

# Why College Students Have More in Common with Non-PC Authors Than They Realize

Several years ago, I visited the two-room shack in Tupelo, Mississippi, in which Elvis Presley was born and in which he spent his childhood. To my great surprise, one of the few items hanging from the sparsely decorated walls of the home was a framed copy of Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If," which I knew well, largely because my father would recite it to me on a regular basis when I was a child. I was surprised that this particular poem should be on the wall of this particular home in the backwoods of the Deep South. It somehow seemed out of place. My curiosity getting the better of me, I asked why the poem was there and was told that it would have been taught to Elvis at his public school and was, therefore, part of the culture in which he was raised. So Elvis, a poor Southern boy living in the poorest state in the whole of the United States, would have known Kipling in general, and this particular poem by Kipling in particular. He would have known it because it was part of the high school curriculum. With this revelation, my eyes were opened to an appreciation and respect for the quality of education during the years of the Great Depression, even in the poorest schools in the poorest parts of the country. I dread to think what garbage, purporting to be literature, is being taught in Tupelo's school system today.

Fast forward from 1930s Mississippi to Manchester, England in July of last year. On July 16, members of the Student Union at the University of Manchester scrubbed out Kipling's "If" from a wall at the university. In its place, they daubed the words of Maya Angelou's poem, "Still I Rise." The choice of poetry had nothing to do with literary merit and everything to do with political correctness. Kipling's poem was being removed from the wall because, according to the student leaders,

Kipling “stands for the opposite of liberation, empowerment, and human rights.” Maya Angelou’s poem was put in Kipling’s place, not for its literary merit, but because she was “a black female poet and civil rights activist.”

For what it’s worth, I am no advocate of Kipling’s politics, sharing many of the concerns expressed by the students. I have no sympathy for his idolization of the British Empire, his imperialistic and militaristic jingoism, nor his support for the oppression of minorities, both black and white. With regard to the latter, Kipling supported the British Empire’s alliance with the diamond and gold mining magnates to crush the agrarian culture of the Afrikaner farmers in South Africa during the Boer War. As for “If,” it is a fine poem, formally speaking, and is perennially popular. It was voted “the nation’s favourite poem” in a BBC-sponsored poll in Britain in 1995. It is, however, trite as a purported philosophy of life, failing to rise above the level of pragmatic utilitarianism, except perhaps in its advocacy of a pseudo-pagan neo-stoicism. It’s more John Wayne than Jesus Christ. It reminds me, in some ways, of Polonius’ advice to his son Laertes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which enunciates a philosophy of life devoid of the life of grace and therefore ultimately worthless and indeed deadly. Kipling’s advice to his son combines the pagan virtue of stoic selflessness with prideful “manliness,” never stooping to the self-serving creed of Polonius, but is equally devoid of anything hinting of holiness.

It is perhaps no surprise that Kipling was listed among the “heretics” in G. K. Chesterton’s book of that name, condemned by Chesterton, ironically, for his cosmopolitanism and his belief in the globalism of the Pax Britannica. I say “ironically” because the students at Manchester University would also, no doubt, consider themselves cosmopolitans and advocates of globalism. Like Kipling, they would presumably spurn the “pettiness” of local patriotism and its “small-minded” resistance to the globalist progress towards “world

peace.” They have more in common with Kipling than they realize, his alleged racism notwithstanding.

If, however, I agree with Chesterton and the Manchester University students that Kipling was a “heretic,” I don’t believe that heretics should be burned, nor that their works should be banned. This is where I part ways with these misguided students. I might not agree with what Kipling says, in “If” or elsewhere, but I am willing to defend his right to say it. I am also enough of a lover of beauty that, even if I don’t agree with what he says, I can appreciate the way that he says it. And this goes for a host of other great poets and writers who might be considered “heretics”: Homer, Virgil, Milton, Byron, Shelley, Keats. And so on. The difference between the liberality of the liberal arts and the censorship imposed by political liberals is that advocates of the liberal arts invite the “heretics” to the great conversation whereas political liberals seek to silence them as dangerous dissidents. Free speech protects freedom, and free speech can only exist if we agree to love our enemies. In the absence of such love, as we have seen in Nazi Germany and in communist countries, the banning of “heretical” books ends with the burning of “heretics.”

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