

How PC Moralism Cuts Us Off From Our Cultural Heritage

Anyone who has read classic literature knows that there are things in old books that offend our sensibilities. And this isn't a new phenomenon either. Every generation sees something in the thought and writing of previous generations that it doesn't like or that it finds offensive.

The difference today is not that there are any more things about the past we don't like, but in our reaction to them.

Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Brian Morton takes note of the increasing tendency among young people to condemn out-of-hand any piece of literature that contains an intolerant character or distasteful idea.

In the article, titled "Virginia Woolf? Snob! Richard Wright? Sexist! Dostoyevsky? Anti-Semite!" Morton mentions meeting a college student who couldn't bring himself to read more than fifty pages into Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* because he encountered an anti-Semitic character.

Every generation down to the last one took the warnings of the occasional disagreeableness of the past under consideration and then read old books anyway. You were not expected to find these things appealing, but it was always expected that you understand the mentality behind them, a mentality you could only understand if you read about it.

But today's readers are different. Says Morton:

When they discover the anti-Semitism of Wharton or Dostoyevsky, the racism of Walt Whitman or Joseph Conrad, the sexism of Ernest Hemingway or Richard Wright, the class snobbery of E. M. Forster or Virginia Woolf, not all of them

express their repugnance as dramatically as the student I talked to, but many perform an equivalent exercise, dumping the offending books into a trash basket in their imaginations.

To today's Politically Correct generation, books should not be read because they are good, but only because we agree with them. Because of this, our society is becoming increasingly inbred—which is why we see so many intellectual hemophiliacs: people who can't sustain the wound of disagreement, lest they bleed to death.

Disagreement today is less a provocation to discussion and debate, and more an excuse for maledictions and anathemas. This is producing a generation of people who think in sound bites and talk in slogans.

The funny thing about this is that it used to be religiously conservative people who were caricatured as closed-minded and easily offended. Today it is just the opposite.

Politically and socially, I am a little to the right of Attila the Hun. But last year I read the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series, books that could easily have offended my sensibilities given the lesbian heroine and its setting—a culture (Swedish) that exemplifies many of the things I abhor. But, despite this, I thoroughly enjoyed them.

I didn't agree with the way the characters lived or the values they held, but I could at least understand them and see the world, for a moment, as they might see it. They did nothing to change my opinions, but they expanded my vision.

The irony, of course, is those who have produced this close-mindedness are the ones who pretend to stand for openness and tolerance.

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