

## **“But... I Love That Book!”: Banned Literature and its Implications**

By Tess Cadman

*It is not enough to simply teach children to read; we have to give them something worth reading. Something that will stretch their imagination—something that will help them make sense of their own lives and encourage them to read out towards people whose lives are quite different from their own.*

-Katherine Paterson

Censorship, or the banning of literature, is defined as the changing or the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good (“Censorship”). Literary censorship is a major issue that can be seen repeatedly throughout history. In more recent years, many pieces of classical literature are becoming banned, which is causing current debates. The problem that arises with censorship is that it is essentially “banning” free-thinking among students. Most people believe that banning information in public high schools has to do with parents, but after a closer examination, evidence demonstrates how the teachers who deliver these lessons play a part in the censorship and banning of books. English teacher Jennifer Rossuck states, “There is no time like the present to explore censorship and no better place than the English classroom” (69). While deliberating the negative effects of book banning, research I have done examines the reduction of curricula in public high schools and how impactful it is on students in modern societies. Specifically, censorship within the secondary curriculum withholds permissiveness and potential realistic conflicts present in everyday life from the past, present, and future.

Censorship began in the United States of America stemming from the wars occurring at the time. President John Adams was the first person to sign a bill stating that it was illegal to criticize a government official without backing up in court. During this time, the United States saw its first disregard for the right to free speech, as stated in the Constitution. After John Adam’s bill, several other enactments and treaties follow: the 1903 Immigration Act; the 1915 Supreme Court Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio case; the 1918 Sedition Act; and many more cases today go against the freedom of speech enactment (Newth). With censorship being nothing new in America, it comes as no surprise that as soon as something is published, printed, or produced it can be banned from shelves, TVs, and classrooms across America. The banning of books has been an ongoing issue for high schools across the world; Therefore, the banning of novels may cause feuds between children, teachers, and parents.

Parents ultimately determine what their children should or should not learn and or read at home. On the other hand, parents do not have control of the content taught in the classrooms and are not fully aware of how these instructions on banned literature are being delivered. When students reach the high school level, communication about their studies and what they are learning is notably less than at the elementary level. Studies show that communication between parents and teachers at the secondary level is significantly lower than at the elementary level where communication occurs almost every week. In a study from 2015, the Parent and Family Involvement in Education organization surveyed more than 14,000 parents (Benner). Their findings concluded that only forty-two percent of those parents reported receiving a phone call



being initiated by the teacher about their child, and only sixty-two percent reported receiving a personalized email about their child (Benner).

With the lack of communication between parents and their children's teachers, it is unlikely that many of these parents know what is being taught to their children. An example of a lack of communication between teacher and parent comes from a case in Kentucky. In the book *Banned in the U.S.A.*, Herbert N. Foerstel examines censorship in public schools and libraries and provides major book banning incidents. One incident took place within a public school in Graves County, Kentucky, where sixteen-year-old student, Chris Hill, brought home a book on reincarnation, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. After reading the book, his mother, LaDone Hill, determined that "it was an example of 'secular humanism'" (Foerstel 31). Secular humanism, much like atheism, is the belief system surrounding the basis that humanity is capable of morality and self-fulfillment with a belief in God. From a religious standpoint, it is understandable why Hill was so upset with her child learning about this. Many parents do not want their child learning about other religious perspectives, especially ones which offer an insight into a life without a God or religious dogma. Offended with what was being delivered to her son, Hill complained to the school board and "accepted the school's offer to assign a different book, *Moby Dick*" (Foerstel 31). After further deliberation, she decided that assigning a second novel to just her child was not enough and needed to "protect" the other students from Faulkner's "dangerous" novel. In doing so, she wanted other children who follow a religious faith to be shielded from the secular humanism material presented. She brought her concerns to school board member, Johnny Shelton (Foerstel 31).

Shelton brought the parents' concerns about what was being taught to her child to a board meeting. In the meeting, he proclaimed that opposing religious ideas should not be taught in the classroom and that Faulkner's novel needed to be removed from the curriculum. Shelton demanded the board members to pass the novel around and to read aloud sentences from a highlighted copy. Many highlighted sentences referred to God, abortion, and contained curse words like "bastard," "son of a bitch," and "goddamn" (Foerstel 32). Board member and high school Principal, Jared Ellington, stated that "[my] teachers do not necessarily condone some of the language in the book, but it had to be seen in the context of the character's personality" (Foerstel 32). He also stated that "a sentence or paragraph out of about every book in print can be taken out of context" (Foerstel 33). Disregarding Ellington's advocations for the book, the board deliberated and concluded that Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* was to be banned from the Graves County High School library and course curricula. Dan Sharp, the school board attorney, stated that "none of the board members had read the book, though few said they had thumbed through it." Sharp also estimated that the school board's discussion of Faulkner's book lasted about five minutes (Foerstel 32).

The Graves County High School case is a leading example that demonstrates how much parents want to have a say in what their children learn and will share their complaints. Parents, much like LaDone Hill, will express their concerns to the school board, and it is then left up to them to make the decisions. In this case, the school board's overarching goal was to please the parent, which is not always in the school district's best interest. An interesting way to view literature is as a window, door, and mirror. These books often allow students to "look in on" situations that they may or may not encounter in their lives. According to Rudine Sims Bishop's famous quote:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to

walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. (Fink)

Literature that allows students to view other people's lives is worth talking about. In this case, the conversation only lasted around five minutes, and most of the board not knowing the context of the novel, it seems unplausible that it was banned from the shelves. There was very little time dedicated to deliberating the pros and cons of the novel, or what benefits the novel can offer to students at their high schools. In this case, there was no record of the teacher of the class attending the board meeting. Much of this conflict could have been avoided if the teacher was present to deliver her argument on teaching the work or what the work can do for a student. The issue presented within cases like Graves County High is that parents, in most cases, are not asking how the content is being delivered to their students or if the conversations facilitated on topics arising from these novels are needed for their child's success. Former teacher, Suzanne Kauer writes that "the only problem is that some of these topics- such as adolescent sexual experiment and substance use or abuse- simply are not real life to every teen, and their parents will tell you they don't need to hear about them" (57). Parents, as well as school board members, are disregarding the fact that these literary pieces could be teaching their children valuable lessons of life, and in this case, different religious perspectives that should be delivered to adolescents (Foerstel 31-39).

Students are another key factor in the banning and censorship of literature. Unlike their parents, they are usually heavily against it. In the Graves County case, students were displeased with the removal of Faulkner's novel. A seventeen-year-old student said, "It was idiotic, you can tell the guy [Johnny Shelton] who proposed it isn't in school. If they tell us we can't read something, everybody is going to read it" (Foerstel 38). Teenagers are naturally rebellious and curious, if you tell a young adult not to do something, most times they are encouraged to do so. Students do not want literature to be banned in their schools because it takes away an opportunity of learning. Students who are against the banning of literature are trying to stop it by actively reading banned novels. If students want access to banned books, it is hard to keep them away from reading them, because "nothing sparks more interest in a book than mentioning it's been banned" (Niccolini 23). If a book is being banned within a public high school, many students may travel to their local public library to sign the book out. In the Graves County High School case, after *As I Lay Dying* was banned "almost overnight, area bookstores and libraries were deluged with requests" (Foerstel 38). Often, the students do not view the novel as inappropriate until it is banned, rather they see the novel as a different style of writing with different themes, plotlines, and in most cases, a new life lesson.

Novels like *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton prove chances for students to experience this. *The Outsiders* has been a topic of controversy and has appeared on banned novel lists for many years since its publication date in 1967 ("Banned"). The *Banned and Challenged Books* website, sponsored by the American Library Association compiles a national list based on reports received from libraries, schools, and the media on attempts to ban books in communities across the country. According to the list, *The Outsiders* ranked number thirty-eight out of one hundred among the most frequently challenged books in the years 1990-1999 and number forty-three out of one hundred for the years 1999-2000 ("100"). Critics say that it needs to be banned due to the "usage of language, drugs, and gang violence" (Leal).

Students across the United States are encouraging other people to read the novel because it has an interesting plotline, great characters, and shares important life lessons. Students claim that they have already been exposed to the controversial content, due to video games, towns, and or the environment in which the students live. *The Outsiders* features prominent themes and ideas of murder, gang violence, and teenage drama. In an article on delivering these harsh classroom discussions steaming from novels to students, former teacher, and researcher, Jennifer Rossuck states that “students already know much of the truth and reality from which parents attempt to shield them either by direct personal experience, second-hand knowledge from peers, or exposure to the modern media” (69). Knowing this, banning books will not solve this issue.

Many articles on the internet offer student rebuttals on the banning of *The Outsiders* through online reviews. A review by a student in Colorado offers her opinions of the book and why she gave it, “5 stars = Bohemian Rhapsody Awesome!” She discusses her rating in her review:

The Outsiders is a beautiful coming of age story that I would recommend for everyone in middle school and high school... I think it's very hard to find a book about teenagers, not unrealistic heroes that are facing problems that we never face. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that type of book, but it was really nice to find a book that I could relate to. It makes you feel like you are not alone, and that other people are struggling with similar issues. (Sophie)

In this review, readers can see that students, much like Sophie, are eager to learn about these harsh topics. Students might experience personal connections to these literary pieces that they could not formulate had they not read the book, again, relating to the door, mirror, and window theory created by Rudine Sims Bishop (Fink).

These opportunities to learn as an adolescent in the young adult stage are often facilitated by their teachers. Teachers are the ones delivering these controversial topics to their students, but not everyone outside of the classroom sees or understands their use of pedagogy. Many teachers have gone through trial and error, but their overarching goal is to teach the book's plot, style, theme, and morals without a heavy focus on the controversial issues. Teachers who explore these novels in their curriculum are addressing argumentative problems that can make their students aware of the complexity of these types of topics. It can be the teacher's job to introduce such topics into their classroom and to provide students with the opportunities to learn and make logical judgments. Additionally, by teaching these controversial topics, teachers are helping students develop a sense of respect for their peer's opinions, gain insight into other perspectives, and actively participate in debates within the classroom in a thoughtful and well-mannered way. In doing so, teachers create a safe educational environment where their students may foster new ideas and take academic risks (Stay).

Suzanne Kauer was a middle school and high school English teacher for five years before she went on to be an assistant professor of English at Radford University in Virginia. She writes in her article that she has been “studying what happens when parents don't agree with what English teachers ask their children to read” and that “in reading, teaching, researching this issue, I have yet to come across anyone who doesn't have a strong opinion on the topic” (Kauer 56). In doing so, she has found a method of delivery that works best for herself, her students, and their parents. Kauer offers that she used to stay away from certain topics in her curriculum that made her students' parents upset, but she eventually decided to think more reflectively on why they were producing conflict. In doing so, she was able to come to a middle ground by teaching these sensitive topics to her students:

I also had to concede that parents have a right to decide what their children will or will not read. That meant that if I couldn't convince a parent that a book was worth reading, I would offer a suitable alternative—even if I did not agree with the parent's decision.

(Kauer 56)

In offering an alternative novel to read, or making them optional, students will not share the understanding or learning that the other students in the classroom have had.

In teaching a novel, the goal is to provide new information on language, characterization, and themes. The exclusion of information because of a sensitive topic that a parent finds un-just is only limiting the student's knowledge of real life. Kauer writes, "I don't think that students should read books that portray their particular religion, class, or race exclusively; that kind of relativism seems as dangerous as fitting everyone into the same mold" (58). The idea of expanding a student's knowledge of concepts outside of their "norms" is only setting them up for success in the long run by directly endorsing diversity, equity, and inclusion within the classroom, and promoting a personal understanding. Another example of a recently banned book is the famous 1982 novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. *The Color Purple* is the story of a deprived, young, uneducated African American girl named Celie who lives in Georgia during the early 1900s. Throughout the novel, Celie encounters racism, sexism, abuse, and challenges to her sexuality (Walker). The banning of this novel restricts adolescents from learning about how other people deal with the topics of sexuality, and what life was like in the 1900s for African Americans in the south.

Another previous high school English teacher, Alyssa Niccolini, shared her process of delivering controversial topics from novels to her students. In her years as an English teacher, Niccolini focused on what the information from a controversial book could do for her teenage students. In the first years of teaching, she would skip over the parts in the book that deemed them "inappropriate." She later learned that "much of my unease about particular books and topics come from the implicit notions I have about adolescence" (Niccolini 22). She argued on behalf of her students' comprehension for years that "what we don't or refuse to include in our curricula—or what we are prohibited from including—speaks loudly as to what we do include" (Niccolini 23). The inclusion of these banned topics from a high school course is only limiting what a student can learn because "reading and discussing banned books, secondary students gain an opportunity think through adolescence as a social construct" (Niccolini 23). Reading books with these types of topics provides advancement of knowledge for later years.

Many teachers have their students' best interests in mind and are ultimately trying to teach them critical information through literature, such as life skills, diversity, equity, inclusion, sympathy, empathy, etc. An assistant professor of language and literacy at the University of Missouri, Nora Peterman says, "That's harmful to a child to not see themselves, to not see literature as a way of understanding their experiences, their histories, the communities" (Benevento). Teachers know that there is more to a novel than what it is being banned for and that is why they teach it. Teachers do not focus their lessons solely on the vulgarity, mistreatment of women, or racism in the commonly banned book *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. Rather, they focus their points of learning on the nature of the human experience, and friendship and companionship themes within the book (Steinbeck). It is important for those unfamiliar with what is being taught in the classroom to know and understand this. The way that teachers are conducting these conversations on harsh topics is important for everyone to understand. Different teachers have different approaches, but they know that banned books can provide the

opportunity for meaningful discussion within the classroom. This concept directly relates to the mirror, doors, and windows ideology in books derived from the earlier mentioned quote.

Banning literature should not solely depend on the preferences of the parents of high school students. Many factors play a part including the school board, students' reactions, feedback from the novel, and the teacher's method of instructional delivery. At length, I believe censorship is problematic in the secondary curriculum because it suppresses valuable information from students. Without the knowledge from these banned novels, students are unable to think freely and navigate their way through conflicts that may arise in their own lives. People must be educated on censorship and the literature that is it impacting. The controversial topics presented in these works are differing the societal expectations of the twentieth century. Censorship is causing adolescents to not be able to see literature as a way of understanding their experiences, their histories, and their communities. These novels are complex, and often favored by the students who are reading them. Whether they cause distress, interest, happiness, tears, or inspiration, banned books are unquestionably powerful—they should continue to be delivered in public high school curricula and remain on the shelves of libraries and bookstores across the globe.

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