with an Englishman:

[his] calves exposed to the public gaze ... dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory ... The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men ... illuminated his face... and triumphant eyes. In the passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth ... his white calves twinkled sturdily. (790)

In reading Conrad's accounts on his first impressions of both races (an Englishman for this matter), Achebe draws strong conclusions about Conrad’s racist mindset by simply examining how he writes about both races. Conrad likens the black Haitian to an animal, whereas he likens the Englishman to a piece of beautiful marble statue.

Chinua Achebe’s last major point deals with the authenticity of Conrad’s writing. A common criticism Achebe receives against his own critique of Conrad is that Achebe was not able to travel down the Congo River at the time Conrad did, rendering Conrad the expert traveler via his accounts. Although Conrad did actually travel down the Congo, his own accounts are still highly subjective by means of his own intrinsic racist Western mindset. Achebe explains further, “... I will not accept just any traveler's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself ... travelers can be blind” (791-92). In
addition, “… Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, ‘notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history’” (791). This further supports Achebe’s claim that Conrad is not accurate in his descriptions of Africa; though he himself may have traveled there, he still writes dehumanizing prose. All in all, Achebe rips apart both Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* in his paper, which proves to be, though seemingly emotionally charged, an extremely insightful look at the juxtaposition of *Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness* in terms of their views on Africa.

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On a Case Study with Scottish Readers and Things Fall Apart

Andrew Smith describes a case study in which the participants were his own students in Scotland, where he follows their response to reading Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in his paper, “Working Class Scottish Readers and Things Fall Apart.” Smith starts off by discussing Karl Marx’s notion of what Greek art does, how he sees it very much a product of its time, and therefore irrelevant to people today. Smith expands upon his idea by explaining Marx’s idea of art as,

... the products of imaginative or creative labours are in some respects, determinate: that they are shaped in significant ways by the historical and social conjunctions in which that labour took place. And that, therefore, for other readers, in other contexts, the products of such labour can often contain something which is disconcerting, not immediately knowable, threatening even. (Smith 1)

This notion of literature not being accessible [mentally] for readers outside of its original context is what Smith discusses further in his findings of working class Scottish readers of Achebe’s work.

At first, their impressions of the book align with what Marx discusses, “... [the readers] felt disengaged by the fact that this was a novel by an African, about African experiences;” they felt, “... estrangement ... the sense of being made to feel like a stranger ... Very few of the readers ... felt that the book was addressed to them, implicitly or otherwise” (2). At first, the Scottish readers did not align themselves with Achebe's work.
They initially felt that because the work was created under a different context, in a different time, in a different place, about different people, that *Things Fall Apart* was not for them, nor could they relate to it.

To give context to the readers, Smith writes,

> Most of these readers had no education beyond secondary school level. Many were retired from manual or semi-skilled work, or were younger, and looking to return to formal education after periods of employment or unemployment, parenting or recovery from drug or alcohol dependency. They had no interest in reflecting abstractly on the novel. (4)

This sets up the mental picture one gets when thinking about who is reading Achebe’s work. They are not African studies majors at a university, even though they are not African American students, they still possess the academic background to see the connection made within Achebe’s work. Rather they are seemingly a world apart.

The first challenge Smith describes in having his students relate themselves to *Things Fall Apart* is their mental framework. His students are stereotypical Eurocentric thinkers; they are the foci of readers of all literature. His students had a challenging time grappling with, “… the degree to which Western readers tend to assume themselves to be the necessary implied readers of any given text” (3). In addition, Smith articulates that the literature that his students have read and understood is different from *Things Fall Apart*. They had difficulty, “… to the fact that the early chapters of the book involve a kind of

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75 Or African-Scottish for this matter!
Literature Review

Orature which is focused around collective experience rather than that of a single individual and which is cyclical or swirling in its construction, rather than straightforwardly linear” (3).

Smith's Scottish students are accustomed to literature and a culture in which value is placed on an individual, rather than the collective whole or the community. They are also accustomed to a plot structure and timeline that are not straightforward beginning to end. It is only through Smith's exercises in his class that the students are able to break through their initial conceptions of *Things Fall Apart* and relate the work to themselves and their own culture. This is where Smith's work becomes extremely crucial to this thesis, as it directly relates to the concept of universality.

As other authors within this literature review have noted, one of the major criteria for canonization is universality, how a piece of literature can relate to readers outside of its original context. In the case of Smith's work, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* about a Nigerian character during pre-colonial rule relates to working class Scottish students today. In the students initial readings they found the literature to be quite distancing. However," ... through a series of small-scale acts of cultural translation ... the seemingly foreign was made explicable in terms of the familiar and the known” (4). It was by dissecting the book through Smith's in-class exercises that these Scottish students could relate to Achebe's work, demonstrating the universality of *Things Fall Apart*.

76 Though I must say, this seems no different than any other high school or university setting; only when a piece of literature is dissected can, students relate to the book; reminding me
Smith continues on, “Achebe’s novel was strikingly immediate. Readers in places like Easterhouse,\textsuperscript{77} or the dilapidated estates outside of Dumfries,\textsuperscript{78} can map the story that Achebe tells onto their own local and personal histories with a remarkably close fit” (9-10).

There was one thing that struck Smith as intriguing. As stated previously, his students were eventually able to see themselves in the book. Yet he found an anomaly in his data with the older middle-class students. They seemed to describe \textit{Things Fall Apart} with, “... an odd kind of double speak. For example: ‘Achebe tells the story well and manages to give us an insight into the life of the primitive Nigerian’ or ‘his book will [...] will I believe alter our perceptions of the colonial history of the dark continent’” (7). This seems out of the ordinary as his students (including these middle class readers) were able to genuinely relate to \textit{Things Fall Apart}. Yet these older middle-class students were seemingly unable to divorce themselves from their preconceived notions about Africa; they spoke of \textit{Things Fall Apart} changing their perceptions, but still used objectifying language.

In the end, Smith found that his students did, indeed, identify with Okonkwo in their “... reading the novel as a form of tragedy” (9). Smith also notes that, “... against the grain of established national histories and against the general media portrayal of Africa as a place

\textsuperscript{77} A suburb of Glasgow, Scotland.

\textsuperscript{78} A city in Scotland.
Literature Review

still primitive and irredeemably violent” (9). The Scottish students were able to see past their general preconceived notions of what Africa is to them and see it through the eyes of the Igbo; they are able to relate the plight of Africans to themselves. Smith’s seemingly insignificant paper, proves to be extremely resourceful in terms of this thesis, as it directly proves Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as worthy of canonization.

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What I find to be noteworthy, is that these Scottish students were able to identify with the Igbo in *Things Fall Apart*. Yet never once did it cross their minds, at least Smith does not note it anywhere in his paper, that his students identified/related the Nigerian history of colonization by the British, with their own history of colonization (or being ruled) by the British empire.
ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

When I started researching my thesis topic, I was extremely open minded. I sat down to develop a series of questions that would guide my work. I really did not have much of a stance either way as to what should be of the canon or whether *Things Fall Apart* should become canonical, because I was not very well informed. I was really hoping to shorten all of my research and time, by banking on the answer of “who created the canon?” to simply find that the Modern Language Association, or any main literary group, had an “official” list of works definitively in the canon. Though this may seem silly to some readers, this almost embarrassing thought was quite serious. Whenever “the canon” is brought up in class or conversation it is always referred to as an ultra famous definitive list carved in stone, housed somewhere important. However, as I will explain, this was not the case, as to my knowledge there is not an official list. Though upsetting at first, as my research thus became more difficult and time consuming to define an indefinable object, it has, over the

80 “What is the canon?” “Who created it?” “How is it formed?” “What are the criteria for canonization?” “Who is included in the canon?” “Why are they included, and not others?” “Does the canon still exist?” “Is the canon still relevant today/do we still need the canon?” “What is the future of the canon?” “What is the purpose of canon?” “Should *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe be included in the canon (if it is not already)?”

81 The only real list that is ever referenced is the one by Harold Bloom in his *The Western Canon*. Ironically, he makes the point that no one really has the authority to decide what is canonical and what is not. To see his list referenced multiple times by himself, as well as other scholars, is almost comical since he himself claims not to “have authority” over the canon.
Analysis and Conclusion

course of the past eight months become almost more exciting to piece together a puzzle, with no picture to follow.

After concluding the majority of my reading and having completed my literature review, I began to formalize my own thoughts on the subject as to what the canon is, how it is created, and what should be its future, i.e. should Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* be included in the canon (if it is not already)? In doing so, a phrase from Professor Paul Gordon, of the Humanities Department, constantly echoing in my head. In his section of the Introduction to Humanities class, he would jokingly “complain” that undergraduates’ tendency to revere “The Holy Middle Ground,” 82 in their effort to find a compromising solution to almost any problem or question. I have come to realize that even in this thesis, I have fallen into the trap of using “The Holy Middle Ground” as my conclusion to my research of the canon. However, I am not quite as ashamed as I was sitting in his class sophomore year, because I have a hundred something pages of research and analysis from both sides of the canon debate to substantiate my final “Holy Middle Ground” conclusion.

82 “The Holy Middle Ground,” is the idea that there is always a compromising solution. Professor Gordon would always try and push us further in our arguments to not “take the easy way out,” by developing conclusions that do not result in a compromise, rather in a sided position. I by no way mean to criticize him or this exercise he performed in class. It has helped me in my studies by trying to develop stronger arguments, which I am very grateful to have been influenced by him. I merely am paying homage to Professor Gordon’s concept in my work, yet explain that sometimes if “The Holy Middle Ground” is well supported it is also an acceptable conclusion.
My conclusion contains two sections. The first is an analysis on the topic of canon where I address the following aspects of my research: the origins of the canon, the different positions one can take in this canon war, the creation of the canon (focusing more on the ideological and economic aspects of formation as opposed to the origin section), and the criteria of what makes a piece of literature canonical. The second section is my analysis on Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and how it fits into my conclusion of the canon. This section focuses on why I have chosen to use *Things Fall Apart*, how *Things Fall Apart* has been perceived and utilized since it was written, and which canonical criteria it demonstrates, if any.

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Analysis on the Canon

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Origins of the Canon

In researching the origins of the canon, all but one source points to the canon first formed by the Catholic Church. This earliest “canon” was a compilation of texts deemed important for members of the church, and it did not contain any secular texts that make up what most people think of as the canon today. On the surface, the origins of the canon stemming from the Catholic Church may not seem relevant to the average person who is reading the canon in its secular form today. However, by using a cultural studies lens, one can see a direct connection to the “dead white guy’s argument.”

83 I would here, like to acknowledge Harold Bloom in his defense of the canon. It is quite apparent that he is writing from a highly attacked position which questions his own authority on the subject, coming from his termed, “School of Resentment,” and in turn affects what, and how he writes in regards to the canon. In acknowledging Bloom’s defense on the canon, after discussing this topic with Assistant Professor Haytham Bahoor, I would say that the way the canon wars started was not the best way to go about opening up an entire academic civil war based on the argument that the canon is solely comprised of “dead white guys.” The goal of those hoping to “open up the canon,” or dismantle it for that matter, is trying to bring awareness of the ideologies involved in canon formation (current maintenance) and to make the case that multicultural/ethnic/class/gendered authors have a valid place in the canon among those already included. The “dead white guys” attack was constructed in a manner in which those being
Analysis and Conclusion

Church, which by design, is European and patriarchal, create the foundation of the canon, the canon will still adhere to an ideology which favors white men in positions of power, regardless if secular pieces have replaced religious ones over time. Because the Catholic Church is based out of the Vatican City, in Western Europe, the very foundation of Catholicism (in its structural operating sense, not how its values are drawn based off the teachings of Jesus Christ) is indoctrinated in a European ideology. The same is true for its patriarchal element, because the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope, as well as all its clergy\textsuperscript{84} are men, adds an additional structural element to the ideologies behind how the Church operates. Even the term “canon” was drawn from the Greek word \textit{kanon}, meaning “measuring rod.” The fathers of the church used \textit{kanon} to mean a “rule” or “standard” when utilizing it in the fixing of the Catholic canon to entail particular gospels, and exclude others (Lindberg 12).

In terms of the privileged and empowered element to the canon via the Catholic Church, one merely can refer to the Church’s history as a major political and economic empire throughout Europe. Proof of this can be seen when looking into the history of the attacked, like Bloom, are “white guys.” The argument turned into a personal attack, rather than constructive criticism for the expansion of the academy. It is this initial attack on the canon that I disagree with, in terms of how the academic civil war began. This inherently addresses the goal of my thesis, where I strove to correct the initial attack on the canon, as a personal one, in an effort to understand its construction, and then move forward in a productive manner to offer a piece of literature not generally recognized as canonical.

\textsuperscript{84} Not clergywomen!
Analysis and Conclusion

Catholic Bible, where a council of men sat around and decided which gospels to include, and equally important, which ones not to include. It no longer seems so farfetched to see why the creation of the canon, with its roots in the Catholic Church, further supports the status quo of focusing heavily, if not entirely, on privileged white men in power; only in the canon, it is privileged white male authors. Further discussion as to the maintenance formation of the canon will be discussed further.

In terms of the current state of the secular canon, it will from here on be referenced as simply “the canon,” as the secular adjective can be assumed, unless noted otherwise. Its status as a secular canon can be understood, as the vast majority of texts considered canonical have little relation to the Catholic Church, or any other religion.

Brian Quinn makes an interesting argument, which is the origin of the canon. Contrary to its supposed Catholic beginning, actually stems from Africa. I find this case to be quite ironic, that if the canon or the idea for canon is actually African, then why has the canon become saturated with authors who are not from Africa? Though this is a compelling question that I am personally interested in, in the analysis on the canon for my thesis, it has played a minor role in the outcome; solely because, along with the canon’s religious

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85 Additional reading on the fixing of the Catholic Bible can be found in Carter Lindberg’s book, A Brief History of Christianity.

86 This will be explained/defined later. For simplicity sake of this argument, one can assume a general body of texts currently being studies in the academy and/or Harold Bloom’s list.

87 Though Bloom does include The Torah, The Bible, and the Koran (Qur’an) in his list of canonical works.
Analysis and Conclusion

founding argument, the actual origins of the canon do not affect my final decision on the

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88 However, I do feel it is important to understand the history and foundation of the canon in

order to deconstruct and analyze it for my conclusion.
What does affect my analysis, is the topic of canon formation,\(^89\) or as I will now refer to it, canon maintenance (formation). Whether the canon was formed by the Catholic Church or in Africa, the economic aspect as well as multiple players, whom authors in the literature review attribute to the formation of the canon, cannot “form” the canon since it already exists. However, these players, ideologies, and an economic element, help to maintain the continual formation of the canon. Therefore, for any of these three actors, I will write in a manner in which they are currently affecting and, maintaining the canon. I have grouped the following players in canon maintenance based on their impact as follows:

- Anthologies, school syllabi, and literary journals.
- Libraries and authors.
- Publishers, both general publishing houses and university presses.

The first group, anthologies, school syllabi, and literary journals, plays the smallest role in maintaining the canon. (This, of course, is not to say they play a small role by any means! All of the actors in the maintenance of the canon play a significant role.) These three actors are grouped together because they affect the canon in the same manner. These players can be named the “Canonical and Other” group, as they impact not only pieces in the realm of canonicity, but also contain other non-canonical works. Anthologies, a collection of works based on a selected theme, function more like Richard Heinzkill’s vision as to the future of the canon; where the canon will be broken down into smaller sub-canons

\(^{89}\) As described by various authors in the literature review.
Analysis and Conclusion

focusing on only one particular theme. Anthologies like The Norton Anthology of English Literature, or other anthologies on American Literature or World Literature, have the unique opportunity to assemble some of the better works within a narrowly defined set of literature. By doing this, they can compile the best works that best embody their specific criteria (e.g. American Literature, Latina/o Literature, sixteenth century Italian Literature, etc.). Not all of these works will stand up to the canonical criteria, but compiling “the best” literature in these groupings allows the anthology to push forward some of its best literature towards canonization.

School (whether secondary or university) syllabi act in a similar role as anthologies. Because classes are themed around a particular idea, teachers can group literature around this theme, encompassing canonical or potentially canonical entries, as well as other texts that do not stand up to the canon’s criteria, yet serve a vital role as a teaching tool.

Like the former two, literary journals also compile works. Most literary journals are published on a regular basis and, must be filled with literary works or critiques. By meeting this need, they broaden their scope of what will be published. However, literary journals perform a special role, as an outlet for literary criticism. Because these journals are peer reviewed, they go through a lengthier process for publication. In doing so, they allow literary works chosen for publication to inherently have an opinion placed onto the work. Before the work is published, it is reviewed by an author’s peer.

The other role literary journals play, is to comment on and critique great works of art. This directly adds weight to pieces that are in the canon or pieces being marked against the criteria of the canon, because scholarly review of these works aids their canonicity.
Analysis and Conclusion

These “Canonical and Other” actors play a critical role in the maintenance of the canon’s form.

The next group, which I will name “The Center,” is comprised of libraries and authors. These actors each play a distinct but crucial role in canon maintenance. “The Center” is where economics first enters into the equation of canon maintenance. Though it does not factor as the main component to “The Center’s” main function; economics here can be viewed as grease to the gears. The term “The Center,” highlights this group’s centrality and importance in canon maintenance; the other groups work in tandem to “The Center’s” margins.

Libraries escalating their role in the twentieth century, have become key players in maintaining the status quo of the canon’s form, as well as offering a way for new pieces of art to enter the canon. Stemming from definition 3b of “canon,” libraries seek to encompass multiple canons, compilations of works by particular authors. By striving to include specific works within their walls, libraries function in a particular capitalist way. As seen in Thomas Staley’s work, Harry Ransom led the changing role of libraries in the twentieth century, when they transformed from mere corner bookstores, where one could read a nice book, to holding value in particular works of art. This is when the capitalist competition began among libraries to contain the “the best” collections in any given field. This competition to own the best works of art gave rise to what was considered canonical. Although libraries also serve a function similar to the “Canonical and Other” group by

90 “3b: the authentic works of a writer” (“canon”).

91 And even cyberspace today!
Analysis and Conclusion

encompassing works in addition to canonical works, particular libraries house “the best” works in a given field. Much like anthologies selecting the best works within a particular subject, libraries are also given the chance to show off works deemed canonical, as seen by their value within the library.

Authors play a role different from libraries, yet they still remain integral to “The Center.” They actually create pieces that may become canonical. Artists play two important roles. The first role deals with the creation of their art. Harold Bloom and Jon Avery both mentioned the important role authors play in the formation of the canon. Throughout the canon, there is a multitude of loosely held themes where influences can be traced within canonical literature. This means that authors are consciously looking at the canonical works of other authors and drawing from them when creating their own art. Such literary influences connecting canonical works, enables a fluid dissemination of genius throughout the canon. This creates a quasi-club where it can become apparent who has tracked whom throughout the canon. Because of this process authors further the maintenance of the canon’s form in regards to what is considered canonical work. Authors who trace their personal influence from other canonical authors write with a lens of “approved” art; i.e. they will create based on what has proven to be signs of genius in literature and therefore canonical.

The second role that authors play in maintaining the canon’s form is highly linked with the role of publishers. This notion is best explained after looking at the role of publishers, a specific power in the maintenance of canon, an economic one.
Analysis and Conclusion

Though a Marxist reading of the canon cannot explain its maintenance in its entirety, it can, however, help to explain aspects of the function of publishers. Both general publishing houses as well as university presses shall be deemed “The Angels,” as they are both responsible for the life and death of literature. The difference between general and university publishers, is nominal in regards to their roles in canon maintenance.

Publishers must decide which pieces of art to publish, and equally as important, which pieces of art not to publish. Their decisions introduce the topic of how economics is itself an actor in canon maintenance. Choosing which pieces to publish is done through a lens of “what will make more money?” This is exactly why publishers are in business; to make money. They choose pieces which will become profitable. These, more often than not, are pieces of work that are “better” than others, not just what a publisher likes. Choosing a “better” piece of art is what makes publishers powerful in canon maintenance. These “better” pieces, which can be read as canonical or worthy of canonization, will continue to be published because they have proven more successful, more profitable; which in turn creates, an upward and downward spiral. “Better,” more canonical works, will be purchased more, allowing the publisher to continue publishing additional copies, and even additional editions of the work. The pieces which do not sell as well, initially seen as inferior works, fall out of publication as they have proven to be unprofitable for the publisher.

As cultural studies tells us, culture is made not only by the “winners” but by the “losers.” Making the decision to discontinue a work of art, or not to publish it in the first place, limits its audience which can read this work. Deciding to no longer publish a
particular piece of literature, if it is initially seen as inferior, denies critics, scholars, and readers alike future access to this initially “inferior” work. As a result of this denied access, a piece of art once viewed inferior to canonical art, has little to no chance of being resurrected into canonical status. This relates to Bloom’s argument on viewing pieces of literature as “living” or “dying.” One can now see the publisher’s role in canon maintenance, how particular pieces of art can “die” off.

Another aspect of the conscious killing of a piece of literature is the fate of “fashionable” genres. Bloom justifies the “fashion,” or lack thereof, of a particular genre to cover up why a certain author is not deemed canonical (an author’s outspoken sexuality).92 “Fashionable” genres can be explained in the problematics of publication. A work initially deemed to be not canonical because it was written in a particular genre that was not “hip” at the time of publication, has the unfortunate chance of being lost in the “pages of time” because of the decisions made by publishers. If these “unfashionable” genres are lost, at the time, due to the economic element publishers add to canon maintenance, they may never become fashionable, because there will not be enough, or any, copies of a particular text, even if it would later become fashionable and possibly canonical.

The role that publishers play in canon maintenance is, as previously expressed, inherently intertwined with the relationship between themselves and other authors. Due to the explicit economic element publisher impose, authors become subject to playing “The Game.” This is where authors’ secondary role in canon maintenance originates. In addition to creating, based on previous genius in the canon, authors must now accommodate their

92 See page 53.
Analysis and Conclusion

art to economic forces. Unless authors are lucky enough to be like Anne Frank, who unfortunately did not live to see the financial success and general popularity of her diary (where one’s personal diary becomes entered into the academy for study, as well as financially successful), an author is thus subject to playing “The Game.” Artists must decide how to create their art depending on the desires, and more importantly lenses, that publishers use in deciding which pieces to publish. Most likely, publishers’ lenses are tinted canonical and/or economic. Through a strictly economic lens, a publisher looks for elements of the author’s work that will be successful for the company and not necessarily great literature. “Fashionable” genres may or may not fall into this economic category. For the canonically tinted lenses, authors must create based on how their target publisher will view their work. On one hand, this can be good for authors, as they know how to play to the publishers’ needs. On the other hand, it severely limits the artists’ creative process. Artists must play either to an economic lens, or for the topic of this thesis, a canonical lens; artists are not free to create the literature they desire. They are limited in creating art that furthers the status quo of what is deemed canonical. Authors cannot create a piece of literature to challenge the canon and its criteria, and in turn to challenge the status quo. This is where we Pluralists come in to act as a mediators between artists and their work, and the status quo canon, to understand how a newer piece of literature, though not following the standard of the status quo canon, can still be considered canonical.

PLEASE DO NOT READ THIS AS AN ANTI-SEMITIC REMARK WHATSOEVER! I am merely using her as an example because of the financial success and widespread readership her diary has seen!
Analysis and Conclusion

Deconstructing the Humanities canon with a cultural studies lens, entails looking at the power relationships created by the added economic element inherent in canon maintenance. This is not to say that I have taken a staunch Marxist approach to explaining the entire deconstruction of the canon, solely looking at economics. However, it is definitely an aspect of canon maintenance that should be addressed.

Another general aspect to the creation of the canon, are the ideologies inherent in its maintenance. The term “status quo" has been used to describe the set of ideologies which place the canon within a political framework benefiting the “dead white guys." I understand that not all authors are dead, white, nor guys. However, this colloquial phrase embodies a mentality that, generally speaking, does play into furthering the positions of men who are white and generally Anglo-European. These ideologies are disseminated, sometimes overtly, throughout the entire canon maintenance process. It is hard to address, deconstruct, and/or fix these said ideologies without giving them a host to work through. The “Canonical and Other” group, “The Center” group, as well as “The Angels,” all work to maintain the canon based on the ideologies of the status quo. Recognizing the power structure that binds these three groups in canon maintenance shows that Harold Bloom is wrong in The Western Canon. He argues that the canon has come into being in a vacuum; formed with a complete disregard to politics and economics. This could not be farther from the mark; the canon is inherently created within a system of politics and economics, as seen

94 In this way that politics is used, it is a broad scope that does not contain itself within a governmental sphere, but rather refers to a general sense of any agenda which is followed.
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by its religious founding in the Catholic Church as well as the current canon maintenance players.

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Analysis and Conclusion

Canon Camps

This brings me to the topic of the different positions one can take in this ongoing canon civil war. Authors like Harold Bloom or Richard Heinzkill view only two possible sides to this debate: “defenders of the canon” or the “classics” view, and the “School of Resentment or the “dismantle” position. This dichotomy pits two, mutually exclusive, sides against each other. Either the canon is defended in its entirety and remains intact as it stands, or it shall be torn apart and no longer utilized. This is not only an incorrect binary, as there are more sides to take, but neither is the direction the canon should go.95

My work aligns with Brian Quinn’s view of the “canon camps.” He sees three sides: the Canon Anarchists, the Canon Pluralists, and the Canon Purists. The Anarchists and Purists fall in line with the dichotomy that Bloom and Heinzkill set up, leaving the Pluralists as my winning camp. Seen in the literature review, dismantling the canon, as the Anarchist see it, would not be productive, as there is an important need for a selection of literature to remain in the canon. As for the opposite camp, the Purists, it has come time to reevaluate the works of art deemed canonical as to why they are worthy of canonization, as well as evaluate old and new literature that previously has been, or is excluded from canonization based on simply not following the status quo of the “dead white guys.” These multicultural/ethnic/class/gendered works have great potential to affect the academy in a positive way, if they are included in a new, transformed canon.

95 No one knows what the canon will be or, which direction it will take in the future. I can only write my guiding analysis.
Analysis and Conclusion

Unlike Bloom’s analysis, the Pluralists (I now define myself as one), do not seek to dismantle the canon, or to remove great works of art that are already canonized. Rather, we seek to understand criteria of canonicity and evaluate their relevance in determining whether the canon should remain as is, or be appropriately altered. Then utilize these evaluated criteria to judge the worth of other texts. We feel it is more important than ever to maintain a high level of quality in the canon, as watering it down with less than worthy texts, defeats the purpose of having a selective body of knowledge. The goal is to find Professor Gordon’s “Holy Middle Ground,” a way to bridge the two opposing camps in a constructive manner. There is a great need to include the “dead white guys,” as these authors wrote important and influential works, which add value to more contemporary literature. It is how our camp goes about including additional authors that must be clarified. It is not done in a replacement fashion (as some, like Bloom, may argue), but rather as a mode of addition. No multiculturalist/ethnic/class/gendered work should be added to the canon if it does not hold up to the great works of the past; “only strength can join itself to strength,” as Harold Bloom stated (Bloom 41).

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Analysis and Conclusion

Canonical Criteria

The history of canon formation, the different actors’ roles affecting canon maintenance, as well as the possible positions to take in the canon debate, provides a framework to understand the criteria for canonization. Along with my initial hope that the Modern Language Association would publish a definitive list of “The Canon,” I wished even more that they, or any other institution, would maintain a list of hard, objective criteria for what makes a piece of literature canonical. Just as I was disappointed to find out that there is no “official” list of canonical works, I was disheartened to discover that there are no “official” criteria. I find it ironic that when people talk of “The Canon” and “The Criteria” that make those selected pieces canonical, they speak with such confidence; there obviously is a simple checkbox list and a rather simple process to see if a piece is worthy of canonization.

This section of my thesis has proven to be the most difficult, yet at the same time, fulfilling, aspect of my research. I approached “The Criteria” for canonization by thinking about them as if they were a quasi-mathematical equation. I read different authors’ opinions, from all sides of the canon debate, and laid them out together.

I had initially expected this process to be more difficult, as I had assumed that all of the criteria I would encounter would be so subjective that they would prove too difficult to lay out in my conclusion. However, this has not been the case. In order to make the list of criteria for canonization tangible, one must move past the argument that, yes, there is a certain degree of subjectivity in all of these criteria. Because the Humanities are distinct
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and operate differently from the hard sciences, there are not “hard” numbers involved, where there can be a clear addition of the total to find an answer. Yet if one can move past this notion and accept a limited degree of subjectivity for each criterion, the list I provide, can be used as a guide to grade pieces of literature as worthy of canonization.

When discussing the notion of aesthetic quality, most scholars disregard it as a criterion for canonization. Except for Harold Bloom, they view aesthetic quality as far too subjective to use it appropriately for evaluating canonicity. Other authors, if they do not dismiss the use of aesthetic quality out right, make it very clear that multiple lenses must be used for this judgment, as a Western tinted lens cannot appropriately judge the value of a non-Western text. This is just another way of saying that the use of aesthetic quality is too subjective to be a canonical criterion. Harold Bloom, on the other hand, in his *The Western Canon*, was the only author in the entire literature review to quantify what he means by “aesthetic quality.” His defined list essentially matched up with my list of canonical criteria. Although throughout his text, I was led to believe that his use of aesthetic quality described a particular Western, “dead white guy” ideology when evaluating literature’s worth of canonization. When he finally described what he meant by “aesthetic quality,” I realized that aesthetic quality is not as much of a specific criterion, but is the combination of having all the other criteria. This way of looking at aesthetic quality allows critics to limit their subjectivity in evaluating whether a piece of art embodies “aesthetic quality.” Because aesthetic quality is a culmination of all seven canonical criteria, I do not consider it to be a specific criterion. If a piece of literature embodies all previous seven criteria for

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96 See page 40.
Analysis and Conclusion

canonization, the work of art in question therefore demonstrates aesthetic quality, meriting its inclusion within the canon.

In my research of all proposed criteria for canonization, I evaluated and defined seven separate criteria by which to judge literature’s canon worthiness by displaying aesthetic quality. In order of descending importance, a piece of literature worthy of canonization must:

1) Enable multiple readings with new information rising to the reader upon each subsequent reading.

2) Display signs of literary influence.

3) Display signs of universality and timelessness.

4) Display signs of superior craft.

5) Display signs of originality.

6) Have a real world effect.

7) Remain alive for at least three generations after it is written.

I liken these eight criteria to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Generally speaking, one must sequentially attain each criterion in order to reach self-actualization. However, there are anomalies\(^7\) that have attained self-actualization, without fulfilling each need, or each need

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\(^7\) Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi is an example of an anomaly for Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Maslow would consider Gandhi to have achieved self-actualization, in the process of achieving
in sequence. This is the same with criteria for canonization. A piece of literature does not need to attain each criterion or each criterion in sequence. However, to attain canonization without doing so would be a rare exception.

The first criterion of a piece of “Enable [enabling] multiple readings with new information rising to the reader upon each subsequent reading,” is the most important criterion. This has been cited by several authors, and I agree that this is the foundation of what deems a piece of literature canonical. A lack of morals or new meanings found from a re-reading of the text is a strong indication of a simple story. One might be quick to give examples of how some children’s stories are simple, could they become canonical? My answer to this (only in regards to the criterion of multiple readings) is yes. Just because a work may appear to be simple, does not mean that it necessarily is. One can re-read children's stories and find new meanings hidden in their seemingly simple surface. Displaying this criterion, is a strong indicator that the author has crafted the piece with mastery.

The second criterion, “Display[ing] signs of literary influence,” enables one to track an author’s use of previous genius. This criterion has the potential to be misinterpreted. In my analysis of canon maintenance, I discussed how authors are subjected to “The Game” by tracing their work from previous authors within the canon. The problem I posed earlier, this level, Gandhi often sacrificed his more basic needs. However, this is a rare exception that a person was able to achieve self-actualization while skipping steps. The criteria for canonization works the same way. There can be rare anomalies, but most literature must achieve each criterion in order.
**Analysis and Conclusion**

deals with the complications of restricting authors’ creative freedom when they are composing their own work. This is still a problem inherent in “The Game,” but it does not necessarily conflict with this criterion. By tracing the literary influence of canonically established works, an author is able to draw from techniques and ideas that are shown to be canonical, from different authors. If an author essentially rewrites an existing work, this new work would not be considered canonical because it defies the 5th criterion, originality. It is how authors use the tools, techniques, and ideas from the canon, and carefully craft to exert their dominance over these selected tools, techniques, and ideas that makes a piece of literature worthy of canonization.

The third criterion of “Display[ing] signs of universality and timelessness,” is important when looking into additional complexities that the author demonstrates. The difference in universality and timelessness is distinct. However, they are grouped as one criterion, because both universality and timelessness must be met. Universality applies to works that allow the reader of a particular place to connect with either the characters or plot within a piece of literature. As a simple example, I read *Daniel’s Story* by Carol Matas in grade school. Though I did not grow up in Nazi-Germany, persecuted and sent to a concentration camp, I could still connect to Daniel, the main character, in other ways. Timelessness deals specifically with the aspect of time within a work. It demonstrates how a reader can connect to the characters or plot within a different time setting. An example of timelessness would be a reader connecting to the struggle the main characters go through in Shakespeare’s play, *Romeo and Juliet*. A reader not from the Elizabethan era, can still
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relate to the storyline as it remains just as relevant today, as it did centuries ago.\textsuperscript{98} Many works, as in Daniel’s Story and Romeo and Juliet, can display both elements of universality \textit{and} timelessness; it may not always be the case. However, in order for a piece of literature to become worthy of canonization, it must display \textit{both} elements.

The fourth criterion, “Display[ing] signs of superior craft,” is where an author can be most creative in terms of fulfilling this criterion. Because this specific criterion is more subjective than other criteria, it allows for leeway in defining “superior craft.” This criterion is evaluated more on intuition, though this is not a “freebie” by any means. Proper spelling and grammar\textsuperscript{99} are necessary and only a basic fulfillment of the fourth criterion. It can be explained by asking any university professor how she or he can tell the difference between a paper written the night before the due date, or one which was planned out and executed ahead of time, even when there are no basic editing mistakes. There is a multitude of ways to express an author’s use of superior craft. An example will be given momentarily when analyzing Achebe’s text. Though not all of the following must be met, when an author displays “superior craft,” most to all examples to follow will generally be apparent. What to look for when grading a piece of literature for signs of this criterion are:

\begin{itemize}
  \item The ways in which the author has used her or his language
  \item The way the sentences were constructed
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{98} Though there is substantially less dueling today.

\textsuperscript{99} According to some type of standardization. It does not need to be “proper” by any means, as this can be a way for writers to express themselves or insert added elements into their work, but it must be standardized throughout the text if “proper” grammar and spelling is not used.
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- The layout of the text
- The development of characters
- The complexity in the plot structure
- Even Bloom’s idea of the way an author makes the reader feel “strange”

Along with other ways to display “superior craft,” will render a piece fulfilling the fourth criterion.

The fifth criterion for canonization is, “Display[ing] signs of originality.” This criterion requires little explanation. If a work of art offers something new to the canon, it fulfills the criterion of originality. Otherwise, critics could simply ask, “What does this artwork have to offer, if the canon already has ... ?” Originality is related to “literary influence” and “superior craft.” Essentially, if an author draws from past authors but utilizes a mastery of style to transform the work into inherently her or his own, an original piece will be created, thus fulfilling the fifth criterion.

The sixth criterion, “Have [having] a real world effect,” is an idea that emerges from the Pluralist camp. Previously, the canon was designed to embody the greatest works of art from a purely literary stance. Yet, the time has come when the objectives of the canon must be reevaluated. Drawing from Jon Avery’s work in his discussion of Plato’s Republic, as well as the driving idea behind the Pluralist canon camp, a canonical piece of literature must have “a real world effect.” It is what a piece does that merits its inclusion within the canon. A great piece of literature may be enjoyable to read, and even show signs of a well developed story, but if the work cannot offer a reader anything that can be applied to real life, the literature is not worthy of canonization. This criterion has been built into great
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literature since writing began. The idea of having a “moral” in the story is what a real world effect is; how readers can learn something from literature. The purpose of having this criterion for canonization, is to promote better human beings. This specifically addresses one of the goals of the Ethnic Studies Department: to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the transformative process. It is what is learned in the university

And oral storytelling!

In my original draft of this criterion, both Jon Avery and Harold Bloom brought up, though disagreeing with each other, how great literature should/should not make one a better citizen/promote citizenship. I have chosen, in my revision of this thesis, not to include the term citizen/citizenship as a political stance. I stand behind this revision, because what Avery and Bloom are getting at, does not have to do with being “a citizen,” but rather to promote a sense of being a better human being. Though they may be writing with a disregard for the complications embodied in the term “citizen,” I find it difficult to see how under the surface, politics at any level is not related to the term; to think so would be absurd! For many people in the United States of America, let alone countries all over the world, citizenship is not only restricted to a select group of individuals, following a specified ideology, but also many individuals who have a certain citizenship on paper, are being stripped of their rights and privileges that come with citizenship. There are also many individuals who even have never received these rights with complete disregard to their actual citizenship status. Because literature is international, I do not want to alienate anyone in my work based on their citizenship status, as I feel it is extremely important to have literature accessible to everyone. This criterion is about humaneness and how literature can promote better societies, not further the restrictions set in place to limit who can read literature and benefit from it.
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that can be applied in the community that makes learning valuable. This is the same for having a moral, lesson, or any other means to promote readers to act in an ethical manner, intrinsic to great literature. In order for a piece of literature to be considered worthy of canonization, it must allow the reader to engage the text and be affected (in a positive way).

The seventh criterion for canonization, “Remain[ing] alive for at least three generations after it is written,” stems from Harold Bloom’s work. As Bloom originally insisted, a test for canonicity is whether an author’s work is still being read and studied two generations after her or his death. The concept of having a “time test” is critical for evaluating a work’s canonicity. It prevents a financially successful or popular text to immediately be considered canonical. This initial popularity could stem from various factors, like a “fashionable” genre, placement on the New York Times Best Sellers List, or inclusion in Oprah’s Book Club. Not to say that these works are not, or cannot be, considered canonical, but their initial popularity and success is not a proven test of canonicity. Where I differ from Bloom, is in the number of generations a book must remain alive, as well as the start of the “holding” period. The notion that a book must remain “alive” stems from the process “The Angels” play on a book’s metaphorical life span, as well as its ability to not only remain in print, but also to sustain readings and studies done during a work’s “holding period.” My starting time differs from Bloom’s, as waiting until an author’s death is not constant for all works, therefore privileging some works over others, as some will have a shorter “holding period.” However, I do agree with the importance of waiting a significant period of time before considering a piece canonical. My three generations from the book’s inception, compared to Bloom’s two generations after an author’s death, though mine can be shorter at times, it can give additional time to Bloom’s “holding period.”
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generations allows for enough time to pass for a society, in which a text is read and studied, to experience significant changes. A critic of mine may argue that by sticking to “generations” the “holding period” is not quantifiable. Yet, I would respond by saying that although a “generation” is not strictly defined by X amount of years, it does not mean that three generations are not quantifiable. Using generations as a marker of time, allows a piece of literature to sustain vastly different periods within a given societal context. It tests the work’s ability to remain relevant and important, despite differences in each generation. What was relevant for the “Baby Boomers” was different from, “Generation X,” or even “The Silent Generation (WWII/Great Depression).” If a work of art can sustain itself throughout three distinct generational passages of time, a piece of literature can become canonical.

Writing from the Pluralist camp, I envision the canon’s future with no smaller “mini-canons” seeking to have their own criteria for what is considered “the best” within an acute disciplinary/genre boundary. This would lead to a watering down of “The Canon” in its importance in society. Anthologies are the place to promote a “mini-canon.” The canon must remain as a single, heterogeneous, ever important cultural institution, setting aside great literary works for both study and pleasure. Its destruction would be detrimental to the academy, as well as writers everywhere. However, the purpose and form of the canon must be reevaluated and changed.

Perpetuating the list of authors and works within the canon, as it is viewed today, is a disservice to readers, writers, and the canon itself as a cultural institution. To have works contained in the canon simply to promote the status quo of the “dead white guys” is no longer acceptable. A piece of art should not be judged by the author who wrote it, but
rather by the contents of the literature. Works of art should be evaluated by the seven criteria for canonization. If works initially attacked for being “dead white guy”-esq, but demonstrate all canonical criteria, then they should proudly remain housed within the canon, and should cease to be hassled as to their supposed “dead white guy” ideology.

The same rules should apply for any new or old texts which previously have been excluded from the canon. If a multicultural/ethnic/class/gendered work of art does wonders to fix “isms” through its fulfillment of the sixth criterion, but fails to embody the other criteria, it should not be proposed as an addition to the canon. (This is not to say, by any means, that literature which does not fulfill all of the canonical criteria, should be discontinued in its reading and study.) These criteria are strict, and to fulfill all of them is not an easy task, which allows only a select few works to pass the gates of “Canon-i-City.” Other works of literature can be equally important in many other realms and not easily forgotten.

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102 Reference to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr?
Analysis on Things Fall Apart

In researching the topic for my thesis, deconstructing the canon, I felt a stronger argument would be made if I were to take a non-canonical piece of literature and examine it against my research. This stems from the Ethnic Studies Department’s goal of the transformative process, where I could apply what I would learn about, the canon and its construction, and take it a step further by analyzing a text to test what I have concluded. This thesis could simply have been a study on the construction of the canon, ending with the criteria for canonization, and it would have been a sufficient project to undertake. However, I believe that taking the extra step on analyzing a text to test my conclusion, adds a deeper level of scholarship. It would be one thing for me to conclude with seven canonical criteria, but using my concluding analysis in a practical method to evaluate a work’s canonicity, gives my work added strength in its applicability for the future of the Humanities Department.

I decided to use Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, as I had read his novel in high school, and it represents the type of literature caught up in my personal academic crisis of answering the question of what actually is canonical art. In choosing Achebe’s piece, I had no opinion as to whether it should, or should not be worthy of canonization; I would have been content with the resulting conclusion. Not being influenced by my personal opinion on the outcome of Things Fall Apart being deemed canonical or not, allowed me to remain
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as objective as possible;¹⁰³ I would not try to “prove” the work’s canonicity and seek research that only supported my viewpoint. This open mindedness encouraged me to research a variety of authors, allowing me to puzzle together pieces from all sides of the canon debate, and in turn, evaluate my criteria based on my conclusion on Achebe’s work.

The first question I set out to answer is whether *Things Fall Apart*, is viewed as canonical. This would not deter me from using the text to test the canonical criteria. If the text was *already* viewed as canonical, it would allow me to reevaluate its canonicity based on the seven criteria. If the piece was *not* viewed as canonical, it would still allow me to decide if it should now be included in the canon based on the same criteria.

In researching this question, I found that, although *Things Fall Apart* is highly read and taught, it is not considered canonical. This addresses my conclusion on the analysis of the canon, and how works not housed in the canon, can still be valuable pieces of literature. This is where *Things Fall Apart* has fallen. The text is popular to teach in schools, both secondary as well as university. However, it is commonly taught, as an ethnographic novel, alongside Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Influenced by Carey Snyder, in order to evaluate *Things Fall Apart*, it cannot be read simply as an ethnographic novel. Doing so, as it is often taught, limits the work’s ability to fulfill its potential as a possible candidate to join the canon.

¹⁰³ Though I understand that it is never possible to remain completely objective, as the hard sciences lead one to believe. Being aware of personal tendencies at all times, allows my research to be as objective as possible.
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Many times, when I have discussed the topic of this thesis among peers and professors, a common question I get is, “But isn’t *Things Fall Apart* already in the canon?” I would often have to clarify that, just because a piece of literature is popular, widely read, and often taught, it does not necessarily merit canonization; although that popularity is often a great indicator. In the case of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which is popular, widely read, and often taught, it was an indicator that this piece has definite potential to be considered canonical. In researching why it has not been readily identified as such, I found its bondage in an ethnographic lens, to be taught as “the other half” of Conrad’s “canonical” *Heart of Darkness*, on which Achebe himself comments in his essay, “An Image of Africa.”

The following section contains my discussion and evaluation of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. It is arranged according to the order of importance of the canonical criteria as previously established.

In terms of fulfilling the first criteria of canonization, *Things Fall Apart* passes. There is something new that can be taken away from each re-reading of the text. At first, one may read *Things Fall Apart* and find it to be a nice book with an interesting plot about an Igbo warrior who is temporarily banished from his home village, and through his constant struggles eventually kills himself as the British take over Nigeria. However, there is so much more that can be pulled from the text. With each additional reading, one can focus on the intricate development of each character throughout the story, or even the undeveloped characters and why Achebe has chosen to do so. Gender plays a large role in the text; upon an initial reading of *Things Fall Apart*, one may come to the conclusion that it is a heavily

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104 As was the case in my high school.
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male gendered text. Yet upon each new reading, one can focus on the role gender plays through the role of Okonkwo’s mother, the Igbo stories threaded throughout the text, the culture of the Igbo community (as seen through the importance of “male” foods versus “female” foods), to eventually finding the re-centering of females within the text. My personal favorite way to reread the text, stems from B. Eugene McCarthy’s analysis of Things Fall Apart as a rhythmical story. It may take three separate readings of Things Fall Apart to find each distinct rhythmical setup. Achebe’s work in Things Fall Apart most definitely allows readers to find new elements to focus on in each reading.

Things Fall Apart also fulfills the next criterion of literary influence. Before the novel even begins, Achebe includes a section of The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats. On my first reading of Things Fall Apart in high school, I did not understand the point of including this poem to start off Achebe’s African (Nigerian) novel. After we finished reading the novel, my teacher addressed the poem to show its relevance to the text. Achebe did not rewrite Yeats’ poem, but he used the selected passage to influence his construction of the story line. Another way one can see Things Fall Apart tracing literary influence is through B. Eugene McCarthy’s analysis in pointing out Achebe’s use of a leitmotiv, a distinctly European tool; making this tool his own, in his use of the African oral style to write Things Fall Apart. Achebe demonstrates that his work has been drawn from previous genius.

Things Fall Apart also fulfills the third criterion of universality and timelessness. This can be seen in Andrew Smith’s case study. Smith’s teaching Achebe’s novel to working class Scottish readers and, most importantly, these readers connecting to the literature, simultaneously fulfills both elements of this criterion. First, these Scottish readers are able
to connect with members of the Igbo community in Nigeria. Second, the story takes place in the late nineteenth century, whereas Smith’s students are reading Achebe’s novel in the beginning of the twenty-first century, and are still able to connect to Things Fall Apart. Readers from a completely different part of the world, in a completely different time setting, connecting to Achebe’s work, shows that Things Fall Apart fulfils the third criterion for canonization.

Things Fall Apart also meets the fourth criterion for canonization, “superior craft.” This is seen best in the author’s use of both English and Igbo phrases, intertwined beautifully. Many authors have written on Chinua Achebe’s mastery of language when writing Things Fall Apart. There are two ways that Achebe has demonstrated superior craft in his novel. The first is by looking at his use of an African oral style when writing an English (language) novel. The Pluralist camp and I use multiple lenses to evaluate this criterion. Traditional Western writing might consider an oral style of writing as inferior within a text. However, the Ethnic Studies Department would argue the contrary. Oral history is just as important as written history, and to argue the contrary, just because it is done in a different medium, would be extremely elitist, and teetering on the edge of bigotry. To place less value on a given medium, in which the Igbo have told their history for centuries, would only fall in line with an elitist and bigoted ideology. In my own writing of this thesis, I have consciously made an effort to subdue the editing of my commas throughout my entire work, adding further support to the legitimacy in which an (African)

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105 Though the time was never explicitly given in the text, this was roughly the time period in which the British began sending missionaries into Nigeria.
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oral style holds. Leaving the “excess” commas in my work, allows one to read my work silently, and it also gives instructions on how to present this work in an oral fashion if one chooses to do so. Writing in an oral style is just as legitimate a writing style as any Western recognized\textsuperscript{106} form of poetry.\textsuperscript{107} The second way Achebe has demonstrated his superior craft, in addition to writing in an African oral style, can be seen through his conscious understanding that he is writing in a certain fashion. As an example, towards the end of the novel, when the Commissioner writes in his diary, Achebe ceases to use the oral style of writing, and uses a drier, Western voice, signaling the Commissioner’s European background. Achebe’s mastery of language in the two styles of writing consciously distinguishes the Commissioner’s diary from the African orality of the rest of Things Fall Apart.

\textsuperscript{106} “Acrostic, Ballad, Clerihew, Damante, Epitaph, Free Verse, Haiku, Limerick Style, Monody, Monorhyme, An Ode, Palindrome, Pantoum, Quatrain, Shape Poetry, Sonnet, Tongue Twister, Villanelle” (Howe).

\textsuperscript{107} Gary Y. Okihiro in his essay “Crafting Ethnic Studies,” gives additional testament of orality as a legitimate method. He attests that the use of an oral method helps to empower normally marginalized peoples without access to a line of power to voice their own stories, as well as the elites. Using an oral method helps to bridge the gap between community and academia, and, “… has the potential for raising social consciousness and enabling avenues for social change” (Okihiro 44). Okihiro would argue that Achebe’s use of orality not only fulfills the fourth criterion, but the sixth as well.
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Originality, the fifth criterion, is also evident in *Things Fall Apart*. Though Achebe’s work is constantly compared to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, *Things Fall Apart* can be read as a correct revision of the way Nigeria and its people, have been portrayed previously. Originality within an author’s text is intrinsically tied to tracing literary influences, and *Things Fall Apart* can be seen as tracing its influence from Conrad’s work. Because Achebe can be viewed as responding to *Heart of Darkness*, he draws from the same notion of writing about Africa, yet very distinctly creates an original piece of literature.

In addition to these five criteria, *Things Fall Apart* strongly demonstrates its ability to have a real world effect, the sixth criterion for canonization. Throughout the entire novel, there are multiple underlying messages and morals that a reader can take from the reading. One of them is how to deal with the “Other.” Achebe demonstrates this by creating universal character types that embody how different people can treat others. As seen in the reading done by Diana Akers Rhoads, Achebe has created two archetype characters, “warriors” and “learners/compromisers.” Another way Achebe demonstrates the moral of how to view the “Other” is by portraying both the British and the Igbo with flaws, as neither is “correct;” both have excellent things to offer, as well as poorer things which can be fixed (by the other). Additional lessons to be taken from *Things Fall Apart* include: the importance of critical thinking, challenging social norms, not always following “tradition” blindly, or making decisions quickly based on fear or anger leading to unwanted repercussions. In terms of the postcolonial discourse, Biodun Jeyifo describes the necessity for female writers to rewrite African texts to create “herstory” as a central issue.
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*Things Fall Apart* has also survived three generations, fulfilling the seventh criteria. Critics have continuously written about *Things Fall Apart* since its original publication in 1959, demonstrating its enduring place within the academy. Another way I tested the work’s survival through three separate generations, was by talking with both my mother and my aunts who attested to reading Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* when they were growing up. By my mother and my aunts to have read the same novel as I, signals *Things Fall Apart*’s vital signs spanning three generations.

Evaluating Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* against the seven canonical criteria, enables his work to enter the selective gates, restricted to only the best pieces of literature. Meeting all seven of these criteria, means that *Things Fall Apart* displays the aesthetic quality needed to be worthy of canonization. In doing so, Achebe’s work can be broken from the chains of being read solely as an ethnographic novel, and rise among the greatest works of art in *The World*.

I limited my work to only one text, now in the canon, as the main focus of this thesis was to make tangible and solidify an objective list of canonical criteria, which future scholars can now use in the Humanities field. Work continuing from this thesis, should evaluate other previously considered canonical pieces based on the seven criteria to determine whether they should remain among the greatest works of literature, or be removed from the canon.
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To Eric Schuck, who without, I would still be writing about military history: “Please note: cannon is a piece of artillery.”

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ADDITIONAL READING


