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# The Last Word: The Politics of Literature: What Makes a Masterwork?

Charles Fanning  
*Bridgewater State College*

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## The Politics of Literature: What Makes a Masterwork?

Charles Fanning



**Rembrandt: Aristotle with a Bust of Homer**

(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchased with special funds and gifts of friends of the Museum 1961.)

One Indian summer afternoon in October I attended a meeting of the college committee whose job it is to approve or reject the courses that our students may take for "General Education" credits. One course that I designed and have taught twice, "The Literature of Immigration and Ethnicity," came under fire from some committee members. Their main objection was the absence from the reading list of books that the committee considered to be "literary masterworks of Western civilization." Not much happened in the way of defining such "masterworks." It was assumed that we all knew one when we saw one. The only title mentioned was *Moby Dick*.

Herman Melville is, in fact, an instructive case, though not in a way that the committee would necessarily welcome. When *Moby Dick* first appeared in 1851, the reviews were few, unenthusiastic, and uncomprehending. So disheartened was Melville by this, and the even more negative response to his next novel, *Pierre*, that he virtually stopped writing fiction, although he was in his early thirties and had 40 more years to live. By the time of his death in 1891, he was a forgotten man. Here Melville's reputation languished until the publication in 1921 of a study of his life and career which began a reassessment that culminated in his canonization as perhaps THE great American novelist. The most important document in Melville's apotheosis was a book published in 1941 by Harvard professor F. O. Matthiessen: *American Renaissance*.

This book had itself become canonical by the time I entered Harvard College as a freshman more callow than most in 1960. Matthiessen had died five years earlier, but his book was already discussed in reverent tones as the Bible of American literary study. The book discusses five writers who Matthiessen contended were responsible singlehandedly for a renaissance in American letters that had taken place between 1850 and 1855, when their masterworks appeared. These writers were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman,

Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, whom Matthiessen called "the American with the richest natural gifts as a writer."

Now, I would no more have questioned Matthiessen's litany of the great American writers (accepted as gospel by my professors, some of whom had been his students) than I would at the time have questioned the gospel itself. In fact, it took me 20 years to ask what now seem two obvious questions: what do these writers have in common, and who is missing from the list? First, all five were men. All came from white Anglo-Saxon Protestant families that had been in America for at least a hundred years. All were from either Boston or New York. Second, who is missing? Women and ethnic and racial minorities. You wouldn't know from reading this book that there were any nineteenth-century American writers worth reading who were not East Coast, male WASPs. Moreover, there are significant gaps in subject matter. You wouldn't know from reading Matthiessen that any writers had dealt with working-class life, factory work, families and child-rearing, attitudes toward women and minorities, or issues of immigration, ethnicity, and assimilation. Had they been asked, Matthiessen and his successors would have said that there were few writers worth reading other than the Big Five, and that the missing subjects were

peripheral to an understanding of the essence of America. They would have said that *Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson's essays, and *Walden* were the masterworks of nineteenth-century American literature. This gets us to the issue of how and by whom the canon of masterworks is determined. Probably the most familiar and widely accepted notion is that a classic is a work that has withstood the "test of time." A classic formulation thereof is that of Samuel Johnson, who declared in his *Preface to Shakespeare* that masterpieces are those works that "unassisted by interest or passion, have passed through variations of taste and changes of manners, and, as they devolved from one generation to another, have received new honors at every transmission." Most interesting to me in Johnson's definition is the notion that a book makes its own way, "unassisted by interest or passion"; that is, that no special interests are at work in a book's ultimate emergence as a masterwork. In those halcyon days of the Kennedy administration I swallowed this sort of thing whole, but such an idea now appears to me to be strikingly naive. It takes a heap of faith to absolve literature of the tangle of motives, the subtext of psychological, social, and economic self-interest, that surely informs every other area of human endeavor. It now seems to me obvious that a literary reputation is no

more arrived at by objective standards than any other kind of reputation. Instead, it is most definitely what I would call a POLITICAL matter. The people who write, read, judge, and teach literature are no more or less capable of objective evaluation than anyone else. They form interest groups as inevitably as any other aggregate of human beings whose interests are served or harmed by the decisions they make.

There have always been established elites in literature -- groups of people in power who have a significant measure of control over what gets published (and thus read), praised (and thus taught), and eventually canonized as a masterwork. It seems to me that there have been three such elites controlling the American literary canon since publishing became big business in the 1830s. Through the late nineteenth century, the publishers were in control. By the turn of the century, the great age of magazines, journalists and reviewers had taken over. And in our time, the literary establishment has become the academy -- college and university professors.

The "test of time" thesis argues that a book remains popular over a long period of time, during which short-sighted cavils and contemporary prejudices drop away to leave -- lo and behold -- a masterwork. Now this certainly doesn't describe the emergence of *Moby Dick*. On the contrary, after 70 years of total neglect, Melville suddenly began to be read again -- thanks to two influential critics from the literary establishment: his biographer Raymond Weaver and F. O. Matthiessen. Actually, this kind of shot-in-the-dark rediscovery is at least as common in literary study as the steady progression of the test of time. What happens is that a particular cultural generation, because of its preoccupations and predilections, becomes receptive to new and different works. Certain cracks appear in the armor of accepted dogma preached by whatever elite is currently established as keepers of the kingdom of culture. Thus, Weaver and Matthiessen broke through the hegemony of late-nine-

teenth-century "Gilded Age" critics, who believed that literature ought to provide ideal examples and moral uplift, in order to praise Melville's fierce grappling with deeper, more disturbing issues.

For a variety of reasons, ranging from accepted ideas of role distribution to sheer prejudice, the nineteenth century was not a good time for women or minorities to get properly published, read, and reviewed in America. But there were dozens of women who wrote novels then that are worth considering in our time. Most such books were dismissed previously as "women's fiction." In a now famous phrase, Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of Matthiessen's heroes, called their authors "a damned mob of scribbling women." A similar intolerance governed the literary scene for ethnic and racial minorities. Thoreau declared in *Walden*, for example, that "the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe." A slander of such generality is of particular interest to me, because I am currently writing a book that traces the literature produced by Irish Americans from the eighteenth century to the present. And, in fact, my research has turned up an impressive number of fascinating, forgotten writers who also deserve to be considered freshly.

Reclamation projects for women and black writers have been under way for some years now, and these have already yielded important discoveries. Some that come to mind are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*, and the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The work in other immigrant and ethnic groups is less far along, but may be no less fruitful, if the Irish are any indication. My point is this. What governs the formulation and revision of the canon of accepted masterworks is not the test of time, but different times. We need to keep our minds -- and our course syllabi -- open so that this work can continue.

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Charles Fanning is a professor of English at Bridgewater State College.

## Pride

You wait for him  
by the side of the road,  
the old, red Peugeot swinging down on you  
like a chariot.

You strain to see if he is anxious  
getting out; if his thighs too are jelly.  
But the strength in his footsteps  
obscures your vision.

*He does not struggle.  
His eyes are silent, blood unscreaming.*

Straightening,  
you fix your face into the same cool gray  
as his jacket.

## Security

You lean with him  
against the car door,  
the three hundred mile good-bye  
breathing down your crotch  
and his hand light on your hip.

In his fingertips  
you recognize your own reluctance;  
his fear freezes on your tongue.  
Somewhere in your toes  
you want to say  
you're not a spider.

## Blossoming

I wake  
with expectation of you  
rising in my blood  
a bubble  
streaming toward the surface  
I am bursting with you

In the telephone  
your voice is an anxious stutter  
thick with Jamaica  
*I did not think that I would call so soon*  
you say  
but it's been centuries  
and I am bursting

Outside  
magnolia buds  
swelled with early morning drizzle  
break into blossom

This I believe  
will be the last beginning

Ann duCille

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Ann duCille is a member of the English Department faculty at Bridgewater State College, where she teaches courses in poetry, Afro-American literature, and creative writing. An alumna of BSC, Class of 1971, she holds a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University. Her poetry and short stories have appeared in several magazines and anthologies, including *The Iowa Review*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Panache*, *New Letters*, and *Presence Africain*.