

Literary Censorship: Reading In a Minefield

Censorship is the practice of examining advertisements, movies, and other pieces of media or art, and removing unacceptable portions of the entire work. Specifically, censorship in literature can range from changing a book's material to banning the book outright. The debate surrounding censorship is littered with topics relating to first-amendment rights, child development, rebellions and war, propaganda, and general philosophy and forward thinking as a whole. Books that are taken granted of today simply because we have complete versions of them are everywhere, and many of these books have paved the way for different ways of thinking and understanding throughout history, either in what they had to say, or in what they could not, or should not, say. Since 2007, the Banned Books Resource Guide lists 1,724 books as being challenged or banned in libraries, and roughly 85% of challenges are not actually documented (Kidd 198). Literary censorship affects the way people enjoy books, use them for education, use them in detrimental ways, develop opinions about a wide range of topics, and explore their own passions and personalities.

By definition, censorship is a process that takes away material or masks it for the sake of an improved experience for consumers, changing the product or original work by means that are approved as representing an overall improvement to the effects or statement the book would have. The statement, language, depictions, or implications of the original work having been argued as offensive, inciting violence or protest, overtly thought-provoking, non-politically correct, outdated, or any other fashion of inherently negative result on a general or intended

audience. As for literature, the role of censorship is vital to the entire message of the work and its interpretation. The general viewing of literary censorship is accurately summarized in Fenice Boyd and Nancy Bailey's descriptive report on censorship in literature which describes three varieties of censorship using three metaphors: censorship as a barbed wire fence, an object that obstructs free thinking and expression in a harsh and brutal way; censorship as a Patina, a protective or clouding layer that hides the deeper or greater meaning of words or messages within literature, not completely blocking the source material, but blurring or obscuring it in a way that changes the fundamental statement(s); and censorship as a dangerous tightrope, a situation that officials and people in charge of prisons, schools, and most organizations or businesses have to walk when they determine what is suitable for inmates, students, or employees that, societally speaking, need a form of protection from possibly harmful, irreverent, or unprofessional material (Bailey and Boyd 655-658). While not a comprehensive guide or strict set of examples, these three categories lead to what our understanding of censorship in literature is on a fundamental level.

On a social level, the way people enjoy books is commonly directly affected by the amount of censorship within them. The inherently appropriate amount of censorship, and for what particular books, falls into "Highly subjective, discretionary decision making that reflects the ideological and personal predilections of the censors and classifiers." (Platt 45). The personal differences in what is enjoyable within literature is also subjective, and has a large influence on what is deemed acceptable. As society as a whole changes and becomes more accustomed to vulgarity and more graphic and mature themes, the question of censorship in literature becomes even blurrier. The enjoyment readers get from the literature comes not only from the work itself,

but also the choice to read what they are interested in, especially in the case of students (Denzin 7). The level of censorship in the literature available for public consumption is one of the most prevalent in the enjoyment of books.

On an educational level, the subjects that are permitted into textbooks drastically affects the ability for instructors to properly inform a class, and play a huge role in what students are able to learn. In addition to the material actually provided, the instated censorship within classrooms, both of individual books as well as segments of textbooks, plays a large role in the effectiveness of education, and can lead to larger issues. One such issue was the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial, in which Tennessee substitute teacher John Scopes was accused of teaching Evolution from a provided textbook, a violation of the now repealed Butler act that censored science textbooks by prohibiting teaching a contradictory viewpoint to creationism (Great Monkey Trail 616). The debates in the past over being able to teach evolution in classrooms serve as an example of the significance of such subjects being allowed into textbooks, and shows how dramatic even a single chapter of a book can be when it plays a role in education. The role of censorship in schools is primarily that of avoiding inevitable, unavoidable, and egregious damage to students, teachers, or school property (physical, social, or emotional), not to avoid discomfort, embarrassment, extra work for teachers, or to adhere to the whims of parents (Petress 251). The commonly connected debates to the censorship of educational books are focused on the effect some books have on impressionable students, and the legitimacy of textbook subjects compared to the acceptance of certain subjects, for example: evolution, environmental policy, politics, and historical events.

While books themselves are not dangerous objects, the use of the information or knowledge available in those books can be as nefarious as any weapon. In prison libraries, books are rigorously reviewed and a significant number of books that have material that could be used to plan an escape are banned, in addition to other works that are of debatable relevance to danger. This can include books on weapons or hacking, but can also include works such as Malcolm X's autobiography and War of the Worlds. In jail "Legal precedents give prison administrators wide berth to ban publications in the interests of security." (Serwer 20). The crux of the issue is what is censored for the sake of safety, and what is simply censored. As Jeff Fogel, an attorney working a First Amendment violation case for the very same prison explains "Broad criteria are very frowned upon in the First Amendment area, but that really shifts completely when it comes to prisoners." (Serwer 21). Situations in which inmates use the several years, to possible decades, of free time they are allotted in order to escape their facilities are the worst nightmares of wardens and legislators that can directly control the books that can and cannot be read by inmates. Significant issues arise when the topic of censorship is further diluted by the debates surrounding security and safety of prisons and the people potentially harmed by the prisoners. A fundamental contradiction arises from the violation of first amendment rights, but the sanctity of human life preserved thanks to censorship gives rise to support for barring books from the grasp of prisoners.

The formative aspect of books comes into question when censorship changes what books are permissible for different groups of society. The role that censorship takes in social, educational, and civil cases is commonly clear, and falls under one of the metaphors for censorship: obstacle, patina, or balancing act. However, the role of censorship in literature when

it comes to the formation of ideas and opinions in relation to an individual's personality is much less clear-cut. The way books are written can have a profound affect on the way we are able to read them. For instance, in Jen Denzin's account of teaching a Senior English course at Saline High School in Michigan for the 2011-2012 academic year, he finds some of his students struggling, and some thriving amidst overt sexual themes and graphic depictions of violence. For the assignment period in question, the students read Ryan Boudinot's *Blueprints of the Afterlife*, Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. By the end of the semester, 6 of the 24 students directly taught by Denzin had claimed that the inappropriate nature of the reading affected their enjoyment and was a part of the in class discussions on the classifications of books, and of the 74 students in the school that were enrolled in the class, 78.2% felt that schools should not censor assigned reading material (Denzin 9). The role of context and choice in the formative nature of books and their effects on those reading them is significant.

In conclusion, the debate over censorship in literature is a considerably dense topic that intertwines various issues of societal development, safety and security, and the rights of expression, as well as the effects on individual people and their ideas. These arguments play a key factor in the representation of various works of literature throughout history, representing the sides that are supporting censorship, and for those that stand against the idea of taking out or abridging an author's original work. These topics coalesce into the argument we still deal with today on whether or not books should be censored, and for what reasons.

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