

# THE CANONICITY PROJECT

THE HISTORY, THEORY, ETHICS, AND  
QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LITERARY  
SPACES

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**Dr. Ken Asher** for listening to us work through more than one problem in the 15 minutes after class.

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1. How We Got Started
2. The Theory and History of Spaces
3. The Problems with Spaces
4. Our Solution to the Spaces Problem
5. Thinking Empirically About Spaces

# HOW WE GOT STARTED

Two years ago offered an opportunity to study any topic  
Chose to research genre

Some conclusions were:

1. Genre conventions are fairly arbitrary
2. Genres help us to see patterns
3. If we came up with new standards for genres, we could observe some interesting patterns

*...the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how, when it comes to genres, shifting the way one approaches constructing them can have radical implications on the subsequent analysis of a text.*

The findings from this research were published in:  
Fischer, Sean. “From Bakhtin to *Skyrim*: An Exploration of  
Chronotopes, Genre, and the Chivalric Romance.”  
*Metamorphosis* (2014).

# TWO PERSPECTIVES







# HOW DO WE GET THEM TOGETHER?



**WHY SHOULD WE GET THEM  
TOGETHER?**

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# THE THEORY AND HISTORY OF SPACES

Let's begin with two definitions:

**Literature** is an interconnected system of texts that use techniques to represent aspects of human existence.

A **literary space** is an arbitrary division inside of literature.

The first theorist to promote the idea of literary spaces was  
Aristotle in his *Poetics*:

*Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and  
Dithyrambic: poetry, and the music of the  
flute and of the lyre in most of their forms,  
are all in their general conception modes of  
imitation. They differ, however, from one:  
another in three respects, — the medium,  
the objects, the manner of mode of  
imitation, being in each case distinct.*



Following Aristotle, theorists have been creating new spaces  
and organizing texts into them

See:

- Longinus
- Giambattista Vico
- Mary Wollstonecraft
- T. S. Eliot

From a contemporary literary perspective, Eliot is the most important of these critics

T. S. Eliot becomes the champion of New Criticism

New Criticism comes to dominate Western academia by the 1950's

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot calls for a distinction between great and not-great literature  
Eliot tries to define what makes some literature great:

*Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion,  
but an escape from emotion; it is not the  
expression of personality, but an escape  
from personality.*

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# THE PROBLEMS WITH SPACES

Thinking about spaces in this manner is really problematic  
Promotes thinking in terms of what is *not* instead of what *is*  
Groups are created through exclusion

Consider Terry Eagleton's definition of **liberal humanism**:

*Liberal humanism seeks to oppose or at least modify such [conservative] ideologies with its distaste for the technocratic and its nurturing of spiritual wholeness in a hostile world.*

Consider Tobin Sieber's qualification of **violence**:

*...depriving [the classified] of rights in  
political and psychological contexts*



When we are thinking in terms of exclusion, we are more likely to fall into the trap of marginalization

Marginalization goes against the purpose of literature studies

Literature studies is meant to develop an understanding of how human experience is represented in language

Literature studies claims to be objective and in turn open to  
all potentialities

As soon as you begin grouping along *good/bad* lines, you  
open the door to ignoring/rejecting any texts you object to

The greatest danger to literary criticism is assuming one's  
beliefs are universal

Consider Eliot's claim:

*Dante and Shakespeare have poetry of  
design as well as of detail.*

Consider Literary Theory vs. Trancendental Theory

**Literary Theory** deals with the actual content/techniques in  
texts

**Trancendental Theory** uses outside contexts to explain  
texts

Thus, making up spaces without having a solid grounding in textual elements runs an extreme risk of turning into criticism based on political or ideological preference

**QUESTIONS?**

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# OUR SOLUTION TO THE SPACES PROBLEM



Begins with how we think of literature

**Literature** is an interconnected system of texts

A **literary text** is any work that uses literary techniques to represent a piece of human experience

How do we solve this problem?

*How, within the unity of the artistic construction, is the direct material presence of the work, its here and now, to be joined with the endless perspectives of its ideological meaning?*

Important to focus on the application of literary theory to  
literary criticism

When we focus on techniques, we create an understanding  
of the text

Once you have an understanding of the text, you can do  
whatever you want

Consider James Longenbach's point:

*...a poem's consolation is neither  
permanent nor complete.*

The benefit of this simple framework is that you can make much more open and interesting connections

Literary criticism is furthered when we recognize the unique/interesting interplay between texts

Allows us to recognize the systematic qualities of literature

Textual criticism allows us to comment on how individual texts affect the entire system that is literature

So how can we consider Kendrick Lamar as a great author?

## Consider *Tristram Shandy*

*I leave the affair entirely to the invoked, to inspire or to inject me according as he sees good...Gentle Spirit of sweetest humour, who erst did sit upon the easy pen of my beloved Cervantes*

*...A COCK and BULL, said Yorick - And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.*



Consider Kendrick Lamar and Dr. Dre on "Compton"

*Now everybody serenade the new faith of  
Kendrick Lamar*

*This is King Kendrick Lamar*

*King Kendrick and I meant it, my point  
intended is raw*

*Fix your lenses forensics would've told you  
Kendrick had killed it*

*I pass the blunt than pass the torch of  
course that's my decision. . .*

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# THINKING EMPIRICALLY ABOUT SPACES

Quantitative methods offer literary scholars new ways to  
evaluate hypotheses

Claims about texts and literature as a whole can now be  
tested

Let's walk through an example!

When considering the Western Canon we want to assess if there are broad stylistic differences between canonical and non-canonical works

Needed to pull texts to study, so we built a corpus from texts  
available through Project Gutenberg

The corpus was organized by year

Here, Dropbox came in a lot of handy for sharing the corpus  
files between multiple computers

All relevant information is stored in a database shared over  
Google Drive

We record:

- File Path
- Title
- Author
- Year
- Canonicity
- Type of Work
- Genre



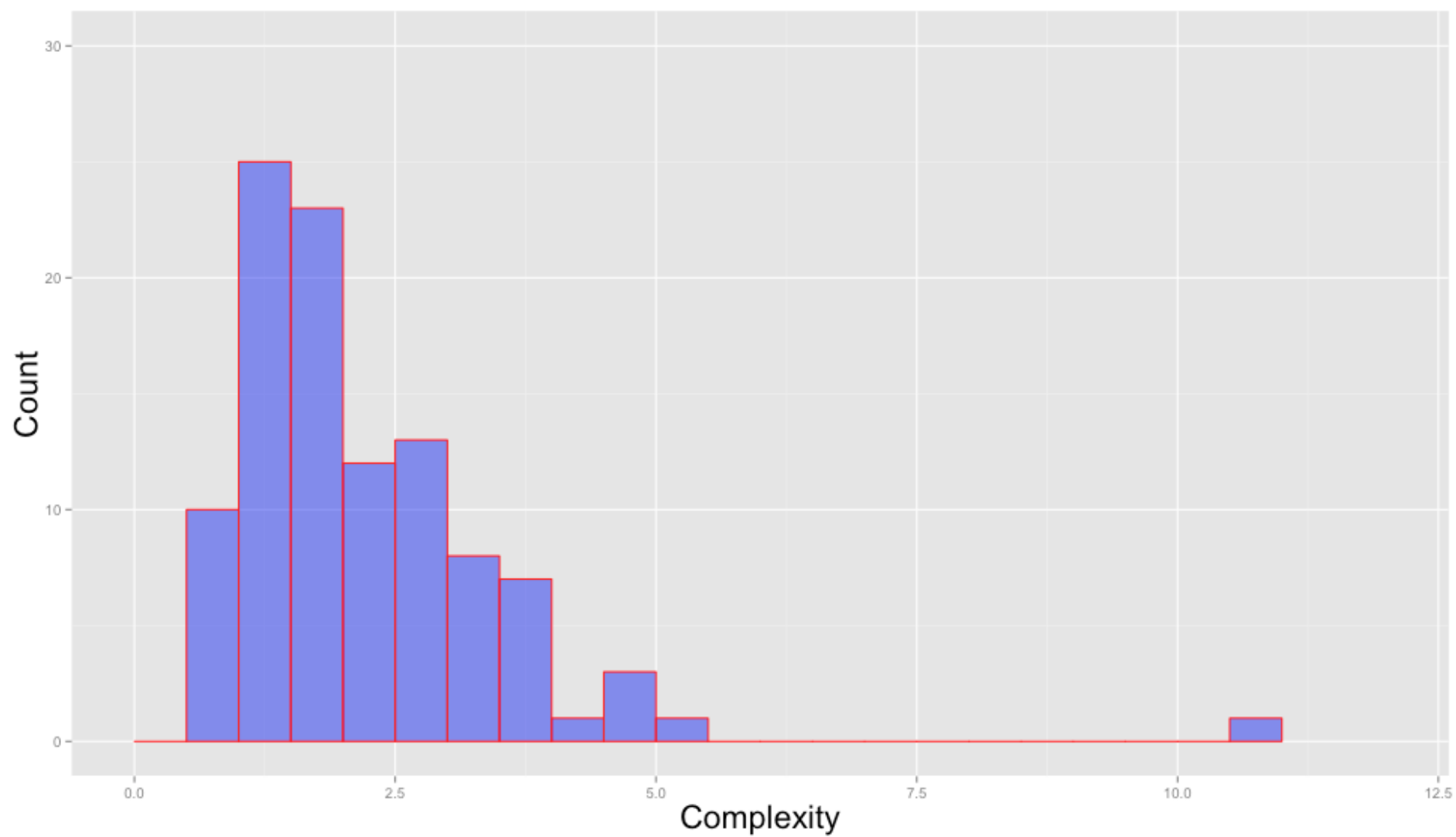
We can download the database at any time in order to load  
it into R

R is flexible enough to handle all of our analytical demands

R also allows us to save and share our work

For our analysis, we chose to consider three areas of stylistic complexity:

1. Ratio of Unique Words to Total Words
2. Median Word Length \* Median Sentence Length
3. Ratio of Non-End Punctuation to Number of Sentences



**QUESTIONS?**