The Pragmatist Canon: Rethinking Literature in the Classroom

by

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Abstract

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Mark Edmundson takes a pragmatic approach to literature and argues that we should read in order to alter our Final Narratives, the fundamental ways we conceptualize the world. I apply this argument to how we construct canons, including classroom syllabi. Specifically, I claim that as the classroom environment is essential to our literary education, we need to read in a pragmatic manner in the classroom, not least of all because doing so is capable of improving our lives and the lives around us. Taking this understanding of a literary education, I then run Don DeLillo’s Underworld and Stephen King’s Hearts in Atlantis through this machinery. The result is that we are able to produce viable, significant arguments for both authors’, but more importantly King’s, canonization. This result is contrary to the canonical views of thinkers such as Mark Edmundson and Harold Bloom who believe that we ought not to engage King in the classroom. By conceptualizing reading, and specifically canonization, as a pragmatic process, we are able to articulate why Stephen King might be a significant part of our literary education.
Without realizing it at the time, I first laid the groundwork for this project a few years ago through a conversation with my brother. I was a senior in high school and he was an eighth-grader. At first, his query sounded innocent enough. “Ronnie,” he said, “why do we have to read Shakespeare in English classes? I can’t stand him.” Well, I wasn’t quite sure how to answer him. Truth was, I had no decent argument as to why someone should have to read Shakespeare other than the fact that a lot of really smart people said he was good. I was vaguely aware that Shakespeare could do some really cool things with language and that he somehow enriched our lives, but in reality these were just empty statements.

Ever since this question some four years ago, I’ve struggled with thinking about why we should read certain authors, and, more often than not, I’ve come up with wholly unsatisfying answers. It seems that in the classroom certain writers are taboo, or at the very least not engaged as a profound source of intellectual enlightenment. However, other than a general sense of fluidity when reading a work, I’ve often wondered what makes one writer a hack and another a genius, what qualifies one work for study and another for the supermarket? My conversation with my brother demonstrates the perplexing nature of this divide. After all, he had no stomach for Shakespeare and yet would not touch a book before being introduced to Stephen King. After that, it was like King awakened a long dormant appetite and my brother became a voracious reader.

It was not until this term, my senior year at the university, that I am able to actually formulate a coherent argument as to why we should study some books and not others. I owe much of this epiphany to my discovery of pragmatism. As a philosophy, pragmatism is concerned with the way we actually operate within the natural world. Incorporating principles of the scientific method, pragmatism stresses the connection of doing with knowing. It believes we
ought to see how we make knowledge operate in the world and then structure our intellectual experience around this understanding that knowledge exists only within real world communities. Thinkers like Mark Edmundson and Richard Shusterman have then taken this philosophy and applied it to the ways that we engage art. Edmundson specifically believes that we should read literature in order to examine and possibly alter the fundamental ways we think about the world (he calls them our Final narratives). While I disagree with Edmundson on some points—a rift I’ll examine in depth later on in the paper—I believe his idea provides a persuasive answer to my brother’s inquiry. We read Shakespeare because he has the ability to alter the ways we inhabit the world.

Armed with this answer, the next move is to propose why we ought to read in this manner in the classroom environment. The answer, I think, is that the classroom affords us certain possibilities that we do not have when we examine a work on our own or with a group of friends. The classroom provides us with the skills to dissect and unpack works in order to get to different layers of meaning and ultimately engage our Final Narratives. Even more, the classroom provides a community of thinkers where we can examine the various ideas and narratives of the stories and our class members. Ultimately, I present an idea for a kind of pragmatist canon in the classroom. While I know the concept of a pragmatic canon sounds contradictory, this conflicting nature is actually what exposes the inherent value of the term. Much like John Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty* in which there is always the quest but no actual certainty, the idea of a pragmatic canon rejects the idea of an immutable canon of literature as an end in itself, but embraces the idea of the quest to construct a reading list of works that is ever-changing and formed through the give and take of argumentation.
Argument. That is what this approach is all about and what it always comes back to. There are no universal standards for what makes a certain work “good” and worthy of our time. Even if there were, we certainly do not have access to them. What we are left with is the ability to present coherent, well-reasoned arguments as to why or why not we should study a work or an author. Within this paper I will present a case as to why Stephen King, an author much maligned and abhorred by the literary establishment, ought to be read in the college classroom. In order to do so, I will hold him up against Don DeLillo, one of the consensus best writers of the contemporary period. The result is that we ought to read both writers because of the way they change our Final Narratives. By embracing the notion of reading as the act of transforming our lives, and ultimately the lives of others, we open ourselves to the vulnerability and possibility of rethinking our literary education as one informed by the idea of a pragmatic approach to literature and canonization. We may come to realize that literature should have a direct impact on the ways we go about living our lives and that we may find this literature anywhere. Even more, this approach opens up the canon to include authors who we might not have considered reading in an academic environment.
Part I: Why we read

Why art?

Upon some reflection, I think I may have been a bit too forward in proposing my brother’s question as a place to start this paper. After all, what Philip probably should have asked was, “why do we study literature, or, more broadly, why do we take time to learn about the arts at all?” The nature of his original question suggests a kind of tacit agreement between student and teacher, institution and curriculum. We learn about the arts and we study them; we accept it as such. It is easy to see why we might study math or science; it has a practical value in our everyday life. We need to know how to add and multiply to get by in the world. Even more, we need to at least partly understand the world in order to function in it. The sciences (understood as including the mathematical sciences) have a practical purpose for us.

Why, then, ought we to sandwich these science classes with the arts? Just as the sciences show themselves in our actual lives, so too do I believe art has a practical value, and I think that this practical value is what makes them worthwhile in the context of our education. Perhaps the best place to start in determining the practical value of the humanities is with John Dewey, one of the founding members of the pragmatist movement. In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey argues for the inseparability of knowledge and action. That is to say, we learn by doing and we do through learning. In the beginning of the work, in fact on the very first page, Dewey gives the reader a definition of art. He says we “invent arts and by their means turn the powers of nature into account” (3). Thus, for Dewey, arts are the means by which we seek to gain control of the uncontrollable in our lives. They help us cope with and direct the natural world. Also, Dewey suggests that the arts are necessarily *unnatural*, that they must be our creations. While they can
incorporate elements of nature, the arts by no means are nature. To some degree they are synthetic.

Now, in this first conceptualization of the arts, we must seek to suspend our modern notion of them. Arts in this sense encompass not just the social arts but also, and perhaps more appropriately, the mechanical as well. Smithing and cobbling are as much art as painting and writing. As Dewey explains, arts are “the method of changing the world through action” (3). Thus, whenever we create, we do so in an effort to actively affect the world we live in. By embracing this larger understanding of the term “art,” we begin to apprehend what art ought to be from a pragmatist perspective; it brings actual and perceivable change to our everyday life.

And yet, often times this first understanding is not the way we think about the arts today. We think of them as something more intellectual, more esoteric. They are a way to change our minds and perhaps only by happenstance the physical world. Dewey argues that this split in the definition of art, and the subsequent disparagement of the physical nature of them, is the result of a manifold of forces. The first is that “Work has been onerous, toilsome, associated with a primeval curse. It has been done under compulsion and the pressure of necessity, while intellectual activity is associated with leisure” (Dewey 4-5). Thus, the arts that could be performed and enjoyed intellectually began their ascension over those that required physical work. Philosophic investigation and the arts that accompany it started to divide themselves off from the more practical arts. As a result, these intellectual arts began to lose their practical value; they started to take on a purely intellectual significance: they were performed to better only the mind. While Dewey sees this division one between theory and practice, for my purposes I recognize the division as one between the social and scientific disciplines.
Dewey goes on to argue that another force that aided in this division is the uncertainty that surrounds practice. As he explicated, “Judgment and belief regarding actions to be performed can never attain more than a precarious probability. Through thought, however, it has seemed that men might escape from the perils of uncertainty” (6). Every time we move in this world, we do so at the risk that we might be wrong. While not necessarily bad in itself, in the natural world, this incorrectness can result in severe hurt and discomfiture for the actor. In fact, by writing the above sentences in the passive voice, Dewey sought to emphasize the objects of the statements: action and thought. However, by doing so he risks obscuring the reason for the division between thought and doing in the first place. It is specifically because of the subject, the actor, that this “precarious probability” has caused humanity to shy away from practice. The doer can never achieve certainty and so risks harm.

However, in the sphere of thought this is not always the case. Because thought seems to be so ethereal, so removed from the everyday forces of the world, people have believed that they could locate certainty within it. Intellectual activity, it has seemed, is capable of producing certain ends thereby removing any risk to the actor. In a world that mandates, “Safety first,” as Dewey puts it, “quest for complete certainty can be fulfilled in pure knowing alone” (7, 8). The result is the rejection of practice as a form of knowing. Since it cannot lead to certainty, practice is rejected as a suitable means to attain knowledge.

From Plato to Kant, the history of philosophy and intellectual thought is riddled with thinkers enabling this divide. The result is not just the further separation of thinking from doing, of the social from the scientific, but also the increased praise of the intellectual and disparagement of the physical. The more we elevate the social sciences, the more we remove them from being able to actively impact the ways we go about inhabiting the physical world. As
Dewey writes, “the ideal of a cognitive certainty and truth having no connection with practice, and prized because of its lack of connection, developed” (40). The important arts to study were the social precisely because they have no connection with the natural world. Only by removing ourselves from the world can we hope to overcome those natural forces which first led us to create the arts in the first place.

Now, if this seems a little strange, then I cannot help but agree. After all, if the point of the arts is to help us deal with the natural world, then using the arts to escape from, rather than deal with, that world seems a convolution of art. The result, then, is that neither the social nor the mechanical give us any degree of certainty in the natural world—the mechanical because of inherent uncertainty and the social because its fruits are outside of the physical realm. As such, the two notions ought to collapse back in on each other and the term art should be understood as a mental/physical effort that helps us deal with nature the best we can. By recognizing the misdirected goal of the social arts, we can reorient it to the physical. This reorientation then allows us to achieve a kind of probable certainty as best as we are able. By combining our mental and physical practices, we can better the way we inhabit the world.

However, as the title of Dewey’s book suggests, this combination has not yet fully happened. Certainty is a goal for which people are always questing and since the social arts provide protection from danger, people continue to quest in this direction thereby continuing the rift between theory and practice. The result of this continued questing is, as Dewey puts it, “The [social] doctrine [is] worked out practically so as to strengthen dependence upon authority and dogma in the things of the highest value” (40). Since certainty can often times only be attained through processes that imply their own rules (for instance, we know Plato’s forms are the true objects of knowledge because awareness of them will inform us of this fact), access to the rules
becomes an exclusive club. Even more, since these rules exist specifically in the intellectual realm, they become the property of the learned class. As such, this class then has the power to pass down certainty as they see fit. Not everyone will be able to understand the rules and their consequences, and so hierarchical relations of power and influence are necessarily established. The end result, inevitably, is that of indoctrination. The knowledgeable pass down their understanding to a receptacle that often awaits in passive acceptance of the supposed truth values.

The implication of my argument so far for my topic of education should be becoming clearer. In very few fields do power relations and knowledge transfer take such prominent roles as they do in the university. A professor stands before the classroom in a position of “knowing.” The authority figure controls the prized knowledge, and the students must jostle to receive it. As a result, the attainment of knowledge can become a mostly passive, uncritical enterprise. Often times, certain people end up controlling what knowledge is and how to go about attaining it. Once again, theory is elevated over practice. Knowledge through active doing, through purposeful creation, takes a back seat.

The further implication of this line of thinking should now come to the forefront: reception of knowledge kills the drive to actively seek it and challenge the current “certainty-mode.” Dewey recognized this possibility when he wrote, “Just as belief that a magical ceremony will regulate the growth of seeds to full harvest stifles the tendency to investigate natural causes of their workings, so acceptance of dogmatic rules as basis of conduct in education, morals and social matters, lessens the impetus to find out about the conditions which are involved in forming intelligent plans” (40). The elevation of theory over practice facilitates a dogmatic acceptance of the status-quo. It leads to a populace afraid to question its modes of operation. Where practice provides an arena to try out new ideas with uncertain ends, theory too
often confines the thinker to a predetermined why of thinking and living. When art is bifurcated, inquiry risks stagnation and could perhaps become harmful.

**Art as Experience**

Part of the solution to the indoctrination dilemma, and I think it is one Dewey would whole-heartedly agree with, is to reinsert the practice back into all the arts, not just the mechanical. Art can be a force that helps us to deal with the physical world. The question then becomes, and I think it is a difficult one, how do we reinsert the concept of doing into disciplines that are specifically geared toward inaction? I think the answer requires a redefinition of how we ought to use the term practice when regarding the humanities such that the result is that the humanities come to help us operate in the natural world. I believe Richard Shusterman provides such a definition in his work, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.

While the title of the work may seem a bit of an oxymoron, Shusterman is confident that he is able to join these seemingly disparate categories. In a sense, and to use the language of Dewey (a thinker who heavily influences Shusterman’s work), Shusterman seeks to unify the concepts of theory and practice. As he writes, “One of the aims of this book is to relieve this paradox [of a pragmatist aesthetics] by challenging the traditional practical/aesthetic opposition and enlarging our conception of the aesthetic from the narrow domain and role that philosophy’s dominant ideology and cultural economy have assigned it” (xv). Shusterman believes that we can go a long way toward reclaiming the social arts as a practical force for political and social change in our lives if we rethink what we mean by aesthetics. The author does not see the study of aesthetics as something removed from our lives, but rather a concept that can carry a practical component if we only allow ourselves to endow it with one.
In his terms, Shusterman is trying to think of a way that we might reasonably combine the aesthetic (theory-based) enjoyment of art with the way it might function to better our lives (practice). His answer is to conceptualize art as experience. Shusterman describes art as experience when he writes: “For experience, as Dewey insists, involves both receptive undergoing and perceptive doing. . . The notion of experience does better justice to the fullness of art and links artists and audience. . . Art, in its creation and appreciation, is both directed making and open receiving, controlled construction and captivated absorption” (55). Thus, in order to inject aesthetics with an experiential component, we also must rework our definition of what practice entails. Before, it seemed to indicate a kind of active doing. In Shusterman’s recasting of Dewey, practice also involves reception. However, this reception must involve an intense scrutiny and investigation of the information being received. Even though one might be taking in information, one does so in order to wield it. As Shusterman says, experience involves both perceiving and receiving, not one or the other.

In fact, I think Shusterman’s conception of practice fits well with the Dewey section. It does nothing to undermine Dewey’s claims, but rather adds a richness to them. Where before the reader may have objected that the sciences do not involve just practice and doing, that same reader may now understand that the practice of science involves this kind of careful reception of theory for the purpose of then actively using the information. The reception is not an end in itself, but rather is to be used in tandem with the doing. In both the science and the social arts, we must first reflect and examine an object or even take in advice and instructions before we can begin to use this knowledge to affect social change.

Shusterman then goes on to explain what this shift in our conception of aesthetics does for our artistic engagement. As he writes, “No longer neutrally aimed at faithfully representing
the concepts it examines, [aesthetics] instead becomes actively engaged in reshaping them to serve us better. The task of aesthetic theory, then, is not to capture the truth of our current understanding of art, but rather to reconceive art so as to enhance its role and appreciation” (xv). The point of art is no longer to try to connect or reach an antecedent concept, but rather to use the same thought processes that we might have previously used to reach that concept to now better our existence. Aesthetics should not be a study aimed at finding truth values, but rather one that recognizes truth lies in our unique understandings and usages of whatever we have gleaned from our studies. Pragmatists ascribe to the idea that knowledge is predicated on our experience of this world and not something that is antecedent to it. Therefore, a shift in our understanding of aesthetics reflects this fact while extending it. As all knowledge is subsequent and therefore changeable, we should work to use our aesthetic knowledge to enact change, to better lives.

Thus, whenever we think of a pragmatist aesthetic, we are thinking of art as experience. Art is something that is produced by this world and operates in this world. So too does our engagement of it. We study, analyze, and evaluate art in order to come to some kind of understanding of what the work is getting at. However, it is not enough to just come to this conclusion. Rather, we must take our new found knowledge and use it in this world. Shusterman works to ground art within our everyday experience.

**Why Read?**

Having established the pragmatic conception of how we ought to use all of art, I want to narrow the focus to the topic of this paper: literature. In his work *Why Read?*, Mark Edmundson takes up the pragmatist banner through his argument for how and why we should read books. He
believes that we should read in order to become better, more complete people. In this regard he lines up nicely with Shusterman and Dewey’s conception of art. Similar to how Shusterman wanted to think about art as experience, Edmundson believes we should engage works of art (here, literature) in order to positively affect the way we act in the world. In a sense, he thinks we should read in order to become better people. Edmundson believes we accomplish this transformative process by reading literature in order to alter our Final Narratives.

Edmundson takes the term Final Narrative from Richard Rorty’s conception of a final vocabulary. Rorty argues that there is a certain set of terms we use to define our base beliefs: ideas that once we reach conversation cannot move past as they are the words that define us as who we are. Similarly, Edmundson claims that we have a set of narratives that underlie our very conception of self-ness. He writes, “A Final Narrative . . . involves the ultimate set of terms that we use to confer value on experience. It’s where our principles are manifest” (25). The idea is that any time we enter into dialogue, there is a certain set of beliefs that define who we are as a person. These beliefs are our Final Narratives; they are what we use to make sense of, in a sense tell a story about, the world. Notice here, however, that Edmundson is specifically discussing Final Narratives in regard to experience. Like pragmatic thinkers before, Edmundson is concerned with how we go about acting in the world. The implication of this belief, perhaps one of Edmundson’s own Final Narratives, seems to be that like Shusterman, he does not believe art has a “merely” aesthetic quality. Rather art—for Edmundson, literature—also must have a dimension that affects us in our lived lives.

Edmundson seems to confirm this supposition when he begins to discuss his views on theory. When talking about how one ought to use theory in order to enter a work, he writes that the question one should always ask when subscribing to a certain way of interpretation is “Can
you live it?” (42) Literature, for Edmundson, is a live field; literature must have an experiential quality. It needs to inform the ways we go about inhabiting the world. Our study and investigation should proceed out into the world.

At this point the reader might be scratching her head and saying, not so fast. After all, living one’s Final Narratives is all well and fine, but if they are, in fact, our final versions of the world, how can literature possibly go about shaping them? Edmundson provides the key to answering this query when he writes that our Final Narratives are “the point beyond which argument and analysis are unlikely to go, at least very quickly” (25). The key to Edmundson’s thought lays in the clarification. Our Final Narratives are the points beyond which argument is unlikely to go. However, our narratives can change, albeit slowly. In fact, Edmundson concurs with Rorty when he says, in all actuality, “a ‘final’ language ought to be anything but final. He [Rorty] believes that we ought to be constantly challenging, testing, refining, and if need be overthrowing our ultimate terms and stories, replacing them with ones that serve us better” (26). Thus, the basic stories we tell about the way the world works ought to be in a constant state of revision as we seek to find more adequate narratives to our ever-changing experience of the world.

The problem, of course, is that, as one might be able to surmise from the description of the narratives, the process of change is one that is difficult to affect and may very rarely happen. Even though Edmundson claims we should be revising our Final Narratives, it does not follow that we are actually doing so. As the fundamental ways we talk about the world, they are not often the topic of revision. Thus, Edmundson’s contention is that one of the most fruitful and effective ways to engender a conversation about of Final Narratives is through the study of literature. As he explains, “I have chosen literature . . . [because] literature [offers] us a latent
hypothesis. This is the view that there are too many sorts of human beings, too many idiosyncratic constitutions, for any one map of human nature, or any single guide to the good life, to be adaptable for us all” (112-3). Literature provides a polyphony of voices for a reading public that is as varied as it is many. Yes, Final Narratives may be difficult to change, but books can help this process by providing countless, varied arguments for why we ought to change. As we engage characters and plot, we, as readers, are, in a sense, getting a picture of a different way of thinking about the world played out before us. We are allowed to contact and try out distinctly different ways of inhabiting the world in a comfortable environment. Because literature manifests itself in so many different forms, it is capable of reaching many different people.1

The implication of this kind of understanding of literature is that the reader is foregrounded as the most important component of the reading process. The pragmatic approach takes the emphasis off the text. The goal of reading is not simply to understand the text or make an argument about the text or even appreciate the text. Rather, the point is to take the understanding, argument, or appreciation and apply it to our lives as readers. It does not “matter” that we can do these things (when they are viewed as ends in themselves); it matters that they have an efficacious effect in producing Final Narrative change. In a pragmatic approach to literature, the focus shifts to the reader.

Already the reader can see why a pragmatist conception of art is resistant to the idea of a set canon. Because people are so diverse and varied, it is foolish to believe the “The Best Works in the Western Tradition” will somehow reach every, or even a large majority, of students. Even a list that proposed the “The Best Uses of Synecdoche” as its subject matter would be problematic at best. All such a list ends up representing is the opinions of the list-makers which,
while certainly the product of extensive training and knowledge, are no more and no less that that one person’s view of the world. While still valuable, such a compilation is in no way a definitive list; it is simply a manifestation of one angle of the manifold of human experience.

The One and Only

Having introduced the theory for why we ought to read, it is useful to think about whether Final Narratives should be the only criterion for constructing our literary experience. Final Narratives are why we read, but it does not follow that it is the sole standard we should use for selecting works. Even more—and this discussion anticipates the topic of Part II—when professors are selecting works for a syllabus, there seems to be other options for structuring a class than merely pragmatic ones. There are a myriad of other considerations for professors and readers to mull over whenever they plan their classes or reading lists that can do other things besides work at the narratives of students. However, I believe that the narrative should be the primary concern while other considerations play a factor, but not necessarily a determining one.

In his essay on undergraduate survey classes, Donald Ulin examines the ways in which we construct these surveys. As he writes, “the literary survey . . . is typically conceived along historical lines” (71). Although Ulin’s claim may seem obvious, it actually has far reaching implications. Understood broadly enough, most undergraduate literature courses are surveys. Classes as narrowly focused as “The Writings of Hemingway” or “1590’s Literary England” inevitably have to be surveys of that topic; there is no conceivable way to cover all the material. As a consequence, Ulin’s proposal is that undergraduate courses in general are constructed around historical lines. The corollary is that we as readers may to choose to read certain works
based on the way those works dialogue in a historical manner. The result is that historical selection provides a viable alternative in syllabus formation.

However, I do not see this historical possibility in any way flying in the face of pragmatic selection. In fact, I believe the two are most productive when they work in concert. History has shown us, if by no other evidence than continued widespread use, that placing works in a historically oriented dialogue with one another is an effective way to teach literature classes. This efficacy is certainly something Dewey and Schusterman would have to recognize and take into consideration. Thus, I see no reason for significant opposition between the two modes. We can take a class, say “1590’s Literary England,” and sketch a syllabus that flows historically as the works talk back and forth. However, from this original sketch, we can also begin to select works that get at readers’ Final Narratives. Through purposeful reflection and the willing solicitation of student input, the instructor can begin to shape this original historical sketch by legitimately considering the ways in which texts act pragmatically.

Besides historically, another viable manner by which to construct a syllabus is according to theory. In classes on topics such as Marxism and psychoanalysis, it is entirely conceivable that the syllabus might proceed ahistorically. For instance, it might make more sense to read Marx and Freud before going back and engaging “A Modest Proposal” or the *Iliad*. Such a method puts texts in a dialogue based on the ways they talk to each other through the lens of an approach on the part of the reader rather than how concepts have developed over time. This system provides another alternative manner in which to construct syllabi or reading lists.

Once again, however, I see this approach as most productive when used in conjunction with the pragmatic angle. Just as after that original reading of Freud, it might make sense to integrate a historical approach and read the *Iliad* and then the *Aeneid*, so do I believe that the
most efficacious approach involves incorporating the pragmatic method. As before, we can sketch a syllabus or reading list based around components of theory and then from these works begin to discuss which of them are able to affect narrative change. Using theory as the overriding unifying factor does not preclude or dull a pragmatic take on reading.

In fact, in many instances, originally structuring a class on pragmatic considerations may have the ultimate effect of intensifying the reading experience. Incorporating historical- or theory-based approaches allows the reader to more clearly see the way works talk with each other. The result, I believe, is greater awareness and understanding on the part of the reader which certainly is never a hindrance to narrative change. Reading pragmatically in no way prohibits professors from constructing syllabi based on other considerations. The point is that it is an option that needs to be legitimately considered when selecting works. This discussion is in no way exhaustive in its examination of the manner in which we construct syllabi. Yet, I believe the point stands that reading for Final Narratives does not rule out reading for other reasons as well. However, these other reasons should never usurp narrative change as the primary focus of our literary engagement.
Part II: Things We Read and Where We Read Them

Part I outlined the possibilities for art in our everyday lives. It sought to move the aesthetic appreciation of art from a “purely” intellectual activity to one that has real practical value. From this move, we were able to give an account of why we ought to read literature. However, this project requires that we do more than just reconceptualize our approach to reading. My argument necessitates that we ground this new conceptualization in the classroom environment. After all, my brother’s question was specifically about reading in an academic setting. The theory of this section seeks to ground the pragmatic conception of literature in the classroom.

However, before we can engage the idea of the environment of a literary education, we need to think about in what this education might consist. Specifically, I am thinking about the issue of the canon. I have referred to it at several points, and even talked directly about syllabi, but it is time I fully spelled out what I mean by a canon. From this definition of a canon, we can move to how it fits inside a classroom environment.

What is a canon?

The idea of a canon is an extremely amorphous one. The Oxford English Dictionary, as a register of academic if not cultural agreement, defines it as, “A body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study; those works of esp. Western literature considered to be established as being of the highest quality and most enduring value . . . from a particular culture, period, genre, etc” (“canon”). Simply put, the canon is a list of literary works of a certain quality in a certain category. This could encompass anything from the greatest works of the Western tradition to the essential works of the Beat movement.
However, there are certain parts of this definition that bear highlighting in order to better understand what the concept is driving at.

The first of these is the notion of tradition. As the *OED* indicates, the works in a canon are those that have repeatedly been identified as possessing a certain level of merit. In a sense, different groups over long periods of time have continually returned to these books for study and guidance. Certainly there is something to this notion of tradition. After all, it must be significant that so many people engage the same basic works. However, there is also a negative component to tradition. Implicitly, the concept suggests that in order to be considered for the canon a work must have existed for some length of time for it to become part of a “tradition.” Thus, certain works are almost always marginalized from the canon. These include recent works as well as those works that, although written awhile ago, were composed by certain marginalized groups that are only recently being recognized as having literary or other worth. This idea of tradition helps to explain why the *OED* identifies “the classics” as a standard definition of the canon (“canon”). These are the works that have been accepted over a long period of time.

The second thing to notice about this definition is the ambiguous language of merit the *OED* employs. Works in the canon are those that are “important, significant, and worthy of study” as well as those that possess “the highest quality and most enduring value.” All of these standards, while undoubtedly necessary descriptors to any work in the canon, are nonetheless completely immeasurable. There is no way to objectively determine what makes a work significant, high quality, or valuable. Certainly, scholars can formulate standards of worth for a literary canon, but these criteria are by no means objective and simply reflect different formulations of what the terms quality and value mean to the standard setter.
This last observation, then, brings me to the third thing I want to note about this definition. No where does the *OED* attribute any kind of intentionality to the selection of the canon. Yet, as I indicated, it is people making necessarily subjective decisions that ultimately determine the standards of quality that comprise a canon. The definition suggests, if only by omission, that the formulation of a canon is somehow free from individual biases or prejudices. However, the reality is anything but. Canons must be constructed by humans through a subjective process in which people define what they feel are the quality and value standards of the canon in question. The corollary to this point is that the people in charge are the ones making these decisions. Although anyone could conceivably conceptualize a canon, the actual implementation of such a list in a practical situation implies a hierarchical power structure where those with authority actually put the canon into service.

Most often in the literary world, those people in authority positions who implement a canon are professors. They select the works that their classes or even departments will engage. Thus, when I use the term canon, I do not simply refer some enormous anthology of collected works, but also to the reading lists a professor compiles for their classes that semester. As Edmundson writes, “The question of canon formation . . . is really a question about what to teach” (121). Canon formation is specifically about what individual professors choose to teach in individual classes. Syllabi are no less “a body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study” than the *Norton Anthology of British Literature*. In fact, it is this move whereby we recognize syllabi as manifestations of the canon that my paper takes on another dimension. Where a person may choose on their own whether or not they wish to read a Norton volume, they *must* read—assuming they want to pass the class—the works a
professor assigns. In this sense, professors unavoidably force their subjective understandings of the canon on their students.

Thus, the idea of someone defending the canon—which many people do, Harold Bloom among them—does not seem so farfetched or improbable as some readers might like to characterize it. In fact, everyone employs a canon when making decisions to select works for study. Employing and defending “the canon” is inevitable. This fact also means that although the canon is the product of value judgments, the body itself need not automatically be assessed a value judgment. What I mean here is that canons are not intrinsically good or bad; I do not wish to convey that idea. They are “simply” a necessary fact and by-product of education.

This shift in the location of the value judgment now means that while the notion of a canon itself may be neutral, we certainly can pass judgment on the actual implementation and formulation of canons. In this paper, I am arguing for a canon formulated out of the pragmatic tradition as I believe it is the best way to infect our literary education with practical and social components. Pragmatic canons can take the work out of the classroom and have it influence our larger social lives. What this means is that in this paper, I will use the term “pragmatist canon” to talk about the type of canon I am arguing for and the term “canon” for the other formulations of it.2

In order to see how the best minds of the literary profession construct canons, I turn to some prominent examples. As I indicated above, Edmundson, a professor himself at the University of Virginia, believes canons are all about what we teach (notice the distinctly pragmatic lean to this statement: canons are things we actually use). Even more, given his previous arguments, Edmundson is obviously going to believe canonical works ought to be those that can alter our final narratives. This is a perfectly reasonable requirement; in fact, it is one I
wholeheartedly endorse. However, whenever he becomes more specific, Edmundson writes, “I think that canonical works . . . ought to be the testing and transforming books that have influenced people in exciting ways over a long period of time” (122). Immediately, we notice the word “exciting.” What exactly makes a work “exciting?” It seems entirely plausible that a work might be exciting while still not reaching our Final Narratives. Thus, not only are Edmundson’s descriptors of value no more precise than those of our original definition from the *OED*, it seems as though it offers the possibility of undermining the central point of *Why Read?*. Whenever Edmundson gives a definition of works that he considers canonical, those that work in exciting ways, he immediately begins to revert to the old, ambiguous standards of definition instead of one firmly grounded in his new idea of reading practices.

This trend continues in the second part of the quote. Edmundson believes that canonical works, those that we use in the classroom, should be those that have lasted “over a long period of time.” What this seems to me to be is another reversion back to the standard definition of a canon. Edmundson wants us to read the classics. He believes the works that are the most exciting, those that are best suited to intensive, life-changing literary study are those composed a long time ago (and as a result, mostly by white men we may add). If the object of Edmundson’s project is actually to get students to alter their Final Narratives, this seems a disingenuous suggestion. To suppose that the best way to fully engage and interest students (and I contend students must be interested and engaged in a work for that work to have any shot at their Final Narratives) is to draw from literature written well before they were born often about topics students have no way to relate to seems a faulty line of reasoning. Even when these works hit upon familiar or more “universal” topics, they often do so in situations that are unfamiliar to the modern reader. Now, I am not suggesting that the classics cannot alter Final Narratives; there is
a reason they have continued to be read for so long. What I am saying is that contemporary literature has distinct values and that automatically dismissing a certain segment of literature because it is too new seems to be harmful to the project given Edmundson’s stated goal.

A closer scrutiny of Why Read? reveals why he believes we should read certain works that have “lasted” over a long period of time. He writes, “What ought to make a work survive is that it can be lived, can function . . . as a Bible of sorts. . . [These] works are far too tough-minded to be written off as wish-fulfillments” (132). Notice that Edmundson’s thoughts contain a qualifier almost immediately. He says that his criteria “ought” to be what make works last. Obviously, it does not follow that it is what made the works persist; there could be a plethora of reasons. I’m sure Edmundson acknowledges this. What he does not give us, however, is any practical way to determine if that work that actually did survive is canon-worthy. Edmundson does write that the works that ought to survive are “tough-minded.” However, this phrase, like many others that have become associated with the idea of the canon, is ultimately a vague one.

This vagueness would not necessarily be a problem—certainly one could decide for oneself what the tough-mindedness entails—were it not for another of Edmundson’s comments. Earlier, when Edmundson suggested that canons are about what we teach in the classroom, his follow up thought was that educators should ask themselves, “What books shall we get young people to read?” (121). For Edmundson, what goes on the syllabi is not a matter of debate. He believes educators “get” students to read certain canonical works. They should force students into it. This attitude becomes a problem when we reflect on what is at stake in our classroom experience. We are reading in order to change our Final Narratives, to reshape who we fundamentally are as people. However, forcing books on students without conversation risks robbing them of the opportunity to transform their lives. In a sense, “getting” students to read
the professor’s chosen works risks producing students who are clones of the professor in theory and thought.

However, while Edmundson argues for a return to the classics through a pragmatic schema, there are other thinkers that think about the canon in different ways. Harold Bloom, in his work *The Western Canon*, defines canonical works as those “authoritative in our culture” (1). This is not a statement I totally disagree with. The works that are authoritative in our culture would seem to be those that have the greatest efficacy in shaping Final Narratives. Even more, given a utilitarian reading, the canon ought to be composed of those works that are best at getting to the Final Narratives of the greatest number of people, those that are most authoritative.

However, like the *OED*, Bloom neglects to add a component of intentionality to his claim. Since works cannot become authoritative of their own accord (no matter how much intrinsic value we might think they have), someone or some group of people is obviously making judgments about what works hold that authority. As before, more often than not, these people are the professors in our classrooms.

Bloom also suggests that a key component of canonical works is aesthetic merit (1, 3). What this merit means for Bloom is that these works contain a “sublimity” or a “strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange” (2, 3). Now, I think the first descriptor, sublimity, risks falling into the realm of vagueness that I have mentioned before. It does not really tell us anything useful about how to define which books should be canonical and which should not. It is so broad, so interpretable that it can be attached to many works. Although someone could certainly posit it in an argument, it would seem to be a very ineffective place from which to begin a defense of works.
The second descriptor, strangeness, however, presents a different matter. Bloom does work to define exactly what he means by strangeness in such a way as it is very narrowly, and usefully, formulated. Strangeness is a special kind of originality that “we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies” (Bloom 4). In a sense, a work is either so original that we have ingrained it into our collective consciousnesses despite its many seeming peculiarities (Ulysses comes to mind) or that it is so original that it has been ingrained to the point where we overlook what would have once been strange (most Edgar Allan Poe stories serve as an example). Bloom’s concept of strangeness could be a very useful criterion in an argument for what should and shouldn’t be taught. The idea of encountering something strange definitely has the potential to make us rethink our concept of the world. Even more, Bloom’s predicted response to this strangeness would certainly serve as evidence that our minds have internalized the content of the narrative to the level required for foundational transformation.

However, I wish to reiterate that the value of strangeness is still only a plausible argument in canon formation. It does not seal the deal. There is no way to objectively determine what is and what is not strange. Even someone as trained as Bloom will undoubtedly experience subjective biases. As such, with both of these descriptors, Bloom skirts around the issue of intentionality in canon formation. He writes that by possessing strangeness, a work “can win canonical status” (4). This formulation of the issue suggests that works can somehow make it into a canon by themselves due to some intrinsic value. In a sense, that they were canonical all along and now they are placing themselves in the canon. Once again, this is far from the truth. Canons are formed by people with distinct and unavoidable biases and prejudices; they do not
form themselves no matter what conditions we may wish to establish for their admittance. Ultimately, we pick which works will go and which will stay.

Bloom is also concerned with the “opening up” of the canon to works whose value is in their social commentary rather than their aesthetic merits. The “we” that is currently choosing the canon has accepted works as canonical even thought they are, quite frankly, bad works of art and do not sustain two readings let alone ten. Bloom seems to imply with this commentary that books of real merit are beautiful and difficult enough to sustain multiple readings, and those that cannot do so are not really worth our time. Although I agree that canonical works—for me those most likely to change Final Narratives—are those that are most likely to sustain many readings, I want to draw attention to the varied nature of readership. Bloom may be able to read a book several times that I cannot stomach and vice versa. The “opening up” of the canon may have more to do with an increased, and therefore more diverse, readership interested in their own betterment than with a pollution of aesthetic merit.

Regardless of the causes, however, it seems clear that Bloom’s concern has particular consequences for contemporary works that older works do not have to deal with. In *The Western Canon*, Bloom takes the last 30 or so pages of the text to formulate his own list of canonical works. He divides his selection into four mostly temporal groups: the Theocratic, Aristocratic, Democratic, and Chaotic Ages with the Chaotic being the most contemporary. When he introduces the Chaotic Age, Bloom seems skeptical of the staying power of many contemporary works when he writes, “I am not as confident about this list as the first three. Cultural prophecy is always a mug’s game. Not all of the works here can prove to be canonical; literary overpopulation is a hazard among many of them. . . What I have omitted seem to me fated to become period pieces” (548). Bloom is hesitant to include recent works in the canon because of
the aforementioned “opening up.” He thinks many of the works that may eventually be
considered canonical will be so on the basis of their “multiculturalism” or some other such
criteria rather than on something more akin to Edmundson’s tough-mindedness that produced the
first three lists. Without the tough-mindedness, the period pieces will not be able to last. For the
task Bloom set himself, he has done an admirable job: although there will always be debates, he
has done a remarkable job selecting those books that have beared rereading over time as well as
those that are likely to be reread by future generations.

However, I think Bloom misses the point slightly in this section. The canon is not
fundamentally about what people have read in the past or what people are likely to read in the
future. No, it is specifically about what we engage right now. Thus, when Bloom is constructing
the canon for the Chaotic Age, it should not be a work of prognostication. It should be a critical
reflection on what books currently affect people. Period pieces may be as likely—in fact, maybe
should be as likely—as anything else to achieve canonical status, especially when we consider
the canon in the classroom. I believe the pieces most likely to really affect people are those with
which they are most familiar (for the strangeness to really subvert social practices and thus be
effective, there must be something to be estranged from), and this group perhaps includes period
pieces. Canon formation is ultimately about the reader’s own intimate experience with a text.
When we try to extrapolate this experience to a culture at large or, even more removed, a culture
in the future, we risk losing sight of the fundamental purpose of the canon.

For an illustration, I turn to Bloom’s list of books from the Chaotic Age. He includes
such pieces by Norman Mailer as The Executioner’s Song, and undoubtedly this will be a well-
remembered piece. However, Bloom neglects to select “The White Negro” for his list, a work
considered important to the Beat movement. Even if the Beats ultimately end up being nothing
more than a ten year blip in the literary radar, certainly their works affected a Final Narrative shift amongst their own generation. The implication is that whenever a group or even single individuals arise that have a similar mindset to the Beats, the books that inspired the Beats will resonate similarly amongst this new body of people. I am not necessarily arguing that Bloom should have included “The White Negro.” Rather, what I am saying is that a reconception of the purpose of the canon might lead to “The White Negro” being just as important as *The Executioner’s Song*. This is a possibility that Bloom does not really entertain.

To see what I really mean here, consider the case of Jack Kerouac. In his list of more or less contemporary authors, Bloom neglects to place Kerouac in the canon. However, few authors or works have affected me or my outlook on the world as deeply as Kerouac’s *On The Road*. Whether or not the novel is sublime I cannot really say as I am not entirely sure what that term means in Bloom’s view. What I can assert very strongly is the work’s strangeness. From the subject matter to the spontaneous prose, *On The Road* contains many unfamiliar elements. Even more, I am not entirely sure that I will ever be able to assimilate the strangeness of the novel; every time I read another work, even one from the Beat movement, and then come back to Kerouac’s prose, I am more taken aback my just how gloriously different it is from anything I have ever read.

And that last sentence is the key. It is different, it is strange for *me*. As a result, I believe the novel has really gotten at some of my Final Narratives. For instance, while in Denver, Dean Moriarty says, “What do my eyeballs see? Ah—the blue sky . . . Together with windows—have you ever dug windows?” (Kerouac 188). This notion of digging really struck a chord with me. It expresses a kind of patient spirituality, a willingness to let the world be revealed to you. However, the term juxtaposes this reception with a wild, active doing. It entails a haphazard
pursuit of joy and things to dig. The result is a constant balance between speed and serenity. In
the previous passage, Dean reminds the reader that it is not just nature that we can dig. We
should also examine the artificial. It too is capable of a sublimity worthy of a good, long dig.
He reminds us that windows are co-valuable with the blue sky. After all, they are made by
humans; they are a product of our nature. We should take the time to dig them while in pursuit
of our next reflection.

Even though *On The Road* might be a period piece of the Beat movement, it still speaks
to me some 50 years later. My problem with Bloom’s conception of the canon is that he seems
to discount the literary and transformative power of works that might not extend too far beyond
the period they are written (in the scope of literary history, my time of existence would seem to
place me in the same period as Kerouac). I am fully prepared to argue that now, at this point in
time, *On The Road* should be canonical, and it is this focus on the moment of the reader that I
believe Bloom’s canon misses. While I am willing to prognosticate that likeminded individuals
will be able to turn to Kerouac’s novel in the future, I am most concerned with what we ought to
do with the work at this point in time. Thus, although Bloom mostly avoided my main problem
with the canon, its flat unwillingness to accept contemporary works, his analysis has some of its
own problems concerning this same time period.

In his elegy for the canon, Bloom quotes Sir Frank Kermode, whom the author considers
to be the best living English critic, on the canon. Kermode writes that canons “negate the
distinction between knowledge and opinion” (4). He goes on to say that even though various
forces are seeking to destroy the canon, “it is hard to see how the normal operation of learned
institutions . . . can manage without them” (4). Kermode, and by extension Bloom, miss the
point here on several instances. Canons do not negate the difference between knowledge and
opinion; to think so is an idealistic fantasy. Rather, canons are the fruition of opinions about knowledge: they should be formed through the dialectical give and take of the best formed arguments scholars and laypeople are able to formulate. Furthermore, Kermode jumps to the conclusion that the deconstruction of canons will necessarily lead to their disappearance. As I have already discussed, canons are inevitable byproducts of the educational experience. The deconstruction of the canon, the forcible ripping apart of the false coincidence of opinion and knowledge, does not seek to destroy the canon. Instead, it works to enlighten the populace as to the workings of the canon so that they can become more thoughtful and knowingly select works that best reach the target audience.

**The Importance of the Classroom Environment to Reading a Canon**

Now that we know what a canon consists of and have fleshed out some of its underlying assumptions, we can begin to think about the ways we engage a canon in the classroom. As I have noted, it is inevitable that we do so; syllabi are a kind of canon, and no matter how loosely they are formulated, there is eventually a discrete set of works we read in the classroom. Since I eventually want to reclaim Stephen King as part of this set, the task is to think about what the classroom does for us as students of literature. The answer, I think, is that the classroom provides us opportunities for study and conversation that are not available elsewhere.

Some of these opportunities help the student to unpack a work in such a way as to more fully understand it. By this I mean that the student learns certain techniques for literary analysis that are not available to a casual reader or even to a critical reader who does not spend a significant amount of time in literary study (say a biology major). The consequence of these techniques is that a book is more likely to reach a student’s Final Narrative. There is something
to the analytical devices we learn in a classroom. They are not just objects for rote memorization, but archaeological tools to uncover a literary world. They allow us a varied, specialized, and nuanced approach to analyzing a novel. By this same token, it is possible that a literary education might misuse these tools. It is entirely conceivable that an introductory course to literary theory might require its students to memorize the definition of metonymy and then go no further. While certainly a nice piece of trivia, such an understanding of literary device in itself does not help us reach the practical level of literature. It could serve other educational ends, but it is antithetical to a pragmatic literary education. Scoring a twenty out of twenty on a definition test proves something, but if the instructor never communicates how to use these definitions, then a valuable part of an education is lost. Even more, if the professor never communicates how the use of these definitions can affect a narrative shift in the reader, then the standards of a pragmatic education are not met.

However, I believe knowledge of such literary devices, knowledge that can only be gained in a classroom environment, has the power to deepen our understanding of a work and so enhance the chances of us being moved by that same work. As an example, I turn to Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock.” The poem is a mock epic which details how the heroine, Belinda, loses a lock of her hair to the Baron. During Part II of the poem, the narrator speculates what cruel fate might befall Belinda on the day of the “rape” when he writes:

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Whether the Nymph shall break Diana's Law,
Or some frail China Jar receive a Flaw,
Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade,
Forget her Pray'rs, or miss a Masquerade,
Or lose her Heart, or Necklace, at a Ball; ("The Rape of the Lock")
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Perhaps the most obvious component of this passage is its repeated use of zeugma. Zeugma is a literary device in which one verb “yokes” (zeugma derives from the Greek word for to yoke)
together two different objects. While zeugmas can be used for many different purposes, this poem employs them in order to flatten out distinctions between two objects of seemingly very different worth. In a sense, Pope is saying that it would be equally heart-wrenching for Belinda to lose either her heart or her necklace at a ball, a concept that seems perhaps ludicrous to the reader.

Because I know what zeugma is, I am able to locate it in the Pope piece. Even more, because I have learned what it does, I am able to derive some significance from its employment. Now, at this point the reader might object that even if I do not know what a zeugma is, that device is still present in Pope’s poem. However, the mere presence of such a device does not really do anything. Certainly, it may have an effect on the reader, but without the proper tools to know what caused the effect or the proper education to go about fleshing out the effect, then the nature of the device remains largely hidden from the reader; she cannot really know its implications, just its presence. To return to the archaeology analogy, there ways to determine that something (fossils, say) lie below the earth. However, without the right equipment, the archaeologist cannot get to these bones. While the scientist may attempt other methods of extraction, these less nuanced ways risk missing what caused the fossil to be in the condition it is.

Even more, the reader might object to my line of thinking by saying that just because I do not know what this device is called, it does not mean that I cannot somehow discover it in use. This argument is certainly true, but its method is one of a low level of efficacy. While the reader may eventually unpack the zeugmatic line, the possible waste of time and energy risks counteracting the gain, especially when we consider that a literary education provides these tools from nearly the get-go. To return to the analogy, an archaeologist might eventually unearth the fossil, but chances are he spent a good deal of time trying to figure out how to use the equipment
with which he was completely unfamiliar. Moreover, the scientist could have been excavating other sites while he was stuck on this one. Far better that the archaeologist learn the proper technique first and then bring these tools to bear on a dig site. Furthermore, initial knowledge of these tools provides that they are applied consistently over time rather than haphazardly. As Shusterman said, our lives are to consist of both reception and creation, and this is no less true of the literary devices we learn in a classroom.

However, whatever the manner of my excavation, it is essential to my literary education that my “unpacking” of this poem does not simply stop with my above analysis as with my memorization of metonymy. I can make a very coherent argument about the poem by using the idea that the narrator sees Belinda’s heart and necklace as equal possessions for her. Nonetheless, the argument is still internal to the piece and says nothing about my engagement with the work of art or even the personal and social ramifications of the analysis. This last step, I believe, is the crucial one. A true literary education requires that we take this concept of zeugma and its ramifications in literature and then reflect on how they inform our lives and the lives around us. My analysis of “The Rape of the Lock” cannot stop with the way the above passage fits into the poem as a whole even though this might be a sufficient standard for some parts of the literary community. Rather, I must see how the work, if it does at all, speaks to my Final Narratives (and if the work does not reach my Final Narratives, then I think this, too, says something about me).

What is at stake in our English classrooms is not just the ability to correctly close read a text, but the ability to change the basic ways we think about, and ultimately live in, the world.

The classroom setting gives the student the skills to begin to unpack works in meaningful ways. However, in the classroom, we also have a very specific learning environment that we cannot find elsewhere. Within this setting, the student is able to interact not just with a
community of peers, but also with a professional that is incredibly knowledgeable in the particular field of study. The classroom thus presents a set of conversational resources that are not (easily) available in many other settings. Our teacher and are peers can help us toward a deeper understanding of the works, and, subsequently, ourselves and the world.

Even more, the classroom can offer a wealth of different voices and perspectives. In the university setting, I am likely to encounter people with narratives that are not similar, and often times radically dissimilar, from my own. The conversation which began on the page can lift off of it as we join our varied existences to the dialogue. When I read *The Widow Ranter* by Aphra Behn, I get a particular story about colonialism. However, within the classroom, I can hear the stories from students who, by virtue of being American Indian or Haitian or African-American, have experienced the practice of colonization first hand from a different perspective. My understanding of colonialism is largely from the perspective of a white, European-American. In order to more fully understand the Other, and for the interlocutor to more fully understand me as their Other, we need a dialogue of the type that literature engenders and the classroom experience elevates. The classroom can place together varied perspectives that might not have otherwise opened a dialogue with each other, let alone on that topic. Moreover, since this dialogue takes place within the framework of a literary classroom, this dialogue is likely to be one that is particularly skilled at analyzing the text at hand.

**Adjudicating the Canon**

And so, if we are to place a pragmatic canon in this classroom environment, we need to think about the ways in which we form this canon. The pragmatist canon cannot simply assert its content; as I mentioned before, such a formulation relies too heavily on the biases of just one
person. Rather, the pragmatist canon must seek to assimilate the notion that a readership consist of a multiplicity of different views. Every time we enter a classroom, we engage a set of individuals, and each individual comes with her own personal biases and narratives. Therefore, the pragmatic canon ought to be constructed as a joint effort between teacher and students. Each individual should have a say in its creation. As a result, pragmatic canons must be formed on the basis of the respectful give-and-take of argument. Argument that the professor, as the person with the most knowledge, ultimately adjudicates.

The philosopher Richard Rorty gives us a framework to think about arguing for a specific formulation of the canon. Specifically with Rorty, I want to look at the ways that he thinks about justification. Like many pragmatists, Rorty discards the notion of knowledge as access to privileged representation. What Rorty means by this is that, “epistemology [was] the quest initiated by Descartes, for those privileged items in the field of consciousness which are the touchstones of truth” (210). Rorty’s image for this kind of project is the mirror of nature (nature is of course used in the broadest possible sense here, not just the physical world). He believes that epistemology sought to find the clearest way that the mind could act as the mirror of nature, and therefore knowledge rested with those people who had the clearest access to these removed, antecedent truths. While we may conceptualize a situation in which a person argues in favor of a canon by relation to antecedent truths, it is unlikely to be the case in today’s classroom. What Rorty’s rejection of epistemological certainty does for us is open us other ways of adjudication.

In the case of Rorty, he believes that argumentation and other forms of social justification can fill the void left by the rejection of epistemological practices. Particularly, Rorty believes that we construct knowledge through this kind of justification. He explains it as: “we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it
as accuracy of representation” (170). The ways that we go about constructing knowledge are entirely subsequent to our experience in the world. We empirically investigate it and then justify our opinions about this investigation socially. What this means is that knowledge is now a product of “conversation and of social practice” (171). Both through conversations and our actions we demonstrate our knowledge and measure it against other people’s ways of understandings. The result of this interaction is that knowledge becomes a product of our interactions.

Rorty calls this way of understanding knowledge “epistemological behaviorism.” What this process entails is “explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former. . . This sort of behaviorism can best be seen as a species of holism—but one which requires no metaphysical underpinnings” (174). Now, there are two important claims here. The first is that knowledge is socially constructed. Truth is a product of the constraints and wishes of social practice. The implication is that if we change our social practices, through the conversational justification Rorty talked about earlier presumably, then the very notion and fact of truth itself can change. The second point involves the holism. Specifically, Rorty has the holism of a language game in mind, and although he never says it explicitly as such, this entails a holism of our experiences since our language, being subsequent and not antecedent to our existence (for more, see Willard Von Orman Quine’s “Two Dogma’s of Empiricism”), derives from our investigations in this world. The implication of this claim is that we are free to construct knowledge by reference to the totality of our experiences. Nothing is out of bounds when we are attempting to justify our claim.

Applied to the classroom, this understanding of knowledge allows us a way to select works. Inclusion or exclusion is now decided on the respectful give and take between teacher
and pupil. However, the goal of this conversation is not to reach some immobile concept of truth like a modern day rendition of Plato’s dialectic. The “winner” of the conversation is not the one who argues that a work more accurately represents some concept or value wholly removed from the experiences of the interlocutors. Rather, the point is decided by the person who is best able to argue her position by relying on the totality of her experiences within this world. As I argue the goal of reading is the adjustment of Final Narratives—values which are specifically about this world—then our justifications for reading need to also rely on the experiences and ideas that move us.

Now, undoubtedly the professor has the upper hand in this exchange, and this is how it should be. One again, there is a reason that person is in charge, and that is because she has had significantly more “relevant” experience. However, this esteemed position does not make her free from challenge. There are certain things she cannot understand as the experience of her students will undoubtedly be of a significantly different type, perhaps most notably demarcated by the difference in years between student and professor. Since the student is young and her experiences are of such a different type, they may fall outside the relevant expertise of the professor.

The keys to this process are respect and openness. Everyone within the classroom has to be a willing participant in the process. Even more, everyone must be willing to be moved and swayed by the carefully formulated opinions of others. By recognizing that our basis for knowledge—our experience in this world—is fundamentally equal, we can move a long ways toward realizing this in many ways idealistic description. This realization should also pave the way for the necessary respect. If we are really open to allowing everyone to speak, then we
already afford them respect. We agree not to bully, shout-over, or demean others for their positions on the canon.

All of this is not to say, however, that I am in any ways relativistic towards what gets into the canon and what is kept out. I am not so naive as to believe that all works do an equal job at getting to our Final Narratives. There is a reason we read Shakespeare time and again. However, I also do not believe that any one work is able to reach everyone. My position on the matter is similar to Rorty’s. He believes that certain vocabularies—certain ways of socially justifying the world—are better at operating in the world than others. As Bjørn Ramberg puts it in his study of Rorty, “the world, by its very nature, rationally constrains choices of vocabulary with which to cope with it” (“Richard Rorty”). Ramberg’s idea is that once we have identified a goal, there are better and worse ways for getting to that goal as determined by the conditions of existence; not every way is equal. The same idea applies to the canon. We have a goal in mind and that is to alter our Final Narratives. The works that allow us to get to this goal do so in better or worse ways. We use epistemic behavioralism in order to justify how certain works are able to reach our Final Narratives.

There is a reason people return to Shakespeare again and again of their own volition. It is because something in his ideas, his plots, his very words strike some kind of a chord within the reader. Shakespeare is able to do this to a number of readers. In fact, this wide appeal is something a person may be able to use in her process of justification. “Look at how often Shakespeare affects people,” a student might say. “We should read him again because, unlike other authors, there is a greater chance Shakespeare is able to achieve our goal.” However, the Bard in no way reaches everyone; sometimes the reaction can be apathy and at other points outright distaste. As such, the lines of justification need to remain open. We have to allow
students to challenge Shakespeare, to explain why he fails. We need to let students explain why
Thomas Kyd is better option than Shakespeare and remain open to the possibility that they could
be right.

Nevertheless, we do not have time to read and study everything we might wish in a
classroom (obviously). A class on American Gothic with thirty different students might very
well elicit many different responses as to what works the class should read. Unfortunately, there
is certainly not enough time to adequately engage all of these works. Assuming that more works
have been adequately justified than there is room for in the classroom, we need a way to
somehow condense these varied viewpoints. The answer, I think, must be a utilitarian one.
When works are equally justified—say Shakespeare and Kyd—then I think we must choose to
read the one that has the greatest chance to reach the greatest number of people. We must keep
in mind that classes are a body of individual students who all need to learn; it is a bigger entity
than any one person. The result is that we must employ a utilitarian approach to selecting the
work. We can argue, as the student above, that Shakespeare reaches more people, and if all other
factors are the same, then we ought to choose to read Shakespeare over Kyd.

Thus, the idea of selecting literature for the classroom is a process that is both
individualistic and communal. The procedure starts with individual students and professors
making individual arguments as to the merits of certain works. When one argument is superior
to another, then the work that that justification supports is the book that the class reads.
However, when the arguments are equal, or at least so equal as there is no discernable difference,
then the ethic that we resort to is a communal one. Given the constraints of the classroom, we
must seek to satisfy the greatest number of students possible.
Lastly, I suppose it is fair to wonder who might adjudicate these arguments. The answer is the professor. As the person with the greatest knowledge and experience, she is in the best position to make decisions. That is why she is in charge and why we have chosen to take her class. Nevertheless, she must make her reasoning transparent. She should fully disclose to the class why she made the decisions she did, that way they can be satisfied she is not abusing her position of authority. Once again, this process demands the utmost respect. The student, as a member of the class, must respect the decision the professor makes, whatever the outcome. Otherwise, the whole process and all the gains the students made regarding having their voices heard would be completely undermined. Only through respecting the transparent adjudication by the professor can the class move forward toward a meaningful engagement of the now canonical works.

**Ethical Implications to a Specifically Pragmatic Approach to the Canon**

What this conversation means, then, is that the pragmatic canon canonizes literature that helps us interact with the world at large. Specifically, the manner in which it helps is by placing competing narratives in dialogue with each other. We dialogue with the text, and, in the classroom, texts dialogue with each other and we dialogue with our classmates. The idea is that this proliferation of varied narratives and the dialogue which ensues causes us to rethink and reshape our own narratives for a more compassionate and varied understanding of the world. Thus, the pragmatic canon, with its emphasis on the way literature can influence our actions, carries with it certain ethical implications.

In his work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre explains how he believes narratives play out in our lives. MacIntyre writes, “We identify a particular action only by invoking two kinds of
context. . . We place the agent’s intentions, I have suggested in casual and temporal order with reference to their role in his or her history; and we also place them with reference to their role of the setting or settings to which they belong. . . Narrative history of a certain kind tends to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions” (396). MacIntyre believes that we understand human action by reference to certain narratives we can identify within the scene of the action. We are able to understand intentionality by placing actions in context, and these contexts have to be endowed with narrative.

In fact, MacIntyre believes that actions are only intelligible due to the narrative context of the various components of the situation. He writes, “The notion of a history is as fundamental a notion as the notion of an action. Each requires the other. . . [I]n identifying the intelligibility of an action [we] place [it] in a narrative sequence” (400). Thus, in order to understand our existence, in order to understand what happens when we “do,” we must be able to identify a narrative structure to the situation. Without the presence of narrative, we are left with meaningless action. However, once we render a situation intelligible through narrative, we are able to engage it in a meaningful way.

The implication for MacIntyre is that our lives have a narrative characteristic. He explains it as, “We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others. . . The characters [in these dramas] of course never start literally ab initio; they plunge in media res, the beginnings of their story already made for them by what and who has gone before” (MacIntyre 400-1). Whenever we enter this world, we are born into certain narratives and ways of living. I act as a character in my own drama and you, yours. However, both of our dramas take place
within the larger cultural dramas that we were born into. For instance, I take part in the drama of an undergraduate honors student while simultaneously participating in the story of Western whiteness and masculinity.

However, in MacIntyre’s view, we are not simply characters in our dramas. As he writes, “What I have called a history is an enacted dramatic narrative in which the characters are also the authors” (401). As much as we play a part in a narrative (the ones where others subordinate us or perhaps cultural narratives), we also have the power to change and alter the character of our existence; we can author parts of our lives. For instance, I have made certain choices in my life that have led me to this moment where I am typing an undergraduate honors thesis. While some of these decision were undoubtedly influenced by outside forces (other narratives), much of the situation is the product of choices that were largely my own. Similarly, although I was born onto a stage where I must participate in Westerness, whiteness, and masculinity, I can author the ways in which I partake in each of these. While I can never change the color of my skin, I can accept or reject certain implications of this color. Even more, I can fold in other narratives of other colors in order to help construct the best way to live.

Thus, it becomes clear that MacIntyre’s ethics is narrative based. He believes we go about living a moral life by proposing what we deem to be ethical ends to our narratives. The object is then to pursue this end to the best of our abilities. These ends need not be completely teleological; rather, they can be different stops and goals along the path of a human life. While I cannot control any of the narratives I was born into, I can shape them into an end that I deem ethical and proper. Translated onto the idea of a literary education, what is at stake in a pragmatist canon are the keys to moral agency. By reading in this manner, we work to shape the
moral direction our lives. Literature proposes a set of narratives that interact with those that are already in place, through our making or not.

Last year at Wittenberg University, Joe Weeks wrote an undergraduate thesis in which he expressed his concern over the direction of literary education. His solution was one that flows naturally from a pragmatic understanding of the canon. He believes that “literature may be treated as hypothetical, a set of experiences that may suggest or ‘play out’ alternative realities” (1). Weeks believes that reading literature can be an intellectual exercise whereby we can posit other narratives of existence. Through this examination we can explore the various goods of these other modes of living. For instance, we can see, as best as possible, what the black, Latino, Asian, female, or homosexual, to name a few, life might be like. We can interrogate these lives to see what goods these various narratives work toward. We can identify competing (or similar) moralities through the narrative structure of lives expressed in literary form.

The result of this experience, according to Weeks, is that we can reflect on our own habitation of the world (1). This claim is very similar to Edmundson’s idea of Final Narrative change. The difference is that Weeks believes we ought to adopt other modes of existence through narrative form, while Edmundson believes that we should engage the ideas that novels produce, not necessarily try on hypothetical existences. However, both of these understandings of a literary education fit inside a pragmatic conception of literature, and, more importantly, within the works we would find in a pragmatic canon. Yet, both of these ideas are ultimately about the reader. We have moved away from the focus being on the text, but we have not disengaged the fundamental solipsism of the reading practice into a wider ethical experience. These techniques are self-serving tools for changing one’s own life. In a sense, one uses other narratives or ideas to better oneself. While this is certainly not a bad thing, this process is
ultimately a form of colonization whereby we background the people whose narratives we have used in order to adopt the most efficacious of their practices. In a sense, this process does not inherently include the Other. However, I believe the idea of a pragmatic canon can extend the ethical focus of literature further outward to include the backgrounded peoples and others not immediately engaged in the act of reading while simultaneously working to develop a better good for one’s own narrative.

In the conclusion of *Why Read?*, Edmundson believes that we use the narrative ethics of literature in order to posit the traditional liberal goal of a cosmopolitan democracy. As he writes, “Literary response is individual, particular: to put trust in literature affirms the antiphilosophic view that there are as many ways of living well as there are individuals disposed to do so. . . The turn to literature for multiple truths is a democratic turn. . . Democracy, and the democratic humanism that can make it unfold—these are my religion” (140, 142). He believes that a democratic world follows from our embrace of the narrative altering characteristic of literature. By recognizing the multiplicity of worldviews, we realize that they all deserve a seat at the table of democratic policy making. Thus, Edmundson begins the transition away from “simply” a solipsistic ethic to one that begins to inherently embrace the Other as well.

I think Edmundson is on to something here, but I believe he mis-locates the ethical implications of his idea by positing a democratic teleos. Edmundson is right to suggest that a pragmatic understanding of literature recognizes many ways of not just living, but living well. However, this recognition is not an antiphilosophic view; it is a pragmatic view. And this pragmatic view would remind Edmundson that by positing a democracy as his teleos, he necessary precludes some ways of inhabiting the world that are likely to constitute living well. Edmundson adopts the traditional western liberal stance, but he fails to recall one of the first, and
perhaps most famous, western philosophers of all time: Plato. In the *Republic*, Plato’s Socrates argued that a democracy was the third best form of government behind both monarchy and oligarchy. By placing faith in only democracy, Edmundson neglects the viability of other possible ends, ends from both inside and outside the Western tradition.

Therefore, I believe Edmundson was correct in his belief that the pragmatic canon would produce a polyphony of voices, but wrong insofar as he proposed a set teleos for those voices. The ethics of the pragmatic canon are not based on where it leads us, but what it does for us. Its value is in the way it alters our Final Narratives, not in where this alteration leads us. I believe that the ethics of a pragmatic canon lie in the respect and compassion it helps to foster within us for people that are markedly different from ourselves. Even more, it helps us to realize our own biases and prejudices that may have gone unexamined. It seems reasonable that such a process might lead to a cosmopolitan respect for different ways of living well, but it seems to undermine the project to argue that such a respect should lead to cosmopolitan democracy. In this manner, the pragmatic canon moves away from a purely readerly focus to include other peoples in the ethics of a literary education.

**Education as the Practice of Freedom**

Ultimately, the argument for a pragmatic canon is an ethical one. We construct syllabi based on works’ abilities to change our Final Narratives because it improves the quality of life for both ourselves and our communities. This reasoning is why the pragmatist canon is superior to other ways of forming syllabi: it seeks out social implications to our university literary study. It helps us to live better lives while also working to better the lives of the community.
In her work *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks comments on how she perceives education is currently, and also how it ought to be. In this book, I think she has something to say about the manner in which we can apply the ethical implications of the pragmatic canon to the classroom environment. hooks writes, “Expanding beyond boundaries [has] made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students” (10).

hooks identifies two goals as the objects of education: interrogating our own lives and engaging diverse ideas. This paper works to demonstrate that a pragmatic approach to the canon does both of these things. Reading literature pragmatically forces us to critically reflect upon the ways we inhabit the world. Even more, it allows us to mine other ways of living to both improve our own existence and gain respect for other modes. While the traditional canon can certainly perform this task, it does not seek to do it. Bloom’s canon only practices this kind of education incidentally because the text is always at the forefront. Thus, when hooks suggests that we examine curricula for the ways in which it reinscribes systems of domination, I do not think that our critical interrogation should stop with systems like racism and sexism. Rather, it should expand itself to look at whether the educational system in its entirety, specifically the way we study literature, equates to a form of domination. We need to see if the curricula itself dominates both the reader and the text by forcing out pieces of literature that might help us live a better life.

If we ultimately find that the system in place represses our ability to live ethically, then we ought to confront that system. When the curriculum places the text above the reader, we need to argue with it. As bell hooks says, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. . . Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know
beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is a movement which makes education the practice of freedom” (12). The classroom ought to be a transformative space. It should make us challenge all of our presuppositions and beliefs with the result that we open our minds and hearts to the Other. The pragmatic canon provides such a possibility within our literary education. The pragmatic canon allows education to be the practice of freedom.
Part III: What we read

Having completed the machinery of my pragmatist project, I can now begin to see how it actually translates into the classroom experience. In a sense, I have outlined why we ought to read and how we go about putting this idea to work in the classroom. Even more, I have shown why it is important to read pragmatically in the university and what the ethical implications are when we approach literature in this manner.

The task is now to run works through the machinery. Because the method for canonizing literature has shifted its focus, this process might seem a little strange. Instead of making arguments that are purely internal to the work, the pragmatic process of canonization makes us reflect on how these internal arguments resonate practically. Furthermore, since the purpose of this section is to demonstrate how we go about canonizing, its arguments are actually more like justifications. The ultimate conclusion to my literary analysis has to be a reason why we ought to read that particular work. Once the work is in the syllabus, then we can begin to make arguments that more fully explore all there is to mine from the work’s narratives. However, in order to do this second analysis, we need to first get it in the canon. I believe the following sections demonstrate why we ought to read Don DeLillo and, more surprisingly, Stephen King in the classroom.

The Process Begins

In order to implement this process, I want to look at two works in particular: Underworld by Don DeLillo and Hearts in Atlantis by Stephen King. This Part does not argue for the inclusion of one work over the other; it may be that they should both be included. Rather, it seeks to apply the process from the earlier parts to both works in order to argue why we ought to
read them given the concept of the literary education I have outlined. Each work will be analyzed on its own—examined for why or why not we should read it—until they are ultimately put in a dialogue with one another in order to see how they communicate.

These novels work particularly well for this project for several reasons. The first of these is that they are contemporary works. The contemporary canon is notoriously difficult for most thinkers to formulate, the reasoning being that we have no historical perspective. As Bloom writes in his construction of the Chaotic canon, “What I have omitted seem to me fated to become period pieces. . . [However,] it may be . . . [that scholars] will come to confirm . . . [them] as canonical by finding them to be inescapable influence[s]” (548). Bloom, parallel with Ulin’s notion of historical sequencing, believes that one of the main formulating factors for the canon is the manner in which earlier works sway later texts. Removed from the publication, we can see how one work has influenced consequent novels and so get a sense of the purely literary import of the work. For instance, *Tristram Shandy* is often considered canonical not least of all because of the manner in which it influenced writers like James Joyce and Flan O’Brien as well as the way it influenced post-modernism as a whole. When constructing a syllabus, certainly placing the works in some kind of historical dialogue is a concern. Having an idea of the history of the work allows the professor a clearer picture of this dialogue. However, the contemporary canon largely strips the professor of this ability.

Even more, from a more pragmatic angle, removal allows us to see how the work has affected readers over a large swath of time. Where Bloom believes influence is an overriding concern for canonization, the pragmatist project places more weight on the efficacy of a work in changing our narratives. So when the point of reading is to alter our Final Narratives and there is only a limited amount of space in a syllabus, then it is important to consider the history of the
work in regards to how it has affected people over time. As I indicated earlier, the fact that a work consistently changes readers over a longer period of time—think Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* versus Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*—is certainly dramatic evidence in favor of a work’s inclusion. Once again, however, the contemporary canon disallows this kind of perspective.

Since the canon remains largely unclear, I have more room to apply the machinery. The historical weight on the choices is significantly less, and so more of the focus is on the work itself. That being said, certain thinkers have a fairly clear idea about who should and should not be included in the contemporary canon, and these ideas also make DeLillo and King a good choice for study. In the mind of Harold Bloom, it is pretty clear that DeLillo is a canonical writer of substance and import while King’s works are simply period pieces or worse. An examination of the Chaotic canon reveals that DeLillo is included four times for *White Noise, Libra, Running Dog,* and *Mao II* [*The Western Canon* was published in 1994, three years before *Underworld*] (564). King, conversely, is nowhere to be found. To be as fair as possible, Bloom’s work was also published before *Hearts in Atlantis.* Nevertheless, King had written many books before 1994, and it is fairly clear that Bloom is significantly surer of the canonical worth of DeLillo’s corpus than King’s.

This sentiment is confirmed when Bloom returns to the subject of both authors in 2003, a date significant because it is after the publication of both *Underworld* and *Hearts in Atlantis.* After the National Book Foundation decided to give its distinguished contribution award to King, Bloom felt compelled to write a column in the *Los Angeles Times.* In it, he writes, “I’ve described King in the past as a writer of penny dreadfuls, but perhaps even that is too kind. . . What he is is an immensely inadequate writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, book-by-book basis. . . By awarding it [the award] to King they recognize nothing but
the commercial value of his books, which sell in the millions but do little more for humanity than keep the publishing world afloat” (“Dumbing down American readers”). Bloom’s previous disregard to King has matured into an actual dialogue against King. It is important to note here that Bloom believes King fails on two fronts. Firstly, King is inadequate aesthetically. His works fail any and all literary measurements no matter what level one examines the texts on. The implication is that when we construct syllabi historically or theoretically, there is no reason to include King because his works create no significant dialogue with the past and are unworthy of a theoretical analysis. Only a course historicizing the commercial aspect of literature would have a reason to include King.

Even more, King is inadequate “humanistically.” Bloom sees King as contributing nothing substantial to our social and cultural engagement. The implication here is that King fails to affect Final Narrative change. If King contributes nothing to humanity, then it is hard to imagine any way in which he could get at anything as fundamental as the basic ways we view the world. In fact, Bloom actually sees King as harmful in this regard. He writes, “The decision to give the National Book Foundation's annual award for ‘distinguished contribution’ to Stephen King is extraordinary, another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life” (“Dumbing down American readers”). Rather than just contributing nothing, Bloom believes that King’s works actually lessen our cultural experience. It is no longer just that King is a bad writer; it is that his bad writing actually does damage.

Diametrically opposed to the manner in which he views King, Bloom has nothing but praise for DeLillo. Near the end of the article, Bloom writes, “Today there are four living American novelists I know of who are still at work and who deserve our praise. Thomas Pynchon is still writing. My friend Philip Roth, . . .Cormac McCarthy, whose novel ‘Blood
Meridian’ is worthy of Herman Melville's ‘Moby-Dick,’ and Don DeLillo, whose Underworld is a great book” (“Dumbing down American readers”). Besides the obvious observation that the only people Bloom mentions are white males (another connection between DeLillo and King), it is noteworthy that out of all the writers working in America today, Bloom finds only four of significance and one of them is Don DeLillo. This is high praise indeed. Even more, out of DeLillo’s entire corpus of works, Bloom takes the time to single out Underworld, the work examined in this paper.

Part of the point of this project is to provide an arena in which we can examine Bloom’s comments and see if they hold up. Parts I and II describe why we ought to read books and how we can ultimately apply this process to canonization. The task is now to see if King is the worthless author Bloom feels him to be. Even more, I will examine DeLillo to see if or how well he retains his canonical status. Bloom’s comments derive specifically from his canonical paradigm, and we now need to see if his concerns translate when we conceptualize literature pragmatically. Where Bloom believes that reading King is harmful, this paper argues that it could very much be harmful not to engage King (and DeLillo) given the manner in which we have reoriented our reading.

Underworld and Hearts in Atlantis also make good choices because of the way that they line up in terms of subject matter. As Caleb Crain notes, “In Hearts in Atlantis, King takes up the Vietnam War” (“There but for Fortune”). Crain is correct; King’s novel does concern itself in many ways with that war. However, a closer examination of the book reveals that it actually spans a much greater time than the war years. Composed of five stories, Hearts in Atlantis runs from 1960, “Low Men in Yellow Coats,” to 1999, “Heavenly Shades of Night are Falling.” These tales tell the stories of a series of loosely intertwined characters as they develop within the
framework of both the Vietnam War and the larger Cold War. Although King uses Vietnam as a focal point, the novel and its various characters extend well beyond those several years.

DeLillo’s *Underworld* follows a similar pattern. As Hans-Ulrich Mohr notes in his study of DeLillo, “Published in 1997, it [*Underworld*] looks back upon the time between 1951 and 1997. This span includes the Cold War” (350). Like *Hearts in Atlantis*, *Underworld* traces its life along a number of years. Also similarly, the two novels both concern themselves with the wars of that period. Where *Hearts in Atlantis* focused on the Vietnam War and kept the Cold War towards the background, DeLillo reverses tacks and forefronts the Cold War while examining Vietnam as a part of it. Also, just as King’s book followed the lives of several loosely related characters, so too does *Underworld* track the lives and works of variously related people. Furthermore, like King, DeLillo too shifts narrators in each section, and often has these different narrators encounter characters from previous or future sections.

Both novels, then, line up fairly nicely in terms of their content and structure. They both engage roughly the same time period and were actually published two years apart (1999 for *Hearts* and 1997 for *Underworld*). Both novels proceed (albeit non-linearly on *Underworld*’s part) by telling several different stories from the perspective of several different loosely related characters. Even more, to touch on Bloom’s comment about the commercial aspect of publishing, as both works proudly proclaim, they were national bestsellers. And so, King and DeLillo’s pieces prove appropriate material for simultaneous consideration.

*Underworld*

Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* is a vast novel that spans almost fifty years in its effort to trace America through the Cold War. While looking at it as a candidate for canonization, much
of the material to argue in the novel’s favor comes from its post-modern aspects. DeLillo presents a novel that occupies itself with a time period that many people expected to lead to the End; nuclear holocaust seemed a real possibility. Rather than fearing this outcome, the sense of impending doom gives DeLillo the chance to play. He subverts, surprises, and upends our notions and expectations. Specifically, DeLillo’s meditations on love, information, and the nature of reflection represent post-modern investigations of familiar concepts. He deconstructs our ideas of love, questions the value of information, and highlights the disconnect of reflection. The manner in which Underworld presents these topics, and the subsequent reactions the reader is likely to have to them, argue strongly in favor of the novel’s canonization.

According to Bloom’s earlier comments, one of the main characteristics for the canonization of a work—here, its inclusion in a syllabus—is that work’s strangeness. While we do not have the historical perspective Bloom’s concept necessitates, we can still examine Underworld (and Hearts in Atlantis) for potential strangeness. Much of the potential of Underworld comes from these post-modern aspects. As a contemporary novel exploring a mostly contemporary time period, Underworld presents the reader with largely familiar material. The Cold War, nuclear proliferation, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Shot Heard ‘Round the World are all present in the novel. More, the novel’s less period constrained topics—art, love, poverty, and crime to name a few—are all entrenched within a contemporary plot. These factors work to make Underworld exceedingly familiar. However, because of his post-modern tendencies, DeLillo tends to subvert our normal perceptions of these easily recognizable features of the novel. This overt subversion of familiar topics causes the reader to fundamentally reconsider the ideas that Underworld has undermined.
"What's love got to do with it?"

One of the ways in which DeLillo unsettles our expectations is by introducing the reader to Marvin Lundy. In her essay on *Underworld*, Elizabeth Rosen argues, “no two characters are more single-minded or explicit in their thinking about [the Cold War] than Lenny Bruce [a comedian] and Marvin Lundy. It is my contention that this is because DeLillo intends these two figures to serve as the apocalyptic prophets of *Underworld*” (100). However, as in so much of DeLillo, the author undermines our conception of what a prophet of the apocalypse might prophesy about. As Rosen also explains, “*Underworld* poses the question, what if the End doesn’t happen? And this is exactly the scenario the novel depicts” (100). Thus, Lundy becomes a prophet insofar as he foretells what doesn’t happen. It is not that the man is a false-prophet; he in no way misleads or misdirects. Rather, Lundy prophesies a future that is apocalyptic because it refuses to have an apocalypse, because it refuses to end.

An extension here is that Lundy speaks of things that are unable to be resolved, satisfactorily or otherwise. In “The Cloud of Unknowing,” DeLillo follows Lundy as he moves through San Francisco, attempting to track down Thompson’s homerun ball. Exasperated with her husband’s searching, Marvin’s wife Eleanor convinces him to take her out on the town. At the end of the night, the two find themselves dancing in their penthouse, and DeLillo writes, “And Marvin held her [Eleanor] close and felt the old disbelief of how they’d found a life together, such fundamentally different people even when they weren’t, and he knew the force of this disbelief was the exact same thing, if you could measure it, as being stunned by love” (324). In my mind, this is one of the most beautiful passages on love I have ever read. DeLillo clearly articulates emotions I have experienced but never been able to put into words. This awe, this wonder, that two people could somehow exist together hits incredibly close to home; DeLillo
It is this kind of writing that first touches on my Final Narratives by hitting at one of the fundamental ways that I understand love. It does not change my narrative, but it does the “dirty” work of getting the novel to that point of basic narrative.

It is the next passage that actually works to change my narrative. DeLillo introduces an element of strangeness by subverting this beautiful passage when he writes, “But in the deep currents, in the Marviness of his unnamed depths, there was still an obscure something that caused him disquiet. And when they danced past the window he looked out at the lights of the Bay Bridge . . . and found that the Lucky Argus [a ship that is connected to the ball] was already off-loaded and gone” (324). DeLillo cannot leave well enough alone; he does not end the chapter by letting the reader bask in the comfort of his passage on love. Rather, he introduces new ideas about what kinds of things intrude on love. He suggests that being “stunned” by love is just that: a moment in which all of our emotions well to a high point. Retaining love, DeLillo reminds the reader, requires much more. There are many other powerful forces that draw our attention away, some of them inanimate objects or abstract ideas.

This kind of reflection is what ultimately toils to change my final concepts of Love. *Underworld* works to deconstruct love in post-modern, Sartrean fashion as it asks the reader to reflect on whether we love something because of the way it makes us feel or because of that thing as a thing. In that moment with Eleanor, Marvin loves her because he is stunned by love. He does not love her because of her *per se*, but because of some feeling she places within him. This realization provokes the reader to wonder whether love is ultimately some kind of selfish emotion about the “experiencer.” However, even though DeLillo does not come right out and provide the reader with an alternative way to think about love, he does certainly suggest one. In
writing about the “Marviness” of the protagonist’s “unnamed depths,” DeLillo proposes that people, if not objects, have some kind of worth that is internal to that person.

By writing about “Marviness,” DeLillo evokes the idea of forms and Platonic philosophy. Often times, in common philosophic parlance, the suffix “-ness” is attached to a word in order to suggest that the author or speaker is referring to that word “-in-itself.” That is to say, the term “Marviness” can be variously rewritten as Marvin-in-himself, Marvin Himself, and The Marvin. No matter the nomenclature, the point here is to evoke the philosophy of the forms. Allan Silverman meditates on the significance of the forms, particularly beauty-in-itself, by writing, “while both Beauty Itself and other items are characterized by beauty, Beauty Itself is simply and solely beautiful. This characterizing variant emphasizes the Phaedo's [a Platonic dialogue] claims that a Form is monoeides and one (Phaedo 78b4ff). Beauty is nothing but beautiful and thus is completely beautiful, differing from other beautiful things in that they are much else besides beautiful” (“Plato’s Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology”). The implication for DeLillo is that Marviness is simply and solely Marvin. It is distinctly different from the person Marvin who contains many other attributes. DeLillo indicates as much when he writes of how Marvin has to wade through unnamed depths to get to that core of Marviness. Nevertheless, there is a Marvin-in-himself that is completely and wholly Marvin. The implication is that Marvin is not a vapid, empty shell, but rather a person with an existent core. A further implication is that, having a self, Marvin can be appreciated and loved for that self: he can be endowed with worth.

Applied to Underworld, this line of thinking provides an option to love as a selfish emotion. The introduction of Platonism into the discussion allows the reader to posit a love of a thing for itself. While DeLillo, in his constant slippery fashion, attaches the Platonism to Marvin
and not Eleanor, he nevertheless still introduces the concept, and it is this introduction that is paramount. To this point, DeLillo has provided the reader with a brilliant moment of love, and then estranged us to the moment by closing the chapter by having Marvin glance out of the window, pining for the baseball instead of his wife. In this moment of subversion, DeLillo causes the reader to think about the very nature of love, a concept he was able to get at with the previous passage. This reflection on the part of the reader then provides the reader with the possibility of changing her Final Narrative. She is forced to purposefully reflect on why we love things: because of the way they make us feel or, alternatively, because of the thing itself.

To return the topic to Lundy as a prophet of the never-occurring apocalypse, DeLillo never provides an answer to the question of love. The issue is never resolved as the chapter immediately ends and the next section follows a different character, Nick Shay. However, by posing the question, DeLillo makes the reader fundamentally reflect on her conception of love. It may be that we decide that love is a selfish emotion; it is about being stunned. Conversely, we could decide that love is all about what we feel for the other person-in-herself. Even more, it could be that we ultimately conclude that love is a combination of the two; it is simultaneous taking and giving. Lastly, it could be, keeping in mind that Lundy prophesies ends that do not materialize, that there is no real end of love. Despite the talk of Platonism and things-in-themselves, it might be that love is an end to which we are never really able to resolve ourselves. Whatever the result, DeLillo has provoked a deep-seated discussion.

Once we come to some kind of resolution on this smaller point about love, we can begin to reflect about how our new (or newly challenged) understanding of love projects on a larger scale. We may wonder about how we love our family, friends, and even our country. Even more, if we decide we love these things in different ways, we must think about what the forms of love
we employ for a thing mean for our relationship to that thing. It is in this way that DeLillo gets at my Final Narratives through his strangeness. He takes a familiar scene and concept and then causes me to purposefully reflect on it such that I may change my fundamental outlook toward it. This reflection on a single concept then resounds in my larger experience by causing me to reconsider my relationships.

“The Good Left Undone”

In the same section, Underworld tells of a love affair Nick Shay has while at a business conference. Before, during, and after the sex, Nick reflects on what it means to possess information. It would seem, upon first reflection that possessing information would be a good thing. However, in the era of ever impending apocalypse, DeLillo subverts this expectation. He picks apart information, makes us think about what it consists of, and ultimately suggests that there may not be a point in possessing information. In fact, it may be a hindrance. And yet, whatever the value we assign to it, DeLillo thinks guilt is inevitable.

In his study of national security in Underworld, David Noon explains the importance of information to the novel by giving background to the period. He writes, “Although they were both nominally subject to civilian control, the Atomic Energy Commission (later the Department of Energy) and the Congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy were both established under conditions of considerable secrecy that deprived citizens of accurate information (Carter 44). As one senator pointed out in 1949, although the United States had spent $3 billion on atomic weapons since the onset of the Manhattan Project, no one knew precisely how many weapons had been built (Boyer 306)” (92). Even though the specific anecdote Noon points us to is a bit previous to Underworld’s time period, both the author and I feel that it is still pertinent to understanding the novel. Noon is suggesting that information acts as a double-edged sword. On
one hand, information guarantees transparency. The senator worries about the secrecy surrounding atomic organizations and that fact that this information denies the public important knowledge. There is the sentiment that if the public had adequate knowledge of our atomic goings on, then it might be able to prevent a catastrophe. However, Noon also tips his hat to the damage information can do. No one, not even Congress, knows how many weapons have been built. Even more, if they don’t even know about the manufacturing of atomic bombs, then it is hard to fathom how people could know where these bombs are or how they are planning to be used. It is a small leap to image that if we did recover this kind of information, we could be scared out of minds. It might be entirely too frightening to think about the extent of atomic proliferation.

When Nick goes to the conference in 1978, the same issues that generated Noon’s ideas about information are still in play, only now scientists have upped the ante. No longer are we “simply” talking about atomic bombs, but rather we have moved onto hydrogen bombs and nuclear war. There is a real threat of mass destruction, and there is still much doubt as to the extent of both superpowers’ nuclear arsenals. And so, when Nick and Donna have their exchange in the hotel room, their comments are not just important in the moment of the conversation, but are also in dialogue with this larger fear of the time.

DeLillo begins the tryst by the side of a pool. He writes, “It was ten in the morning and the pool man and the gardeners drifted along the edge of the conversation. ‘Among the waste machines. Strange way to spend a morning, Donna.’ We’d exchanged only first names” (291). Right from the start there is a hesitancy to exchange information. The two of them are afraid that giving away too much might somehow ruin their moment. DeLillo warns us from the start that having too much information can be a bad thing; it can somehow bring an end to an enterprise.
However, he simultaneously establishes that we do need some information in order to operate. They have to exchange first names. Thus, as with love, DeLillo does not tip his hat in either direction. The reader is left adrift as to the value judgment of information.

_Underworld_ then goes on to play with these names. For instance, Donna asks Nick, “What’s your name again?” and Nick replies, “Donna, I like your mouth” (291-2). Where the reader would expect Nick to respond with his own name, the first word out of his mouth is the name of his interlocutor. This move works to further destabilize the reader. Where before the reader was left to think about the nature of information, now she does not even know if she can trust the information she is getting. DeLillo is demonstrating the disconnect between what we seek and what we get. We might want information on the nuclear arsenal, but all we hear is doublespeak from politicians. It is not real information, and, if anything, it can be a bit misleading, much like Nick’s answer.

Later on in the same conversation, the information between the two would-be lovers breaks down further. Donna says, “I’m a person if you ask me questions. You want to know who I am? I’m a person if you’re two inquisitive I tune you out completely” (292). At this point in the conversation, DeLillo shows the dangers of pushing too hard. If we try too hard to uncover information, there is a chance that our interlocutor might shut down completely. No longer are they giving us false or misleading information, they now refuse to participate entirely. Donna warns Nick that if he keeps asking questions about her swinger lifestyle, then she is apt to not listen. However, and this is crucial, Donna never says that she will not act. She will tune Nick out, but she could still have sex with him. Translated to the arms race, if we push too hard for information, then a country might stop answering our questions but still retain the ability to act with whatever weapons it might have.
Doing nearly a complete three hundred sixty degree turn, one of Nick’s next comments is about what can happen when information becomes public. He says, “Maybe you’re not completely wrong about me, Donna. Maybe I have a theory about the damage people do when they bring certain things into the open” (294). No longer are the interlocutors denying each other information, but they are worried about what might happen when that information becomes public. Sure knowledge can be a good thing, but it can also hurt deeply. DeLillo suggests that there are some things that go better unknown, that it is better to keep some things to ourselves. This belief echoes Noon’s earlier implication that if we actually had all of the information about the atomic weapon supplies it might scare us badly.

However, DeLillo also explores the power this secrecy can have over us. Nick says, “But I know that it [a book] made me think of God as a force that withholds himself from us because this is the root of his power. . . . And so I learned to respect the power of secrets” (295). While secrets might be good in some instances, DeLillo also recognizes the imbalance in power they represent. The secret-keeper has power over those who do not know. The one who has knowledge, regardless of the final value of that knowledge, has a greater strategic and practical authority than those who lack the information. Transposed to Noon’s situation, the government wields power over us because it withholds certain information from us. Whether or not this knowledge ends up being valuable or worthwhile, in that moment of unknowing, the government has all the power in the relationship.

To this point, DeLillo has shown a number of different possibilities in the quest for information. More, he has delivered all of them without a value judgment; he is simply setting them out there for us to see. Before he moves on to offering any kind of resolution to the dilemma of information, DeLillo summarizes his argument. As they move closer to sex, Nick
and Donna converse on that topic. Nick says, “Sex is the one secret we have that approximates an exalted state and that we share, two people share wordlessly . . . and this makes it powerful and mysterious and worth sheltering” (297). Donna responds to this argument by saying, “Sex is not so secret anymore. The secret is out . . Sex is what you can get. For some people, most people, it’s the most important thing they can get without being born rich or smart or stealing” (297). DeLillo summarizes the terms of his discussion in this exchange. On the one hand, information is powerful because it can be a secret. It can be information we share with those we care about, a kind of window into our soul. It is this ability that makes knowledge important. On the other hand, information is powerful because it can be publicized. It is an equalizer and gives all people the chance to operate on the same level. Put in Noon’s terms, information is good because we don’t have to think about the breadth of the atomic threat, or information is good because it allows us to know where the bombs are.

However, in all this talking, DeLillo never picks one side or the other. He simply presents the cases. Recalling Rosen’s comments from earlier, she believes Underworld is a novel about the failed arrival of the end. Just as the apocalypse does not come, so does DeLillo not make a value-judgment on information, just as he refused to do so with love. However, differently from before, the author does give us some kind of an answer to this dilemma. Unfortunately, it is not about the function of information per se, but rather about the overall effect that information has on us. As the two prepare to have sex, Donna demands information from Nick. She says, “You think you’re discriminate? What makes you discriminate? I don’t even remember your name?” to which Nick, as narrator, says, “I told her my name, first and last, and she said it sounded phony,” and Donna ultimately replies, “More. I need more” (298). This conversation returns us to the discussion of names that started the tryst. Naming something is
not enough for Donna. She needs background, context, stories. Simply asserting a fact or making a statement does not count as information to her. Names are phony; they exist to cover up the important stuff that constitutes real information. Not even finally adding a last name is sufficient in this account.

DeLillo then moves on to describe the sex. He writes, “She [Donna] was near to real earth now, the sex-grubbed dug-up self, and I [Nick] felt close to her and thought I knew her finally even as she shut her eyes to hide herself. I said her name” (300). Near the moment of climax, Nick feels that he really knows Donna, that he finally has the information. The reader is about to find out what DeLillo believes about the secrecy of information. And yet, in his normal, slippery way, DeLillo refuses to give us this information, as a close reading reveals. Even though Donna hides herself from Nick by closing her eyes, he still believes that he finally knows her. And yet, he knows her exclusively by her name, which, as DeLillo expressed through Donna, is a phony thing. Names do not constitute information. They might look like knowledge, but to assert that they are so is false. Nick actually has nothing.

And so, DeLillo deprives the reader of the subject of the conversation. The sex ends without any real information about information. DeLillo simply presents the different sides of the different value-judgments one might attach to information. However, he does tell us this much: “A voice my wife had never heard and a story I’d never told her [Donna’s “more information”] and how strange this was and how guilty it made me feel. . . You withhold the deepest things from those who are closest and then talk to a stranger in a numbered room. What’s the point in asking why? Guilt later in Phoenix, where I could evade vexing questions” (300-1). Although we might not be able to have any kind of comforting answer on the issue of information itself, DeLillo does tell us about what kind of emotion is likely to accompany the
information. Whether we decide keeping some things secret is best or whether we feel that it is better to get it all out in the open, chances are we will feel guilt: guilt that we withheld information or guilt that we shared it. No decision comes without regrets and retrospections, that is the only certainty. It is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is going to happen.

Thus, DeLillo takes an account of information in an extremely personal situation and sets it against a background that is exceptionally public. He uses the private space to talk about the public sphere. Therefore, if we translate DeLillo’s comments back to Noon, we find that no matter what the outcome of the information regarding the bomb, we will undoubtedly, at some point, feel guilty about the knowledge. Maybe we have let the enemy in on important data, or perhaps we have kept the public from information that could have helped prevent a catastrophe. Either way there will be something to feel guilty about; to put it another way, every choice leaves good left undone.

It is this last observation that strikes at my Final Narratives: the idea of good left undone. The philosopher from earlier, Alasdair MacIntyre, also talks about reclaiming ethics as something that is based in virtues. In order to do so, he must reject many post-modern assumptions about existentialism and claim that there is an importance to giving our lives narrative. By viewing lives as narrative, we can characterize and judge actions as more or less useful, more or less good. However, when we start viewing our lives as narrative, we can also conceptualize the different goods that different paths might lead us to. As MacIntyre writes, “situations [are now] defined by the necessity of tragic, dilemmatic choice. . . [B]oth of the alternative courses of action which confront the individual have to be recognized as leading to some authentic and substantial good. . . Whatever I do, I shall have left undone what I ought to have done” (407). Every decision I make becomes tragic. Every time I act, I necessarily
preclude some other course of action. I shut off whole universes when I make the simplest of choices. When it comes to trying to decide issues of virtue, then, I feel the weight of these choices multiplied. No matter which good I choose to pursue, I will always leave another good behind.

Thus, by reflecting on the nature of information and refusing to provide an answer, DeLillo causes me to rethink the ways I go about making decisions in general. According to MacIntyre, the goal is now for each of us “to perform his or her task better rather than worse” (407). This realization forces me out of comfortable right/wrong dichotomies, and I can no longer view the world in terms of good versus evil, right versus wrong. Rather, virtue is a spectrum where we have many possible choices, and all that we can try to do is attempt to pick the course that will allow us to reach our goal better. However, in doing so, I necessarily preclude other, equally viable ways of inhabiting the world. For instance, tonight I may choose to act qua student or qua boyfriend. As a student, I work toward completing my thesis, but I also preclude the happiness of being with my girlfriend and vice versa. By choosing the good of my thesis, I am currently denying myself other, equally valuable goods. This realization works to change my Final Narratives by making me recognize the multiplicity of possible correct ways of inhabiting the earth. There are many goods and many good ways to get there, and DeLillo helps me to realize this fact.

“You’re a loaded gun”

However, moving away from Bloom and the idea of apocalyptic strangeness, DeLillo’s work is also canonizable for other reasons. Namely, the manner in which Underworld examines the possible separation of actor from action causes us to reflect on the ways in which we go about inhabiting our world. This idea of separation is an especially important one given the
nature of this paper. Part II spent time examining an experiential model of knowledge. It described how we gain and justify knowledge only by reference to the ways we interact with this world. Part of *Underworld* inspects how we interpret this experiential data.

In his essay on DeLillo’s novel, Stefan Mattessich reads the Moonman section of *Underworld* within the larger framework of democracy. During part of this analysis, Mattessich points the reader to Moonman’s proud phrase: “I’m your movie, motherfucker” (DeLillo 441). Moonman says this while reflecting on the ways in which his graffiti-tagged trains will flash by commuters’ eyes. Mattessich sees this sentence as a commentary on the “dual standpoint” of social order when he writes, “He [Moonman] knows and at the same time is a part of what he knows, both inside and outside the situation he reflexively exemplifies. . . it suggests something unhinged or detached, a casual amorality of the mind; it points, moreover, to the futility of matching sense with intention or grounding action in abstract principles derived from a putatively substantive symbolic work” (“DeLillo’s Thing”). Mattessich mediates on the nature of reflection. By claiming that he is like a movie, Moonman both exists inside his actions, as a character in the movie, and outside of them, as the creator of the movie. Mattessich claims that this reflexivity produces “amorality” as the actor is able to remove himself from the action itself. The author also claims that reflection leaves the actor unable to really line up the sense (the product of his action) with what he or she originally intended to do. Even more, Mattessich points to the trouble of finding meaning within our various actions. In Moonman’s case, the amorality could derive itself from “bombing” public property, the futility of matching sense with intention from perhaps the commuters’ various reactions to his pieces, and the void of meaning possibly results from wondering what all the tagging ultimately amounts to.
Mattessich’s comments within the frame of the Moonman scene translate well to the murder of George the waiter. Throughout the novel, Nick Shay dances around the secret that landed him in juvenile detention. Near the end, however, Nick finally details how he killed George with a shotgun. George had shown Nick the gun, and Nick flashed it around the empty room, asking George if the gun was loaded. George gets a smile on his face and tells Nick, “No.” Nick then points the gun at George, pulls the trigger, and the gun goes off. DeLillo describes the aftermath by writing:

Then the thing went off and the noise busted through the room and even with the chair and body flying he had the thumbmark of George’s face furrowed in his mind.
   The way the man said no when he asked if it was loaded.
   He asked if the gun was loaded and the man said no and the smile was all about the risk, of course, the spirit of the dare of what they were doing.
   He felt the trigger pull and the gun went off and he was left there thinking weakly he didn’t do it.
   But first he pointed the gun at the man’s head and asked if it was loaded.
   Then he felt the trigger pull and heard the gun go off and the man and the chair went different ways.
   And the way the man said no when he asked if it was loaded.
   He asked if the thing was loaded and the man said no and now he has a weapon in his hands that has just apparently been fired.
   He force-squeezed the trigger and looked into the smile on the other man’s face.
   But first he posed with the gun and pointed it at the man and asked if it was loaded.
   Then the noise busted through the room and he stood there thinking he didn’t do it.
   But first he forced squeezed the trigger and saw into the smile and it seemed to have the spirit of a dare.
   Why would the man say no if it was loaded?
   But first why would he point the gun at the man’s head?
   He pointed the gun at the man’s head and asked if it was loaded.
   Then he felt the action of the trigger and saw into the slyness of the smile. (780-1)

While this passage may seem to be overly repetitive and long, it clearly demonstrates what can happen when we reflect on our actions. Nick struggles to assign guilt, and thus morality, to the
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shooting. He alternates between blaming George (“the man said no”) to the gun itself (“the gun went off”) to himself (“he pointed the gun at the man’s head”). Removed from our actions, we are left to interpret them in a variety of ways, and DeLillo clearly captures this fact. As in the Moonman passage, we are both in and apart from the scene. Nick was a character in the drama, but he is also a critic outside of the scene, reviewing the characters’ performances.

The result of this dual standpoint, as Mattessich pointed out, is that we can become detached from the act. As before, this detachment leads to amorality as Nick is unsure who he should blame for the event. It couldn’t be him: he did not mean to kill George. It couldn’t be George: George had no idea about the bullets. And it couldn’t be the gun: the shotgun is inanimate. This chaos of amorality then leads to Mattessich’s second concern, the problem with intention. Nick did not mean to shoot George any more than George meant to be shot. It was a calculated risk on the part of both parties that ended tragically. Unable to ascribe intention, Nick cannot “ground his action in abstract principles” and attempt to find a value judgment (the morality) or even a meaning within the act (a particularly post-modern idea). Ultimately, Nick is not even able to answer his own questions. All he can do is restate the facts of the situation.

However, as thinking, acting creatures, we must do more than simply restate the facts of any of our experiences. We are required to—in fact, it may be impossible not to—make value judgments on what we and others do. This act of assigning morality goes a long way toward establishing the base of experiential knowledge from Part II. Sure, knowledge of cause and effect imparts some kind of wisdom: if I point a gun at someone it could go off and kill that person. However, this kind of reflection does not produce any kind of higher level knowing. It does not allow us to extrapolate or project the situation or decide whether it is something we
should repeat or avoid. In fact, it does not even allow us to enter the grey area between the good and bad of an action.

DeLillo’s work, then, reminds us of the problems inherent in evaluating a situation. The good, the bad, the nonsense we decide upon is ultimately concluded through a subjective reflection on the initial moment of experience. It is our interpretation of events (George said no, the gun went off, I pointed it at his head) that allows us to construct knowledge we often times view as objective. Through this reading, *Underworld* becomes a reflection on pragmatist epistemology. It demonstrates why all knowledge is of a fundamentally equal kind because of its basis first and foremost in experience, and it also shows the inherent problems in trying to make truth or value claims. *Underworld* suggests why others’ opinions automatically deserve a measure of respect if only because our own knowledge is suspect.

*Underworld* is able to affect the kind of Final Narrative change through literature that I spent quite awhile attempting to get at through pragmatic theory. DeLillo’s novel reaches toward the heart of this very paper. In a way, *Underworld* deserves canonization because of the ways in which it talks critically about the canonization process. Not only is it a text that sustains classroom conversation and gets at individual Final Narratives, but it causes us to rethink the whole process of the classroom experience whether or not it is a pragmatic classroom. A novel with as deep seeded implications as *Underworld* deserves to be read in the university. Students can engage it on multiple levels, and, in a nod to Bloom, it could turn out to be sufficiently strange to upset our expectations. Even more, it asks us to reconsider many of our expectations about both pedagogy and the world.
**Hearts in Atlantis**

Nearly as lengthy as *Underworld*, *Hearts in Atlantis* also stands as a testament to the Cold War period. However, rather than examine the period as a whole, King chooses to mainly center on the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, King still focuses on many of the same issues, and it is these issues that commend King for canonization. Like DeLillo, King also takes up the topic of love. However, rather than talking about the idea of love itself, King instead uses the idea as a focal point for the different imagery of the novel. More specifically, he uses the idea of “hearts” to talk about both individual love and the game by the same name. Eventually, he uses the concept to extrapolate to what these two different understandings mean for those in Atlantis, those away from the war. Also similar to DeLillo, King takes on the topic of information. However, where DeLillo ultimately focused on the reaction information provokes in us, King changes tact. He sees information as a possible end in itself because of the vulnerability a true flow of information requires. King also meditates on the worth of the components that make up the situation where information could be an end, namely peace and love. Ultimately, however, King wonders whether we can ever achieve this goal of freely sharing information.

Even more, where *Underworld* commented on this project by engaging pragmatist epistemology, *Hearts* does the same kind of thing by talking specifically about the books we read. As in so much else, King comments more clearly and directly than DeLillo, if no less complicatedly, on this subject. Unlike other thinkers in this paper, King sees differing values in different types of literature: those commendable for their language, those for their plots, and those for both. These facets of the novel—its reflections on love, information, and reading—make King’s work a candidate for canonization in our classrooms.
As before, when thinking about canonization, one of the best places to turn is Harold Bloom. Much like Underworld, Hearts presents a world that is eerily similar and yet entirely foreign to many readers: college life during the Vietnam War. This possibility for strangeness for many younger readers (recall the book was published in 1999, some 24 years after the end of the war) upsets the reader’s expectations and makes her rethink how she understands her world. One of the best ways King takes advantage of this new space of misunderstanding that the strangeness creates is by playing with the implications of the term “hearts.”

King introduces the strangeness of the time to the reader almost immediately in the title section of his work, the novella “Hearts in Atlantis.” Roz Kaveney hints at what this disconnection might be when she writes that “Hearts in Atlantis” is “about those who did not go to war—in this instance a group of college students. . . [King] evok[es] the atmosphere of cigarette smoke, bad college meals and all-night Bogart shows at the local cinema” (78). On one hand this description is intensely familiar to college students, after all the novella is about them. However, at this point the similarities begin to break down. Even though we still attend school with the specter of war in the background (two, actually), our situation is incredibly different. Unlike students in the sixties, we don’t have to worry about the draft if we drop out. We go to school without that imminent fear, a fear that plagues the novella’s characters as they get closer and closer to flunking out. More, the time period is different. We still have to deal with bad college meals, yes, but good luck finding Bogart at the local cinema or a place to smoke indoors. King’s atmosphere is at once wholly familiar and yet incredibly foreign.

In fact, the narrator of the novella, Pete Riley, probably states the issue the best. As he says, “College is always a time of change, I guess, the last major convulsion of childhood, but I
doubt there were ever changes of such magnitude as those faced by students who came to their campuses in the late sixties” (327). In a sense, Pete is acknowledging that we had or will have an experience similar to his; college has become a fact of life for many people. However, Pete is simultaneously telling us that our experiences were not nor could ever be the same as his. The sixties were a special period, and unless we happened to be at school during this time, then there are many aspects of this familiar rite of passage that we will have trouble assimilating. This quote occurs in the very first paragraph of the novella as King wants us to know up front what we are getting into.

King’s next move is to introduce the now wary reader to the title of this novella. However, unlike what the reader might expect from my comments thus far, rather than starting with the “Hearts” in the title, King begins by mentioning the place where the hearts are: “Atlantis.” Pete says, “And I still hear Donovan Leitch singing his sweet and stupid song about the continent of Atlantis, lyrics that still seem profound to me in the watches of the night when I can’t sleep” (327). For King, Atlantis becomes a symbol of the collegiate experience during the Vietnam War. The students are on this advanced island in the middle of an ocean of war. They are safe on land, and yet their island is sinking and soon they will be drowned by that war and the culture that created it and it subsequently created.

And yet, Leitch’s lyrics also carry another understanding of Atlantis. Sure Atlantis seems a great place to be: “the great Egyptian age is but a remnant of The Atlantian culture” and “all the Gods who play in the mythological dramas / In all legends from all lands were from fair Atlantis” before “the great flood” overtook the island (“Atlantis”). However, this reading of Atlantis is but one possible understanding of what King is getting at. College is not just some glorified safe haven from the dangers of war. King sees possibility in the destruction of Atlantis;
he views the coming flood as an opportunity for change. As the song says, “And as the elders of our time choose to remain blind / Let us rejoice and let us sing and dance and ring in the new” (“Atlantis”). Atlantis has run its course and its way of existing is no longer sufficient. It cannot cope with the changing of time. Leitch ends the song by singing, “Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up, oh yeah / Oh glub glub, down down, yeah” (“Atlantis”). Thus, the flood is not necessarily a destructive force, but rather a wakeup call. The drowning of the continent signals an end to the blindness of the elders who led us into this war, and the possibility of “the new” to lead us in a different direction. The stage has been cleared as best as it can be.

However, “Hearts in Atlantis” never gets to what happens in this post-Atlantian stage. As the title of the novella suggests, although the continent might be sinking, the characters are still firmly entrenched on its shores. And so, the focus then shifts to the first word in the title and what it might mean to have hearts in this dying continent. King presents this concept to the reader in the dual nature he will employ for the remainder of the novella. He writes, “It was a time when almost anybody could get laid, of course, but even by the standards of the time Skip [one of Pete’s friends] was busy. None of that had started in the fall of ’66 though; in the fall of ’66 Skip’s heart, like mine, would belong to Hearts” (335). Thus, “hearts” means one of two things. It can be the classical image associated with love where our hearts dictate our passions. However, it can also mean the four person card game. Therefore, whenever King speaks of hearts in Atlantis, he wants the reader to think of both of these concepts. It is also important to note the state of the Atlantians’ hearts. In the fall of ’66, Pete’s first year in college, his heart does not belong to a person, but rather to a game. Hearts thus collapses into one term as hearts becomes a subset of Hearts, and, at this point, the only kinds of hearts in Atlantis are those found in the card game.
The next step is to see what kind of a value judgment King attaches to Hearts. After Pete wins his first game, King writes, “By four o’clock all of the longue tables were occupied by quartets of third-floor freshmen, ragtag scholarship boys who had to buy their texts in the Used section of the bookstore playing Hearts at a nickel a point. In our dorm, the mad season had begun” (362-3). Hearts leads to a kind of madness. It occupies all of the boys’ time so that school work and relationships fall by the wayside. All that matters is Hearts. King also notes that the boys cannot really afford for this madness to happen. They are poor kids only in college because of scholarships. A low enough GPA, and they fail out and risk going to Vietnam. Hearts can flood Atlantis but can do so only by debasing the boys, failing them off the island.

In fact, Caleb Crain sees King extending the trope of Hearts even further. He writes, “Everyone on campus, in fact, is carrying a queen of spades, of one sort or another. The card-playing delinquents are frank about their hostility; they know they’re flunking themselves into war” (“There but for Fortune”). In Hearts, the queen of spades is the most powerful card; the player who takes her also takes her thirteen points. To have the queen in one’s hand is a double-edged sword: the player knows where the queen is and cannot be surprised by her, but the player also risks being bled out by the other players into taking the card for himself. Crain sees the students as possessing the queen, the card that could wreck them with her thirteen points and a trip to Vietnam, in their hands. They hold their own fate. However, Crain also sees how the students’ hands are being bled out and they’re coming closer and closer to having to take the queen themselves. The students know this fact as they hold the queen, but they can do nothing to change it.

However, an encounter with Carol Gerber (a main character from the first novella, “Low Men in Yellow Coats”) gives Pete the chance to get rid of his queen. King explains by writing,
“Earlier all I’d wanted was to get back to the third-floor longue and play Hearts . . . but standing out here in the cool air with Carol, it was hard for me to understand why” (370). Carol begins to pull Pete’s heart out from underneath Hearts. She gives him a different direction. In a sense, she has played the king of spades, and Pete can play under her. Pete can continue to give his life to the game, or he can risk it with Carol. However, by throwing in his lot with Carol, he doesn’t remove himself from the queen. She has it in her hand, and if he intends to stay with her, he cannot really avoid it and Atlantis might begin to sink again. However, the difference now is that he would not leave Atlantis debased by a card game, but rather of his own volition with someone he could love. In a sense, he has removed his heart from Hearts and placed it willingly with another person.

In fact, Atlantis does begin to sink again, and it is because of Carol and her queen and not the game. Pete explains the moment when the continent began to take on water when he says, “we kissed . . . [and I wasn’t] thinking of flunked prelims or the war in Vietnam or LBJ wearing a lei or Hearts or anything” (429). Carol affects a good change in Pete by getting his mind away from the card game that caused him to flunk those prelims. However, she also makes it very dangerous for him by taking his mind off those very same “F’s.” Even more, he cannot think of the consequences of his failing: the dangerous waters that represent Vietnam.

However, before Pete drags himself under with Carol, she makes one of the most selfless moves of the novella. Carol decides that she needs to leave school. Now, she claims that it is to take care of her mother, but King makes it clear that Carol knows what is happening to Pete as he makes the transition away from the card game toward her. Carol tells Pete, “You want to talk about shooting my education? You know what I’m hearing about that fucking Hearts game on Chamberlain Three [Pete’s floor] these days? That everyone on the floor is going to flunk out . . .
You’re confused, Pete. About school, about Hearts, about Annmarie [Pete’s girlfriend back home], and about me, too” (432, 434). Carol sees that Pete is going under and knows that she is not helping. She knew she was needed at home, but this tips the scale. And so Carol leaves, taking the queen with her.

Later on in the novella, and the book as a whole, the reader sees what this decision does to Carol, to her heart. Before she left, Carol tried to assuage Pete’s fear of a broken heart by saying, “Hearts are tough, Pete. Most times they don’t break. Most times they only bend” (433). And yet, by making the decision to dive off Atlantis head first, the reader sees exactly how her heart bent. Carol embraced Leitch’s idea that bringing Atlantis down could be a wakeup call and so joins the anti-war movement. In fact, she becomes one of the most infamous members of it, even resorting to violence. By the close to the novel, “Heavenly Shades of Night are Falling,” Carol has survived a fire and changed identities. No, her heart didn’t break, but it bent to the point that she had to give up herself and becomes someone else.

However, Pete is still on Atlantis and trying desperately to cling to it. With Carol gone, Pete goes right back to Hearts. As he says, “The whole thing began to seem distant, okay? The way classes did. The way Carol did, now that I understood she was really gone. . . What seemed real was Hearts” (469). Once again Pete is in danger, and he gets dealt the queen again in this hand. He knows classes are there, but they seem distant; he knows that he’s failing out. He sees the queen, but all he can do is play. His heart once again belongs to Hearts.

As with Carol, however, another person comes along to play over Pete. This time it is Stoke Jones, a cripple and enigma from Chamberlain Three. Much like Carol, Stoke sees possibility in Atlantis’ destruction, even going so far as to risk getting kicked out of school by writing, “Fuck Johnson! Killer President[!] U.S. Out Of Vietnam[!] NOW!” on the side of a
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campus building (464). Yet, he takes Pete’s queen not simply by virtue of his anti-war attitudes, but also because of his handicap. One rainy night, Stoke tries to crutch back to the dorm, but instead falls down in the ice-cold puddle at the bottom of a hill. Instead of helping, Pete describes the boys on Chamberlain Three’s reaction as, “Ronnie began to giggle, and the sound spread the way a little flame spreads through dry tinder. I didn’t want to join in but was helpless to stop. . . Partly because giggling is contagious, but also because it really was funny. . . We staggered aimlessly about, laughing and clutching at our throats . . . I was laughing harder than I ever had in my life” (472, 475). The boys’ reaction to this kid’s misfortune, to his impending death from hypothermia, is to laugh. It has gotten to the point where all that Pete and the other boys care about is Hearts. No one else’s heart matters, not even their own as they throw away love and decency in this laughing spasm. Pete has reached his low point.

Eventually, the boys do run out to help Stoke and take him to the infirmary, but the whole time they are trying to help they can’t stop laughing. Finally, a nurse asks the boys what is so funny, and Pete’s best friend Skip responds by saying, “It was his misfortune that was funny” (486). King describes the nurse’s response as: “‘How terrible,’ she said. There were tears of rage standing in the corners of her eyes. ‘How terrible you are’” (486). This moment is the turning point for Pete. The nurse shames him, makes him feel the whole weight of his reaction, the way that he laughed as a man almost died. Pete cannot deal with this feeling. Where Carol was not completely able to save him, Stoke Jones is. The difference is that Carol willingly accepted the queen from Pete. She left of her own accord. The boys speculate Stoke’s fall might have been on purpose, and in that sense there is a similarity, but the difference is that Stoke did not want Pete’s queen. Stoke might have asked for the fall (he was done with Atlantis), but not the reaction. It seems Pete had to be saved by someone else’s unwilling misfortune.
And so, Pete decides to give up the game. He describes his decision by saying, “I don’t know if it’s too late to pull up my grades, but I’m going to try. And I don’t care much, one way or another. The fucking scholarship’s not the point. . . I can live with the laughing at him, I guess . . . but I don’t want to wake up forty with my kids asking me what college was like and not be able to remember anything but Ronnie Malefant telling Polish jokes [while we played Hearts]” (487-8). The nurse’s shaming makes Pete look at his life, and he sees something he does not like. As a result, he decides to get his life back in order. However, this ordering contains a crucial difference from before. Now, Pete is resigned to the continent sinking. He is okay with falling into the ocean as long as he is okay with himself. This is something that could not have happen if Carol forced him off. It is something he had to do himself. He says he will try to stay on Atlantis, but if he falls off he will be okay with that result because he is okay with himself.

Effectively, Pete takes back his heart from Hearts with the aid of Stoke’s misfortune. And yet, this decision carries some of his own problems, and causes Pete to wonder what will happen to him as Atlantis sinks. He puts it by saying, “Hearts are tough, [Carol] said, most times hearts don’t break, and I’m sure that’s right . . . but what about then? What about who we were then? What about hearts in Atlantis?” (518) Pete wonders what will happen to him now that he has resigned himself to this sinking continent. He thinks his heart won’t break but is scared what else might happen to it. After all, Carol ends up a public enemy and irrevocably damaged. This situation causes Pete to wonder about his very selfness. He has reclaimed it, yes, but he does not know what he will become. What starts out as a reflection on love turns into an examination of self.
King does not straightforwardly answer what happens to hearts in Atlantis in the rest of the novella. However, if the reader returns to the very first lines, she can get an idea of what King thinks. He begins the piece by writing, “When I came to the University of Maine in 1966, there was still a Goldwater sticker, tattered and faded but perfectly readable (AuH20-4-USA), on the old station wagon I inherited from my brother. When I left the University in 1970, I had no car. What I did have was a beard, hair down to my shoulders, and a backpack with a sticker on it reading RICHARD NIXON IS A WAR CRIMINAL” (327). What happens to hearts in Atlantis? They change drastically; they bend in a completely different direction. We are changed as a person. As the continent goes under and we are thrust into the broiling sea, we change for that sea. It is a wakeup call, and we recognize a different way of living, of inhabiting the earth.

While DeLillo’s discussion of love led the reader to think about the composition of that topic, King’s meditation leads the reader in a completely different direction. DeLillo had us consider our relationship to other people, and King’s does some of that incidentally with the involvement of Carol and Stoke. On the way to King’s ultimate reflection on self, we are asked to think about what we do to other people on our solipsistic journey. Often times, as King points out, we can (almost) destroy them. Ultimately, however, King’s discussion is about oneself and not others.

By using the setting of college in the Sixties, one we can both identify with and yet cannot totally grasp, King makes us wonder what this process of institutionalization is doing to us. He wants us to think about how college is changing us, if at all. By using that trope of hearts, King is making me reflect on me, and it is hard to think of a better way to get me to rethink the fundamental ways I understand the world than to provoke a conversation about my selfness. I must wonder about the state of my own heart and what might constitute my Atlantis. I have to
think about the ways that college is changing me and whether these changes are at the cost of other people. In a sense, King makes us think deeply about the college experience.

“Number Six, we want . . . information”

Besides, manipulating the possible strangeness to play on the term “hearts” and make us reflect on our college experience, King also uses this incongruity to discuss information. In a sense, since he has disrupted most readers’ conceptions of a familiar subject, he wants us to think about the value of the main tool we use to reconstruct that world. Contrary to the manner in which DeLillo did not provide an answer of how to think about information and so caused us to rethink how we go about understanding the world, King actually does offer the reader a resolution. The answer we get, though, is not one that the reader might expect because King does not necessarily value information for where it might lead us. As with DeLillo, that is left up in air. King actually believes that information can be intrinsically valuable when it is shared in situations of love and peace. Information in this environment is an end in and of itself due to the vulnerability and openness required to share it. Yet, King is ultimately led to reflect on whether this situation is one that can ever actually materialize.

Once again, the main vehicle the King uses to convey his ideas is Pete Riley. In his reading of *Hearts in Atlantis*, Bill Delaney believes that “Through Peter Riley, King captures the anxiety, frustration, and confusion familiar to many college students who find themselves losing motivation while at the same time dreading being thrust into the dark, chaotic world outside the ivy-covered walls” (“Hearts in Atlantis”). I think Delaney has it right in one regard. King certainly does employ Pete to examine anxiety, frustration, and confusion—that much can be seen from the previous section. However, I think Delaney misses a lot of what King is up to with Pete Riley and these same topics. King also uses that character to discuss one way out of
anxiety, confusion, and frustration: information. As much as King uses Pete to discuss one
magnetic pole, he employs him to also engage the opposite.

In fact, the first time Pete and Carol meet, Carol believes they need to exchange some
information before anything can happen. Much in the same way that Donna and Nick had to
give up information before their tryst, King writes the following after Nick asks Carol to a movie:

“I’ve got a boyfriend back home,” she said at last.
“Is that a no?”
She shook her head, still with the little smile. The smoke from her
cigarette drifted across her face. Her hair, free of the net girls had to wear
on the dishline, blew lightly across her brow. “That’s information.
Remember that show *The Prisoner*? ‘Number Six, we want . . .
*information.***”
“I’ve got a girlfriend back home,” I said. “More information.”

(370-1)

Before the two of them can even begin with any kind of a relationship or affair, Carol feels that it
is necessary to share information, and Pete does the same. It seems, much like DeLillo, King
believes that we need information in order to function with each other in the most basic of ways.
In DeLillo’s case it was names, in King’s it is relationship status, but in either case it is necessary.

However, what seems to be different about the two authors is that where DeLillo was
worried about what information might be able to do, King seems content to be satisfied with
simply the exchange of knowledge. And yet, recalling Delaney’s comments, there might be
something opposite to this seemingly simple evaluation of knowledge on King’s part. Delaney
claims that Pete is a vehicle for anxiety, frustration, and confusion, and certainly going on a date
with a girl who is in a relationship while you still have a girlfriend is cause for all three. Thus,
King’s examination of this issue is slightly more complicated than it might first appear.
Knowledge permits the date to move forward, but it also lets them know that they will be
adulterous. They cannot proceed together with completely clean consciences.
The first time (and the last) the two of them have sex together, they again feel the need to exchange information. After Carol has told Pete that she is leaving school and they are sitting in Pete’s car, he says, “You want some information?... I’ll give you some whether you want it or not. Okay? You’re breaking my heart here. That’s the information. You’re breaking my goddam [sic] heart” (433). Notice that thus far, whenever King has mentioned information between the two lovers, he italicizes it. King wants to make sure that the reader recognizes that the exchange of information is essential to what is going on in the plot. In order to operate, the two of them need information. However, this time King makes it much clearer that information can have negative consequences. Pete acknowledges that Carol might not want this knowledge. That being said, he proceeds to tell her because he feels it is more important to have it all out in the open, as painful as it might be for both parties.

The next bit of knowledge Pete shares is essential to how King believes knowledge can have intrinsic value. Moreover, it is important when trying to conceptualize how, in many ways, the culmination of the relationship between Pete and Carol is one of the most important moments of “Hearts in Atlantis.” King writes, “I don’t want you to go,” I said. “I love you.” Then I tried to smile. “Just a little more information, okay?” (434) The product of their exchange is rooted in love. Pete loves Carol, and so he feels compelled to share all the information he has with her, whether she wants it or not, and whether it might hurt him too. Because he loves her, he is able to put himself out there and share knowledge of himself. However, it is important to note that at this point, Pete’s love is unreciprocated. Carol hints that she might love him, but she never shares that information.

The other component to what will eventually make up the formula for intrinsically valuable knowledge comes soon after but it is much less obvious. Carol says, “If you flunk out
this December, you’re apt to be in the jungle next December. You need to think about that, Pete. It’s one thing for Sully [Carol’s boyfriend and a character from “Low Men in Yellow Coats”]. He thinks it’s right and he wants to go. You don’t know what you want or what you think,” and King writes Pete’s reply as, “Hey, I took the Goldwater sticker off my car, didn’t I?” It sounded foolish to my own ears” (434-5). Here, King gestures toward the idea of peace. Pete has begun to reject the pro-war positions of Barry Goldwater and other similar politicians. However, this move is, in fact, only a gesture and even Pete recognizes it. He has only removed a bumper sticker. Thus, King introduces the concept of peace into a discussion about information, but does not really flesh it out because Pete (we have no idea yet about Carol’s anti-war activities) has not really embraced the idea.

And so, since Carol has not expressed her love and Pete has not embraced peace, Carol shares information with Pete that is a lie. When Pete asks to drive Carol to the bus depot the following day, King writes Carol’s response as: “She considered it, then nodded . . . but I saw a shaded look in her eyes. It was hard to miss, because those eyes were usually so wide and guileless” (435). Because the addends for information are not quite in the picture, Carol shares information that is false. And yet, because some of the addends are in place (Pete’s love and Carol’s peace, even if we do not know it yet), this information is not completely false. Carol cannot hide her emotions, and Pete sees through them. The information is valuable, if not intrinsically so, because he knows that this will be their last time together. In fact, they both know it now.

King then hints at what can happen in an environment where pure information is the end goal. The two of them do not have it yet, but they want to proceed like they do. Carol tells Pete, “Now, Number Six: We want . . . information . . . Have you ever done it before? I mean, all the
way? That’s the information I want” (435). King writes Pete’s response as: “I hesitated. It’s a question most boys find difficult, I imagine, and one most lie about. I didn’t want to lie to Carol. ‘No,’ I said” (435-6). An arena in which information is the end necessitates a kind of vulnerability. King indicates this much with Pete’s answer. Pete loves Carol and thinks he is anti-war, and Carol might love Pete and, we find out later, is very anti-war, and in this environment Pete does not want to lie to Carol. He wants everything to be true, and that requires that he tell her something that is embarrassing and, admittedly, hard for him to share. Of course, this vulnerability with Carol does cost Pete as he is stung immensely by her departure. King seems to be indicating that when all the necessary addends for information are not in place, we can get hurt as a result of our vulnerability, even though in and of itself it might be a wonderful thing.

However, all of this is not to say that nothing good comes from Pete’s (and ultimately Carol’s when she tells him she has slept with her boyfriend before) willingness to be vulnerable. In fact, they get to share a moment of information in the sexual act, something Nick and Donna never get in Underworld. King writes:

The pump turns on in ecstasy. I closed my eyes, I held her with my eyes closed and went into her that way, that way you do, shaking all over, hearing the heel of my shoe drumming against the driver’s-side door in a spastic tattoo, thinking that I could do this even if I was dying, even if I was dying, even if I was dying; thinking also that it was information. The pump turns on in ecstasy, the cards fall where they fall, the world never misses a beat, the queen hides, the queen is found, and it was all information. (437)

For Pete, that moment is pure ecstasy. It is like nothing he has never known or had before, and he indicates that the reason for this feeling is that the moment consists, most of all, of information. Because Pete was willing to be vulnerable, he is able to experience, in that instant, the joining of peace and love which, in that moment, results in pure information. However,
because the addends were incorrect, Pete will still get hurt. Yet, there was enough trust in place to act, and so not all of the results were negative; in fact, some were quite amazing.

At this point, the reader may note a certain objection to my characterization of the situation. I have consistently described what the information is like for Pete, but not for Carol. I do this because King does not really tell us about Carol’s experience. In fact, Kaveney sees this exclusion as problematic within the whole of the novel. She writes, “we needed to see Carol’s story through her own eyes” (78). Every time Carol enters the picture, she is filtered through someone else’s perspective. She never really gets to tell her own story. However, I do think Kaveney overstates this issue slightly because we actually do get to hear Carol unfiltered voice twice. King includes the text of two letters that Carol writes Pete, and those words are her unfiltered voice, even though they only constitute two smaller sections. In fact, we can gage Carol’s reaction to that night when she writes, “Last night was the sweetest thing that’s ever happened to me. If it gets any better than that, I don’t see how people can live thru [sic] it” (441). Even though we cannot know that Carol’s reaction in the above environment was similar to Pete’s, we can make a reasonable inference that it was, which, while not ideal, certainly is better than what Kaveney seems to suggest.

The next day, then, after Carol leaves, Pete finds one of these letters. He recalls Carol’s voice saying, “We want information,” and he thinks, “Yes. And we had gotten it. God knew we had” (442). This particular response, like the original date between the two of them, exemplifies the positive side of knowledge as expressed in their sexual act. However, after reading the letter, Nick tells us, “I folded her letter, stuck it into the back pocket of my jeans, and drove home to Gates Falls. At first my eyes kept blurring and I had to keep wiping at them. Then I turned on the radio and the music made things a little better” (442). Much like finding out your
relationship will consist of adultery, this reaction describes the negative consequences of information. Since the information they shared was imperfect, since knowledge was not the complete end, Pete cannot escape the negative and positive dichotomy in the information question. Similarly, we know Carol had an amazing experience, but that she also gets hurt. In “Heavenly Shades of Night are Falling,” the reader discovers that Carol was badly burned in a house fire as a result of her anti-war activities. Thus, both people gain the benefit of vulnerability, but both are also hurt in the area they gave into in order to get to that step: Pete is hurt in love and Carol in peace.

Near the end of the novella, Pete gets one last letter from Carol. By this time, Pete has committed to the peace effort, spraying a peace sign on his jacket as perhaps the most obvious form of his commitment. In a sense, he has contributed the other half of the equation. In this letter from Carol, she too completes her other half when she writes, “I love you, Pete” right after she tells him that the letter is “full of information” (517). She also includes a copy of *The Lord of Flies*, and in it she has written: \[ \heartsuit + \text{PEACE} = \text{INFORMATION} \] (518).

King finally introduces the reader to the equation that renders information as an end. When there is an environment that consists entirely of love and peace, then knowledge becomes intrinsically valuable. One can have love without peace (war against those we consider sub-human) and peace without love (see *1984*), and it could be that neither can exist. King has demonstrated that these situations, while perhaps still capable of intense moments of greatness through vulnerability, ultimately end in hurt. However, in such a situation where the equation is complete, we may be completely vulnerable and open and not suffer for such a posture.

And yet, Pete has a strange reaction to this letter, written as it is in an environment of love and peace. King writes, “My eyes filled with sudden and unexpected tears. I put my hands
over my mouth to hold in the sob that wanted to come out. . . I can’t remember hurting anymore ever in my life than I did then” (518). Pete has made himself vulnerable, but he is still hurting, something I indicated an environment such as the one he and Carol share precluded. This seems a complete contradiction. And yet, I think it is not. I think it is an indication of one of two things. The first is that something is not totally in place. For instance, Pete may not be sold on the anti-war movement, and King may be indicating that simply painting a war sign on one’s jacket and voicing one’s opposition is not sufficient to ensure peace. Peace requires proactive measures, not lip service. Similarly, the activities that land Carol in the house fire are anti-war protests that verge on, if not cross over into, violence. King may also be indicating that violence in no way can ever lead to peace. Thus, Pete’s reaction to Carol’s letter may be King’s reflection on peace protests. He may be indicating that much of what we do in the name of peace is either insufficient and done for outside reasons, or even completely wrongheaded and hypocritical.

Even more, this strange scene from King might be a commentary on the likelihood of these conditions ever arising in real life. Pete and Carol never see each other after that last night; they never actually enter into a dialogue and Pete never sends her a letter. It appears that there is an arena for perfect vulnerability, but it never materializes. So it appears that Pete’s reaction might be a heavy handed attempt on King’s part to draw the reader to the previous point. He wants to shock the reader into the awareness that, chances are, this kind of an environment will not exist in our lifetimes. The best we can do, he seems to be saying, is go back to that night in the car and try to approximate it. Put yourself out there and take a risk because that is the only way that such an intense moment, like the one in the car, can happen. By forcing the reader to puzzle out Pete’s reaction, King calls attention to the fact that his view of information is a completely utopian one.
And so, King’s comments begin to get at my Final Narratives. He demonstrates the importance of vulnerability in a world where we are likely to get hurt. While he tips his hat toward the possibilities of a utopian conception of information, King is ultimately a realist. By setting “Hearts in Atlantis” in a college atmosphere, King makes me reflect on the ways that vulnerability plays out in a campus, specifically in a classroom. I go into a class trusting that all involved will respect the free flow of ideas. I trust that people will not ridicule my thoughts or debase me because of them. And yet, often times I do get hurt. Many times, people can be not just intellectually cruel, but personally hurtful as they react to ideas in a classroom setting. I know this fact. However, King insists that it is a way of life. While I should strive for a utopian setting, I should not wait for it as an inevitable end. I must be prepared to be hurt, but I must not let that deter me from classroom engagement because, as King shows, the benefits of vulnerability can far outweigh the costs.

This point also reflects on the machinery of this project. In order to construct the kind of classroom that this project requires, we must become vulnerable. Now, part of this project is to help explain why we ought to be vulnerable; however, we should not believe that everyone will all of a sudden jump on board with the project, nor should we expect it. The pragmatic classroom requires the student to trust the professor’s experience and decisions, and the student must also trust that the teacher will respect and consider the student’s opinions. Similarly, the teacher must trust that the student will still show respect even though the teacher has broken down many of the power structures in the classroom. King shows us how we must work toward this end and how it can be extremely beneficial. Nevertheless, he also warns that we might get hurt along the way. Thus, King’s discussion of information, much like DeLillo’s on knowing, cuts to the heart of this paper and asks us to reflect on pedagogy as a whole.
“Book snobs and play-it-safers”

In the last section, I had mentioned that Carol writes her information equation in a copy of *The Lord of the Flies*. In fact, Golding’s novel is also important for other reasons. In the first novella of *Hearts in Atlantis*, “Low Men in Yellow Coats,” Bobby Garfield struggles to grow up in a single-parent home in small town America. King explores the pains of growing up and losing innocence in this story. However, he also takes time in the novella to examine an issue central to this project: namely, why and what we read. Ted Brautigan, a sexagenarian who moves into Bobby’s apartment complex, introduces Bobby to that William Golding novel. King uses this introduction and subsequent engagement to reflect on what types of books we should be reading and why we might want to read them. Ultimately, he sees different values in differing kinds of books, but the best are those that combine verbal stimulation with a provoking plot. This assertion comments directly on this paper and gives the reader cause for reflection.

Unlike the previous ways in which the two authors have made us think about this project, this particular discussion seems much more blunt and obvious. In fact, King seems to just come right out and say what he means. Near the beginning of the novella—in fact, near the beginning of the book as a whole—Ted Brautigan says, “There are . . . books full of great writing that don’t have very good stories. Read sometimes for the story, Bobby. Don’t be like the book snobs who won’t do that. Read sometimes for the words—the language. Don’t be like the play-it-safers that won’t do *that*. But when you find a book that has both a good story and good words, treasure that book” (25). Although King puts it a bit simply within the novella, he is after all talking to a kid, it seems clear that King believes there are three kinds of books worth reading: those that are beautiful for the way the words fall on the page, those that are beautiful for the way they thrill or move us, and those that can do both. Note that not all books fall into one of these
categories; some, it appears, are not worth reading. However, we are able to distinguish the ones that should be read by whether they fall into one of these categories.

King believes that good stories are a true criterion that we should use to measure a book. He thinks that if we can really get into a plot, then that book is a worthy one. He does not say why we should read in this manner, but we can reasonably hypothesize that it is because the story in some way engages us or moves us. In this way, King seems to be talking about the kinds of stories that are capable of changing our Final Narratives even though the manner in which they seek to do it is cumbersome or choppy. It takes a narrative to change a Final Narrative, and some books, through their plots, are able to do just that regardless of the beauty of their composition. For instance, *On the Road* is a very uneven work. There are parts that soar and places that thud. However, the buddy narrative of Sal and Dean spoke to and influenced an entire generation, even continuing to change people until this day. King wants us to remember works like these. They too have power and are worth reading. He warns us against elitist snobbery that might try to keep such a work from real and proper examination.

However, King also makes it clear that there is value in engaging a book in a kind of “simply” aesthetic manner. Sometimes just the way the author joins together his words, phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs is so moving, so incredible, that the work becomes valuable through that fact. For instance, a reader might find *The Picture of Dorian Gray* an incredibly tedious and boring work, but still recognize that Oscar Wilde has a tremendous skill for constructing witty, complex sentences. In fact, in these sentences, we might find cause to reflect on our own lives. Even if we do not, however, King recognizes that that work still has value and still requires us to thoughtfully engage it. Even though it may not change our lives, surely these kinds of works can better them, either through pleasure or intellectual stimulation or even by
helping us to think about the ways we may communicate in a similarly beautiful manner. This is a possibility Edmundson does not really account for but King embraces. In fact, King warns about the kinds of people who are too intimidated or too disdainful to try to read these books. Much like those that disregard books with good plots, King sees this group as in error.

Lastly, as much as King cherishes the previous two groups, he believes that the third category is where the best books reside. It is the books that somehow manage to combine both of these parts—those that tell a moving story and sing off the page—that we should treasure. Perhaps these are the kind that we should work to have in our classrooms. Bobby asks Ted if there are many of these books around, and Ted replies, “More than the book-snobs and play-it-safers think. Many more” (25). King believes that these books are out there if we just break down our walls enough to see them. We have to get out of our comfort zones and take a risk, acknowledging that there are valuable books out there that may not be the kind I am used to reading. I have to be willing to accept value in different places, and realize that there are different ways to read and appreciate a text.

However, King does not explicitly state how we are supposed to figure out which books these are. Rather, he demonstrates the process for us. When Bobby sees Ted again, Ted tells him, “Remember I told you that some books have both a good story and good writing? . . . This is one of that breed. A belated birthday present” (33). Ted then hands Bobby a copy of The Lord of the Flies. The first thing Ted does in trying to find a book that fits into one of those groups is make an assertion. He posits that Golding’s novel is a book with good plot and writing, making it a treasure. He believes that this is a book Bobby should read, and says so from his incredible experiential advantage over Bobby.
Yet, he does not demand that Bobby read it. Ted gives Bobby the chance to feel his own way through the book, to decide for himself and tell Ted. As Ted says after Bobby asks about what happens if he does not like the book, “A book is like a pump. It gives nothing unless first you give to it. You prime a pump with your own water, you work the handle with your own strength. You do this because you expect to get back more than you give. . . How long would you prime a water pump and flail the handle if nothing came out? . . . This book is two hundred pages, give or take. You read the first ten percent. . . and if you don’t like it by then, if it isn’t giving more than it’s taking, put it aside” (34-5). Ted lets Bobby engage the book, and does not judge Bobby’s reaction. He keeps an open mind about what might or might not speak to Bobby. Ted makes it clear that if Bobby respects him enough to try the book, then he will respect Bobby enough to trust his decision. Ted even gives Bobby his own library card at one point so that Bobby can try to find his own books. The environment is a completely open one.

Even more, Ted makes a kind of argument for the book. He believes we should read it because *The Lord of the Flies* gives back to the reader much more in terms of knowledge and enjoyment than it takes in time and frustration. Even though this is not the kind of complicated, nuanced argument we would expect in a college classroom, Ted is still following Rorty by arguing for a book and not simply asserting its worth. In fact, Ted recognizes that this situation is distinctly different from a school one. When Bobby tells Ted that he wishes his teachers would let him do this with a novel, Ted says, “School is different” (35). Ted recognizes that in a classroom, we must read the works to the end. Not only have we made an implicit agreement to do so by enrolling in the class, but we should trust and respect the teacher’s knowledge enough that the book will eventually payoff. In fact, in many works the payoff comes near the end. Ted is confident *The Lord of the Flies* will come sooner, but this might not be the case for all books,
and Ted makes it very clear that in a classroom, we are to operate by a different procedure. However, the process King suggests for locating the best kinds of books is still similar to the one this paper uses to determine classroom syllabi: we must posit a work then seek to defend its inclusion.

However, King does not simply posit this one manner of canonization. He also suggests a different way to determine a book’s worth. Bobby finishes the book then reflects, “And the book’s ending—happy or not? Crazy as such a thing would have seemed a month ago, Bobby couldn’t really tell. Never in his life had he read a book where he didn’t know if the book was good or bad, happy or sad” (42). Another way to determine if a book is to be treasured is if that book is too complicated to figure out on a first read. Whether by virtue of the plot, the language, or, most likely, some combination of the two, treasured books leave us needing to go back and re-examine them. We need to use other resources (Bobby asks Ted) and re-engage the work. This notion is extremely similar to the earlier notions of what makes a work canonical. Although Edmundson said it clearest, most thinkers agree that works need to be “tough-minded” in some way, that they need to sustain conversation. King’s point is nearly the same, but with three caveats. The first is that King’s idea does not carry the requirement of longevity that Edmundson’s did. A work need not have been around a long time to demonstrate just how tough-minded it is. Secondly, a work need not be tough-minded universally, across all ages. King seems to indicate that there is a value in a work being difficult for the reader, even if it might be an easy read for a different age group. King centers the reader. Thirdly, King thinks that we should return to these works willingly. Just like Bobby wanted to re-examine the ending, for a work to be truly treasured, we should not have to be coerced to analyze it. Once again, the focus shifts to the reader.
When we argue for canonization for King’s piece, all of these factors work in its favor. In fact, the argument for King’s piece is very similar for the one I constructed for DeLillo’s. King deserves canonization because of the manners in which he gets at our Final Narratives. He does this in many ways by possibly infecting his works with a kind of strangeness that many readers cannot assimilate. Even more, King does not just get at our Final Narratives, but his narrative presents views that risk changing the basic stories we tell about the world. Lastly, in much the same way I thought about DeLillo, King deserves canonization in a literary environment because some of his ideas are directed toward scrutinizing that same environment. He does not just work to challenge our conceptions of the world in general, but also to make us rethink the reason we are sitting in this classroom reading this work. His novel offers ideas that are about the structures which require us to read.

However, one may imagine many arguments for many works may fall along some of these lines. “We ought to read work X because it forces us to change our narratives.” Yet, this argument by itself is ultimately insufficient because the claims are not substantiated for work X. I believe that this section on *Hearts in Atlantis* (as well as *Underworld*) provides concrete, persuasive arguments in the form outlined above. It is for this reason of sufficient argument that we should canonize King.
Part IV: Coda

King in the Classroom

I have built the machinery and run the works through it. The result is that we have viable reasons for reading both DeLillo and King in the classroom. While the former result might surprise no one, the idea that we ought to read King is, on many levels, revolutionary. Long vilified as a writer of those “penny dreadfuls” whose work has little or no literary substance, King’s merit is revealed when we reorient the way that we approach literature. Once we take the focus away from the work and place the importance of a literary education on the reader (and hopefully the reader’s community), it begins to become clear that writers such as King have real merit in the classroom.

And yet, even thinkers who subscribe to a reader based ethic find fault with King. For instance, Mark Edmundson still views King as an unworthy choice for canonization. In Why Read?, Edmundson writes, “King is an entertainment. King is a diversion. But when you try to take him as a guide to life, he won’t work” (133). Now certainly I will not dispute the first two points. There is no doubt that King is entertaining and that he can provide a diversion for us. However, on the last point, it is not so much that King can be used as a guide that is important, but whether or not he writes narratives that are able to speak with and challenge the ways that we view the world. Thinking of an author as a guide to life undermines part of the narrative project. The idea of Final Narratives presupposes that there are many ways to view the world. Even more, Edmundson’s project seeks to put these different ways into conversation with one another. By supposing that a single author could somehow construct a coherent guide to how we ought to live, we risk marginalizing and ignoring the other kinds of lives that are clamoring to be tried out.
If we take an author as a guide, we adopt one stance toward life and possibly stop trying to put narratives into conversation.

Yet, this last argument causes me to assume the truth value of the statement “King can’t be taken as a guide to life.” Edmundson’s reasoning behind this statement, however, bears scrutiny. He writes that King “is a sentimental writer. In his universe, the children (or at least the pack of nice kids, the ones the bullies prey on) are good, right, and true. . . Just about all adults who are not in some manner child-like are corrupt, depraved, lying, and self-seeking. . . [B]ring this way of seeing to the world and you’ll pretty quickly pay for it” (134). First off, I should note that Edmundson provides no textual support for his claims. However, even if we grant him that he could, we ought to remember that King has penned nearly fifty novels. This number gives us a wide body of work to pick from, many of which may be uneven in terms of merit. Recall that in an argument for canonization, we are arguing for specific works, not entire corpuses. Yet, Edmundson’s substantiation (if he could procure it) would be evidence for his claim; yet, if we turn back to the last section, in “Hearts in Atlantis” King provides us with two characters, Pete and Carol, that are far more complicated than mere child projections. In Part III, I have provided a counter argument to Edmundson’s claim. I believe my analysis provides instances of how we could live King, how his characters are more complicated, and how he is able to get at our Final Narratives.

What Edmundson has done is open up an argument as to the merits of King, and that is the goal of this project. He has provided one view as to why King should not be read, and I have produced counterarguments. Even more, Edmundson’s arguments are directed toward the way that the text affects the reader, not the other way around. This process is the mechanism through which a reader-centric ethic works. Thus, we need to continue to interrogate Edmundson’s
claims to see if we are able to fully respond to them. Part of Edmundson’s argument about why King is not an acceptable guide to life (a formulation I already dispute) is King’s apparent positive evaluation of child-like qualities. Edmundson believes that King simplifies the child, finding only good at this age. Edmundson wants us to understand the child as a more complex creature whose outlooks and behaviors are both good and bad (134). However, even if we grant Edmundson that the child in King is always good and simple (Carrie and Pet Semetary come to mind as counter examples), we must remember that a novel can be understood as an argument for the reader. It presents certain propositions and ideas which can be embraced or rejected. Part of King’s argument, according to Edmundson’s analysis, seems to be that adults need a return to certain “childish” outlooks in order to survive (or at least remain sane) in this world. It might not be that King uncritically praises the child, but that King is demonstrating for the reader, who is most likely not a child, the ways in which being young can help us live our lives. For instance, in “Low Men and Yellow Coats,” Bobby Garfield has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and literature. He wants to know and does not assume that he speaks from a position of intelligence, that he somehow knows it all. Rather, Bobby voraciously gobbles up any knowledge that he can. By simplifying King’s texts into the “child = good” formula, Edmundson risks missing the ways in which King’s texts might actual argue to the reader, not about the actual make up of a child, but the ways in which a child’s outlook can be useful for adults.

We need to revisit, also, the idea of King as entertainment. Now, certainly Edmundson does not object to certain works being read for pleasure. He calls these works “wish fulfillments,” and he believes that they have their time and place. However, it seems as though he believes that these works have no place in the classroom. By reclaiming King’s power to reach Final Narratives, I have provided justification for his place in the classroom. However, I
also want to reclaim this entertainment aspect as a reason for placing King in the university setting. Several times throughout this essay, I have made references to the fact that, if a work does not in some way engage us, we are unlikely to be interested in the work, and so, no matter how “great” that work might be, it stands little chance of reaching our Final Narratives. The philosopher and educator bell hooks has a similar idea in her work *Teaching to Transgress*. She writes, “The first paradigm that shaped my pedagogy was the idea that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring. And if boredom should prevail, then pedagogical strategies were needed that would intervene, alter, even disrupt the atmosphere. . . But there seemed to be no interest among either traditional or radical educators in discussing the role of excitement in higher education” (7). For hooks, in order to truly learn, we must be excited; we have to get fired up about our educations. Now, this energy can come from a variety of places and a variety of pedagogical strategies, and hooks mentions ideas and the classroom environment specifically. However, I argue that the texts we read can also contribute to this vibrant environment. Certainly most students have experienced a class that just explodes because of the manner in which the work in question provided energy for the class to begin a very real discussion about it. Whether it is William Blake’s “The Clod and the Pebble,” Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, or Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, such works contribute, not detract, from the university environment. Thus, whenever we claim that King’s works entertain us, we can claim this as a positive for the author because of the way it can enable discussion.

To return to Harold Bloom’s comments about King, Bloom believes that King is, first and foremost, an inadequate writer. And yet, how do we measure inadequacy? Partly, for Bloom, it seems to be a matter of “pure” aesthetics as he claims that King is inadequate “sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph.” However, we have rejected, through Dewey,
Shusterman, and Edmundson, this notion of a pure, intellectual aesthetics as one that is inadequate and false. Dewey tells us that we value this intellectual remove because it gives us security from an uncertain world of action. Yet, this intellectual pursuit really gets us nowhere because all of our knowledge is actually based on an experiential interaction with the world. The answers are not apart from this world when the data is based firmly within it. All that results from such a pursuit is the risk of indoctrination; knowing is really about doing. As Shusterman argues, the aesthetic is inextricably tied to our ability to do. A true understanding of it would require that we appreciate things aesthetically because of the way they improve our lives. While it is true a particularly well constructed paragraph may give us pleasure, to limit the notion of aesthetic to only this kind of reaction marginalizes the other facets of art, facets which I have demonstrated King possesses. Thus, Bloom’s aesthetic idea is problematic.

Bloom’s other claims are that King is inadequate on a book by book basis and that he detracts from our cultural experience. With these objections, Bloom seems to be moving away from a purely intellectual understanding of the aesthetic to one that affects how we live. Yet, in response to these objections, I need to point the reader to Part III. King’s works do contribute to our cultural dialogue because they cause the reader to reflect on certain ways that the reader lives her life. They cause her to question some of the narratives and some of the modes of existence that she employs on a day-to-day basis. While Bloom is certainly making an argument against King, it is only that: an argument. For him to assert such a claim does almost nothing. Rather, he must engage us in a sincere dialogue so that we can determine the degree to which King contributes to our cultural lives.

This process, then, provides an avenue through which we can consider King for canonization. It works so that we cannot appeal to worn out biases and metaphysical claims to
reject him. Rather, we must sit down (or stand up if we are so moved) and debate the manners in which King can alter our Final Narratives. We must examine the works for their efficacy in changing us. The focus has shifted away from the work (how well or how poorly it bears our analysis and unpacking), and to us, the readers and our communities (how well this analysis makes us rethink the way we live). I believe that my analysis of King provides a strong argument for the way in which *Hearts in Atlantis* completes this task well, and so ought to be considered for canonization.

However, it would be disingenuous for me to restrict this discussion to only King. Rather, this pragmatic understanding of literature provides a mechanism through which we can consider all pieces of literature for canonization. The default stance is not rejection, but acceptance; no work is automatically excluded from the get-go based on some predetermined, universal, or even culturally implicit (we do not read work X in the university) criterion. Rather, every work that we are willing to propose is worth scrutiny. Certainly some books will be easier to accept or reject than others (say, James Patterson’s *The Jester* versus Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*). Nevertheless, we must still interrogate them as possible ways to examine our basic narratives.

In a world that is not static, in a culture that constantly changes, we need a canonization process that is able to adapt. Different and viable ways to inhabit the world are coming to our attention. Social movements such as the Civil Rights, women’s, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender are bringing into the national consciousness, and thus dialogue, alternative ways of living. In order to really engage these different narratives, we need an open forum for conversation in which we can bring these formerly repressed narratives to light. Certainly one such forum is through literature, and the pragmatic process of canonization requires that we examine such minority literature in a real and meaningful way as it comes onto the national stage.
It might mean that, as Ted Brautigan suggests, the stories minority literature tells might outweigh some defects in its language (an idea Bloom finds absolutely repulsive in *The Western Canon*) as that story is able to place different narratives in dialogue with our own. Ultimately, as Ted suggests, this process is a balancing act between the poles of “language” and “plot.” However, the pragmatic canon allows us to freely add weight to these poles in the ultimate argument for canonization.

**Revisiting an Old Friend**

Well my brother, this is the best that I can do. You made me wonder why we do not read King in the classroom, and I was not able to offer a direct answer. However, I could offer you a framework for understanding literature that would allow us to posit an answer to that question. Rather than trying to answer straight on, I have proposed a mechanism through which we can construct syllabi that are able to include Stephen King. It is not a given that he will be admitted into the classroom, but at least he, and a number of other authors, are now in play. In a pragmatic understanding of literature, this situation is the best for which we can hope. We have to believe that our claims will be taken seriously, and our failure or success is predicated to a large degree on an open and respectful dialogue.

We read in order to change our Final Narratives; literature ought to work in ways that cause us to reexamine our own lives while simultaneously developing compassion for other ways of living. And yet, this goal cannot be completed on our own. While Plato’s Socrates likes to remind us that the unexamined life is not worth living, undoubtedly professor of philosophy Miguel Martinez-Saenz would remind us that Malcolm X reflected on just how difficult this examined life is. In a literary sense, it requires a classroom environment to maximize our
learning potential. It requires that we learn different practices and techniques to unpack works to find these narratives. It requires that we engage with other people to free the conversation from one that is strictly between us and the text. A pragmatic understanding of literature and the canon is about freedom; freedom to transgress boundaries and freedom to find good ways to live.

Thus, if we are not reading King in the classroom, it indicates several things that may help to answer my brother. The first of these is that a pragmatic understanding of the canon is in place and our arguments are simply unpersuasive. Given the nature of this project, that result is a very real possibility. And yet, I believe that I have provided strong evidence in this essay for King’s inclusion. Even more, I have demonstrated how a pragmatic reading of King and Don DeLillo, an author much more frequently read in academic circles, argues for their inclusion in many similar ways. This is not to say that the authors are the same, just that the process might produce similar results for works that are worthy of canonization.

And yet, the fact that we are reading King in very few academic settings suggests that the pragmatic canon may not be in place. While there are certainly viable reasons for why we should not read King, his complete scarcity allows us to consider the other, much more likely, option that we are not constructing syllabi pragmatically. Besides the fact that ignoring the pragmatic canon carries certain ethical implications, it also helps to answer Philip. We do not study King because we do not educate for the ways in which literature can change our Final Narratives.

And so, when Ted discusses the end of The Lord of the Flies with Bobby, he makes a comment that resonates outside the world of Hearts in Atlantis. King writes the exchange as:

“Tell me what he said about the ending. Mr. Golding [,” Bobby said.]
“As best as I can remember, it was something like this: ‘The boys are rescued by the crew of a battle-cruiser, and that is very well for them, but who will rescue the crew?’” . . .
“I still don’t understand. They don’t need to be rescued—the crew of the boat, I mean—because they’re not on the island. Also . . . The guys on the cruiser are grownups. Grownups don’t need to be rescued.”
“No?”
“No.”
“Never?” (48-9)

Much of the complication of *The Lord of the Flies* comes from the manner in which the book ends. However, Ted’s comments actually bear on this project too. Sometimes grownups need to be rescued. They, like anyone else, are not infallible. Just because older people have a wealth of experience and knowledge behind them, it does not mean that they cannot get lost in the wrong direction. In fact, often times their wealth of knowledge can blind them to their own missteps.

Now, I am not claiming that I am out to rescue the English discipline, but I think it may have strayed from the fundamentals of what it out to be. As Bloom notes in *The Western Canon*, English is in a crisis. It is getting eaten up by various disciplines: philosophy, psychology, cultural studies. Even the bastion of theory is decaying (Edmundson is glad to help it on its way out). We are on an island, on our own Atlantis. The question is then, where do we go from here? Do we go down with it, just giving up? Do we ignore it? Do we see possibility in its destruction? Or do we look to find other viable ways to read and understand literature in the classroom? I believe the answer is the last of these. Reconceptualizing why we read and the manner in which this reasoning can be employed in the classroom gives us a way to drive back the flood waters. It gives the discipline new vigor as we seek to better our lives and those lives around us.

As Dewey’s work suggests, a literary education may have become about reinforcing the divide between theory and practice. As Shusterman believes, it may currently neglect the experiential aspect of the aesthetic. Edmundson thinks it has become about theory. Weeks claims that the problem is that it has become a text-first field. hooks sees fault in that education works to maintain, at best, the status quo. Whatever the form of the critique, the common
denominator is the same: literature has been divorced from its efficacy in effecting real change in our physically inhabited world. The pragmatist canon reverses this trend. It allows us to consider King, DeLillo, and anyone else that we believe can help us becomes better human beings. This is the best I can do, Philip. The task is now up to you and anyone else who sees similar problems to argue that the study of literature ought to be a pragmatic one that educates us toward freedom.
Notes

1The corollary here is, of course, that other forms of art might be able to reach a person’s Final Narratives. This is a fact that Edmundson does not deny and I readily embrace. I firmly believe that listening to music or examining a painting has the ability to shake us in a fundamental way. In fact, I believe that this is the sort of circumstance Shusterman is driving at. He believes any form of art can reach us aesthetically and experimentally. It is a small leap to suggest that these same works might then be able to change our Final Narratives as well. However, since this paper is one in the English Department, its focus is necessarily on literature.

2I realize the problems that accompany this kind of a blanket statement. Certainly, I recognize that there are different ways to construct canons and that canons over differing material may be formulated in very different ways. Nonetheless, my argument recognizes a pragmatic canon as the proper way to construct such a list and all other formulations as necessarily deficient in some respect. Thus, while the term “canon” may be overly ambiguous when applied to such a large group, I believe that within this context it still makes sense to employ it.

3For the reader’s reference, I have included the rules to Hearts according to www.wikihow.com. They are:

1. Understand the objective of the game: Players want to possess the least amount of points at the end of the game. (Hearts [worth 1 point each] and the Queen of Spades [worth 13 points] are the only point cards.) If, in a hand, a player receives ALL the points from that hand (called Shooting the Moon), they receive a score of 0 and all other players receive 26 points.

2. Familiarize yourself with the basic rules of the game:
   - How many can play: 3-7 players but 4 is standard;
   - The cards: Standard 52 card deck (omitting Jokers), each player is dealt the same amount of cards until the deck runs out. In each suit the cards are also ranked from the Ace (the highest value) on down, with 2 being the lowest value.

3. Learn how to deal: The players cut for deal with the lowest being the first to deal as the whole pack is dealt out clockwise, one card at a time, face down.
   - After the cards have been dealt, each player looks at their cards and then chooses three cards to pass to an opponent prior to recieving any cards from opponents. Cards are passed to the right at the first deal, to the left with the second, and across with the third. At the fourth deal, players keep their own cards and no passing is allowed.
   - In the event that the cards do not split evenly between the amount of players, usually the leftover cards are set aside as "hole" cards. However, some variations dictate that the person who takes the first trick also takes these remaining cards.

4. Know how to play the game:
   - The player with the 2 of clubs plays first and must lay down the 2 of clubs. Each player after the lead must follow suit if he can. If a player cannot follow suit (on any trick), they may play a card in any other suit. On the first trick of each hand, no points (Hearts or the Queen of Spades) may be played.
   - A player wins a trick when he or she plays the highest card of the suit that is led. The winner of the trick leads the next.
   - Again, each player after the lead must follow suit if he can. If the player can't, the player may play any card he or she wants.
o A player can't lead with a heart until a heart has been played in the game (broken). Hearts are broken when a player lacks a card in the suit that has been led, so he or she throws down a heart instead. Many people play that hearts can't be broken on the first trick. The exception to this rule is when a player has voided all suits and possesses only Hearts.

o Playing continues until all cards have been played.

5. **Keep Score:**

o After all the cards have been played, players count up their tricks. Each heart card a player has results in a point. The player who ends up with the Queen of Spades gets 13 points.

o When one player reaches 100 (or some other predetermined number) all points are tallied and the player with the least amount of points wins.

4Several times throughout the book, King displays the following symbol:

\[ ♥ + ☮ = \text{INFORMATION} \]

It is in a letter Carol writes Pete, and it is on a page of *The Lord of the Flies* that Bobby (the protagonist of “Low Men in Yellow Coats”) finds at the end of “Heavenly Shades of Night are Falling.” Even more, King places it on the extra pages at the end of the paperback version of the novel and on the back dust jacket of the hardback version. Clearly, the idea that love and peace equate information is a key idea for King and this book.
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