The American Literary Canon: Impervious to Change?

Al-Shalabi, Nazmi, Salameh, Fahd A., Thebyan, Qusai, Umari, Kifah, International Forum of Teaching and Studies

[Abstract]

It is claimed that the American literary canon should be revised and expanded because it does not do all American writers justice. Focusing on males and whites, this canon has been divesting women and nonwhites of the right to existence. The discussion demonstrates that the canon has been dominated by males, that it does not reflect the American diverse society, as it excludes nonwhites and women, and it should be diverse, inclusive, open to change, and indicative of who Americans are and where they come from. This study recommends that the canon be expanded to reflect America's wide variety of cultural discourses, to positively impact students' views of themselves, to help students understand America's rich experience and history, to enhance the equalizing influence of public education, to strengthen curricula, and to deepen students' understanding of America's heritage. Without this expansion, a range of voices is certain to be erased, which stifles the development of a decent and just society.

[Keywords] American literary canon; culture and literature; cultural discourse; public education
The American literary canon is composed of works that are valued for their aesthetic value and embodiment of the ideals of American society. Works such as these are held in high regard because they constitute the core curriculum for literary study in high schools, community colleges, and universities. By virtue of this status, these works are read, enjoyed, and remembered by students. Commenting on the significance of these works, Edward Said (1983) contends, in "Secular Criticism," that students are "almost always taught that these classic texts embody, express, represent what is best in our, that is, the only, tradition" (1983, p. 21). Said adds that students are also taught that such fields as the humanities and such subfields as "literature"... define the limits of what is acceptable, appropriate, and legitimate as far as culture is concerned" (p. 21).

In stark contrast with these canonized works are the ones that are excluded, unread, unnoticed, forgotten, and, thus, nonexistent. In other words, works included in the canon exist, those excluded do not. Thus existence of canonized works is ascribed to their being, Rocklin (2007) claims, "most kept in print, most frequently and fully discussed by literary critics, and most likely to be included in anthologies, and taught in college courses with titles such as 'Great American Writers'" (p. 7-8).

This matter of existence is significant. It has been giving rise to increasing contentions over the canon which has been attacked as a compendium of books written mainly by dead white males. While many critics criticize the canon for being, Stamoglou (2009) argues in "The Battle of Books," that "the vehicle for spreading and reinforcing the dominance of specific groups" (p. 29), a few authors of whom Harold Bloom (1995), Yale Professor of Humanities, is one, argue strongly in favor of the canon. Following Bloom's steps, Mary Louise Pratt (1990) maintains, in "Humanities for the Future: Reflections on Western Culture Debates at Stanford," that having a canon provides a "comm
on intellectual experience "as well as cultural capital" (p. 56). The value of the canon which shapes America's beliefs and values lies in its being a prerequisite for understanding the country's heritage. Reckoning with this value, it is unwise to suggest eliminating the canon because this act, Singleton (1996) claims that a loose canon will "result in anarchy, pure and simple" (p. 2).

Instead of elimination, the canon should be kept because it establishes a common ground. This means that people share, Jenkyns (2007) argues for "a set of references and resonances, a public vocabulary of narratives and discourse" (parag. 1). The significance of this set of references is that it constitutes, Jenkyns adds, a shared cultural inheritance that is "now being destroyed by multiculturalism and technology, satellite television and the internet in particular" (parag. ...