English Canon Essay, Research Paper

If I were an English Professor for English 1a and 1b, I would try to convey to my students the significance of literature as art. I would not simply give my students an overview of the major periods of English and World Literatures. While it is important to know these, most students have already learned these subjects in high school and would be further exploring them in the survey classes, if they choose to continue studying English classes. In order to truly appreciate it, I believe that the students should be familiarized with the more creative aspects of different types of literature. Being aquatinted with unique, quality writings would help them to become better writers themselves. Those who support the English Canon as it stands now, have been criticized for its reliance and their insistence on the almost exclusive inclusion of works by so called dead white men”. They have also been criticized for not taking into consideration the multicultural voices that have also shaped the literary world. I agree that the Canon has been highly westernized and consequently it has been turned into a political weapon for power. After all, the powerful predominance of white male literature mirrors the society we live in. What we need to keep in mind as educators, however, is that these “dead white men” usually are considered by many to be the most influential writers in the history of literature. While female writers and those of other races should certainly make their way into the Canon, educators need to make sure that quality always comes before diversity. Keeping in mind that these students are mostly freshman and sophomores with little or no introduction to writing and analysis, I would compose a reader which includes sections out of the major, civilization building texts, such as Plato, Homer, John Locke, Confucius. It would be important to know these texts as a background to literature, to understand the values and assumptions of authors that followed or disputed their tradition. In a similar way, The Bible having shaped views and interpretations of the world will have to be covered. It is the inevitable backbone to the entire Western and certainly great majority of Eastern and African literature. I would include various excerpts from the Bible but would definitely provide the entire book of Song of Solomon, which has the most literary value. In the reader, I would also include cultural myths and folk tales from the Asian and the African people that later came to influence literature. This reader would serve as a secondary reading material, always going along with and helping to interpret literature. We would refer to the reader throughout the semester. All great literature starts with Shakespeare. He can never be completely confined to any genre or body of literature. Eagleton says about Shakespeare s work his success and literary greatness disproves those who think that literature can never be looked at as a stable, well-definable entity (p12). Another inescapable figure is James Conrad. “The Heart of Darkness” would serve as the major novel of the semester, it explores issues of good and evil, race and conflict, and stands apart with it powerful language. Novelist E.M. Forster censured him as a vogue and elusive writer who never quite clearly discloses the philosophy that lies behind his tales . James Joyce has to be covered because of the influences of his “Ulysses” on the literary world. He is one of authors who were developing their own closed symbolic system in which tradition, the male and female principles, medievalism and mythology were to provide the exhaustive models for the control and explanation of historical reality (Eagleton p110). While “Ulysses” is by no means within the scope of these classes, his themes and style of writing should be shown, perhaps through sections out of “Dubliners”. Another major figure who came to influence the way we view literature by standing on the rigid border between the Victorian and modern periods is Virginia Woolf. “The Room of One’s Own” would be the best example of her political and literary philosophy. Her fluid, diffuse, sensuous style offers a resistance to the kind of male metaphysical world (Eagleton p189). She is the female writer who not only challenges the male standard, but often equals those standards with great success and comes to set her own.

T.S. Elliot needs to be covered extensively especially his poems “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Wasteland”. The criticism of Eliot displays an extraordinary lack of interest in what literary works actually say: its attention is almost entirely confined to qualities of language, styles of feeling, the relations of image and experience. (Eagleton p51). His rough, creative and disturbing writings will be an inspiration to many a students pursuing an analytical essay and would serve as a good contrast to what they previously thought of poetry — something beautiful and delicate. American literature should be prefaced with Native American poetry and tales, such as Chief Seattle s Speech on the Signing of the Treaty of Port Elliot and Scott Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain . The European image of nature and the role of humanity are so very different compared to the American way of seeing the universe. The poetry of Edgar Allan Poe for example The Raven , is a great Introduction to the way American authors differed from their British counterparts. They were more individualistic, less concerned about the matters of society, and more troubled by universal ideas than characters. These themes reoccur in Mark Twain’s “Huckleberry Finn” probably considered by many to be true American classic. What defines American literature is its extreme uniqueness. We have to cover Allen Ginsberg, the most outspoken and celebrated beatnik poet, for taking on the challenges posed by T.S. Elliot and making even more disturbing and controversial poems out of ordinary things. Sandra Ciseros’ “The House On Mango Street” because of it poetic quality and deep underlying themes is a novel written like a poem, extremely creative and unique which allows students to analyze it on many different levels and to write creatively themselves. American Canon would not be complete without Toni Morrison. While many professors shy away from her work, considering her highly provocative and controversial, she is the most artistic and moving author of our time. Although Eagleton says she exhibits specifically famine mode of writing (p189), she never limits her novels to race, or gender or class. She always celebrates the simplest humanity while exploring the overwhelming universal issues of truth, love or family. “Beloved” because of its critical acclaim is worthy of the Nobel Price of Literature. Because of its musicality and masterful prose Beloved would be the best text to study and write about. In addition to the English and American writers who have transformed the way we humans think, feel and view the world, there are others who have changed the way we view the literary world. Leo Tolstoy has to be mentioned although his novels are too long to read for our class. In the reader, I would include a list of his works as well as those of Dostoyevsky. Both of these men had an exceptional insight into the state of the human soul and their works could almost be thought of as religious literature. Italo Calvino, a living white man, whose “If on the Winter’s Night a Traveler” will forever change the way you look at your relationship with books. While my canon looks similar to most other existing canons dominated by white males, I refuse to demean literature by trying to make it more diverse only for the sake of diversity. Many people would include Maxine Hong Kingston, as one of the world’s most significant authors. Though, the simple fact that she is the only Asian female that is available to us at this time does not make it all right to put her in the same category as Shakespeare or Toni Morrison. The canon should mirror society we live in. Our world is unfortunately or fortunately, justifiably or not, dominated by white males and so is the canon. Hopefully as times goes by, more quality writers of all genders and races will emerge and we will be able to satisfy need for diversity without sacrificing quality. Yes, the literature canon is ever transforming but it is also sacred.

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