

Stopping Sexism? Canceling Classics Isn't the Answer

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As debates and complaints regarding sexist themes in classic texts continue, the works' legitimacy, and very existence is being questioned. But at the end of the day, burying our heads in the sand and attempting to erase these works is not the answer.

The TikTok

Weeks ago, as I scrolled through my Instagram feed, I stumbled upon a Tik-Tok video snippet regarding my favorite author: Fyodor Dostoevsky. Instagram knows me well, refining my algorithm every day to show more of the content I'm interested in. I stopped scrolling to watch the video. Although it may have been about Dostoevsky, the message was far from the praise of his writing that I usually get. Instead, the individual in the video had made a semi-humorous video discussing why she had stopped reading Dostoevsky. In the 30 second snippet, she recalled her disappointment at discovering Dostoevsky's gambling addiction and marital problems that arose because of it. Appalled at his spending of his wife's money to fuel his addiction, she concluded that Dostoevsky was a misogynist, and she would no longer read his works.



What's Happening?

Dostoevsky's works are certainly not the first to be "canceled" after complaints of sexism. Throughout the U.S., many are making the decision to not read authors' works based on their controversial viewpoints. Some have gone further than merely deciding for themselves and have urged the public to adopt this same attitude and to eliminate books from school curriculum and libraries. Canceling in this instance is advocating that certain texts should no longer be read. These canceling efforts primarily revolve around classic works. While "classic works" is a broad term, it can be generally understood that classic texts are accepted by the literary community to have stood the test of time and contain historical and societal weight. These classic texts may span a large period of time, but works from across history are now being singled out and cancelled. After a brief Google search, I found complaints and calls to cancel [Orwell](#), [Shakespeare](#), [Melville](#), [Hemingway](#), and more. Unlike the first example of Dostoevsky, most people who wish to cancel the authors listed are not focused on the author's personal lives, but, rather, the opinions and attitudes expressed in their work. For example, the argument against Orwell's *1984* is that it objectifies the main female character, Julia. Readers argue that Julia's descriptions are all focused on her physicality. The character seems only to function as a plot device and sex object in the text.

The Argument

Because of problematic portrayals, teachers and students alike argue that these texts shouldn't be read or taught. There are a few primary building blocks that make up the argument against these classics. Firstly, various individuals argue that the text is damaging to those who read it. When discussing why Shakespeare's plays should no longer be taught in schools, students complained that the work "fuels intolerance." *The Taming of the Shrew* was deemed

problematic due to its perceived gender stereotypes regarding marriage. Cases like these were



said to isolate students and not provide a welcome environment for their learning. Female students were made to feel inferior and excluded. Secondly, some have pointed out that sexist works reflect outdated ideals. Many prescribe replacing classics with modern works that are more aligned with current cultural values and ideals. Lastly, a common argument for canceling classic works that contain sexist themes is that reading them perpetuates sexism. This

argument maintains that not only does the work *reflect* outdated ideas, but it propagates them too. Literature does have profound effects on its readers, and this argument says that this effect can be negative, causing the reader themselves to adopt a sexist attitude.

The Reality

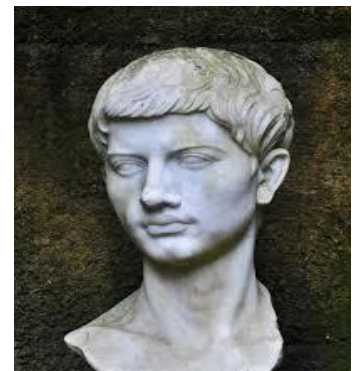
As well-intentioned as these arguments against sexist classics may be, they fall short. Classics that contain sexist themes may be difficult, shocking, or sad. That doesn't mean, however, that we completely stop reading and teaching them. By burying our heads in the sand and ignoring these texts, we do more harm than good. There are substantial harms that arise as a result of canceling sexist works, but one of the most prominent is the erasing of and failure to understand our history.

History

Canceling these classic books removes us from our own history. Often, the way many people tend to think of history is that it is taught strictly from a textbook or a teacher. One of the most valuable ways to learn history of a particular place and time, however, is to examine the

texts of the day. Nowadays, many seem to view literature as something only to be consumed for the story itself. On the contrary, literature is much more than that. Literature contains the very forces that have shaped history. From classic literature we read about how individuals and societies reacted to events like the Renaissance, the French Revolution, the Reformation, WWI, and more. The impact of these pivotal moments upon humanity's history can best be understood by reading those who actually lived during them. By removing classics from our reading list, we are essentially cutting off the flow of valuable information. From classics, we gain insights into our past and what has made us into the society we are today. This applies to classics that may contain misogynist or sexist themes. Without reading these texts, we fail to understand how women have been viewed throughout history. As a woman, I may be uncomfortable with the viewpoint presented in some of these texts. At the same time, I think it's necessary that we read them. I want to understand the opportunities women have had throughout history and how past views of them have led to our current cultural viewpoint.

How can we understand the ancient world's view of women, and women's journey today without reading of Virgil's character, Dido? Her story may contain elements that modern readers find offensive, but it was also monumental in how it encompassed Dido's independence and character. How can we understand women's place in entertainment and culture without reading Shakespeare's plays with female characters? A quick examination of *Jane Eyre's* reviews on the app Goodreads shows that many readers consider Jane's marriage to Rochester after he deceived her to be extremely problematic. However, *Jane Eyre* is integral in portraying female interiority and power. Even when the depiction of women isn't favorable, it teaches us about our own history. Huxley's portrayal of women in *Brave New World* is largely focused on



their physical attributes and sexual allure. This may initially seem pointless to read and to subject students to studying. But by examining works like this, we can see how women were viewed in



Huxley's time. We also see, due to the dystopian nature of *Brave New World*, Huxley's fears for the future, including the treatment of women. Literature is not simply stories. Literature is history, philosophy, physics, art, and more. It encompasses societal views and understandings. Reading classics has been shown to [increase emotional awareness and understanding](#). This directly combats the

argument that reading sexist classics will hurt students. Rather, it allows them to see the world through different perspectives and understand the factors that have shaped society. By not taking the time to grapple with these texts and explore them as portals to the past, we are merely surface level creatures. We take the story at face value, conclude that it is offensive to women, and toss it in the discard pile. By doing this, we not only undercut society's history, but also the complex history of different women's experiences throughout time. Instead of expanding the narrative, we're condensing it to fit our version of history. History is not pretty. Why would we expect its literature to be?

What Now?

Where does this leave us? Classics can be taught and read critically and thoughtfully. We can recognize their historic and linguistic importance in the canon and accept that the works have shaped our society. We can acknowledge ways that authors may not fit in with our society's standards, while recognizing that our own standards are shifting day by day. Yes, many classics have misogynistic and sexist themes. That doesn't mean we throw them away. To truly

understand the female experience and work towards positive change, it is actually imperative that we read these texts.