



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF  
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS***

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## 1.1. The Canon

### Reading Skills

\* Prior to dealing with the following questions, students should read:

- Catherine Belsey, "Re-reading the great tradition". *Re-reading English*. Ed. Peter Widdowson. London and New York: Methuen, 1982. 121-35.
- Marilyn Butler, "Repossessing the Past: the Case for an Open Literary History". *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*. Ed. Dennis Walder. Oxford: Oxford University Press / The Open University, 1990 (1987). 9-17.
- Terry Eagleton, "Literature and the Rise of English." *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*. Ed. Dennis Walder. Oxford: Oxford University Press / The Open University, 1990 (1983). 21-27.
- Frank Kermode, "Canon and Period." *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*. Ed. Dennis Walder. Oxford: Oxford University Press / The Open University, 1990 (1988). 17-20.
- F.R. Leavis, "The Great Tradition". *The Great Tradition*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980 (1948). 9-39.

I

1. Check the definition of "canon" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). What do you understand by the canon of English Literature?
2. Where does Butler date the birth of the literary canon?
3. What does Butler point to as disadvantageous for students with regard to the "Modernist-Romantic canon"?
4. How does Eagleton define the literary canon?
5. What, according to Kermode, does the "manifesto" produced by the Professor of English and Human Relations at the University of Pennsylvania propose?
6. What, according to Kermode, are the assumptions underlying the Professor's assessment of the canon?
7. On what grounds does Kermode express a sceptical attitude to "the whole revolutionary enterprise"?
8. Why, according to Kermode, are canons useful?
9. What, according to Kermode, happens to books once they become canonical?
10. Who, according to Leavis, are the "great English novelists"?
11. What do the novelists concerned by Leavis to be "great" reveal a marked degree of concern with?
12. What is Leavis's opinion of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Joyce's *Ulysses*?
13. Comment on Leavis's judgement of the nineteenth and twentieth century novels highlighted by him.
14. What, according to Belsey, did Leavis's "critical 'discriminations'" establish?

15. According to Belsey, for what purpose might one re-read “the great tradition”?
16. Comment on Belsey’s use of the small case in “the great tradition”?
17. How does Belsey see texts?
18. What claim does Belsey make for her feminist reading of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*?
19. Which writers do you understand to be canonical in Catalan and/or Spanish literature?
20. Are you aware of challenges having been made to either or both of the above?

## II

\* Prior to dealing with the following questions, students should read:

- Harold Bloom, “Preface and Prelude”. *The Western Canon*. London: Macmillan, 1995 (1994). 1-12.
  - Peter Widdowson, “What is ‘Literature’?” *Literature*. London: Routledge, 1999. 1-25.
1. Whom does Bloom categorise within the “School of Resentment”?
  2. Identify the element which Bloom detects as making authors and texts canonical.
  3. Comment on Bloom’s attitude to Cultural Materialist, New Historicist and Feminist readings of Shakespeare.
  4. Widdowson sees “unthinking assumptions” and “unexamined criteria” in Bloom’s *The Western Canon*. Can you identify any from your reading of the “Preface and Prelude” to Bloom’s text?
  5. Widdowson claims that canonical texts “can also be ‘re-read’ in ways which release them from the limitations of their canonic status”. How can canonical status be limiting?

## Writing Skills

1. Read “An Elegy for the Canon” in Bloom’s *The Western Canon* (pp. 15-41 in the edition cited above). Define Bloom’s positioning and explain your own position in relation to his.
2. Discuss Kermode’s view in “Canon and Period” that “canons are useful in that they enable us to handle otherwise unmanageable historical deposits” (1990: 18).
3. Consider the authors regarded as canonical in Spain and Catalonia in Bloom’s “Appendix D. The Chaotic Age: A Canonical Prophecy” (Bloom 1995: 549-50). Would you agree with his lists or not? Argue your case.
4. Comment on Widdowson’s assertion: “‘The Canon’ needs to be studied as the cultural formation it inescapably is” (1999: 23).