

Undisciplining The Victorian Classroom

Peer-Reviewed Syllabus

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SYLLABUS CANON FODDER: WHAT SHOULD WE READ?

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

In recent years, student activists across the country have brought renewed focus to the question of the literature syllabus. Calls to diversify the literature curriculum have met both success and resistance, in academic departments and the national media. But they have also raised more fundamental questions about our engagement with literature. What constitutes a “great book”? Should the “canon” of major literature be adjusted or expanded, or is the idea of canonicity itself a problem? Are “counter-canon” empowering or problematically hierarchical—or both? What are the criteria by which we should decide what to read and teach? When and how should we engage texts whose values—or the values of whose authors—we find abhorrent? Are there books everybody should read? Are there books that should be read no longer? This course both participates in and provides a pre-history to these conversations. We will read important theoretical critiques and defenses of literary canon alongside literary works, both “canonical” and “non-canonical,” that either engage with these questions themselves or have been important objects of debate. We will pay particular attention to the relationships between canon and gender, race, colonialism, and national identity.

READING SCHEDULE

MODULE I: WHAT IS LITERARY CANON?

Note: This module provides students with a working understanding of the concept of literary canon and that concept's history, while foregrounding the tensions raised by two core “problems” of canon: the problem of representation (canonicity's role in the uneven distribution of prestige among communities and demographics) and the problem of choice (one cannot read everything)

Meeting #1

- Departmental Major Requirements
- Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck”

Meeting #2

- Alison Flood, “Yale English students call for end of focus on white male writers,” *The Guardian*, 1 June 2016
- Colleen Flaherty, “Diversifying a Classic Humanities Course,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 12 April 2018
- Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (selection)
- Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”
- Lucille Clifton, “Study the Masters”

Meeting #3

- Rachel Donadio, “Revisiting the Canon Wars,” *The New York Times*, 16 September 2007
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (selection)

Meeting #4

- Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered* (selection)
- Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive* (selection)
- L.D. Burnett, “On Lamentations for a Lost Canon,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 May, 2016

MODULE II: WHOSE CANON?

Note: This module considers the implications of representation in or exclusion from canon for writers, readers, and other participants in culture. It emphasizes how broader social inequalities can be mirrored in and reinforced by literary canon, and asks whether, conversely, adjusting curricula and definitions of “great” literature might have impact on those social forces.

Meeting #5

- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

Meeting #6

- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (selection)
- Phillis Wheatley, “To His Excellency General Washington”
- Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”

Meeting #7

- Derek Walcott, “The Schooner *Flight*”
- Kamau Brathwaite, “History of the Voice”

Meeting #8

- Gloria Anzaldúa, “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To Third World Women Writers”
- Nellie Wong, “In Search of the Self As Hero”
- Rebecca Solnit, “Men Explain Lolita to Me”

MODULE III: HOW IS CANON USED?

Note: This module considers the conscious construction of literary canonicity. It asks what cultural and political functions the promulgation of a canon might have and takes up the question of the “counter-canon,” attending to the potential value and risks of different efforts to construct—or reject—the notion of a “canon of our own.”

Meeting #9

- Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”
- Langston Hughes, “Theme For English B”
- James Weldon Johnson, “O Black and Unknown Bards”
- Elizabeth Alexander, “The Black Poet as Canon Maker”
- Kimberly Connor, “Saving the Text: An Interview with Deborah E. McDowell, Editor of the Beacon Press ‘Black Women Writers Series’”

Meeting #10

- T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”
- T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land”
- H.J. Jackson, *Those Who Write for Immortality* (selection)

Meeting #11

- Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (selection)
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “On The Abolition of the English Department”
- Toru Dutt, “Our Casuarina Tree”
- Felix Mnthali, “The Stranglehold of English Lit”

Meeting #12

- Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (selection)
- Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka and his Precursors”
- Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”

MODULE IV: WHAT SHOULD WE READ?

Note: This module emphasizes the sociocultural and material factors, often unrelated to the “content” of a work of literature, that affect its circulation, reception, and canonicity. It considers how those factors affect evaluations of literary quality, taking a sociological approach to the category of the “literary” and asking how texts become eligible for canonical status.

Meeting #13

- Joanna Russ, *How To Suppress Women’s Writing*
- Mark Laver, “Lil Nas X and the continued segregation of country music,” *The Washington Post*, 20 June 2019

Meeting #14

- Helen Vendler, “Are These the Poems to Remember?,” *The New York Review of Books*, 24 November 2011
- Rita Dove, “Defending an Anthology,” *The New York Review of Books*, 22 December 2011
- Marjorie Perloff, “Why Big Anthologies Make Bad Textbooks,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 April 1999
- Emily Dickinson, “479 (712) (“Because I could not stop for Death –”)
- Emily Dickinson, “788 (709) (“Publication – is the Auction”)
- explore Kenneth Roemer, et al., *Covers, Titles, and Tables: The Formations of American Literary Canons in Anthologies* (website)

Meeting #15

- Joan Acocella, “Prophet Motive: The Kahlil Gibran phenomenon,” *The New Yorker*, 30 December 2007
- Kahlil Gibran, “On Marriage”
- Kahlil Gibran, “On Pain”
- J.D. Porter, *Stanford Literary Lab, Pamphlet 17 (Popularity/Prestige)*
- Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (selection)

Meeting #16

- Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (selection)
- Kristen Roupenian, “Cat Person”
- Constance Grady, “The uproar over the New Yorker short story ‘Cat Person,’ explained,” *Vox*, 12 December 2017

MODULE V: WHAT SHOULDN’T WE READ?

Note: This module focuses on questions of when and whether certain texts should be “removed” from curricular, canonical, or otherwise elevated status as works “to be read.” Cultural questions of appropriation and “cancellation,” often encountered through bad faith political messaging, are situated within a broader discourse, raising fundamental questions of the relation between art and artist, ethical consumption, and the implication of culture within larger moral and ideological frameworks.

Meeting # 17

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”
- Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, “The Slave Mother: A Tale of the Ohio”
- Robert Hayden, “Night, Death, Mississippi”
- Myriam Gurba, “Pendeja, You Ain’t Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature,” *Tropics of Meta*, 12 December 2019
- Alexis Nowicki, “‘Cat Person’ and Me,” *Slate*, 8 July 2021

Meeting #18

- Brian Morton, “Virginia Woolf? Snob! Richard Wright? Sexist! Dostoyevsky? Anti-Semite!,” *The New York Times*, 8 January 2019
- Rachel Poser, “He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?” *New York Times*, 2 February 2021
- David M. Perry, “Why Did the ‘Times’ Let Alice Walker Recommend an Anti-Semitic Book?,” *Pacific Standard*, 20 December 2018
- Nylah Burton, “Alice Walker’s Terrible Anti-Semitic Poem Felt Personal – to Her and to Me,” *New York Intelligencer*, 28 December 2018
- IN CLASS: Hannah Gadsby, selections from *Nanette*

Meeting #19

- Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
- Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”
- Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (selection)

Meeting #20

- Junot Díaz, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love”
- Kristine Phillips, “Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz accused of sexual misconduct, misogynistic behavior,” *The Washington Post*, 6 May 2018
- Christine Emba, “We Can’t Protect Junot Díaz at All Costs,” *The Washington Post*, 4 May 2018

MODULE VI: WHY SHOULD WE READ?

Note: This final module raises a question familiar to all humanities scholars: the purpose of literature, as an object of study and as a component of culture at all. Considering this question in light of the preceding semester’s worth of conversation helps students think about it concretely, in relation to the various discussions of individual and social impact outlined above.

Meeting #21

- J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

Meeting #22

- John Guillory, *Cultural Capital* (selection)
- Justin Stover, “There is No Case for the Humanities,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 March 2018
- Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* (selection)

Meeting #23

- Ankhi Mukherjee, *What is a Classic?* (selection)
- Italo Calvino, “Why Read the Classics?”
- Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

CURRICULUM PRESENTATION & PROPOSAL

Imagine you are a member of this department's faculty and you have been summoned to a department meeting about the current requirements of the undergraduate major. At this meeting, the department is considering making adjustments to the major requirements. In a brief presentation, **make an argument about how the requirements should—or should not—be changed.** This can be anything from a defense of the current system to minor tweaks to a wholesale transformation of the requirements or an argument to have no specific requirements at all. In your presentation, you must **refer to specific arguments from at least three writers from our course**, showing engagement with their ideas by using them as evidence (or counterevidence) in support of your proposal. You may (but are certainly not required to) produce a handout to clarify your proposals. You may also write on the board or make use of other classroom resources. But this is not at all necessary. Your presentation should last 5–7 minutes (I will cut you off at 7!). You may speak from a pre-written speech or from notes, but be sure to practice your presentation beforehand and to time it. Then, in an assigned group of three, collaborate on a **compromise proposal to be submitted in writing.** The 1–2 page proposal should lay out the revised requirements and acknowledge the considerations your group balanced.

PAPER ASSIGNMENT

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, identifies two main strategies used by thinkers critical of the current state of literary canon. Discussions, she writes, tend to be “structured around the possibility of change, of rearrangement and reassignment of texts, within one over-arching master-canon of literature” or, on the other hand, “around a vision of an exploding master-canon whose fracture would produce, or at least leave room for, a potentially infinite plurality of mini-canons, each specified as to its thematic or structural or authorial coverage” (49–50). For this paper, make an argument analyzing Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in relation to one of these two strategies. Through close-readings and specific textual analysis of Woolf's book, answer the following question: **How does *A Room of One's Own* argue or imply that literary canon should be changed?**

PAPER ASSIGNMENT

You may choose one of the following topics as a starting point for developing a focused thesis, or you may develop your own *highly specific* topic and argument. Your analysis should be rooted in *careful, specific close reading* and should engage a minimum of three and a maximum of six writers from our syllabus.

- *Literary Nationalism.* Some of our writers have argued that canon should be used to empower specific cultures, groups, or nations through the creation, study, or celebration of a literary tradition specific to that group. Others have argued that literature should transcend group identities, and that literary nationalism works to reinforce damaging power dynamics. Develop an argument putting some of these arguments in conversation, explaining how your chosen writers address this question and what new insights are generated by considering their ideas together.

- *Canon as a Weapon.* Several of our writers make arguments about how canon or literature in general can be used as tools of social control, political suppression, or in-group/out-group differentiation. Develop an argument responding to one or more of these critiques, analyzing how these damaging uses of literature work and considering how literary production and literary study might avoid these pitfalls.
- *The Problem of Choice.* One purpose of canon is to help address the problem that we simply cannot read everything: we have to choose. Several of our writers make arguments about why certain texts or kinds of texts should or should not be chosen. Analyze some of these arguments by showing how broader concepts of what literature is *for* and how it should be *used* shape ideas about which texts to choose.