

Canon

Definition of Canon

Originated from the Greek term “kanon,” canon means “a yard stick,” or “a measuring rod.” Generally, the term canon is used in three different meanings.

First, it is defined as a traditional collection of writings, against which other writings are evaluated. In other words, it means “a long list of works taken as authentic.” For example, the Bible – both written in Hebrew, and even translated versions. This sense of the term makes canon opposite to “apocrypha,” which means “written works having anonymous authors.” The Bible was considered a yardstick to evaluate other literary pieces, according to a certain criterion.

Secondly, students of literature use it to refer to the writings included in anthologies, or textbooks under certain genres, and thus are evaluated according to the [genre](#) under which they are placed. This meaning covers the entire literature generally thought as suitable for aesthetic admiration and academic use.

The third definition of the term indicates the literary writings of a particular author, which are considered by scholars and critics in general to be the genuine creations of that particular author. This is based on some already deduced rules intended to be applied on the future pieces in the same genre. The term “canon” is also confused with a homonym “cannon,” which means “a military weapon.”

Difference Between Canon and Apocrypha

Apocrypha is also a literary term, which means “hidden,” or “anonymous literary pieces,” which were considered not to have conformed to the rules set by the written Bible, in Hebrew or in Latin. It describes those books, which have dubious authorship or the authority, or where the accuracy of

the writers is questionable. However, canon is a literary rule that is used to evaluate books and writings against certain models, such as plays are evaluated against *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, where Oedipus the King is a yardstick which has set canons for plays.

Examples of Canon from Literature

Example #1: *The Plowman's Tales* (By Geoffrey Chaucer)

“In a summer season when soft was the sun,
I clothed myself in a cloak as I shepherd were,
Habit like a hermit's unholy in works,
And went wide in the world wonders to hear.
But on a May morning on Malvern hills,
A marvel befell me of fairy, me thought.”

Taken from *The Plowman's Tale*, these lines exemplify the third definition of canon. Chaucer's canon includes “The Canterbury Tales”, for instance, but it does not include the apocryphal work, “The Plowman's Tale,” which has been mistakenly attributed to him in the past. The canon is the use of archaic language that Chaucer used in his works but not used in this part.

Example #2: Authors Who Made Extraordinary Contributions to Literature

In the history of literature, a number of authors and poets have made such an extraordinary contributions that their literary works are considered yardsticks to have set canons to evaluate other works. Their literary works obtain in themselves the position of literary canon which the successive writers use as touchstone to compare their creations with. For example:

Greek Poet Homer

For a very long time the world considered the Greek epics of Homer, *the Iliad*, and *Odyssey*, as the most sublime examples of literature. However, we have no idea whether the popular and well-known author was a genuine

to the list of the greatest literary brains of the world since antiquity – only by following the literary canons of writing.

English Writer William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare wrote both tragedies and comedies for Elizabethan audiences, throughout the late 16th, and early 17th centuries. However, Shakespeare's earned appreciation for these works became yardstick by which other writers to judge their places in literature. For many decades, English writers compared themselves with Shakespeare. This approach of looking at, and following a writer's work for measuring literary excellence and success is, in fact, called a "Shakespearean canon."

English Novelist Jane Austen

Jane Austen is one of those female writers who came to the limelight by breaking all the traditional and conventional shackles. She wrote mild and smiling romantic novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, [setting](#) them in England, and making marriage her subject to be explored. As she used round characters in her novels, uniquely different from her counterparts, this became her [style](#), and finally a canon against which other female writers would be evaluated.

Function of a Canon

The function of a canon has always raised confusion and complexity. The works, traditionally considered as following a certain canon, belong to the writers who have long been dead. Moreover, only the white and male writers of antiquity have been given membership to this exclusive club. Women, minorities, and non-Western writers were kept out of this kind of arbitrary practice for a long time – until they won recognition such as the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

Furthermore, philosophical and political biases also resulted in disputes over literary canons. Hence, a number of critical circles suggest that the idea of having specific canons for specific genres needs to be abandoned. On the contrary, some other critics advocate the expansion of canons by including the extended range of sampling to broaden the horizon literary

