

Literary Value and the English Canon

The **literary canon** is often understood to mean the group of authors or works that a consensus of academics, historians and teachers recognise as worthy of study: these are the texts that are regularly in print, are studied for school examinations and in universities and which have 'status'. The apparently 'accepted texts' that appear on your English Literature exam papers, for example, are regarded as belonging to the literary canon. The canon is often accused by its critics of representing the values of the ruling educated classes. Writers who question the canon often do so because of its association with privilege. In this section you will see writers questioning who makes decisions about what makes certain literary texts more valuable or worthy than others and why they do so. In reading this criticism you will be able to think for yourselves about what makes a text valuable.

Aesthetics and pleasure, art and beauty

Taken from The English Studies Book, by R. Pope:

In casual usage if we say a poem, picture or landscape is 'aesthetically pleasing' we generally mean that it gives us a refined sense of pleasure: it is 'artistically beautiful'. In this respect the sense of 'aesthetic' (also spelt 'esthetic') is loosely synonymous with that of 'artistic'. We start with such broad generalities and potential confusions because that is precisely where these terms and concepts are in most people's minds. 'Aesthetics = refined pleasure = art = beauty' is therefore the formula we shall explore and, to some extent, explode. The result should be a sharper sense of the distinctions as well as the connections amongst all these terms.

Aesthetics derives from a Greek word meaning 'things perceptible to the sense', 'sensory impressions'. At its broadest, anything could have an aesthetic effect simply by virtue of being sensed and perceived. From the late eighteenth century, however, aesthetics became narrowed to mean not just sense perception in general but 'perception of the beautiful' in particular. Thus by the late nineteenth century aesthetics was chiefly identified with the cultivation of 'good taste' in anything and everything from fine wine and clothes to literature, painting and music. As such, it melded with highly idealised and often socially elitist notions of 'the sublime' and 'the beautiful'. At its crudest, an aesthetic sense was simply a sign of good breeding.

Art, meanwhile, was undergoing a corresponding process of narrowing in meaning and elevation in social status. Initially, the term 'art' had derived through

French from a Latin word (*ars/artis*) meaning 'skill', 'technique' or 'craft'. At this stage anything requiring practical knowledge and technical expertise could be an art, from the arts of husbandry (i.e. farming and housekeeping) to the arts of writing and building. Moreover, the 'seven arts' of the medieval universities (later called the Seven Liberal Arts) did not recognise modern distinctions between sciences on the one hand and arts and humanities on the other. The seven arts thus comprised Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric (the trivium) along with Arithmetic, Music, Geometry and Astronomy (the quadrivium). But all were 'arts' in that they required technical knowledge. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, 'Art' was increasingly being used as a singular and with a capital letter. Art was also being used as an umbrella term for what were now being called the fine (as distinct from the applied) arts: architecture (as distinct from building), sculpture (as distinct from carving), chamber and orchestral music (as distinct from popular singing and playing), ballet (not just any dance), painting on canvas (rather than, say, house-painting), poetry (as distinct from verse and song) and Literature in the sense of 'belles lettres' (as distinct from writing in general). Significantly, at the same time, the sciences were also tending to be split into pure and applied (e.g. physics as distinct from engineering).

The overall result was that henceforth 'Art' was increasingly distinguished from other forms of representation and signification. By the same gesture, artists (who were supposedly preoccupied with the sublime) were carefully distinguished from their more humble and practical counterparts, artisans. The former, it was argued, made beautiful things; the latter made useful things. (Incidentally, it was precisely against this divisive state of affairs that William Morris and Company and the related 'Arts and Crafts' movements came into being. They resisted the split between fine and applied art, as well as that between artist and artisan.) At any rate, notwithstanding the efforts of Morris and Co, from the late nineteenth century to the present it has been common to assume that art is ultimately a matter of 'art for art's sake', and that it is either fine and pure or impractical and useless, depending on your point of view. At the same time, 'the aesthetic' is assumed to be nothing more nor less than a sensitivity to the sublime and the beautiful and an aversion to the ordinary and ugly.

For English Studies, especially for the study of Literature, the legacy of such a division has been profound. Many traditional English Literature courses still concentrate substantially on just one side of the divide: on a canon of literature treated as high art (poems, plays and novels revered as classics), as distinct from popular writing and mass media production in general (magazines, news stories, songs, soap operas, adverts, etc.). All the latter tend to be treated as artisanal,

applied, commercial and ephemeral, and therefore left to courses in Cultural, Communication, and Media studies. The former, meanwhile, are treated as artistic, fine, sublime and timeless, and appropriated as certain kinds of aesthetic literary object. The narrowed sense of 'aesthetic', meaning tasteful, refined and discriminating (rather than 'sense perception in general') has played a crucial role in maintaining the boundaries. So has a willingness to play down the fact that many works currently canonised as timeless classics (e.g. Shakespeare's and Dickens's) were highly popular and commercial and designedly ephemeral in their own day.

Pope, R. (1998) *The English Studies Book*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 162–165.

Judgement and value

Taken from *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature*, by M. Montgomery, et al:

Many kinds of writing might be designated as 'literature'. In the past, definitions of what counts as literature have been much broader than our present definitions, at times taking in non-fictional works, travel writing, essays, political and religious texts, and so on. However, not all literature excites critical interest and comment. Literary critics have usually assumed that the texts which seem to repay special attention, by many readers over a long period of time, thereby gaining the status of 'classics', do so because they are somehow intrinsically valuable. And it is these classic texts which – by virtue of their special value and the amount of criticism and commentary which they generate – come to comprise the 'canon' of Great Literature. This canon tends to form the core of syllabuses in schools, colleges and universities. Judgements about the value of texts, therefore, can clearly be seen to be at the heart of literary studies. Also, for many critics, assessing the value of a text is also seen to be a crucial part of the role of the critic.

a Characteristics of valued texts

It was against this background of assuming that certain texts were more valuable than others that critics such as F.R. Leavis set out to judge which texts are valuable and which are not. Value, in such a view, is seen as a quality residing within texts themselves. And critics of this persuasion have generally stressed the importance of characteristics such as complexity, aesthetic unity, literary language, subject-matter, and canonical status.

b Complexity and unity

Literary texts which are assumed to be of special value are generally characterised by complexity of plot, structure, language, and ideas. Indeed, complexity is often used in this context as a synonym of value. But complexity can be of a number of different kinds. In novels, complexity typically involves not only a skilfully constructed main plot, but often the co-existence of this plot with sub-plots which mirror and highlight the events and themes in the main plot. The structure of a specially valued poem is held to be complex in ways which repay close attention; for example, the poem may be structured as a complex sequence of parallelisms. The more the reader studies the poem, the more he or she is aware of the poet's skill in composing it in this way. The language of valued literary texts is also typically assumed to be complex: writers do not simply choose 'ordinary' words, like the words we use for conversation, but words which have resonance, historical associations, beauty, or 'rightness' for the particular context. The reader is encouraged to assume that writers of valued texts laboured painstakingly to choose exactly the right word, since each word forms part of a larger complex structure. Nor can the ideas of a poem or novel be taken as haphazardly chosen: they too form complex patterns or structures, either being echoed by other ideas in the text or reaffirmed in the form of general themes. The complex interweaving of elements of language, structure, plot, ideas and so on, can be seen to constitute the aesthetic unity of the text. Through carefully studying the text, the reader will consequently find that all of its elements contribute to the same overall structure, and is thereby likely to consider the poem to have achieved value, or even greatness. Alternatively, if by applying the same criteria the reader is not able to discover a complex but unified pattern in the text, that text will not be regarded as the highest kind of literature, and will be judged to be flawed.

c Language

We assume that writers of canonical texts are crafts persons – that they are in command of their writing, and that they are skilled in ways that other writers are not. Of special interest, as regards the question of value, is the attention paid to the language of valued texts. Language in valued texts is described as being elegant, witty, patterned, controlled; in short, the author is considered to have taken care in her or his choice, and the reader takes pleasure in the skill which the author displays. Literary language, for critics such as the Russian Formalists, is seen to constitute a separate type of language where authors consciously play with the possibilities of expression in order to produce verbal art that has specific aesthetic qualities.

d Subject-matter

The subject-matter of valued texts is generally considered to be serious, dealing with moral and philosophical topics of acknowledged importance. Valued texts are supposed to give the reader an insight into fundamental questions which are of universal concern, such as the nature of evil, the corrupting effect of money, the value of love, and so on, and to rehearse the dilemmas of moral and ethical choice. For this reason, comic texts are rarely accorded status unless they appear to discuss such supposedly universal themes. Because valued texts are held to deal with such universal themes, which are of concern to all people, they are also thought to have qualities of durability. Shakespeare's works, for example, are deemed valuable because they are believed to have significance not only for his time but for all time. When texts discuss evidently universal questions, they are unlikely to be at the same time texts which discuss specific political questions in any detail. Political polemic (open and heated critical discussion) is generally taken to be at odds with literary worth, and is often seen to detract from the universalising aim of great literature (satires are often valued for their observations about humankind in general, rather than for their more specific criticisms of particular societies).

e The canon

As has been suggested above, the canon is the group of texts considered to be of most value. These are the books which are generally taught in schools, colleges and universities (though the canon is constantly changing, especially in schools). Although many new universities have largely dispensed with the notion of the canon, and offer courses on noncanonical writing, many more traditional universities still structure their syllabus around a chronological study of the canon. Despite changes in the canon, however, when students are asked to list members of this elite grouping, the results are generally very similar: the first writers on the list are usually Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton; after these, a certain amount of debate generally occurs on whether to include such writers as Dryden, Lawrence, Pope, Swift, Joyce, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Jonson, Dickens, Hardy, Burns, Woolf, Austen, Eliot, and the Brontës. These writers share certain characteristics. First, most of them are male (indeed it is not unusual for some students' lists to include only male writers). Second, they are generally from the middle- or upper-class, and are all white. Third, they are all dead. To be included in the canon, writers must be seen to have written valuable texts; but is it merely a coincidence that these writers also belong to essentially the same socioeconomic, racial and gender group? As soon as you ask one question about the canon, others arise. Who decides whether someone is in the canon and who is not? And how is it that most students of English literature

know, to a greater or lesser extent, who is included and who is not? Most traditional critics do not consider that there are any agencies involved in decisions about who is in the canon and who is not; the selected texts are simply clearly better than others. You might like to consider, however, a range of agencies which make and enforce decisions about canonical status. Within the school context, because of the introduction of the National Curriculum, the choices about which authors and books are included on the syllabus are largely taken by government agencies. In universities, individual lecturers, ratified by other staff, university bodies and external examiners, make decisions about which books should be studied. They also largely make up the researchers and critics who work on canonical writers, and publish learned articles or introductions for students to canonical texts. This system of 'commentary', as Michel Foucault calls it, ensures that certain texts remain the focus of attention and stay in print. Outside of the educational domain, there are publishers who commission critical books from academics writing on particular authors, and who also label certain books as 'Classics'; libraries who buy such books; and individual readers who accept this version of canonicity. In the light of this, you might like to ask yourself some questions about your own course of study: for example, do you study Shakespeare; how many texts are there by contemporary writers, women writers, working-class or black writers? Underlying the way that your course is constructed may be notions about value which may come to the fore when you consider your answers to these questions.

f Some recent critical perspectives on value

Modern literary theorists have professed much less certainty about questions of literary value. While many of them have considered that certain texts do seem to be better than others, others have considered that value is simply a means of excluding certain texts. A range of differing views on questions of judgement and value now exists.

Roland Barthes, for example, was innovatory in analysing not only texts which are canonical, but also texts drawn from popular literature, like Ian Fleming's *Goldfinger* (1959). Barthes does consider, however, that there are important differences among texts; and he is concerned in much of his writing to describe those differences. But rather than assuming that value resides within the text, he shifts attention to the 'pleasure of the text'; instead of being a scholarly enjoyment of the seeming control of the writer over her or his material, the process of reading, for Barthes, involves a more sexualised pleasure. In particular, Barthes identifies the different types of pleasure to be gained from reading realist texts compared with other texts. He calls realist texts 'readerly',

because in reading such texts the reader begins not to be aware of the fact that he or she is reading and starts to get caught up in the pleasure of narrative. But Barthes prefers 'writerly' texts, which are those texts (such as experimental and avant-garde texts) which force the reader to 'work' (and 'play') more in order to make sense of them. With writerly texts, attention is drawn to the process of writing; we are unable to become 'lost' in the narrative in the same unthinking way as with readerly texts. Thus, although Barthes claims to be opposed to constructing hierarchies, there does seem to be a value judgement made between readerly and writerly texts. Despite this, his writing on the pleasure of the text does question the traditional notion of canonical texts as somehow intrinsically more valuable than others, and suggests that the reader plays an important role in attributing value to a text.

Marxist critics are often much less clear about whether the notions of value and evaluation are useful. Terry Eagleton, for example, attacks the concept of the canon, arguing that texts become canonical precisely because they serve to support the ruling ideology. He does not want to dispense, however, with the notion of value completely, since he also thinks that there are literary texts which question or 'escape' ideology, and so force the reader to consider her or his position and perhaps lead to a form of consciousness-raising. Within the Women's Movement, for example, feminist novels written by Fay Weldon, Jeanette Winterson, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter have been very important in bringing about changes in women's thinking. These literary texts have brought about a questioning of certain ideological assumptions about the position of women, and could therefore be considered valuable for that reason.

Michel Foucault takes a more sceptical position, questioning the idea of attributing value to texts at all. He argues that literary texts are really empty texts, containing less rather than more than other texts. They display, as he puts it, 'enunciative poverty'. With literary texts, critics have to work hardest, in order to fill gaps which the text leaves gaping open. It is critics themselves, writing scholarly articles and books on canonical writers, who repeat over and over the message which the text itself failed to tell. Foucault also questions the notion that the writer is totally in control of what is written. He draws attention to the importance of other factors in the writing process, such as the common-sense knowledge of the time, literary traditions, and the economic and literary pressures which led the writer to write within certain genres or styles, and on certain subjects.

Montgomery, M., Durant, A., Fabb, N., Furness, T. and Mills, S. (2000)
Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English
Literature, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 297–301.