

*The Lithuanian High School Literary Canon: Reconstructing the Developments of a Century*¹

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Abstract. This paper reconstructs the developments of the Lithuanian high school literary canon from 1918 to 2018. Drawing on the theoretical framework of descriptive canon research, attributed to the theoretical field of cultural sociology, we investigate how ideological shifts have shaped education policies as well as the selection and interpretation of literature taught in secondary education over the past hundred years. We argue that the school, more than any other institution, has the power to establish and disseminate normative literary values across generations. Using a large corpus of published and archived sources, we examine how Lithuanian literature was defined in the country's high schools, how its historical narrative was modelled, and what criteria were used by the authors of high school literary curricula and learning materials to select writers and their works during three historical periods: the First Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940), the Soviet occupation (1940–1990), and the post-independence era (since 1990). We analysed not only the canon of authors and works of literature, but also their dominant interpretation in the learning materials of each specific period. This reconstruction of the Lithuanian high school literary canon contributes to broader comparative research on the formation of literary canons, particularly in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: literary canon; Lithuania; high school; canonical authors; descriptive canon research

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Preface

This paper presents our study, financed by the Research Council of Lithuania (2021–2024), examining the principles that shaped the Lithuanian high school literary canon since the founding of the Republic of Lithuania (1918) and the changes it has undergone to this day. The chronological limits of our study begin with the establishment of the Lithuanian national education system, concurrent with the establishment of the state, and end with the first hundred years of its existence (2018).⁴

Our study was inspired by canon theoretician John Guillory's insights into the essential role that the school plays in shaping literary canons:

(it is perhaps an illusion of our own age to believe that we are simply free to read and write whatever, whenever, and however we wish). We are now in a position to recognize the major social institution through which this regulation is exercised: *the school*. ... the school was assigned the general social function of distributing various kinds of knowledge, including the knowledge of *how* to read and write as well as *what* to read and write (Guillory 2006: 239).

A national education system has greater social power to instil a specific system of normative literary values than any other institutions of canonisation (for example, literary criticism) because it reaches all social groups and possesses disciplinary levers (such as evaluating a pupil's progress and conducting compulsory final exams). Thus, the school shapes a society's understanding of its most meritorious works of literature and their selection criteria more than any other institution (Guillory 1993: vii). Despite Guillory's persuasive arguments about the impact that schools have on shaping the literary canon, there are but a few studies on the *long-term development* of a school literary canon in a particular country or nation.⁵ These studies usually analyse the canon of reading materials for a particular level of education (primary, basic, secondary) and utilise materials used in lessons, learning aids available on the market, and (or) surveys of teachers and pupils (Applebee 1993; Verboord

⁴ Before the establishment of the Republic of Lithuania, Lithuanian literary history was only taught in private Lithuanian gymnasiums, which Lithuanian education societies began to open during the years of the First World War. Each of these gymnasiums had separate curricula approved by their founders. The first national Lithuanian language and literature curriculum (applicable to all schools in Lithuania) was approved only in 1921.

⁵ One such study was done by canon theoretician Hermann Korte and his colleagues, who conducted a historical analysis of the 19th-century German school literary canon (Korte et al. 2005; Korte et al. 2012).

and Rees 2008; etc.). The nature of these studies of the school canon (and contemporary canon in particular) is determined by specific regulation of literary education. Many Western countries do not possess strictly defined lists of literary works to read; except for a few compulsory literary classics, the authors and works taught are chosen by the teachers themselves, who use a variety of methodical and learning materials.⁶

Throughout the majority of the 20th and 21st centuries, Lithuania, like some other post-Soviet and former communist-bloc countries, more or less strictly regulated the literary works taught to pupils in the upper grades. This is directly tied to the protracted duration of undemocratic rule: the authoritarian regime of Antanas Smetona (1926–1940), the Soviet and Nazi occupations during the years of the Second World War, and the long period of occupation under the Soviet Union (1944–1990). The stricter an education system regulates, controls, centralises, and unifies how literature is taught, the more effectively scholars can reconstruct the state-modelled school literary canon. Therefore, this protracted duration of undemocratic rule in Lithuania offers us the opportunity to analyse and compare the system of normative literary values under conditions of independence and occupation as well as different forms of government, i.e. parliamentary democracy (1918–1926, and from 1990 to the present day), authoritarianism, and totalitarianism.

As a result of our study, we published a monograph in Lithuanian in 2024 (Šeina and Kučinskienė 2024). This paper is not only meant to introduce our findings to an international readership, but also to encourage researchers of other national literatures to reconstruct their school literary canons, which would open up future avenues for comparative school canon studies.

Theoretical Premises of the Study

Our study follows descriptive canon research, attributed to the theoretical field of cultural sociology, which analyses the mechanisms that shape and permit the functioning of a literary canon in society. The essential approach of such research is to treat the shaping of a canon as a sociocultural process wherein the elites of a society select a corpus of the most significant texts and create practices ensuring the transmission of these texts to future generations.

Literary scholar Simone Winko (2002: 11) defines a canon as the result of the work of various mutually exclusive canonising institutions. She refers to

⁶ The documents defining school literary education in some countries specify no compulsory authors at all, while some specify only a few compulsory authors. For more on this, see Stotsky 2012; Witte and Sâmihăian 2013.

canonising institutions as those which participate in the selection of exemplary works of art and the process of transmitting them to future generations. Depending on the nature and functions of a certain institution, its canon could diverge from the system of normative literary values created by other institutions. Thus, the school canon usually differs from the academic canon, because school teaching has specific objectives of not only developing the ability of reading and interpreting texts, but also of fostering the maturing personality of the pupil.

The literary canon of schools (and that of other institutions) imparts not only aesthetic norms, but also models of gender, social class, national, and cultural identity (Assmann 1998: 50). Although the works read vary from one member of society to the other, there is a basic corpus of texts that a majority of people across several generations in that society are acquainted with (mostly thanks to the school). As part of that intergenerational cultural self-perception, this corpus of texts allows members of a society to identify with collective experiences and values, thus providing a foundation for societal communication.

Precisely because a canon shapes the self-perception and value system of a community, it cannot be a scattered cumulation of axiologically incompatible works. A complex of selection criteria based on common values is what assembles these works into a coherent whole (Herrmann 2007: 39). As the historical circumstances and the social and cultural needs of the society change, so do some of the selection criteria (Herrmann 2007: 28–32).

Herrmann Korte has distinguished two types of author (or work) present in the structure of a national literary canon – those at the core of the canon, who maintain their cultural prestige over a long period of time and enjoy international renown, and those at its margins, who, for various reasons, receive a lesser degree of canonisation and thus can easily be pushed out of the canon (Korte 2002: 34–35). In other words, the degree of anchorage for a particular author or text may vary from a weak representation at the margins of a canon to a privileged position at its centre.

The canon may undergo restructurisation because a shift of values occurs among the society's elites; however, the canon itself never disintegrates, instead only changing some of its parts (Korte 2002: 25–26). This process is vital for the canon's survival as only through constant renewal can it respond to the self-identification needs of a changing society. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, it may be impossible to push certain works out of the canon even if they do not correspond to its changed code of values. According to Guillory, in such cases the school is able to subordinate the historical specificity of a work to the code of values that governs the canon: dangerous heterodoxies

are assimilated into the learning materials by applying homogenisational methods of presentation (such as selecting excerpts of works or expurgating them) and interpreting texts. “Only in this way can one explain the use of the *same* canonical works to inculcate in different generations of students many different and even incompatible ideologies” (Guillory 1993: 63). Canonical works can be homogenised because of their inherent polysemy. It is this immanent feature of a literary work that Winko considers to be an important premise for considering its canonical value, as it allows the literary work to be associated with new semantic contexts and values as times and communities change (Winko 2001: 598).

The various (cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, emotional, and other) values embodied in the canon, just as in literature itself, are selectively actualised based on the needs of a particular time. The intermediaries of the canon (historians, critics, or teachers of literature) transmit these values in the form of criteria catalogues and canonical meanings. Renate von Heydebrand distinguished the terms *material canon* (*materieller Kanon*) and *interpretive canon* (*Deutungskanon*) (von Heydebrand 1998: 613). The material canon means a fixed group of authors or literary works that are canonised for a particular period of time. The interpretive canon defines the prevailing methods that are used to evaluate and interpret the material canon.

The interpretive canon is shaped by the specific techniques of reading literature that are taught in schools, the biographies of writers and evaluations of their works as they appear in textbooks, as well as guiding questions and the wording of learning tasks. The conditional stability of the material canon is opposed to the flexibility of the interpretive canon. Thus, the canon can fulfil both society’s need for cultural stability and its need for change (Anz 2002: 24–25).

The premises of theoretical descriptive canon studies that we have succinctly described here were put to the test in our analysis of the century-long developments of the Lithuanian school literary canon: we examined how the political, social, and cultural changes of Lithuanian society in the 20th and 21st centuries affected the selection and interpretation of Lithuanian literary works in high schools. Our research is limited to upper school grades. Throughout the whole period under analysis, the history of Lithuanian and world literature was taught in the two to four upper grades (this number would vary based on the time period) of general education schools.⁷ A school canon’s code of values

⁷ Literary education in Lithuanian high schools in the 20th century was influenced to the largest extent by the German and Russian education systems and their tradition of teaching literature based on the historical principle, which extends back to the 19th century (See Zimmer 2006: 137; Lanu 2001: 14–43).

is best revealed precisely through this chronological principle of teaching literature. These values can be gleaned not only from how specific works are selected and interpreted, but also how the stages of literary development are presented. Through such modelling of literary history, the elites of a particular time are able to pass on their causal concepts of literary development to pupils. Thus, in order to understand the code of values that governs a canon's structure, the literary curriculum and other learning materials for higher classes are much more telling than those meant for more junior pupils.

In Lithuanian literary scholarship, a number of studies of certain aspects of literary canonisation have appeared in the 21st century.⁸ But up until now we have not possessed a comprehensive view of the high school canon for a particular period, nor a reconstruction of its historical development. This was the goal of our study. It is not only the first such study in Lithuania, but also, to the best of our knowledge, the first such study ever done.

We employed a vast corpus of sources: Lithuanian literature curricula for higher classes, various learning materials (textbooks, anthologies, etc.), methodical tools and recommendations, documents regulating the work of teachers of Lithuanian literature, teachers' memoirs, and interviews with authors of curricula and textbooks.

We began our study by analysing the Lithuanian literature curricula for the higher classes. Based on this analysis, we distinguished the development stages of the high school canon. The principle turns in the development of the canon coincided with the most important political events of the period: the school canon initially established in the First Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940) was restructured during the Soviet occupations (1940–1941, 1944–1990) and eventually revised after the reinstatement of Independence (1990).⁹ We divided our study into parts based on these three stages of development.

The First Lithuanian Republic (1918–1940)

In the interwar high school, Lithuanian literature was first and foremost considered to be an expression of the writer's national identity. This is especially clear from the differences in the periodisation of national and world

⁸ The positions of specific Lithuanian authors in the school literary canon were discussed by Regina Norkevičienė, Nijolė Toleikytė, Viktorija Šeina, Aistė Kučinskienė, and Gitana Vanagaitė.

⁹ The curriculum used in Lithuanian high schools before the Soviet occupation (1940) was reinstated (with minimal changes) during the years of the Nazi occupation (1941–1944).

literature. The history of Lithuanian literature as it was taught in schools (and universities, too) was based on the stages of an emerging national consciousness: the first writings in Lithuanian from the 16th century, the literature of the nobles from the early 19th century sparked by an interest in Lithuanian culture and language, works by writers aligned with the late 19th-century national movement, etc. Meanwhile, world literature was taught in accordance with cultural eras or art movements (the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Realism, Modernism, etc.). The principal aim of Lithuanian literature lessons was to familiarise the younger generation with the history of their 'national awakening' and the works best fit to represent the 'spirit of the nation'. The central place in the school canon of this time was held by Lithuania's national bard Maironis (real name Jonas Mačiulis, 1862–1932).

The criteria for shaping the canon, used in the First Republic of Lithuania, were based on modern Lithuanian nationalism constructed by the national movement's ideologues which praised sovereign medieval Lithuania as the nation's golden age (and thus considered the establishment of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569) to have caused a political and cultural downfall for the Lithuanians), regarded the Lithuanian language as the most important representation of national identity, and celebrated the peasant class, who had managed to retain their Lithuanian language and culture despite long-lasting Polonisation and Russification (and naturally deemed the Polish-speaking Lithuanian nobles to have been outsiders). For example, the curriculum for the higher grades includes Simonas Daukantas (1793–1864), the first Lithuanian historian to write in Lithuanian, whose works were indispensable for developing the cult of medieval Lithuania. Even though Daukantas never wrote fiction, the textbooks of that time presented him as the ideal Lithuanian writer, emphasising that his decision to write history *only* in Lithuanian was the author's most significant achievement.

The promotion of the Lithuanian language was another important thematic criteria for selecting works for the school canon, which led to many language-praising, practical, religious, or non-fiction works being included alongside fiction in the curriculum of the higher grades. Some of them held a lasting position in the Lithuanian school literary canon. For example, every generation of Lithuanian pupils in the 20th century was obliged to memorise an excerpt from the preface to Mikalojus Daukša's (1527–1613) collection of sermons *Postilla catholicka* (*Catholic Postil*, 1599), which spoke of every Lithuanian's duty to use his or her native language (and not Polish, prevalent among the Lithuanian nobles of that period).

In the interwar school canon, works depicting the ethnography of the Lithuanian countryside and the ethnotype of the Lithuanian peasant also

gained an important position. In the Lithuanian school of the 1930s, ethnological reading was the prevailing mode of interpreting Lithuanian literature. Textbook authors applied it to nearly all school reading. For instance, the first work of Lithuanian fiction, a didactic poem by Prussian Lithuanian Lutheran priest Kristijonas Donelaitis (1714–1780) titled “Metai” (The Seasons, written between 1760 and 1775 and published in 1818), teaches the reader to live according to God’s commandments and presents both positive and negative examples of Lithuanian peasant behaviour. However, Lithuanian interwar schooling paid almost no attention to the didactic or theological aspects of *The Seasons*, focusing solely on the ethnography of an 18th-century Prussian Lithuanian countryside, the types of Lithuanian peasant, and the juxtaposition of Lithuanians and foreigners.

The Lithuanian elites carried an inferiority complex because of the lack of a national epic, usually a large poetic work that recounts a nation’s origin, which many European nations possessed (including the other Baltic States Latvia and Estonia). In seeking to compensate for this deficiency, the authors of school curricula and textbooks turned folklore into a substitute for the Lithuanian national epic. According to interwar textbooks, folklore is the most authentic means of expressing the national spirit; moreover, it provides an aesthetic benchmark and sets the standards for proper language, style, and artistic composition. The folkloric ideal of beauty influenced the selection of canonical literature, meaning that school curricula favoured works characterised by a lyricism often found in folk songs and a poetic or prosaic language close to rich, vernacular dialects.

The Soviet Occupation (1940–1941, 1944–1990)

The literary scholarship of Soviet Lithuania developed an oppositional canon to counter the former normative value system of the so-called “bourgeois” period. All textbooks published before the occupation, as well as the works of all writers who had emigrated to the West, were taken out of the book market and school libraries during the Soviet era. However, the Soviet authorities refrained from radically dismantling the literary canon of the Republic of Lithuania, instead merely *adapting* it to Marxist-Leninist doctrine.

Although they never publicly admitted it, the creators of Soviet-era literary curricula for the upper grades had no choice but to rely on canon selection practices used in the Republic of Lithuania. They could not completely reject all classical works of literature that did not comply with Marxist-Leninist doctrine, because they simply would not have had enough books to replace the classics. Only some of the Catholic-minded authors (for example Šatrijos

Ragana, real name Marija Pečkauskaitė, 1877–1930) and writers who escaped Soviet occupation by fleeing to the West (for example Ignas Šeinius, real name Ignas Jurkūnas, 1889–1959) were pushed out of the canon. The hierarchy of the remaining writers was reorganised in favour of (socialist) realist literature that criticised the exploitation of peasants and labourers in feudal or capitalist society. Thus, the central position of the canon, previously occupied by Romanticist poet, patriot, and Catholic priest Maironis, was now given to his contemporary, the writer Žemaitė (real name Julija Žymantienė, 1845–1921), whose fiction examined social issues. Žemaitė's canonisation during the Soviet period was additionally inspired by the anti-clerical theme of some of her works.

Although the dissemination of atheism was an important objective in Soviet schooling, the authors of curricula lacked the resolve to purge from the school canon all writers who were priests and had dominated the school curriculum until then. Instead, Soviet textbooks and anthologies expurgated their works and interpreted them in way that avoided religious meanings in order to shield the code of values of the Soviet canon. For example, *The Seasons* by Donelaitis remained at the centre of the Soviet Lithuanian school canon because textbook authors ignored its theological ideas and concentrated only on its social critique of serfdom.

Marxist historiosophy pictures society as inevitably developing in the direction of communism; therefore, Soviet textbooks taught that literary development is in a state of permanent progress. The textbooks of that period declared Salomėja Nėris (1904–1945) and Petras Cvirka (1909–1947), who collaborated with the Bolsheviks and were canonised by the Soviet school, to have been the best Lithuanian writers *of all time*, as they were able to use the “most advanced” method of socialist realism in their work, which was not yet known to the writers of previous epochs.

The aesthetic conservatism that characterised the literary canon of the Soviet era (as well as that of the first Republic of Lithuania) meant that virtually no modernist literary works had made it into the school curriculum up until the late 20th century. Lithuanian modernist and avant-garde literature from the 1920s and 1930s never met the criteria for being included in the interwar school canon: it was not nationally or patriotically committed and had become too detached from the Lithuanian folk tradition. In terms of the Soviet school, modernist literature was barred from the canon by Marxist-Leninist doctrine as it demanded that literature express the class struggle while being intelligible to the masses. Since it was not socially engaged and required specific reading strategies to be understood, the Soviets eschewed modernist literature.

The antimodernist principles of canonical selection were also backed by a concept Soviet aesthetics had preserved since the times of classical realism,

i.e. that art is supposed to reflect the life of society. This concept laid the foundation for the ‘piercing’ method of reading that was institutionalised in the Soviet-era school and especially favoured by Stalinists: the reader ignores the text’s literary fabric, instead pushing deeper in search of an explanation for how society works (Dobrenko 1997: 140). Since Soviet ideology claimed that all social processes had already been explained by the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, writers can only convey this doctrine in a way that is either more or less correct, or more or less stirring.

School literary teaching began gradually to free itself of ideological schemes beginning with the Khrushchev Thaw (mid-1950s to the mid-1960s). Literary curricula and textbooks of the 1970s and 1980s began to concentrate more on artistic expression, the aesthetic experience of reading, and text analysis. The authorities were less concerned with controlling education, and canonical selection was not regulated as much as it had been during the Stalin era. However, throughout the whole period of Soviet occupation, the school canon would still be shaped based on how ‘correctly’ a work of literature evaluated social processes.

The Second Republic of Lithuania (since 1990)

The restructuring of the literary canon happened during the years of the Sąjūdis (1988–1992)¹⁰ and the early period of independence (1990s). The newly independent state sought to renew its ties to the interwar Republic of Lithuania. This “looking back” was also reflected in the newly reformed school (for more, see Bruzgelevičienė 2008). The authors of updated curricula and textbooks brought back almost all works that were taught in schools in the 1930s, eliminated many authors of the Soviet canon, and integrated the works of writers who were repressed or had escaped the 1944 Soviet reoccupation.

The restoration of independence brought with it attempts to liberalise (literary) education and consider the individual needs of pupils while also grounding teaching on national and civic values (Jonynienė 1990; Narkevičius 1989). This dual nature of literary education meant that the authors of the curricula and learning materials were divided into two camps, which can be referred to, with some reservation, as the conservatives and the liberals. The conservatives viewed literature first and foremost as a vault for storing national cultural values; thus, they sought a stable, equally shared canon based on

¹⁰ Founded in 1988, Sąjūdis was a political organisation that raised issues of democracy and sovereignty for Lithuania, organised meetings and events, and helped lay the foundations for restoring Lithuania’s independence.

the classical works of Lithuanian literature. The liberals, on the other hand, emphasised the significance of aesthetics and individual interpretation, focusing on the interests and abilities of the pupil; consequently, they offered to abandon any strictly regulated selection of works. The liberals were in favour of close reading, which gained prominence in the Lithuanian school at the turn of the 21st century. But shortly afterward, beginning with the 2010s, teaching switched back to a literary analysis model tailored to contextual knowledge and sociopolitical and cultural history, which the conservatives supported. Therefore, except for a brief period in the early 2000s, the learning materials for upper grades prioritised the function of transmitting national cultural heritage (Salienė and Toleikytė 2014: 114), which ensured the stability of the canon.

Speaking in general terms, the axiological foundation of the school canon in the Second Republic of Lithuania can be defined as national identity and civic spirit. Here, as well as during the interwar period, the concept of national consciousness was linked to the ideals expressed by the national movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Civic spirit referred to how literary works expressed the individual's duty to their country, the sense of patriotism, and praise of Lithuania's past.

Despite the fact that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, deemed a historic predecessor both by the First and Second Republic of Lithuania, was a multinational and multilingual state, throughout the 20th century the Lithuanian school maintained an ethnolinguistic concept of literature that favoured works written only in Lithuanian. But by relying on the historical understanding of citizenship within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (which defined citizens independently of the languages they spoke), the authors of textbooks and curricula of the late 20th and early 21st centuries gradually began to include works written in Ruthenian, Latin, and Polish by authors who were biographically related to Lithuania. The school canon was updated in the 21st century to include the work of Renaissance author Ioannes Radvanus (died after 1592), written in Latin and not featured in any previous school curriculum, which celebrates the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's rulers and their military victories. Another significant addition to the new school canon was 19th-century Romanticist Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), even though the poet's Polish works confessing his love for Lithuania were taught in the world literature course before 1990 (because they were considered part of the Polish literature corpus).

The integration of foreign-language literature into the school canon remains the most important addition to the curricula and learning materials of this period, and it modified the way history of literature was taught at schools. For instance, the folklore that the interwar school held to be the origin and aesthetic standard for Lithuanian literature (and which was also presented in

the Soviet school) was now moved to be taught in the lower classes. Authors of learning materials were now confident that Lithuanian literature can be traced back to these old works written in foreign languages, pushing the chronology of literary history to an earlier period (the first work of fictional literature in Lithuanian was written only in the mid-18th century, while foreign-language literature existed as early as the 16th century). Some literary scholars even consider the seminal poem by Radvanus titled *Radivilias* (1592) to be the Lithuanian heroic epic (Narbutas 1998: 81); thus, foreign-language literature is referenced in the continued pursuit of Lithuania's national epic.

The early 21st century saw Lithuanian society gradually embrace Western influence and begin the processes of European integration (Lithuania joined the European Union and NATO in 2004). As a result, another new trend appeared in school canon practices – an orientation toward the Western cultural tradition based on the concept of Lithuania as an integral part of Western culture. The selection of literary works was increasingly more focused on how they reference Western culture and art with old foreign-language literature strengthening the idea of Lithuania's ties to the West. For example, the Masurian-born poet and Vilnius University professor Matthias Casimirus Sarbievius (1595–1640), who wrote in Latin, is presented in textbooks as the principal example of European Baroque poetry and as one of the most influential and well-known European poets of the 17th century (Kaniškauskaitė et al. 2011: 88–110). The modern canon, too, was considerably influenced by the Western perspective. In the late 20th century, an important canonical position was given to the modernist novel *The White Shroud* (1958) by Antanas Škėma (1910–1961), a diaspora writer associated with French existentialism. The novel is set in New York, and this represents, among other things, the turn from agrarian to urban literature in the school canon.

Modernism, contrary to its position in the earlier periods under study, was eventually accepted as an important part of the narrative that constitutes literary history. Therefore, the late 20th and early 21st centuries saw the school canon appended with a previously unseen number of modernist literary works. In spite of this, many modernist works do not reflect the objectives of raising national and civic awareness, so they are still considered inferior in terms of importance to the classics of earlier eras.

Conclusions

The somewhat brief and richly documented history of literary education in Lithuanian schools provides good conditions for reconstructing the establishment of the school canon in the 1920s and 1930s and its further

transformations amid changing political regimes. The results of our study support the theoretical premise of canon research – that as dominant ideologies change, the political elites do not dismantle the school literary canons that they inherit. The canon transforms only by replacing some of its works, while others are reinterpreted according to its changed code of values.

Although all Lithuanian generations of the 20th and 21st centuries read more or less the same classics, the selection, evaluation, and interpretation of these texts (or their excerpts) varied greatly. A radical reworking of the interpretive canon occurred during the Soviet occupation. It can be argued that literary education in Soviet Lithuania had a dual impact on society. On the one hand, the dissemination of classical literary works through the education system contributed to the preservation of Lithuanian culture under the conditions of Russification. On the other hand, literature lessons were used to Sovietise pupils by conveying Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, materialist and atheistic worldviews, the identity of Soviet citizenship, and biased historical narratives. After the restoration of independence, the interwar interpretations of classical works made a comeback, yet they also underwent a gradual renewal. The interpretive canon of the few Soviet-loyal writers who remained in school curricula has also changed in the 21st century: their Marxist-Leninist interpretation was abandoned in favour of social sensibility, national identity, or other codes.

For almost the entire 20th century, the high school canon of Lithuanian literature was based on ideological criteria: pupils examined literature looking for manifestations of the national spirit (interwar school) and for a ‘correct’ reflection of the past and present life of society (Soviet school). The literary education of the late 20th and early 21st centuries began liberating itself from the constraints of a single ‘correct’ perspective and the control previously exerted over historical narratives; its aim was to take into account the needs and abilities of the pupil. However, liberal literary education, which briefly emerged at the turn of the 21st century, did not have a lasting effect on canonical selection. The last curriculum that we analysed (2011) returned to the idea that literature must first and foremost cultivate the national self-identity of pupils and foster a sense of respect and commitment to their country. Thus, throughout the period we have analysed, the task of transmitting cultural tradition dominated Lithuanian school literary education, and the selection of works to be studied was strictly regulated.

Generally, the Lithuanian school literary canon clearly favours male authors. It is true that this was the result of objective circumstances – for a long time, women were far less involved in the Lithuanian literary scene than men, and this dynamic only started to change by the mid-20th century. However,

the significantly lower canonisation of female authors could also have been due to the socially-oriented selection criteria of the canon. Women writers in Lithuania (with minor exceptions) often wrote on personal experiences and familial relations, and much less often than male writers chose themes such as love of one's homeland, political and social oppression, personal dramas in the face of historical change, etc. When works by female authors were included in the canon, the ideological, patriotic, or social motifs they employed would allow them to compete with their male counterparts. In addition, throughout the century, the school canon remained conservative in terms of genre: ego-documents, for instance, could pave the way for a richer representation of women writers in the Lithuanian school canon, but they are hardly discussed in the higher grades.

The new high school literature curriculum came into effect in Lithuania in 2023. It contains no more than eight compulsory authors; teachers now have much more freedom to choose the literary works they wish to discuss in class. Will they use this newfound opportunity and decide to alter the Lithuanian school literary canon? This is something that will only be established by future studies.

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