Empathy in the Classroom: How Great Books Create Meaningful Discussion

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Table of Contents

Dedication……………………………………………………………………………..…4

Abstract………………………………………………………………………………...5

Chapter 1

Rooted in Love……………………………………………………………………………6

Truth in Fiction……………………………………………………………………………7

A Post-Racial World?……………………………………………………………………..8

It Starts With Me…………………………………………………………………………11

Empathy……………………………………………………………………………….…12

Chapter 2

Cultivating Compassion…………………………………………………………………14

Empathetic Care…………………………………………………………………………16

Civil Rights………………………………………………………………………………20

Past and Present…………………………………………………………………….……21

Institutions of Change……………………………………………………………………27

Biblical Conviction………………………………………………………………………32

Chapter 3

Mark Twain………………………………………………………………………………34

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn………………………..…………………………..…36

Controversy: Historic and Present……………………………………………………….38

Teaching Huck Finn…………………………………………………………...………40

Chapter 4

Lorraine Hansberry………………………………………………………………………43

A Raisin in the Sun……………………………………………………………………………46

Teaching a Raisin in the Sun……………………………………………………….………50

Chapter 5

Nic Stone…………………………………………………………………………………….53

Dear Martin…………………………………………………………………………………54

Teaching Dear Martin………………………………………………………………………59

Chapter 6

Angie Thomas………………………………………………………………………………61

The Hate U Give……………………………………………………………………………63

The Hate U Give Controversy……………………………………………………...………66

Teaching the Hate U Give……………………………………………………………......71

Chapter 7

A Case Study in Pedagogy……………………………………………………….………72

References…………………………………………………………………………….……76

Dedicated to my parents for their support throughout this thesis, bridge builders past and present, and Jesus Christ, the ultimate bridge builder.

Abstract

Every day it seems there is another news story detailing our problem of division and polarization, especially where race is concerned. In this thesis, I will explore the ways in which teachers can facilitate empathy within their students, especially through utilizing literary works that address prejudice and division. I intend to approach this topic through the lens of a biblical worldview and draw from current scholarship in making a case for literature as a lesson in empathy. I will conclude with addressing a variety of well-known literary works and the practical ways in which teachers can utilize them in the classroom.

Keywords: empathy, diversity, race, ethnicity, literature

Artist Statement

Rooted in Love

“It ought to be possible . . . for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated.” – John F. Kennedy. From the time I was very young, I have always had a passion for seeing human flourishing and for seeing every person treated with dignity, love, and respect. Growing up in the church, I was familiar with the Greatest Commandment; …“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Matthew 22:37-40). I have also long been familiar with the Golden Rule, which tells us to do to others as we would have them do to us (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Matthew 7:12).

I quickly discovered the gravity of these verses as a young, preteen girl, acutely affected by the times someone has shown intentional kindness toward me. I can still remember being a child, sitting in church next to my mom and the faces of the pastors and leaders who showed us kindness when we were new in our faith. I can remember feeling welcomed and like I belonged, even at a time when my knowledge of the Bible was minimal. I can remember the students in my youth group who welcomed me and made me feel at home. I also, during middle and high school, experienced times when I didn’t feel welcomed. Times when I was bullied, excluded, and left out. This only amplified my passion to never see another person treated in this way, and to see every person treated with the kindness that Jesus calls us to in the Scriptures.

As I got older, this passion began to extend beyond the people that I knew to those that I saw hurting in the world at large. This birthed within me a passion for the marginalized and those who are “othered” by society, especially because of things that are well beyond their control. I began, little by little, to develop a paradigm for biblical justice through reading books like *The Future of Our Faith* by Ron Sider and *Compassion & Conviction* by Justin Giboney. These books helped me frame important and complex social issues through a consistent, biblical worldview. They also showed me that, as believers, we cannot look to secular politicians and parties to lead us, but rather, we are to look to the timeless truths found in Scripture. At a time when we were slowly starting to inch toward our current era of political polarization, these books helped guide me to the platform of Jesus and ethics rooted in Christian truth and love.

Truth in Fiction

In high school, I was blessed with a thousand role models in the form of characters, who taught me what it means to use my voice and stand up for those who cannot speak for themselves. I was taught by Atticus Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who took a stand for Tom Robinson, even when he knew it would cost him everything. I was taught by Lena Younger of *A Raisin in the Sun*, who bravely stood up for what she believed in and fought for racial equality. I was taught by Huck Finn of the classic novel, *Huckleberry Finn,* to be discontent with the status quo, especially when it leads to injustice, looking to what could be rather than the current reality.

As I thought over my topic for this thesis, I began to think through some of the modern injustices that we see in culture today. After narrowing it down to three, I narrowed it down even further, landing on just one issue: race. Upon coming to this conclusion, I asked how we could improve race relations in America today. I believe the answer is surprisingly simple: books. Books have given me the lens needed to experience life through another person’s eyes and glean compassion for those in situations and contexts far removed from my own. For this essay, I have chosen five books that illuminate this theme, and that teachers can use to create empathy. These books are as follows: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Dear Martin*, and *The Hate U Give*. I am approaching this essay through the lens of a Christian worldview as my faith colors the glasses through which I see the world. It is through the light of the Gospel that everything else becomes clear to me, to paraphrase a popular quote by C.S. Lewis (Lewis, 1962). However, I believe that the information in this thesis can benefit both Christian and public schools, as well as secular private schools. This thesis is also, in part, driven by my own personal experiences, which have helped fuel this passion deep inside of me; experiences that have forever shaped me and that have shown me that the fight for justice and equality is not over, but rather, ever-changing and shifting with each passing generation.

A Post-Racial World?

This realization began during my freshman year of college, as a young eighteen-year-old girl coming of age during the year 2016. As to be expected, I was met with all of the fears and excitement that come with beckoning into this new chapter of my life. I was prepared for the academic and social challenges that I knew would soon come my way. I was prepared to encounter radically different worldviews than my own. I was prepared for the challenges of academia and making new friends. I was prepared through years of apologetics to defend my faith if the need should arise. However, I was soon met with a sight that nothing could have prepared me for: racially self-segregated tables, where the Black students sat with the Black students and the white students sat with the white students. This was extremely jarring and disheartening to me, as I had come from a homeschool co-op and small community church where no one seemed to take into consideration things like race or ethnicity. While I had dealt with cliques in the past, they were always formed around things like common interests or “popularity,” never a person’s skin color. Growing up, my parents had raised me with the views of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and taught me to judge a person by the content of their character, rather than by the color of their skin. It was shocking to me that so many people in my own generation did not seem to share this mindset.

Soon thereafter, I discovered that my friend and his family were threatened by the Ku Klux Klan at their home because they did not want Black people living in the neighborhood. They were deeply shaken by this experience, as to be expected, but they ultimately decided to stay, adopting a dog and installing an alarm system as a measure of security and self-protection. This, again, shook me deeply, as this did not seem like something that ought to be happening in the post-racial world. Racialized hate groups weren’t something that people had to worry about *now* . . . were they?

Flashing forward into the future, I soon witnessed another event that shook me to my core. It was May of 2020, and I had just come home from a walk around my neighborhood, in a desperate attempt to regain some normalcy. I pulled up Instagram, much like I would on any other day, and glanced through my friends’ stories. *Sensitive content* . . . *Sensitive content* . . . *Sensitive content.* This appeared time and time again, the warning that Instagram puts up for sexual or violent content. Oddly enough, all of the people who had their posts flagged were my friends from church. Out of sheer curiosity, I finally tapped on one story to see what was blocked. On my screen, appeared a video of George Floyd and Derek Michael Chauvin; two names that were unfamiliar at the time, but that I would come to learn about for weeks to come. I watched the video, horrified at what I saw: a man who had sworn to serve and protect, violently stealing the life of someone made in God’s image; a person who clearly had no intent of harm. Just seeing this sight made me feel sick to my stomach.

Following this national event, a youth leader I served alongside at my church posted a video to Instagram. He spoke about his own experiences as a Black man, raised in an adopted white family and living in a predominantly white neighborhood. He shared how even as a law-abiding citizen, he himself has had frightening encounters with law enforcement because of the color of his skin. On one occasion, he had taken his younger sister and her friend to the mall, where he was questioned by security about why he was with a young, white girl. On another occasion, he was driving home and was followed by cops into his own neighborhood, who assumed that someone with his skin tone could not possibly live there. How was this possible? In the year 2020, how could a person be questioned for being a good older brother, and taking his little sister shopping, all because of the color of his skin? How could law enforcement make an assumption like this, in an era where segregation is a thing of the past?

Situations like these were all new to me. As a young, white girl born at the end of the Millennial generation and the beginning of Gen Z, I thought that these types of scenarios were things of the past, things that we had already overcome a long time ago. Throughout my childhood, I watched shows from the late eighties and early nineties like *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, where Black and white individuals peacefully co-existed as friends and neighbors. I watched *Boy Meets World* and rooted for Shawn and Angela; an interracial couple comprised of two very likable characters. I experienced my preteen and teen years during Barack Obama’s administration; our country’s first Black president. These things were enough to convince me that we were living in a post-racial world; but *were* we? Could I truly say that this was an issue of the past when a close friend was visited by the Klan and a fellow volunteer leader was harassed for taking his little sister to the mall? Or when students were choosing to self-segregate at my college?

Suddenly, everything I had once believed about our victory in achieving Dr. King's dream felt called into question. Despite the fact that we had a Black president in office for eight years, it seemed that we still had so far to go in achieving true equality. Upon living through those events, I no longer felt like I was living in an integrated suburban neighborhood in 21st-Century Central Florida, but rather in the small Alabama town of Maycomb in Lee's classic novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Soon a question began to arise within the crevices of my mind: what does it look like to climb into another's skin and walk around in it (Lee, p. 29, 1960)? What does it look like to enter into an experience different from my own?

It Starts With Me

I am a firm believer that the best and surest path to a better, more equal future is through exposure; choosing to intentionally climb into another's story. A couple of years ago, I saw a Convocation at Liberty University that echoed a similar sentiment. Christian hip-hop artist, TobyMac was invited to speak, and after answering questions about his family and career, he so poignantly stated that while it is not a sin to not have friends who look different from you, you are missing out greatly if you do not have a diverse group of friends to walk alongside in this journey called life. He has, for a long time, been a vocal proponent of diversity in Christian spaces, as the husband of a Jamaican woman, the face of a band of musicians that he calls "Diverse City" and the father of bi-racial children (Liberty University, 2018). He writes in one song, *Starts With Me*

I was born with two, dirty hands
Something my daddy didn't understand.
Something his daddy didn't understand
So it starts with me
I was raised with distrust, in my heart

Momma told me we’re worlds apart
Her momma told her don’t even bother
So it starts with me (TobyMac, 2018)

Each generation is given the chance to do a little better than the generation before it. However, it starts with being willing to listen and really hear. It starts with empathy.

Empathy

“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It doesn’t take more than a casual glance through the Gospels to see the value that Christ places on empathy and compassion. Throughout the Scriptures, we see Him heal the sick and set the captives free. One may also argue that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is the greatest display of compassion; His decision to leave Heaven to come to this broken world the greatest example of empathy. In Hebrews 4:15 we are told, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Hebrews 4:15). Even though Jesus knew everything that was in the heart of man, He chose to put on skin and walk into the human experience. How much more ought we, as humans prone to judgment and misunderstanding, exercise this principle and strive to understand those different from us? How much more ought we fight for those forgotten or mistreated by society?

In the words of Dr. King, caring about specific oppressed people is only the beginning. We must also fight to create a world that allows human flourishing, biblical justice, and mercy. We must be willing to acknowledge both social and individual sin, as it is sinful individuals who create the systems we see in our culture and policies. Historically speaking, this is not a new concept for the Church. Speaking on behalf of my own beliefs, and the beliefs of most other Evangelical Christians, abortion is an issue that has historically been fought on both systemic and personal levels, especially by prominent leaders such as Francis Shaeffer. Talbot notes, in an article for First Things,

> Schaeffer encouraged Christians to bring legal and political action against hospitals that perform abortions and abortion clinics, and to mobilize pro-life voters in their community and work with lawyers and legislators toward overturning *Roe*. But he also emphasized the need to tangibly help young mothers and families who find themselves in crisis pregnancies—demonstrating his care not just for an issue, but for real people in real situations (Talbot, 2022).

Just as Evangelicals have fought for the unborn through direct initiatives like crisis pregnancy centers and broader-reaching initiatives like voting, racism, and discrimination must be addressed through both meeting the needs of individual people and advocating for a more just system for all. Because empathy asks you to walk in another's shoes, it demands the passion to fight for another just as you would fight on behalf of yourself. To reference another song that speaks on this issue

> I'm starting with the man in the mirror
> I'm asking him to change his ways
> And no message could've been any clearer
> If they wanna make the world a better place
> Take a look at yourself and then make a change (Michael Jackson, 1988).

True change happens when people see not just the problem, but the part they can play in the solution. This is the start of empathy.

Critical Paper

In my research for this thesis, I have chosen to utilize mixed-methods research, taking the best from both quantitative and qualitative methods. This includes both concrete research methods, such as surveys and statistics, as well as data that is more subjective and philosophical in nature. I believe that utilizing both methods will make this thesis stronger than it would otherwise be using only one method. Wasti notes in *The Growing Importance of Mixed-Methods Research in Health*

> The overall goal of the mixed-methods research design is to provide a better and deeper understanding, by providing a fuller picture that can enhance description and understanding of the phenomena [4]. Mixed-methods research has become popular because it uses quantitative and qualitative data in one single study which provides stronger inference than using either approach on its own [4] (Wasti, 2022).

This research will consist of online resources, literary journals, and books, and focus primarily on the topics of empathy, literature, pedagogy, and racial inequality. The main question I explore is how literature can be used to create a culture that is more empathetic, especially in regard to racial minorities. I will delve into this topic by first defining my terms: What is empathy?

Cultivating Compassion

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "*Empathy* suggests the notion of projection. You have empathy for a person when you can imagine how they might feel …The sentiment behind empathy is often presented in the familiar idiom 'to put (oneself) in another's shoes' " (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). However, recent data suggests that empathy may be on the decline in the Western world. In 2011, Anderson and Konrath released a scholarly journal detailing their research, aptly titled *Why Should We Care?*

They note in this article that, statistically speaking, American college students have scored lower on a standard empathy test over the last three decades than ever before. They also note that "since 1980 scores have dropped 34 percent on perspective taking" or putting themselves in another's shoes, and "48 percent on empathetic concern" (Anderson & Konrath, 2011). This can be further evidenced by an increase in bullying (McNair, 2022), hate crimes (Li & Lartey, 2023), and other violent crimes (Rosenfeld & Lauritsen, 2023). While statistics show that as a culture, we have decreased in empathy, it is less clear as to what has caused this sharp decline.

Some, such as Dr. Sherry Turkle have suggested that our increased usage of technology has made us less willing and less able to sit across the table and work through conflicts in a meaningful way, as computers have made it easy to leave conversations that feel challenging or inconvenient (Turkle, 2022). Others have suggested that we are experiencing on a grand scale what psychologists have coined "compassion fatigue" (Gabbert, 2018). This is a phenomenon that occurs when people are faced with such a great onslaught of emotionally triggering information that their ability to emotionally empathize shuts down as a form of self-preservation.

Regardless of what may be triggering this trend, research shows that it is, indeed, reversible and it is possible to train our brains to respond empathetically. More and more, social scientists are discovering the human capacity for neuroplasticity, a term coined to describe our brain's naturally ingrained aptitude for change (Psychology Today Staff). This stands in stark contrast to the view traditionally held in this field, popularized by William James, who once stated, "It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of 30, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again" (Ross, 2017). For years, the experts in this field have held a belief in line with the popular adage, “You cannot teach an old dog new tricks.” However, recent evidence suggests the opposite. Just like the muscles that you use when engaged in vigorous exercise, the neurons that aid in empathy grow stronger the more you confront a problem from a new perspective. This creates more empathy and willingness to understand life from another’s point of view.

Empathetic Care

Ross notes, in an article for Juniper, that there are three exercises one can engage in to grow in empathetic care. The first exercise that he lists in this article is *understanding yourself.* This means cultivating a strong understanding of yourself, your motivations, and your strengths and weaknesses. According to Ross, one way that a person can glean self-awareness is through journaling and personality tests, such as the Myers-Briggs or Hermann Brain Dominance test. Though these tests are imperfect tools of self-assessment, they could provide us with valuable insight into what we value and how we engage in the world. For believers, this practice is heavily supported by the Scriptures, and it is a practice that many prominent biblical figures engaged in themselves. A perfect example of this is King David, in Psalm 139:23-24. He writes in this Psalm

> Search me, God, and know my heart;
> test me and know my anxious thoughts.
> See if there is any offensive way in me,
> and lead me in the way everlasting” (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Psalm 139:23-24).

Meanwhile, Paul specifically instructs the Corinthian church to practice introspection, when he tells them in 2 Corinthians 13:5, to examine themselves (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, 2 Corinthians 13:5). Thus, this is a practice that is supported by both Scripture and modern psychology alike.

The second exercise that Ross lists in this article is cultivating a strong understanding of others. He notes that when we understand the motives of those around us, we are better able to empathize with their struggles. Ross also references McClellan's Needs Theory, which states that all people are driven by three primary motivators to varying extents: power, achievement, and affiliation. According to an article by Gavin, aptly titled *Understanding Other People*, there are a number of ways that we can acquire an understanding of others' emotions, motivations, and experiences.

The first thing we can do is put ourselves in another's shoes, asking ourselves how we would feel if we were in the same situation. Would we feel hurt? Confused? Angry? Invisible? Misunderstood? By honestly assessing how we would feel if we were going through something we may not have experienced ourselves, we can glean a deeper understanding of how the other person may be feeling.

The second thing we can do is read the expressions and body language of the person we're trying to understand. Are their shoulders slightly slumped? Is their face downcast? Does a slow frown emerge on their face? Can you detect pain in their eyes? Noticing these small things can help you glean a greater sense of understanding as to how someone may be feeling, without them having to say a word. Lastly, we can practice active listening and read books that portray realistic human emotions and characters. This helps us grow in both empathy and virtue, as Karen Swallow Prior, public academic and former professor at Liberty University, states in her book, *On Reading Well, "*Literature embodies virtue, first, by offering images of virtue in action, and second, by offering the reader vicarious practice in exercising virtue…a practice by which habits of the mind, ways of thinking and perceiving, accrue" (Prior, 2018, p. 15).

Thus, these things can all help us develop a greater sense of emotional intelligence and understanding of others (Gavin, n.d.). In fact, this point is supported by the research of Matthijs Bal and Martijn Vetkamp, who suggest that through the psychological process of being transported into a story, readers are given an opportunity to grow in empathetic care. The authors write

> Fiction is primarily aimed at eliciting emotions [2], [3]. To become engaged in a fictional story, a reader suppresses the notion of fictionality of the story and the characters to experience the emotions of the characters [15]. According to Goldstein [15], a person reading fiction tends to react more strongly towards a story than when he/she would read a non-fictional story, because fiction provides a safe arena in which a reader can experience emotions without the need for self-protection. Because fiction does not follow the reader into real life, the reader can allow oneself to freely experience strong emotions, without immediate transfer of these emotions to real life (Bal & Vetkamp, 2013).

This point, which will be elaborated upon later in this thesis, is further supported by a New York Times study, which suggests that there is a positive correlation between reading and empathy (Belluck, 2013). Piper and Jean So make a similar point in their research, adding that reading may even have a depolarizing effect, building bridges between people that would otherwise be divided. Some of these bridge books include books like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *1984*, and *Lord of the Flies* (Piper & Jean So, 2016).

The third exercise Ross lists in his article is *authentic and empathetic communication*. In this section, he highlights the work of Martin Seligman, which demonstrates how we can use effective communication by asking authentic questions and building rapport. This process is described as active-constructive responding (Ross, 2017). In *The Benefits of Active-Constructive Responding*, this process is described as “a way of responding when someone shares good experiences or information. If the receiver of the good news actively and constructively responds, it can often provide a boost in well-being to both people involved in the conversation” (Hood, 2021). When we engage in empathetic habits and actively engage in conversations with others and are met with a positive response, we will be more likely to engage in such behaviors in the future. Believers can also look to the actions and character of Jesus for guidance in engaging with this practice. This is illustrated clearly in passages like Mark 9:35-38, which describes the empathetic disposition that Christ held for those who were sick or mistreated, “like sheep without a shepherd” (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Mark 9:35-38).

This is further demonstrated in passages like Mark 14:13-21, where Jesus feeds the five thousand, and Mark 1:40-42, where Jesus heals a leper, amongst countless others. In fact, empathy isn’t just something that is shown in the Scriptures, but something that is at the heart of Christ’s nature, as previously noted. In John 11:33-37, John writes

> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, John 11:33-37).

Though Jesus knew that Lazarus would be resurrected, His heart was moved to compassion by the pain in Mary’s eyes. Likewise, as believers, though we know that this world will soon fade away and be forever restored to perfection, our hearts should be moved to compassion when we see brokenness, pain, and injustice in this world around us. In developing an empathetic disposition, we are posturing our hearts in alignment with Christ, and living out the biblical command to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, [and] weep with those who weep" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Romans 12:15).

Civil Rights

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
  And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
  and to walk humbly with your God" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Micah 6:8).

Though the principle of empathy could be applied to a number of social ills and problems in our world today, one that has been especially highlighted in recent years is our historically rooted sin of racism and discrimination. This is a continuous struggle that we see throughout America's history, and some have even gone so far as to say that racism is our country's original sin. One notable person who used such language is Jim Wallis, who wrote *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America.* Though there are areas in which Wallis and I differ politically and theologically, he takes a hard stance against racism and white supremacy, which he believes is deeply ingrained in our collective history as a nation. He writes in one section that "The heart of racism was and is economic", though it also had deeply rooted effects on culture, psychology, sexuality, religion, and politics. He notes that because of these roots and the longevity of slavery and segregation, "no area of the relationship between black and white people in the United States is free from the legacy of racism" (Wallis, 2017).

In stating this, Wallis is drawing to light the fact that much of our economic growth as a country has come about through the institution of slavery, and many white families have financially benefited from the egregious institution of chattel slavery. Looking through the lens of a Christian worldview, it becomes clear that racism in America does not only have roots in partiality, which, biblically speaking, is a sin (James 2:1) but greed. Ironically, this is a topic that Christ addressed time and time again during his earthly ministry. In Mark 10:25, Jesus tells his disciples that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into Heaven ((Mark 10:25). Furthermore, James gives a rather harsh warning to those who would glean wealth at the cost of exploiting others. He writes

> Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you. (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, James 5:4-6).

However, despite our egregious history, we have also made great strides towards equality that I believe could be replicated in the modern age. Oftentimes, the assumption is that battles for equality are fought within the walls of the White House. However, many of the people who had the greatest impact in the era of desegregation were not politicians, but rather, pastors, poets, and artists. They were also not all Black or all white, but rather a diverse mix of people fighting for the common good of all.

Past and Present

Though Elvis Presley is not typically a name that would appear in articles surrounding civil rights, he was one of many who had a heart for the marginalized and a desire to see all people treated fairly. As an artist, he was influenced by a wide variety of styles, including music that has historically been performed by Black individuals. By re-recording these songs, he gave them far more exposure than they might ever have had otherwise and gave them a larger audience than they had before (University of Florida, 1997).

Furthermore, there is evidence that shows he donated money to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, as well as other similar organizations (Pilgrim, 2006). Baldwin was another influential voice in the civil rights movement who used his voice and the power of the pen to make a lasting impact on culture. He was a reporter, and up close and personal with many significant events that took place during this time, interacting with many prominent figures such as Robert F. Kennedy, Burke Marshall, Harry Belafonte, Lorraine Hansberry, Lena Horne, Rip Torn, Edwin C. Berry, Kenneth Clark, Clarence Benjamin Jones, June Shagaloff, and Jerome Smith (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2021) In addition to his more noticeable acts of advocacy, he also penned a number of works that challenged the racial narrative of his time, including *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Notes of a Native Son, The Fire Next Time, Giovanni's Room*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Another Country* (James Baldwin, 2020). These are just two notable examples of everyday people who chose to use their platform and their voices to contribute to broader cultural conversations and make a positive change.

As a nation, we have made great strides in creating a society that is fairer and more equitable, however, the facts alone are evidence that there is still more work to be done. Statistics show that over half of death row exonerees are Black, and nearly half of all people executed on death row are Black. Innocent Black individuals are also seven times more likely to be convicted of murder than innocent white people. Furthermore, Black individuals are more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than their white counterparts (Selby, 2021).

Black families are also significantly more likely to struggle financially and often lack access to the opportunities and capital that could help them progress economically. This is largely due to racist ideologies and beliefs that are still present in our culture today. Baker and Addo write

> Racial discrimination in the labor market means less access to competitive wages to be used as a mechanism to build wealth. Black applicants are less likely to receive callbacks (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Pager, 2003) and get hired (Quillian et al., 2020). This occurs in entry-level positions (Agan & Starr, 2018; Pager, 2008), among the college-educated (Gaddis, 2015), and among those with advanced degrees (Reeves, 2014). Black workers receive lower average earnings, experience less overall employment stability, and reside disproportionately in states where the federal minimum for low-wage workers is binding (Hardy & Logan, 2020). Black workers are disproportionately channeled out of more stable jobs and into less reliable, more precarious, unstable work. For instance, Black workers are disproportionately represented as temporary workers, who earn 40 percent less for the same jobs as permanent workers in the same position (Wilson, 2020) (Baker, R. & Addo, F., 2023).

Thus, while we have made great strides since the days of chattel slavery and Jim Crow Laws, we still have progress to make in both individual attitudes and larger systems, such as our legal systems and places of business. While some of these changes may take years to fully implement, we can as a culture take the steps necessary to move into a more equal and equitable society. One way we can go about doing this is through education, and implementing school curriculums that value diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). According to sociologists, one of the main ways that change happens and people learn social norms is through the school. While the manifest function of the school is to teach students skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, there is often also a latent function or hidden curriculum, where students learn what is valued in the culture in which they live. Some examples of this in the Western world include respect for authority, patriotism, punctuality, individualism, and competition. They have also, at times, perpetuated cultural bias by asking questions on tests in a way that favors white, middle-class Americans. (n.a., 2016). This makes prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom all the more crucial, to ensure that each student feels valued and respected, gleaning as much as they can during the time they are in school.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion, or "DEI" has become a controversial and politicized buzzword, however, at its heart, it is focused on ensuring that every person feels valued and respected in a school or workplace environment. The main things that DEI training focuses on are discrimination, fairness, access, legitimacy, learning, and effectiveness (McCarter et al, 2023). Though the core remains the same, it may be implemented in a number of ways in the workplace. Diversity training, or DEI initiatives may include meeting face-to-face, online, or a combination of the two. It also may include pre and post-work reflection. However, many of these initiatives, while well-intended have not brought forth meaningful change and significant results. McCarter notes, in his article, *Effective-based strategies*

> …short-term educational trainings typically do not change individual behaviors, (b) some anti-bias workshops actually promote stereotypes, (c) diversity trainings can create a false confidence in participants who then become complacent in their own biases, (d) workshops can leave Whites feeling attacked or left out, and (e) often, individuals react negatively to efforts to change their values or beliefs. Alhejji et al. (Citation2015) systematically reviewed 61 publications on diversity training programs and found that the literature is fragmented and methodologically weak…Ngounou and Gutierrez

> (Citation2017) suggest that Americans’ beliefs about race and equity are too complex and entrenched to effectively address in a one-time workshop that often lectures educators about bias, confounds them with data, and promotes social justice as yet another initiative for schools to adopt (ibid).

Thus, while such diversity trainings are well-intended, they have often been shown to be ineffective in practice. McCarter suggests in his research that the impact could be improved by having participants engage in honest self-reflection prior to beginning the training, which correlates back to Ross’ research on self-assessment and empathetic care. In one workshop, participants were asked to rate their current level of knowledge on matters of race and racism. Upon completion of the workshop, they were asked whether they felt they understood these issues better than they did before. A shocking 90.8% answered yes to this question. Thus, it would seem that people are more likely to engage with new information when they see a deficit in their current understanding of a problem or social issue.

This, interestingly enough, correlates with the Christian principle that states one must first understand his own sinfulness before he truly grasps his need for a Savior. Paul states this principle clearly in Romans 3:20-24, where he says, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin” (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Romans 3:20-24). While it is not a sin to lack knowledge, our lack of knowledge, like sin, points us to the need for a solution.

Another thing participants were asked prior to beginning their training was a question concerning their knowledge of implicit bias. Upon completing this workshop, 74% of participants said that they gleaned a greater understanding of such bias, even if they already had some knowledge prior to this event. One participant noted, “I learned more detailed information regarding the different brain “systems” and how most of the time we operate on a subconscious level that often results in snap judgment, especially regarding another person’s perceived “race.” ”

Furthermore, upon beginning this training, participants were asked how this knowledge might manifest in their own lives. This forced participants to see the importance of this knowledge beyond the abstract and into the practical realm of life. Thus, it would seem that people are more likely to pay attention and glean from DEI initiatives when they see a clear and practical way to implement the knowledge they have gleaned into their lives. Some of the ways that participants believed this knowledge would benefit them were as follows: an increase in one’s own positive attitude toward their race and that of others, educating themselves and others, advocating for the marginalized, and working proactively toward systemic change.

At the end of this journal article, the authors cite a quote by Agovino, which states, “You can mandate diversity, but you can’t mandate inclusion …inclusion is about behavior, relationships. You have to change hearts and minds” (ibid). In other words, a business can mandate that so many minorities are hired, but they cannot ensure that each person is treated fairly and equitably without an intentional culture of inclusion and an emphasis on training their employees on this matter. While ensuring diversity is certainly a step in the right direction, it cannot be the only measure a business takes in creating a culturally robust workplace. Again, a gospel correlation can be found here: Just as a person’s heart must be changed to truly be a follower of Jesus, a person’s heart must be changed to see the insidious nature of prejudice and discrimination and root out implicit bias in their own hearts and attitudes. One cannot simply aim for behavior modification in either instance; behavior modification will only happen when one’s heart posture changes. In the Christian faith, behavioral change without emphasis on a heart change, repentance, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is legalism. In navigating issues of racial injustice, emphasizing policy change without true heart change is what has been coined by many as *"Performative activism*."

Performative activism, according to Boston Medical Center, is "…activism that is done to increase one's social capital rather than because of one's devotion to a cause. A person who is taking part in performative activism would rather let it be known to others that they are not racist…than actually seeking to change the racist structures within our country" (Boston Medical Center). If racism is a sin, which I believe based on biblical texts to be true, then this could also rightly be labeled as hypocrisy, which Jesus calls out on a number of occasions. In Matthew 23:27-28, Jesus says

> "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Matthew 23:27-28).

Furthermore, in the Psalms, David writes, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" ((*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Psalm 4:23). Thus, we cannot have true policy change without changed hearts and changed attitudes, and these things both come about through knowledge and conviction.

Institutions of Change

While DEI initiatives in the workplace are a good starting place, this initiative must reach beyond the workplace in order to have a lasting impact on our culture at large. Furthermore, if workplaces are discovering instances of either overt racism or implicit bias, it is a fair assumption that these attitudes may be trickling down to the next generation as well. This leaves us with the logical next question: Where must this instruction begin? As a believer, I am partial to the belief that instruction about any important issue should begin in the home and the church. However, from a pragmatic standpoint, I also understand that these cannot be the only places such instruction takes place. According to a recent poll by Gallup, 40% of Americans attend a Protestant church and 30% attend a Catholic church. This means that a large percentage of Americans do not attend church at all (Jones, 2023). Furthermore, a study conducted by Pew Research shows that very few conversations are taking place within the home about race. According to their study, only 34% of Democrats say that they are likely to discuss this issue often, and only 15% of Republicans say the same thing (Hurst, 2022).

Thus, from a pragmatic standpoint, it would seem reasonable to conclude that these conversations must be supplemented in other influential spheres, such as local schools. These are conversations that teachers can facilitate with their students through the material they are already studying, specifically, in classes like History and English. Though most schools implement lesson plans that cover certain historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman, these lessons usually do not extend beyond a particular study or month. Nonetheless, in our current racially charged landscape, it may be all the more necessary for teachers to address this topic. This should be implemented on a school-wide level. It should also be handled with a level of sensitivity, care, and intuition. Schwartz writes in an article for Education Week

> Making this space also requires teachers to practice and become comfortable redirecting students if they say something racist or hurtful. Teachers need to know “which students to protect, which to correct, and which subjects to center,” said Hasan Kwame Jeffries, an

> associate professor of history at the Ohio State University, in a keynote presentation at the conference (Schwartz, 2022).

Teachers and principals must be prepared to navigate this with parents, as well as students, and present a united front on this issue. They must also be aware of their county's guidelines in navigating this sensitive topic. One barrier that may hinder schools from addressing this topic in a meaningful way may be the political legislation in their state. In recent years, states like Montana, South Dakota, Florida, Georgia, Utah, and Alabama have either banned or placed extreme limitations on discussions about race in the public school system. Many policymakers are banning these conversations by coming against Critical Race Theory, a term that has only recently emerged in common American vernacular. This theory essentially teaches that systemic racism is part of American society and that it touches every institution, ranging from education to healthcare. It sees prejudice as something that can be cultural, rather than just personal, and it is essentially a counterargument to the notion of colorblindness (Legal Defense Fund). However, there is little to no evidence that Critical Race Theory is a theory being taught in K-12 schools. Weingarten notes, in an interview for CBS News

> Let's be clear: critical race theory is not taught in elementary schools or high schools. It's a method of examination taught in law school and college that helps analyze whether systemic racism exists — and, in particular, whether it has an effect on law and public policy…But culture warriors are labeling any discussion of race, racism or discrimination as CRT to try to make it toxic. They are bullying teachers and trying to stop us from teaching students accurate history (O'Kane, 2021).

A teacher could easily engage in a discussion about slavery or segregation without delving into whether or not racism is inherently rooted in our American systems. However, even these conversations are being heavily censored by people in power. One state that has been particularly stringent on this matter is Florida, as a result of Governor Ron Desantis’ Stop W.O.K.E. Act, which has radically changed the way Black history is being taught in this state. One of the most controversial changes includes a statement in history books about how enslaved people learned new skills that could benefit them later in life through this horrendous institution.

Desantis has also rejected a number of math and social studies textbooks on the basis of how they discuss the issue of race (Natansan, 2023). However, this is not strictly a point of contention between conservatives and liberals, as there are many conservatives who have pushed back on these controversial measures. Republican Wesley Hunt noted, in a tweet, "As the direct descendent of a slave, I have a hard time understanding Governor DeSantis’ position that transferrable skills learned in bondage are somehow a net benefit… (Gomez et al, 2023).” Furthermore, the Senator of South Carolina, Tim Scott noted

As a country founded upon freedom, the greatest deprivation of freedom was slavery. There is no silver lining … in slavery…What slavery was really about was separating families, about mutilating humans and even raping their wives. It was just devastating…So I would hope that every person in our country — and certainly running for president — would appreciate that. People have bad days. Sometimes they regret what they say. And we should ask them again to clarify their positions” (ibid). The public reaction to such policies has been mixed; some believe that it is a necessary precaution to avoid exposing children to Critical Race Theory, while others see it as reactionary and a form of censorship, destined to bear negative fruit in the next generation.

While I cannot speak for politicians and policymakers, I do believe that most parents’ concerns about race-based discussions can be assuaged through open dialogue between parents and educators. Flowers does an excellent job articulating some parents’ concerns about Critical

Race Theory or CRT in a way that I believe reflects the majority of those who have reservations about discussing race in the school system. She writes

> To attack CRT is not to attack history. But CRT is subversive, toxic and dangerous in that it doesn't just teach about history. It points fingers at those who have no guilt, no investment in past abuses, no responsibility for their classmates' pain and no obligation to apologize. Children do not bear the mark of Cain (Flowers, 2021).

If the aim of educators was truly to make students feel guilty for the sins of their ancestors, then I would agree that this is logically problematic and emotionally damaging. It is also a mindset that would explicitly contradict a biblical worldview. In Jeremiah 31:30, it says, "Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Jeremiah 31:30). We see a similar point in Ezekiel 18:20, which says, "The person who sins will die. A son will not be punished for his father's sins, and a father will not be punished for his son's sins. The righteousness of the righteous person will be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked person will be his own" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Ezekial 18:20).

Nonetheless, it is entirely possible for one to learn from the mistakes of another without taking on the guilt of those mistakes as their own. Again, framing this from a Christian worldview, we study the lives of people like King David, Moses, and Paul to learn both what they did right and where they fell short. We are all descendants of the same two people; however, we do not take on the sins of, for example, David, and feel guilty for the things that he did. The only reason that we would have to feel guilty when reading about his affair with Bathsheba or his decision to kill a man by sending him to the front of the battle would be if we had lustful or hateful feelings in our own hearts. These feelings would not be the fault of our pastor for making us feel guilty, but the rightful conviction of the Holy Spirit.

In the same way, we can learn from the mistakes of our American ancestors without taking on the guilt that comes from their sins. Even if our deceased relatives owned slaves, that is not something that we personally are responsible for in God's eyes. However, as with the example of King David, these stories must challenge us to check our own hearts and ensure that we do not hold within ourselves the sin of partiality rooted in the color of a person's skin. This kind of guilt is not a false guilt or in any way political, but rather, the kind of godly conviction that leads to repentance. We can see this point emphasized in Paul's letter to the church of Corinth, where he says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, 2 Corinthians 7:10).

Biblical Conviction

As teachers, we must not teach about our history in a way that creates shame in the next generation, but rather in a way that brings forth positive conviction and change. In approaching the topic this way, we are not teaching through the lens of Critical Theory, which is a theory created by man and rooted in worldly dogma, but rather through the lens of a biblical worldview, calling each person to learn from those who have gone before them and respond to conviction if it so arises.

Furthermore, while I personally do not agree with all of the language and beliefs attributed to Critical Race Theory, we must be willing to examine this theory and see if there are areas in which our beliefs and an academic theory share some overlap. For example, Critical Race Theory teaches that it is not just individual people, but entire systems and nations that can be corrupted.

In the Scriptures, we see themes of both person and social sin emerge, which would correlate well with this particular claim. In Amos 2:1-5, it says

> This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Moab, even for four, I will not relent. Because he burned to ashes the bones of Edom's king, I will send fire on Moab that will consume the fortresses of Kerioth. Moab will go down in great tumult amid war cries and the blast of the trumpet. I will destroy her ruler and kill all her officials with him," says the LORD. This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not relent. Because they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed, I will send fire on Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Amos 2:1-5).

Thus, it becomes clear in this passage that both people and nations can be out of step with the heart of God, and therefore, guilty of sin. Because of this, we must be willing to examine our nation and government through the lens of humility, and we must be believers first and patriotic second for the sake of our witness to a watching world. To critique our nation is not to somehow see it in a lesser light, but to see the world in the way God sees it; for God corrects those He loves. Paul writes in Hebrews 12:5-6, "And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Hebrews 12:5-6). Thus, the best way for us to be good citizens is to challenge the things that God calls sin and fight for a culture in which each person has the opportunity to flourish.

As educators, we can be a part of this positive change, through studying our history with a degree of honesty and humility and encouraging pro-social behavior and diversity within our classrooms. We can also utilize literature to help our students develop empathy for experiences different from their own.

Mark Twain

According to the literary theory of Biographical Criticism, we cannot truly understand a creative work apart from its creator. We cannot truly appreciate a literary work if we do not know the mind in which it was formed. Benson notes in Steinbeck—A Defense of Biographical Criticism, written about writer John Steinbeck

> It is our sense of a writer, a person, behind the text that gives the text its meaning. Even when the identity of the writer is unknown, we respond with the expectation that we can reach out to find some basis of commonality…A real author behind the writing encourages belief and trust, the kind of trust that is necessary if literature is going to challenge us to expand our sympathy and understanding in difficult ways (Benson, 1989).

Thus, before launching into my first book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, legally named Samuel Clemens, I would like to take this time to explore the author and the things that shaped his own views on civil rights and equality. Born as the youngest child in 1835, in Florida, Missouri to John and Jane Clemens (Paine, 2016, Quirk, 2024), Twain was deeply impacted by the slaves that lived within his household. Paine notes that they were some of the most “potent influences” in his life (Paine, 2016, location 381). In fact, the house girl, Jennie, and Uncle Ned were the primary caretakers of Twain and his siblings, and they oftentimes supplied them with great entertainment. They would do this by telling tales that sparked his young, childhood imagination and likely provided a foundation for him as a future novelist.

However, as great a joy as these slaves often brought Twain and his siblings, they were also a great source of discomfort for them. Their greatest fear was of one day meeting a runaway slave, who was regarded by society as “worse than a wild beast, and treated worse when caught” (ibid, location 415). This was a fear that came to pass for the Twain children when they saw a slave brought to Florida by six men who forced him to an empty cabin, threw him on the ground, and kept him bound with ropes. Even though they were not with this man, they could hear his loud and frequent groans, which made a lasting impression and left a lasting scar.

Unfortunately, this was not only a reality that existed out there, but in their own home. In one instance, Twain’s mom attempted to punish Jennie for her sauciness with a whip, prompting Jennie to snatch the whip from Jane’s hand. Following this instance, John Clemens used a bridle rein to tie her wrists together and chastised her across the shoulders with a cowhide.

Slavery, in all its horrors, was an everyday part of the life of a young Mark Twain, as it was for most young, white Americans during this time. However, one thing that set him apart from many of his peers was his fondness for the slaves that he met, and his refusal to see them as less than human. As a boy known for breaking the rules, this is perhaps one of his most noble examples of rebellion: choosing to see people as people. This started within his own home, however, his ability to get along well with slaves extended well beyond the walls of his house. His uncle, John Quarles, also owned slaves, and one of his slaves, Dan, would later become the inspiration for Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* (ibid, location 611).

Interestingly enough, despite his good relationships with slaves and his horror at the mistreatment of them, Twain didn’t oppose the institution of slavery until much later in life. It was likely so normalized to him that he never thought to question the morality of it; it simply was an institution that always was and would never cease to exist. However, Twain's views shifted upon marrying into an abolitionist family, where his father-in-law, Jervis Langdon helped Frederick Douglass escape a life of slavery (9 Facts about The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, n.d.).

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

This shift in perspective serves as the basis for the main themes present in Twain's fictional novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This story follows the journey of a young boy named Huck, who longs for freedom under the strict and watchful eye of his Aunt Polly; paralleling the story of Jim, who dreams of being free from the bondage of slavery. At one point in this story, after a particularly bad beating, Jim decides to run away, which prompts Huck to follow him. Through their journey together, Huck enjoys Jim's company in much the same way as Twain enjoyed the company of his family's slaves. However, as the story progresses, he battles a moral dilemma: should he do what is right eyes of the law and society, and return the runaway slave, or do what he knows to be right?

While allowing Jim to be free would be the obvious choice for most in our modern, post-abolition world, things were not so clear-cut during this time. Slaves were viewed as property, and the right thing to do if someone's property is lost is to return it to their rightful owner. Furthermore, despite Paul's letter to Philemon, urging him to accept his runaway slave, Onesimus, "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Philemon 1:16), it was also seen as a Christian duty and obligation during this era to return a slave to their owner. This is evidenced throughout this novel. Huck notes in one section

> It was a close place. I took . . . up [the letter I'd written to Miss Watson], and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I

> knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: “All right then, I’ll go to hell”—and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming (Twain, 1884).

In this section of the book, Huck is torn between a warped societal morality and his own conscience. He is torn between accepting the status quo of oppression or fighting for the freedom of an innocent man. This is likely an internal conflict that the author struggled with as well, coming from a slave-owning family but developing close relationships with slaves and eventually supporting the cause of abolition. Prior calls this reality a “malformed conscience.” She notes that this is something everyone wrestles with and that a person’s conscience can be heavily influenced by the culture and context in which they live. This truth is perhaps illustrated most strongly through 1 Timothy 4:1-2, where the Apostle Paul writes,

> The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Matthew 22:37-40).

As was the case for many living in the Antebellum South, owning a slave was viewed positively by Huck’s immediate family and community. It was even seen as “virtuous”, prompting Huck to believe that the temptation to do wrong was instead the call of God, punishable by Hell if refused (Prior, 2018, p. 98).

Thus, in addition to Huck’s struggle between false morality and true morality, Huck also wrestles with his faith, which was a lifelong struggle for the author as well. Twain appeared to struggle with the hypocrisy and unkindness of the Christians he personally knew, so much so that he said in one instance, “If Christ were here there is one thing he would not be — a Christian” (Baggett, 2023) A similar struggle emerges for Huck in this book as he wrestles with Christians’ complacency in letting Jim be treated as property rather than a true human being.

Controversy: Historic and Present

While this book is known for being a great literary classic, well-known and read years after its initial publication, it is not without controversy. Upon publication, it was harshly criticized for “coarse language” and in 1905, it came under scrutiny for using words such as “sweat” and scratched”. Today, it is still controversial, though for different reasons, and it has been banned by a number of schools.

One of the primary modern critiques of *Huckleberry Finn* is its repetitive use of words such as “n*****” and “injun” (Gregg, 2023). Because Twain uses these words, especially the “N-word” quite liberally, he has been accused not of writing about racism, but rather of being racist himself. However, readers must understand the time and context in which this book is written. During the late 1800s, this word was, sadly, extremely commonplace. It was also uttered by characters who either were themselves prejudiced or raised by individuals who held prejudiced beliefs and dispositions. Thus, in using this word, he was portraying how such characters would likely speak if they were real people. Furthermore, it is important in reading a book to examine the whole book, not just isolated sentences or passages. Renowned theologian and writer, C.S. Lewis, writes in *An Experiment in Criticism* that before criticizing any book, we must first lay aside our presumptions and surrender ourselves to the literary work. We must first ask: Does the whole text support a racist ideology, or does it actually counter such a viewpoint? Lewis notes in one section of his book, “[T]he true reader reads every work wholeheartedly, making himself as receptive as he can… he will read ‘in the same spirit that the author writ” (Lewis, 1961). The responsible reader will first strive to understand the authorial intent before making a moral or literary judgment about the views a story conveys; the only way to do that is to read the book for oneself, not through a modern lens, but rather, through the lens the author would have been given at the time of the book's publication.

Another modern critique of *Huckleberry Finn* stems from the authorship itself. Some readers, especially those in academia, believe that because this story was written by a white man, it cannot adequately portray the struggles of racism and slavery. This largely coincides with the recent push for books written about marginalized individuals, by marginalized individuals. The push for representation by authors of the same culture gained traction in 2015, after middle-grade author and co-founder of Diversity in Kidlit, Corinne Duvyis, posted the hashtag #OwnVoices in a push to recommend books by diverse authors. This movement quickly took off, especially in children's and young adult fiction, and it has become everyday lingo in publishing verbiage (Steffens, 2021). In some respects, this has been a positive push in the industry. It has allowed writers to tell their own stories, stories that they may not have seen represented in their favorite books as a child. It gives the author an air of authority in their penmanship, as they are writing about experiences they have lived through. It prevents the danger of a single story, or a monolithic, stereotypical idea about a particular culture or people group (Athaide, n.d.). It also creates an intentional space for ethnic minorities and female authors in the Western Literary Canon, which has historically been very white and very male. However, those who make the claim that only those of a particular culture have the right to write about issues that affect that culture tread on slippery ground. Jocelyn A. Chadwick notes of this rebuttal against Mark Twain and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in an interview with PBS, "To me, that argument is specious. If you're telling Twain that white men or women cannot write about people of color, are you saying that black writers should not write about white characters? You can't shut one door without shutting the other" (Public Broadcasting Service, 2017).

In an effort to elevate marginalized voices with the #OwnVoices movement, we end up marginalizing the same voices that we are trying to liberate. If Twain lacks authority in writing about the experiences of Jim, a Black slave, then by that same strain of reasoning, a Black author is only permitted to write about other Black individuals, which carries with it a strong tone of prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, to say that we should only read books on marginalization by authors of the same community discounts a plethora of books that have dramatically shaped history. During the time of slavery, slaves were not legally allowed to read or write, which means that we have very few firsthand accounts of slavery in literary fiction. However, without the knowledge of our history, we are apt to forget how hard we have fought to get where we are today, albeit our present-day imperfections. Having students read about our country's history through fictional accounts can help them glean a deeper appreciation for the importance of fighting against injustice and a deeper appreciation for the people who have blazed a trail for a more equal society. This will motivate students to see on a deeper level the importance of racial equality and the work that is still yet to be done in this nation.

Teaching Huck Finn

Having explored the life of the author, the controversies surrounding this book, and the book itself, the question naturally arises: How ought a teacher approach teaching *Huckleberry Finn* in a 21st-Century, multicultural classroom? While there are certainly challenges to be navigated, I do not believe this task to be impossible. However, before we delve into the complexities and nuances of how this book addresses race and inequality, I believe it is important to address the book's aesthetic quality and the importance of teaching aesthetics in high school and college. So often as teachers, the temptation is to focus on the theme and lesson of the story to the exclusion of its aesthetic quality, but in order to truly appreciate a book both must be taken together, a book must be read for its entirety. Prior notes in her book *On Reading Well*

> To use art or literature rather than receive it "merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it." Reading well adds to our life—not in the way a tool from the hardware store adds to our life, for a tool does us no good once lost or broken, but in the way a friendship adds to our life, altering us forever . . . While the ethical component of literature comes from its content (its ideas, lessons, vision), the aesthetic quality is related to the way reading—first as an exercise, then as a habit—forms us. Just as water, over a long period of time, reshapes the land through which it runs, so too we are formed by the habit of reading good books well (Prior, 2018, p. 19).

In his book, Twain goes to great measures to write in a way that is realistic and believable. This is shown through the actions of the protagonist Huck, as well as other supporting characters. It is also portrayed through the way that he uses speech. While Twain's writing style may appear to be the furthest thing from aesthetic to some, he is very intentional and artful in the way he strings sentences together. He at times purposefully misspells words, so as to force the reader to read more with their ear than their eye. In doing so, he develops a very unique style that is easily recognizable to those who have read his other works. He also brilliantly makes his protagonist, Huck, come to life through his word choices. Time and time again, we see Huck fight against his Aunt Polly's attempts to make him "civilized". By having his protagonist talk and narrate in a way that is not always grammatically correct, he is weaving the narration together with a major theme and motif in this book. He also makes the story feel more "real" or believable as a novel narrated from the perspective of a young, and at times, rebellious teenage boy.

That being said, teachers can begin by teaching Huck Finn in an interdisciplinary way, acknowledging both the literary and historical aspects of the book, and the ways in which the events of the book correlate with American history. Teachers can also lead up to Huck Finn by intentionally studying African history, showing how African people have a history before and apart from slavery. This would help Black students to be able to process their cultural identity through a positive rather than negative lens, characterized by slavery. This would force schools to study Black history beyond slavery and the civil rights movement, both of which highlight and draw attention to Black oppression. Schools can also use this book as a starting place for discussions about resistance, and how it has been and can be used to push our culture toward a deeper sense of equality. Professor Lawrence Little notes of this pedagogical possibility in an article for PBS, "[African American] kids are ashamed this is their history…To counteract this, we try to give teachers strategies to work around these problems," such as looking more closely at the ways slaves resisted" (Huck Finn: Teacher's Guide).

Teachers can also educate their class on satire before starting a study on this book. Because Twain wrote this book with satirical intent, the characters can at times feel flat or stereotypical, especially the character Jim, who has been accused by critics of playing into slavery-based stereotypes. In *Satire or evasion? : Black perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* the authors write

> Not fully aware of the satire in Huckleberry Finn and the various and manifold uses Twain's moral vision requires of Jim, some readers become disquieted, fearful that Twain shared the racist views of his society. Exactly the opposite is the case. The satirist enjoys the freedom to move his characters about at will—make them both targets of satiric thrust and mouthpieces for the authorial voice. Characters may sometimes be victims and pawns; at other times they may be active agents. Ultimately, the satirist as a social

> reformer will do with his characters whatever he needs to do to act as a corrective agent for the society he portrays (Leonard, Tenney, and Davis, 1992, p. 155).

In utilizing this storytelling method, Twain plays upon the ignorance of prejudice by showcasing the ideologies and stereotypes that he saw in his surrounding culture. Interestingly enough, Twain is not the only person to use satire for the benefit of racial equality. In the early 1970s, CBS aired the first episode of the wildly controversial and, oddly, wildly successful television sitcom *All in the Family.* All in the Family was, in some ways, a conventional sitcom, focusing on the plights of a working-class family living in Queens, New York. Like many of its counterparts, this show had a laugh track, focused on family dynamics, and was a half-hour long. However, this show was also in many ways dramatically departed from other shows in its same genre. Unlike other sitcoms, the character Archie Bunker was extremely prejudiced and controversial, saying things that would not be aired on television today. However, because this show was set up as a satire, with the prejudiced Archie painted as the antagonist or anti-hero, this show did the opposite of what many predicted during this time: it reduced prejudice. Though some resonated with Archie's bigoted thoughts and attitudes, it caused those on the fence to see the ignorance of his views and why Archie is not a role model to be imitated (Hodenberg, 2015).

Thus, while the portrayals of Jim and the use of the "N-word" are valid concerns of anti-racist educators, if taught in the right way, with wisdom and discernment, I believe this book could actually serve to show the absurdity of prejudice and injustice of slavery. However, for this to occur, it is essential for teachers to take an active role in walking with students through the text and pointing out the ways in which the author uses satire to make his point.

Lorraine Hansberry

Like Twain, Hansberry was an American author who was living during a time of social change and unrest, deeply impacted by her own experiences of racism in this country. She was the granddaughter of a formerly enslaved woman and the youngest of four, born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. Her parents both avidly supported the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People as well as the Urban League, making their living as a real estate broker and a schoolteacher (n.a., 2023). Though slavery was, by this point, a thing of the past, prejudice was still alive and well. When Hansberry was just eight years old, her family attempted to move into a restricted neighborhood with the help of Harry H. Pace, who was the then-president of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, as well as several white realtors, who secretly purchased property at 413 E. 60th Street and 6140 Rhodes Avenue for her and her family.

However, while attempting to move into their new home, the Hansberrys faced a situation reminiscent of the author's eventual novel, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Upon their move, they were met by a violent white mob, who, determined to drive them out of their neighborhood, threw bricks at their window, one brick nearly hitting Hanbury herself. This ended with a legal battle that the family unjustly lost. Nonetheless, it played a crucial role in the eventual desegregation of South Side Chicago. One could speculate that this violence and hostility that her family faced at a very young age may have prompted her to become heavily involved in civil rights and desegregation later in life.

She also became a prominent author, writing books that raised awareness for Black equality and became a prominent player in the literary world. Furthermore, Hansberry was involved in nonfiction writing for a time, contributing to newspapers that addressed the issues she cared about, such as the Black progressive college newspaper, *Freedom*, and the Daughters of Biltis Magazine, *The Ladder*, where she wrote about feminism and homophobia. However, she wrote under a pseudonym for this magazine out of fear of discrimination (n.a., 2023) She remained involved in these forms of activism until her death in 1965 (n.a., 2021). Perry notes of Hansberry's life, in her biography

> Like the ones who came before, she lived an artist's life, a flesh and blood life, with a great deal of difficulty in the way of respectability once she committed fully to who she was. She did things that were politically dangerous. She was brave and also fearful; experimental and superb. She failed and hurt. Her tradition, then, cannot be reduced to the picture of greatness. It has to entail the vagaries of imagination and the many circumstances that excited it (Perry, 2018).

Because she was Black, female, and queer in a time when it was not socially acceptable to be any one of these things, Hansberry endured much heartache and struggle throughout her lifetime. However, one may argue that it is precisely her unique struggles and perspective that made her such a powerful writer, able to prophetically speak about the social condition of her day.

In addition to being a trailblazer in her own right, she was connected to many influential people within the Civil Rights movement. From the time they met, in 1958, Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin, a fellow activist and writer, became fast friends. They shared the same ideals about racial equality and progress in the United States, as well as methodologies for achieving such a vision. Both were well-educated on world events and believed that America's struggle with racial oppression was not isolated from or disconnected from other injustices committed against oppressed people worldwide. They were also both skeptical about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s belief in and commitment to nonviolence and held views that were more closely aligned with those of Malcolm X. In addition to their shared political views, they were avid supporters of each other's work and shared a passion for the power of the pen (Üsekes, 2008).

Hansberry and Baldwin were closer than most male and female friends, but because both of them were attracted to the same sex, they were never anything more than friends who, in some ways, became like family. Baldwin cared so deeply for her that he wrote a book that he published posthumously, titled *Sweet Lorraine*. He wrote of her in his book "She seemed to speak for me… A small, shy, determined person, with that strength dictated by absolutely impersonal ambitions: she was not trying to "make it" — she was trying to keep the faith." He also wrote that she was "his sister" and "comrade," and that they had a respect for each other that was only felt by people who happened to be on the same side of the barricades (Jasmine, 2018). Unfortunately, their friendship was short-lived, as she died of pancreatic cancer just six years after their meeting. However, though she died at the young age of thirty-four, her legacy continues to live on even today (ibid).

A Raisin in the Sun

Though she was a prolific writer, she is perhaps most known for her 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. This play follows the lives of a Black family who has just received a $10,000 life insurance policy upon the death of the father. Following this unexpected twist, the family becomes torn, arguing about what they ought to do with their newfound wealth. Matriarch Lena Younger wants to use the money to buy a home in a white neighborhood while her son, Walter Lee Younger, wants to use it to open a liquor store. Meanwhile, his sister, Beneatha, wants to use it to go to medical school. This conflict is resolved when Lena decides to give part of the money to Walter to invest in his business, part of it to Beneatha for medical school, and use the rest for a down payment on the house. However, upon making this milestone purchase, the family is visited by a white man named Mr. Lindner, who offers them an even greater sum of money to move to another house. Out of principle, Lena refuses his offer and buys the house she had originally planned on purchasing.

This is a richly literary play that, while fictional, contains much truth about the time in which this book was written. Integration was becoming a hot topic in American culture, and many white individuals were moving to other neighborhoods once Black families began to integrate into the primarily white suburbs. This phenomenon came to be known as “White Flight” (Wilson, 1987). This also, though much kinder and less violent, bears some similarity to the traumatic situation the Hansberry family faced when they attempted to move into a white neighborhood during Lorraine’s childhood years.

In addition to being historically accurate and likely drawn from her own life, the title of this play was inspired by another great literary work penned by Langston Hughes, titled *A Dream Deferred* (Gosset Jr., 2024). This was a poem that, while broad enough to be applied more universally, was written about the lived experiences of Black Americans in a segregated society. (Spacey, 2023). It reads

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (Hughes, 1959)

This novel showcases the plights of a family determined to live in an affluent, middle-class neighborhood, and the ways in which their dreams are deferred by racism. It also presents the reader with a moral dilemma: Should the Younger family stay in the neighborhood out of principle and fight for what is fair and just or move for the safety of their family? Whichever choice Lena made, the stakes remained high. If she left, she would be shrinking from her commitment to full equality. If she stayed, she risked her family's very lives. This is a choice that would be unimaginable for most Americans today. However, this choice was a sad reality for many Black Americans living during this time. Because this play is so rooted in real-life history, this literary work could be an excellent starting place for conversations surrounding housing and integration, and what the fight for desegregation cost those who bravely risked their lives for their ideals.

Teachers could also dissect the ways in which the American Dream manifests in this novel. While the fight to live where they choose is perhaps the most obvious battle in Hansberry's literary work, there are many other ways in which she showcases the oppression felt by Black Americans during this time period. For the character Walter, access to the middle class came not through moving, but rather through owning and running a successful business. However, even his beliefs about what would give him freedom had its roots in oppression. Historically, liquor stores have been more prominent in primarily Black communities, and research shows that they have had significant destabilizing effects on such communities and the families within them (n.a., 2000). Alarmingly, studies show that these liquor stores often sell larger quantities of alcohol than taverns and restaurants. Furthermore, it is often sold chilled, prompting more people to drink it right away, resulting in “excessive drinking, public drunkenness, automobile crashes, and physical violence,” contributing to the crime rates and endangering these communities (ibid).

Meanwhile, the character Beneatha dreams of going to medical school, which she believes will be her ticket out of poverty and into the middle class. This is significant not just because graduates of medical school often go on to high-paying careers, but because of the history surrounding Black Americans and education. During slavery, it was illegal for slaves to read or write, preventing many capable Black Americans from achieving the same level of education as their white counterparts. This slowly began to change upon the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and little by little, Black colleges such as Howard, Hampton, and Spelman began to open, along with others, which allowed Black Americans to pursue a higher education.

Furthermore, the well-acclaimed abolitionist, W.E.B. Du Bois heavily advocated education as the pathway through which Black Americans would one day be seen as equals (A Brief History: Black Americans in Higher Education, n.d.). He once wrote in a letter to Benjamin F. Hubert, “Higher education is not for itself and its own enjoyment but furnishes the power and leverage by which the mass of people can obtain not only economic security but cultural progress” (Wendling, 2018). Thus, Hansberry may be reflecting this ideal through the character of Beneatha.

We also see in Beneatha the theme of intersectionality. In addition to being Black in a pre-desegregation world, Beneatha is a woman and is often looked upon with disdain for her refusal to fit into the role prescribed for her by the culture in which she lives. This is, at times, pointed out in very blunt ways. In one section, her brother Walter says to her, "Who in the h*** told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people — then go be a nurse like other women — or just get married and be quiet” (Hansberry, 1959). In this section, Hansberry showcases the struggles not just of Black people living during the late 1950s, but of women who were eager to escape the status quo and live out the life that they wanted, even if it was unconventional for the social norms of the time.

Throughout each character's story, we witness the struggles of a family fighting to be seen as equals, and the way the American Dream cuts across racial and gender barriers.

Teaching a Raisin in the Sun

The classic play, which challenges racial prejudice and discrimination, has not garnered near the amount of controversy as Twain's novel, *Huckleberry Finn.* However, it has still accumulated raised eyebrows from a small minority. The Chicago Public Library notes in an article regarding this work

> Despite the championing of the play by James Baldwin and other prominent writers, criticism of *A Raisin in the Sun* ranged from those who found it too radical to those who called it conservative. Nelson Algren disparaged it as "a good drama about real estate." Poet and playwright Amiri Baraka originally described the play's subject as "middle class—buying a house and moving into white folks neighborhoods." But he later said that its themes "are actually reflective of the essence of black people's striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination and national oppression (Chicago Public Library, 2003)."

Unlike some more modern literary works about race, such as *Dear Martin* and *The Hate U Give*, the Youngers do not directly challenge racist ideas and systems. Their goal is simply to achieve the same standards of living for themselves as their white counterparts. However, in their determination to stay in their house and not succumb to pressure, they still manage to subvert toxic racial ideology and showcase the importance of true equality. Modern readers will quickly notice the injustice that has been committed against this family and the significance of their decision to stay. Thus, while the characters do not set out to correct racism outright, they take a stand in their determination to work for the things that they want, and their courage in standing against those who would oppose them, making this rebuttal an easy one to counter.

However, while the content of this book has not been heavily criticized, teachers do have a dilemma in teaching this book in the classroom. In her book, *Using Informational Text to Teach a Raisin in the Sun*, Fisch and Chenelle note a recent trend that has emerged in the classroom since the implementation of the Common Core. Rather than emphasizing fictitious, literary works, such as *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Huckleberry Finn*, schools are emphasizing nonfiction texts that speak about a particular topic or issue (Fisch & Chenelle, 2014). This shift has occurred largely for pragmatic reasons, in order to equip students to excel in the college classroom and future employment. Very few jobs will require a strong knowledge of literary texts. However, most students will have to read informational texts throughout their lives, whether it be for a standardized test like the SAT or ACT, on-the-job training, or passing their driver’s test (Kinsella, n.d.).

While at first glance this seems to spell “nightmare” for English teachers who are passionate about stories, this actually creates a challenge for teachers to approach literary texts in new and interesting ways. Fisch and Chennelle note that teachers can observe the themes found in a literary work and utilize informational texts alongside novels and plays to enrich students’ understanding of history. For instance, a student may have a vague idea of segregation during the era of this play, but Hansberry’s work creates an opportunity to teach on this topic more deeply, helping students understand the full gravity of what a family like the Youngers may have experienced during this time (Fisch & Chenelle, 2014).

Teachers can also easily utilize this this text to teach empathy, exploring the theme of The American Dream and how, historically, it has been inaccessible to many Black Americans. Students can discuss what the American dream has generally been comprised of, and how, homeownership in particular, has been a huge part of this cultural ideal. Viator and Halper note in their article *Is the "American Dream" of Home Ownership an Equal Opportunity Goal?* how homeownership carries benefits beyond a piece of property to one's name. Historically speaking, it has been a wise financial move for many, as the value of a house increases with time and can help many with retirement later in life. Thus, informational texts on the history of housing can be utilized alongside Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* to spark discussions about the barriers that Black Americans have faced historically and even today regarding home ownership. For instance, in the 1960s, property values decreased when neighborhoods became integrated, causing many white Americans to flee.

Furthermore, similar to the scenario in Hansberry's novel and the one that I describe earlier in this paper, some Black Americans have experienced prejudiced attitudes and threats upon moving into predominantly white neighborhoods. Teachers can encourage students to put themselves in the shoes of this novel's characters and ask them how they would feel or what they would do if they found themselves in a situation similar to the Younger family. They can also utilize exercises like group projects to encourage students to actively apply what they have learned. Viator and Halper suggest in the aforementioned article that teachers can challenge students by asking whether homeownership is equally accessible for all people. Students can research data through a project like this and glean a greater sense of empathy for those whose experiences may be different from their own. In presenting Hansberry's book in this way, teachers could adequately meet Common Core standards while educating their students on injustice and cultivating compassion in their classrooms (Viator & Halper, 2014).

Nic Stone

Nic Stone is the bestselling YA author of a wide range of books, such as *Dear Martin*, *Chaos Theory*, and *Blackout*. She is a graduate of Spelman College, a Historically Black College in Atlanta, Georgia, and has a wealth of experience in teen mentoring (nicstone.info). Because she is an up-and-coming author, there are not many biographical academic resources explaining her background and creative vision. However, there are a plethora of interviews in which she openly shares her heart for the books she has written. When speaking about perhaps one of her most well-known works, *Dear Martin*, in an interview with The Augusta Chronicle, she notes that this book was inspired by two real-life events. The first was the death of Jordan Davis in Jacksonville, Florida, in the year 2012. Jordan was only seventeen years old at the time of his murder, and he was killed by Michael Dunn, after a confrontation about Jordan's rap music being too loud. Upon threatening Davis, Dunn open fired and killed him on the spot (Pantazi, 2016 & Augusta Chronicle, 2020).

The second source of inspiration for this novel was an event that happened in the protest of Michael Brennan in 2014. As she watched the news, Stone noticed more and more that political commenters were co-opting the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King for their own benefit, noting that "King would be appalled by these protests" (ibid). However, history shows that Dr. King was in fact involved in many peaceful protests. One historically notable event includes the Bus Boycott of 1955. During this event, thousands refused to use public transportation in protest of unfair seating laws that required a Black person to sit in the back or move to the back if a white person wanted their seat. In speaking of this event, Dr. King said

> I want it to be known that we’re going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses in this city. And we are not wrong.… If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong (Montgomery Bus Boycott, n.d.).

Furthermore, Dr. King was arrested on multiple occasions, often accused of disrupting the peace (Black History, n.d.). While King was a staunch believer in nonviolence, he did not believe in passive non-action. He noted on a different occasion that it is “immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber” (Fenner, 2022). Thus, while some have used King’s commitment to nonviolence to argue that he would oppose modern-day protests, evidence appears to support the opposite. It would seem, based on King’s own words, that he would not support protests turning violent, however, he would be opposed to stopping such protests out of fear of violence. One can only be held responsible for their own actions in their commitment to fighting injustice. Thus, Stone’s book, *Dear Martin*, which I will be exploring in this section, explores both the heated climate of our time, in which a teenager can be shot for listening to music too loudly, as well as the misconceptions surrounding Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who has often been sanitized by our culture today.

Dear Martin

The book *Dear Martin* opens with the teenage protagonist, Justyce McAllister, on his way home from a party, where he runs into his ex-girlfriend, Melo Taylor. In this scene, Melo is noticeably drunk, and though she and Justyce are no longer together, Justyce decides to do the right thing and help her by driving her home. This opening chapter gives us a glimpse into the moral character and integrity of our protagonist, Justyce. However, upon stopping to help Melo and entering into a confrontation, he is stopped by two police officers who misread the situation, assuming Justyce is up to no good. Responding rather hastily, they handcuff Justyce and slam him to the ground, creating a terrifying situation that haunts Justyce throughout the rest of this novel and manifests through a form of PTSD. Justyce also gleans a heightened awareness of race following this incident and the way it affects his day-to-day life and conversations, sharply foiling his best friend, Manny, who often turns a blind eye to the ignorance and prejudice of his close friends. To navigate this newfound dilemma, Justyce begins writing letters to one of his deceased heroes, Martin Luther King, asking questions about how he would navigate racism and prejudice in a 21st-century context. In one letter, he writes

> I've been trying to figure out what you would've done if you'd been in my shoes today. I know you lived in a world where black folks were hosed and beaten and jailed and killed while fighting for equal rights, but you still managed to be, like, dignified and everything. How did you do that, Martin? How do I do that? There are people who don't see a man with rights when they look at me, and I'm not real sure how to deal with that…How do I handle people like Jared? Arguing obviously won't work….Do I just ignore him? But what does that solve, Martin? I want to "put my best foot forward," as Mama would say. That's what you did (Stone, 2017, p. 32).

In this section of the book, we get a glimpse into the raw and unfiltered thoughts of the novel's protagonist in a story that is mainly told from a third-person point of view. Throughout this story, Justyce's questions continue to rise to the surface as he finds himself in various moral dilemmas, climaxing with the death of his best friend, who was brutally shot for listening to rap music too loudly in his car. Justyce handles these and other situations with a commendable amount of grace and maturity. However, he also rightfully deals with all the emotions that any teen would experience, ranging from sadness to anger to grief.

One of the major things that Justyce wrestles with throughout this book is the fact that there are people on both sides who don’t want him to succeed or who don’t believe that he can. On one hand, he has people like Trey, a Black peer who has tried to convince him that white people will never accept him at an Ivy League school, and that he will forever be seen as an “other.” On the other hand, he deals with white peers like Jared, who assume that any success he has achieved is the result of affirmative action, rather than his own academic merits. This is steeped partly in the false belief that many Americans hold about the nature of affirmative action. Columbia University notes of this often misunderstood practice that has been utilized by colleges and universities in the past

> The…myth is that the process of admissions is essentially a process of rank-ordering the candidates by credentials…And then we take into account race, and we make sure that we have a critical mass of minorities - and that race is the one exception to the decision-making process...Most public and private universities across the country, including Michigan and Columbia, use a variety of factors to determine a student's admissibility (Office of the President).

Thus, race and gender are not the only things that schools look at outside of a student’s grades and GPA to determine admission. Many schools will also factor in things such as Alumni relationships, personal achievement, leadership and service, socio-economic background, and athletic ability (ibid). Furthermore, the law prohibits organizations from hiring or accepting unqualified minorities for the sake of affirmative action. An article from Birmingham University states “Only affirmative action plans that do not compromise valid job or educational qualifications are lawful. Plans must be flexible, realistic, reviewable, and fair" (Affirmative Action: Myths versus Reality). While affirmative action is far from the focus of this book, this comment is the reflection of a much bigger theme that this book tackles, which is how prejudice and insensitivity will sometimes emerge even amongst supposed friends. This theme is primarily shown through Manny's friends, who will oftentimes make shockingly racist or insensitive comments without even seeing it, convinced that they're not prejudiced because they have Black friends. For some, the term "racist" is limited to those who engaged in "white flight" during the late sixties and seventies or those who are a part of hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Nonetheless, more often in this generation, racism manifests in more subtle ways, through microaggressions and rude comments; however, the fact that this type of racism is not as overt or noticeable does not make it okay or somehow less hurtful. When a person acts surprised by the success of a Black person, they are speaking from a place of holding prejudice and biases in their heart. This is not a political or progressive viewpoint, but rather, a biblical one. Jesus says to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:34-37

> Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (*King James Version*, 1982, Matthew 12:34-37).

Furthermore, in speaking about adultery, Jesus says, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Matthew 5:28). Thus, we see in these passages that Jesus is just as concerned about the posture of one's heart as he is the actions that were or were not committed. When a person speaks about an ethnic group in a way that belittles them, it shows the true condition of their heart.

Interestingly enough, the excuse of having a “Black friend” is not a new trend or way of dodging accountability for hurtful words, brought about in a post-segregation world. This excuse dates back to the time of slavery when slaveowners would attempt to use their connection to their slaves as an excuse for their enslavement. Parry notes in an article for Black Perspectives

> In 1854, pro-slavery firebrand George Fitzhugh castigated northern abolitionists for interfering with the affairs of white and Black southerners, exclaiming “The [white] Southerner is the negro’s friend, his only friend. Let no intermeddling abolitionist . . . dissolve this friendship.” By claiming sentimental attachments to the enslaved, masters and mistresses hoped to obfuscate abolitionists’ claims that they were domineering tyrants and sought to convince the enslaved that Northern whites held evil intentions. If they convinced the American public that enslaved people loved them and were content in their bondage, they could assert that they were simply preserving the natural order of the races.

In a similar way, by claiming friendship with Manny, Jared frees himself from being held accountable for his words and actions and the ways in which they could be hurtful toward someone who is Black. Perhaps one of the most cringeworthy sections of this book occurs when he encourages everyone to dress as stereotypes for Halloween. Justyce dresses as a “thug”, Manny is dressed as the “Token Black Guy”, Jared is the “Yuppie/Politician”, Tyler is a “Surfer Dude”, Kyle is a “Redneck”, and Blake is dressed, shockingly, as a member of the Ku Klux Klan. While Manny initially seems okay with this idea, we immediately see Justyce’s discomfort. Stone writes on page 34 of Blake’s costume, “Blake takes it too far. He’s dressed as a Klansman. He’s got on the white robe with the circular red and white cross patch on the chest, and he even has the pointed hood with the eyeholes cut out. If Jus didn't know it was a costume, he'd be a little scared" (Stone, 2017).

Teaching Dear Martin

One theme that teachers can emphasize through teaching this book in the classroom is the importance of belonging. This is a major theme throughout the story, as Martin regularly struggles with the sense that he doesn't belong. He also struggles with the nagging sense that no one can relate to the things he is experiencing as a Black teenage boy. While his Societal Evolution teacher, Doc, and his friend-turned-girlfriend, SJ, both strive to be allies and sources of support to Justyce, neither of them have had the exact same walk, SJ being white and Doc being a middle-aged man. His sense of alienation becomes so bad that, at one point, he contemplates joining a violent gang called the Black Jihad, just so that he feels like he belongs and is understood by someone like him. This is an extremely drastic shift, as Justyce has always avoided this gang, and opposed everything it stood for, however, this scene goes to show the lengths people will sometimes go to feel that they belong.

Teachers can use this scene as a way of sparking discussion about the need to belong, and how, oftentimes, it can lead previously law-abiding citizens to join gangs or fall in with the wrong crowd. Educators can also discuss ways in which students can support each other well and show empathy toward experiences different from their own. We cannot all understand every person's experience on a firsthand level, but we can all listen and do our part to create a safe space for people to feel they are valued and loved (Lannaman, 2019).

Another theme this book addresses that teachers can discuss in the classroom is the theme of racial profiling and judging a person based on appearances alone. In the opening scene of this book, Officer Tommy Castillo calls Justyce “a punk” who is “up to no good.” However, the officer does not know anything about Justyce other than that he is a Black teen wearing a hoodie. Justyce later, pondering this incident, writes “I apparently looked so menacing in my prep school hoodie, the cop who cuffed me called for backup” (ibid). Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon occurrence. According to the ACLU, “41% of Black Americans say they have been stopped or detained by police because of their race, 21% of Black adults, including 30% of Black men, report being victims of police violence, and thirteen thousand, seven hundred, and forty foreign nationals were placed in deportation proceedings as part of the U.S. response to Nine Eleven, but none have ever been publicly charged with terrorism” (Racial Profiling, 2023). Teachers can ask their students how they think they would feel if they were profiled or judged unfairly because of something they could not control, such as their race or their gender. Educators could also use this as an opportunity to teach about stereotypes and the harm they create in the world today.

Lastly, teachers can discuss the role the media plays within this novel and in our world today. The author wisely chooses to narrate this story from a third person perspective, so the reader has no shadow of a doubt that the information they are getting is unbiased, especially in the details surrounding Manny’s death. However, upon this incident, the media begins to speculate whether Officer Garrett was in the wrong for shooting him, and whether Manny was as innocent as he appeared. They even go so far as to dig up a photo of Justyce in his Halloween costume dressed as a thug, using it as further evidence that Officer Garrett was in the right, and merely exercising self-defense. In our world today, the media has the ability to dramatically shape public opinion, even before they have all of the facts. Teachers can use this as a discussion point within their classroom, asking how news outlets and social media play a role in national race-based cases, such as the death of Trayvon Martin or George Floyd. Educators can also ask students how the media could report more ethically, in a way that does not sway public opinion without having all of the facts.

Angie Thomas

The last book that I will examine in this thesis is the critically acclaimed YA novel, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. Thomas is a woman with a wide array of gifts and passions, ranging from writing to producing to speaking to activism. However, she is arguably best known for the aforementioned literary work and movie by the same name. Born in an economically downtrodden part of Jackson, Mississippi, she was quickly exposed to the perils of inner-city life, including drug dealing and gun fights. Thus, books became her safe space at a very young age. As she got older, this love for the written word continued to grow, so much so that she obtained her BFA in Creative Writing from Belhaven University (angiethomas.com, 2023). She also would likely be in wholehearted agreement with the topic of this thesis. She noted during the 2021 National Book Fest that she is "… a firm believer that books can create empathy and that empathy is more powerful than sympathy" (Hartley-Kong., 2023).

It would seem that one of Angie's goals as a writer is to educate readers, and therefore, create empathy for those growing up in underprivileged communities. Statistically, this is much needed, as historically speaking, up until recent years, there have been very few books that highlighted diverse life experiences, specifically the experiences of people of color. Lewis notes in an article for The Guardian, highlighting Thomas' contribution to the YA literary canon

> The campaign We Need Diverse Books was started after a US study showed that, of the 3,200 children's books published in 2013, only 93 featured black people as the main character. The problem was further highlighted when American schoolgirl Marley Dias attempted to find 1,000 books where the protagonist was a black girl and failed.

> "When a 12-year-old kid calls you out, you need to change," says Thomas. "And I can see it slowly changing. There's been a shift within the past few months where more than half of the books on the *New York Times* bestseller list for young adults were by authors of colour featuring main characters of colour, and that's huge" (Lewis, 2019).

Thus, as Thomas writes in hopes of cultivating empathy for those from diverse backgrounds, she also writes books that speak to the experiences of many racial minorities, something that is vitally important for children and teens in need of role models with whom they can identify. Laura Thomas, who coincidentally shares a last name with the author of *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas, talks about the importance of representation in her post for Edutopia, *Why Representation Matters*. In this article, she writes about how the mom of a child featured in a previous post sent in a picture of her child dressed as Rey from *Star Wars*, and how important it is for her child to have a strong female role model whose sole purpose was not to be rescued by a man. She states emphatically "If she can see it, she can be it." Seeing a female character play an active role in the plot of the story helps her see that she is just as capable as her male peers. This is something that I can personally attest to, as I have recently been watching the CW show, *Star Girl*. Ironically, the protagonist shares my hair color, my name, and a very similar last name. Thus, the protagonist resonates with me in a strange and familiar way and empowers me to fight my own battles, just as the character does in the show.

Furthermore, Thomas reflects on her own experiences growing up in the rural Midwest, and how little representation she saw as a child. She writes "The women that I saw in the media and read about were either urban or suburban…The subtle message I received was that the place where I lived didn't matter…my experience didn't matter" (Thomas, 2016). No child, Black or white, male or female, should ever be made to feel that their experiences do not matter or that their lived experiences are not important. Thus, by including more books with Black protagonists in the high school curriculum, students are given the chance to see themselves represented in literature and find role models within the characters.

The Hate U Give

The Hate U Give opens in a similar way as the last book, with the protagonist, Starr Carter, at a party. Through Thomas' use of a first-person point of view, we are given a glimpse into the inner thoughts and feelings of Starr. This helps us to connect with the character in a more personal and intimate way, and through her thoughts, we see how uncomfortable she feels at this party, even though she grew up with most of the teens there, in Garden Heights.

Unlike the people that she talks to at this party, Starr attends a predominantly white and wealthy private school. Her parents made this decision to keep her safe and give her opportunities that she would not otherwise have had at her local public school, where gangs run rampant and teen pregnancies are so frequent that Starr makes multiple references to them. However, growing up in a predominantly Black, lower-class neighborhood and attending a wealthy, predominantly white school makes Starr feel as though she has to be two versions of herself, and hide the "Black" parts of herself around her white friends. In one section, she notes

> "Williamson Starr doesn't use slang - if a rapper would say it, she doesn't say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her "hood". Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she's the "angry black girl". Williamson Starr is approachable. No stank-eyes, none of that. Williamson Starr is no confrontational. Basically, Williamson Starr doesn't give anyone a reason to call her ghetto. I can't stand myself for doing it, but I do it anyway (Thomas, 2017)."

Interestingly enough, this is not something that is specific to the protagonist of Thomas' novel, but rather, a reality present within the Black Community. Such behavior has been coined "code-switching" and occurs when a Black person feels they must assimilate to fit into white spaces. One student, Emokah, recalls in an interview being formally taught in school how to code-switch for interviews when she was only in the fifth or sixth grade. Before this class, she was taught informally how to code-switch from her grandma (Vasser, 2023). This phenomenon occurs most often in professional or scholastic settings; however, it can happen in other spheres of society as well. One area of society where this pressure can sometimes show up is within the walls of the classroom.

Cooks-Campbell writes in an article for Better Up that students may choose to engage in code switching for a number of reasons, ranging from a fear of confirming negative stereotypes toa hope of achieving a positive result (Cooks-Campbell, 2022). While code-switching has often generated positive outcomes for Black students, there are a number of negative effects it can have one the person who is practicing it, including uncertainty of one's authenticity in self-expression, identity confusion, a sense of not belonging, mental toll, burnout, fatigue, and hypervigilance (Sharma, 2023). Cooks Campell further notes in her own article that "For people of color…it can feel like only certain parts of their identity are welcome in professional settings" (Cooks-Campbell, 2022). Another article by Andrea Castellano, speaking specifically about the K-12 school system, notes "Black children are being taught to leave parts of themselves behind when entering academic or professional spaces" (Castellano, 2022). Thus, it can be a hindrance to learning if a student is so focused on or exhausted from trying to assimilate that they cannot adequately focus on the material at hand, as well as a hinderance to one's own individuality.

While unfamiliar to many white people in America, code-switching, or *double consciousness*, is far from a new phenomenon. In fact, civil rights pioneer W.E.B. Dubois once wrote of this practice,

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others…One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Harris, 2019).

Thus, this is one of many themes that Thomas addresses in *The Hate U Give*.

Another theme addressed in *The Hate U Give* is what sociologist, Robert K. Merton has titled the Strain Theory. The Strain Theory, according to Merton, is the strain that occurs when individuals cannot afford to meet their basic needs in moral and socially acceptable ways, and thus, turn to crime. We see this play out in the character of Khalil, who, after his death was labeled a drug dealer by the media and Starr's friends from Williamson. This initially rattles Starr, who cannot, for the life of her, understand why her friend, whose mother was living in bondage to a debilitating drug addiction, would choose to sell the very stuff that ruined his family and his mother's wellbeing. However, upon having a conversation with DeVante, who was closer to Khalil near the time of his death, Starr begins to realize that the situation is far more complex than she initially thought.

In this conversation, DeVante tells her that Khalil's mother stole from King, the head gangster of the King Lords, and that after this happened, his mom was in danger of being killed. Because his family was extremely poor, the only way for him to pay back the debt was through dealing drugs. DeVante also confesses to Starr that, while his situation wasn't as desperate as

Khalil’s, he didn’t truly want to be in a gang or be a drug dealer either. He says on page two thirty-eight

> They couldn’t look out for us like the King Lords do…Me and Dalvin looked out for them. With King Lords, we had a whole bunch of folks who had our back, no matter what. They bought us clothes…momma couldn’t afford and always made sure we ate…It was just cool to have somebody take care of us for a change, instead of the other way around…Like I said, nobody likes selling drugs…But I hated seeing my momma and my sisters go hungry, you know? (Thomas, 2017).

Thus, we see in this section that neither Khalil nor DeVante set out to get into trouble or break the law. They only wanted to protect their families and have their basic human needs met. We also, as the audience, grow in empathy for people whom we, more often than not, look down upon for their choices.

Khalil’s past also serves as a justification for his death for some characters in this book. One of Starr’s closest friends even goes so far as to say that the world is better off without him in it. However, from a Christian worldview, this is entirely anti-biblical. We have value not because of what we do or don’t do, but because we’re created in the image of God. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the son is immediately welcomed home by his father, despite wasting his money on prostitutes and wild living. The same ought to be true for Khalil. Though he is imperfect, as we all are, his life had value, and his death should not have been justified by the things that he did.

Nonetheless, this is unfortunately not an uncommon occurrence in real life. Growing up in Sanford, Florida, roughly ten minutes from the place where Trayvon Martin was killed, this is a line of thinking I have heard myself. Upon his death, I can still vividly remember hearing people justify what happened to him by the fact that his autopsy revealed traces of marijuana. While I have always been and continue to be opposed to drugs, I do not believe this justified what happened to him, as he, like every other person on this earth, was created in the image of God. His life, like mine, and every other life, young and old, Black and white, male and female, born and unborn, mattered.

The Hate U Give Controversy

One of the major controversies surrounding *The Hate U Give*, aside from its use of profanity, is its supposed “anti-police message.” Having read the book myself, I believe there are chapters where students may need guidance and clarification from wise adults, however, I do not think that it is intrinsically anti-police officer. One of the main reasons I say this is because Starr’s Uncle Carlos, who is a police officer himself, is portrayed in a largely positive light, even though he at times clashes with Starr’s father, Maverick. He is shown, despite his imperfections, to have an intrinsic sense of justice, and he proves to be a stabilizing force to the Carter family in the aftermath of this tragedy. Starr also clarifies in one section that she is not angry at the good police, like her uncle, but the ones who would take an innocent life in a moment of haste. Furthermore, I would argue that many of the instances where Starr does come off negative about police officers stems from a place of unresolved trauma and fresh pain over the death of her childhood best friend. In her more clearheaded moments, she acknowledges that there are, quite literally, good cops and bad cops (Marshall.edu). In fact, I would argue that most of the more troubling aspects of this book must be read with the understanding that this first-person point of view novel is told by a narrator who has experienced trauma. I also believe this must be emphasized clearly by teachers in order to avoid confusion and quick reactions from students.

For example, in one section, Starr is suddenly extremely uncomfortable with the fact that her boyfriend, Chris, is white. This has never bothered her previously, even though she notes that her dad has never approved of interracial couples. However, it is quickly noted that she associates his skin color with the skin color of the cop who killed her friend. While Chris is initially bewildered by her reaction, he slowly begins to understand what she's going through, and eventually becomes an ally to Starr and the Black community. He also serves as a stark foil to Starr's childhood best friend, Hailey, who Starr begins to find is more prejudiced than she initially let on, early in their friendship. Both characters make mistakes throughout this book, not just related to race, but over time they are shown to have excellent communication and a healthy relationship overall. Even her dad slowly comes around to the idea of Chris over time, and we find that much of his struggle in the beginning of this novel is deeply personal, born out of the feeling that he somehow failed his daughter since she chose someone, who, at first glance, seems so different from him. To this, Starr replies "You haven't set a good example of what a black man should be. You've set a good example of what a man should be," showing that character matters more to Starr than skin color.

That being said, while I believe this book contains more positives than negatives, white readers have much to glean from this book, and that no book ought to be banned, there are some aspects of this book that Christian educators in particular ought to navigate with a spirit of wisdom and discernment. Aside from the language and situations commonly found in nearly every mainstream YA novel, there is a definite secular worldview surrounding the theme of identity. In *The Hate U Give*, Black identity tends to be portrayed as all-encompassing rather than simply one facet of a person's lived experience. Starr frequently struggles with living in Garden Heights and attending Williamson, feeling torn between what the book appears to characterize as "blackness" and "whiteness", between being too black and not black enough. While this is a realistic character arc for a sixteen-year-old girl growing up in the world today, this paradigm is never questioned by the protagonist or by the older adults in her life. Thus, rather than simply a struggle the character faces, race becomes something of a worldview in this book; the world is painted as black and white—quite literally.

However, from a biblical worldview, our identity is not primarily rooted in our race, gender, sexuality, or socio-economic status, but rather who we are in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, the Apostle Paul writes "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (*New International Version,* 1979/2011, 2 Corinthians 5:17). Furthermore, Galatians 3:28 says, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (*New International Version*, 1979/2011, Galatians 3:28). To be clear, this does not mean that components of our lived experience, such as our race and our gender do not matter. My experience as a woman affects the way in which I exist in the world and the church. When people make assumptions about my capabilities or giftings because of my gender, I am still affected, even as a Christian woman. When I hear about sexual harassment or assault, or walk to my car late at night, I am still affected, even as a Christian woman. However, because of my faith, I do not define myself first and foremost as *female*, but *redeemed,* and women's issues like abortion are informed primarily by my faith, not my gender.

Esau McCaulley articulates this point profoundly in his article for the National Association of Evangelicals. He writes

> God's eschatological vision for the reconciliation of all things in his Son requires my blackness and my neighbor's Latina identity to endure forever. Colorblindness is sub-biblical and falls short of the glory of God. What is it that unites this diversity? It is not cultural assimilation, but the fact that we worship the Lamb. This means that the gifts that our cultures have are not ends in themselves. Our distinctive cultures represent the means

> by which we give honor to God…The vision of the kingdom is incomplete without Black and Brown persons worshiping alongside white persons as part of one kingdom under the rule of one king. (McCaulley, 2022).

This brings me to another point where this book and a biblical worldview begin to diverge: the ideology of "us versus them," which appears in chapter eleven. This section reads "This is bigger than me and Khalil though. This is about Us, with a capital U; everybody who looks like us, feels like us, and is experiencing this pain with us despite not knowing or Khalil" (Thomas, 2017). By saying this is about "everybody who looks like us", it is clear that this is not simply drawing a line between those on the side of justice and those on the side of error, but rather, Black and white people as a whole. I found this to be troubling for a couple of reasons. On a very base level, it, in many ways, echoes the sentiments of those who would choose to oppress Black people during the time of segregation, declaring that there is a water fountain for "us" and one for "them." It is a sharp departure from the dream of Martin Luther King, in which Black and white people could live and co-exist alongside each other, basing their feelings about another person on their character rather than their skin. On a theological level, this also sharply betrays the fact that every person descends from the same two people, meaning there is only "us." In 1 Corinthians 15:39-41, it says

> Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. (*New International Version,* 1979/2011, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Thus, we see here that the Bible only makes allowance for three different kinds of flesh: human, animal, and celestial. Nowhere do we see humans divided by the level of pigmentation in their skin. In fact, this is a viewpoint that is more Darwinian than biblical. Rose writes of Darwin's views on race

> Darwin was, after all, a man of his time, class and society… he still divided humanity into distinct races according to differences in skin, eye or hair colour. He was also convinced that evolution was progressive, and that the white races—especially the Europeans—were evolutionarily more advanced than the black races, thus establishing race differences and a racial hierarchy. (Rose, 2009).

Thus, in order to believe with any level of intellectual honesty that there are two different kinds of human races, one must hold to the evolutionary view of mankind rather than the one laid out by God in Genesis. You cannot be theologically consistent and believe that there are two different types of races.

Teaching the Hate U Give

In teaching *The Hate U Give,* I believe it is important that teachers focus on both the struggles Starr faces because of her ethnicity and the struggles that are universal to all, regardless of their ethnic background. White teachers also must begin with the understanding that they have not and likely will not experience some of the things Starr endures because of the color of her skin and read with a spirit of humility.

Ellis and Goering note in their article on this matter for Emerald Insight that to effectively engage in racial dialogue, we must first explore our own racial identities (Ellis & Goering, 2023). Many white teachers, according to the author's findings, are apprehensive about discussing race in the classroom, fearing they do not know enough or that they will make a mistake. However, true growth only happens when we acknowledge the areas in which we lack knowledge and seek to educate ourselves before attempting to educate others. Schools and universities can utilize practices such as workshops and training sessions to help white teachers feel more comfortable engaging in these conversations, and white teachers can have discussions with colleagues from different ethnic backgrounds and broaden their knowledge through these conversations and relationships. This can help teachers feel more equipped to navigate race-based discussions when they come up in the classroom, especially when studying a book like *The Hate U Give* (ibid).

I believe that teachers can and should also draw attention to the parts of Starr's story that are universal, and not solely related to race and ethnicity. This novel takes an in-depth look at one form that hate takes in the world today; however, as horrific as it is, it is not the only form of hate that our world has seen. Jewish people during the early twentieth century experienced hate at the hands of Nazi Germany for their religious beliefs. Asian hate crimes have climbed dramatically over the last couple of years, as have hate crimes against the LGBTQ community (n.a., 2023). Teachers can spark classroom discussions about what causes such deep-seated hate and how they, as the next generation, can fight for a kinder, less hate-filled world. They can also encourage students to actively think about how they would feel if they were victimized for things like their ethnicity or religious beliefs, encouraging empathy within the classroom and the practice of the Golden Rule in relation to all people.

Furthermore, educators could draw attention to the ways in which *The Hate U Give* showcases a coming-of-age story, and how Starr learns how to use her voice. Pierce notes of this story, recounting reviews from the press, that

> For Starr, her growing sense of justice and seeking her voice means she must come to terms with all the ways her identity has been fragmented" (Manson). "Starr must find her

voice and speak up for what’s right, even when facing peer and community pressure.” (Diamond) (Pierce, 2020).

Since many of the students reading this book will likely find themselves in the same Erickson “Identity versus Role Confusion stage of Development”, teachers can use this book as a springboard for talking about identity and the ways in which we develop our sense of self through adolescence (Cherry, 2023).

A Case Study in Pedagogy

Though the content thus far has focused speculatively on the ways in which teachers can utilize fiction in the classroom to create more empathy, especially surrounding the issue of race, there are real-life examples in which educators have used the books listed in the classroom. In this section, I would like to take the time to explore the results. On the website, It’s Lit Teaching: High School English and TPT Seller Resources, one teacher recounts her experience teaching the popular YA novel, *The Hate U Give* in her high school English classroom.

She starts off this article explaining some of her fears in teaching this book, noting that it was not a part of the official curriculum and that it would only take one person being offended to ruin this reading experience. She wondered what her students were thinking as they read it, whether they would like it as much as she did, and whether they would think she was attempting to push a political agenda in the classroom. However, to her surprise, the reactions were overwhelmingly positive. Nearly every student was hooked from the first page, and one student even went so far as to say it was the best book he has read since middle school. However, despite mostly positive reactions and outcomes, there were some negative responses as well. One drawback that she listed in this article was the length of the book, which made it hard to go deep or utilize supplemental texts to enhance the learning experience. She also noted that there were some students who immediately checked out or became defensive because of the subject matters that this book addressed, and one student chose to leave her class for good, opting instead for an online class (Teaching the Hate U Give: A Case Study). However, it would seem that the “wins” she had when teaching this book made this experience worth it. She writes

> Toward the end of the unit, one of my best and most engaged students showed up without her book. My heart melted though when she told me why. She had already made her sister read the book (who finished it in two days). So then her mom had stolen it that morning to read, so she could discuss it with her daughters… My colleagues were asking for copies of this new book. They were reading it and carrying it around the halls, which prompted conversations between students and staff. Every week, I heard a new story of a staff member and a student stopping to discuss the text! (The Hate U Give: The Most Important Book I Ever Taught).

Thus, it would seem that for this teacher, her decision to utilize this novel in the classroom was a good one.

Another teacher, Elizabeth Heubeck, recounts her experiences teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* in her high school English class. Though this book has been challenged by many educators and academics for its use of the “N-word” and instances of white saviorism, Heubeck believed, as do I, that this book has valuable lessons that are still relevant to this generation. To ensure that her classroom remained a safe space, she forbade students from using the “N-word” when reading it in class. She also presented an in-depth history lesson on Jim Crow laws to give her students a historical context for this literary work. In doing this, she saw incredible results, noting that they sparked in-depth discussions about race and nationally known cases like that of

George Floyd. At the end of the module, she asked them what they thought of the book. Their answer was that it was tough, but valuable. This answer was unanimous amongst all her students (Heubeck, 2023).

These real-life examples, alongside the research I have conducted related to empathy, pedagogy, psychology, and literature seems to support that it is possible for literature to spark empathy in race-based discussions. This is not to suggest that this is an easy task or even a fool-proof one. For some, it may take more than a book to break down the barriers of prejudice and bias. However, it does seem that literature has the power to plant seeds of compassion and spark much needed discussions that will help move our country forward into a better future where we are willing to climb into another's shoes and walk around in them. It has the power to change the way someone sees the world, and to climb into another's world. It is how we learn and grow, and it is education such as this that prepares students for life outside of the classroom. In the words that have been attributed to William Butler-Yeats, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."

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