

# Cancel Culture Is Undermining Learning and Harming Students Like Me

In my tenth grade English class, just like many other American students, I read some of the works of the late [Joseph Conrad](#), an unbounded explorer and captivating writer.

But my class did not analyze Conrad's books as my father or grandfather did when they were my age.

Instead of discussing how his works shaped authors-to-come and how his novels were some of the earliest modernist ones, we debated whether or not he should even be taught in the classroom.

We did not study the stories of exploration and tragedy that captivated the many authors who shaped the Western psyche; rather, we had long arguments over whether or not to cast him out of the literary canon entirely because of some of his racially insensitive statements, which in his time were not unorthodox.

Put simply, we were taught to throw the baby out with the bathwater – to hold past figures like Conrad to a modern standard unthinkable for those of his era, and to throw those who could not meet such standards out of the libraries of our schools.

One year later, I have grown to see [cancel culture intensify](#) with the capricious nature of political debate in 2020, with some of humanity's most pivotal philosophers and writers like [Aristotle](#) and [Shakespeare](#) being its current targets. While the immediate consequences may be hard to see, our youth – the future of our nation – will ultimately end up having to pay the price for America's cancel culture.

Some of the country's schools, pushed by activists and influencers to embrace cancel culture, have begun focusing on the supposed harm of individual out-of-context words without understanding their broader meaning in a text.

For example, in 2019, members of the New Jersey state government [attempted to remove Mark Twain's \*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn\* from the state's educational institutions](#), citing numerous uses of racial slurs and stereotypes. But the 19th century book, which shares the title of "[Great American Novel](#)" with the likes of *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, [is in fact an anti-racist one](#). It unmaskes the racist falsehoods that were used to justify slavery for centuries, while also [showcasing the humanity of enslaved characters](#) and bringing an egalitarian message to readers.

Unfortunately, the near-sighted crowd that wants to ban this book from schools has failed to critically analyze the book's meaning. The usage of the n-word in the novel to showcase racist attitudes moved many to press for its removal from America's literary canon. Some schools have already [heeded their words](#).

The idea is that the removal of such a novel will shield the nation's schoolchildren from bigoted words and sentiments, but this will not be the real outcome.

By removing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from our schools, we lose one of the most influential anti-racist books of our time.

Continually canceling old figures as we update our definition of "woke" or "PC" will lead to the obliteration of our most important works as a species. There would be no historical mistakes to learn from, nor successes to admire.

We would be left on an artificial and isolated loop of history – and if we cannot teach the nation's youth about the problems of the past, they are bound to imitate them in the future.

Mark Twain's novel was obviously one that spoke out against racism, but what about figures who outright supported bigoted views? Are they to be tossed into the dustbin of history?

Aristotle, who is regarded as one of the greatest philosophers to ever live, was himself [openly supportive of slavery](#). Only several weeks ago, *The New York Times* [published a piece](#) that argued against the cancellation of Aristotle for these views. It was met with criticism from professors such as Bryan W. Van Norden, [who stated that](#) “[professors] also need to remember that among our students are people who have felt firsthand the continuing practical consequences of Aristotle's more heinous views.”

Now, of course, nobody (and especially not me) is arguing that we should be defending Aristotle's views against equality, which belong in antiquity. But it is important to remember [his positive contributions to modern political theory, physics, economics, and psychology](#) – some things that we, in the modern era, regard as integral parts of Western civilization.

Should we cast away the remainder of Aristotle's thoughts and ideas because of a few bad apples? We would lose some of the very foundations of the modern world.

In addition, it is unreasonable to hold the “heinous” beliefs of ancient figures to modern ethical standards. Instead of ignoring their thoughts as a whole, we should understand their faults and teach them to our youth, so they understand why our society deems them to be unacceptable.

All that being said, Professor Van Norden's statement resonated at first with me. As a Jewish person myself, I have cringed at works like William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which contains [highly stereotypical depictions of Jewish people](#). Many of these stereotypes ended up influencing centuries of antisemitic sentiment in Europe and worldwide.

Nevertheless, I have come to understand that the Bard's other

works – *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet* – have all had profound positive impacts on literature. Rest assured, I won't be trying to cancel Shakespeare anytime soon.

The burden of a society that continually condemns old figures as progressive quotas change with time lies on the students of America. It is nothing short of Orwellian: yesterday, at war with Eurasia, tomorrow, at war with Eastasia. Yesterday, reading Aristotle, tomorrow, burning his works in the name of progressivism.

I introduced my experiences with Joseph Conrad's books in the beginning of this article for a very important reason: the alternative introduction to his novels that my class was given was not just a simple trigger warning. It foreshadowed a long, dark path of literary suppression, one that will continue to significantly limit intellectual domains in the pursuit of a society free of offense at the cost of our most beloved texts: a society where ignorance is strength.

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