

Revisiting Canonical Texts in Popular Culture: The Enduring Influence of Iconic Poems and Literary Works

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Abstract

The persistence of canonical literary texts within popular imagination highlights their continuing capacity to inspire, adapt, and reshape cultural meanings across generations. This paper examines how poems and literary works, once confined to the domain of elite readership and formal study, acquire renewed significance when reinterpreted in contemporary cultural practices. The purpose is to explore how these texts, while retaining their historical weight, undergo processes of reinterpretation and circulation that open them to new audiences and diverse forms of expression. The objectives of the study are twofold: first, to analyze the shifting dynamics between established literary authority and popular reinterpretations; second, to interrogate how cultural practices reshape the meaning of these works, moving them beyond static reverence toward active cultural participation. Through critical approaches that foreground the relationship between literature, power, and popular representation, the study traces how canonical voices are re-read in everyday cultural artifacts such as films, music, and digital media. The discussion demonstrates that canonical works do not remain frozen within the boundaries of tradition but continually re-emerge as vital cultural resources. Their reappearance in varied forms reveals the ways in which popular culture both challenges and revitalizes literary heritage, extending its relevance across contexts and audiences. In this manner, the paper establishes that the enduring influence of these texts lies not only in their historical stature but also in their capacity to be re-imagined as part of the living fabric of cultural life.

Keywords: Canonical Literature, Popular Imagination, Reinterpretation, Cultural Practices, Literary Authority

Submitted: 12.07.2025

Accepted: 23.09.2025

Published 30.09.2025

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Introduction

The literary canon has traditionally been understood as a curated collection of texts that embody the intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural foundations of societies. Works such as Shakespeare's sonnets, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore have been elevated to the status of cultural icons, celebrated for their perceived universality, aesthetic perfection, and timeless relevance. These canonical texts have historically functioned not only as literary achievements but also as markers of social distinction, institutional authority, and cultural legitimacy. Their presence in curricula, anthologies, and academic discourse has reinforced the idea that certain works possess inherent value, capable of instructing, refining, and shaping the sensibilities of readers across generations. Yet, despite this aura of permanence, these works have never existed in isolation from the wider currents of cultural practice. The persistence of canonical texts in popular memory and everyday life demonstrates that their power lies not only in institutional recognition but also in their capacity to circulate, be reinterpreted, and resonate beyond elite literary spaces. They are continually reappropriated to address the social, political, and emotional concerns of diverse audiences, ensuring that their influence extends across temporal, geographic, and cultural boundaries.

The concept of the literary canon itself has been a site of considerable theoretical debate. Matthew Arnold's nineteenth-century formulation, which described the canon as "the best that has been thought and said" (ix) established it as a standard against which cultural sophistication and intellectual refinement could be measured. However, later critics, particularly post-structuralist and cultural materialist theorists such as Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, challenged the presumed neutrality of canon formation (Abuaniza 3). They argued that what is included or excluded from the canon is not dictated solely by aesthetic or intrinsic merit, but by institutional, ideological, and class-based frameworks that regulate access, interpretation, and legitimacy. From a Foucauldian perspective, the canon reflects mechanisms of power: it preserves certain voices while marginalizing others, constructing hierarchies of cultural authority (Bhattarai 1429). When these canonical works enter popular culture—through film adaptations, music, digital media, or public discourse—they undergo a process of decanonization. This is not a rejection of their value, but a transformation in which authority is redistributed, meanings are pluralized, and the works become accessible to broader audiences beyond traditional academic or elite circles. The tension between preservation and reinterpretation, authority and accessibility, continuity and change, forms the conceptual backbone of this inquiry. The enduring relevance of canonical texts is evident in the ways they are continually reimagined across diverse cultural landscapes.

Shakespeare's plays, for instance, have been adapted in Bollywood to reflect local narratives of love, conflict, and social tension, such as in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013), which transposes *Romeo and*

Juliet (1597) into a Gujarati cultural context enriched with music, dance, and ritualized performance. Wordsworth's Romantic sensibilities, particularly his reverence for nature and the sublime, have been invoked in contemporary environmental discourse, shaping eco-poetic movements, climate change documentaries, and public campaigns that reframe human-nature relationships in ways resonant with twenty-first-century ecological consciousness (B K 373). T.S. Eliot's modernist work, particularly *The Waste Land* (1922), finds renewed life in popular music, digital subcultures, and even memes, demonstrating how fragments of canonical texts can acquire new significance when detached from their original historical or scholarly contexts. Tagore's poetry, similarly, continues to mediate debates around nationalism, global citizenship, and humanist values, circulating through digital media, political rhetoric, and global literary networks.

What emerges from these instances is a picture of the canon not as a static monument of literary achievement, but as a living, adaptable cultural resource. Its endurance lies in its capacity for both continuity and transformation: while the historical, aesthetic, and institutional weight of these texts remains, their meanings are continually reshaped through cultural practices that engage with contemporary concerns, values, and audiences. This dynamic interplay between permanence and reinvention ensures that canonical works retain their relevance while being continually reinterpreted, allowing them to influence thought, culture, and collective imagination across temporal, spatial, and ideological boundaries.

Elite Readership to Popular Imagination

The authority of canonical works has traditionally been linked to their institutionalization in schools, universities, and anthologies of literature. They gain not only their cultural prestige from their aesthetic quality but from the social roles they play in demarcating cultural hierarchies (Flannery and Griffin 203-204). Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital is particularly insightful here. Cultural capital is the symbolic assets—education, good taste, literary know-how—that one acquires and uses to claim social distinction (Ventura 3). In this way, canonical texts used to serve as stratifying instruments: knowing how to read Milton well, or quoting Eliot confidently, signaled one's membership in a class with access to formal schooling and cultural polish. Having access to the canon was less a matter of straightforward pleasure and more one of social acceptability, maintaining the distinction between elite readerships and the broader public. When these books enter the sphere of popular culture, though, the exclusivity surrounding their ownership starts to break down. Shakespeare is the best illustration. His plays, formerly staged for courts and taught in elite universities, have been remade through mass entertainment in ways that redistribute their cultural authority. *Romeo Juliet* (1996) by Baz Luhrmann (Nand 6-9) moves the play to a hyper-stylized urban setting, substituting swords with guns and maintaining Shakespeare's dialogue. Similarly, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013) situates the same story within a Gujarati cultural framework, integrating folk traditions, music, and performance. These adaptations demonstrate how Shakespeare's themes of love and conflict

transcend their original elite associations and become accessible to audiences unfamiliar with Elizabethan theatre. The cultural capital previously localized in universities and upper-class circles is, through this process, redistributed so that Shakespeare can work as shared cultural memory instead of an exclusionary sign of prestige.

The same redistribution appears in the cultural afterlives of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Originally exclusive as the apotheosis of modernist complexity, readable for the most part by a learned readership proficient in several languages and literary conventions, the poem has moved subsequently into popular currency. In these contexts, Eliot's writing no longer needs specialist cultural capital for decoding or status. Stripped of its rich allusive matrix, the fragment takes on fresh meanings in modern settings. This illustrates how canonical texts, when once bound to distinction at the elite level, are slowly incorporated into popular culture, where authority is distributed and meanings made more democratic. Described through the lens of Bourdieu's theory, the translation of canonical texts into popular culture does not represent the erasure of their authority but rather its transformation. The symbolic capital they once invested in elite institutions is redirected to mass audiences by adaptation, quotation, and reappropriation. Power thus moves away from the academy to the cinema screen, the concert stage, and the computer screen. In this manner, the canon remains not as private property but as a living archive, constantly reinterpreted in the day-to-day practices of culture.

Processes of Reinterpretation and Cultural Circulation

Canonical works survive in cultural memory because they are themselves dynamic, subject to reinterpretation and recontextualization across different contexts. Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality (Raj 77) offers a helpful conceptual lens for grasping this process. Intertextuality suggests that each text sits within a web of relations with other texts; meaning is not generated in isolation but becomes effective through relation, reference, and dialogue with other texts of the past or present. That is, texts are situated in the midst of a continuous cultural dialogue, as reinterpretation enables them to pick up increasing importance through the passing of time. This understanding explains how canonical writing moves throughout media, genres, and social contexts, repeatedly negotiating their applicability. Wordsworth's poetry illustrates such a process. These works have now, however, been enlisted in environmentalist discourses in modern cultural practices. Climate change films, ecological poetry movements, and ecological tourism drive frequently make use of Wordsworthian imagery and diction to describe human connections with the natural environment (Gorin 2-3). Through intertextuality, the Romantic text no longer exists simply as historical literature but is made a resource through which contemporary environmental issues are being conveyed, showing how canonical meaning is reconstituted in an engagement with current contexts. Rabindranath Tagore's poetry shares an analogous circulation. *Where the Mind is Without Fear*, initially a nationalist hymn for India's independence struggle, today figures on various digital campaigns, political oratory, and education programs

worldwide. The poem's intertextual references to notions of freedom, human dignity, and international justice make it possible for the poem to break out of its initial historical context, situating Tagore as a nationalist poet in the first instance but more importantly as a voice whose words address universal issues. The text's ongoing dissemination illustrates the manner in which canonical texts can gain new layers of interpretation yet still carry elements of their initial power.

Music is another domain in which intertextuality fuels circulation. Bob Dylan's lyrics, which abound with biblical allusions, Shakespearean echoes, and modernist fragments, provide one example of how canonical texts are enacted in popular culture (Manjula and Reddy 2003). Through such interpolations in songs, Dylan reanimates the power of literary traditions while adapting them into accessible, mass-mediated forms. Through the dynamic between high literary culture and popular music, one can see that circulation is not repetition but active retranslation, so that listeners get to encounter canonical texts in new registers. Digital culture also enhances this process. Memes, Instagram poetry, online fanfiction, and other forms of participatory digital culture create venues in which canonical lines are reworked in creative, playful, and sometimes ironic fashion. Edgar Allan Poe's *Nevermore*, for instance, is often used in gothic subcultures online, severed from its original melancholy and tragic framing and reworked as snarky or self-referential humor. These digital conversions underscore the flexibility of canonical works: intertextual associations enable them to reach a varied audience, adapt to changing cultural demands, and travel beyond official or institutional contexts.

Through Kristeva's lens of intertextuality, it becomes evident that the endurance of canonical works is not a product of passive reverence but of active engagement and reinterpretation. Their meanings are not fixed; rather, they are continually negotiated in dialogue with other texts, media, and cultural practices. This ongoing circulation ensures that canonical literature remains relevant, accessible, and influential, demonstrating its capacity to be both historically grounded and contemporaneously resonant.

Canonical Texts as Living Cultural Resources

The versatility of canonical texts makes them living cultural resources, connecting historical literary authority with current relevance. They are not frozen artifacts kept intact for the sole purpose of academic consideration or aesthetic appreciation but vibrant texts that engage in ongoing cultural arguments, influencing discourse generation after generation (Dickinson 371). Materialism, in the form of theory, points out that literature is situated within ideological struggles, social relations, and material conditions, and not as independent or standalone art (Pérez-Jara et al. 5). Using this as a perspective underscores that canonical texts are not just historical documents; they are tools that can be called upon in order to question issues that arise in the present, mirror social tensions, and fuel cultural criticism. The canonical text becomes a tool for understanding the ongoing interplay between literature, power, and societal norms.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) exemplifies this dynamic function. Beyond its position in literary curricula, *Hamlet* has transcended its textual boundaries to become a cultural shorthand for indecision, melancholy, and existential reflection. Political leaders, journalists, and filmmakers frequently invoke Hamlet to comment on crises of governance, moral uncertainty, or ethical dilemmas. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014), based against the backdrop of political instability in Kashmir, reimagines the story as a commentary on state brutality, betrayal, and the stifling of alternative voices. Bhardwaj's adaptation illustrates the possibility of Shakespeare's text being reinterpreted to address particular sociopolitical realities, revealing the canon's ability to address pressing modern realities in a meaningful way (Lari et al. 2).

In each instance, *Hamlet* is not a passive work; it is a living cultural artifact that actively assists in shaping and being shaped by the conditions under which it is being read, performed, or watched. By operating as living cultural resources, canonical texts disclose their strength of renewal and adaptability. Their authority is not limited to institutionalized study or elite readership anymore; it circulates dynamically, engaging in ongoing negotiations of meaning, ideology, and social critique. Survival is not guaranteed by preservation but by active use: the canon continues to be relevant because it can always be reinterpreted, used, and deployed in response to current issues. Whether existential crises, political strife, or ethical controversies are being considered, canonical texts retain their relevance through practice, an indication of literature's lasting power when incorporated into the lived experience and interpretive modalities of each subsequent generation.

Conclusion

This article has examined the long-lasting impact of canonical texts, highlighting their ability to serve as rich cultural resources in movement, not as leaden monuments of literary tradition. Rather than being relegated to classrooms, anthologies, or institutional power, canonical texts are actively involved with wider cultural practices, permeating through different media, genres, and social environments. The research has revealed that the literary canon is not an absolute or rigid institution; instead, it is in constant negotiation and reinterpretation based on social, political, and cultural forces. The canonical works persist not merely due to their past prestige or artistic quality, but because they enable reflection, conversation, and sense-making, allowing audiences to critically interact with cultural standards, ideologies, and shared values.

The study has pointed out that the canon-popular culture relationship is dialogic and not one-way. While institutional structures grant historical authority and legitimacy on some works, popular reception reallots this authority, enabling the canon to find diverse audiences and gain additional interpretive meanings. This dynamic process illustrates that canonical literature is not fixed; it changes, develops, and continues to be current by actively engaging in the cultural debates of every period. Theories such as Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Kristeva's intertextuality, and cultural materialism give meaningful insight into such processes,

explaining how literature acts as an intermediary between elite authority, ideological structures, and the day-to-day lives of audiences. Through these prisms, the research demonstrates that the canonical writings are both formed by and forming cultural contexts, displaying the intersection of historical relevance and current importance.

Canonical writings meaningfully enrich contemporary society by bridging literary pasts and current issues. Their flexibility enables them to guide cultural and public debates, encourage moral and intellectual consideration, and serve as models for investigating social and political questions. The survival of canonical works resides in their ability to be reinterpreted, allowing people and groups to take an active role with literature as a means of thought, creativity, and cultural engagement. Through the ability to act as living culture, these texts facilitate identity development, coordinate collective memory, and allow participation with universal human issues, thus keeping their applicability well past elite or scholarly society. In the future, the research anticipates several areas of future study. Digital media, online platforms, and transnational cultural flows provide new arenas for the remaking, circulation, and reappropriation of canonical texts. Social media, fan fiction, memes, and other user-generated digital activities speed the democratization of literary power and present rich territory for the analysis of intertextuality and cultural flow. Comparative analyses of regional adaptations, cross-cultural reinterpretations, and interactive media forms can also shed further light on how literature acts as a mediator between innovation and tradition. Exploring the processes through which marginalized voices and diverse communities negotiate with and transform the canon is also an essential area of inquiry into its changing social and cultural meaning. Such investigation would enrich understanding of how literature continues to negotiate power hierarchies while promoting engaging access to cultural heritage.

In the final analysis, reengaging canonical works in the terms of contemporary culture highlights the strength, versatility, and creative potential of literary inheritance. These texts are neither fossilized artifacts nor icons of mere respect; they are an integral part of an unfolding cultural dialogue, able to provoke reinterpretation, resonate with diverse publics, and promote conversation across temporal, spatial, and ideological frontiers. Their continued impact illustrates the ability of literature not simply to keep alive historical imagination but to democratize cultural participation, making great texts available, relevant, and significant to successive generations. By mapping the paths of canonical texts through popular culture, adaptation, and reinterpretation, this chapter confirms that literary texts exist as both historical texts and live tools of cultural imagination—texts through which societies are perpetually negotiating, reinterpreting, and reviving their shared values, stories, and identities.

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