The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages by Harold Bloom

Discussed and debated, revered and reviled, Bloom’s tome reinvigorates and re-examines Western Literature, arguing against the politicization of reading. His erudite passion will encourage you to hurry and finish his book so you can pick up Shakespeare, Austen and Dickens once again to rediscover their original magic. In addition, his appendix listing of the future canon - the books today that will be timeless tomorrow - is sure to be the template for future debate.

Harold Bloom has been, arguably, the world’s best reader, the most wide-ranging and the most retentive. Some people believe his book, The Western Canon, verges on the audacious since Bloom dares to list what Western literary works are canonical as well as what ones will be. While the appendices, with their lists of books, are the section of The Western Canon that provokes the most argument, these take up relatively few of the book’s 578 pages. Bloom begins with a Preface and Prelude, then indicates the mood the book will assume in An Elegy for the Canon. Adopting Giambattista Vico’s theory of history, Bloom then goes on to discuss twenty-six writers from different ages of literature. From the Aristocratic Age: Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Molière, Milton, Johnson and Goethe; from the Democratic Age: Wordsworth, Austen, Whitman, Dickinson, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy and Ibsen; and from the Chaotic Age: Freud, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Borges, Neruda, Pessoa and Beckett. Just before the appendices is the Elegiac Conclusion, in which Bloom says he has very little confidence that literary education will survive its current malaise, but he hopes that there will be literate survivors.

Early in the book, Bloom tells us that he is not interested in the debate among those want to preserve the Western canon and those who want to destroy it. Instead, Bloom is interested only in literary aesthetics and he claims that canonicity comes only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction. Bloom
believes in the existence of canons, he says, because the very brevity of life prevents us from reading more than a fraction of the literature created by various authors throughout the centuries. The Western Canon is more than an interesting book; it is also very thought-provoking. Some of the questions raised include: Is canonicity always the result of one writer's triumph over a great literary ancestor? Do not canons, to some degree, depend on the choices of the wealthy as well as on chance, luck or other devices of caprice? Does Bloom put too much emphasis on cognitive difficulty, choosing books that few readers outside of universities would ever want to read, much less reread? Then there is the excessive praise of Shakespeare as the entire center of the Western Canon. Is this perceptive criticism or does it cross the line into idolatry? There are those who believe Bloom is too quick to dismiss the moral value of literature. Shelley, they say, went too far in his Defence of Poetry in praising great literature for enlarging a reader's imagination and thus leading to moral improvement. But Bloom, say the same critics, fails to go far enough in acknowledging the moral implications inherent in all great literature.

The greatest arguments, however, are reserved for the lists at the end of the book. How could Bloom leave out this author and include that? Why is this book included and that one not? But even the critics have to praise Bloom for the breadth of his lists; his idea of the Western canon includes authors from the United States, Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Western Asia, Africa, the West Indies and South America. Bloom even notes The Mahabharata and the Ramayana and says that ignorance of the Koran is foolish and increasingly dangerous. Bloom has also included English-language works by writers whom one would not necessarily think of as Western, for example: R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala.

Another source of controversy has been the (almost) exclusion of female authors. Bloom does mention Alice Walker even before he gets to his lists, but he refuses to say anything good about her. Regarding the works of Toni Morrison, Bloom sees fit to include only Song of Solomon in the canon. He omits all works by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Ayn Rand, Bobbie Ann Mason and Pearl Buck. To be fair, Bloom leaves out a number of male authors as well, authors whom one would have assumed would have been included such as John Gardner, John Updike (represented only by The Witches of Eastwick) and Arthur Miller (represented only by Death of a Salesman).

Although some have accused Bloom of composing a canon made up of Dead White European Males, he does include several American authors in his lists as well as devoting half chapters to Jane Austen and George Eliot and full chapters to Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, all of whom he praises lavishly.

The Western Canon will never be beyond argument and debate, that is simply an impossibility. People will always disagree with Bloom on one point or another. In the final analysis, Bloom, this century's greatest reader, has treated an enormously important topic with tremendous expertise. And, although an eccentric par excellence, Bloom has definitely compiled
astute reading suggestions and critical opinions that certainly deserve anyone's careful consideration.

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