HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

To Teach or Not To Teach?: *Reader's Theater*

Script Adapted from To Teach or Not To Teach? case study 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.

CHARACTERS:

Narrator, Monique, Jamie, Dave, Liz

NARRATOR:

Assistant Professor Jamie Bordwin was reading over his revised syllabus for the Introduction to Literature course he would be teaching for the first time in the fall, taking over from his colleague Dave Gilbert. He looked up to see Department Chair Monique Richards.

MONIQUE:

Hey! How are you?

JAMIE:

Happy to see you—I've been staring at this syllabus for too long by myself.

MONIQUE:

Then let's stare at it together.

JAMIE:

I'm really looking forward to taking over Intro to Lit, though it feels like I have some big shoes to fill. I mean, Dave taught it for more than two decades!

MONIQUE:

You'll be great. It's a large course, and you're such an engaging and interactive lecturer. That feels particularly important, since a lot of students looking to satisfy the humanities core requirement take it, plus all the English majors. But you said you're thinking about making a few changes to the syllabus?

JAMIE:

I'm really torn. I've been thinking about dropping *Huck Finn* and adding *Americanah*.

NARRATOR:

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain, had been a key text in Dave Gilbert's syllabus, not to mention an American classic for over a century. *Americanah*, by Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie, had won a number of awards after its release in 2013, but was far less famous.

JAMIE:

I was hoping that you could help me think through the decision with your post-colonial expertise. I also asked Dave to join us. I'm curious to know more about the thinking behind his syllabus before I make final changes. And I asked Liz to come as well; I remember her talking at a department meeting last year about taking *Huck Finn* off her syllabus.

MONIQUE:

Here she is now.

NARRATOR:

Liz Fisher appeared in the doorway, followed by Dave Gilbert.

JAMIE:

Thanks for coming, both of you. Here, take a revised syllabus.

DAVE:

(*joking*) A paper syllabus? I thought I was the dinosaur around here.

JAMIE:

(*chuckling*) As you know, I'm thinking about making changes this fall. Dave, your syllabus was clearly a fantastic overview of important movements and works, but I do have some concerns about some 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.

DAVE:

What would you add?

JAMIE:

I'm thinking of adding *Americanah*, by Adichie.

DAVE:

I haven't read that one.

JAMIE:

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. 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*.

DAVE:

I understand that some students find *Huck Finn* offensive, but at the same time, some of them find it quite powerful. I remember talking to a student last year who 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.

MONIQUE:

Plus, Twain was important not just for his social commentary but for his style. So many early American works were imitations of British style, while Twain broke away from that tradition—like with his use of American dialect.[1]

LIZ:

It's undeniable that Twain is foundational in American literature, but a lot has changed in the time since *Huck Finn* was published. 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 and the hateful views that various characters espouse. I personally just can't justify the potential harm that causes to students.

JAMIE:

That's what I'm worried about. 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?

MONIQUE:

Many diverse contemporary writers like Adichie see themselves as a continuation of the great canon of English literature. They see teaching their works alongside the classic canon as reclaiming their literary heritage, especially as writers whose identities have historically been excluded from the canon.

DAVE:

But there's value in continuing to teach foundational texts that serve as literary touchstones. 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.

JAMIE:

I've been thinking about that. 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*?

DAVE:

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

MONIQUE:

That's true. 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*.

LIZ:

But we're not talking about cutting *Paradise Lost*. Not all books that are part of the canon deserve to stay there indefinitely and uncritically. 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. One could even argue that he wanted *Heart of Darkness* to be eliminated from the Western canon.

MONIQUE:

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. But, generally, when I teach the historical context about Conrad's lived experiences going on expeditions in the Congo as a young man — which informed his disillusionment with Belgian imperialism — students understand *Heart of Darkness* as a critique of imperialism and racism.

JAMIE:

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*. He even argued for some form of reparations,[2] which is still pretty radical today.

MONIQUE:

That's why 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 and to try to separate the art from the artist.

DAVE:

And we can take that close-reading approach with *Huck Finn*. 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. I hate to see us lose a text that's so meaningful in the canon and such high-quality literature.

LIZ:

Ah, "high-quality literature." 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?

JAMIE:

I see what you're both saying. 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. 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?

LIZ:

I heard that Adichie even doubled down on her comments after one of her former students pushed back against her. 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.

DAVE:

We can't cut every writer who ever said or did something problematic from the canon. 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.

LIZ:

Again, what's "great" is subjective.

DAVE:

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

LIZ:

Nobody here would deny that *Huck Finn* is an important literary text, 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.

DAVE:

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

LIZ:

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

MONIQUE:

(*diffusing the tension*) In post-colonial studies, we see that even contemporary authors who are thinking more critically about identity and power aren't perfectly progressive or politically correct. As instructors, we need to 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.

JAMIE:

(*sighing*) But I might get pushback either way. I fear that I'll hear criticism from students no matter what I choose.

DAVE:

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—for a canonical American author. You don't want to be subject to a media firestorm the year before you come up for tenure.

LIZ:

Adichie is a MacArthur "genius grant" awardee! 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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MONIQUE:

Sadly, Dave isn't wrong about the current moment. 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.

DAVE:

(*reassuring*) Intro to Lit is in good hands with you. I look forward to hearing what you decide to do with the syllabus. Keep us updated!

NARRATOR:

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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