

# *The Canon: Critics and Defenders*

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## **What is the Canon?**

- The canon is defined as: the “select” group of literary works that transcend time and culture to be almost universally regarded as ‘great’ works.
- Professor George Landow writes, “Belonging to the canon confers status, social, political, economic, aesthetic, none of which can easily be extricated from the others. Belonging to the canon is a guarantee of quality, and that guarantee of high aesthetic quality serves as a promise, a contract, that announces to the viewer, “Here is something to be enjoyed as an aesthetic object. Complex, difficult, privileged, the object before you has been winnowed by the sensitive few and the not-so-sensitive many, and it will repay your attention. You will receive pleasure; at least you're supposed to, and if you don't, well, perhaps there's something off with your apparatus.” Such an announcement of status by the poem, painting, or building, sonata, or dance that has appeared ensconced within a canon serves a powerful separating purpose: it immediately stands forth, different, better, to be valued, loved, enjoyed. It is the wheat winnowed from the chaff, the rare survivor, and it has all the privileges of such survival.”

## **Defense of the Traditional—Arguments for the Canon**

### **Two Critical Works**

- E.D. Hirsch – Closing of the American Mind
- Harold Bloom – The Western Canon – 3000 Books

### **Arguments for the Canon**

1. The canon is so large we can't add.
2. The Canon Does Evolve. Over time, works of merit are added to “the list”. It takes time to evaluate the value of works of literature—don't be impatient.
3. Literature should be evaluated for merit, not politics. In other words, we ought to read a poem because it is good, not because it talks about the Hispanic-American experience.
4. Only strength should join strength.
5. Must reject the School of Resentment. According to Bloom, “...*the expansion of the Canon has meant the destruction of the Canon, since what is being taught includes by no means the best writers who happen to be women, African, Hispanic, or Asian, but rather the writers who offer little but the resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity.*”
6. We do have the ability to make judgments about the aesthetic value of a work of art. To suggest that we cannot would be to suggest that we cannot evaluate anything. Aesthetic relativism assumes humans cannot have objective standards of taste.
7. Perhaps the best argument: We don't have time to waste on bad books. A lifetime of reading will not allow us to even cover all of the Canon; why would we waste time on books that are not the equal of canonical works?

*Harold Bloom: We need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers. The others, who are amenable to politicized curriculum, can be abandoned to it.”*

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## ***Problems with the Canon***

- Exclusion of minority and female voices. The canon has been called a collection of the best writing done by “dead white males”. Literature from the dominant culture is given privilege. **Dead White European Males**
- Non-controversial works. The canon tends to exclude works that are dangerous, radical, and different than the views of the status quo. How many of you have heard of John Reed, Kenneth Fearing, Walter Lowenfels? How about Steinbeck, Hemmingway?
- Ideological Conformity. Texts that are included in the canon may not have been selected because they were ‘the best’, but because they conformed/created/reinforced a particular ideological perspective.
  - Raymond Dolle argues: "Students must realize that a canonical text may be included not because of its eternal beauty and truth or because it represents the best that has been thought and said, but rather because it serves someone's political or ideological interests."
- Tokenism. Standard anthologies select the “best” of different racial groups to represent the whole. According to the critic Ishmael Reed, this is almost worse than no representation. Not only are minority groups under-represented, they are “given” some token representation by the groups that oppress them.
- Assumption of White “Universality”. Writing about one’s minority group is seen as less valuable, less universal. Toni Morrison as a writer of white novels?
- Limited View of the World. Students and teachers have been confined to an intellectual cave, with a narrow view. William Oandasan calls American education, the “Ogre with One Eye”
  - According to Reed, “In North America there is a multiverse of literatures, but so far our view has been limited to one.”
- Dangerous Isolation. Internal focus that ignores other cultures is uniquely dangerous in the current world.
- How the Canon is Formed
  - Power Relationships
  - Politics-for example, in the US, Texas and California dominate the market for textbooks, with the result often being textbooks that adhere to their standards
  - Tradition
  - Bias?