Towards a Civic Education in a Multicultural Society: Ethical Problems in Teaching Literature

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In 1974, the school system in Kanawha County, West Virginia, experienced a dramatic battle over the books selected for the community's youngsters to read in their classes. The dispute created a furor both locally and nationally. In Kanawha County, coal miners and bus drivers went on strike to support the fundamentalists who led the challenge against the school board's choice of textbooks. Schools were firebombed, school buses were fired upon, and the school board building was dynamited as the protest intensified. Nationally, the controversy served as a lightning rod for the censorship issue, inspiring involvement from The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.; from Mel and Norma Gabler, who head national textbook challenges from their base in Longwood, Texas; and from other outsiders "from Communists to the Ku Klux Klan" (Moffett, 1989, p. 73).

The dispute in Kanawha County involved questions regarding the types of texts students should read in school. The district had invested nearly a half million dollars in new textbooks, including James Moffett's just-introduced *Interaction* series, that reflected multicultural perspectives. As Moffett has written, those who protested the new texts

> believe that most of the topics English teachers think make good discussion are about matters they consider already settled. The invitation to reopen them through pluralistic readings, role-playing, values clarification, personal writing, and open-ended discussion can only be taken as an effort to indoctrinate their children in the atheistic free-thinking of the Eastern seaboard liberal establishment that scoffs at them and runs the country according to a religion of Secular Humanism. (Moffett, 1989, p. 76)

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The book protesters argued that in its attempts to present diverse points of view the board of education was working against the values of a significant segment of the community. While perhaps preparing students for participation in a broader portion of the American culture—one which the fundamentalists regarded as heathen and hollow—the new curriculum threatened the cohesion and continuity of the immediate community, its "heart and ethos," by "[weakening] local authority and control" (Moffett, p. 75). The protesters sought to preserve and perpetuate their values and way of life by controlling and censoring the books their children read. They objected to texts of all types that challenged "family, church, and state—authority in general" (p. 77). Thus they characterized works such as T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" as "a take-off on the Bible" and "poking fun of the birth of Jesus" (p. 79) and therefore not suitable for their children to read.

Many who have heard of this case and others like it have found the book protesters to be narrow-minded, parochial, and dogmatic. Yet Moffett, while questioning the behavior of the Kanawha County fundamentalists, maintains that their critics are not necessarily all that different. He argues that

> Transmitting any heritage entails selecting some ideas, frameworks, and values and excluding others. Exclusion is built into the very idea of education as cultural transmission. What's the difference between prohibiting certain facts and ideas and simply omitting them? In other words, how far does the selectivity of ["progressive" and pluralistic] education have to go before *it* becomes censorship? (p. 77)

Moffett's observations raise an important question for educators. What is the difference between *censorship* and *selection?* One way to distinguish between the two is to consider the concerns and objectives that motivate each type of choice. Those who censor aim to control the type and range of material which others may read. In essence, censorship works *against* freedom of speech because it shields people from language and ideas regardless of the source's artistic merit. Thus, censors might object to the profane language of *The Catcher in the Rye,* the pro-environment ideology of Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax,* or the anti-Christian theology of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with no consideration given to the literary quality of these works.

Selection is distinct from *censorship* in that it is proactive rather than reactive. Those who engage in selection would consider any text to have potential value, with the exception perhaps of those that might terrify tender viewers or readers; we might prevent, for instance, our five year old from watching *Silent Night, Deadly Night,* which features Santa Claus as a serial killer, without considering ourselves to be

censors. Aside from these exceptional cases, those involved in selection make *principled decisions* about what to read based on the value potentially derived from the experience. Those who select would consider engagement with virtually any text to have potential value.

But the infinite range of texts available to select from puts us in the predicament described by Moffett. The typical teacher of high school juniors, for instance, probably uses an anthology around a thousand pages thick containing hundreds of selections. Additionally, the curriculum might include several novels and dramatic works, plus all the grammar, composition, test preparation, vocabulary and so on that pack the instructional agenda. If we are to study literature with any depth of understanding plus teach everything else a teacher must teach, then we must make decisions about which texts to read in the classroom. Whether we engage in censorship or selection might depend on what motivates our decisions: Do we exclude *Manchild in the Promised Land* because the language offends us? Do we exclude *Sister Carrie* because we feel prostitution is immoral? Or do we select alternative texts because we find them to have greater potential value for study?

The issues of censorship and selection are particularly important for those concerned with the issue of civic education, and of the role of teaching literature in a multicultural society. The West Virginia fundamentalists who appear so closed-minded are "insisting in fact on a principle that public schools seem founded on—the transmission of culture," says Moffett (p. 76). Their notion of culture just happens to be extremely narrow, not even reflecting the values of their whole community or state. The problems exemplified in Kanawha County illustrate problems faced by educators around the country. One model for curriculum design that could help us think about them comes from Tyler (1949; see also Smagorinsky & Gevinson, 1989). Tyler poses four fundamental questions that he argues are central to developing curriculum and instruction (p. 1):

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

Essentially, he suggests that a community needs to articulate an overall philosophy about the purpose of schooling, which in turn will help identify a set of goals or objectives for students to achieve. These broader issues will suggest appropriate materials and learning activities for students to experience, and also the organizing principles behind

their sorting and sequencing over the course of schooling. The assessment of student achievement should be in line with the philosophy that has generated the curriculum. All of this sounds very simple and sensible. Yet implementing it has proven to be very difficult to do.

Agreeing on a philosophical basis from which to develop an educational program can be very troublesome for a community, as illustrated in Kanawha County. One fairly broad tenet with which many of us might agree is that schooling should promote citizenship. Many educators feel that "one of the basic purposes of public schools is to prepare students for active, informed citizenship" (Nathan & Kielsmeier, 1991 p. 742). This assumption about the importance of instilling a sense of citizenship has deep roots in American schooling. Wentzel has found that "the development of social responsibility in the form of citizenship skills and moral character is often considered to be a primary function of schooling" with "the instructional process directly [promoting] the development of social responsibility" (1991, p. 1). The goals of social responsibility and character development, she finds, have been "stated as explicit objectives for public schools in almost every educational policy statement since 1848" (p. 2).

If a philosophical tenet is to provide coherent direction to an educational program, then it requires some articulation. Stotsky has defined a "civic identity" as

> the psychological foundation for participation in public life as a "citizen," as someone with a sense of the common good as well as a sense of one's own interests or a particular group's interests. Civic identity includes more than a sense of belonging to a particular political entity that can be defined by specific political principles and processes. It is also a sense of kinship with all those who live within the boundaries of that political entity, regardless of economic, intellectual, ethnic, or religious differences. Civic identity transcends individual or group differences, permitting individuals or groups of individuals to consider the well-being of the whole political community. (1991, p. 23)

She stresses that a civic identity involves "a feeling of kinship [which] undergirds a sense of responsibility for all those who share one's civic communities," so that "the common good can emerge only when all participants in a political conflict believe that they share some essential values despite individual or group interests" (p. 24).

Stotsky's definition helps us understand the Kanawha County book protest. Undoubtedly, both the protesters and defenders of the textbooks felt that they were acting in the best interests of the community, that they were engaged in active, informed citizenship. They were also taking vigorous social action in order to shape civic issues. The

antagonists in Kanawha County, however, operated from different and poorly defined conceptions of citizenship and social action, conceptions which were not rooted in a sense of core values. As a result active citizenship and participation in social issues caused violent, irreparable damage to the community and the ideas of censorship and selection were never clearly distinguished.

With Stotsky's definition in mind, let us assume that promoting a civic identity among students is an important objective of schooling. We are then faced with a number of problems in our teaching that are difficult to resolve due to the ethical conflicts they raise, and that may indeed have different solutions depending on the context in which they present themselves. The solution to these problems must come from *principled decisions* based on carefully considered criteria. The choice of literary experiences for a civic education in a pluralistic society might emerge from the consideration of questions such as these:

1. In a society composed of countless sub-groups with distinct histories and identities, how can we include the voices and experiences of all or most of our various sub-cultures? If we strive for multicultural inclusion, which of the myriad groups should we single out for our students to be exposed to? Should our selection criteria be driven by race, religion, ethnicity, continent of origin, region within the United States, political values, or some other source of determination? If we choose according to one of these criteria, on what basis do we then choose the voices from within each sub-group?

2. Should the potential offensiveness of a work be a consideration in our selection process? Is the profane and racially inflammatory language of James Baldwin' *Blues for Mister Charlie* a sufficient reason not to use it in the classroom? Is the persistent use of the word "nigger" and the overwhelmingly bigoted views of the characters in *Huckleberry Finn* good reason for our students not to read it?

3. Should the particular moral, social or political values imparted through a text be a consideration in our selection process? For example, should the anti-business values of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* or Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* work against their selection? Should we seek to teach texts in a "values-neutral" way in the classroom and thus avoid the issue? Should the question of values be of greater or lesser importance than the literary merit of the works?

4. Should we seek to achieve a balance of positive and negative images in the depiction of various subgroups and genders? If we have our students read Richard Wright's *Native Son,* for instance, which depicts the discrimination against urban blacks in the 1930's, should we attempt to balance this with an uplifting story of black accomplish-

ment such as Pauli Murray's family history, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family?*

5. Should we choose texts that are often misunderstood due to the author's use of sophisticated literary techniques, such as ironic distance between the author's views and those of the speaker as found in Swift's "A Modest Proposal"?

6. Can we solve any and all of these problems by providing an appropriate instructional context for the literature we use in our classroom? In other words, can we teach any problematic text in such a way that it can be a potentially valuable experience for any student? Or are some texts prohibitively problematic, particularly in certain communities? Is every community a potential Kanawha County in which certain texts are potentially inappropriate to teach? We might assume that John Updike's *Rabbit Redux,* with its profanity, sex, drugs, violence and so on would create a stir in many conservative Christian communities. But might books such as *Little Women* also cause a commotion in communities with a great sensitivity to women's issues?

The six sets of questions raised here are not meant to be comprehensive, but to serve to introduce ethical problems that face teachers in the selection of literature and the experiences students have with it. At this point I would like to take several works of literature frequently found in curricula and anthologies and discuss problems they present for teachers in light of the goal of a civic education. The discussion will center on three types of texts that raise troublesome issues for teachers: *ironic* texts about social issues, *didactic* texts written from a particular cultural perspective, and *"representative"* texts that are intended to depict the experiences of a particular group of people.

Ironic Texts about Social Issues

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is one of the most celebrated, widely-read, and frequently protested books in the history of American letters. It has also been among the most commonly read books in American secondary schools for much of the Twentieth Century, ranking as the third most frequently taught novel in a 1989 survey by Applebee. Those who believe that *Huck Finn* is a work of great literary merit have interpreted the text through a recognition of Twain's use of dramatic irony; that is, the distinction he has created between his own views and those of the speaker, Huck. Let us look at Huck's narration in a passage from Chapter 31, "You Can't Pray A Lie":

> Once I said to myself it would be a thousand times better for Jim to be a slave at home where his family was as long as he'd got to be a slave, and so I'd better write a letter to Tom Sawyer

> and tell him to tell Miss Watson where he was. But I soon give up that notion for two things: she'd be mad and disgusted at his rascality and ungratefulness for leaving her, and so she'd sell him straight down the river again; and if she didn't everybody naturally despises an ungrateful nigger, and they'd make Jim feel it all the time, and so he'd feel ornery and disgraced. And then think of me! It would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was ever to see anybody from that town again I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame. That's just the way: a person does a low-down thing, and then he don't want to take no consequences of it. Thinks as long as he can hide, it ain't no disgrace. That was my fix exactly. The more I studied about this the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't a-going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame, but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday school, you could 'a' gone to it; and if you'd 'a' done it they'd 'a' learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about the nigger goes to everlasting fire.

As a high school teacher I assigned *Huck Finn* to my American Literature students for many years. Yet the responses of my black students, who composed about 30% of my classes, made me increasingly uneasy about the role of the book in the civic education of my students. In the paragraph just cited the word "nigger" appears four times, and it recurs routinely throughout the book. The white characters repeatedly assert and assume that Negroes are "property" for them to use as they please, and that God supports their subjugation. A detached, sophisticated reader can make the intellectual argument that Twain is showing us that these beliefs are wrong; that the white characters who have bone-deep beliefs about the subhumanity of blacks have themselves been drawn by Twain to exhibit hypocrisy, avarice, and other negative traits, while Jim in contrast is noble, honest, and deeply sympathetic.

The question I would pose regarding the use of this text, and others like it, is: To what extent does a work of literature—regardless of its apparent literary merit—contribute to a sense of civic identity when the speaker condones the degradation of characters based on race or ethnicity? In works that appear to employ dramatic irony in such a way that the interactions of characters work against the construction

of a sense of kinship among readers, how do we help students make an intellectual judgment apart from their emotional response to the story? We see an interesting modern reversal of this problem in the film *Do the Right Thing,* written, produced, and directed by Spike Lee, and also starring Lee in the role of a black employee who starts a riot against his generally sympathetic white employer. Does Spike Lee, in occupying all of the central roles in the creation and production of the film and then himself playing the role of lead rioter, advocate the behavior of his character? Is he endorsing this as the "right thing" to do?

Intellectually, we might argue that Lee is being ironic and cautioning *against* the actions of his protagonist. Similarly, we can argue that Mark Twain is setting up his characters to reveal the folly of a racist society. Teachers who use these texts with students who cannot create intellectual distance from stories are faced with difficult questions. In that we must accept the works as ironic in order to interpret them as socially constructive, on what grounds do we select them for students to read? Research by Smith has suggested that high school students take a "submissive" stance in response to a text; that is, they accept the authority of the narrator without question. Students he studied "did not make inferences and . . . focused only on literal interpretation. They never questioned the source from which they received the information in a story, and they could not control the associations engendered by texts" (1991, p. 7). Many readers do not respond to *Huckleberry Finn* and *Do the Right Thing* as ironic, but accept the surface meaning instead and respond emotionally rather than intellectually. Given this generally "submissive" approach to texts in general, one that Smith (c.f. Smagorinsky, 1992) argues requires extensive instruction in interpretive strategies to overcome, do ironic texts that on the surface involve socially destructive behavior make good selections for students to read?

If we can justify their selection, how then do we use them in the classroom, particularly with students who feel personally degraded or threatened by them? Is an intellectual interpretation sufficient? Ironic literature is consistently difficult for readers to interpret, particularly when the dramatic irony requires high levels of inference. What challenges do these texts present in the classroom if our goal is to promote social cohesion and mutual understanding in a pluralistic, democratic society?

Didactic Texts Written from a Particular Cultural Perspective

Another sort of problematic text is one that pits race against race, culture against culture, yet instead of relying on dramatic irony for

social reform has the didactic intent of elevating the values of one culture above those of the other. Gary Ebersole has studied "captivity tales"—that is, stories (often memoirs) written from the perspective of a person captured by members of another culture. The earliest examples of the genre come from New World accounts written by white settlers captured by Indians, such as *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* written in 1682 about her capture and ransom by the Pequot Indians of Massachusetts. The early tales had a strongly ethnocentric perspective, with the authors describing their personal experiences with what they found to be a savage and threatening native culture. More recent examples of the genre, such as the film *Dances With Wolves,* tend to have a self-conscious didactic intent to depict the "white" culture as barbaric and the counter culture as noble and innocent. Ebersole has found that many recent captivity tales come from the Amazon and are

> usually told in terms of an ecological/save the rainforest interpretive frame. The film *The Emerald Forest,* for example, is based on the true story of a young boy abducted by Amazonian Indians. His father, an American engineer engaged in building a dam on the Amazon, searches for his son for 10 years. When he finally locates his child, he discovers that the boy has "gone native." This story and other modern tales twist the traditional frame so that the Indians are represented as heroes, living at one with nature, and the white man becomes the savage destroyer of a Rousseauistic idyll (Shore, 1991, p. 32).

The text needn't be a captivity tale to take such a didactic angle. One frequently anthologized story, "Chee's Daughter" by Juanita Platero and Sijowin Miller, features a clash between Chee, a Navajo who lives according to the traditional ways of his culture, and his in-laws, who have attempted to adopt Western capitalistic ways. Chee's wife has died, and tradition has decreed that their daughter be raised by the in-laws. This potentially compelling story deteriorates into caricature, with the in-laws becoming one-dimensional figures embodying the worst of Western ways:

> As his father-in-law walked heavily across the graveled lot, Chee was reminded of a statement his mother sometimes made: "When you see a fat Navaho, you see one who hasn't worked for what he has."
>
> Old Man Fat was fattest in the middle. There was indolence in his walk even though he seemed to hurry, indolence in his cheeks so plump they made his eyes squint, eyes now smoldering with anger.
>
> Some of the tourists were getting into their cars and driving away. The old man said belligerently to Chee, "Why do you come here? To spoil our business? To drive people away?"

> . . . . Chee's dark eyes surveyed the land along the highway as the old man continued to brag about being "progressive." *He* no longer was tied to the land. He and his wife made money easily and could *buy* all the things they wanted. Chee realized too late that he had stumbled into the old argument between himself and his wife's parents. They had never understood his feeling about the land—that a man took care of his land and it in turn took care of him. Old Man Fat and his wife scoffed at him, called him a Pueblo farmer, all during that summer when he planted and weeded and harvested. Yet they ate the green corn in their mutton stews, and the chili paste from the fresh ripe chilies, and the tortillas from the cornmeal his wife ground. None of this working and sweating in the sun for Old Man Fat, who talked proudly of his easy way of living—collecting money from the trader who rented this strip of land beside the highway, collecting money from the tourists.

At the end of the story, a new highway diverts traffic away from Old Man Fat's business and he and his family have become destitute. Meanwhile, Chee has had an exceptional harvest and brings his in-laws some of his bounteous produce to help them out. The food will get the in-laws through the winter, but not with the baby to feed as well; and with that realization "the Little One ceased to be their daughter's daughter and became just another mouth to feed." They promptly trade their granddaughter for food, and Chee and his daughter ride off to live the traditional Navajo life in communal serendipity while the in-laws are presumably left to rot in the seething swamp of capitalism.

The inclusion of this story in a number of anthologies raises some important questions about an unexamined attempt to include multicultural materials in the literature curriculum. How does this text contribute towards a sense of community? Does it have literary merit? Do cartoonish depictions of heroes and villains help students achieve a civic identity? Are stories such as this worth using in the classroom as examples of manipulative works designed to create sympathies and antipathies?

Once again we need to ask: On what grounds do we select this story for study in our classrooms? Is it of greater value than other texts? And if we decide to teach it, what sorts of experiences should students have to make their engagement with the text fruitful?

Texts Selected to "Represent" a Particular Group of People

A third type of text that presents problems for teachers concerned with a civic education is one that is chosen to "represent" a particular group of people. Many curricula are now being rewritten to reflect concerns

for global consciousness, racial and ethnic diversity, gender issues and other attempts to depart from reading lists heretofore restricted to works written by dead white American and British males. One problem with diversifying reading lists is that the world is indeed a diverse place. While we have relatively few genders to complicate the selection of materials, we have many, many countries, most of which are composed of members of widely varying cultures, religions, ethnicities, and classes, all of which may have had different characteristics at different points in history. Changing curricula to reflect global consciousness then becomes a prohibitively diffuse task, forcing us to select those works which will constitute our new culturally diverse curriculum. And, as Moffett has pointed out, when we make these selections we do so with a bias that undoubtedly affects our students. Which countries should our anthologies represent? In choosing writers to represent Africa, should they be from Madagascar, Ivory Coast, Egypt, South Africa, or someplace else? And after we have made these decisions, we are faced with the problem of diversity within nations. Typically in anthologies we now see writers identified as representing one country or another, even such extraordinarily diverse nations as India, Russia, China, Brazil and others. What single writer, or small set of writers, can possibly represent the old Soviet Union, an immense nation in which over forty languages were spoken by people of countless ethnicities, which was "the Soviet Union" for less than a century and indeed "fell apart" as I was composing this article?

On a more local level we have an attempt to represent the various peoples of the United States through the inclusion of multicultural voices in our new curricula. Once again we have the same problem of selection: Which writers represent which groups of people? Should we attempt to represent all racial and ethnic groups who occupy our nation? Which voices represent "Latinos," who originate from such distinct nations as Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Panama, Venezuela and many others? The group known as "Native Americans" is considerably more diverse, with the state of Oklahoma alone including close to seventy different tribes, many of which originate from different parts of the continent, speak different languages, have developed different cultures and were continually at war with one another for centuries. Which tribes should speak for such a diverse race of people?

More relevant to the issue of a civic education is the problem of selecting works which negatively depict the lives of a racial or ethnic group. We can see this problem through the example of Richard Wright's commonly taught autobiography *Black Boy.* Without question, this book has great historical and literary significance and should be read by all Americans who seek an understanding of American society.

Wright is one of the century's most important writers, and his story teaches us much about the oppressive racism in Mississippi in the early part of the century, as related in the following passage:

> One afternoon I was wheeling my barrow toward the pond when something sharp sank into my thigh. I whirled; the dog crouched a few feet away, snarling. I had been bitten. I drove the dog away and opened my trousers; teeth marks showed deep and red.
>
> I did not mind the stinging hurt, but I was afraid of an infection. When I went to the office to report that the boss's dog had bitten me, I was met by a tall blonde white girl.
>
> "What do you want?" she asked.
>
> "I want to see the boss, ma'am."
>
> "For what?"
>
> "His dog bit me, ma'am, and I'm afraid I might get an infection."
>
> "Where did he bite you?"
>
> "On my leg," I lied, shying from telling her where the bite was.
>
> "Let's see," she said.
>
> "No ma'am. Can't I see the boss?"
>
> "He isn't here now," she said, and went back to her typing.
>
> I returned to work, stopping occasionally to examine the teeth marks; they were swelling. Later in the afternoon a tall white man wearing a cool white suit, a Panama hat, and white shoes came toward me.
>
> "Is this the nigger?" he asked a black boy as he pointed at me.
>
> "Yes, sir," the black boy answered.
>
> "Come here, nigger," he called me.
>
> I went to him.
>
> "They tell me my dog bit you," he said.
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> I pulled down my trousers and he looked.
>
> "Humnnn," he grunted, then laughed. "A dog bite can't hurt a nigger."
>
> "It's swelling and it hurts," I said.
>
> "If it bothers you, let me know," he said. "But I never saw a dog yet that could really hurt a nigger."
>
> He turned and walked away and the black boys gathered to watch his tall form disappear down the aisles of wet bricks.

Wright experienced this humiliation in 1924, and without question young black boys and girls are going through similar degradations in various parts of the United States in the 1990's. The inclusion of *Black Boy* in a curriculum becomes problematic through the context in which it is typically taught. Although it did not make Applebee's (1989) list of the forty-three most commonly taught books in American schools, it was named by teachers in New England as one of the forty-five most frequently recommended books in a survey by Stotsky and Anderson (1990). None of the authors in Applebee's survey was black and of

those named in Stotsky and Anderson's survey, four were black, the others being Maya Angelou, Lorraine Hansberry, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of whose books concern pre-Civil Rights movement experiences. We might conclude, therefore, that "the black experience" in America is often represented in secondary school curricula by books that focus on events taking place prior to 1955, and often long before then, in settings notorious for their oppressive treatment towards blacks.

I wish to emphasize again that the texts in and of themselves are exceptional works of literature and are essential reading for concerned citizens. But when they are among the few texts selected to depict the lives of African-American citizens they offer a very narrow, negative and potentially destructive view of the experiences of black Americans. In the 1990's we unquestionably have far too many black citizens whose lives are adversely affected by discrimination. But we also have a strong, growing black middle class and prominent, successful black leaders such as Colin Powell and Douglas Wilder. Should American schoolchildren be exposed to a view of black Americans that focuses on vitriolic, dead-end encounters with whites? Are black and white people encouraged to develop a sense of kinship with one another through exclusive exposure to such texts?

A related problem in these texts is the lumping together of "white people" as a monolithic, generally evil group. In *Black Boy,* Wright repeatedly makes statements such as "White people looked upon Negroes as a variety of children." Perhaps to Wright the "white people" of his community were quite homogeneous and could be regarded as a single culture. But many "white people" have very little in common with one another other than the fact that their skins come in various shades of a generally light hue. An Israeli-American Hasidic Jewish delivery truck driver from New York City, an Italian-American Catholic ACLU lawyer from Tampa, an Orthodox Greek-American hairstylist from Chicago, a Norwegian-American chimney sweep from rural Minnesota, a Lithuanian-American Buddhist racehorse trainer from Louisville and a mixed-nationality atheist real estate developer from the suburbs of Sacramento are all "white people," but do they represent "white America" any more than young Richard Wright represents "black America"? Should we also begin singling out white sub-groups for representation in curricula? And if so, how are we to define these sub-groups? By nationality? Religion? Region? Political affiliation? How does such an approach to selection contribute to a sense of social cohesion among students? By selecting according to sub-group characteristics, are we also helping to foster a sub-group orientation? What happens to a sense of personal uniqueness when works are selected because they represent the experiences of particular groups? Teachers

need to consider these problems when selecting materials, and consider how the experiences of the literary characters in the texts contribute to a sense of civic identity among students.

What's to Be Done?

Stephen, one of my students at the University of Oklahoma, tells the story of how, as a tenth grader in a small Oklahoma community in the 1960's, he had been suspended for three days after having been caught reading Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice;* and then after having moved to the more progressive community of Norman for his senior year he was assigned *Soul on Ice* as required reading. Stephen's experience suggests the dilemma faced by secondary English teachers in the 1990's: On what basis do teachers make decisions about the experiences they encourage students to have with literature? In the case of Stephen's teachers the decisions were no doubt determined to some extent by the various school boards' approval of particular anthologies and supplemental readings. Yet board approval only establishes parameters. We have seen in Kanawha County that a community can dispute a school board's decisions; and through much of this essay I have tried to outline difficulties in teaching texts frequently approved of by boards. At this point I'd like to discuss some possible solutions to the issues I've raised.

For me the most troublesome problem of those I've examined is whether or not to teach novels such as *Huckleberry Finn.* Many teachers have an immense loyalty to this book and regard it as essential reading; only an unsophisticated reader, they say, could fail to see the ironic distance between Twain's own views on bigotry and those expressed by the speaker, Huck. My own experiences in teaching *Huck Finn* to multiracial classes, however, have suggested to me that "understanding" the novel on an intellectual level is only one of many responses people may have to it. Many black students I have taught have acknowledged the differences in belief between author and speaker and have recognized the novel's literary merit, yet still have been deeply hurt by the attitudes expressed by Huck and requested that we please not read any more stories that used the work "nigger." I have heard this sort of student response patronizingly referred to as the "hurt feelings" of a small group of readers, a consideration that should not impair our vision of what benefits most students in the long run. I would argue that these students have experienced a much deeper pain, one that we (and I suppose that by "we" I mean white, middle class English teachers) need to try to understand and help to heal.

So am I suggesting that we stop teaching *Huckleberry Finn*? Not really, although I became increasingly troubled by the novel towards the end of my high school career. I would suggest a greater sensitivity in our teaching that reflects our recognition that the experiences of some of our students may not enable a dispassionate reading. In this light we would need to be very open-minded in listening to student responses and try to work constructively with them. If *Huck Finn* is truly a great book then students should have great experiences with it. I don't think this is possible unless we treat the book emotionally as well as intellectually.

The didactic texts present a different sort of problem for teachers. The success of *Dances with Wolves* and the frequent inclusion of "Chee's Daughter" in secondary anthologies suggests that we have a strong market for stories that criticize white industrial society by juxtaposing it with "unspoiled" cultures such as those of Native Americans. Undoubtedly industrial societies have their flaws and have exploited other cultures over the years, and are quite deserving of criticism. Yet it strikes me as decidedly unliterary to tell stories that present the issues through such shallow, polarized characterizations.

If didactic texts such as these have a place in the classroom I would argue that they be used as examples of manipulative, propagandistic texts whose message has distorted their medium. Great literature presents us with characters who are, like their readers, complex. A story such as "Chee's Daughter" could be instructive in examining how authors draw caricatures rather than characters, and how they can take a truly perplexing theme such as the clash between modern and traditional cultures and reduce it to a simplistic morality tale with a clear, unambiguous victor. Perhaps "Chee's Daughter" could be used in a context that includes more complex stories centered on the same theme, such as D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* or T.M. Aluko's *One Man, One Wife* (see Smagorinsky and Gevinson, 1989, pp. 201-3, 213-14 for more extensive suggestions).

I find the problems addressed in the section on "representative" texts to be quite troubling in that the manner in which these stories are taught seems to reinforce many of the attitudes that teachers purport to be combating through their inclusion in the curriculum. I believe as earnestly as anyone that the experiences of our various minority groups need to be shared and empathized with. I think, however, that the goal of hearing multicultural voices in a truly representative way is impossible, and that we are then left with the problem of making decisions about which "black" books to read, which "Latino" books and so on. We need, however, to represent people as complex and balanced so that when students read *Black Boy* or *Native Son* their

exposure to African-American experiences also includes family dramas such as the film *To Sleep with Anger.*

The solutions I offer here are perhaps not really solutions at all but approaches I might try if I were to be faced with these problems again. I suspect that contextual factors may influence many of our decisions for us. Like the teachers in Stephen's small, insular community we may be prohibited from using certain texts; or our school's resources may limit the range of literature from which we may select. In spite of external constraints, however, teachers still need to make principled decisions regarding the selection and teaching of literature. Articulating our principles and considering how they affect our decisions is an essential step in addressing ethical problems that face us in the teaching of literature.

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Memberships Available in NCTE Committee on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English

A limited number of memberships in the newly reconstituted Committee on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to investigate and make recommendations to counteract racism and bias in written and visual teaching materials for English and language arts classrooms; to serve as a resource for Council groups, administrators, and/or community leaders on matters pertaining to racism and racial bias in teaching English and language arts and to make recommendations for specific actions; to provide guidance and serve as a resource in eliminating racism and racial bias in teaching methods and the administration of programs in language arts and English classrooms; to develop brief information sheets on pressing or emerging issues or events in racism and racial bias in the profession. If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by January 15, 1993, explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to Candace Fatemi, Administrative Assistant to the Deputy Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.
