

# What is the Western Canon Good For?

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I AM IN THE MIDST OF MY SIXTH YEAR OF TEACHING AT SHIMER COLLEGE, A SMALL LIBERAL arts school in the Great Books tradition. This tradition, which began in the early 20th century in response to the perception that higher education was becoming too specialised, starts from the premise that every college student should engage with primary texts of enduring importance. A Great Books education is a broadly humanistic one, aimed at inducting students into the ‘Great Conversation’.

In many ways, it is a very optimistic pedagogical model, throwing students into the deep end without textbooks or background lectures, on the assumption that nothing human is foreign to them. Hence they will be able to make at least some productive headway with exemplary products of human thought. It has also tended to be a deeply conservative pedagogical model, reifying the ‘canon’ of the Western Tradition—the intellectual trajectory that postcolonial theorists have lampooned as stretching ‘from Plato to NATO’. The best-known Great Books school is St. John’s College, where students read great texts from the Greeks forward, in chronological order, meaning that they do not encounter a single text by a woman until late in their career.

A colleague of mine calls Shimer’s program ‘Reformed Great Books’, meaning that we make room for more contemporary and diverse texts in our curriculum.

Unlike the St. John's program, the Shimer curriculum is divided into three broad disciplines—Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences—and does not necessarily proceed in chronological order, even within a single course. There is one exception, however: in our senior capstone course, which is a two-semester sequence every student must take in their final year, we aim to provide a broad view of the Western tradition. Though many Great Books programs do something like this in the first year, we believe that students will be in a better position to engage with big questions and themes after they have completed the more discipline-specific sequences.

While Shimer is very liberal in the context of Great Books schools, its curriculum remains fairly conservative. That has become an increasing point of contention with our students, particularly since we have been attracting a much more diverse student body in recent years. Why should those students not have the opportunity to engage with more texts that reflect their own experience? Why should they continually have to entertain the perspective of white straight males, while white straight male students so seldom have to do the reverse? More broadly, why should they have to spend their college career working through a tradition that has been used to legitimate patriarchy, racism, and imperialism?

As the most traditional of our offerings, the senior capstone has come in for the greatest criticism on this front. Why should students spend their final year reconstructing the conventional narrative of 'the West', running from the Ancient Near East, through Greece, Rome, medieval Christianity, and modern Europe? That is a question I have been grappling with all summer, as I have been assigned to teach an 'experimental' version of the capstone course, one that reflects student concerns while still being recognisable as the same course.

The first half of the sequence, which focuses on ancient and medieval sources, is a particularly challenging one from this perspective. Aside from highlighting texts by women where available, I have tried to address student concerns by placing much greater emphasis on Islam as an integral part of the broad debate that grows out of the intersection of monotheistic religion and the Greek philosophical tradition. I have also added contemporary works of scholarship that themselves count as 'primary sources', with a preferential option for women—particularly women who aren't writing solely on 'women's issues'. And more generally, I have sought to highlight conflict and contingency in the tradition, dispelling the myth that the trajectory from Homer to the Hubble Space Telescope is a predetermined narrative of ever greater progress and awesomeness.

Much of my preparatory work, however, has consisted of reviewing some of the Greatest of Great Books: *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, the *Oresteia*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine*

*Comedy*. And as a result, it has been a very happy summer for me. These books may not be Great in some absolute, reified sense, but they are clearly, well, *great*. They don't all reflect or even anticipate the values that we take to be self-evident today, but that very foreignness opens up the space for critical reflection.

Even more interesting to me, from a pedagogical perspective, is how many of the texts stage the advent of a new idea. Most striking for me was the *Oresteia*, which presents a narrative of the emergence of law and justice out of the cycle of vengeance, a narrative that is raw and intense and, in my view at least, ultimately convincing. From a different angle, one could read the *Aeneid* as an attempt to legitimate Rome's historical destiny, an attempt that ultimately fails as it cannot help but present the cruel reality of conquest. The *Aeneid* is obviously the story of the man who would found Rome, in accordance with prophecy and with the blessing of the gods, but it is also the story about how a stranger came to town, ruined Turnus's life, and ultimately murdered him for complaining about it.

In short, if we must have a canon, we could do much worse than the traditional Great Books of the Western World. They are not the end-all be-all, but they are very fruitful points of reference that have a proven track record of inspiring creative cultural development. I am glad to have the chance to work through them, and I hope I can convince my students that they should be glad as well.

But must we have a canon? I am inclined to answer yes. Part of that stems from my personal background of being raised in a conservative Christian community. For many people, such communities are the strongest possible argument *against* the need for an authoritative canon: doesn't the Bible justify the most retrograde positions, which are blindly followed as God's word? In my experience, however, that's not how it works. What the Bible says is never simply the last word, because the Bible is a complex and heterogeneous document. Even if one presupposes that it is teaching a consistent message, that message is far from self-evident. And that means that the Bible is effectively *not* a repository of final answers, but a required reference point for argument and debate—a reference point that gives even the most marginal position an entry point into the conversation and a claim to attention and provisional legitimacy.

Now I study rather than practice religion, and my investigation of scriptural traditions in all of the great monotheistic religions shows the same pattern: far from the parodied view according to which the fundamentalist robotically does whatever is written down in scripture, the scriptural canon is *always* the starting point for reasoned deliberation, even in communities that want to believe that they are literally following scripture. And because no scriptural canon is or can be entirely self-consistent, there is always room for creativity and change. For that reason, I have always maintained that I would much rather debate with even

the most hardened Christian fundamentalist than with someone like Richard Dawkins. The fundamentalists' loyalty to a complex and ambiguous scriptural canon means that I would have at least a chance of finding a way to change their minds, whereas Dawkins' belief that he has direct access to reason and truth leaves much less room for hope.

Obviously the Great Books are not a canon in the same sense as the Bible or the Qur'an are canons. A shared cultural tradition functions differently from a shared religious or legal tradition. Yet there is a similarity in that a cultural tradition promises to provide everyone with grounds to be taken seriously as a part of the conversation. This feature explains the enduring appeal of the Great Books for class-aspirational auto-didacts. I count myself in that group: as an intellectually inclined son of working-class parents, I loved the idea that there was a list of books that could grant me credibility and respectability (and as a result, I looked long and hard at St. John's when applying to college). The Great Books collection put out by Encyclopedia Britannica had a similar audience in mind when it was released, as it was believed that working people could study and discuss the Western canon in their free time and enjoy at least some of the benefits of higher education.

This association between the classics and the working class is far from new. Library records from the Industrial Revolution reveal that where the wealthy checked out what we might call 'bestsellers', working class patrons focused on the classics. The Soviet Union took pains to make the tradition of Russian classics available to the masses (somewhat paradoxically, given the aristocratic and religious attitudes on display in most of that literature), and in the West, the Penguin Classics provided a more capitalist spin on the same goal.

The working class affinity for the classics is even inscribed directly into the tradition of great literature itself, in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Reading the book when I was the same age as young Jude, I identified deeply with his naïve belief that he could open up a new life for himself by learning Greek verb conjugations—and I felt it deeply when the promise of the Great Books was shown to be a lie in his case. When he gets his letter of rejection from Oxford, it reveals that Oxford is not a place for those who love learning, but for the kind of person who goes to Oxford.

The contemporary American university faces the risk of the same kind of self-referential nihilism, where people are expected to go to college so that they will have gone to college (and become friends with the type of people who will have gone to college). In the wake of the 'canon wars', virtually no university has a clear answer to the question of what students are getting out of college aside from very expensive vocational training. Faculty could not agree on an expanded

cultural canon that met the fully justified demands of groups that felt delegitimated from the outset by the traditional Western canon. The result is that college has become a grab bag with no shared points of reference. 'General education' requirements are a checklist that can be fulfilled by any number of courses, and the attempt to create some kind of shared cohort effect (through shared summer readings for incoming first-years, or interdisciplinary 'seminar'-style courses) often feel artificial and tacked on. If we ask what all this adds up to, the only answer is a vague gesture toward something called 'critical thinking', and of course no one can agree on what that means, either.

Compared to this directionless, content-free regime in American higher education, some cultural canon, *any* cultural canon would surely be preferable. Best of all, of course, would be a truly inclusive canon where no group would feel ignored and yet no group could ever feel completely at home—not so that we would finally have the *real* depository of all the answers, but so that we would have even more starting points for our most urgent debates.

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