

**‘Artists, musicians or writers who have expressed racist, sexist or homophobic views publicly should no longer have their work taught in schools.’  
To what extent do you agree with this viewpoint?**

Should artists, musicians and writers who have expressed racist, sexist, or homophobic views still have their work taught in schools? To discuss this, we need to understand what is meant by these terms. Racism is defined as ‘a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race’, or ‘racial prejudice or discrimination’<sup>1</sup>. Sexism is defined as ‘prejudice or discrimination based on sex, especially discrimination against women’ or as ‘behaviour, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex’<sup>2</sup>. Homophobia is defined as the ‘irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals’<sup>3</sup>. This definition can be extended to discrimination against any sexuality or person that is not heterosexual, or perhaps in an even broader sense against any member of the LGBTQ+ community.

I think that it is essential not to censor and erase such prejudices – they play an unfortunately relevant part in society in the times the artists, musicians and writers lived and worked in, and more importantly, in society today.

Let’s take the *Secret Garden*<sup>4</sup>, a classic piece of children’s literature, for example: when the main character, Mary, arrives at Misselthwaite Manor having travelled from India to England, she meets her maid, Martha. Mary doesn’t expect to have to dress herself because she was raised by servants who did everything for her, including dressing her. Martha, who very much seems to be the intended voice of reason in this conversation tells Mary “‘I dare say it’s because there’s such a lot o’ blacks there [India] instead o’ respectable white people.” She then follows this up by saying “‘When I heard you was comin’ from India I thought you was a black too,” causing Mary to throw a fit because the natives “‘are not people.””<sup>5</sup> Black people are not explicitly referenced for the rest of the book, but throughout there is indication of symbolic racism – Mary only begins her journey of self-discovery and becoming a better person after she has changed out of her black clothes and doesn’t have to engage with ‘black’ Indian servants.

Such presentation of both black and Indian people can be damaging, both to black and Indian children who might read it and become upset, but also to white children who might read it and believe it. However, the core message of the book is one of self-healing and self-improvement – through looking after the garden, Mary becomes a kinder person, and Colin, the sickly son of the master, finds himself healed<sup>6</sup>. *The Secret Garden* is a classic story and arguably a staple of children’s literature, but, at least in part due to the time it was written in, it was racist in a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexism>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/homophobia>

<sup>4</sup> Frances Hodgson Burnett – *the Secret Garden* (1911) – Oxford Children’s Classics (2007)

<sup>5</sup> Chapter 4, Martha

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Secret-Garden>

potentially harmful way. And yet, I imagine that if a school were to propose banning this book, and other classics like it, there would be objections. Personally, I too would object to the censorship of a book in school.

When certain subjects become taboo in schools, the students gain added interest in them, which may then lead to them finding other ways to find out (for example, extremist hate websites). When that happens, teachers or librarians can no longer give context for or explain the material, potentially resulting in harm<sup>7</sup>. But when teachers or librarians are involved in the learning of that material, there is less chance of this happening – in some cases they could teach a passage, for example, give background information of the creator, and explain what was said and how it was wrong. In others, students could be given a warning before they start studying the material if something particularly violent or upsetting is described – for example mentioning that there are racist, homophobic, transphobic or sexist slurs, or bullying and violence because of race, gender or sexuality. This gives students who may be distressed by the material an opportunity to emotionally prepare for it<sup>8</sup>.

To censor material that children (or their parents) might find upsetting or offensive will protect them from the injustices of the world, yes, but it will also leave gaps in their education. Entering the 'real world' will come as a possibly distressing shock. It may also leave people not in the discriminated group with the belief that such prejudices are a thing of the past and no longer an issue today. In a 2017 survey, over 10% of Americans thought that racism was either not a problem or only a small problem<sup>9</sup> and in a 2016 survey 56% of US men thought that "obstacles that made it harder for women to get ahead are largely gone"<sup>10</sup>. This is harmful to the people being discriminated against because it leaves them as the only people who are trying to fix the problem. Which is an issue because most of the people in power are white, cisgender<sup>11</sup>, straight men. Only 27% of Cabinet members are women<sup>12</sup>, for example.

Many (particularly male) writers of the past were sexist simply because of the times that they lived in. Similarly, plenty of Western authors were racist for the same reasons. As for homophobia, 'homosexual acts in private between two men' were only legalised in the UK in 1967<sup>13</sup>, and even then it only applied to men over the age of twenty-one and only in England and Wales and excluded the Merchant Navy and Armed Forces. Of course, while much of the prejudice demonstrated in literature and expressed by those writing it was a product of its time, this fact does not excuse any of these views. However, pretending that they never existed denies not only past discrimination but that which many people still face. Doing this may unintentionally invalidate

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<sup>7</sup> Journal of Instructional Psychology (Vol. 32, Issue 3) – Ken Petress – Sept. 2005

<sup>8</sup> <https://theconversation.com/in-praise-of-trigger-warnings-66044>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/how-many-americans-dont-believe-racism-is-a-problem-in-the-us-four-graphs-that-explore-race-in-america>

<sup>10</sup> <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/08/the-majority-of-u-s-men-believe-sexism-is-over.html>

<sup>11</sup> Not transgender

<sup>12</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01250/>

<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual\\_Offences\\_Act\\_1967](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_Offences_Act_1967)

the experiences of students who feel their lives are affected by prejudice against their race, gender, or sexuality.

Censoring these works would erase their literary and artistic value, and the positive observations and conclusions about humanity that they might contain. For example, should we lose the powerful lesson about the evils of jealousy and beautiful language of 'Othello' because Shakespeare's portrayal may seem in some ways stereotypical to modern eyes?

In addition, to erase the prejudice and bigotry of (mostly) influential figures like writers, artists, and musicians is essentially to erase the suffering and discrimination that many people have experienced and still experience today – and perhaps even serves to downplay the great struggles that they have gone through and continually face in order to be recognised as humans, equal in their own rights.

It is also to erase the story of the work, struggle, and sacrifice that many people have contributed in order to demonstrate the wrongness of these views and improve all our lives by making them more equal. As Whoopi Goldberg said, "we have to bring them like they are because these were the views then. They aren't right now but hiding them and pretending these prejudices never existed is worse than showing them"<sup>14</sup>. The lesson we must learn from these dated prejudices is that by working together and making small changes today, we can still make the world a better place for the future.

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<sup>14</sup> Looney Tunes Golden Collection Vol. 3