# Censorship and classics

Literature, American Literature



Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Harper Lee, Maya Angelou. What do these writers have in common? Sure, they are all great American authors, but there is something else. They are all "banned." Censored. Forbidden. Who has not read a book by at least one of these authors? All are great pieces of literature and should be crucial parts of the high school curriculum. School censorship of books is detrimental to the educational development of high school students. In order to understand the problems with school censorship, one must know why it is done. One reason is bad language. A prime example of this type of censorship occurred in a California school when words like " damn" and " hell" were blacked out of Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451. Students were stunned by the irony of the situation. A book about censorship was being censored (Wright). Sexual activity is another common reason for censorship, along with assaults on family values and violence. Why is this happening when 90% of students surveyed do not believe that books should be censored because they contain offensive language or sexual situations (Survey)? Negative racial treatment of characters, setting, or theme also fuels censorship (Simmons). Something else that must be mentioned in order to understand the evils of school censorship are facts censors ignore; the first being literary quality. When they chose to censor a book they do not take into account the educational value of the book. How can one say a book does not belong in schools if they do not know what lessons it teaches? The second key element ignored is the manner in which teachers lead students to interact with texts. They give no credit to the teachers that they could address an offensive issue, such as slavery, as purely objective. When a teacher teaches controversial issues they usually try to stick to the facts or

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in a subject like slavery show the evils of it. Teachers are not in schools to fill the minds of children with their own opinions or those of authors. They are there to teach students facts, and the books are instruments in which they do so. The final element ignored by censors is the context of the offensive elements. An example of this is foul language. When a censor looks at a book and sees foul language, they shy away. They do not even consider that this language was the norm during the period in which the story takes place and is thus essential (Simmons). In today's society the most popular reasons for censorship are racial ones, even though 100% of students surveyed do not believe books should be censored because they contain racial situations (Survey). The prime argument against books containing racially tense situations is that racial slurs " are detrimental to the self esteem of students in minority groups" (Wright). This argument is ridiculous for two reasons. The first is that the slurs add to the realism of the book. " If a book was set in a period of time when racism against blacks was common, then slurs are used by the author to make the reader feel like he/she is actually experiencing the book, rather than reading it" (Wright). The Adventurers of Huckleberry Finn is an example of this. " Doan' le's talk about it, Huck. Po' niggers can't have no luck. I alwuz ' spected dat rattlesnake skin warn't done wit its work" (Twain 97). The derogatory terms in the book are not used to put down African Americans, but to provide valuable insight to the lives and opinions of the people of the pre- emancipated south. The second reason why this argument is ridiculous is because authors sometimes use these slurs to poke fun at the context in which they were used. Thus, at times the slurs are actually used because the author feels racism is bad and is trying to show

why. There are three main reasons that schools should not censor. The first is that a significant benefit of literature is that it provides insights into human experience. The best way to learn about an experience, next to living it, is by reading about it. By censoring books we rob our students of this wellspring of knowledge. The next reason is that as students mature, they benefit by thinking critically about texts. Again, removing these texts is robbing our students. How will students learn about racism without reading Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird? How will they learn the evils of slavery without The Adventurers of Huckleberry Finn? Without these texts, how will they develop their critical thinking skills? We will produce a generation who does not know how to think. The final reason is that censors have no faith in the ability of teachers and students to work through a text critically. Rather, they see nonconforming ideas as dangerous to young and impressionable minds (Simmons). What will we do? If our high school sophomores read Ayn Rand's Anthem they will all denounce democracy, slaughter the American dream, and form a brain dead socialistic society full of cattle with numbers for names and lacking any sort of individuality. For years teachers have used texts with nonconformist themes without creating a generation of foulmouthed communists. Why would they start now? Teachers and students alike know how to take a book, read it, analyze it, and then defend or refute the ideas it contains. When questioned, 100% of students said that when reading a novel containing offensive language, racism, sexual situations etc. that they do not necessarily adopt the words or opinions as their own. 100% also said that students have the ability to read a text, analyze it, and then make an informed decision on whether to agree or disagree with it (Survey).

If our students know they can do this, then why do censors not think so? The main argument of proponents of the censorship of books is ludicrous. They say "letting high schoolers read the material in guestion will dirty their minds at a time when they are trying to develop their own morals" (Wright). However, the action of not letting highschoolers read such material is itself detrimental to their moral development. To be against something it is first necessary to have a knowledge of it. Censoring and banning books like The Adventurers of Huckleberry Finn denies students this knowledge and this stands against this necessary development. If censorship is not the answer, than what is? An example would be when the stage adaption of Harper Lee's novel To Kill a Mockingbird was banned at Owings Mills High School (The Sun). It was banned for two reasons. First " like many works of literature To Kill a Mockingbird makes a moral point by depicting a moral vacuum, the topics it addresses- including rape and racism-create discomfort" (Wright). The other reason is the offensive language used. Simply censoring the book would not work because isolating these words demeans it's intent to condemn racism by illustrating it's worst qualities. Instead, it could have been used as a catalyst for learning, rather than an excuse for continual ignorance. A school wide discussion on race could have taken place after viewing the play and reading the novel. There are alternatives to censorship that have better educational value. Thus, school censorship of books is detrimental to the educational development of high school students. Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Harper Lee, Maya Angelou have been teaching our children about controversial issues for generations and look at the effects. We have won two World Wars, squashed communism, pushed through the

equal rights movement, ended the Cold War, destroyed the Berlin wall, and stopped Saddam Hussain in his tracks. All done by men and women who read the same books that censors claim promote racism and communism. Even the library says "we support the American Library Association on freedom to read" (Interview). They also say " If parents want materials censored it is up to them, not the government, to do it" (Interview). Students are able to form their own opinion on books and, with the help of teachers, are not going to simply adopt the ideas and vocabulary as their own. " A student has to be taught the various ways of looking at an issue before he or she can decide what side to take" (Wright). That is what novels do. It is the most controversial ones that causes students to think the most. In theory censorship thus prevents students from thinking. There are ways of teaching our children morals, but censorship is not one of them. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, " Every burned book enlightens the world." Works CitedKilling a Classic; Censorship: Offensive language can be instructional in a play about racism and segregation. The Sun; Baltimore, Md.; Nov. 6, 1999. Simmons, John S. School Censorship: No Respite in Sight. Forum. Winter 1996/1997, pp. 12-16Survey. " Survey on Censorship of Books in School" November 18, 1999. Twain, Mark. The Adventurers of Huckleberry Finn. Penguin Books. New York, New York, 1959. Virginia Beach Public Library Librarian. Interview. November 19, 1999Wright, Jake. Literary Censorship in America's Schools. On-line. Available: http://members. xoom. com/jakewright/censorship/