

Read Or Bury Our Traditional Stories?

I think avoiding controversial texts, like "Heart of Darkness," does nothing to serve individual growth or growth as a diverse society or community. Without reading a book like "Heart of Darkness" and considering internal and external reactions to it, we risk reaching a point where we continue to operate in the same ideological framework and do not move past certain ideas. I suppose one could argue that teaching the same text each generation can lead to the same sort of intellectual stagnation, but I would say the risk is almost negligible because the context in which each group reads "Heart of Darkness" changes through time and space. As a result, "Heart of Darkness" continues to inform people, but brings about different conclusions. For example, "Heart of Darkness" was read for over 50 years before an opinion like Chinua Achebe's was developed and published. Achebe rails against the text and Joseph Conrad for the evils he observed, but without reading "Heart of Darkness" Achebe might not have been compelled to respond to the larger issue of race and domination when and how he did. Additionally, we may not be considering other topics such as the question posed in Hillis Miller's essay "Should We Read 'Heart of Darkness'?"

As may be deduced from my comments above, I agree with Hillis Miller's general opinion that "'Heart of Darkness' should be read, ought to be read" (HoD 474). However, I somewhat disagree with Miller's opinion that it should only be read a certain way. "Heart of Darkness" is a work of fiction, so to assume everything in the book is historically accurate or valid is not reasonable. However, I think there is value in "Heart of Darkness," or most any book, regardless of how one reads it (whether as a factual representation or as a fictionalized account of events). Is reading "Heart of Darkness" without some sort of discourse, introspection, etc. dangerous? I think dangerous is overstating things, but yes, I suppose it could skew or reinforce a reader's incomplete or underdeveloped opinions. However, everything we experience is open to interpretation and if someone goes into "Heart of Darkness" looking to find examples to reinforce their negative (or positive) opinions of an issue, that is what they will likely find. Furthermore, if they do not read "Heart of Darkness," they will probably find the same type of supporting material in another text they come across. I do not think we should sacrifice the discourse and cultural growth that can come out of reading "Heart of Darkness" in a misguided attempt to avoid the risk of causing "harm." We should not avoid things just because they present potentially disquieting concepts or that they may reinforce erroneous beliefs.

We must face and consider various sets of ideas because they can contribute to the development of other unique opinions or ideas. Removing controversial texts and ideas from the conversation would prevent the social and cultural progress noted earlier. Furthermore, we, as members of society in general, should also read classic books like "Heart of Darkness" because those who came before read them. We should not read them out of blind obligation or to maintain the status quo, but to understand what shaped our forbearers' thought processes, how society has or hasn't changed, and how we can individually interpret the world in which we live.