

ENGL 122: Literature and the Canon



Professor Russell A. Potter

Mondays/Wednesday 2-3:50, Craig-Lee 153

<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 adaptations in *The Graphic Canon*. 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.

GUIDELINES

Our class meets Mondays and Wednesdays from 2:00 to 3:50 in Craig-Lee 153. Please arrive on time, and give other students the courtesy of refraining from use of cell phones and other electronic devices during class.

As with all English courses at Rhode Island College, attendance is a vital part of your course experience; no more than two unexcused absences are allowed; any more than two may have an adverse effect on your final grade. Active, engaged participation in class – which is only possible when students have done the assigned reading – is expected from all. In addition to class discussions, 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.

Please familiarize yourself with the College's policies on academic dishonesty (available online in the student handbook at <http://www.ric.edu/studentlife/pdf/RICStudentHandbook.pdf>). The use of words or ideas from outside sources without proper citation is a violation of this policy, and will result (at least) in an "F" for the assignment. In addition, all such cases are reported to the Chair of the English Department.

CLASS STRUCTURE

The assigned readings for each class meeting are given on the dates they are due in the schedule below. In addition to these texts, I'm asking each of you to select at least three other texts from our three-volume anthology to read and analyze. There will be three 3-5 page papers for the class; the first and third are based on one of our common texts, while the second will be based on one or more of the three additional texts. In each, I'm asking you to address the *substance* of the adaptation (what's omitted, what condensed, what added?), the *style* of the art (is it minimalist? Cartoonish? Realistic?), and the *effect* of the adaptation (on you). In addition, starting in week two, an informal response of 1-2 paragraphs to one of the week's texts should be posted to our blog each week; these blog posts are part of your participation grade. The final grade is calculated from Paper 1 (20%), Paper 2 (25%), Paper 3 (25%), with the remaining 30% based on class participation: regular attendance, regular blog postings, and participation in class discussions.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

¶ = We will read part or all of the original version of this text; all original readings will be provided via links to our blog.

Week 1 (Jan. 22) Wednesday: Introduction to class – loaded canons in a culture war.

Week 2 (Jan. 26, 28): Monday: The history and future of canons. Reading: Scholes, "Aiming a Canon at the Curriculum" (blog link). Wednesday: Inventing the precursors: The pre-canon canon. Readings: *Gilgamesh* (adap. Dixon); *Beowulf* (adap. Hines) ¶ Excerpts from *Beowulf*.

Week 3 (Feb. 2, 4): The sacred and the secular: scripture as canon. Monday: from *The Book of Daniel* (Adap. Frisch), and *The Book of Esther* (Adap. Waldman). Wednesday: *The Revelation of St. John* (Adap. Geary). ¶ *The Revelation of St. John* (King James Version).

Week 4 (Feb. 9, 11): Canon as Foundation – Monday: Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” (Adap. Chwast). Wednesday: Dante, *The Inferno* (Adap. Chwast and Emerson). ¶ Excerpts from The Wife of Bath’s Prologue.

Week 5 (Feb. 16, 18): Monday: Adapting a poem – Marvell, “To his coy mistress” (Adap. Yip); Milton, from *Paradise Lost* (Adap. Dart); Sonnet 18 (Adap. Levitas). Wednesday: The ‘Age of Reason’ unraveled – Swift, “A Modest Proposal” (Adap. Kuper); Boswell’s London Journal (Adap. Crumb). ¶ Swift and Johnson.

Week 6 (Feb. 23, 25): Romantic adaptations. Monday: Coleridge, “Kubla Khan” (Adap. Duke); Percy Shelley, “Ozymandias” (Adap. Ventura). Wednesday: Mary Shelley, “The Mortal Immortal” (Adap. Tooks). ¶ **“The Mortal Immortal.”** Paper #1 due Feb. 25.

Week 7 (March 2, 4): The stakes of the graphical. Monday: Blake, “Auguries of Innocence” (Adap. Koch). “Jerusalem: The Emmanation of the Giant Albion” Wednesday: Melville, *Moby Dick* (Adap. Kish).

SPRING BREAK

Week 8 (March 16, 18): Adapting nonfiction. Monday: *On the Origins of Species* (Adap. Keller and Fuller). Wednesday: Freud, *On the Interpretation of Dreams* (Adap. Siebel).

Week 9 (March 23, 25): The color of the canon. Monday: Douglass, “The Message from Mount Misery” (Adap. Tobocman); Hurston, “Poker” (Adap. Knight).

Week 10 (March 30, April 1): The children’s canon. Monday: *Struwwelpeter* (Adap. Glisic); Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (photo-dioramas by Raie). ¶ Naughty Little suck-a-thumb. Carroll, “Jabberwocky” (Adap. Cantrell); Alice Gallery (various artists). Paper #2 due April 1.

Week 11 (April 6, 8): Canon and gender – Dickinson, “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” (Adap. Darcy); HD, “Sea Iris” (Adap. Som). Wednesday: Chopin, “The Awakening” (Adap. Migdal).

Week 12 (April 13, 15) – Monday: Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (Adap. Ventura). Wednesday, Joyce, “Araby” (Adap. Mok). ¶ “Araby.”

Week 13 (April 20, 23) Adapting modernism: Joyce, *Ulysses*. Monday: Adaptation by Barry and Levitas. Wednesday: Adaptation by Lasky.

Week 14 (April 27, 29) Humor and Adaptation. Monday: “Good ol’ Gregor Brown,” ¶ Kafka, “The Metamorphosis.” Wednesday: Dr. Seuss does Lovecraft’s “Call of Cthulu.”

Week 15 (May 4) Review; Paper #3 due; all revisions due.