

And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes: Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity. A Response to David Fishelov

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This response is a contribution to the debate on “And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes: Textual and Other Reasons for Canonicity,” see <http://www.connotations.de/debate/parodies-of-six-word-stories>. Further contributions to this debate are welcome; please contact editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract

This response to David Fishelov suggests that the establishment of canonicity could/should be described as the result not only of textual and aesthetic qualities but as a semiotic process that extends the borders of genre.

David Fishelov’s article on the conditions of what makes a literary work part of the canon may remind the reader of a statement by Thomas Mann at the beginning of *Der Zauberberg* where he claims that only the thorough is truly entertaining, i.e. worth one’s time. Fishelov’s article is truly thorough and entertaining, thorough from beginning to end, no doubt, entertaining because it is a pleasure to see how a six-word-story gives rise to a scholarly disquisition of more than four and a half thousands words.

Fishelov first describes the textual characteristics that might account for the canonicity of a literary text, in particular of the six-word-story he is concerned with, the so-called Hemingway story. Then he connects the textual characteristics of the story with three aesthetic categories or values as described by Beardsley: complexity, unity, and intensity.

While these categories cannot be prescriptive, they help to understand essential qualities of literary texts: they may be necessary but not sufficient conditions. Complexity almost guarantees interest on part of the readers; unity is a more formal quality but does not preclude complex relationships within literary works. Intensity may be more difficult to pinpoint in terms of form, but it definitely is a decisive element of reader reception.

Considering these categories, Fishelov cannot but agree that some works belong to the literary canon. At the same time, Beardsley's aesthetic categories are derived from what is considered as the literary canon. Neither intends to escape this circular dilemma, and Fishelov is careful not to define canonicity.

Even though textual characteristics could be called the foundation of canonicity, Fishelov rightly points out that there are other factors that play a part. They are the result of "a broader perspective" (128). In this case I would have suggested using the more specific semiotic categories, i.e. semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics, the triad of signification within and outside of literature.

Without actually using semiotic terms, Fishelov points to several semiotic factors that have an influence on the formation of a canon or have contributed to the canonicity of particular works. He refers to the "Zeitgeist," e.g. fashions or, as in the case of the Hemingway story, the popularity of a famous name. Fishelov nicely calls such facts "external hospitable cultural conditions" (129), definitely pragmatic issues. They would favour imitation, the greatest compliment for the inventor.

By referring to the success of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* not least thanks to its cinematic versions, Fishelov exemplifies the semiotic extension of the literary work or rather the extension of its reach. Other semiotic means are able to pave the way to new audiences. The literary sign is not limited by its composition but interacts with other sign systems as much as with unexpected phenomena in the process of reception. Fishelov rightly speaks of this process as "an impressive trail of echoes and dialogues" (131).

Finally, a comment on the title of Fishelov's essay "And This Gives Life to Baby Shoes": the title could be said to be "meta-canonical" as it combines phrases from two canonical texts—if not stories—, each one metonymical. Who would not immediately associate Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 and, because of the Baby Shoes, the Hemingway story. Thanks to its contrasting canonical phrases, the title links human tragedy with Dantean comedy. If there were a canon of exquisite titles, I would put this one on the shortlist.

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