

Longini Symposium Discussion

Taboo Dinner Conversations: Censorship in Literature

Draft:

On the surface, English may not seem like a discipline rife with taboo topics. Dusty tomes and decrepit libraries don't exactly scream controversy. But open any book and it becomes clear how much controversy is the foundation of literature. *The Scarlet Letter* - religion, politics, sex. *Beloved* - race, violence, sex. *War and Peace* - politics, class, and yes, once again, sex. Literature is filled to the brim with topics that polite society would deem unseemly, and yet polite (and impolite society, for that matter) is founded on, expressed in, and assigned value by the pages of books. So, with the pedigree of English in all things Taboo well-established, I'll turn my focus on today's topic.

Perhaps the most politically divisive and controversially relevant topic in literary studies right now is the discourse between free speech and censorship. At first the answer seems easy - support artistic freedom and abolish censorship. But this is complicated by the idea that some artistic expression could be harmful to certain vulnerable groups. The news of the publishing world has been fixated recently on rewriting dated classics, giving a platform to banned books, and restructuring libraries to exclude content deemed inappropriate. Each case brings different values to the forefront, and therefore each is illuminating as to how this debate is far more complicated than it may initially seem.

A couple years back, Blake Bailey's biography of noted Jewish American novelist Philip Roth was mired in controversy. The New York Times reports, "In April, weeks after the publication of Bailey's book, several women accused Bailey of sexual misconduct and assault, leading his publisher, W.W. Norton, to halt shipments and then take the biography out of print." The book was later picked up by another publisher, but many were split over whether the consequences of condemning the author would affect his subject's legacy.

Around the same time, Dr. Seuss' estate began heated arguments when they decided to pull several of his works deemed racist or otherwise offensive. Philip Nel, a children's literature scholar at Kansas State University and author of a Seuss biography argued that, "It will cause people to re-evaluate the legacy of Dr. Seuss, and I think that's a good thing ... There are parts of his legacy one should honor, and parts of his legacy that one should not" (NYT). Others felt that this content should not be removed, like Ms. Lewis, co-owner of Hicklebee's bookstore in San Jose, California, who said, "I think when there is something in a book that you find offensive, what a great teaching opportunity" (NYT).

Other recent rewritings, revisions, and bans have involved Ian Flemming's James Bond novels (notably removing racist content but not misogynistic scenes) and Roald Dahl [whose estate rewrote a few of his bestsellers to remove "language that can be damaging and perpetuate harmful stereotypes" (NYT)]. On what can be viewed as the political flip side, other recent bans have taken effect removing LGBTQ novels from school libraries (most notably in recent months in Florida following Ron DeSantis' "don't-say-gay" bill). The same arguments used to justify the removal of racially offensive content are being used in these cases: protecting

vulnerable populations (in this case, children) from potentially harmful content. According to the American Library Association, “Five of the 10 most challenged and banned books in the U.S. last year were flagged because of their LGBTQ content” (NBC).

Clearly, all of these examples come from wildly different sides of the political spectrum, and yet, they are all revolving around the same crucial issue. In an attempt to better delineate the various facets of this discourse, I turned to what the English academic sphere had to say about it. Liviu Malita’s article in the *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* titled “Arguing for Art, Debating Censorship” serves as something of a literature review on this topic. She writes:

There is a persisting indecision regarding the question whether the freedom of art must be absolute or, on the contrary, if there should be limits to social permissiveness in relation to it. The current debate seems to indicate that relativism cannot be overcome. There are credible arguments on both sides. While we have an intuition that absolute immunity cannot be granted to art and literature, it is hard to argue convincingly in favour of judicial intervention to regulate this sensitive area of society. (Malita 18-19)

The gut-response from the perspective of the English discipline is to support full artistic freedom of expression - after all, where would we be if *To Kill a Mockingbird* never made it past the censors? But as Malita identifies in her scholarship, it isn’t so simple.

So what are some of these “credible arguments” Liviu Malita identifies? She traces “the most common accusations by which the law seeks to justify art censorship: immorality (pornography, obscenity), the encouragement of indecent behaviour, or incitement to violence/hatred/racism” (Malita 5). It’s easy for English professionals to see the possible damage caused by racist, sexist, or otherwise harmful texts on vulnerable populations. We believe that words have power, and we certainly don’t want a book that could harm marginalized groups to have the freedom to influence politics. (For a chilling example, consider *Mein Kampf* in interwar Germany).

On the flip side, we don’t want censorship to get out of hand and leave us in a situation reminiscent of Fahrenheit 451 or Orwell’s 1984. Additionally, there is the question of if ideas, especially fiction, fall under the same jurisdiction as physical actions. Censorship can also have unintended consequences that render it futile, such as the notoriety effect in which banned books see increased sales. However, this is only the case if the work already has a platform (e.g., a well-known author). If the ban is at a legislative, local, or educational level, the notoriety effect can be removed. For example, not allowing LGBTQ YA books in children’s libraries doesn’t have the unintended effect of popularizing them - their audience just loses exposure and access.

Regardless, it is hard to disagree with the reasons on either side. Malita concludes:

The bibliography of the problem indicates that the theme of censorship in art is a reason for permanent controversy. Although both positions taken in the dispute are comprehensible and compelling from the perspective of the ideology assumed by each, all these interpretations are undermined by various problems. (30)

We can all see the merits of a moderated approach to both free expression and censorship, and we can all imagine nightmare scenarios when one approach is taken to the extreme. For this reason, I’m not here today to tell you which option is correct. Rather, I am here, in the spirit of “Taboo Dinner Conversations” and as a representative of the English graduate program, to urge

you to live in the controversy. The important thing is that this can't be a conversational non-starter. We need to be able to discuss the implications of free speech and censorship, we need to have the difficult conversations, or this delicate issue could swing too far one way, and we could end up with dire consequences. For the sake of democracy, argument, and the future of the written word, we must always be examining how we decide to regulate artistic expression and ready to scream across the dinner table and be screamed at in return.

Thank you.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are there any instances of artistic expression that you can confidently say should always be censored/banned/etc.?
2. When might the freedom of artistic expression become a limit on the freedom of others?
3. Should historical texts be updated in modern editions to remove potentially harmful/offensive language?
4. Do modern texts have limitations that we don't need to apply to older ones? Vice versa?