

Censorship and the Myth of Appropriateness: Reflections on Teaching Reading in High School

Vicky Greenbaum

Teaching mature texts is part of the challenge of censorship.

Springtime comes to the campus, and my sophomore class is reading *Hamlet* in the best possible way: outside, in groups, preparing to perform scenes and soliloquies in class on an imminent rainy day. Someone—call him José—chooses to read Hamlet's speech to his mother from Act III, Scene iv, in dialogue with a friend who'll play Gertrude's part. They're asking questions about the meaning and delivery of certain lines: when Hamlet asks, "Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed and batten on this moor? Ha! Have you eyes? You cannot call it love, for at your age the heyday of the blood is tame." The facing-page notes in our edition inform. *Batten* means to greedily feed upon. José, reading between the lines, wonders is Hamlet chastising his mother for having oral sex with his uncle?

Eleven years ago when I began teaching, I might have considered this question inappropriate, or at least difficult. Now, given what I know about the relationship between the teaching of reading and the connection of such teaching to student response, I find the question unsurprising, especially from students adept at picking subtext up from between the lines. How do we, as teachers, encourage readiness in readers for challenging literature of all kinds? Shall we teach the art of insightful reading, or shall we live in fear that parents and other well-meaning arbiters may bar Shakespeare and other challenging texts from the curriculum? I offer instead the provocative idea quietly held by many of my fellow teachers, and even by parents: censorship in literature is futile because, in literature, appropriateness is a myth.

THE CONCEPT OF APPROPRIATE

Current common usage of the term *appropriate* is derived from the concept of "age-appropriate" behaviors investigated by psychologists, beginning with Jean Piaget.

However, recent scholarship questions the notion that appropriate behaviors can be defined by age: in his recent book about cognitive organization of curriculum entitled *Smart Schools*, David Perkins (1995) notes that:

Piaget argued that little could be done to accelerate development through these [developmental] stages Contrary to Piaget's belief that stage advance comes at its own pace, a number of teaching experiments have accomplished stage advance by using a variety of instructional methods Concrete or familiar materials can make very abstract ideas accessible. (62, 63)

Thus, recent research refutes the notion that there exist specifically "age-appropriate" concepts or reading material within a curriculum.

Unfortunately, the current climate in education leads some English teachers and (perhaps especially) administrators to self-censor, rigorously investigating the "appropriateness" of any material taught. Some would withdraw *Huck Finn* before any parents complain about the use of the word *nigger*; some would avoid mention of Hamlet's mother's sexuality, or chastise any student question on the matter as "inappropriate," thereby quelling potential difficulties, like student giggles or parental furor. Indeed, many English teachers are feeling war-weary, not in the mood to incite parental controversy, media coverage, sessions in the principal's office.

DEFENDING LITERATURE

Reflexively, English teachers give thought to interpretations and consequences implicit in the literature we teach. Sometimes we even question one another. One colleague questioned my decision to teach *The Color Purple* in a class offered as part of an independent summer school course. She wondered whether "the material" was "ap-

appropriate” for high school sophomores. Further questioning elicited the root of the fear: could fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds read about apparent incest, child abuse, rape, and remain undisturbed?

Replying to this question involves a three-pronged defense. First, I must vouch for the novel’s literary merit, showing that the various sexual incidents portrayed therein are not shown gratuitously, and in fact construct meaning amid the context of the story for the reader. Next, when presented by a teacher who will guide student discussions and answer questions, significant meanings will emerge organically amid the story’s context. Finally, I must defend students of fifteen and sixteen as readers, and this task remains far more difficult. Many adults seem convinced of a type of innocence in youth, making them unready to face the sight of death, sex, or evil (which three forces may, according to such a vision, be inextricably linked).

This vision of innocence persists despite the prevalence of violence on television, in the movies, and in various other highly visible cultural manifestations, along with real-life traumas such as child abuse. In fact, adolescents tend to know far more than wishful thinking surmises. Adults who cling to this vision of youth have a corresponding vision of what’s appropriate, hoping perhaps that if youth are unexposed to certain elements in the world, they will remain pure, and the world will be a better place. Indeed, for such adults a pristine vision of youth often forms a wall between themselves and any adolescents they happen to know. Youth are people already, possessing knowledge and vulnerabilities in ways akin to adults, and their greatest need may be for thoughtful consideration or guidance while making sense of a vast, difficult, not always appropriate world.

“Appropriateness,” while suitable when used to describe behavior, may not accurately describe literature. For instance, if José, in my sophomore class, recognizes by himself the possibility of oral sex in Hamlet’s chastisement of his mother, then discussion of the possibility is clearly appropriate for him. If English teachers are committed to teaching literature (any serious works which convey meaningful and significant human content with a depth and multiplicity of

metaphor), no book we select will be “inappropriate.” If we teach students strategies to become skillful, intelligent readers, they should be able to make up, and defend, their own minds.

How shall we teach reading? David Hawkins (1990) suggests that:

For every text that comes alive for a child, there must be a live context—both over and above and down underneath the paper and ink. Those sorts of contexts need to come in part, of course, from his experience before he goes to school, and from beyond it, but optimally for all children, and urgently for many, the school itself should provide that context. It is a rich context of material provisions, of relation to the world beyond, but also of atmosphere, association, and self-initiated work that skilled teachers can support. (Hawkins, 5)

Teachers must initiate the habit of connecting words on the page to worlds outside. Students reading *Hamlet* need to see illustrations of the Shakespearean theater, to read original history texts from which Shakespeare drew his tales, to see maps of northern Europe depicting Denmark, Norway, England. Teachers should also urge students to think and write about parent-child dynamics, about natural and unnatural relations; students may benefit from being asked to imagine their way into a distant context provided by Shakespeare or another author.

Convincing parents and other well-meaning adults of the futility of censorship and of the myth of appropriateness may be impossible unless we, as teachers, are prepared to be very specific in showing how we teach reading. While most students learn to read letters and words during elementary school, the interpretive reading process is most often developed and practiced throughout secondary schooling; the reading process, for high school youth emerging into adulthood, involves strategies for making meaning in literature and in the world. Therefore, works like *Hamlet* and *The Color Purple* remain not only relevant but necessary to these readers as their sensibilities emerge. Intelligent reading obviates the need for censorship, because active readers are able to participate in making meaning from texts instead of being possibly swayed by any “message” the words might convey.

THE INTELLIGENT READER

For a thumbnail sketch of the intelligent reader, I turn to Sven Birkerts' *Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1984). Birkerts suggests that fully-engaged readers "work with the writer to build our own book" (83). He also argues that readers learn this habit of building through a long apprenticeship in reading, beginning as a little child and continuing throughout the school years. At its best, however, reading transcends vocabulary-building, verbal facility, a command of metaphor, and other skills, to:

involve a change of state and inner orientation. . . . when we read we not only transplant ourselves to the place of the text, but we modify our natural angle of regard upon all things; we reposition the self in order to *see* differently. (80)

Thus viewed, reading acquires the possibility to broaden minds, introduce flexibility, promote critical thinking.

So, how do we teachers promote ideal readers in our classrooms? Most of us begin with metaphor; as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson said in their basic and vital book *Metaphors We Live By* (1990), metaphors exist throughout our language, from casual speech and daily journalism to literary masterworks. Metaphors make us see, delivering images from the page to the inner eye. Students may go on metaphor hunts, finding dozens in the daily paper: "The White House capitulated today in the face of Congressional demands"; "NFL Superstars Must Face the Music"; overhearing images in daily conversation: "he's slick"; "she's not afraid to grab the bull by the horns"; "that kid is a tiger on the ballfield."

From the dailiness of metaphor, teachers find it easy to step over the threshold into narrative realms. As Robert Alter (1989) notes in *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, "literature is remarkable for its densely layered communication, its capacity to open up multifarious connections and multiple interpretations to the recipient of the communication" (28). Connections and interpretation, the stuff literature is made of, repose close to daily speech. When teaching reading, we are teaching about voice: how to hear, how to understand. Thus the metaphor of "battening" on "this moor" in *Hamlet*

accrues meanings: students may envision the barrenness of a hypocritical relationship and be aware of the sexual implications in the context of the Elizabethan world as well as our own.

Opening the door to my ninth-grade classroom where I teach connected reading, you may hear the first line Holden speaks in *Catcher in the Rye*: "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth." There was a time when censors heard only the word *crap*, followed by a profusion of *damns*, *hells*, and other suspect language; *Catcher* was deemed, for awhile, to be inappropriate for high school students. Now, the novel is widely taught: student readers hear Holden's ironic, scathing tone; they wonder about his "truth"—after all, he spends the whole novel "going into it."

In my grade nine classroom last September, students needed only the gentlest of pushes to realize their connection to Holden's voice, despite the distance he seems to create through irony. My students also had to ask: Who's David Copperfield?, and as I explained about Dickens' focus on lost children, connections formed before my students' eyes. Holden is lost, and his love/hate relationship with truth may be a casualty of the distance he experiences between himself and elements of his world. An important web of connection may be made explicit in reading; today's writers and readers are inextricably linked to our metaphorical forebears. There is no literature without connection, and the discovery of these links may lead to discoveries of our own connectedness as humans. "For," as Alter reminds us, "this dynamic system of multiple and often ambiguous connections within the literary work, the metaphor of a world . . . may be the most adequate one" (41).

From voice we proceed, in class, to the discovery of worlds. For instance, I carefully make explicit the nature of each book as a world; thus I invite students to choose between involving themselves in it and distancing themselves. Either choice is valid in different circumstances. For instance, I may explain, if entering this book's world makes you feel vulnerable in a certain way that you

Censorship in literature is futile because, in literature, appropriateness is a myth.

don't like, you may want to pull back, or you may want to ask yourself: why do I feel this way? What's the author doing here? If, for instance, a student has a sibling who, like Holden, has run away or been institutionalized, or who, like Allie, died, they will feel different when reading than do others among us who don't share these experiences. The book, as world, is not entirely unreal, for effective narratives resonate with readers as well as within the world of the text.

This resonance may help readers make meaning and significance from words on the page, and it may affect them deeply. Indeed, narrative effectiveness forms the root of fears which induce censorship, beginning with Plato. Therefore, I as a teacher seek to ease the cause-and-effect fears by showing students how various meanings may be made, how readers may involve or, through certain kinds of awareness, distance themselves from a text.

DISCUSSING MATURE SUBJECTS

By the time my sophomores read *Hamlet*, they have acquired strategies as practiced readers. Therefore I ask: "What's Hamlet's tone of voice when talking to his mother?" Students usually note that he's angry, perhaps a little crazed, perhaps rightfully scornful—after all, Gertrude may be blamed (they point out) for marrying her husband's brother so quickly. I might ask if anyone knows of good reasons to be angry with a parent; what about bad reasons? Which might Hamlet have? Yes, he might be accusing Gertrude of having oral sex with his stepfather—the sexual images are there. We have (by this time) noted other sexual imagery as it occurs in the play; we've discussed, as a class, the nature of Shakespeare's audience, the tastes of groundlings on the floor and noblefolk seated high above the stage, the importance of nature for Elizabethans and their questions about what constitutes natural or unnatural behavior (a dichotomy that sounds familiar to many twentieth-century readers). Students have watched me answer questions with a calm face and serious eyes.

Teachers like me set classroom tone by remaining calm, serious, yet casual in manner while discussing mature subject-matter, pointing out that sophisticated readers must be able to discuss adult material without act-

ing like sixth graders on a playground. I like to indicate that sexuality invites thoughtfulness, a certain seriousness at first, fraught with responsibility, intimacy, a need to respect others' emotions. Jokes should be funny; sex and body parts by themselves are not, among the mature, a cause for glee. If one is uncomfortable with this material, one might be tempted to laugh, but I can show my students that they may hope to become comfortable with this aspect of humanity as they approach adulthood; there's no time like the present for serious discussion of the matter in the comfortable distance literature provides. Discomfort begs questions; asking questions is important, and I urge students to find ways for doing so in a respectful manner. Usually, the atmosphere in class will reflect the teacher's state of mind.

WHAT CENSORS FEAR

What do advocates of censorship fear? Perhaps they wish to gain an element of control through their push to sanitize reading; perhaps the censor believes that if students are given books reflecting the censor's ideas about an appropriate world, those students will "reposition the self" according to norms deemed acceptable. These adults may fear any reading which possibly transforms the self away from a controlling ideal. However, the teacher's job is to empower students, through the teaching of interpretive skills, to become independent readers capable of finding viable meanings within the text.

Indeed, the purpose of reading provides us with a strong rationale for teaching, instead of censoring, controversial texts. Mike Rose (1989) devotes the most moving chapters in his book, *Lives on the Boundary*, to showing how he:

developed the ability to read closely, to persevere in the face of uncertainty and ask questions of what I was reading—not with downcast eyes, but freely, aloud, realizing there is no such thing as an open book. My teachers modeled critical inquiry and linguistic precision and grace, and they provided various cognitive maps. . . . encouraged me to make connections and to enter into conversations—present and past—to see what talking a particular kind of talk would enable me to do with a thorny philosophical problem or a difficult literary text. And it was all alive. (58)

His students, like Rose, achieve a basic kind of power when they are interacting as readers with a book, making meaning. Good readers know (and often come to appreciate) that reading allows the reader to interact with difficult matter, to conquer it or realize a vital transformation. Rose poignantly recalls—in a voice which echoes students I have known—how a text can frustrate, can be “so damned hard.” To help with the difficulty, a memorable teacher taught him ways of reading: “he’d draw me into the difficult passage, slowly opening the language up, helping me comprehend a distant, stylized literature, taking it apart, touching it” (57). Only when we teachers are able to open literature to our students in detail, line by line, taking it apart, making it safe to touch, will censorship be made obsolete.

CONCLUSION

Students are as ready as we make them. We (parents, students, teachers, administrators) may no longer be so desperately uneasy in the face of difficult texts if students are able to read closely and make sense of what emerges from between the lines. Students might lose their queasiness at the mention of sexuality when they can place such mentions in a context alive with meanings, with the option of being at a safe distance. If teaching imparts helpful strategies, and teachers are aware of discomfort and able to ameliorate this in their classrooms, then students will have a chance to read silently, to ask questions first, to form an interpretation in context with history and their own lives, to make meaning out of the difficult text.

Works Cited

- Alter, Robert. 1989. *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Birkerts, Sven. 1994. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.
- Hawkins, David. 1990. “The Roots of Literacy.” *Daedalus* 119 (Spring): 3–15.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Perkins, David. 1995. *Smart Schools: Better Thinking and Learning for Every Child*. New York: The Free Press.
- Rose, Mike. 1989. *Lives on the Boundary*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Vicky Greenbaum teaches English, conducts the orchestra, and runs the writing center at Menlo School in Atherton, California.*

Heart to Heart with Thoreau

Louis Phillips

*Dance with me, Henry,
Pointing out Nature
That a city-slicker
Like myself will miss.
Sure, there's a snowy owl
With its dusky feathers,
Backswimmers &
Other beetles, but
Let me tell you something:
How is a body
Suppose to enjoy
All these natural wonders?
Let's say there is a lake,
Well, it takes a car
To get there, &
That car has to be insured, &
The people in the car
Have to be insured, &
If you want to stay overnight
You have to pay rent
Or be rich enough
To own a cabin
Which also has to be insured.
Then let's say
You have a wife & kids
Who, for one reason or another,
Have gotten used
To three meals a day.
Well, you get my drift.
Today I stood by your pond,
Ground & branches damp
From an overnight rain, &
A gruff Canadian Jay
Was doing something
With its beak, a mist
Rose from the water
Before anyone got on it,
But I had been hit by the IRS
For \$1500. It was enough
To ruin anything you cd. think of.*

Playwright Louis Phillips edited **The Random House Treasury of Light Verse** (1995, New York: Random House). He teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.