DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 596 CS 212 971

AUTHOR	Bowers, Bradley R.
TITLE	Toward Decentralizing the Study of Literature, or Who Do We Think We Are?
PUB DATE	Mar 91
NOTE	5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College English; *Critical Theory; *English Curriculum; *English Departments; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; Literary History; Politics of Education; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	Educational Issues; *English Teachers; Literary Canon

ABSTRACT

As English departments face the 90s and beyond, the pressure will only rise to define and justify the role of the English professor in the academy. Three current debates suggest the indeterminate future of English departments, which now represent a multi-faceted discipline. First, the canon debate must be resolved; second, the teaching role of the old "English" department must be defined; and third, the place of theory in the "English" department must be determined. Regarding the third point, since the intrusion of both linguistic and theoretical studies threatens the historical foundations and the raison d'etre of the traditional English department, a split must be made between literary history and critical theory, perhaps on a department level. Regarding the second point, since writing is an integral and adapted skill to every discipline on campus, there is no real reason why the literature department should assume it can or should teach writing at all. Finally, the "new" canon must be allowed to separate itself from the "old" canon, and the free market of ideas concerning literature must include the entire college or university community. The free market of the real world--that is, the real academic world--should and will determine those works which are of real value. (PRA)

BRADLEY R. BOWERS

Toward Decentralizing the Study of Literature, or, Who Do We Think We Are?

The vociferous canon debate belies an underlying dilemma much more difficult to argue, because the concealed debate eludes containment in either "great books" or "neglected classics." As English deparments face the 90's and beyond, the pressure will only rise to define (read this *to justify*) our roles in the academy. Three current debates suggest the indeterminate future of literary studies, or is that the study of literature, or is that English studies? Perhaps this outmoded designation--of being the "English" department--offers a clue to our multi-faceted, or is that fractured, discipline.

Three related, yet distinct, questions are provoked by that clouded image that forms when one hears, "He's an English professor." Yes, it has always been he, a graying, balding, bespectacled, pipe-smoking, tweed-coated, leather-patched, thoughtful-looking, kindly and condescending he. But we do not fit that image anymore--why, then, do we still play that role? Who do we think we are anyway?

First, and perhaps most important, the canon debate must inevitably be resolved, for good or ill. Second, the teaching role of the old "English" department must be defined: literary history, social history, canon, non-canon, composition, business writing, folklore, political theory, linguistics, psycholinguistics, American studies, technical writing, Marxian dialectics, Bakhtinian dialogy, grammar, literature appreciation? And third, as the previous list suggests, the place of theory in the "English" department must be determined, again for good or ill.

What is the primary role of literary studies, and does it include theory? The intrusion of both linguistic and theoretical studies threatens the historical foundations--and raison d'etre--of the traditional English department. While most departments will be able to accommodate and develop both of these lines of inquiry--literary history and critical theory--presently this marriage of circumstance is accomplished only by dumping most critical theories (except perhaps New Historicism) into the linguistic stew--call it Theoretical Meta-Critical Meta-Rhetoric--and by isolating the adamant literary historicists up on the fifth floor, out of earshot of the theory seminars.

The split must be made, perhaps on a departmental level. Compare: is theoretical physics considered a sub-category--a curriculum, a program, or an area--of applied physics? This necessity of this separation becomes more apparent in regard to teaching roles.

To provide a practical excuse for their existence, the lingui-criti-theorists should and will be called on to teach their language

expertise to undergraduates; thus, they will be thrust mostly into freshman composition classes (where the students will not care about *otherness* but still will want to know whether to put a comma *here*). The scenario will then raise a much more pertinent question, one about both otherness and commas: Why does the English department--the literature department--get stuck with teaching composition? This ludicrous condition exists at present; our department employs medieval literary historians to teach business writing.

This tradition is both illogical and short-lived, no matter which way Janus looks. Over their four years, students will write more in all their other subjects than in all their literature classes, so why do we teach expository, research, analysis, argument, technical, scientific and business writing? Why do *we* teach writing-across the curriculum, or rather, why do we *teach* writing-across-the-curriculum? Who do we think we are? Our students rightfully complain that their *other* professors mark their papers differently, want them to write differently. Since writing is an integral and particularly adapted skill to every discipline on campus, why does the literature department assume it can or should teach writing at all?

And these lead to the third question: how do we determine a canon, should we determine a canon, etc.? Traditionalists argue the value of proven works; opponents do not usually dispute their value entirely. This debate usually mires in the art of compromise versus the compromise of art. Stanley Fish suggests that the purists are simply fascists who ignore the adversarial history of, well,

everything, and that plurality and a free market of ideas will solve the canon debate once and for all (never mind the inherent contradiction in that statement). But Fish suggests an important concept: a "free market" concept should and ultimately will determine the canon.

But another inherent contradiction has so far remained the impediment to resolution. The free market has heretofore been defined as those in the profession, our profession, professors of language and literature. For the same reason that 1) linguistics and critical theory must separate itself from the study of literature, that 2) the literature department must separate itself from the writing program, that 3) the "new" canon must be allowed to separate itself from the "old" canon--for this same reason--the free market of ideas concerning literature must include the entire college or university community. The free market of the real world--that is, the real academic world--should and will determine those works which are of real value.

Not only do English departments need to stop teaching all the writing classes, every other department on campus needs to start teaching--not just writing--but also literature.