

Outline for The Canon and Literature

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Introduction

- Declining interest in literature
- Students no longer respect our field of study
- Lost our credibility in terms of having a discipline with standards of judgements and in terms of having any practical value
- Need to redefine both the Canon and the criteria used to judge and create it
- Need to make sure that the revised Canon is not a reactionary, revisionist one, but one that truly represents what is best in Western and American Literature and English Literature

Post-Modernism and Cultural Studies' effect on Literature

- Who Killed Homer, V.D. Hanson: Classical Studies as a comparative example
- Deconstruction—undermined the notion of universal values in literature; essentially a negative movement
- Cultural Studies: also attacked the Canon as being sexist and racist and imperial; while the newly created departments do offer literature classes, they are not necessarily taught by literary experts and the focus is not on literature per se, but upon class, race, and gender. This does not promote literature as a value.
- While this was a well intentioned correction in the curriculum, which for too long had ignored women and minorities, it threw out much of what was good. It also has led to a Balkanization of literary studies—with various departments outside of English and Comparative Literature Departments carving out their own territory.

What IS literature

- Expanding notion of Text to include almost any form of communication from comic books to cartoons, to movies to advertising
- Plato's concept of the Forms; the bottom line is if you cannot define something, you don't know what you are talking about; and if you don't know what you are talking about, you have no credibility
- Why study literature instead of film? Instead of Com Arts? Instead of Women's Studies? Instead of Cultural Studies?

The Concept of the Canon

- Agreed upon texts that are universal
- Texts that participate in a dialogue about universal questions of human nature and society and the individual.
- Texts that add something unique and interesting to that dialogue
- Texts that stylistically are superior or unique
- The Canon is fluid and can adapt and grow

Why a Canon?

- Defines the field of study
- Provides a common, cultural language or framework
- Appreciation for the cultural accomplishment of the past
- Providing a seed bed for the cultural achievements of the future. New works of great importance are not created in a vacuum; they are usually a response to preceding generations. Without this seedbed literature becomes solopsistic

Problems to defining a Canon

- Today's students, especially community college students, do not want to “work” hard or read long works
- How to incorporate works by women and minorities without erasing the past tradition?
- If a Canon represents the values of a civilization, how can a civilization as diverse as ours have a Canon? Is there anything that we hold universal any long?

Common Values?

- Universal human rights
- Gender equality
- Liberty and individual choice
- Inclusive Multi-culturalism
- Religious Pluralism
- Equal opportunity for all

What would a Canon Look Like?

- Some of the old Canon that evoke those Modern Common Values: Moby Dick; Moliere; Shakespeare;
- Some new female classics like Woolf, Austen, Mary Shelley
- Some modern, multi-cultural texts
- Some ancient, foreign texts that were overlooked in the West