

# “A matter of opinion versus skill”

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In American Literature class, I was introduced to Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain as the main authors of the canon. The canon is supposed to be the greatest works in American literature, but who defines what's great and what's not? The text has a pattern of making major writers in the canon as dead, white men. I'm shocked Emily Dickinson made it considering she's a woman. America loves to broadcast the fact that we have so many different races living in this country and we're considered the melting pot, but I haven't seen America blend together yet when it comes to literature.

Langston Hughes said it best when he stated "I, Too, Sing America." His poem focuses on how white people may be ashamed of blacks when com-



pany comes. Hughes wants us to realize us that he is American and someday will rise and get his proper recognition. His goal was later reached by his future presence in the canon. Countee Cullen was another person introduced to me as a canon writer. But the population of blacks in this country is about thirteen percent and I'm sure that two black writers aren't a fair portion. I know that populations change over the years but the Harlem Renaissance has been going on since the 1920s and I feel that there are many strong, black writers who could've also been introduced into the canon of "great works of literature".

I do feel that the canon is getting a little more diverse by including men who may have been rumored to be homosexual (ex. Walt Whitman) along with the presence of women other than Emily Dickinson. But many people do not understand the

significance of this diversity. During a discussion of why the canon should or should not be more diverse, a student said "Why should the canon be more diverse? At the time the canon was presented, it was basically all white males who were writing literature. Black people weren't writing literature, so why should we change the whole canon just because the country is more diverse?"

That is the most ignorant statement I've ever heard my whole life. Why would you want to glorify such a huge character flaw? The majority race may be uncomfortable with putting black writers into the canon because it points to the flaws in U.S. history as well as the ancestors of many readers. No one wants to air their own dirty laundry. Many black poets: Nikki Giovanni, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks point out the struggles that they've endured in this country. Along with these few, many more black writers/poets point to slavery as the source of it. Putting poetry in the canon about how black people struggled through slavery, discrimination, and poverty is like sitting in the family room having leisurely conversation about how

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Daddy molested his daughter last night. It hurts your ears. You are ashamed. No one wants to talk about what they're ashamed of.

A few black writers side step race, history, struggle, along with other controversial topics. But overall, the ratio is slim to none when you consider the main black writers and poets in the Harlem Renaissance.

**A**nother issue in the canon is whether it's disrespectful to use certain derogatory terms. A fellow student said that she had a teacher who refused to read any literature in her class that used the word "whore". But at the same time, she'd let the class read aloud any writings with the word

"nigger" in it. I don't understand how you can differentiate derogatory terms like these. Maybe it's the ratio of the school that makes a difference. Had I been at an H.B.C.U. or had the ratio of blacks been higher, maybe this teacher would've been pickier about the word "nigger" as well.

I think the canon relates in the same way. Who are the people who picked what should and shouldn't be in the canon? White males. Who is mainly in the canon? White males. I'm not saying it's wrong to support people that you are familiar with or people that you can relate to. But I think it's unfair to exclude a whole race of people just because you don't understand nor attempt to understand their point of view or talent. I question whether these literary buffs actually think that literature from other cultures is not great. Instead I go back to my original theory on putting bad business into the spotlight.

The first three months in this class, the teacher stuck to the white male authors mentioned above, even though the class description specifically states that the Harlem Renaissance would be one of the main topics. In the fourth month of this class, we finally discussed Harlem Renaissance writers. Two. Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. These are two of the most well known authors of our time. Why not dig deeper? Why not study someone else whose less known? Saying the Harlem Renaissance would be a major topic in American Literature III and then only using two authors is like saying we're going to discuss American history and then just adding Martin Luther King, Jr. There are more than just three black influential people in American history. What ever happened to W.E.B. DuBois, Rosa Parks, George Washington Carver, Malcolm X, and Hank Aaron?

The times when those everfamous black people were mentioned within the canon, they were ignorant slaves who kissed up to their master and didn't have much to say except "Yes massa". Although I enjoyed Mark Twain's twisted self-entitled novel, I noticed that the slave who Mark Twain is trying to help run away is the only black mentioned. Why is this a great work? How can I can count on a few people who obviously have such different taste from me to say what's great and what's not? The word great is a matter of opinion and so is the canon.

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