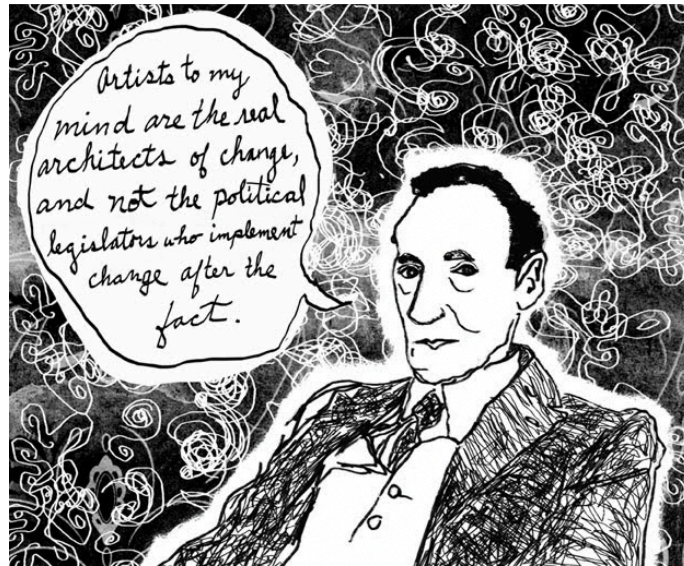


ENGL 122: Literature and the Canon (Revised)



Professor Russell A. Potter
Tuesdays, 4-5:50, Craig-Lee 206
<http://engl122litcanon.blogspot.com>

What is the proper function of literature? Is it to teach, to amuse, or both? Can literature change the world? Or can it at least change the course of one person's life? And, if reading fiction and poetry has any potential whatsoever to perform any of these functions, which texts are the best ones to do so? The answer to this question has led literary critics and professors to create, and to question, all kinds of lists of readings, both prescribed ("it's good for you!") and proscribed (every list of Banned Books from the Spanish Inquisition the local school board). Through these processes, canons of literature – conceived of as a body of texts that offers the richest array of the sought-for merits – has formed over the past century and a half. The field of English is a young one, and yet many of its texts date to a far older period, before any broad consensus of the relative value of texts – other than sacred ones – even existed. In this, as the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges put it, writers and critics have 'invented their precursors,' leaving their mark on the past, trailing texts behind them.

We are very far from a consensus on this. In the 1980's and 1990's, a "canon war" was declared, between those who, like my old professor Robert Scholes, who preferred to see the canon as dynamic and changing, and those, such as former Education Secretary William Bennett, who regarded it as a fixed set of "great books" – books which (only coincidentally in his view) were almost entirely written by white men. Similar kinds of battles are being fought today, as the much-vaunted "Common Core" curriculum has stirred controversy among parents and educators across the country. Its new utilitarianism, within which nonfiction counts more than fiction, and analysis is valued over passion, may shift the canon once more. In this class, we'll trace the history of a literary canon as an idea, following its footsteps via the graphical adaptations of both canonical and non-canonical books. We'll also look at the question of adaptation itself; what is gained (or lost) when a written text becomes a graphical one? What's the difference between mere illustration and actual transformation of the text? And what do the modes and styles of these graphic versions reveal about the original, the author, the artist, and ourselves?

BOOKS (Available at the RIC Campus Store)

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*
Classics Illustrated: Robinson Crusoe (free online text)
Peter Kuper and Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: The Graphic Novel*
Kristina Gehrman and Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle: The Graphic Novel*
Odyr and George Orwell, *Animal Farm: The Graphic Novel*
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale, The Graphic Novel*
Octavia Butler, *Kindred: The Graphic Novel*
Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*
Dorf Backderf, *My Friend Dahmer*

GUIDELINES

Our class meets Tuesdays from 4:00 to 5:50 in Craig-Lee 206. Please arrive on time, and give other students the courtesy of refraining from use of cell phones and other electronic devices during class.. Active, engaged participation in class – which is only possible when students have done the assigned reading – is expected from all. Because this is a hybrid class, we will be meeting in person only ½ of the time, with the other, equally important part of our class taking place via online readings and viewings, and participation in the discussion of each week's assignment on our class blog. Beginning in Week 2, every student is responsible for posting a response to each of our weekly readings and viewings on the class blog. These responses are not graded for content, but are part of your participation grade; I encourage you to respond to one another as well (if you use the "Reply" link, it will be automatically threaded).

CLASS STRUCTURE

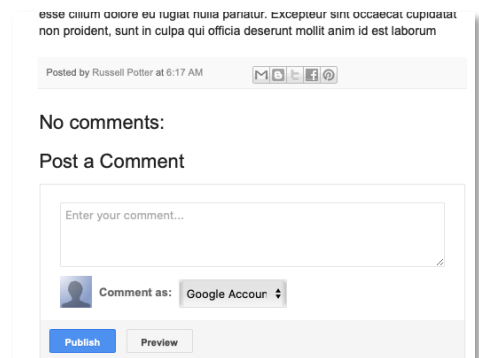
This is a hybrid course, with roughly half of our work being done in class, while the rest of our readings, viewings, and discussions will take place online. The online discussions will take place at our blog, which is located at <https://engl122litcanon.blogspot.com/> For each class meeting, beginning with our second class, a response is due on the blog. These will be written in conversation with each week's readings and viewings; in many cases there will be specific prompts on the main blog post. Responses should be roughly 1-2 paragraphs in length, and speak as specifically as possible to that week's assignments. Your response may be framed in the form of a question (to which I or others may respond) or you may choose to respond to or comment on the post of another member of the class. Responses are not graded, but they are counted as the central part of the online component of the course; any missing or incomplete responses will have an adverse effect on your grade for the class.

You'll need to start right at the beginning by having a close look at our blog and its associated links. In order for Blogger, which I use, to work properly, you'll need to be sure to set your browser's security to accept cookies from blogger.com. Most of the online readings and viewings are publicly available, but some are hosted by Adams Library and will require that you access them using your RIC credentials. You should finish reading and watching all the materials listed for each class day, and post your response *prior* to our class meeting. These response writings constitute the online component of our class, which is equal in scope and importance to our in-person class meetings.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week I (January 21). Introduction to class. What is a literary “canon”? How has it changed over time? Do we still have one? And what effect does the introduction of graphical versions of literary works have on it? What are some of the key differences in a graphical adaptation, as opposed to a film or television one?

NB: The comment field is at the end of each blog posting. If you use a Google identity, you can automatically tag your posts; you may also simply post anonymously – but in that case be sure to include your name at the end of your post. I also recommend composing your response in a separate file, and then using “paste” to insert it – that way, if there are any technical issues with the posting (your browser needs to be set to accept “cookies” from Blogger), you won’t lose your text. Remember also that you can reply to other students’ posts; when you use the “reply:” function your text will be automatically threaded.



Week II (January 28). The vocabulary of the comic form. Readings: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, Chapter One (pp. 1-23) and first section of Chapter 3 (pp. 60-75) This week, as in every week, a blog comment is due – this time, it will be an answer to a prompt in the main post. **NB:** The Scott McCloud book is not yet at the bookstore, but I’ve supplied a temporary .pdf of the full text, linked to our blog. This temporary link will be deleted once the book has arrived.

Week III (February 4) *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 6 (pp. 138-161); *Classics Illustrated: Robinson Crusoe* (linked via blog).

Week IV (February 11) Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: The Graphic Novel*, adapted by Peter Kuper.

Week V (February 18) Sinclair, *The Jungle: The Graphic Novel*, adapted by Kristina Gehrman, first half (chapters 1-5); *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 8 (pp. 185-192).

Week VI (February 25) Sinclair, *The Jungle: The Graphic Novel*, adapted by Kristina Gehrman, second half (chapters 6-11).

Week VI (March 3) Orwell, *Animal Farm: The Graphic Novel*, adapted by Odyr. Paper #1 due.

SPRING BREAK

Week VII (March 17) Campus closed for spring break extension.

Week VIII (March 24) *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 4 (pp. 94-137); first half of Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale: The Graphic Novel*, adapted by Renée Nault .

Week IX (March 31) Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel*, second half.

Week X (April 7) Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*.

Week XI (April 14) Derf Backderf, *My Friend Dahmer*, first half

Week XII (April 21) Derf Backderf, *My Friend Dahmer*, second half.

Week XIII (April 28) Roundup and conclusions. Paper #2 due by Monday, May 4.

FORMAL PAPERS

Along with our weekly blog posts, there will be two formal papers of 5-7 pages in length. The subject of these papers is open to anything we have read or viewed as part of our class; the paper can also be comparative, making connections between our class readings and your personal experience, or other texts, films, or television shows that you are prepared to connect actively with them. Additional guidelines and suggestion are linked on our blog, or at <http://www.ric.edu/faculty/rpotter/paperguide.html>. I will return your midterm papers with comments, directed toward the possibility of revision, and will accept a revised version for which I'll reconsider the grade. If you want to have this same option for the final paper, you'll need to get it to me no later than April 21st.

GRADE BREAKDOWN

Attendance and participation in class: 25% -- Participation in online prompts and discussions: 25% --
Paper #1: 20% -- Paper #2: 30%