

Discussions on Literature: Breaking literary rules

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Abstract: *The present study is not based on a broader academic research, and it is not our intention to exhaust the subject. Our aim is to analyze the relationship between canonic and non-canonic literature, discussing the superiority of the first one over the latter and proposing that the non-canonic one be given more value, since it has experienced, recently, a growth that cannot be denied or ignored.*

Keywords: *canonic literature, non-canonic literature, classics, best-sellers, literature.*

It has been centuries since the creation of *The Canterbury Tales*, written by Geoffrey Chaucer. Since then, the English-language world has consolidated in its studies a tradition of canonic literature, comprehending authors from Shakespeare to Joyce's level. However, the canonization of a particular set of literature has marginalized that sort of Non-canonic literature, which has had an enormous growth in recent years: young people's best-sellers, self-help books, humorous chronicles, some horror stories and other examples that compete for room in bookshop shelves.

The main concept that comes through many definitions of the word *Canon* is that of a list of very strictly selected things – books, rules, symbols - that have been chosen by supreme authorities as the standards of perfection. The word is frequently used regarding the books of the Bible that are officially recognized by the Church. Following that pattern, the Canon of English Literature intends to establish the most important pieces of literature in the English Language through the years.

However, it seems that the so-called academic authorities not only deny any status to the Non-canonic literature works, but also vehemently admit their dislike for them, taking these books as representatives of the popular mass, which is never seen as cultured; and emptying them until they look like “lesser books”, mere money-makers, even when they are not. With the increasing variety of approaches in literary studies, as

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well as the rise of new authors, the traditional Canon has been the subject of various debates. The questioning of the Canon itself is one of the most debated topics in literary studies, not only for the literatures of the English language.

Perhaps the Non-canonic books are, indeed, commercial books. Maybe they are really useful to give money to their authors. Samuel Johnson, however, did not find it a problem when he stated that “no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money”¹. His view can be a little extreme, but the history of art is full of these “self-seeking” people. Titus Maccius Plautus, one of Shakespeare’s inspirations, was a writer because his business had failed and he needed money. In Music, Rossini composed his most famous opera, *The Barber of Seville*, because he had a debt to pay.

Critic and writer Harold Bloom wrote a review on J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series entitled: “Can 35 Million Book Buyers Be Wrong? Yes.”. In his article, Bloom claims that children's literature such as the mentioned series only contributes for a “dumbing down” of its readers, also saying that Rowling's writing is not demanding enough for children, as, for instance, Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. After paragraphs of what we can only understand as an extremely narrow point of view on readers education, Bloom asks his reader: “Why read, if what you read will not enrich mind or spirit or personality?”². Ten years later, the *Harry Potter* franchise is one of the largest in the world – there are whole generations of young people who have heard of, read and chosen *Harry Potter* as one of their favorite book series. Are all of them wrong? According to Bloom, certainly. According to many of today's young readers, the *Harry Potter* series may become a classic in the future.

The reading of Non-canonic literature books, best-sellers or not, is important. Nowadays, reading classic books is a less and less frequent habit of young people and works of literature that may light that spark of pleasure for it should be seen as a positive thing. If we were to introduce reading to a young teenager through series such as *Harry Potter*, who is to say this child would not seek other books, maybe with more “demanding” language, afterwards? Chances are he/she probably would, or, if he/she would not, he/she might seek other best-sellers, and that can be just as good, for one

¹ *Quotes on Writing: The Samuel Johnson Sound Bite Page*. Disponível em: <<http://www.samueljohnson.com/writing.html>> Acesso em 14 set. 2009.

² BLOOM, Harold. *Can 35 Million Book Buyers Be Wrong? Yes*. Disponível em <<http://1xn.org/softspeakers/PDFs/bloom.pdf>> Acesso em 14 set. 2009

thing: his/her reading skills would be pushed, somehow. When he/she grows up, he/she will feel familiarized with literature, and thus may take an interest in reading the works of the Canon.

Simply putting Canonic and Non-canonic literature in extreme opposite sides is not good to any of them. One guarantees the survival of the other: the first one because it establishes the basis and serves as a model, since many of the subjects dealt with in Canonic works, such as the Achilles' heel and the Pandora's Box, are also present in Non-canonic works. On the other side, the reading of Non-canonic literature books is important to keep classic books in. The Academy, concerning literature, remains very traditional at this subject. Books are expected to be true works of art to become classics or Canonic books, and are compared to those books in the Canon in terms of language refinement and plot construction when, in fact, simple story books are being read far and wide, while the refined works of authors the Academy may rate as Canon-level literature are unlikely to reach the majority of the readers.

According to Bloom, *The Western Literary Canon* "exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral"³, and there are only some few essential pieces of work, such as Shakespeare's major tragedies, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the Torah, the Gospels, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Homer's epics. The Canon proposed by Bloom leads us to an idea that our references can only be built according to these imposed limits, and that authors should be, as they have been, Canonized due to their ideology role, and not their popularity. Why are the Non-Canonic books so popular? By being based on works of the Canon – once they are taken as worldly references – don't they cover the same values and portray, in different ways, ideologies that are similar to those in the Canon books?

Ítalo Calvino, in "Por que ler os Clássicos", a study about Classics, states that a classic is the kind of book we are constantly rereading, those that "constitute a richness for those who have read and loved them [...], that have a particular influence when they impose themselves as unforgettable [...], that have never finished what they had to say."⁴ Why, for many of those who read Non-canonic books, this is the exact feeling

³ BLOOM, Harold. "The Western Canon". In: *The Western Canon – Books and school of the Ages*. Riverhead Trade, 1995, p. 33.

⁴ In the original: "[...]constituem uma riqueza para quem os tenha lido e amado [...], que exercem uma

they have when recognizing, at a certain time, their own classics, not necessarily in the strict meaning of the word. When writing a book, the author has something to say, and by reading it, the author is being heard. The pleasure for reading the same book is not something that can only be applied to Canonic works – every reader has a favorite book, one that they love to read and reread every once in a while.

The timeless quality of the Canonic books can also be seen in many Non-canonic works. Critics may say otherwise, but it would be unreasonable to believe that there is a certain prejudice towards Non-canonic books, for they are often written in a much simpler way than the Canonic ones. However, as mentioned before, there are various subjects that are covered by both Canonic and Non-canonic books, and it is mainly those subjects that make them touching to us. Considering that these popular works, both fiction and Non-fiction, are also part of our culture and have a great influence in our society, then it is impossible not to take their importance into account: how many of them have not moved the readers? How many have not been reread countless times with ever-growing delight, dating a new era in a man's life?

It is valid to mention T. S. Eliot's words in "Tradition and individual talent": "what is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career."⁵ This is shown in both Canonic and Non-canonic literature, and not only in poetry. The difference between them is how they have been displayed, some in a complex and timeless way, and the other in a more contemporary – that can be equally timeless - and simpler way.

The "consciousness of the past", as mentioned by Eliot, should always be taken into account. Of course, there are important works listed in the Canon, and they form the basis to various concepts that have been developed in literature, but the extreme opposition of Canon and Non-canon is not good for any of the sides. According to Aristotle's *mimesis*, everything is a reconstruction of something formerly known – why should literature be different?

Establishing standards of perfection in such a subjective matter as literature may

influência particular quando se impõem como inesquecíveis [...], que nunca termin[aram] de dizer aquilo que tinha[m] para dizer." (CALVINO, Ítalo. "Por que ler os clássicos". In: *Por que ler os clássicos*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995, pp. 10-11).

⁵ ELIOT, T. S. "Tradition and individual talent". In: *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. Disponível em: <<http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>> Acesso em 14 set. 2009.

be a mistake. The Canon is filled with rich, valid reference works, but that does not mean it cannot be reviewed, nor does it mean new works cannot be added to it. Recognizing Non-canonic literature, rather than marginalizing it, could contribute to positive changes in the Academic views, as well as in our cultural consciousness and backgrounds.

If all the books ever written were gathered in a pyramid, the real classics would be at the top. Works of unquestionable quality, of everlasting influence. But the base would be built of that great part of the books that, being good or not, may have a special and particular meaning for those who read, and whose demerit must always be doubted and put to the test. Because they are not paradigmatic, or origins of totally original views, they will never be regarded as Canonic. We are not saying, however, that there are no such things as badly written books. There are, naturally, as there are ugly paintings and boring movies. We intend to have discussed the value of Non-canonic literature in the building of a livelier and more flexible reading spirit, according to individual realities; and the acknowledgement of the current literary multiplicity, which also respects human ideals and affirms virtues of our time.

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