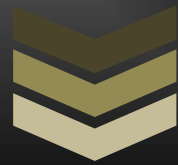


TRADITION AND THE LITERARY CANON



We need to know the writing of the past,
and know it differently than we have ever
known it; not to pass on a tradition but to
break its hold over us.

Adrienne Rich,
On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose
1966-78

CARL TIGHE

This article explores the relationship between contemporary writers, the literary canon and the idea of belonging to a national literary tradition, and it invites you to consider these things in relation to your own writing.

I am concerned here with what is often called the Literary Canon. One definition of the canon is a collection of books and documents (literature, poetry, epics, history, biography) somehow accepted as normative, as 'the representative literature' of a particular community: that is, the most important books in the life of that community. The community referred to may be a national community or linguistic, a speech community.

But that is not the end of it. Another definition of the Literary Canon is: 'an authoritative list of books compiled by university scholars in the 1930s and 1940s, which all educated people should respect and admire'.¹

Our word canon came from the Greek word *kanon*, meaning a rod or reed, and by extension a rule or measuring stick. Here are some modern definitions of the idea:

- A Church law; an ecclesiastical law or code of laws established by a church council
- A general secular law, rule or code of law governing the treatment of subjects
- Criterion, the basis for judgement, standard
- The list of books of the Bible officially recognised and accepted by the Church
- With a capital C. Part of the Mass, beginning after the Sanctus and ending just before The Lord's Prayer
- On the list or calendar of saints accepted by the Roman Catholic Church (i.e. canonised)
- An authoritative list of genuine works by a particular author or authors
- A musical composition or passage in which the same melody is repeated by one or more voices successively, overlapping in time in the same or related key
- In printing: a size of type, 48-point
- A member of a chapter of priests serving in a cathedral or collegiate church
- A member of a religious community living under a common rule and bound by vows.

The idea of the canon clearly represents something – but what, and to whom?

One way of looking at the canon is to say that it represents a 'line' of writing that stretches back through time, and which constitutes a kind of 'handing on' of styles, techniques, themes, concerns, ideas and discussions. Nobel prize winning poet T. S. Eliot, in his famous essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', made the point that no artist has their complete meaning alone. By this he meant that we all operate within a

¹ Naomi Wilds, 'The Reading Revival', *Word of Mouth 2*, (Derby, March 2003), 6. See also: Kathryn B. Stockton, 'Canon: Dictionary Definitions', www.gender/defcan.

context of history, society and intellect, and that we cannot, as writers, be appreciated except in relation to the writers around us, the writers who went before us, and what we do with the culture that has come down to us:

The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.' Eliot also made the point that tradition was not necessarily something we absorbed in the air. Tradition, he wrote, 'cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.'²

The poet Roger McGough gives us some idea of the power of tradition in his book *Said and Done* (2006). In 1984 McGough travelled to Deya on the island of Majorca to meet the veteran poet Robert Graves. Graves was in poor health and was to die the following year. After taking tea McGough rose to go and shook hands with Graves. He wrote: 'I was aware that I was holding the hand of the man who had held the hand of Thomas Hardy, who in turn had held the hand of Tennyson, who had held the hand...'³ McGough had been born in 1937: Graves had been born in 1895: Thomas Hardy had been born in 1840 and Tennyson had been born in 1809. McGough had in mind a line of poets that stretched back into history that he, as a fellow poet and by meeting and shaking hands, had become a part of. If you like that is an image of poetic tradition, literally a 'handing on' of something, contact, friendship between two poets.⁴

Taken together these things help us not only to define a particular tradition of writing, but to define a literary culture, set that within a national tradition, and contribute to a cultural identity. A literary tradition says this is who we are, these are our concerns and this is what we write about. Somehow, the canon, however imperfectly, represents us.

The question comes down to how we apply and use a literary tradition, and whether we regard innovation as betrayal or development. To a great extent, even though we might be at odds with the writers who went before us, our writing is still an extension of what has been written before. This line of thinking leads to further questions. Think about you and your writing in relation to the following:

- Can writers ever hope to be absolutely new in what they write, and if they are absolutely new, will anybody understand them?
- Is it possible to separate a tradition from the people who practice it? How can individual practitioners, particularly in traditional forms like Folk singing or Storytelling, break with tradition by doing something new? Is any and all innovation the end of a tradition or the development of a tradition?

² T. S. Eliot 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) in: *T. S. Eliot Selected Prose* (Faber & Faber: London, 1953), 23.

³ Roger McGough, 'Introduction', *The Spoken Word: Robert Graves*, The British Library: London, 2009.

⁴ See also the chapter on writing and tradition in Carl Tighe, *Writing and Responsibility* (Routledge: London 2004)

- Are you part of more than one tradition? Apart from English, what other literary traditions do you have access to? Can you identify elements of Caribbean, African, Arab, Indian, Persian, Irish, Welsh, Celtic, Jewish, East European, Scandinavian, Australian Aboriginal, Indigenous American or other traditions in your work?
- Is it possible to cross from one tradition to another? Is it possible to import ideas and techniques from one tradition to another? Can you think of any examples?
- What literary traditions and blending of different traditions are you aware of in your writing? What tradition/s are you a part of? What other traditions might 'claim' you? What traditions would you like to claim a part of?

The position of writers in the English literary tradition is very different from that of writers in other literary traditions – even when they use the English language: writers in Ireland, Wales, the Caribbean, South America and Africa all have a very different take on the function of writing and their role within their society, and many have written about the Eurocentric canon that dominates the idea of what 'good writing' might be. Barbara Christian for example, who was educated at a Christian Mission school in the West Indies, has complained about words like *center*, *periphery*, *discourse*, *canon* and *texts*, as forms of cultural power and colonial oppression, and has said that she cannot 'hear the word canon without smelling incense'.⁵

Our literary heritage is part of our culture and our identity. Even if we innovate in language and literary form, there are questions we have to ask about any literary canon, about any literary authority and about any literary traditions to which we might belong. The American writer Alice Walker felt it was vital to challenge the culture of a predominantly white America, to challenge certain currents within black American culture, and that it was also equally necessary to challenge black American perceptions of African tradition. She challenged the former with her novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and then later with a stark study of female genital mutilation in her book *Warrior Marks* (1993).

Writers in opposition to Communism, for example, were central to the preservation of pre-communist cultural values, but also more constrained by the culture they preserved. Vaclav Havel has been at great pains to say that over the last century the writing traditions of east central Europe have been very different from those of Western Europe:

Traditionally in our circumstances more is expected of writers than merely writing readable books. The idea that a writer is the conscience of his nation has its own logic and its own tradition here. For years, writers have stood in for politicians: they were the renewers of the national community, maintainers of the national language, awakers of the national conscience, interpreters of the national will. This tradition has continued under totalitarian conditions, where it gains its own special colouring: the written word seems to have acquired a kind of heightened radioactivity - otherwise they wouldn't lock us up for it! Many of our western colleagues might envy us the degree of

⁵ B. Christian, 'The Race for Theory' (1987) in: B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Routledge: London, 1997), 459.

attention and social resonance that we enjoy. But it's a double-edged thing: it can bind one, tie one down, limit one. It's as though he were suddenly blocked by his social role, as though, out of respect for the role assigned to him and doubts about his worthiness for it, his voice acquired a stammer; as though he were simply no longer as free as he should be.⁶

This was the certainly the case in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, where communism inadvertently preserved a social and political role for writers that, for all the problems of repression and censorship, was envied by many writers in the west.

But where does this leave the contemporary writer? Does the 'accepted literary canon' represent us? Do we have a responsibility to tradition or to the identity that goes with certain traditions? Should writers be concerned with tradition? Does tradition affect them at all? Can writers ignore tradition? How can we distinguish a traditional practice from the practice of an individual? How can we know for sure that a thing is traditional? What difference does it make whether it is traditional or not? Are we part of a tradition of writing just because of the language that history handed us? Who among our predecessors do we look to, have time for, reread, admire and argue with? Who do we dismiss? In what areas do we share things? In what ways are our aims common? What binds us to the writers of the past? Are we doing something that develops an idea they started? Or are we doing something entirely new? In an age dominated by Hollywood, TV soaps and a commercial rather than a literary market for writing, is it possible to do something new? And if we do something new, will we find a publisher or a market for it? Where do we go now?

A further difficulty with the canon is the idea that English Literature is written only by English people, or that it can only be written in 'standard English'. Poetry, particularly in the oral tradition, and writing from the Caribbean, Australia and Africa often stretches the concept of the English language. It must also be said that some of the most famous writers in English, writers accepted in the canon, are not in fact 'English'. A great many 'English' writers have been Irish, Welsh and Scottish, many are American, and a great many come from what were once termed 'the colonies'.

For writers tradition and the established canon usually produces one of two reactions. Firstly it can be seen as the productive and practical study of a mode of writing to be superseded, argued with, improved upon. Or, more often it can be seen as producing an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and a crippling self-consciousness in the face of the 'classics'. The growth of Creative Writing in universities, since it is as intimately bound up with the practical aspects of writing as it is with questions of where writing will go next, addresses question of tradition and the canon pragmatically by tackling the issue of the writer's relationship to the language and seeking new ways to develop and by promoting the view that the canon is useful for knowing what has already been done. But perhaps that is all it is useful for.

Tradition - and literary tradition is no exception - can be made, manufactured, remade, altered and shaped at will, and as such it is useful, important, but deeply meaningless. However, we can't easily get away from tradition since it is our

⁶ V. Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (Faber & Faber: London, 1990), 72.

language, our identity, our accumulated knowledge of the world and how to survive in it.

For example, here are the names of some well-known modern writers in 'English' whose names you might recognise. They are all judged to be canonical now – even if they do not appear in Professor Bloom's list. They all use English, but they are not English. See if you can identify which country / culture they are associated with. You might also add up the number of female writers here, compared to the male writers:

Chinua Achebe	W. B. Yeats	Emyr Humphries
Salman Rushdie	G. B. Shaw	Joseph Conrad
Nadine Gordimer	James Joyce	Phillip Roth
Jonathan Swift	Athol Fugard	James Kelman
Kazuo Ishiguro	e e commings	Brian Friel
Samuel Becket	Tom Stoppard	Derek Walcott
Robert Frost	Louis McNeice	Peter Carey
Ernest Hemingway	Vladimir Nabokov	Katherine Mansfield
Patrick White	Jean Rhys	Stephen Crane
Grace Nichols	Timothy Mo	Sylvia Plath
Robert Burns	Irvine Welsh	Toni Morrison
Isaac Bashevis Singer	Tennessee Williams	Keri Hulme
Doris Lessing	Kate Chopin	Emily Dickinson
Margaret Atwood	Seamus Heaney	James Ngugi
Dylan Thomas	F. Scott Fitzgerald	Wole Soyinka
R. S. Thomas	V. S. Naipaul	

To put it bluntly, when looking at the orthodox literary canon – at how we are represented in terms of our identity, gender and culture - it is not only that we have to ask whether what we are asked to study and respect is not still merely a list of books mainly by dead, white, upper-middle class, English males, but also that we have to ask what the canon has to do with what we want to write and read now. But this in turn opens up questions about privacy and choice, about the fragmentation of society, about the lack of community and about the 'core values' of education. Rick Gekoski opened up some of these questions when he wrote:

I lived through a time when it was great to read. There were so many books that you *had* to read, which would have been read by everyone you knew. Not merely read, through, but digested and discussed. We formed not merely our opinions but ourselves on them. It was a common culture – or more accurately, a common counter-culture – which included music, art and film. Within our middle-class, educated world there was a canon, which wasn't limited to Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Scott Fitzgerald. You could assume people around you had read a lot of contemporary books: if they hadn't, it occasioned not merely puzzlement, but disapproval. So: if we asked a bunch of literate university students today what they had read, what they had *all* read – what would be the answer? I suspect the answer would be: nothing. Not

that young people don't read, but they don't read together. They haven't got, as we had, a common culture.⁷

To a great extent, even though we might be at odds with the writers who went before us and might feel we can do better, our writing is still an extension of what has been written before.

Commentators have voiced the opinion that since 1939 or 1945 or 1964 or 1968 or some other date (and perhaps even before) Culture has been busily entertaining itself to death. Radio, cinema, romantic and teenage novels and tabloid journalism have all been blamed for the decline of 'high culture'. Democracy, universal suffrage, compulsory education and mass literacy have all helped create a mass culture that is inevitably in conflict with 'high art'. But where does this leave writers? Do writers have a responsibility to tradition or to the identity that goes with certain traditions? Should writers be concerned with tradition? Does tradition affect them at all? Can writers ignore tradition? How can they distinguish a traditional practice from the practice of an individual? How can they know for sure that a thing is traditional? And what difference does it make if a thing is traditional or not? Are writers a part of a literary tradition just because of the language that history handed them? And if so who among their predecessors do they look to, admire and / or argue with? Who do they dismiss out of hand? In what areas do they share things? In what ways are their aims common? What binds them to the writers of the past? Are they doing something that develops an idea the writers of the past created, or are they doing something entirely new? In an age dominated by Hollywood, TV commercials and soap operas, rather than the literary market for writing, is it possible to do something original? And if writers do something original, will editors, producers, readers ever know about it? Will the writer find a publisher or a market for something genuinely original?

⁷ R. Gekoski, 'asks if there was a new canon', 'Guardian Books Blog', *The Guardian* (30 October 2010), 21.

THE CLASSICAL ENGLISH LITERARY CANON



Look at this list.

It is the accepted canon of classic English literature – at least according to Professor Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (Vintage: London, 1995).

These are the books Professor Bloom would expect a student to read for a degree in English, and which, he thinks, an educated person, a literature graduate and a contemporary writer ought to 'know'.



THE ARISTOCRATIC AGE

Geoffrey Chaucer
The Canterbury Tales
Troilus & Cresseyde

Sir Thomas Mallory
Le Morte D'Arthur

William Dunbar
Poems

John Skelton
Poems

Sir Thomas More
Utopia

Sir Thomas Wyatt
Poems

Henry Howard (Earl of Surry)
Poems

Sir Phillip Sidney
Arcadia
Astrophel & Stella
An Apology for Poetry

Fulke Greville (Lord Brooke)
Poems
Edmund Spenser
The Fairie Queene
Poems

Sir Walter Raleigh
Poems

Christopher Marlow
Plays & Poems

Michael Drayton
Poems
Samuel Daniel
Poems
A Defence of Rhyme

Thomas Nashe
The Unfortunate Traveller

Thomas Kyd
The Spanish Tragedy

William Shakespeare
Plays
Poems

Thomas Campion
Songs

John Donne
Poems
Sermons

Ben Jonson
Poems
Plays
Masques

Francis Bacon
Essays

Robert Burton
The Anatomy of Melancholy

Sir Thomas Browne
Religio Medici
Hydriotaphia or Urn Burial
The Garden of Cyrus

Thomas Hobbes

Leviathan

Robert Herrick
Poems

Thomas Carew
Poems

Richard Lovelace
Poems

Andrew Marvel
Poems

George Herbert
The Temple

Thomas Traherne
Centuries
Poems
Thanksgivings

Henry Vaughan
Poetry

John Wilmot (Earl of Rochester)
Poems

Richard Crashaw
Poems

Francis Beaumont & John Fletcher
Plays

George Chapman
Comedies
Tragedies
Poems

John Ford
'Tis Pity She's a Whore

John Marston
The Malcontent

John Webster
The White Devil
The Duchess of Malfi

Thomas Middleton & William Rowley
The Changeling

Cyril Tourneur
The Revenger's Tragedy

Phillip Massinger
A New Way to Pay Old Debts

John Bunyan
The Pilgrim's Progress

Izaak Walton
The Compleat Angler

John Milton
Paradise Lost
Paradise Regained
Lycidas
Comus
Poems
Samson Agonistes
Areopagitica

John Aubrey
Brief Lives

Jeremy Taylor
Holy Dying

Samuel Butler
Hudibras

John Dryden
Poetry
Plays
Critical Essays

Thomas Otway
Venice Preserv'd

William Congreve
The Way of the World
Love for Love

Jonathan Swift
A Tale of a Tub
Gulliver's Travels
Shorter Prose Works

Poems

Sir George Etherege
The Man of the Mode

Alexander Pope
Poems

John Gay
The Beggar's Opera

James Boswell
Life of Jonson
Journals

Samuel Johnson
Works

Edward Gibbon
The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

Edmund Burke
A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful
Reflections on the Revolution in France

Maurice Morgan
An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff

William Collin
Poems

Thomas Gray
Poems

George Farquhar
The Beaux Stratagem
The Recruiting Officer

William Wycherly
The Country Wife
The Plain Dealer

Christopher Smart
Jubilate Agno

A Song to David

Oliver Goldsmith

The Vicar of Wakefield
She Stoops to Conquer
The Traveller
The Deserted Village

**Richard Brinsley
Sheridan**

The School for Scandal
The Rivals

William Cowper

Poetical Works

George Crabbe

Poetical Works

Daniel Defoe

Moll Flanders
Robinson Crusoe
A Journal of the Plague
Year

Samuel Richardson

Clarisa
Pamela
Sir Charles Grandison

Henry Fielding

Joseph Andrews
The History of Tom Jones

Tobias Smollet

The Expedition of
Humphrey Clinker
The Adventures of
Roderick Random

Laurence Sterne

The Life and Opinions of
Tristram Shandy
A Sentimental Journey
through France and Italy

Fanny Burney

Evelina

**Joseph Addison &
Richard Steele**

The Spectator

THE DEMOCRATIC AGE

Robert Burns

Poems

William Blake

Poems

Prose

William Wordsworth

Poems

The Prelude

Sir Walter Scott

Waverley
The Heart of Midlothian
Redgauntlet
Old Mortality

Jane Austen

Pride & Prejudice
Emma
Mansfield Park
Persuasion

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Poems

Prose

Dorothy Wordsworth

The Grasmere Journal

William Hazlitt

Essays

Criticism

Lord Byron

Don Juan

Poems

Walter Savage Landor

Poems

Imaginary Conversations

Thomas De Quincey

Confessions of an English
Opium Eater
Selected Prose

Charles Lamb

Essays

Maria Edgeworth

Castle Rackrent

John Galt

The Entail

Elizabeth Gaskell

Cranford
Mary Barton
North & South

James Hogg

The Private Memoirs and
Confessions of a Justified
Sinner

Charles Maturin

Melmoth the Wanderer

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Poems

A Defence of Poetry

Mary Shelley

Frankenstein

John Clare

Poems

John Keats

Poems

Letters

Thomas Lovell Beddoes

Death's Jest Book

Poems

George Darley

Nepenthe

Poems

Thomas Hood

Poems

Thomas Wade

Poems

Robert Browning
Poems
The Ring and the Book

Charles Dickens
Pickwick Papers
David Copperfield
Oliver Twist
A Tale of Two Cities
Bleak House
Hard Times
Nicholas Nickleby
Dombey & Son
Great Expectations
Martin Chuzzlewit
Christmas Stories
Little Dorrit
Our Mutual Friend
The Mystery of Edwin Drood

Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Poems

Dante Gabriel Rossetti
Poems and Translations

Matthew Arnold
Poems
Essays

Arthur Hugh Clough
Poems

Christina Rossetti
Poems

Thomas Love Peacock
Nightmare Abbey
Gryll Grange

Gerard Manley Hopkins
Poems
Prose

Thomas Carlyle
Prose
Sartor Resartus

John Ruskin
Modern Painters

The Stones of Venice
Unto This Last
The Queen of the Air
Walter Pater
Studies in the History of the Renaissance
Appreciations
Imaginary Portraits
Marius the Epicurean

Edward Fitzgerald
The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

John Stuart Mill
On Liberty
Autobiography

John Henry Newman
Apologia pro Vita Sua
A Grammar of Assent
The Idea of the University

Anthony Trollope
The Barsetshire Novels
The Palliser Novels
Orley Farm
The Way we Live Now

Lewis Carroll
Complete Works

Edward Lear
Complete Nonsense

George Gissing
New Grub Street

Algernon Charles Swinburne
Poems
Letters

Charlotte Bronte
Jane Ayre
Villete

Emily Bronte
Poems
Wuthering Heights

William Makepeace Thackeray
Vanity Fair
The History of Henry Esmond

Francis Thompson
Poems
Lionel Johnson
Poems

Robert Bridges
Poems

G. K. Chesterton
Poems
The Man who was Thursday

Samuel Butler
Erewhon
The Way of All Flesh

W. S. Gilbert
The Complete Plays of Gilbert & Sullivan
Bab Ballads

Wilkie Collins
The Moostone
The Woman in White
No Name

Coventry Patmore
Odes

James Thomson (Bysshe Vanolis)
The City of Dreadful Night

Oscar Wilde
Plays
The Picture of Dorian Gray
The Artist as Critic
Letters

John Davidson
Ballad and Songs

George Eliot

Adam Bede
Silas Marner
The Mill on the Floss
Middlemarch
Daniel Deronda

Robert Louis Stevenson

Essays
Kidnapped
Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde
Treasure Island
The New Arabian Nights
Master of Ballantrae
Weir of Hermiston

William Morris

Early Romances
Poems
The Earthly Paradise
The Well at the World's End
News From Nowhere

Bram Stoker

Dracula

George Macdonald

Lilith
At the Back of the North Wind

THE CHAOTIC AGE**W. B. Yeats**

Collected Poems
Collected Plays
A Vision
Mythologies

G. B. Shaw

Critical Essays
Heartbreak House
Pygmalion
Saint Joan
Major Barbara
Back to Methusalah

J. M. Synge

Collected Plays

Sean O'Casey

Juno & the Paycock
The Plough and the Stars
The Shadow & the Gunman

George Douglas Brown

The House with the Green Shutters

Thomas Hardy

The Well-Beloved
The Woodlanders
The Return of the Native
The Mayor of Castorbridge
Far from the Madding Crowd
Tess of the D'urbavilles
Jude the Obscure
Poems

Rudyard Kipling

Kim
Collected Stories
Puck of Pook's Hill
Verse

A. E. Houseman

Poems

Max Beerbohm

Zuleika Dobson
Seven Men and Two
Others

Joseph Conrad

Lord Jim
The Secret Agent
Nostromo
Under Western Eyes
Victory

Ronald Firbank

Five Novels
Ford Madox Ford
Parade's End
The Good Soldier

W. Somerset Maugham

Collected Stories

The Moon & Sixpence

John Cowper Powys

Wolf Solent
A Glastonbury Romance

Saki (H.H.Munro)

Short Stories

H. G. Wells

The Sci Fi novels

David Lindsay

A Voyage to Arcturus

Arnold Bennett

The Old Wives Tales

Walter De la Mere

Poems
Memoirs of a Midget

Wilfred Owen

Poems

Isaac Rosenberg

Poems

Edward Thomas

Poems

Robert Graves

Poems
King Jesus

Edwin Muir

Poems

David Jones

In Parenthesis
In Anathemata

John Galsworthy

The Forsyte Saga
E. M. Forster
Howards End
A Passage to India

Frank O'Connor

Stories

D. H. Lawrence

Poems
Studies in Classic
American Literature
Short Stories
Sons & Lovers
The Rainbow
Women in Love

Virginia Woolf

Mrs Dalloway
To the Lighthouse
Orlando
The Waves
Between the Acts

James Joyce

Dubliners
Portrait of the Artist as a
Young Man
Ulysses
Finnegan's Wake

Samuel Becket

Murphy
Watt
Three Novels: Molloy,
Malone, Dies, The
Unnamable
Waiting for Godot
Endgame
Krapp's Last Tape
How It Is

Elizabeth Bowen

Stories

J. G. Farrell

The Seige of Krishnapur

Henry Green

Nothing
Loving
Party Going

Evelyn Waugh

A Handful of Dust
Scoop
Vile Bodies
Put Out More Flags

Anthony Burgess

Nothing Like the Sun

G. B. Edwards

The Book of Ebenezer Le
Page

Iris Murdoch

The Good Apprentice
Bruno's Dream

Graham Greene

Brighton Rock
The Heart of the Matter
The Power & the Glory

Christopher Isherwood

The Berlin Stories

Norman Douglas

South Wind

Aldous Huxley

Essays
Antic Hay
Point Counter Point
Brave New World

Lawrence Durrell

The Alexandria Quartet

William Golding

Pincher Martin

Doris Lessing

The Golden Notebook

Mervyn Peake

The Gormenghast
Trilogy

Jeanette Winterson

The Passion

W. H. Auden

Poems
The Dyer's Hand

Roy Fuller

Poems

Gavin Ewart

Poems

Basil Bunting

Poems

William Empson

Poems
Milton's God
Some Versions of the
Pastoral

G. W. Knight

The Wheel of Fire
The Burning Oracle

R. S. Thomas

Poems

Frank Kermode

The Sense of an Ending

Stevie Smith

Poems

F. T. Prince

Poems

Philip Larkin

Poems

Donald Davie

Poems

Geoffrey Hill

Poems

Jonathan Spence

The Death of Woman
Wang
The Memory Palace of
Matteo Ricci

Elizabeth Jennings

Poems

Keith Douglas

Poems

Hugh MacDiarmid

Poems

Louis MacNeice

Poems

Dylan Thomas

Poems

Nigel Dennis

Cards of Identity

Seamus Heaney

Poems 1969-87

Field Work

Station Island

Thomas Kinsella

Peppercanister Poems

Paul Muldoon

Poems

John Montague

Poems

John Arden

Plays

Joe Orton

Plays

Flann O'Brien

The Dalkey Archive

The Third Policeman

Tom Stoppard

Travesties

Harold Pinter

The Caretaker

The Homecoming

Edward Bond

The Fool

Saved

George Orwell

Collected Essays

1984

Edna O'Brien

A Fanatic Heart

Follow-up work

- To what extent are you aware of the literary canon?
- How many of the books on the above list have you read? How many have you heard of?
- What would you say is your relationship to this list?
- What would your list look like?
- What writers have you met?
- How many of their works have you read?
- As a writer, can you create new work adequately with your current knowledge of the books on this list?
- How is this topic relevant to the theme of Responsibility?
- Does the term 'literary canon' mean just an authoritative list of genuine works by a particular author or authors - or does it mean something more?
- How does the canon contribute to the concept of an authoritative list of authors to be taught on university literature courses?
- Does the idea of the canon also imply criteria, the basis for judgement, standards?
- To what extent is the idea of a musical composition or passage in which the same melody is repeated by one or more voices successively, overlapping in time in the same or related key, relevant?
- Some people regard the literary canon as arbitrary, oppressive and tyrannical. What do you think?
- In what ways has the canon of Western Literature, and the definition of the canon, changed over the last 100 years?
- Do 'approved' literary works provide the criteria by which you judge your written work?
- To what extent have writers been canonised as the saints of approved literature?

- If writers are saints, does that mean those who teach the authorised canon are the priests of western culture?
- Who made the canon and whose interests are served by these particular books / authors?
- Whose interests and works are ignored and why?
- Why should we study and acknowledge these particular writers and their works?
- In what ways can writers challenge and redefine the canon?
- Whose identity and interests are bolstered by the study of this particular canon and literary tradition?
- Do you agree that the listed books you have read should be included?
- Are there unlisted books you have read which you think should be included?
- How do you think a feminist would respond to this list?
- Would you describe this canon as patriarchal?
- How many female Victorian writers can you think of?
- How many contemporary female writers can you think of?
- Is a female canon possible?
- Is an oral canon possible?
- Is a canon of popular literature possible?
- Is a minority literature canon possible?
- Is an alternative canon within English literature possible?
- Why are so many Irish writers listed as part of the English canon?
- What about the Welsh, Scottish, Australian, American, Canadian, Caribbean, African and Asian contributions?
- What part do Black writers play in this version of the canon?
- What is it that we do when we teach English Literature?
- What cultural, political, social, moral and sexual values do you think this particular canon preserves and conveys?
- Is this a multicultural canon? Is it a canon that is 'inclusive' of minority experience?
- Can you imagine an alternative canon?
- In what ways do you represent the past in your writing?
- What is your relationship to this canon? Do you think this canon determines what you write?
- Does this canon have a 'hold' on you?
- What might you have to do to break with it, revise it or know it differently?
- Would you want to do these things?
- In what way would your canon differ from this one?
- Even if we innovate wildly in language and literary form, even if we try to do something radically different from what has been done before, is it possible to ignore or entirely abandon the canon?
- What does the advent of the new technologies, the information superhighway and the digital era mean for writers and the future of the canon?
- How fully can a writer emerge or get away from a tradition to become an individual writing for them self rather than reinterpreting what has already been done?

- Can writers ever hope to be absolutely new in what they write, and if they are absolutely new, will anybody understand them?
- Is it possible to separate a tradition from the people who practice it?
- Does the individual practitioner in Folk singing or Storytelling, break with that tradition by doing something new?
- Is any and all innovation the end of a tradition or the development of a tradition?
- In what ways do you think a writer sees and understands the canon and the idea of literary tradition?
- Do you think this differs from the way a teacher of literature will see the canon and literary tradition?