

Since the beginning of the year in Dr. Miller's AP Literature class, we have frequently discussed the topic of literary merit. What is it? How would you define it? What are the qualities of it? How do you know it when you see it? All of these are questions we have had to ask ourselves throughout the year, because our goal was to develop our own definitions of literary merit. Not what Google, Webster's Dictionary, or College Board says literary merit is, but how we would personally define literary merit. We developed our definitions little by little throughout the year by reading books that College Board had determined had literary merit. After each book, we would analyze what it taught us about literary merit, whether we thought it actually had literary merit, and how we would redefine our ongoing definition of literary merit.

At the beginning of my literary merit journey, I thought it was when you read a book that you made a conscious decision on how you felt about that book. As in, whether or not you can trust what this book is telling you. I know it is very basic, but remember, this was at the very start. I initially tried to define literary merit as how the literary community perceives a book. Whether it be positive or negative, I thought it might be how those books are ranked either purposefully or accidentally by the literary world. My thought process at the time was that the word merit meant they thought there was more inherent value in some works compared to others so that it might be used as a ranking

system of sorts. I learned later it is not structured like a competition but more like a category. I believed that qualities that gave a book literary merit would be the reputation of the author, a history of writing trustworthy works, a high-quality writing style, how their writing sound to the reader, how critics review it, and how experts in the field feel about the work. Later on, I would come to narrow these qualities WAY down, but I was really just at a speculation phase in my process. I hadn't really begun to read any works that are considered to have literary merit with a critical eye yet. Heck, at the beginning, I had never even heard of it before.

The first book we read on our literary merit journey was *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton. The book is set in the fictional town of Starkfield, Massachusetts, during a cold New England winter. The protagonist, Ethan Frome, is an isolated farmer struggling to make a meager living while dealing with his rather frigid wife, Zeena. A ray of hope enters Ethan's life when Zeena's cousin, Mattie Silver, comes to help. Mattie's presence brings excitement and companionship to Ethan's otherwise dull life. As the two spend time together, their mutual feelings grow, and they fall in love. However, their love is complicated by the fact that Ethan is already married to Zeena. The tension between the three characters escalates, leading to tragic consequences. By reading *Ethan Frome*, I came to learn that literary merit is not based on

personal opinion. You can't determine whether or not a work has literary merit based on one or two or even a group of people's negative or positive opinions. Literary merit is more based on whether something had an impact on society, good or bad. I didn't care too much for this book. However, I will admit that while it was a simple story, it laid a foundation for me to use when identifying literary merit in the future.

The second book we read to learn more about literary merit was *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. The novel follows the Price family on a mission trip to the Belgian Congo in 1959. Led by their Baptist minister father, Nathan Price, the family grapples with cultural clashes, political turmoil, and personal crises. The Price daughters and their mother narrate the novel, each providing a unique perspective. The family believes they are carrying a superior culture to the village of Kilanga, expecting to be masters of their new environment. However, their faith begins to waver as they encounter challenges. Their live-in helper deserts them, and the villagers resist Nathan's insistence on baptism. Despite the danger, Nathan remains steadfast in his mission, while the family undergoes profound shifts in their understanding of culture and faith. Something reading the *Poisonwood Bible* taught me about literary merit was that a quality of it is how well a book discusses and examines a social problem or topic. For example, in the *Poisonwood Bible*, a frequent

theme and main driving force of the plot is, as I mentioned, religion and how people can twist its meanings to fit their agenda. Nathan Price embodies this idea; he takes a more Puritan approach to the Bible and takes everything it says to be hard and fast laws. Nathan also leaves out all of the compassion, empathy, and interpretation often associated with Christianity. Though, the book doesn't attempt to discredit religion or speak out against it. There is no black and white in the Congo the Price family drives into; everyone is painted in shades of gray. Instead, Barbara Kingsolver takes a nuanced approach to religion using her extremely proficient writing skills and historical creativity. I believe this gives the Poisonwood Bible literary merit and the qualities that give it merit.

After the class read our first two books together, everyone in the class went their separate ways when it came to the third book. We all got to choose our own book to read based on a list of Pulitzer and Booker Prize-winning books. All of these had already been determined to have literary merit. I chose to read *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy as my third book in my literary merit journey. The story chronicles the journey of a father and his son as they travel through the broken roadways of a devastated landscape. An unspecified apocalyptic event has nearly wiped out the earth, leaving everything dead. The sun is blotted out, all plants and animals are extinct, and most humans have become

either lone travelers or members of cannibalistic cults. The Father and The Son share an unshakable bond as they navigate this desolate world. Their survival plan hinges on constantly moving along the road to avoid threats from other survivors. As they journey, they encounter both goodness and depravity. The father becomes hardened, willing to survive and keep his son safe by any means necessary. Meanwhile, The Son develops compassion, grieving for those they encounter. The Son's empathy remains intact even in this harsh world, while The Father struggles to hold onto his. After reading Ethan Frome, I determined that literary merit was based on whether something impacted society, good or bad. Then, after reading The Poisonwood Bible, I expanded my definition to include that literary merit is how well a book discusses and examines a social problem or topic. The Road, in my mind at the time, met the criteria I seemed to have developed for literary merit at this point. The Road has for sure impacted society. I feel like you can find many of the themes in this book in a lot of other books in the apocalyptic genre, like what are you willing to do to survive, at what point are you no longer the good guys, and having to guide an inexperienced person through an unforgiving environment. I'm not trying to say that The Road invented these ideas, just that it might have revitalized them in the genre. I think it isn't a far stretch to say it might have inspired the works that came after it, such as The Last of Us series and The

Walking Dead series. Both of these are extremely popular, multi-award winning, and still in discussion today.

In my opinion, *The Road* is one of the most beautifully written and beautifully depressing books I have ever read. The author, Cormac McCarthy, is a true wordsmith. He strips the book down entirely from usual standards. The characters don't have names; a specific setting is never mentioned, times are never discussed, and even the exact circumstances of how our main characters got into the situation they are in now are never determined. You think this would make the book a confusing, jumbled mess to read, but you would be wrong. Stripping down everything unimportant forces the story's spotlight onto the relationship between the father and son, their thoughts and motivations, and their fight to keep their morality and survive. This way of writing is by far the best way I've seen an author examine a topic in their work. This book touched me mainly because it reminded me of my relationship with my father. In the book, The Father comes down with a sickness that slowly kills him as the story goes along. He knows his time is coming, so he tries to teach his son as much as he can before he goes. He tries to prepare The Son for a future without the time he has left. My dad was diagnosed with brain cancer when I was ten and died around a year later. During that period of time, my dad

tried to teach me as much as he was able to, given his condition before he passed. I felt very akin to the father and son in this story.

The fourth work we examined, this time together as a class again, was a play instead of a book. It was *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare. The play is set in the Italian town of Messina and revolves around the courtship between two couples: Hero and Claudio, and Beatrice and Benedick. Hero captures the heart of young nobleman Claudio. They pledge their love and decide to marry. Meanwhile, Beatrice, Hero's cousin, constantly argues with Benedick. Hero and Claudio's friends conspire to make Beatrice and Benedick fall in love. Their tricks succeed, and the two secretly develop feelings for each other. However, trouble brews when a character named Don John deceives Claudio into believing that Hero is unfaithful. Claudio publicly denounces Hero on their wedding day, leaving her heartbroken. Hero's family pretends she has died of shock and grief. Fortunately, the truth comes to light. Hero is innocent, and Claudio grieves for his mistake. Benedick and Beatrice confess their love, and the joyful lovers celebrate a double wedding. Reading "*Much Ado About Nothing*" introduced some new ideas to me about the meaning of literary merit. Shakespeare's play highlighted to me the concepts of character development, the exploration of societal norms and gender roles, and the complex nature of human relationships. All of which obviously contribute to

the play's status as one of the classics. This experience broadened my understanding of what literary merit is, once again. I rewrote my ongoing definition of literary merit to include the ideas that it looks at unfair standards, there aren't any stagnant characters, and deals with how intricate relationships can be. These are the qualities that resonate with readers across different cultures and time periods. For some reason, at this time, I thought for sure that this was definitely literary merit.

The fifth work we looked at was, once again, an independent read of a book. This time, we chose from a list of books that had appeared before on the AP Literature Exam. I chose *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow because I had some vague memories of seeing a regional production of a musical based on the book. I'm also just a history buff. The novel opens in 1906 and revolves around three interconnected families: an upper-class white family living in New Rochelle, New York, representing privilege and tradition. A struggling immigrant father, Tateh, and his daughter, who face poverty and hardship. The talented ragtime pianist, Coalhouse Walker, and his love interest, Sarah, whose lives intersect with the other families. The novel is set against the backdrop of historical events and figures, delving into the themes of social upheaval, racism, and the American Dream prevalent at this point in history. Just when I thought I had a firm grip on what precisely literary merit is, reading *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow



illuminated the concept of literary merit to me in a completely new light.

Doctorow's skillful interweaving of historical events, characters, and narratives underscores the idea that literary merit extends beyond how well you can tell a story. Doctorow's ability to blend fact with fiction, seamlessly including actual historical figures alongside created characters, highlights the power of literature to illuminate truths about the human condition. Whether the story is true or not, it still feels natural, as if you are reading someone's memoir. This book expanded my understanding of literary merit, including originality and the capacity to provoke thought and inspire empathy. *Ragtime* taught me that literary merit lies in the ability of a work to transcend its genre and time and leave a lasting impact on both its readers and the literary world as a whole.

The sixth and final work we analyzed to gain a full grasp of literary merit was our second play, *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen. It's a thought-provoking play that portrays the disintegration of a marriage between Nora and Torvald Helmer. Nora Helmer is a seemingly frivolous housewife who secretly works to pay off an illegal loan she took out to save Torvald's life. Torvald Helmer is Nora's condescending husband. Nora reveals her secret loan to her best friend, Mrs. Linde, explaining that she has been repaying it secretly. Torvald's employee, Krogstad, threatens Nora, revealing her forgery of her father's

signature. The play explores societal expectations, individual restrictions, and Nora's awakening to her true self. Reading *A Doll's House* taught me that a key factor that comes into play when determining literary merit is the quality of the work's social commentary. Ibsen's play, as previously mentioned, is focused on the societal standards and expectations of the late 19th century, particularly regarding gender roles and marriage. The exploration of these themes not only shed light on the mistreatment faced by women at the time but also started important conversations about equality and individual agency. Previous works have influenced my definition similarly, but *A Doll's House* has helped me further refine that idea. The other key factor that comes into play when determining literary merit is the quality of the characters within the story. What I mean by that is how realistic the characters feel to the reader, and can the reader empathize with them. The characters in Ibsen's play are complex and multi-layered; each one is wrestling with their desires, motivations, and conflicts. Nora's journey, especially from submissive to self-realization, connects with the audience and contributes to the play's longevity.

All of these works in some way, big or small, have influenced my finalized definition of literary merit in some way. I firmly believe that literary merit is based on how a work discusses and examines a social problem or topic, its

ability to leave a lasting impact on both its readers and the literary world as a whole, and its ability to portray complex relationships with its characters. It feels good to finally be able to say that after an entire school year. I think this assignment is an excellent example of literature itself. Like works in literature, everyone has their own opinions on it, and everyone comes out of it with their own unique experiences.