

Censorship in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Introduction

Every year, around the turn of the first semester, I find myself having a very difficult and often times, very awkward conversation with my students.

“Okay”, I begin, “I’m going to read this passage to you, and as I read it, I’m going to say a very offensive word”.

It’s around this time my students begin to sneak glances at their copies of “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in search for clues of the word I’m referring to but not saying.

“When I say this word,” I continue, “I need you to understand that it is for *strictly academic purposes*. I do not like this word and it pains me to even read it off of a page, but author’s intent is important, and we have to respect that. More over, we all have to respect that this word is offensive, and that we will all treat it with the utmost maturity and responsibility.”

I end my short speech by making them a promise. “I will never, ever, say this word unless it appears in a text, but since it’s part of some of our texts, I’m going to read it as the author intended”.

Before I even begin reading, most of them have already figured it out. By the time I’m done, it’s undeniable which word I was referring to.

If you haven’t figured it out by now, I’m referring to “The n-word”.

As a white teacher I have a hard time dealing with self-censoring when it comes to this issue because, while I absolutely hate saying racial slurs, authors use language for a reason. When reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee with my students, the issue of the n-word always presents itself.

Which brings me to the point of this whole unit: If it’s not ok for me to say it, was it ok for Harper Lee, a young white woman, to write it down for all to read? In 1960, Harper Lee published her first novel. This rewrite of an original draft went on to be one of the most influential novels of the 20th century. Since then, the novel has been brought in to High School classrooms around the country. After half a century, it still manages to capture the imagination of teachers and students alike, while providing a scathing condemnation of American society that still burns with relevance.

America in the mid 19th century was wrought with civil strife. The African American Civil Rights Movement was at the height of its fight. With her novel, Harper Lee was able to shed light on the disadvantaged position of African Americans in America and how we interact across racial lines. Unfortunately, the issue of race as illustrated by Lee is still very relevant in today's society. America is experiencing a new racial movement today as African Americans continue to fight for their civil rights and equality among all Americans. The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."¹ Censorship in America has always been a hot button issue. This unit will examine how the first amendment is relevant to students today and how they understand a text.

Howard High School of Technology is one of four high schools in the New Castle County Vocational Technical School District. Of the four high schools in the district, it is the only school located within the city limits of Wilmington, Delaware. Because of its location, the majority of its students come from the inner city. Wilmington is a city plagued by violence and poverty. According to the state of Delaware, nearly half of the students at Howard, 43.4%, come from low-income households. 84% of the student body is made up of students who identify as a racial minority (specifically African American and Latino).² These students share a bond with people who have been censored over the course of American History in their pursuit of civil rights. In this unit, we will discuss the power of censorship as it relates to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the civil rights movement of the mid 20th century, and the current movements for equality in America.

We have been teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* as part of our 9th grade curriculum for longer than I have been teaching at Howard. Every year, the students seem to get particularly upset at one aspect of the story: Harper Lee's use of "the n-word". I always tell them about how Lee's novel has been banned for its use of the word "nigger" in the past. The class is often very split on whether or not debate over the appropriateness and use of this word continues today. In this unit, we will attempt to define the word's appropriateness both in the novel and in a modern context.

Rationale

This unit will focus primarily on writing skills and work as a pre/post reading unit for Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The novel is part of the 9th grade curriculum at Howard and the center point of the learning year. Our curriculum is very challenging for the majority of our students, and for many of them, this is the first novel they have ever read. Because of this, I will use this unit to help foster interest in the novel and work writing into the reading of the novel. Harper Lee's work has been said to be one of the

greatest novels ever written. With its acclaim, it has also had its controversy. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was once and still continues to be banned in states around the U.S. The focus of this unit will be on argumentative writing. In the unit, students will examine other controversial censorship cases involving minority groups. As they read the cases, they will learn and practice the basis of argumentative writing. This will culminate in an argumentative essay centering on the censorship of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Demographics

Howard High School of Technology is part of the New Castle County Vocational Technical School District. Students at Howard split their time between vocational and academic study time. Howard offers 13 competitive career programs, ranging from Cosmetology to Auto/Diesel technology. After an exploratory first semester as freshmen, students select their career area.

Howard is the only of the four Vo-Tech schools that is located in an urban setting, located right between Wilmington's Downtown business hub and the East Side neighborhoods, some of the most violent and crime ridden neighborhoods in the country. Because of its location, Howard serves the inner city more than its sister schools. African American student enrollment the past two years has hovered around 70% (70.7 in 2013-14, and 68.7% this year). Of the 940 students currently enrolled at Howard, over 40% of them come from low income households.³

Ninth grade students at Howard receive "extra" English and math as freshman, taking a block period of both every day. Their time is split between academics and their career areas. Due to the heavy career focus at Howard, relevance is key to engaging students in the humanities. Traditionally, vocational-technical students are not, on the whole, "academic". Many students choose this path in order to pursue careers, recognizing that academics may not be their strength.

Student Interest

The average Howard student comes from a household that is below the poverty line. Many times, these households are headed up by a single parent and are located in high crime neighborhoods. Clearly, Howard students come from tough circumstances.

Tough circumstances make tough people, and my kids are tough. They like to fight, argue, and make a scene. My favorite part of teaching argument is that it speaks directly to this. When teaching argument, I always say to my kids, "today, I'm going to teach you how to always win a fight". Once they're hooked, I explain how to structure their verbal arguments in a way that makes it extremely difficult to refute. Once they see how it works verbally, we transfer it to paper. Argument always yields high levels of engagement from my students.

Also, my students, especially with race coming to the forefront of our social consciousness in recent years, tend to have many questions regarding race in America. Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* with my students always helps to open up a dialogue about race that we can never quite satisfy due to time constraints and standards. In this unit, I hope to harness my student's interest in race.

Opening a dialogue about Race

One of the most powerful but disappointing aspects of reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that, while it was written over half a century ago and takes place almost a full century ago, it still feels so relevant. It's hard to miss the poignancy of this novel when watching the news and seeing the riots in Ferguson, Missouri. Students immediately make the connection between the fictional plight of Tom Robinson to the real life tragedies of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Sandra Bland. "Black Lives Matter" has pointed the public's attention towards the treatment of African Americans by law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Though great strides have been taken to achieve equality in America, the injustices felt by those in the early twentieth century are still present as we move into the early twenty-first.

The first step to addressing any problem is discussion. In the case of race relations in America, we often times find ourselves stuck on step one. As an educator, I feel that it is our duty to educate the youth on how to have difficult and often uncomfortable conversations about relevant and important issues. One of the key goals of this unit is to open a dialogue about race in America in a way that is responsible, respectful, and productive.

To Kill a Mockingbird

To Kill a Mockingbird is currently the only novel built in to the ninth grade curriculum in the New Castle County Vo-Tech School District. The novel, widely considered to be one of the most important pieces of American literature, was first published in 1960 and is still widely used in classrooms across the country today.

Although Harper Lee's seminal novel takes place in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, it offers a candid look at the American South in the 1930's. The plot centers around a young girl named Scout Finch and her Lawyer father, Atticus. Atticus steps up to represent Tom Robinson, a black man, who is accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a member of the town's most notoriously reprehensible family. Though Atticus works hard to show Tom's clear innocence in the case, bigotry clouds the courtroom and distorts the final outcome.

Lee's story provides a scathing criticism of race relations in the American south. In her

effort to paint a clear picture of the Jim Crow era, she ruffled many feathers. The book has a long history of being banned, especially for its use of the n-word.

Grappling with hard ideas is part of what makes this novel great. It forced people to look at their country under a critical lens.

Censorship

To Kill a Mockingbird is simultaneously one of the most loved and most banned books in American history. While a variety of reasons have been cited for its banning, the overwhelming majority are due to its use of the n-word.

A landmark case for recent censorship took place in Nova Scotia in 2002, where a school board committee gave the following statement:

“In this novel, African-Canadian students are presented with language that portrays all the stereotypical generalizations that demean them as a people. While the White student and White teacher may misconstrue it as language of an earlier era or the way it was, this language is still widely used today and the book serves as a tool to reinforce its usage even further ...The terminology in this novel subjects students to humiliating experiences that rob them of their self-respect and the respect of their peers. The word ‘Nigger’ is used 48 times [in] the novel ...There are many available books which respect the past history of African-Canadians or Americans without subjecting African-Canadian learners to this type of degradation ...We believe that the English Language Arts curriculum in Nova Scotia must enable all students to feel comfortable with ideas, feelings and experiences presented without fear of humiliation ... *To Kill a Mockingbird* is clearly a book that no longer meets these goals and therefore must no longer be used for classroom instruction.”⁴

In this unit, students will learn about the protection of the First Amendment of the Constitution. Most notably, they will examine hate speech to see whether or not the First Amendment protects Harper Lee in her use of the n-word and if that would be grounds for banning the book. To do this, students will read excerpts from the court case “*R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*”.

The First Amendment and Hate Speech

The First Amendment of the United States constitution states that, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”⁵

Over the years, the Supreme Court has grappled with what exactly “freedom of speech” means. To protect other rights of citizens, the court has held that not all speech is

protected by the First Amendment. It has decided that language that may incite violence, for instance, will not be protected under the First Amendment. Likewise, any act of expression deemed obscene has also been removed from constitutional protection.

Though these have been removed, one act that is still constitutionally protected is hate speech. Racial slurs, like the one this unit examines, fall into that category. While many countries have made provisions to protect people from hateful expression, the United States has not.

R.A.V. v. St. Paul

This Supreme Court case is one of the most important hate speech cases in American history. The Defendant, a minor known only as R.A.V., had allegedly constructed a cross out of wood from a broken chair and lit it on fire in the front yard of the home of an African American family. He was arrested under a city ordinance against bias motivated crimes. The defendant argued that the ordinance was too broad and did not cover the actions of the defendant. The case worked its way to the Supreme Court, where Justice Antonin Scalia delivered the court's opinion. The court held that the ordinance was overbroad and not content-neutral and overturned the city's ruling. Because the ordinance singled out only words that provoked violence on the basis of race, religion, or gender, it amounted to unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination.⁶

This case implies that, while many types of harmful and offensive speech are not protected by the Constitution, hateful speech, especially in the case of race, is protected.

The Case for Mockingbird

Though the book was immediately received with high praise and quickly lauded as a new classic. Teachers quickly recognized the didactic potential of the novel and brought it into the classroom. Controversy quickly followed.

In "The Case Against To Kill A Mockingbird", author Isaac Saney details a brief history of the book's banning and cases presented by those offended by the novel. In these cases, the people fighting to ban the book cite the use of the word "nigger" as offensive and marginalizing. The article details multiple cases and describes how difficult it is to build an argument against a book that is so highly regarded. Saney offers the students a new perspective on the novel and its history that is not often discussed in classrooms.

On the other side of the argument, the students will read "In Defense of To Kill a Mockingbird" by Jill May, which is an excerpt from *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*. This critical essay highlights some of the key points in the novel, showing how Harper Lee creates a powerfully scathing critique of America. Scott argues that what Lee writes is not pleasant, and that it may not be comfortable to read, but that the novel presents truths about America that must be grappled with.

In this unit, these two texts will be paired and will serve as the basis for evidence for the student's argumentative essays. Both present strong, contrasting evidence that students can use to formulate and argue their positions.

Unit Goals

This unit will strive to accomplish several learning goals that align with district, state, and National standards. The following Common Core State Standards will serve as the main teaching standards to drive instruction throughout the unit:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4](#)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2](#)

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1](#)

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2](#)

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content

The key goal of this unit will be for students to create argumentative writing that accompanies Harper Lee's novel. Students will be arguing about the appropriateness of Harper Lee's language in the novel, specifically her use of racial slurs.

Students will understand the importance of the constitution, especially the first amendment. They will also understand the elements of argumentative writing. Furthermore, they will understand censorship as it relates to civil rights in America. The Unit Essential Question will be, "How could censorship affect the impact of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*?"

Argument

A key-learning takeaway from this unit will be argument. Students will be learning the

key points of argumentative writing as highlighted by the Common Core State Standards. Specifically, students will learn to form claims, counter claims, and rebuttals. Also, students will be instructed on how to form support for their claims. This will require that they learn about rhetorical appeals, ethos, pathos, and logos.

Parts of Argument

In order for students to understand how to effectively structure argument, they must learn how to effectively create and support a claim. It will be key that students understand how to take a firm position and support it with textual evidence.

In order to do this, the CSET writing format is recommended for structure.

CSET

- Claim
- Set Up
- Evidence
- Tie In

Claim requires that the students make a strong statement of their thoughts or beliefs. Being succinct and direct is of the utmost importance. Set up requires the students use an attributive tag or summary of evidence to transition from their personal statements to textual evidence. Evidence must be correctly formatted quoted evidence from a reliable source. Tie in requires the students to explain how their evidence connects to their claim. The following graphic organizer is helpful for teaching students the structure, though they are encouraged to move away from it quickly in order to get into the habit of using this structure as a paragraph.

Claim	
Set Up	
Evidence	
Tie In	

Once they are familiar with this writing structure, students can begin to learn how to effectively create claims, counter-claims and rebuttals. Once claim has been taught,

students must understand and know the connection between counterclaim and rebuttal.

Lessons and Activities

Lesson One : Introducing The Word

In the first activating lesson, students will be viewing an episode of the TV show “Blackish” (season 2, episode 1), where characters debate on the appropriateness of “The N Word”. Students will use a graphic organizer to note the different ends of the debate. After watching, students will discuss which character they most agree with, which character they most disagree with, and whether or not hearing and seeing different opinions on the matter affected their opinions.

Warm Up: Students will respond to the question: Are there words or phrases that should never be said? Explain your answer.

Discussion: Use student answers to the warm up to generate a discussion among the students. At this time, it would be ideal to establish classroom norms of having a respectful discussion.

Viewing: Students will watch the episode and fill in a graphic organizer. Students will note the views of each character in the episode and provide 1-2 quotes or examples that support each character’s viewpoint.

Summarizing Activity: Students will summarize, in writing, the various views of the characters.

Lesson Two: The Constitution

In the second lesson, students will examine the first amendment of the constitution and learn about the legal grounds on which *To Kill a Mockingbird* was banned. Learning about the ideas of free speech as it relates to hate speech is important to establish so that students can have a base of understanding for their summative arguments. The key question for students to answer is whether or not Harper Lee could legally use a racial slur in her novel.

Warm Up: Students will respond to the quick write topic: “Should people be able to say what ever they want whenever or wherever they want to? Why or why not?”

Analyzing: Students will be given “Free Speech Provisions in Various Constitutions” (Appendix B). Students will examine and compare the different provisions in each as it relates to the idea of hateful speech. Students should answer the question- “How does the

American provision compare with the other countries as it relates to hate speech?"

Reading: In small groups, students will read excerpts from *R.A.V. v. ST. PAUL*, (1992). Students should be able to understand that the R.A.V. had their conviction overturned, because, to quote the court, "Let there be no mistake about our belief that burning a cross in someone's front yard is reprehensible. But St. Paul has sufficient means at its disposal to prevent such behavior without adding the First Amendment to the fire."⁷

Summarizing Question: Is Harper Lee's use of the n-word in her novel illegal under the first amendment? Furthermore, what does this case say about the way that hate speech is treated in this country?

Lesson Three: Argument

In this lesson, students should learn the keys to argumentative writing as outlined in the unit. This can be done to the teacher's preference.

Lesson Four: The Cases for Mockingbird

In this lesson, the students will read two texts that examine the censoring and importance of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Students will begin by finishing the keys of argumentative writing and the CSET writing format. After, students will begin working with "In Defense of To Kill a Mockingbird" and "The Case Against To Kill a Mockingbird". This should take place over two class periods so that students have time to learn the keys of argument and begin to apply them to the texts

Lesson Five: Assessment

In the final lesson, students should use the evidence they gathered from the texts to write an in class essay addressing the following prompt.

"Harper Lee's controversial use of language in To Kill a Mockingbird has been grounds for it to be banned in several places over that last half of a century. Write an argumentative essay using evidence from the texts in which you argue that the book should be banned for its use of offensive language or against the banning of the book based on its use of language."

Bibliography

- "First Amendment." LII / Legal Information Institute. Accessed November 12, 2015. https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first_amendment. This page provides the text of the first amendment, along with useful resources to help understand what it is and how it's impacted law in the United States.
- "Howard High School of Technology." State of Delaware. 2005. <http://profiles.doe.k12.de.us/SchoolProfiles/School/Default.aspx?checkSchool=26&districtCode=38>. State of Delaware demographic information on Howard High School.
- Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960. The unit is centered around this novel. This unit relies on students having had previously read the entire text.
- Karolides, Nicholas J., Lee Burrell, and John M. Kean. "In Defense of *To Kill a Mockingbird*." In *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993. This text offers a viewpoint that defends the novel against censorship.
- R.A.V. v. St. Paul (June 22, 1992). Google Scholar. Accessed December https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=14621372290934958371&q=RAV+v+st+paul&hl=en&as_sdt=10006. Supreme court case that set the precedent that hate speech is not protected under the first amendment.
- Saney, Isaac. "The Case Against *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Race & Class* 45, no. 1 (2003): 99-105. Accessed November 13, 2015. <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/blog/Mockingbird.pdf>. Article which details instances in which the novel was banned and defends the censorship of the novel.

Notes

1. "First Amendment." LII / Legal Information Institute. Accessed November 12, 2015. https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first_amendment.
2. "Howard High School of Technology." State of Delaware. 2005. <http://profiles.doe.k12.de.us/SchoolProfiles/School/Default.aspx?checkSchool=26&districtCode=38>.
3. Ibid.
4. Saney, Isaac. "The Case Against To Kill a Mockingbird." *Race & Class* 45, no. 1 (2003): 99-105. Accessed November 13, 2015. <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/blog/Mockingbird.pdf>.
5. Ibid.
6. R.A.V. v. St. Paul (June 22, 1992). Google Scholar. Accessed December https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=14621372290934958371&q=RAV+v+st+paul&hl=en&as_sdt=10006.
7. Ibid.

Appendix A:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4](#)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2](#)

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1](#)

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2](#)

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content

Appendix B:

Free Speech Provisions in Various Constitutions

France (1789), Article 11, Declaration of the Rights of Man: The free communication of ideas and of opinions is one of the most precious rights of man. Any citizen may therefore speak, write, and publish freely, except what is tantamount to the abuse of this liberty in the cases determined by law.

Norway (1814), Article 100: There shall be liberty of the Press. No person may be punished for any writing, whatever its contents, which he has caused to be printed or published, *unless* he willfully and manifestly has either himself shown, or incited others to, disobedience to the laws, contempt of religion, morality or the constitutional powers, or resistance to their orders, *or* has made false and defamatory accusations against anyone.

The People's Republic of China (1982), Article 35: Citizens of the Peoples Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration. *****[Article 51]:** Citizens of the People's Republic of China, in exercising their freedoms and rights, may not infringe upon the interests of the state, of society or of the collective, or upon the lawful freedoms and rights of other citizens.

England (), Article (): [The English have no written constitution.]

Germany (Federal Republic) (1949), Article V: (1) Everyone shall have the right freely to express and disseminate his opinion by speech, writing and pictures and freely to inform himself from generally accessible sources *** There shall be no censorship. (2) *These rights are limited by the provisions of the general laws, the provisions of law for the protection of youth and by the right to inviolability of personal honor.*

The Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 38: Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. *** **[Section 43]:** Nothing in section *** 38 *** of this Constitution shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society--in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health***.

European Convention on Human Rights (1950), Article 10: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. *** (2) The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.

The United States (1791), First Amendment: Congress shall make no law *** abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.

Sources. William Van Alstyne, The American First Amendment in the 21st Century, 3d ed. (2002) and Alan Brownstein and Leslie Jacobs, Global Issues in Freedom of Speech and Religion (2009)

Student Learning Map

Topic:

Key Learning:

Literature is a reflection of the context in which it was written.

Unit Essential Question

How would censorship affect Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

Concept Censorship	Concept Argument
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Lesson Essential Questions: <input type="checkbox"/> What is Censorship?	Lesson Essential Questions: <input type="checkbox"/> Should Harper Lee's TKAM be censored?
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Vocabulary

Hate Speech

The First Amendment

The Constitution

Supreme Court

Freedom of Speech

Vocabulary

Argument

Claim

Counterclaim

Rebuttal

Rhetorical Appeals

Ethos

Pathos

Logos

Evidence