THE READING ROOM REVIEW · LITERARY ANALYSIS NEWSLETTER

Built, Not Found: How "What Is an African American Classic?" Turns the Canon Into a Conversation

[Student Name] · [Course] · [Date]

Central claim: Through personal narrative, allusion and a long catalog of writers in conversation, the chapter redefines an African American classic not as a protest document or a fixed list but as a work whose craft keeps it "speaking" and whose place is secured by later writers, readers and institutions that keep choosing it.

Overview: The Chapter's Argument

The chapter reprinted in Stephanie Stokes Oliver's anthology *Black Ink* under the title "What Is an African American Classic?" was written by Henry Louis Gates Jr. as the general introduction to Penguin Classics' African American titles. It asks what makes a Black-authored text endure. The answer it develops has three parts: a classic keeps generating new meaning for new readers; it is valued for how it is written, not only for the injustice it exposes; and it belongs to a tradition of writers who answer and revise one another. Finally, the chapter admits that publishers, teachers and anthologies help decide which works survive.

Close Reading: Two Key Passages

1. "A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say"

Borrowing Italo Calvino's definition (Gates [page]), the chapter shifts the test of a classic from age or prestige to continued life. In context, this matters because African American texts were often read narrowly, as evidence of oppression rather than as literature. If a classic is a book that keeps speaking, then a slave narrative or a Harlem Renaissance novel qualifies not because it is old or historically important, but because readers keep finding new meanings in it. The quotation supports the chapter's argument by placing Black writers inside a universal standard instead of a separate category.

2. "Writers are read for how they write, not what they write about"

This sentence (Gates [page]) complicates a long tradition that valued Black literature mainly as a weapon against racism. The chapter acknowledges that protest writing was necessary and honors Frederick Douglass, yet it warns that writing focused only on its cause can become a historical record rather than art. By insisting on craft, the chapter raises the bar: a classic must earn its place through language, form and imagination. This complicates the argument productively, because it implies that some important political texts may not become classics, while some quieter, formally daring works will.

> "These texts reveal the human universal through the African American particular." (Gates [page])

The Writer's Choices

Personal narrative

The chapter opens with memory rather than theory: a first-grade school pageant in which children dressed as penguins, and a moment at age fifteen when a priest at a church camp handed the young Gates a book by James Baldwin. These stories make the abstract question of the canon personal. They show that a classic becomes one, in part, because a specific reader meets it at the right time, often through an adult who chooses to put it in his hands.

Allusion and a catalog of voices

The chapter quotes or names dozens of writers, from Calvino, Twain and Faulkner to Equiano, Douglass, Du Bois, Hurston, Ellison and Morrison. The catalog does rhetorical work. Placing Black writers beside Shakespeare and Woolf argues for equal standing without stating it outright, and tracing the "talking book" trope from Equiano to Douglass shows "signifying," writers repeating and revising one another. The effect on readers is to see the books not as separate titles but as a conversation they can join.

Metaphor

Calling racism "the dragon" that Black writers were expected to slay frames protest literature as heroic but also as a burden: if writers are only dragon-slayers, their art is defined

by their enemy. The metaphor helps the chapter argue for freedom of subject and style.

Who Decides What Becomes a Classic?

The chapter is candid that classics are made, not simply discovered. It treats the Penguin Classics series itself as a canon-defining institution, notes that classroom adoption determines which titles stay in print and observes that every anthology and syllabus contains an implicit definition of what an educated person should read. It also recalls that Black writers and women struggled to win places in anthologies and courses. My interpretation is that the chapter distributes responsibility among three groups. **Writers** create classics by signifying on earlier texts and keeping them alive in new work; **readers**, especially teachers and mentors like the priest who handed over Baldwin, create classics by passing books on; and **institutions** such as publishers, schools and testing systems decide what is affordable, assigned and remembered. The danger, which the chapter hints at in criticizing test-driven teaching, is that institutions can silence works as easily as they can elevate them.

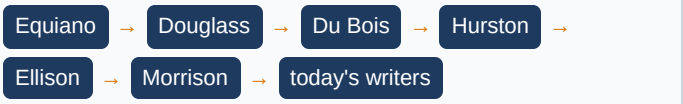


Figure 1. A tradition of "signifying": each writer revises tropes and metaphors from earlier texts, such as the "talking book" and double consciousness. Original design by the author, based on the chapter's examples.

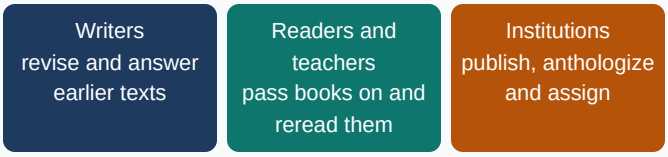


Figure 2. Three forces that make a classic in the chapter's account. Original design by the author.

Conclusion: A Canon That Keeps Talking

"What Is an African American Classic?" answers its own question by redefining the classic as a living conversation: works that keep speaking, are read for their artistry and endure because writers, readers and institutions keep choosing them. The chapter's mix of memoir, allusion and metaphor models the very process it describes, inviting readers into a tradition rather than lecturing them about one. The lingering question is ours: if classics are built by the choices of readers and institutions, which Black writers being published now will future readers keep talking to, and what will we do to make sure they are not left out?

Works Cited

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "What Is an African American Classic?" *Black Ink: Literary Legends on the Peril, Power, and Pleasure of Reading and Writing*, edited by Stephanie Stokes Oliver, 37 Ink/Atria Books, 2018, pp. [page range].

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Henry Louis Gates Jr. on What Makes a 'Classic' African American Text." *Literary Hub*, 31 Jan. 2023, lithub.com/henry-louis-gates-jr-on-what-makes-a-classic-african-american-text.