

Confined to the Cannon: An Existentialist View of Restricted Imagination in American Adult English Literature Classrooms

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Abstract

This essay highlights the controversial educational issue of the literary cannon debate within adult English literature education. The debate over the cannon has dominated professional and literary critics in the field for decades and continues to do so in the current day. This essay questions the strong idealization of traditional literary works over more contemporary works from an Existentialist's perspective. Moreover, it advocates how English literature instructors are robotically dehumanized by authoritative literary society and should be granted the freedom to rebel against the traditional literary cannon without fear of minimizing the students' level of literary sophistication. In addition, this essay argues that the traditional works within the literary cannon tend to limit and restrict the imagination, ultimately failing to effectively reflect the social, cultural, and psychological norms of modern-day society.

Keywords: English; Existentialist; Confined; Adult; Cannon; Debate; Literary; Freedom; Imagination; Traditional; Literature

1. Introduction

For generations, English literature instructors across the country have been forced into a restricted, suppressed curriculum idealizing only the classical, epic works of American and British literature such as William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, William Blake, and many other authors who are regarded as the corner stones of the literary cannon. Professional English instructors and students are trained that these traditional literary authors are the embodiment of literary sophistication and value within the literary canon and all authors outside of this traditional cannon of American and British literature are frowned upon, ultimately labeled as “fluff” within the sophisticated literary circle. This educational issue is very controversial among literary educators and tends to be an exhausted debate longing for an effective solution.

2. Academic Freedom in Literary Instruction

From an Existentialist's perspective, instructors and students should have the freedom of choice to cast all arbitrary academic regulations aside and exist within the literary field as independent thinkers detached from confined thinking and learning. They should be allowed to study a wide range of literature that encompasses and evokes diverse levels of emotion and imagination. Moreover, instructors and students should be able to openly embrace and study the wide range of highly accomplished female authors that represents a significant portion of the modern-day literary cannon: As far as the cannon of English literature is concerned, women authors fared better in the earlier literary histories than in the later ones.

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Cibber in 1753 included thirteen, and due to the fact that he was, above all, out for interesting life stories, he gave no fewer than seven of them (Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley, Elizabeth Thomas, Elizabeth Rowe, Catherine Cockburn and Laetitia Pilkington) between ten and twenty pages of space – as much as Chaucer, Spencer and Ben Johnson. (Grabes, 2004, p. 37)

In this passage, Herbert Grabes is expressing the level of gender discrimination within the traditional literary canon, which ultimately paints a very suppressive, unrealistic image of author diversity in modern day society. Although women authors of literature were marginally prominent during early literary periods, the number does not compare to that of traditional male authors within the canon such as Chaucer, Spencer, and Ben Johnson. Instructors should have the freedom to expose students to a literary curriculum that presents an equal representation of gender in an effort to heighten their awareness of the educational advancement, as well as the accomplishments of women within the rhetorical, and literary spectrum. Moreover, instructors should not be bound by conventional regulations regarding educational value and idealization of the canon. For example, from an Existential perspective, I feel that literature written by female contemporary author Danielle Steele possesses an equal capability to her more traditional male literary counterparts within the literary cannon in regard to evoking high levels of emotion, and imagination. More importantly to note, a contemporary author such as Danielle Steele could possibly evoke a much deeper level of emotion and imagination within a student due to her “contemporary” representation of culture, which is frequently lacking within more traditional, academic works within the literary canon: It is also important to consider how teachers can help readers discover the literature of other generations. Understanding how readers apprehend the past, when it can only be grasped through the limited perspective of the present, is a complex issue. How readers, saturated in early 21st-century culture, can derive pleasure from texts produced trans- historically when we cannot make our journey into the past without taking the present with us requires careful consideration because the sort of experience that different readers have in the present varies so widely. (Pike, 2003, p. 359)

In this passage, Pike challenges us to acknowledge how as students read the conventional works of the canon, they are charged with the task of relating their contemporary cultural and social norms to oftentimes outdated norms displayed within works of the canon. This questions how readers so engulfed in contemporary thinking and social structures are ultimately gaining any relative insight from texts that are so thoroughly grounded within views and social norms of the past. What pike is suggesting here is that readers need the luxury of engaging in a text without the difficult burden of transferring ideas of the present into the past in an effort to gain some form of enjoyment, or comprehension from the given text. Moreover, readers should have the option of enjoying and appreciating a piece of literature for its meaning and relevance to the present. They should be able to engage the innermost imagination as it naturally exists in the present without feeling obligated to transform it to fit into a previous realm of existence. Green (1995) states in her book entitled *Releasing the Imagination* that “we have to hold in mind that the modern world is an administered world structured by all sorts of official languages. More often than not, they are the languages of domination, entitlement, and power; and there are terrible silences where ordinary human speech ought to be audible, silences our pedagogies ought somehow to repair” (p. 47). In this passage, Maxine Green is challenging us to realize how the world around us is nothing more than an environment of rigid regulations that powerfully suppresses the imagination and innermost creativity of the soul. Ultimately in many instances, our freedom to exist in the world of academia detached from robotic, stagnant levels of intellectual suppression has been stripped from us in exchange for an authoritative, “administered” academic environment.

3. An Existentialist View

Looking at this educational issue through existentialist’s lens, I strongly feel that as professionals within the field of literature education, we must challenge ourselves to find and develop an “independent” “choice driven” manner of thinking. Moreover, we must begin to display a confident acknowledgement for this new found independence regardless of conservative criticism from the “conventional” literary circle. Literary professionals within the conventional literary circle must progress beyond the constraints of the conventional literary canon and allow both instructors and students to freely exist in the moment of their choice to pursue the study of literature, to engage their imagination, and embrace a broad spectrum of intellectual and scholarly perspectives within a variety of literary genres. The conventional canon is not a scientific answer to ultimate literary sophistication and enlightenment, nor does it universally relate to all cultural or aesthetic interests.

4. Intellectual Engagement within a Diverse Society of Thinkers

In today's diverse society, one should have the freedom to engage in texts that are closely compatible with a broad spectrum of cultures, educational attainment, and scholarly interests. This is a continuous challenge for many English literature instructors due to the fact that most are frequently divided between loyalty to the traditional anthology and contemporary, culturally diverse texts, which tend to better reflect the modern-day intellectual diversity that dominates today's classroom:

In an effort to please everyone, some instructors may attempt to "cover" the classics, while at the same time incorporating works by women and non-white writers into their syllabi, using a standard anthology and then supplementing it with extra readings [. . .] This results in "overstuffed" courses [. . .] John Sandman's response to "overstuffed" courses is to toss out traditional anthologies in favor of single author collections, which allows instructors to examine fewer authors in greater depth. (Mujica, 1997 p. 210)

Barbara Mujica makes an excellent point here regarding the literature instructor's continuous efforts to please all cultural categories in the classroom with a single anthology. From an Existentialists' view, eliminating the anthology and focusing on "single author texts" is a decision that would indeed create a great deal of controversy within the literary community. This is a necessary consequence to suffer that would ultimately yield the reward of an enhanced contemporary literature education for today's contemporary student. Although elimination of the anthology may not seem rational, it would ultimately enable literature instructors to evenly target the diverse cultures and aesthetic interests in the classroom: Bacon (1993) states that "upholders of the traditional canon such as Allan Bloom, Harry Levin, E. D. Hirsh, Jeff Smith, and George F. Will support the teaching of an established body of knowledge, garnered from what Bloom calls the greatest texts" (p. 502). From an Existentialist's view, this is exactly the type of bias, restrictive educational view that has suppressed the individuality and free will within instructors, ultimately deadening their innate, natural teacher instinct to teach literature based on choice, rather than law.

A specific contemporary and controversial example of how literature education has restricted the free will of instructors and students is the strong criticism of the Harry Potter book series, authored by contemporary author Victoria Rowling. This book series presents themes and ideas of mystery, adventure, horror, and power, which are very intriguing to the intellect and curiosity of today's elementary and middle school students. It also sparked nationwide popularity due to its contemporary elements of plot and characters, yet it has been "otherized" from joining the "conventional" literary canon due to the fact that it is not recognized as being among the "classics" in the eyes of traditional literary critics. This is a clear example of a conservative attempt to scientifically define what is educationally rational, appropriate, and intellectually valuable within the realm of literature education. Robbins (1994) states that "it is time [. . .] for 'progressive' teachers to take back the humanities curriculum – all of it – as an integrated program of study" (p. 372). The word "integrated" is key in Robbins' statement here as "non-integration" of contemporary and marginal pieces of literature is what has created such a lack of diversity among literature within the literature classroom.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, the authoritative figures of English literature education must begin to focus on how literature is a means of escape for the reader and an opportunity to engage the intellectual, and aesthetic senses on multifaceted levels. Moreover, literature is a means through which many are able to exist in this world independently, freely, and find unique perspective and meaning in life free from the dominating, suppressive, dictating entities of society. Overall, students and instructors must be granted the choice to study a mixture of classic and contemporary literary works in an effort to diversify intellect, imagination, and general respect for the art of writing as a whole. Whether a literary work is deemed intellectually or aesthetically valuable should be determined by the intellectual curiosity of the individual, rather than the constrictive nature of conservative literary society. For decades, instructors have been in a sense dehumanized and forced to conform to the robotic teaching styles of the traditional canon. Literary beauty and interpretation are "subjective," rather than "objective." Ultimately, the imagination should be allowed to grow and extend as far beyond the "conventional" canon as one's educational passion desires.

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