**Teaching English Literature With an Exploding Canon**

Back when life seemed simpler than it is now, the teaching of literature in school was determined essentially by the literature provided in school anthologies. This situation changed with the growing availability of inexpensive paperback books in the 1950s and 1960s. Coincident with the popularity of paperbacks was the push toward multiple electives at the secondary level, a move that would not have been possible had it not been possible to move outside typical school anthologies.

As the use of paperbacks proliferated, so did the problems of school administrators, who often faced concerted resistance from parents and pressure groups within the community that sought to ban “indecent” readings from the curriculum. What people considered indecent varied broadly from objector to objector and covered a multitude of transgressions. The upshot was, predictably, the censorship of such popular books about teenagers as J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* or Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman*.

More surprising to some was the banning of books like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and even Frances Patton’s innocent novel, *Good Morning, Miss Dove*. In fact, it is difficult to find any quality literature, including the plays of William Shakespeare and the poetry of Emily Dickinson, that has not been banned somewhere at some time. The *Arizona English Bulletin* for years published a running tally of the what's and where's of book banning in the United States.

English educators are now faced with a new reality. Most major English departments in American colleges and universities are keenly aware of the inadequacy of a literary canon that has for a century ignored much of the writing that women, racial minorities, and political dissidents have produced. In a society that has systematically sought since the 1960s to banish discrimination and to move toward equality of opportunity, this lapse is all the more keenly felt because much of the work produced by these writers is of high literary quality and significant social content.

Gary Nelson, author of the newly released *Repression and Recovery*,1 has unearthed and regularly teaches his students a vast body of credible poetry that seemed all but lost but is now beginning to surface in various collections and anthologies. The same thing is occurring in English classes throughout the country.

In a recent interview, Nelson charged that “the literary history we have been taught and passed on to our students in the last twenty years is largely a scandal.”2 In response to a question about whether he foresees the new canon’s finding its way into the schools, he responded, “As we send out students who have had a wider range of courses and have read a wider range of texts, it’s guaranteed to filter down to secondary schools.”3 *Theory in the Classroom,*4 edited by Nelson, discussed changes that we can anticipate in how literature will be taught and in what literature will be taught, and the implications these changes have for literary anthologists. The major anthologies have already expanded the canon to include more women and more representatives of minority groups. The tendency thus far, however, has been for publishers to err on the side of safety and to anthologize the less searching writing of these authors; in other words, the writing that most nearly reflects the dominant culture.

A major concern now is that the canon be made more representative of what actually has been going on in society. Revision is afoot; changes are inevitable; resistance will be organized and angry. Administrators, informed by faculty who best understand how and why the canon is exploding, will have to frame answers to questions from those who seek to limit its scope.

The caveat that must haunt administrators is that great literature is and ever has been searching, discomfiting, thought-provoking. Literature, at its best, is a burr in the human conscience that slowly transforms the social order.

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3Ibid.

R. Baird Shuman is Professor of English, Director of Development for English, and Acting Director of the Writing Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Box 1687, Champaign, IL 61820-1687.