

# Poverty of the Imagination

#DisruptTexts and the problem with teaching literature for social justice



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"To Kill A Mockingbird" (1962)

by

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“**E**ven Homer Gets Mobbed.” This was the title of a recent *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece that set in motion a social media kerfuffle about the literary canon and censorship — specifically, whether a group of educators associated with #DisruptTexts really do want to ban books such as *The Odyssey*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Great Gatsby*.

In response, a cascade of tweets characterized these educators as “book burners” hell bent on trashing the classics. But the educators also had their defenders: some contested the book-banning allegations, and championed the work of #DisruptTexts for challenging the white, Eurocentric canon.

The online frenzy fit neatly into familiar culture war battle-lines, with defenders of “great books” pitted against proponents of a more expansive, multicultural literary canon. And while the question of *what* books are taught is clearly important, the question that should really draw our attention is *how* books are taught.

Disrupt Texts is representative of a broader, growing movement in K-12 education to teach literature through a social justice lens, with an emphasis on centering the voices and experiences of BIPOC (black, Indigenous, and people of color) authors and students. Informed by antiracist pedagogy, what we call Social Justice Lit is committed to reimagining “the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum.” Its ambitious mission is nothing less than to create English Language Arts curricula that “dismantle systems of oppression.”

As such, Social Justice Lit asks students to focus on how texts “support or challenge issues of representation, fairness, or justice” and whether they “perpetuate or subvert dominant power dynamics and ideologies.” (You can see representative examples of the Social Justice Lit approach here, here and here.)

There are two big problems with Social Justice Lit that greatly diminish how students study and understand literature.

First, in its current form, Social Justice Lit is promoting a cult of relevance that advances an extremely narrow vision of what kinds of texts will engage and inspire students.

Second, it is encouraging a tyranny of presentism in which literary analysis revolves around interpreting — and judging — texts based on 21st-century, socially progressive

values and concerns.

## The Cult of Relevance

The guiding assumption behind Social Justice Lit is that the canon is “for white people, by white people, and about white people.” Dominated by dead white men, it *necessarily* excludes and alienates BIPOC students. According to Disrupt Texts, the notion that we teach Shakespeare because his work is “universal” or “timeless” is a shameful rationalization. Instead, Shakespeare’s exalted place in the literary canon is really about “white supremacy and colonization.”

The biggest knock against Shakespeare — and the traditional canon in general — is that the work is not relevant for today’s students. Indeed, relevance, in the sense of teaching books in which students’ own lives are reflected, is Social Justice Lit’s most sacrosanct value. A high school teacher from Sacramento, California explains:

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*I am not supposed to dislike Shakespeare. But I do. And not only do I dislike Shakespeare because of my own personal disinterest in reading stories written in an early form of the English language that I cannot always easily navigate, but also because there is a WORLD of really exciting literature out there that better speaks to the needs of my very ethnically-diverse and wonderfully curious modern-day students.*

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But if you look at Social Justice Lit’s lists of recommended books, it is immediately apparent how narrow their definition of “relevant” is. Young adult fiction focusing on issues of race and identity make up the overwhelming majority of selected texts. These are books such as *Brown Girl Dreaming*, *The Hate You Give*, and *Frankly in Love* — books that Social Justice Lit educators believe will “represent and validate” the “experiences and cultures” of their students.

Novelist and literary critic Zadie Smith has eloquently contested the Social Justice Lit premise that readers will have a natural affinity and appreciation for books written by authors that “look like” them. She likewise rejects the idea that authors should “write only about people who are fundamentally ‘like’ us: racially, sexually, genetically, nationally, politically, personally.” On Shakespeare’s thrilling “multiplicity” and his remarkable capacity to “speak simultaneous truths,” Smith writes: “In his plays, he is woman, man, black, white, believer, heretic, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim. ... To pin

him down to a single identity would be an obvious diminishment, both for Shakespeare and for us.”

In a similar spirit, Ralph Ellison observed that it required “real poverty of the imagination” to think that black folks would only take delight in literature by black authors. As he explained: “In Macon County, Alabama, I read Marx, Freud, T. S. Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Hemingway. Books which seldom, if ever, mentioned Negroes were to release me from whatever ‘segregated’ idea I might have had of my human possibilities.” Literary critics insisted on placing Ellison in the company of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, but Ellison himself cited Hemingway and Faulkner as far more important influences than any of his fellow black writers.

Reading books offers a chance to escape one’s own provincialism, according to Ellison. This wondrous, imaginative, inspiring, sometimes disorienting or disturbing experience of reading texts is all but foreign to Social Justice Lit, where familiarity and proximity reign supreme.

What a loss this is.

By predetermining which texts will speak to whom based on crude racial and cultural categories, we potentially deprive people of some of the most transformative reading experiences they may have.

Here, for example, is how one inmate at a Missouri correctional facility described his experience playing the role of Hamlet in a prison theater production:

*This gives me an opportunity to see a society beyond what I’m used to. I’m familiar with rap music and videos and big butts on the TV and all that. But let me come back to something that I’m not familiar with. You know, let me get into something else. You know, that did open my eyes into getting into reading Sylvia Plath and Frost and Wadsworth and different other people.*

Laura Bates, a professor who started a Shakespeare program at a maximum security prison in Indiana, was in awe of some of the prisoners’ interpretive chops, noting that they “were able to make sense of some passages that professional Shakespeare scholars have struggled with for 400 years.”

It is Ruth Simmons, though, the first African-American president of an Ivy League institution, who has the most devastating rejoinder to those who believe that some literary traditions will not or cannot appeal to particular readers. Asked in a *60 Minutes* [interview](#) why she — “a tenant farmer’s kid from the wrong side of the tracks of this country” — decided to study French literature, she replied: “because everything belongs to me. There is nothing that is withheld from me simply because I’m poor. That’s what children have to understand.”

## The Tyranny of Presentism

Social Justice Lit [insists](#) that the classics have “no more and no less” “literary merit” than any other works. So the value of teaching classic literature is reduced to present-day concerns — either by transforming reading into an exercise in calling out a text’s “[problematic and outdated ideas](#),” or by using the text as a springboard to discuss socially relevant topics through a social justice prism.

Some books are so “problematic” they should simply be struck from the curriculum, according to Disrupt Texts founding member Lorena Germán. “They feature characters that are straight-up racist or sexist,” Germán explains. “We can replace those texts.”

By this yardstick, we would no longer teach *Heart of Darkness* — but we would also no longer teach the likes of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Invisible Man*, and *The Bluest Eye*.

In the event that you must teach Shakespeare’s plays or other classic texts because of prescriptive school policies (or of your own free will), social justice educators insist “[the only responsible way to do so is by disrupting](#)” them. When teaching Shakespeare, 8th grade English teacher Christina Torres [urges teachers](#) to “call out the misogyny in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the racism in *Othello*, and the antisemitism in *The Merchant of Venice*.”

“When I read *Romeo and Juliet* with my students,” Torres reports, “I pause, give a thumbs-down and say ‘Boo’ when the play says something misogynistic.”

This turns reading literature into a whack-a-mole game of spot the “problematic” -ism. It encourages students to take a self-righteous, judgmental stance toward fictional characters, scanning texts for any sign that they fail to live up to today’s socially progressive standards.

With *To Kill A Mockingbird*, for example, Germán says that readers should have their attention drawn to the “limits” of Atticus’s advocacy: “He doesn’t use his privilege to bring about change. ... He is a part of the very system that let Tom die.” Without exposing these and other “flaws” in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Germán says that “teachers uphold the racism it presents.” With white students in particular, Germán uses the book to introduce them to “antiracist ideas and critical race theory to help them see the racism in the text and in their own lives.”

Social Justice Lit embraces a do-not-read-between-the-lines approach to literary analysis and interpretation. It fails to see that an author’s portrayal of a “racist” or “sexist” character is not necessarily an endorsement of the character’s worldview, but can instead be a way of highlighting social ills and presenting sharp, social commentary. Vexing, endlessly fascinating, and hugely important questions about an author’s intent remain unaddressed.

So *The Merchant of Venice* is wholly and definitively antisemitic; there’s no room to consider that Shakespeare’s depiction of Shylock’s treatment in the court of law might be a critique of discriminatory attitudes toward Jews. And the *Great Gatsby* simply “toes the line of perpetuating the myth of meritocracy.” That Fitzgerald threw into sharp relief the ostentatious lifestyles of the rich and famous to critique materialism, social climbing, and the American dream is not even entertained. The word “satire,” alas, is foreign to the Social Justice Lit lexicon.

In a lovely, short book called *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, English professor Alan Jacobs notes that “the reader who instantly translates the subject or story of a book into present-day terms often is not having a genuine encounter with the book at all.”

Unfortunately, the Social Justice Lit approach to reading classics tends to produce painfully strained encounters that are anything but genuine. Teaching the *Great Gatsby*, one high school teacher assigns students different characters and has them complete a 43-step privilege walk activity in order “to visualize how class prevented some from achieving the [American] Dream.” Another teacher recommends using *The Crucible* “to open up conversations about prison and bail reform, ways to interrogate systems of power and privilege that marginalize people of color and many others from minoritized populations.” A high school teacher from Flint, Michigan describes teaching *Romeo and Juliet* through “the lens of healthy relationships” to show students “how there were few

examples in Shakespeare of what we would deem a ‘healthy’ relationship today.” She calls this “a good first step” in her efforts to “disrupt the classics that *plague* our curriculum” (our italics).

Plague is an apt word here because it speaks to Social Justice Lit’s fear that students will be contaminated by the mere exposure to classic works that are seen as little more than vectors of “racism, sexism, homophobia, and general social injustice.” Based on partial or distorted readings of many classic books, this is a deeply patronizing view that vastly underestimates the psychological resilience of students and their capacity to grapple with difficult subjects.

This is not to say there is no value to making connections between present day social concerns and literature — but that shouldn’t be our exclusive or even primary concern; and the connections to the present should not always have to be determined by a social justice framework.

But in Social Justice Lit classrooms, students are not taught how to contextualize and develop layered interpretations of classic texts. Instead, these works are being used to buttress our presentist egos and feed crude notions of linear progress. We could teach the classics to show students how ideas of fairness and justice are culturally and historically constructed; instead, we are using literature instruction as a site for virtue signaling and books as mere props to help us perform our progressive values.

Social Justice Lit seems to have no appreciation for the fact that great works of literature lend themselves to multiple, even contradictory interpretations. There is no singular or definitive way of reading literature and that is the gift that the classics give us and one that we as educators are responsible for passing on to our students. As Italo Calvino reminds us, “a classic is a book that has never finished what it has to say.”

Without some familiarity with the canon, you cannot fully grasp the significance and beauty of newer works. Literary interpretation cannot be developed in a temporal vacuum. “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone,” T. S. Eliot declared. “His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.”



We are in favor of expanding the range of texts that are typically taught in English classes.

As the canon is revised and reimagined, American literature courses can contribute to what historian Ronald Takaki called a “more inclusive and accurate history of all the peoples of America.” We can revel in rather than deny our “immensely varied selves.”

The significant inroads that the African-American literary tradition in particular has made into schools over the past generation is a major accomplishment, one driven by the sustained efforts of literary scholars, librarians, and teachers at all levels, many of them African American themselves. Thanks to their work, among the 50 most assigned texts in colleges and universities today are *Beloved*, “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Invisible Man*.

What concerns us most about Social Justice Lit is its fetishization of relevance, which circumscribes the kinds of texts deemed suitable for students and narrows the scope of interpretation to the progressive values of our times. All students of all races and ethnicities should be given the opportunity to engage with the widest variety of texts — from classics to young adult fiction and graphic novels — by authors from the widest variety of backgrounds.

The insistence that we must teach texts where students can “see their own lives reflected” forecloses the possibility of looking beyond ourselves and our own horizons. Literature, Susan Sontag notes, has the power to:

*train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours. Who would we be if we could not sympathize with those who are not us or ours? Who would we be if we could not forget ourselves, at least some of the time? Who would we be if we could not learn? Forgive? Become something other than we are?*

The crusade to make the study of literature personally and socially relevant may appear noble at first glance. But by holding up today’s progressive values as unassailable truths, Social Justice Lit appears to be making teachers and students alike insular and arrogant.

Reading books from the perspective of judge, jury, and executioner is antithetical to cultivating the kind of intellectual humility and curiosity that is essential for rich,



sophisticated encounters with different texts. It turns the study of literature into an exercise in judgment. And judgment is not the route to understanding.

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