HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

To Teach or Not To Teach?

By Cat Huang, Caroline Tucker Mehta, and Sara O'Brien

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Learning about a topic like the legacy of slavery can be overwhelming. Community Care Resources are available for members of the Harvard community seeking support for mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

BACKGROUND

In this fictional case, literature Professor Jamie Bordwin tries to decide whether to keep *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in this year's "Introduction to Literature" syllabus or swap it for a postcolonial text like *Americanah*. He calls together a group of colleagues, and together they weigh the historical and literary value of *Huck Finn* against the potential harm it may cause students, as well as the place of postcolonial texts in the literary canon. This fictional case builds on challenges faced by university professors and academic departments around the United States in recent decades as they determine which texts to use in humanities courses.[1]

Assistant Professor Jamie Bordwin sat in his third-floor office, fiddling with a pen and reading over his revised syllabus for the Introduction to Literature course he would be teaching for the first time in the fall. While he had been at the university for five years, most of his courses had focused on his area of study: colonial and early American literature. But when his colleague Dave Gilbert had announced that he was ready to stop teaching Intro to Lit after 23 years, the chair of the department, Monique Richards, had asked Jamie whether he'd consider taking over. Jamie was known for his engaging, interactive lecture style, and since all English majors were

[1] For an exploration of the challenges humanities professors are facing in making decisions like the one in this case, see Louis Menard's "What's So Great About Great-Books Courses?" https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/whats-so-great-about-great-books-courses-roosevelt-montas-rescuing-socrates.

required to take Intro to Lit, and many others took it to satisfy their humanities core requirement, the course could get quite large.

Jamie looked forward to teaching Intro to Lit; he was excited to reach a broader audience of students than he had with many of his courses and appreciated the new challenge. However, he did feel slightly apprehensive as he thought about teaching 500 years of literature over the course of one semester. Originally, he had planned on keeping Dave's syllabus largely unchanged for the first year.

Over the past few weeks, though, he had been rethinking that plan. While all the texts on the syllabus were clearly foundational in various ways, Jamie was concerned that some of them might be problematic. He was currently mulling over one possible switch for the fall: dropping *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by American author Mark Twain, and adding *Americanah*, by Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie.

Jamie had asked Monique to help him think through this possible change; she was due at his office any minute. As Monique's expertise was in post-colonial literature, he knew she'd have valuable insights. He'd also asked a few colleagues to join them: Dave Gilbert himself and Liz Fisher. Liz's scholarship focused on 19th century American and British literature, and Jamie knew that she had cut *Huck Finn* from her American literature survey course several years earlier.[2]

"Hey!" Monique appeared in the open office doorway, smiling. "How are you?"

"I'm happy to see you." Jamie returned her smile. "I've been staring at this syllabus for too long by myself."

"Then let's stare at it together," Monique said, sitting down and grabbing one of the printed syllabi Jamie had stacked in the middle of the table.

"I also asked Dave to join us," Jamie informed her. "I'm curious to know more about the thinking behind his syllabus before I make final changes. And since I'm considering removing *Huck Finn*, I asked Liz to come as well; I remember her talking at a department meeting last year about taking it off her syllabus."

"And here she is now," Monique said, as Liz appeared in the doorway. Right behind her was Dave, who was just finishing a slice of pizza from the cafe downstairs.

[2] In his essay "The Essential Discomfort of Reading Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*," Derek Bunting details efforts to remove the book from high schools, dating back to the late twentieth century. https://www.literaryfocus.org/post/the-essential-discomfort-of-reading-mark-twain-s-huckleberry-finn.

“Thanks for coming, both of you,” Jamie said. “I didn’t want to make any decisions on my own. Here, take a revised syllabus.”

“A paper syllabus? I thought I was the dinosaur around here,” Dave joked, pulling a pen from the pocket of his blazer.

“I know, I know,” Jamie laughed. “I just like having the paper to scribble on. I don’t even have an e-reader.”

“Whereas some of our students haven’t picked up a real book in years,” Liz chuckled, flipping the pages of the syllabus as she scanned it.

“As you know, I’m thinking about making changes to the Intro to Lit syllabus for the fall,” Jamie began. “It’s clearly a fantastic overview of important movements and works, but I do have some concerns about a few of the texts. In particular, I’m thinking about swapping out *Huck Finn*. I know we’ve gotten feedback from students uncomfortable with its reliance on racially charged language and stereotypes, and its liberal use of the n-word.”[3]

“What would you add?” Dave asked.

“I’m thinking of adding *Americanah*, by Adichie,” Jamie responded.

“I haven’t read that one,” Dave admitted.

“It’s about a young Nigerian woman named Ifemelu who attends Princeton. She has to learn to navigate the racial hierarchies here in the States,” Jamie explained. “Adichie also writes quite powerfully about post-colonial Nigeria in the book when Ifemulu returns home. I think she brings such a valuable perspective into the canon on her experiences as a Nigerian woman and writer. But I’m curious to hear your experiences assigning *Huck Finn*.”[4]

“I understand that some students find *Huck Finn* offensive,” Dave conceded, “but at the same time, some of them find it quite powerful. I remember talking to a student who took the class last year, and he loved getting to read *Huck Finn* because of the ending, where Huck basically condemns slavery. He felt like it had an important moral takeaway, and he probably would have never read that book otherwise.”[5]

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[3] In her 1996 introduction to a new edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, Toni Morrison wrote about her discomfort with *Huckleberry Finn*, but also said that the novel should still be considered “classic literature.” See: Morrison, T. “Introduction.” In Twain, Mark (1996). The adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Fischkin. S.F. (ed.). Oxford University Press. Please be aware that the literary criticism about the novel may contain offensive racial epithets.

[4] For more on *Americanah*, see: https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/books/review/americanah-by-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie.html.

[5] The ending of Huckleberry Finn has inspired much debate in literary criticism. See, for example, Banta, M. (1969). Rebirth or Revenge: The Endings of “Huckleberry Finn” and “the American.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, *15*(2), 191–207. Please be aware that the literary criticism about the novel may contain offensive racial epithets.

"Plus, Twain was important not just for his social commentary but for his style as well," Monique pointed out. "So many early American works were imitations of British style, while Twain broke away from that tradition, with his use of American dialect, for example."[6]

"It's undeniable that Twain is foundational in American literature, but a lot has changed in the time since *Huck Finn* was published," Liz argued. "When we ask students to read the book, we're exposing them to the n-word more than 200 times, not to mention the racial stereotypes in the text and the hateful views that various characters espouse. I decided that I just can't justify the potential harm that causes to students."

"That's what I'm worried about," Jamie agreed. "And, Dave, you mentioned the student who never would have read Twain on their own. But how many students would pick up Adichie, or any contemporary African author, on their own? Shouldn't we make space for their voices in a course like this?"

"And many diverse contemporary writers like Adichie see themselves as a continuation of the great canon of English literature," Monique added. "They see teaching their works alongside the classic canon as a way of reclaiming their literary heritage, especially as writers whose identities have historically been excluded from the canon."[7]

"But there's value in continuing to teach foundational texts that serve as literary touchstones of the texts that came after," Dave maintained. "In a survey course like this, we have to make choices about how far to trace the inspiration in the primary texts students read. There's only so much time. Texts like *Huck Finn* are foundational and even essential readings in order to understand much of modern and contemporary literature."

"I've been thinking about that," Jamie sighed. "For example, I thought about swapping *Huck Finn* for *James*, Percival Everett's reimagining of *Huck* from Jim's perspective. But could students appreciate the brilliance of that book without reading *Huck*?"[8]

"Exactly," Dan agreed. "We're responsible for giving students the foundation so they can appreciate books like *James*. The canon is the canon for a reason."

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[6] For more on Twain's style, see: Sevik, G. (2015). Poetry, Prosody, Parody. *The Mark Twain Annual*, 13(1), 130–148 https://doi.org/10.5325/marktwaij.13.1.0130.

[7] To learn more about an approach that Stanford University took in the late 1980s and 1990s that is similar to the one Monique suggests, see: https://www.chronicle.com/article/stanford-revisits-the-course-that-set-off-the-culture-wars/?sra=true. For an example of the arguments within the "canon wars" debate, see Bloom, A. (1987). The closing of the American mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students. Simon and Schuster; Nussbaum, M. C. (1987, November 5). [Review of The Closing of the American Mind, by A. Bloom]. *The New York Review of Book*s, 34(17) https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1987/11/05/undemocratic-vistas/.

[8] In 2025, Percival Everett won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. See more here: https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/22691.

"That's true," Monique mused. "For instance, Toni Morrison used to cite William Faulkner as one of her inspirations in the literary world, and scholars have suggested that *Paradise Lost* influenced the writings of Faulkner. So, we do lose a bit of the literary lineage if we don't teach *Paradise Lost*."[9]

"*Paradise Lost*—now we're speaking my language," Dave joked. His scholarship focused on British literature of the Renaissance and Reformation.

"But we're not talking about cutting *Paradise Lost*," Liz reminded the group. "Not all books that are part of the canon deserve to stay there indefinitely and uncritically. Particularly books that expose students to harmful language and imagery. I mean, think about another text we often get complaints about: *Heart of Darkness*. Chinua Achebe—Chimamanda Adichie's mentor—denounced Joseph Conrad as a 'bloody racist' for his offensive portrayals of Africans.[10] One could even argue that he wanted *Heart of Darkness* to be eliminated from the Western canon."

"Well, I do have students who read *Heart of Darkness* and conclude that it's racist because of how Conrad represented the native people of the Congo as 'savages' and uncivilized," Monique responded. "But, generally, when I teach the historical context about Conrad's lived experiences going on expeditions in the Congo as a young man — informing his disillusionment with Belgian imperialism — students understand *Heart of Darkness* as a response to and critique of imperialism and racism."[11]

"And, of course, Twain's views on slavery shifted dramatically throughout his life, and he wanted others to question the status quo when he published *Huck Finn,*" Jamie added. "He even argued for some form of reparations,[12] which is still pretty radical today."

"That's why, in my teaching," Monique continued, "I tend to take an approach that prioritizes close reading. History and context are important—especially in post-colonial literature—but I've seen trends in English departments where students begin to read certain political interpretations or narratives that just might not be in the text. I tend to encourage students to seek the value of what's actually on the page, in the text, and to try to separate the writer from

[9] For more on the possible influence of Faulkner on Morrison, see: Denard, C. C. (Ed.). (2008). Toni Morrison: Conversations. University Press of Mississippi, 24-28; Dunkel, S. (2018). Toni Morrison and William Faulkner's Verbose Ghosts. *The Faulkner Journal, 32*(1), 51–66. https://doi.org/10.1353/fau.2018.0008; Vendrame, A. (1997). Toni Morrison: A Faulknerian novelist? *Amerikastudien / American Studies, 42*(4), 679–684. For more on the possible influences of Milton's *Paradise Lost* on Faulkner, see: Gans, T. (2011). Creation and rebellion in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. *Inquiries Journal, 3*(05). http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=532; Hopper, V. F. (1947). Faulkner's Paradise Lost. *The Virginia Quarterly Review, 23*(3), 405–420.

[10] In 1975, Achebe gave a lecture in which he called Conrad a "bloody racist." In 1977, he published the lecture and slightly amended the language to "thoroughgoing racist." See Achebe, C. (2016). An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. *The Massachusetts Review, 57*(1), 14–27; Central Oregon Community College (2011). Achebe on Conrad's Heart of Darkness, https://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/eng109/achebeonconrad.htm.

[11] For an example of the scholarly debate about Conrad's possible critique of imperialism, see: Hawkins, H. (1979). Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in Heart of Darkness. *PMLA, 94*(2), 286–299. https://doi.org/10.2307/461892.

[12] Fishkin, S.F. (1995). Teaching Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/teachers/huck/essay.html.

the work and the art from the artist. Not to say that history and context isn't important, but I have seen a sort of trend where students begin to read things into works without the evidence in the text to back it up."[13]

"And we can take that close-reading approach with *Huck Finn*," Dave argued. "When I taught it, we studied the prose, critical analysis, and moral lessons, and then we analyzed how the stereotypes and language are a product of the time when the book was written.[14] I hate to see us lose a text that's so meaningful in the canon and such high-quality literature."

"Ah, 'high-quality literature,'" Liz repeated. "What makes literature 'high quality'? We rely on a list that was created in a time when the authors and the people determining the quality bar all looked alike and came from similar backgrounds. Our students and the pool of great literature are so much more diverse now—shouldn't the syllabus reflect that?"[15]

"I see what you're both saying," Jamie said. "But Monique, something you just said is sticking with me: you help students try to separate the art from the artist. I had forgotten until now about the uproar some years back over Chimamanda Adichie making controversial remarks about trans women.[16] Some students would be even more upset about that than they would be about the racism in *Huck Finn*. Would I just be swapping one problematic text for another?"

"I heard that Adichie even doubled down on her comments after one of her former students pushed back against her,"[17] Liz added. "Not that I'm saying you shouldn't include her book, but it's something that could be on students' minds when they see her name—or Google her."

"We can't cut every writer who ever said or did something problematic from the canon," Dave pointed out. "We'd have nothing left—or at least nothing very interesting or meaningful! We can address concerns about author identity or political views, whatever the time period, when we teach the works. But a great work of literature is a great work of literature."

"Again, what's 'great' is subjective," Liz reminded him.

"But often scholarship agrees on what's great," Dave argued. "*Huck Finn* is undeniably a great work of literature."

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[13] For more on close reading as a mode of analysis, see: https://classicswrites.hsites.harvard.edu/close-reading-0

[14] Here, Dave adds the analytical method that some scholars call "historicism" to the method of close reading. See more here: https://philonotes.com/2023/03/what-is-historicism.

[15] For more on the diversification of higher education, see: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2024/05/21/ace-report-higher-ed-diversifying-outcome-gaps-persist

[16] In March 2017, Adichie "came under attack after she failed to call transgender women 'real women' in response to a question," according to *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/13/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-clarifies-transgender-comments.

[17] Adichie stated that the controversy over her comments was "fundamentally about language orthodoxy," later saying, "I don't think I have anything to apologise [sic] for," according to *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/21/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-nothing-to-apologise-for-transgender-women.

"Nobody here would deny that *Huck Finn* is an important literary text," Liz agreed, "but that doesn't mean we automatically include it in the syllabus. In my experience, it harms students. I can't in good conscience include it in my teaching."

"I just think you're doing students a disservice if you cut it," Dave said. "This is a foundational course. Students need to read foundational texts."

"It's that kind of attitude that has kept us from diversifying the canon for so long!" Liz exclaimed.

"In post-colonial studies," Monique jumped in, seeking to diffuse the tension, "we see that even contemporary authors who are thinking more critically about identity and power aren't perfectly progressive or politically correct. I often feel like I try to teach all types of texts, as a way to learn from humanity and their past mistakes and learnings. As instructors, we need to be aware of the complexities of the authors and indicate to students that assigning a text is an invitation to read critically and engage with perspectives and experiences different from one's own. Jamie, you could do that with either of the texts we're talking about."

"But I might get pushback either way," Jamie sighed. "I fear that I'll hear criticism from students no matter what I choose."

"And frankly, in this political climate, you might want to be careful subbing in a contemporary African author—particularly one most people haven't heard of[18]—for a canonical American author," Dave counseled. "You don't want to be subject to a media firestorm the year before you come up for tenure."[19]

"Adichie is a MacArthur 'genius grant' awardee!"[20] Liz burst out. "She's hardly unknown. Though the best way to ensure that award-winning African authors stay unheard of is not to assign them in general ed classes like Intro to Lit."

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18 While Dave is unfamiliar with Adichie's work generally, some would argue that she's better known in the United States for her extremely popular 2009 TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," than she is for her literary fiction. To watch her TED Talk, visit https://youtu.be/D9Ihs241zeg?si=G9V384eDkJcW5FgS.

19 Across the United States, professors "perceived by the right as progressive" have found themselves facing campaigns calling for their removal. Social media often plays an important role in these campaigns. See: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/14/chris-rufo-jo-boaler-academics-woke#:~:text='A%20political%20attack',a%20reckless%20disregard%20for%20accuracy.%E2%80%9D. With this increased scrutiny, professors see themselves as under "surveillance." Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/04/us/professors-classroom-surveillance-politics.html - :~:text=In late 2024, a student,Indiana University" during his classes.

20 Adichie was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2008: https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2008/chimamanda-adichie.

“Though Dave isn’t wrong about the current moment,” Monique sighed. “It’s a delicate balance weighing what a text provides in terms of its literary merit or its lessons and history against its possible impacts in the classroom. In the end, you need to do what feels right to you.”

“Intro to Lit is in good hands with you,” Dave said reassuringly as he stood up to go. “I look forward to hearing what you decide to do with the syllabus. Keep us updated!”

As Dave, Monique, and Liz filed out of his office, Jamie sat baffled, more unsure than ever what felt right to him. He knew he had to submit his syllabus pronto; the college bookstore was supposed to have finalized book orders last week. What should he include in the course?

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