WHAT SHALL WE READ IN READING CLASS?

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[Assignment: Choose a current controversial issue. To defend your position on the topic, and to refute the opposing position, you will need to research scholarly journals as well as other outside sources.]

(1) The most recent battles between religious conservatives and secular humanists threaten to catch all of society in their crossfire. The minds of our nation's youth have become the territory that the religious right would claim for its own by attempting to dictate what should and should not be read in school. As a result of clashes over content in textbooks and outside reading material, our young people have experienced a steady decline in the quality of available public education. Regardless of whether liberal or conservative thought systems predominate in the political and judicial areas, education is vital to the preservation of this democratic society. As such, it must be free from outside influences, especially of the political or special-interest variety, in order to provide future generations with the skills they will require.

(2) Two people in Texas have assumed a near-dictatorship over textbooks in the United States, charging that secular forces are causing moral decline in America ("Education" 40), and purposely suppressing Christianity in favor of humanism ("Humanism" 6). Norma and Mel Gabler, an evangelical Christian couple who claim to speak for at least 75 percent of all Americans (Hefley 24), have had an astounding impact on, not only text selection, but structure and content as well. The Gablers review textbooks submitted to the selection committee in Texas (17 of the states "adopt" texts by state agencies; the others are "open" states with county and local discretion) in search of anything that might be out of line with their traditional values. In 1975, when they first began their crusade, the Gablers found plenty, since the progressive education of that decade employed "values classification" which encouraged situation ethics, cultural relativism, and the full authority of the student in determining his or her own value system (Hefley 26). The Gablers have led the chorus of "new right" voices in protest against books which present, for example: non-traditional roles of men, women, boys, and girls; theories that are not clearly distinguished from fact (evolution); critical views of United States history or views which neglect the Christian origin of our country; atheistic or agnostic views; secular humanism, masturbation, adolescent petting, or premarital sex in a positive context; Marxism in a positive context; the concept of a one-world government; anti-establishment, negative, or pessimistic views; and anything which might challenge moral absolutes or undermine parental authority (Hefley 24-26).
(3) Fearful of losing the huge Texas market—$64 million in 1983—some otherwise respectable publishers have compromised the intellectual integrity of their products by self-censorship. Bob Jones, regional representative of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, spoke for the textbook industry, commenting, "When you're publishing a book, if there's something that is controversial, it's better to take it out" (qtd. in Hentoff 29). Harper and Row, Macmillan, Houghton Mifflin, Follett, and Doubleday have also played it safe in order to get on the list of approved books in Texas by deleting those passages to which conservatives voiced objections. But the rewritten books which were tailored to satisfy conservatives in Austin end up becoming the texts used throughout the nation because "it's too expensive to print other editions which put back in what was left out for Texas" (Hentoff 29). Thus, some narrowly defined, sectarian values are shunted upon mainstream American youth.

(4) For religious conservatives in "open" states, groups like the American Education Coalition offer assistance to parents in influencing their local educators. Their ACTION kits, aimed at promoting conservative views, recently included a "how to" approach to getting elected to the school board (Hefley 26-27).

(5) The conflict continues in the courtrooms as well. In Hawkins County, Tennessee, Judge Thomas G. Hull ruled that the district must allow fundamentalist children to be excused from reading class to be taught reading at home in order to avoid "books that promote feminism, pacifism, and other themes they regard as anti-Christian" ("Decision" 36). Additionally, he awarded damages and legal fees to the families involved, which, if the ruling stands, could bankrupt the Hawkins County schools. Nat Coleman, attorney for the school board, charges that the decision "gives any off-the-wall group the opportunity to say they hold sincere beliefs and blackmail a school system with the threat of a lawsuit" ("Decision" 1). Timothy Dyk, attorney for People for the American Way, fears that the ruling will cause chaos in the schools as children are shuffled in and out of the classroom according to which material is acceptable to their parents ("Decision" 38).

(6) A sampling of the more that 400 "objectionable" stories indicates the narrow vision within the wide range of ideas which fundamentalist Christians find so repulsive as to not allow their children to be exposed to them:

Cinderella, because it mentioned magic. (Peter Pan was not objectionable, however, because it depicted flying and not growing old as make-believe rather than magic.)

Macbeth, by William Shakespeare, for its mention of witchcraft and magic.
The Wizard of Oz, by L. Frank Baum, because it portrayed a witch as good and because it revealed courage, intelligence, and compassion as personally developed rather than God-given.

The Diary of Anne Frank, because it suggested all religions are equal in a passage by Anne: "Oh, I don't mean you have to be Orthodox . . . I just mean some religion . . . It doesn't matter what. Just to believe in something."

The Revolt of Mother, by Mary Wilkins Freeman, a seventh grade short story about a woman challenging her husband's authority, because it attacks the "biblical family."

A fairy tale by Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen because it described a child's trip to a fortune-teller, which introduced children to the supernatural.

Accounts of dinosaurs if the creatures were said to be older than the biblical account of the beginning of the world.

Stories about religions other than Christianity, including worship by American Indians and followers of Islam.

A story that depicted a child's imagination as a "third eye" inside his or her head, because such representations are considered to be occult and to put too much emphasis on imagination ("Decision" 37).

(7) In another court case in Mobile, Alabama, Judge W. Brevard Hand ruled that secular humanism as a religion was being promoted in county schools and prohibited further use of 44 textbooks: five home economics books for grades 8-12, nine history books for grade 11, and thirty social studies books for all grades from 1 through 6 ("Sleight" 18). Curiously, the only humanist involved in the trial was Paul Kurtz, Professor of Philosophy at State University of New York, member of the American Humanist Association, and author of its 1973 Humanist Manifesto II. Defending the school board against lawsuits by fundamentalist Christian parents, Kurtz denied that the manifesto is a religious creed and stated that secular humanism as a "specific, organized movement" is not being taught in the schools ("Humanism" 34). Nevertheless, Judge Hand declared that humanism is indeed religion. He agreed with the plaintiffs that the school curriculum's focus on man and his values, rather than on God and his values, was offensive to the "practitioners of Judeo-Christianity" ("Sleight" 14). Because the Humanist Manifesto addresses a broad range of universal issues concerning the nature of man ("Humanist"), Hand's decision opens the door to attacks on ideas by members of the religious right. As long as this decision stands, they may file discrimination suits against any discussion of human activity that is expressed in purely conceptual terms, for failure to mention God's role right alongside.

(8) While many Americans share a common concern for the moral and ethical well-being of children, they do not
agree that the public education system is the place to conduct ideological warfare. The righteous right claims to be acting in the best interests of education, but educational quality has declined under the barrage of attacks that forces authors and editors to remove ideas from books. Good ideas are disappearing with the bad, and bedlam is creeping into the classroom.

(9) Teachers already have a tough time attempting to structure their class in a way that will not be offensive to minority groups or promote specific religious doctrine. At every national holiday, they are faced with the dilemma of how to explain the themes behind the tradition without focusing on a religious symbol or promoting a specific denomination. Literature is one way a teacher can accomplish these goals, using themes that address universal values (Ahern 234).

(10) It would seem that to reject every story to which a parent raised an objection would leave the teacher with a scarcity of material and no time to teach it. Just keeping track of which literature has been targeted for censorship is a full-time job, as the Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom indicates by its monthly publication of updates on censorship issues. Its pages contain case after case of censorship in the classrooms, libraries, educational committee meetings, and courtrooms from local scuffles to Supreme Court hearings. The religious right is targeting ideas on several fronts, aiming at theater, film, music and art, along with the printed page. The list of titles includes dozens of new entries each month, many of which have become familiar childhood classics.

(11) If teachers try to accommodate all the points of view, education will be reduced to the lowest common denominator ("Decision" 38). Rote learning and indoctrination into already established beliefs will be all that public schools have left to offer. Reason, intellect, and the ability to make responsible choices will atrophy. The history and philosophies of education indicate that:

Crucial to the preservation of democracy is freedom of inquiry and criticism at every level of schooling. Students and teachers have the right to examine any idea or doctrine or body of knowledge. . . public schools at any level cannot become spokespersons for any group interests, whether religious, anti-religious, business, industrial, patriotic, or any other. (Edwards 20)

(12) The religious right believes that they are bringing publishers "back in line" with the majority view (Hefley 24). But the majority (84 percent) in a recent survey by Penn and Schoen Associates of New York said they "oppose restrictions on access to lawful books . . . Among those who explicitly identified themselves as "born-again Christians, 74 percent agreed with this position" ("New Survey" 202). Ironically, reports of
censorship are on the rise, having doubled in the last four years. This is attributed mainly to the religious right, whose "efforts are increasingly accompanied by more sophisticated tactics of litigation, regulation, and legislation" ("Report").

(13) The religious right professes to have traditional American values at heart, yet they would systematically deny some basic first amendment freedoms to school children. Archibald Cox, Professor at Harvard Law School and former solicitor general of the United States, feels that spiritual liberty is implied in the Constitution. First amendment intentions cannot truly be resolved in terms of the original intention. However, the underlying principle was that "liberty of expression benefits more than the speaker" (Cox 9). The hearer and reader suffer if certain ideas are censored because "no man, no committee, and surely no government, has the infinite wisdom and disinterestedness accurately and unselfishly to separate what is true from what is debatable, and both from what is false" (Cox 10).

(14) Educators are at the front line battling for freedom from intrusions into their profession by sectarian zealots. They hope to stand firm on the grounds outlined by Sidney Hook, Senior Research Fellow, Hoover Institute, who states that:

... the legislature has the legal power to establish or not establish any educational institution, whether liberal or professional. But once that decision is made, then it is within the professional competence of the educators to operate and control that institution without let or hindrance from those not professionally qualified, including the legislators. (10)

(15) Educators point out with some alarm that increasing incidents of censorship are "teaching youngsters that suppression of controversial ideas is acceptable" and that students may "see suppression as an acceptable way of responding to controversial ideas"("University" 7), leaving them unprepared in a democratic society where citizens need to answer new and complex questions. Considering the problems within our society, now is not the time to narrow or eliminate possible solutions by eliminating ideas. Considering the great peril of the world, society needs all the ideas it can get.

Works Cited

