

American Literature 1880 to Present

Culture/Canon Wars Lesson Plan Excerpt

Hayley C. Stefan

For this class, students would have read:

- Rachel Donadio's "Revisiting the Canon Wars"
- Scott Jaschik's "The Evolution of American Women's Studies"
- Paul Lauter's "Transforming a Literary Canon"
- Irum Shiekh's *On Strike*

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Canon & Culture Wars

“Canon wars” refers to a debate in the 1980s & 1990s within higher education and the public about what should be taught in the humanities.

“Culture wars” are fundamental conflicts over the values of a group or nation.

During the **culture wars** of the 1980s and 1990s, left and right shared a commitment to the values of the humanities as a crucial element of American higher education. The humanities were more than a mere luxury. They were vital to higher learning. **What left and right disagreed upon, often ferociously, was how to define and teach the humanities.** Conservatives contended the humanities should accord with traditional hierarchies and that all American college students should read the Western canon as they defined it... In contrast, academic leftists sought a more inclusive, multicultural humanities curriculum and argued that students should read texts that challenged traditional hierarchies.

- Andrew Hartman, “Culture Wars and the Humanities in the Age of Neoliberalism”

The Canon Wars

Great Books

“Good” arguments and writing have value and our society depends upon what we learn from them.

Revising what we teach for the sake merely of representation risks politicizing education.

“Dead White Men”

Representation in curricula of diverse ideas & writers.

Silenced or erased histories should be reclaimed and revisited.

“Who decides what is good?”

Which lessons are valuable?
Which should we adjust?

How do we react to this conversation today?

How are the culture/canon wars still evident today?

What is the value of tradition?

What should be changed?

How would we adjust the curriculum here at UConn or in this class?

UConn

AmLit 2203

Responding to the Canon/Culture Wars

Taking the significance of the culture/canon wars seriously, we are reviewing what we read and discuss in our American Literature class to see what is under-, mis-, and/or unrepresented.

Think about what groups, genres, forms, concepts, or otherwise you feel we should add to our class. In the linked survey, please include

- One (or two) suggested additions for our syllabus, and
- A short (i.e., one or two sentences is sufficient) statement about why you chose this text, group, or idea.

We will accept nominations through this Sunday, April 1st at 7 pm. In class on Monday, April 2nd we will vote on these nominations. The "winning" text will be added to our syllabus to be read and subsequently discussed in class next Friday, April 6th.