

## Canon Fodder

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The literary canon, most commonly understood as, collectively, those books typically taught in our nation's schools and universities (and, more importantly, those texts generally considered *worthy* of scholarly attention) has been a source of great debate in recent years, as many critics, scholars and educators begin to ponder whether a critical re-evaluation of the accepted standards for canonical inclusion might not be in order. The phrase "literary canon" itself refers typically to quote-unquote "good books," yet it is precisely this question of what constitutes a "good book" that many within the halls of academia have been forced to consider.

Furthermore, who decides upon this criteria and what are their motives for doing so, for electing to include some texts while excluding others? Quite simply, who selects the canon -- what *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines as "a basis for judgement; a standard or criterion" for those texts that will become "officially accepted" by "an established principle"? In this paper, I hope to examine the debate over canon reform -- looking first at the benefits espoused by many critics, contrasting these with the possible drawbacks envisioned by others, and then finally demonstrating why these potential drawbacks are ultimately outweighed by the need for canonical reform and literary re-evaluation.

Until only recently, the canon has remained a court ruled predominantly, if not exclusively, by the proverbial "dead white males" of literature -- ranging from the Judeo-Christian Bible to Shakespeare and Socrates to Milton and Mark Twain, but still relatively exclusive to texts within Anglo-Saxon, Western literature. While these authors and texts certainly merit our continued critical examination, many argue that they should not be our sole concern or subject of study, that such a narrow view cannot, ultimately, be truly reflective of literature as a whole. The canon should not be seen as a means of silencing those who are otherwise powerless, of denying those authors who fall outside this narrow Anglo-centric framework a forum for their respective voices (Deena, 57-58). Rather, this somewhat myopic view should be replaced with a much broader, multicultural understanding of literature. Only then, these critics claim, when all voices are allowed to be heard and examined on their own individual merits, can literature truly grow, rather than stagnate; only then can our canon truly be called canonical.

For the sake of convenience, if nothing else, these critics in favor of change have often been dubbed "pluralists" because of their desire to introduce a polyphony -- a plurality -- of voices into the literary chorus. The very nature of literature, they claim -- what it is, and who is given the power to define it -- should itself, then, be open to repeated debate and question in a contemporary classroom. Only by examining the considerable benefits of a diverse canon, one that reflects a broad spectrum of writers of all races, creeds and genders, and by contrasting these with the drawbacks of the more traditional system, wherein the "dead white males" have the first and final word, can we hope to understand precisely why the canon ought to be expanded to integrate a vast assortment of writers who have largely been ignored up to this point. Only then can we hope to enter into what critic Keith Gilyard calls "a legacy of healing" and a new understanding of the texts we read (Gilyard, 99).

Indeed, it is Gilyard who asserts that many traditionalists, so-called "literary purists," who argue against alterations and additions to the existing literary canon, are waging an ultimately meaningless war; the less complex and less multicultural era they often seem to so desire is, at its heart, a myth. "It is all before us now," writes Gilyard. "There is a past to draw upon but not to duplicate. What of the golden age of American education when all was fine? Forget it. It never happened" (Gilyard, 86). The literature of African Americans, to use Gilyard's own example, is not a new phenomenon that has suddenly cropped up merely to befuddle scholars and make choosing reading selections more difficult for educators. It is, rather, part of our literary tradition, but a part that has largely gone ignored by those who are in power, those who compile lists of "good books" and decide which books enter into the canon and which are deemed "unworthy".

As Gilyard and others state, however, this power has often been misappropriated, used not necessarily to celebrate great works of literature -- the one and only function of any canon -- but to relegate to the sidelines those authors who do not "fit in," to bring about conformity, which is indeed antithetical to the principles literature claims to uphold. If we agree with George Orwell that all writing is political, we must also acknowledge that the criticism and scholarly debates that erupt after the fact are also often political, and often overtly so (Orwell, 28). We must, as Katherine Arens and Elizabeth M. Richmond-Garza suggest in *The Canon of Theory: Report on an Institutional Case*, "begin to acknowledge unpaid debts that will make literary and cultural studies even more international than they have been to date" (Arens & Richmond-Garza, 400).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this seemingly endless, ongoing debate, however -- and certainly one of the more surprising -- is that those who argue *against* canonical reform typically do *not* assert that the canon is anything but exclusive. Many who argue against the creation of a multicultural collection of texts do not do so simply out of a reactionary fear of change, but do instead present a strong (although I personally believe ultimately unconvincing) argument. Excluding a work from the canon is not, they claim, an act of suppression, but rather one of either necessity or critical choice and prerogative.

The main debate, then, has been not so much over whether the canon is truly exclusive, but whether this exclusivity should be eradicated -- whether it is, fact, a *bad* thing, and whether authors and texts generally relegated to the sidelines or previously ignored by educators and scholars should be admitted to the collective. What, these traditionalist critics wonder, is to be gained from such changes? Indeed, as critic James Guillory writes:

"...clearly a 'representative' canon does not redress the effects of social exclusion, or lack of representation, either within or without the university.... But in construing the process of canon formation as an exclusionary process essentially the same as the exclusion of socially defined minorities from power, the strategy of opening the canon aims to reconstruct it as a true image (a true representation) of social diversity....the liberal pluralist critique fails to consider what other effects, even political effects, the canon may have at its institutional site" (Guillory, 62).

Many traditionalists, then, argue that alterations to the already existing canon would, at best, prove ultimately fruitless and, at worst, would merely erupt further debate and unrest among readers, that such "true representation" is perhaps an admirable, but ultimately unattainable, goal. Admitting every text is both infeasible and unwise, an exercise in futility.

Therefore, while we may wish to introduce a greater level of diversity to the canon and to give each text the scholarly attention it may deserve, many critics assert that this is, ultimately, impractical and impossible. "If politics is in some degree essentially about the distribution of power," writes Gregory S. Jay, "and if knowledge about the powerless tends to be biased or simply left out, then redressing the imbalance will be seen by some as a 'political' rather than an 'academic' matter" (Jay, 65). Those in favor of sweeping canonical reform view this reform, generally, as an absolutely necessary step, a means of making amends for the years these voices and texts have been ignored.

However, even James C. Hall, an experienced educator and a major proponent of canonical reform, has been forced to wonder "can we honestly say that the sum of our reconstructive, deconstructive, multiculturalist, feminist, and democratist efforts should be another canon, however new, however provocative?" (Hall, 3). While the appreciation of new or *newfound* works is certainly commendable, should these works be included on an official list, a class syllabus of texts students *must* read? What is to be gained from such changes? What, on the other hand, is to be lost? As Jay points out, often ignored by many pluralists is that "teachers cannot help the fact that they inherit schools, textbooks, and ideas that reflect the biases of the past" (Jay, 65). While we should indeed attempt to move beyond these biases by examining a broader spectrum of texts, we should not assume that such changes can be made overnight. Nor, in fact, should we assume that all such changes are entirely beneficial. Some books, these traditionalist critics might very well argue, *should* be excluded.

The canon, by its very nature, *must* be finite; we cannot, simply, read everything or discuss all works on the same level. Some texts will, inevitably, receive more critical examination than others; some, for better or worse -- out of bias of the reader, or critic, or out of "quiet, but nonetheless effective benign neglect" -- will be ignored (McCrea, 11). The sheer volume of texts prohibits a fully comprehensive study. "In a society composed of countless subgroups with distinct histories and identities," wonders Pete Smagorinsky and others, "how can we include the voices and experiences of all or most of our various subcultures?" (Smagorinsky, 50) The answer, many so-called purists argue, is that we cannot. While we can recognize that important works of literature often fall outside the canon, we should not be forced to introduce such works into this collection of "good books" merely to appease agenda of political correctness.

For indeed, while the impulse toward diversity should be admired in educators and students alike, a totally representative canon, giving equal weight in equal measure to all groups and subgroups, *is* admittedly impossible. We must also be wary of including works on class syllabi and reading lists -- and, therefore, in the canon itself -- merely as a type of literary affirmative action, a means of reaching a certain quota of texts, as merely an extension of political correctness. Smagorinsky writes:

"I believe as earnestly as anyone that we need to share and empathize with the experiences of our various minority groups. I think, however, that the goal of hearing multicultural voices in a truly representative way is impossible, and that we are then left with the problem of making decisions about which *black* books to read, which *Latino* books and so on....In discussing a James Guillory writes *new canon*, therefore, we must broaden our vision beyond the idea that the books themselves constitute some sort of prescription for new values and look more carefully at the constructive nature of the reading process and the ways in which classroom processes and the instructional context influence readers' construction of texts" (Smagorinsky, 62-63).

In our quest for diversity, we must not lose sight of the fact that true diversity, of the sort advocated by many pluralists -- where all groups and all texts receive the same consideration and esteem -- is ultimately impossible in our classrooms today.

What, then, can be done and, perhaps more importantly, why is the argument against any and all canonical reform ultimately unconvincing? Why must we find a middle ground between these two sides? True diversity within our literature, reflecting that of modern society, may indeed be unattainable, yet it remains a truly admirable goal. We must, as the pluralists argue, continue to explore and accept change in the canon, for only with change comes growth. We must, however, also acknowledge the truth within the purist argument: a canon free of bias and including all works, however ideal it may appear, cannot be obtained. Nor can such reform undo the wrongs of the past. Reading Toni Morrison or Richard Wright or W.E.B. DuBois, for example, will not unshackle the chains of slavery. Indeed, these texts only provide one aspect of "black culture," one view of a greater whole. We risk yet another form of marginalization if we seek to include works merely because they have been written by minorities; this is little more than literary ghettoizing. Reading the works of minorities and women will not undo the years their words have remained shrouded in silence. We must not simply accept these works, then -- we must critically examine them.

We must also, therefore, view these critical changes as academic, rather than political actions; we must strive to improve and expand the literary canon not because some authors have been excluded or denied a voice and these are wrongs which must be redressed, but simply because these voices are worth hearing. As our world continues to shrink and our lives become less insular, less isolated from diversity on a daily basis, we cannot afford to adopt anything less than an equally diverse literary canon. We must allow ourselves to hear all the voices or we will not understand the world in which we live.

Yet, many purists may argue, one simple fact remains: we simply cannot read everything. Perhaps, though, as author Harold Bloom suggests, the only question ultimately worth asking is what do we *want* to read? (Bloom, 15) Whether we adopt a multicultural or traditionalist view -- whether we argue that the exclusion of certain texts is a political decision based on ethnic, racial or gender bias or is merely the

inevitable result of "too many books, not enough time" -- the one question we must continue to ask ourselves, must continue to pose in classrooms and on our own, is *what do we want to read?* Where do we, as individual readers and scholars, want to explore? What avenues do we wish to take and what texts do we wish to celebrate or even condemn? What works would *we* add to the canon, were we given the option -- and which works would *we* exclude? Only by individually answering these questions, by critically examining our literary past and present, can we hope to expand our understanding of literature as a whole. Adding a text to a list of "good books" is meaningless without attempting to understand why it belongs there (or does not).

We must not, of course, exclude works from our new canon merely *because* they are oriented toward "dead white male" or Anglo-centric, written by authors who have not recognized diversity. We must accept these works and judge them on their own merits, just as we judge the texts that do celebrate this diversity -- texts from women, African Americans, other minority groups -- simply because they themselves are part of that diversity, that chorus. We must acknowledge the truth in both the pluralist and traditionalist viewpoints: we cannot read everything, but we should understand *why* we include or exclude certain texts.

There are no simple solutions available, however, no immediate answer to the question of what constitutes a "good book" or which of these should enter the canon. "If I had a solution to the problem..." writes Smagorinsky, "then I would likely be President of the United Nations rather than an assistant professor of education" (Smagorinsky, 62). We cannot, however, simply ignore the importance of this debate, as it is increasingly difficult to undertake *any* discussion of an area or movement of literature without also discussing those works reacting *against* it, those works that have been excluded. Indeed, one can rarely examine the literary works enumerated on a class syllabus without debating what other works could (or should) also be listed, or which should be removed. Ultimately, however, I believe that it is the debate itself -- the open questioning of literary standards long since accepted -- that will prove the most beneficial to us as readers.

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