Teaching the Controversy:
Using Challenged and Banned Books in the High School English Curriculum

Caroline Virginia Greenblatt
Dallas, Texas

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Committee Members:

Brad Pasanek

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Entering the Conversation: Book Banning, Censorship, and Academic Freedom in Secondary Schools

When 2022 ended, it became the year with the most book titles banned or with restricted access to. 2,571 titles were named on the American Library Association’s list.¹ This number is nearly doubled from 2021. The uptick in banned and challenged literature coincides with an increasingly divided political scene and society. Book banning is not new in America. What is new, or at least a more recent phenomenon regarding controversial literature in schools, is the sudden acceleration and increasing divisiveness of book banning. Since the tracking of book banning began nearly twenty years ago, the rate at which titles have been banned has increased exponentially.

This brings to question: why ban books? Why so many banned books? Who is challenging texts? And who is in control of the classroom and what is taught? How can a modern educator navigate the politically, socially, and culturally divided nation and incorporate titles and texts that are relevant to the curriculum, engaging to students, and permitted by administrators and parents alike?

High school English teachers in America face a vexation in their responsibilities to student learning and the furthering of their career. As more and more texts are challenged and banned at a number higher than the past twenty years of tracking, teachers are left with fewer and fewer options for the classroom. Beloved and renowned authors such as Toni Morrison, who have long been on syllabi, are now deemed too controversial by parents, community groups, and

politicians, be it for racial language, sexual content, or “inappropriate” content, leaving the options for the curriculum to stagnant, predictable texts. But it is the material that some deem controversial which is often the most valuable and desirable to teach, as this is the material which promises the highest quality of learning and thus in the best interests of the students. Often, the problem that occurs within banning controversial texts is that parents, social and/or religious groups, and politicians are fearful that teachers cannot tackle difficult and controversial subjects to their liking, and out of that fear, these groups, leaders, and parents attack the instruction of the text containing the materials, and sometimes even reprimand and punish the educators themselves.

Parents’ rights regarding the say they have in what their children learn in schools has also become a hot-button issue, especially in the political sphere, occasionally even deciding elections. Book banning revolves around several concerning questions, including that of: what reach should parents have when it comes to deciding what their children learn? What kinds of rights do students have concerning what they are able to learn and access in schools? What kinds of legal protections are there for educators teaching controversy? What kinds of censorship laws are in place regarding book banning in schools? And lastly, what is considered controversial, and who decides? All these questions contribute to the conversation about book banning in modern-day America. The conversation between censorship in schools and intellectual rights remains ongoing, and the law constantly changes with regards to providing solid conclusions about intellectual and academic rights of parents, teachers, and students.

In order to understand the reasons for the inclusion of banned and controversial books in the high school English curriculum, it is important to understand the true purpose of the English class. Although part of the standard curriculum includes preparation for standardized tests, which follows a formulaic assumption of reading comprehension and writing instruction for students, a larger part of the purpose for English is to survey literature. Milka Mustenikova Mosley, a high school English teacher and college composition professor, notes the purposes of the survey class: “Our English classes are…mainly surveys of different genres of literature, but also surveys of World Literature, American Literature, and British Literature . . . . Through the study of literature, high school English classes provide students with a window to the world, so they can understand and appreciate the universal aspects of the human experience” (61). It is through the survey of literature that this worldly lens is acquired. A varied and diverse selection of texts is essential for student learning, especially in a society and country that grows more diverse every year. Acquiring this cosmopolitan appreciation through literature is necessary for students to learn to properly communicate with others, across state, country, and cultural boundaries. With social media and internet culture connecting people with the tap of a button on a screen, students should be equipped with cultural comprehension and the ability to understand, appreciate, and communicate with others, especially those who are unlike them in a socio, cultural, and geographic sense. Of course, the English classroom also prepares students in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and study skills, but the overarching takeaway from these classes is the ability to read diverse texts and comprehend them, to broaden their communication knowledge, and develop their growing minds.

As the culture around high school changes, and students are inundated more and more with texts, images, videos, and web pages from various social media platforms, tv shows,
movies, and music. Students are exposed to controversial topics far before they are ever touched in their high school English classroom. Part of the issue could be that parents are unaware of what their children are consuming on their phones, tablets, and computers, whereas they can see and feel the required text for school. Written word also carries a heightened authority, compared to digital media: writing operates as an indexical sign, meaning that it indicates a concrete reality - what is perceived in written text is perceived as reality (Knox, 30). Society has taken official, published, written text as “something that is (or should be) true” (Knox, 30). According to Emily Knox, a professor of library and information science at the graduate school at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, books are a “fixed medium and have a particular kind of power. They operate as symbolic, stabilizing objects within the social world that can legitimate the ideas that are contained within them. That is, the book as a book legitimizes and gives credibility to ideas in texts” (31). This definition of books as inherent symbols of power and knowledge as accepted by society helps to explain why they become targets in the classroom by opposing groups. Though a controversial subject may be presented on a popular TV show, its representation in a book makes it more concrete and powerful, and therefore more accessible and threatening. It is easier to keep track of what a child reads for class, as they hold the physical object, versus what they can watch on a screen, which can be easily hidden. Knox also notes the historical importance of the book as a form of knowledge, “as its material form allowed for the spread of a limitless number of ideas across the West and throughout the world” (31). The accessibility of written word contributed to the spread of knowledge, allowing any literate person the ability to access any idea written about. What is often overlooked or ignored when pressing book bannings is the concept of critical distance - the idea that “modern humans are capable of rational thought and are able to apply their own ideas to a particular text…and do not simply accept whatever is
written in the text” as truth (Knox, 40). Those who challenge texts in the classroom often believe that children are unable to maintain critical distance. That, however, lies in the job of the educators, to show students how to maintain critical distance while analyzing a text and using strategies for interpretation and discussion.

The classroom can provide an important space for students to have difficult conversations regarding topics deemed controversial. Educators are hired within the context of being trusted adults that children can talk to. Often, children feel more comfortable discussing difficult topics with non-parent adults. Literature can provide important context for difficult subjects and discussions, providing distance by creating fictional characters and a historical lens to understand said subjects and discussions, as long as critical distance is maintained. The selection of literature and texts in a classroom is planned intentionally in order not only to convey curricular instruction, but also aims to make students into logical, functioning adults, with enough knowledge and practice to be able to contribute to society in some way. The educators employed by institutions to fulfill the transfer of knowledge, skills, and learnings to students are hired with the assumption that they are qualified not only to select texts but also to teach the selected texts in a way that will contribute to the goal of knowledge transfer and critical thinking development.

Academic freedom is based on the concept that education is at its strongest when ideas can be freely exchanged and discussed in the classroom. The American Federation of Teachers specifies that “Academic freedom is the right of faculty members, acting both as individuals and as a collective, to determine without outside interference: (1) the college curriculum; (2) course content; (3) teaching; (4) student evaluation; and (5) the conduct of scholarly inquiry.” There are

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certain laws which protect academic freedom in higher education, at the collegiate and graduate level, ensuring that students and professors have a right to study, research, and publish what they wish without fear of censorship.\footnote{OAH Committee on Academic Freedom. “Academic Freedom Guidelines and Best Practices”. Accessed December 2022. https://www.oah.org/about/governance/policies/academic-freedom-guidelines-and-best-practices/} However, these standards do not consistently extend to that of secondary education as, oftentimes, parents, administrators, and various community groups involve themselves in the academic freedom of students, restricting it in both what is available for students to learn and how it is taught. “A Teacher’s Guide to Education Law”, published recently in 2013 by Imber et. al., notes of the many cases brought before courts regarding academic freedom: “Although many cases have been brought by teachers claiming academic freedom, no court has recognized the constitutional right of a teacher to control basic course content or instructional methodology” (232). Legally, there are protections in place for higher education to protect the academic freedom of both its teachers and its students, but for secondary and primary education, academic freedom seems to be deemed a nonessential right. As the goals of elite secondary education are most often to prepare students for post-secondary education, the schools themselves seek to adopt and reflect some of the academic standards of the university level. After all, many independent Secondary schools self-describe as “college preparatory academies”. Secondary schools should seek to adopt a framework of academic freedom to prepare students for that which they will find at college. However, public institutions, which must abide by state law, are not afforded these freedoms due to political meddling - students are restricted from academic freedoms through book banning, making it more difficult for them to understand and adapt to post-secondary education, leaving students who can afford and attend
elite institutions as more “college-ready”, and broadening the gap between elite and average Americans.

There also exists precedent for what is considered censorship in high schools, and whether book banning veers into censorship categorization. Debate is ongoing between the proper usage of the terms censorship and selection, and which is the proper application of it in regards to book banning in the high school classroom. Henry Reichman, author of “Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools” defines censorship as “the removal, suppression, or restricted circulation of literary, artistic, or educational materials - of images, ideas, and information - on the grounds that these are morally or otherwise objectionable in light of standards applied by the censor” (2). Worries of violating the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution in regards to educational learnings are valid; however, simply excluding a book from a reading list does not fall under censorship. The National Coalition Against Censorship states that schools “could be acting unconstitutionally if they decide to remove a book solely because of hostility to the idea it contains”. This would mean that in order for a book banning instance to be categorized as censorship, it would require the following conditions: 1) a controversial idea or content, 2) hostility to the content, and 3) removal based on the objection to the content, rather than based on content alone. When an educator selects to not teach a certain text because of its content, that is referred to as self-censorship, or “the chilling effect”. The chilling effect is the concept that “restricting access to information based on particular viewpoints will discourage the use of potentially controversial (or even complicated) material in the future, that teachers, for example, will avoid teaching a book just because they don’t want to risk the disruption a formal complaint would cause, even if they truly believe that book would be

an excellent educational choice” (NCAC). This would categorize more so as selection, rather than censorship. Regardless, censorship in schools is not violative of the First Amendment, falling in line with the lack of academic freedom protections in secondary schools as well.

It is important to note that book banning comes from all sides of the political spectrum, and not from one group in particular. Books are banned for being supposed too progressive or too conservative. They are banned for containing racially insensitive language and for committing to discussing race and racism. Book banning is not a partisan issue. Challengers of books in Republican-led states note several instances of “Republican elected leaders and local school board members lashing out at books that address topics such as queer identity, racism, and sex education” (Shivaram). Liberal-led states and many parents in those states often demand the banning of books containing racially insensitive language, such as “To Kill a Mockingbird” or “The Adventures of Huck Finn”, “fighting to ban novels that eloquently and passionately attack racism in 19th and 20th century America”, as parents wished their children to be shielded from reading the racially-insensitive language (Parini). Regardless of the reason for banning, there is a huge cultural uptick in the number of instances of banned books in American schools, caused by an increasingly partisan political scene in which power is up for grabs to the loudest voice and societal fears of too much change, too quickly.

As book banning has moved into realms of political control and debate, it is essential that educators understand the issues regarding book banning, academic freedoms, and censorship and selection, so that the complicated framework in which educators work can be navigated safely and effectively. As secondary-school English teachers are required to teach year-long survey classes on American literature, British literature, various semester-long seminars, and other classes, certain subjects are completely unavoidable, as uncomfortable as they may be for some
to discuss. These topics include, but are not limited to, colonialism, slavery, women’s rights, and the Holocaust. This thesis will aim to cover some of the subjects frequently subjected to banning and controversy in the classroom. The central section of this thesis will be to provide references and understandings of book banning for educators to use to guide their classroom curriculum and any issues, objections, and hostilities they may face from administrators, parents, and social groups, all of whom can act as censors for classroom material. This thesis, therefore aims to be an educator’s guidebook to banned books and classroom controversy, one that advocates for the introduction of controversial topics in the English classroom, for the specific purpose that restricting learning from literature due to individual sensitivities will make knowledge and growth more difficult for students to obtain. Banning literature from classrooms because of individual concerns can “hardly address students’ real concerns, satisfy their curiosity, or prepare them for life” (NCAC). It is in the best interest of the student and educator to advocate for and implement the use of controversial literature in the classroom because it will (i) contribute to the understanding of the democratic values on which America was built upon and professes to uphold, and (ii) develop intellectual strength in all areas and the student mind – a critical goal of scholastic education.

6 Ibid.
Why Ban Books? The History of Controversy in the Classroom

Censorship itself is as old as written works and literacy. Books, and being able to read them, possess a power for any individual who wishes to gain knowledge and information, and pose a threat to other individuals or powers who wish to keep them from that knowledge for various reasons. Following the creation of American common schools in the 1800s came the issue of censorship in American schools. As influential places of childhood development, schools were a unique environment. No longer were children just learning and inheriting their parents' values, but they were in a place where many students congregated, and therefore many ideas, values, and oppositions were voiced, discovered, and discussed, including ideas held by teachers. “American schools were born in controversy, but they did not aim to teach it” writes Zimmerman and Robertson, reflecting on how American schools were conceptualized to be a neutral place, designed to keep out any controversy occurring outside of the walls of the classroom (12). Books then, as a pedagogical tool in the early years of standardized American education, were implemented in schools to reflect that neutral stance. If a text contained a controversial idea, educators were to not comment on the controversial nature of the passage, but rather, “he is either to read it without comment or remark, or, at most, he is only to say that the passage is the subject of disputation, and that the schoolroom is neither the tribunal to adjudicate it, nor the forum to discuss it” dictated Horace Mann, an early common-school advocate.7 While books weren’t outright banned from the classroom for controversial material, the controversy itself was meant to be exempt from educational instruction.

Controversy in the classroom historically flared in periods of global conflicts, as politics then and now interweaves with daily life, and rule and restrictions are made about what can be taught: in the 1930s, “teachers were to avoid ‘partisan’ questions in class; some districts even barred specific topics from discussion, including tariffs and the League of Nations” (Zimmerman and Robertson, 17). During the Cold War, subjects like public housing and the New Deal, were considered too controversial to bring into the classroom; even the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were too “dangerous” to teach (Zimmerman and Robertson, 25). Teachers felt fearful of being considered spies, and due to that underlying alarm, they kept controversial topics out of the classroom for fear of being deemed Communist sympathizers, resulting in the loss of their jobs, and being shunned by society. The trend continued in Vietnam War era-America, in which teachers feared the same effects of the Red Scare, hesitating to bring in materials or discussions about the war. The battles continue through the present day, with subjects such as sex and gender orientations, race, religion, political affiliation, and others being contested, challenged, and banned from discussion or reading in the classroom.

The first national scale book ban is commonly believed to involve Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, published in 1852. At a time when race and freedom were the most contested subjects in America, it is unsurprising that the literature which reflects those topics was subjected to bans nationally. In 1873, the U.S. Congress passed the Comstock Act, which ruled that it was illegal to circulate written material that was deemed “obscene”. The definition of obscenity was intentionally broad and all-encompassing, effectively limiting any schools from including any texts that could be deemed offensive, such as The Canterbury Tales, many of Shakespeare’s works, and other classic, canonical works used and read for centuries.8

This act was used for decades to defend any removal of books from classrooms, as parents, school boards, administrators, and even students would deem a controversial subject “obscene.”

Book banning in classrooms was challenged with the 1969 Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “neither teachers nor students shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate”.\(^9\) However, as discussed previously, the right to freedom of speech in terms of what can be taught and read in the classroom is still purposely vague and unprotected. Furthermore, in 1982, the Supreme Court ruled in *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* that “local school boards may not remove books from school libraries simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books”\(^10\), resulting in school boards, parents, and administrators providing reasons for book bannings. In seeking to find reasons for specific texts being “outlawed,” censors and challengers of texts actively limit academic freedoms from children seeking to find knowledge. Through examining the historicity of banned books in the classroom, a trend in motivations behind book bans is revealed. Knox writes on the mentality behind bans, noting that “The discourse of censorship and more specifically the discourse of challengers informs a reality wherein only some members of a given community (or nation) should have access to certain types of information while others should be excluded” (Knox, 8). The purpose behind book bans is two-fold: (i) for challengers and censors to establish power through the containing and (ii) limiting of information.

In order to actively work against book banning, it is helpful to understand the motivations behind censors’ efforts. Knox discusses the work of Norman Poppel and Edwin M. Ashley, who

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\(^10\) Ibid.
“found that censors have two motivations behind their actions: first, they have a high sense of community, and second, one of their primary concerns revolves around the moral development of their children” (Knox, 8). They seek to feel they have the duty and the power to protect their community and their children what they consider “moral wrongness” in educational spaces (Knox, 65). A separate, broader issue to consider is who has the power to decide what is considered morally acceptable and what is not. David Booth defines several trends in reasoning that lead to censors banning books from curriculum: age-appropriateness, fantasy and violence, language and taboo words, sexuality, religious affiliations, and more recently, political correctness. The American Library Association found that the five most common challenges by reason for the years 1990 - 2010 were sexually explicit material (3,169 challenges), offensive language (2,658 challenges), unsuited to age group (2,232 challenges), other (1,346 challenges) and violence (1,310 challenges). The year 2022 had 1,651 titles challenged, demonstrating just how much of an increase there has been in the last ten years in pure volume of challenges. In more recent years, from 2010 on, more challenges have occurred for new reasons, including LGBTQIA+ material, gender dysphoria, anti-police, graphic illustrations, religious viewpoint, political viewpoint, and others. Censors and challengers often take an “out of sight, out of mind” approach when breaching these topics - they believe that removing it from school curriculum will keep their children from interacting with these subjects. However, in the age of the internet, reading about controversial topics in school texts should be the least worrisome place of adults for the discovery by adolescents.

But it is precisely the controversy behind these texts that make them inherently valuable to discuss in the classroom. When children come across difficult subjects and complex questions, (and it is when they will come across it, and not if) it is better to have a safe, open place like a classroom for discussions to tackle and understand these controversies. In order to prepare students to be engaged members of a democratic society, they need to know how to confront controversy with precise language, demonstrated subject research and understanding, and a mind to listen to what others may want to say. It should be acceptable for students to disagree on something controversial; in fact, disagreements should be welcomed into the classroom and addressed directly. Zimmerman and Robertson note that “introducing students to scholarly debates, when possible, conveys to them the nature of inquiry…it lays the basis for critical thinking, the ability to develop and support arguments, intellectual tenacity but also the willingness to acknowledge the better argument even when it’s not one’s own, a commitment to truth, open mindedness, and so on” (50). Diving headfirst into controversy will produce the type of students who can go out into the world, participate in discourse and discussion with many different people and perspectives, and be civically engaged with society in a way that promotes diversity of thought and ideas. That is precisely the kind of learning that occurs in the English classroom, guided by mentor texts and great authors.

Furthermore, it is a useful exercise in freedom for students to read frequently challenged and censored books. Students can discuss the reasons for censorship, whether or not they find the attempt to censor right and just, and explore the Bill of Rights and Constitution alongside the banned text, forming their own opinions on the reach of censorship within U.S. law. By understanding the history of the text, and the historical views around the text, students can gain a deeper perspective around historical criticism theories of textual analysis.
Teaching Controversial Texts by Subject

This guide will not attempt to cover every single challenged text in America but will rather group them by subject matter and provide information on how to approach some of the common themes for controversy in the classroom. These content areas include: (i) sexually explicit content, (ii) offensive language, and (iii) violence/horror.

Sexually Explicit Content:

Sexually explicit material is the most common reason for book challenges. Challengers worry about childhood innocence being impeded upon by the institutions to which they send their children to learn. This view of childhood innocence is socially constructed in that children need unending protection from the outside world, and that these learned notions of sexuality are “triggered by some outside mechanism” (Knox, 83). There exists a mentality in which “there is a direct relationship between not supporting the challengers’ position and being unwilling to protect children” for these challengers (Knox, 83). Most texts assigned in a classroom are not “commonly devoted to sexual themes” but may contain depictions of it “with considerable frankness” (Reichman, 51). Many educators may feel the need or pressure to completely skip over any content which contains sexual themes; however, depending on the text, that context may be a part of essential understanding of the plot. Furthermore, texts containing sexual elements can be used to show students important life lessons, such as healthy relationships, consent, and falling in love. Andrew Simmons of The Atlantic notes that “Running away from the tough questions does an injustice to the material; failing to use them to make meaningful connections to the students’ lives does an injustice to the students. English class is where
teenagers get to talk about the human condition.” This is not suggesting that educators talk to kindergarteners about sex. When children are of an appropriate age, such as mid-to-late teenagers in high school, inevitably sex becomes a part of their adolescent experience via the media surrounding them or their own interpersonal relationships and giving them a space to “talk about the human condition”, as Simmons suggests, can be beneficial. Fictional characters give students a chance to explore and relate to their own differences and similarities. Challengers and censors may bring into question the idea of critical distance; however, students need to be given credit for their abilities to read, understand, comprehend, and analyze. After all, that is what they have been learning in schools for years. High school students are aware of the fictional nature of fictional stories: “The distance from the stories allows students to hypothetically discuss situations without fear of being called out or expected to share anything truly personal. Narratives in which characters negotiate sexuality give students roadmaps for their own lives” (Simmons). Rather than avoiding the subject of sexuality altogether, texts provide a place for open discussion, and that discussion enriches students' abilities to comprehend and analyze literature, one of the key aspects of a high school education. Furthermore, Simmons notes that “if students don't have literature to help them think about unhealthy relationships and why physical pleasure plays the role it does in human life, they risk getting their clues from inferior sources”. Especially, in an increasingly technologically social world, where quite literally anything can be accessed on smartphones, laptops, and tablets, inferior sources are plentiful and inundating. Exploring sexuality in a text with many accolades, doted upon by scholars and public alike for decades, proves to be a more enriching source than a Google or Twitter search.

Common Core ELA standards dictate that “in order to become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across
genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students’ own thinking and writing”. Discussing literature with sexual themes is a part of exploring the human condition, as noted by both Simmons and Common Core. Sexual content goes hand in hand with interpersonal human relationships, and providing students the opportunity to discuss these themes provides them with “models for students’ own thinking and writing,” according to the Common Core standards. Not only will students’ thinking and writing skills improve, but their understanding of relationships will also as well.

When it comes to approaching texts containing sexual themes, it is important to prime both students and parents of the content. A beneficial approach for educators would be to provide both students and parents with a course syllabus, including all texts, at the beginning of the semester or year. Let them know which texts contain sexual themes and explain the purpose behind each text’s specific inclusion in the course, including why it is valuable for student learning. Furthermore, let both parents and students know that if they have an objection to the text, that an alternate text will be provided. This does constitute more work for the instructor; however, there is value in working to include controversial texts. In the case that a parent, student, admin, or other rejects the text being taught to the class as a whole, the instructor should be prepared to resolve the issue with department and school deans, including being prepared to defend the text chosen. Censors often decry texts as “pornographic,” and it is important that educators are able to voice as to why texts containing themes of sexual material are different from pornographic material. (“Keep Them Reading: An Anti-Censorship Handbook for Educators” by ReLeah Cossett Lent and Gloria Pipkin provides step-by-step procedures for dealing with challenges and can be very helpful when dealing with censors.) The classroom

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should be a place of open and safe discussion, and the instructor should work from day one to ensure the class is a positive space for students. It is advisable to not make the text with sexual themes the first text discussed in the class - the instructor should take time to get to know the students and their learning styles and abilities before approaching this subject. Every student and every class are different, and it is the instructor’s discretion to determine if the class can handle mature material or not. When it comes time to discuss the sexual content in class, it is best to advise students that they are free to leave the class at any moment if they become uncomfortable.

This is especially important when texts contain instances of sexual assault and sexual abuse, which can be substantially triggering for victims. Implore students to be mature and appropriate; remind them that the primary discussion is about literature and, that what they are reading is fiction, or if it’s nonfiction, that what they are reading are someone’s actual life occurrences. Stick closely inside the text and redirect any conversations or questions that veers too far outside of it. Thank the students at the end of the discussion for their attention and maturity, letting them know that you appreciate their thoughts and ideas, so that they feel assured that the classroom is a place for open and honest exploration of literature. Regarding the topic of gender identity and LGBTQIIA+ texts, censors will loop them in under the category of sexually explicit themes, rather than outright challenging the material itself. This has become one of the most typical challenges in the past ten years, as young adult literature becomes more inclusive of identities.14

Frequently taught books commonly banned for sexually explicit content:1516

1) “The Scarlet Letter” – Nathaniel Hawthorne
2) “Beloved” – Toni Morrison
3) “The Bluest Eye” – Toni Morrison
4) “Song of Solomon” – Toni Morrison
5) “The Catcher in the Rye” – J.D. Salinger
6) “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” – Sherman Alexie
7) “The Color Purple” – Alice Walker
8) “Brave New World” – Aldous Huxley
9) “Their Eyes were Watching God” – Zora Neale Hurston
10) “The Awakening” – Kate Chopin
11) “Rabbit, Run” – John Updike
12) “A Separate Peace” – John Knowles
13) “Speak” – Laurie Halse Anderson
14) “Native Son” – Richard Wright
15) “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” – Maya Angelou
16) “The Kite Runner” – Khaled Hosseini

**Offensive Language:**

Most canonized literature contains some form of offensive language. Words that were socially acceptable to use fifty, or one hundred years ago are no longer appropriate. Most offensive language challenges are a result of racial slurs used in literature. Besides omitting the text from the curriculum completely, other forms of censorship emerge when encountering offensive language: blacking out the language, only assigning passages from the text that don’t contain any offensive language, and the instructor neglecting to say anything about the language and outright ignoring it. Reading a book with big black redacted boxes around text is not the same reading experience and can be more distracting for the reader. Inappropriate language can include common curse words, slang, racial and ethnic slurs, and body parts. However, as with students' interaction with sexual material, “students who use objectionable language have seldom
learned to speak this way from books…it is a common mistake to assume that if a character uses profanity in a book, the author advocates such words” (Booth, 40). Obviously, there is a large difference between using common four-letter curse words and racial slurs, but both often are objected to and censored in classrooms.

There is a litany of reasons why texts including offensive language should be employed in the classroom. High school students are old enough and mature enough to differentiate between textual works and reality and understand the implications of language in both of those spaces. “Contemporary students are able to distinguish between discussions about language and the indiscriminate use of certain words” writes Henry Reichman, editor of the ALA’s Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom. “They can understand that literature and life are not identical; that the representation of reality through fiction is not the same as reality itself. It must be stressed that when characters in fiction use obscenity or profanity, this does not mean the author advocates the use of such language” (Reichman, 48-49). Here, Reichman reiterates the ability of students to grasp critical distance, and states that it is not something censors, parents, and educators should fear students cannot obtain. Critical distance is a reason to include difficult literature, not a reason to censor it. If it is understood that profanity in literature will not lead to use of profanity by the students, and that use of profanity is likely learned from other sources, the reasons to negate texts based on profanity dissipates. Educators may be tempted to teach cut versions of texts in order to remove any objectionable language; however, such an approach denies the students the opportunity to read the full text as the author intended it to be read. Secondly, redacting, or whiting-out profanity “violates democratic principles and are often illegal…expurgation or alteration of such works - including those done under the cover of ‘revision’ - by anyone other than the author is impermissible in principle. Where applicable, it is
a violation of copyright law” (Reichman, 50). It is meritorious and best practice to have students read texts as the author wrote them. Of course, texts are edited, revised, and cut for selection time and time again by publishers and anthologizers, but they are still the author’s words and intentions.

However, racial and ethnic slurs present a different problem. Though slang evolves and changes as to what is acceptable to use in the past and in the present, in both definition and intention, the use of slurs doesn’t change in intention or definition, but it does change in terms of acceptability. Teachers face an issue in text selection here, as it is important to emphasize that slurs are not acceptable. Censors, however, “may judge a work solely on the basis of its use of inflammatory language, with little concern for its overall message or content” (Reichman, 73). The purpose of literary study is to understand the text as a whole, not just nitpick a part of it. Censoring a text selection because of the inclusion of one word is to ignore the merits of literary analysis and reading comprehension altogether, which is the job of the English student. Furthermore, censoring a text due to inflammatory and offensive language, specifically slurs, sends the message that if one ignores such language, it does not exist, or will go away. Reichman states that “racial, sexual, and other prejudices are part of our country’s history and of its present reality. [School curriculum] will necessarily reflect this, which is not wholly a bad thing since students can hardly be taught to identify and reject prejudicial thought without directly confronting examples of bias and stereotyping” (73). Using the whole text, slurs and all, serves the purpose of conveying the text as the author intended, which presents an opportunity for students to analyze and discuss why slurs were included, practicing literary skills such as using critical lenses (such as historicism, reader-response, new criticism, etc.)17. Censors fear that, by

permitting a text which uses objectionable language in the classroom, the language itself is permitted. However, as students possess critical distance, they can understand that is not the case. As long as educators present objectionable language as just that and explain to students that the words are not to be used outside of classroom discussion, that fear will be nullified.

Reichman insists that texts with slurs need to be acknowledged as vile and degrading, and in no sense can slurs be presented as “neutral”. He stresses that “it must be recognized that the word appears in a variety of contexts in a number of important and traditionally studied works of literature, including several whose overall message favors racial equality and tolerance” (74). It is crucial to teach works such as those, as they paint a true story of racial inequality and injustice in America’s past, which cannot be overlooked. Just as America’s racism cannot be ignored, texts that illustrate, detail, and inform readers of that racism should not be banned from the classroom. To reiterate Reichman, these issues must be dealt with head-on, and that includes dealing with the offensive language surrounding it.

As a starting point, educators must first determine whether the conditions in the classroom are appropriate for such texts. Classroom demographics can play an integral role in deciding if a text would be good for the learning environment. If the classroom conditions are deemed acceptable and suitable for a text with objectionable language, educators need to take several steps to teach these texts. Educators should understand their own position in regards to the chosen text, and examine what it means for them to teach that text from their own perspective. They should also be very familiar with the social, cultural, and historical context of the selection. Ground rules should be established with the entire class when it comes to reading out loud and discussion. It may be in the best interest of the classroom to select passages that do not include objectionable language to read aloud, if possible. Regarding discussion of the text,
educators should plan for potential violations of ground rules and regulations and actively handle any violations after the discussion has ended in an appropriate manner. To best teach a text that deals with offensive language, it is quintessential for not just the educator to understand the background and context, but the students should do so as well. Educators should present students with different perspectives and inform their reading as much as possible with knowledge of the context. Zaretta Hammond, author of “Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain,” offers a suggestion: “Rather than simply debate where it’s ok or not to say the n-word or other racial epithet, help students know the word’s origins and its evolution. Do not assign this for students to do on their own” (Hammond). Understanding etymology gives another layer for the students to unpack and acknowledge the harm and history of slurs. Give students opportunities to voice when they are uncomfortable and explore that discomfort. Students should also be given the choice to opt out of participation, given the sensitive nature of the language. There is no perfect script that a teacher can recite to inform the students of the impropriety and blatant wrongness of using offensive language. Teachers will have to use their own knowledge of their own students to best determine how to speak to them about offensive language in the texts but can and should be equipped with enough context and information to deliver it to students. Offensive language should not be a reason to shy away from a historically important and significant text which could add value to students' overall learning experience in the English classroom.

**Frequently taught books commonly banned for explicit language:**

1) “The Catcher in the Rye” – J.D. Salinger  
2) “The Grapes of Wrath” – John Steinbeck  
3) “Of Mice and Men” – John Steinbeck”  
4) “As I Lay Dying” – William Faulkner  

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https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/classics
5) “Invisible Man” – Ralph Ellison
6) “To Kill a Mockingbird” – Harper Lee
7) “Gone With the Wind” – Margaret Mitchell
8) “The Great Gatsby” – F. Scott Fitzgerald
9) “Slaughterhouse Five” – Kurt Vonnegut
10) “Cat’s Cradle” – Kurt Vonnegut
11) “Huckleberry Finn” – Mark Twain
12) “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” – Mark Twain
13) “Fahrenheit 451” – Ray Bradbury
14) “Lord of the Flies” – William Golding
15) “Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry” – Mildred D. Taylor
16) “The Things They Carried” – Tim O’Brien
17) “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” – Ken Kesey
18) “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” – Sherman Alexie

Violence, Death, and Horror:

Similar to sexual content and offensive language, violence, death, and horror are extremely common in American media. Complaints against these topics in literature are often that they are “too depressing” (Reichman, 58). Most challenges deal with the maturity of the age group; seeking to shield young children from the realities of violence and death in the world. In the case of young adult students, who have matured enough to hold critical distance from texts, it follows the same pattern of censors attempting to keep it out of the eyes, ears, and hands of students by removing it from the curriculum. However, depressing as they may be, these themes are a part of life, and exploring them only benefits an adolescent’s development. David Booth notes that “literature deals with many aspects of life - all of which may be viewed by some as demoralizing. Not acknowledging unpleasant things does not cause those things to disappear.
Instead, stories featuring these topics can provide a vehicle for children to express their concerns and open new avenues for classroom discussion and writing” (34). The issues of death, horror, and violence, and censoring them in the classroom, omits crucial literature. For censors, books about the Holocaust, the Civil and Revolutionary War, famine, illnesses, and other, real, historical events are shut out from the classroom in the name of “protecting” students. As in the case of texts dealing with slurs, ignoring them doesn’t make them non-existent. Yes, these events can evoke sadness, anger, grief, and other difficult emotions from students, but channeling that into discussion or writing will help students learn to process those emotions. Eric Echolm, Professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University and former grade schoolteacher, opines that “we can use texts dealing with death to teach about empathy, grief, and injustice as well as to bring moral education into the classroom” (27). As stated before, the English classroom is the place to explore the human condition - that includes death and violence. Especially since death is something every human will inevitably experience, it is quintessential to give students the ability to channel their questions, concerns, ideas, and wonderings through literature. By analyzing a character’s death, or a character’s violent reaction, or a powerful historical event that discusses death, students can work through and process emotions, not just characters, but their own thoughts and feelings. That invaluable experience and learning can only happen in an English classroom, through textual analysis, and to ban that from the classroom would be to ban it from student’s learning. The American Psychological Association encourages educators to discuss death with students, as it helps students process and understand. Educators should not shy away from including death and violence in the English curriculum, as the classroom is the best opportunity for students to have open discussion. Furthermore, having these

hard conversations can help students develop empathy, which is crucial in helping adolescents to become global citizens.

When it comes to teaching texts involving death and violence, the same principles apply as teaching books with offensive language: just because it is contained in the text does not make it applicable or appropriate outside of the text. Booth reiterates that “critics have charged that some stories encourage violence or aggression in young readers. And yet when violence is depicted, it is generally not presented as an acceptable way of behaving, nor is it rewarded or condoned” (36). It is always best practice to reiterate that presentation to students before starting a text with violence. As with other controversial material in texts, let students know that if they are uncomfortable, they do not have to participate in discussions. Give students options and opportunities to process complex feelings through ungraded writing assignments, which can be therapeutic and low stakes. If teaching material that is historically accurate and important, collaborate with history or social studies teachers to ensure the necessary background and context is being taught to students. Educators should also incorporate teaching background to the texts used to further students’ understanding. The more students know about and understand historical events, the more likely they will be able to empathize with characters.

Horror presents a slightly different case than violence and death. Though the topics can be intertwined, as horror often includes violence and death, horror can also take on a difference in genre as it veers into fantasy. Fantasy as a genre presents a completely different set of censor objections, as it can relate to the occult and supernatural. Censors object to horror for similar reasons out of fear and worry that the material is unsuitable as it may frighten students. However, for a high school English classroom, where most students will be teenage, that fear is impacted

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by critical distance. Students of that age can differentiate between what is fantasy and what is reality. Reichman notes that “many young readers relish the ‘controlled and safe’ fears produced by such reading and use these books to confront some of their own anxieties” (69). As the classroom is a “controlled and safe” environment, it produces a great place for students to tackle any literary fears that might present. Students can unpack any horror-genre text through analysis and discussion, actively unpacking the horror itself. This genre also reaches to a different type of student, one who may not be excited or entertained by less frightening literature. The horror genre can produce excitement about reading, according to Reichman: “such books frequently interest students otherwise not excited by reading and can become a pathway into more varied and mature fare” (69). As such is the job of an educator to make lifelong readers out of their students, using the horror genre can be an asset in helping to accomplish that goal.

**Frequently taught books banned for violence/death/horror**:

1) “The Color Purple” – Alice Walker
2) “Lord of the Flies” – William Golding
3) “Invisible Man” – Ralph Ellison
4) “Native Son” – Richard Wright
5) “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” – Ken Kesey
6) “Slaughterhouse Five” – Kurt Vonnegut
7) “Catch-22” – Joseph Heller
8) “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” – Sherman Alexie
9) “As I Lay Dying” – William Faulknber
10)“Beloved” – Toni Morrison
11)“Carrie” – Stephen King
12)“Fahrenheit 451” – Ray Bradbury
13)“The Diary of Anne Frank” - Anne Frank

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14) “Maus” – Art Spiegelman
15) “The Giver” – Lois Lowry
16) “Goosebumps” – R.L. Stein
17) “1984” – George Orwell
18) “Of Mice and Men” – John Steinbeck

Other Subjects

Of course, there is no limit to reasons why a book may be controversial or challenged in the classroom. These topics presented in this thesis are just a few of the most presently common ones. In the past, issues such as creationism, secular humanism, and witchcraft were common reasons for challenges, but in recent years these issues are less challenged compared to issues of race, sex, gender, language, and violence. This is, this, interesting to note that book bannings reflect cultural changes and fears in society.

Resources to find other commonly banned books:

Banned Books Week. https://bannedbooksweek.org/resources/


Resources for teaching controversial texts:


National Coalition against Censorship. [https://ncac.org/](https://ncac.org/)


The Educator’s Role and Parental Rights

The lingering question amongst the debate on the inclusion of controversial literature in the classroom is that of who gets to decide what students can read. There are many overseers of education: teachers, parents, school boards, administrators, politicians, and the students themselves. Groups grapple with power, struggling to imprint what they believe is right into schools. Laws on book banning are implemented, changed, ratified, and challenged. What is controversial now, may not be in ten years, and opinions and challenges will shift in frequency and subject. Controversy cannot be avoided and must be engaged. The main goal of planning, teaching, and fulfilling any educational curriculum should be to determine what is best for students’ mental, emotional, and educational well-being. The issue of parental rights is, as stated in the introduction, a hot-button issue which can decide elections and have massive
consequences for on educational curriculum. Part of the essential question is how much control over curriculum should parents have. In Florida, the “Parental Rights in Education” bill was recently passed which “prohibits instruction that is not age appropriate for students”, as to be so decided by the parents. Should a parent find instruction not age appropriate, the curriculum must be altered under Florida law. The problematic approach of this law, and others similar to it, is that it undermines the educational structure and trust of students and teachers. Teachers are hired with the intention that they are knowledgeable and trained in the art of teaching. Too much outside input by less qualified persons can result in uninformed changes to curriculum that will affect the outcomes of student learning. If teachers encounter too many barriers to efficient instruction, students cannot be expected to learn. We, as a society, need to trust that our educators have our students' best interests at heart when it comes to text selection. After all, teachers go through at least four years of training, achieve certifications, pass student teaching evaluations, and go through countless observations to be deemed ready for classroom instruction. Parents, administrators, community groups, and others inputting their own feelings above teachers’ educational experience and expertise undercuts their training.

The fear that teachers are “indoctrinating” students with their own worldview also undermines educator’s experience and pedagogical practices. It is not irrational to think that parents want to instill their own beliefs in their children, especially in a divisive and polarized social atmosphere such as the United States. However, impressing the idea that teachers seek to

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indoctrinate, rather than educate, students render their educational training and experience obsolete. Zimmerman and Robertson note that “while parents and the state clearly have interests in the education of children, these interests should not override the professional obligations of teachers to teach the truth or to prepare students to be full participants in our democratic society,” essentially acknowledging that educators' professional backgrounds deserve respect and acknowledgement, as well as do parents’ interests in their children’s education (76). Education should involve collaboration between teacher, student, and parents, hence the importance of parent-teacher conferences, parent nights, permission slips, and other aspects. However, Zimmerman and Robertson argue that collaboration between invested parties should not override the teacher’s vocation requirements. A solution to prove parameters for this collaboration would be as follows: “schools should develop policies for teaching controversial issues that allow teachers appropriate freedom to exercise their professional judgment and meet their professional responsibilities” writes Zimmerman and Robertson (76).

Furthermore, teachers are aware of their own opinions and how that can affect students. David Moshman writes that “your interests, values, and personal commitments will inevitably influence your choice of what your students read but you have an obligation to make those choices with the best interests of your students in mind. It may be in your students’ best interest to be exposed to issues you deem especially important, but it is not in their best interest to be indoctrinated by your specific views,” noting that teachers must keep a critical distance from their own views (71). Just as students are capable of keeping critical distance when engaging with texts, teachers too can hold that distance when engaging with controversy. In fact, they may even have more capabilities of critical distance due to longer experience as a student and more
frequent engagement with texts. This behavior can be modeled to students as a way to engage and discuss controversial texts.

Now, this essay does not bring into question the issues of book banning in regard to libraries, but only looks at challenges to inclusion in curriculum. Libraries pose a separate issue regarding academic freedoms and the right to read. Libraries can include classroom libraries, school libraries, and public libraries, and all are under the threat of book banning and public challenges. Is the threat simply that a public entity such as a library holds a controversial text, or that a child can potentially choose to read it? This brings into play the topic of children having the freedom to learn what they wish to learn, and if parents have oversight on what their child can or cannot learn. Of course, parents have the ability to tell their child not to read or check out a particular title, but whether they have the jurisdiction to control what other children can or cannot read is the issue to be determined. This issue holds true in the classroom as well - if a parent has qualms about a text being included in the curriculum, does that parent have the right to petition to remove it from the curriculum, making it so not just their child is excluded from learning about it, but every child in the class?

These are the issues that communities and governmental bodies need to take time to address. With the frightening increase in the number of book challenges, both in the classroom and in the library, laws and policies need to be put in place to protect academic freedoms of students and teachers. Teachers need support and trust to conduct their curriculum and classrooms to promote the best interests of students. Constantly monitoring, overreaching, and changing their classroom will only serve to stress and undermine teachers. And with record
numbers of teachers making an exodus from schools, it is in the best interest of the public to seek
to keep their educators and allow them the freedom to teach.²⁵

It is of the utmost importance that schools support their teachers by allowing them the
academic freedoms to choose curriculum and engage with their students. Schools must also
allow students the academic freedom to interact with differing texts and opinions. As the law is
ambiguous with regards to academic freedoms regarding reading and English classroom
curriculum, it is up to the citizens to prioritize and understand the necessities of engaging with
controversial literature in order to prepare students to become responsible, participative members
of a democratic society.

²⁵Barnum, Matt. “‘I just found myself struggling to keep up’: Number of teachers quitting hits new high”.
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quitting-than-usual-driven-stress-politics-data-shows/11390639002/
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