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Phonies

Aquatint etching

My work is focused around the literary canon of most high schools in America. My project in particular focuses around three specific authors: J.D. Salinger, Arthur Miller, and Earnest Hemingway. In my research I explored the idea of the separation between the art and the artist and I wanted to explore this through literature. In school I had read works such as *The Catcher in Rye*, *The Old Man and The Sea*, and *The Crucible*. When I read these books in school I felt very disconnected from the content and never really understood the relevance. I also thought about the character of these authors and how that would often leak into their writing. I thought about how it would be beneficial if we updated our literary canon to more relevant works made by people who are sharing more relatable experiences. It is necessary to realize that these works were once relevant but now there is more relevant work to be shared.

For my art I decided I want to make prints. I wanted to demonstrate the bad character of some of these authors by displaying things from their life that may have been morally questionable. I wanted these prints to be very stark so I chose a technique called aquatint. This was a long process and I discovered that I was taking on a lot. I made one plate at a time and went through the process three times. In each print I put some elements in from their works and from their personal life. In making this piece I hope people will reflect on the importance of our classics and how it is important to adapt things in time.

The Books We Read



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Writer's Note: This paper talks about the importance of the literature we read. It addresses the flaws of our literary canon and why it matters to keep updating what we read. It is important to hear from new voices and unique perspectives. This paper poses the question: Does the type of literature we read matter? Does it matter who wrote it?

I have always had trouble with the claimed importance of novels like *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Great Gatsby*. I just never understood why these were the voices schools were inclined to share with their students. The more I reflected on these books, the more I thought about the voices behind them. These people's impact is unmovable and their works will always be considered some of the most important works ever. I have always spent a lot of time thinking about the people who influence us and I often end up thinking that these people do not deserve the praise or power they get. So when I started researching influential authors such as JD Salinger and Arthur Miller I felt these same feelings. What is so important and impactful about the *Catcher in the Rye* that so many people idolize and praise a pedophile? Arthur Miller stood for many good values. He spoke against the Vietnam war and showed admirable qualities during the Red Scare when he refused to name people. He is considered admirable because he stood up for all he believed. All these authors are people who thought uniquely during their time. They did this in spite of pressures, which is very admirable. Miller, like Salinger, also had a tainted personal life. And Hemingway and Fitzgerald were both angry people who were abusive toward the people around them. These two were just standard bad people where Miller is, I would say, cruel. Life is so complex and humans are flawed but there is no excuse for the actions of some. The actions do very much on the pain they have caused others. In society, male expectations are very different. Nobody cares if JD Salinger had an inappropriate relationship with a fourteen year old girl, because he was a genius man. It is the

job of the individual to decide if they care enough to give up some of the “greatest literature of all time.”

I always felt as if certain people do not have to worry about the repercussions of their own bad actions. In my study, I found the most frustrating thing to be how easy it is to be considered great as a white man. They are extremely talented writers but there are so many other, more talented writers who do not stem from extreme privilege. For example JD Salinger grew up similar to that of his character Holden Caulfield, rich. Arthur Miller however grew up during The Great Depression but he still never had to worry about his words being taken seriously. These people are privileged because as white men they never had to worry about being completely dismissed, they were lucky enough to be able to rely only on their talent. There are plenty of skilled authors who have something new to share, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. They bring new meaning, things that are not as commonly talked about. Why are the tales of Holden Caulfield still relevant today? It is only relevant to a very small group of people.

Does it matter if they are bad people or not? Why does it matter if they are dead? The distinction is case by case, a bad thing is not just a bad thing. There are obviously levels in their corruption. It is also a factor that these authors are dead. This matters because they are no longer around to make money or benefit off of their work being consumed. However even if they are dead, their values leak into their work. They are the sole authors of most of their works so people will be influenced by people with very questionable morals. How important is it to care about the harm these people caused in their personal lives if their impact is so lasting?

Arthur Miller is an American icon. He has had a very significant impact on literature and theater. He has won countless awards and is also widely known for marrying Marilyn Monroe. He was a truly bright man and his impact is definitely cemented. His plays are so impactful as they

talk about political and controversial topics from his time. They are so widespread that, “There is scarcely a moment of any day when one of his [Arthur Miller] plays is not being performed somewhere in the world” (Otten). Miller's pull is something that must be recognized. However just because he holds great significance doesn't mean his words are what people need right now. We have heard so many stories about the struggles of the average white man. There are so many issues that are relevant to more people who do not often get represented. It is about representation and how the stories of these authors have been told so many times. We all need something new, we need it so we can grow as people.

Arthur Miller is, like many of these authors, someone with a moral impact. He was socially engaged and is considered to be a leftist figure. He is associated with communism and was most significant during the red scare. His play *The Crucible* is a story relating his experiences and thoughts to the virtues of the American system, “Arthur was fond of saying that he wrote metaphors rather than plays”. This is significant because Miller is a thoughtful impactful man, when it helps him. Miller writes about the flaws of the American government and human nature when he is the victim of it. He shows no care or thought when it comes to people who are actually marginalized and oppressed. In *The Crucible* he takes the story of real people who were actually victims of a certain society and makes a martyred version of himself a victim of a group of women. Of course the Salem Witch Trials did actually happen but he is no victim similar to John Proctor and he fails to address the horrors of living as a woman in Puritan times.

Miller and similar authors tend to be romanticized; they behave like martyrs. When reading about Miller there seems to be this idea that he has been undervalued and misunderstood. Everyone thinks they are special and misunderstood. It's just human nature, according to an article people have, “a strong tendency to minimize other people's claims of hardship, and amplify our own”

(Burnett). Some articles stated things like, “Miller was not fully respected by drama critics and the larger public in the United States.” This has been said in spite of the fact that he has won multiple Tonys and a Pulitzer Prize.

Miller stood against going to Vietnam which is commendable. His opposition of Vietnam goes back to his display of morals, he opposed the war because it was morally incorrect. He also believed that every American had a right to their own political views which is why he refused to identify to the government during the Red Scare. So why do all morals fly out the window when something may become inconvenient to him? Arthur Miller had a son, Daniel Miller, in November of 1966. Daniel is the son of Inge Morath, a photographer and the third wife of Miller. Their son was born with Down Syndrome. The couple then gave their son to an institution. Arthur Miller abandoned his son because he had Down Syndrome, possibly to protect his image. He also could have had certain beliefs towards people with disabilities. He would never visit him, never speak of him, he would deny he even existed. His wife would visit him every once and while but they basically abandoned their son. How could a moral person do something like this? Is he still a moral person? It relates back to his selfishness, he only stands for something when it affects him. When he is the victim it matters and when it is others it is not worth his time or thought. Marginalized people do not get any attention in his works, only people he can relate to. This is not necessarily his fault, people write about what they know. So maybe because of this we should put our admiration and time into authors who do have something new to share.

Miller gets to be known as a moral and philosophical figure. It should be acknowledged that he was a very morally questionable person. How can one write a play like *The Crucible* which stresses judgment and deflection and then do this to someone who he is supposed to love and cherish. This does make him a bad person, it makes him a hypocrite. A bad person completely

dismisses the life of another. Bad is subjective but in my mind a bad person lacks empathy and thought. A person like this will always choose what is easiest for themselves. On the same note a bad person can produce great things. His message and impact is still the same even if he did this. In conclusion, he does not deserve his reputation as a moral man or a thoughtful man. His works will be read, and his works are important. We must acknowledge that a horrible man made great things and those things will be consumed in spite of his character.

His work *The Crucible* is still widely read in schools everywhere. *The Crucible* is a play that features female characters which is actually a positive aspect because in most of these older works there are no female characters or female characters who exist just around the male character. At least in this book there is a fully developed female character who is central to the plot. However the martyr of the book is a white, male landowner. He gets to be the victim and in light of all that has happened with women and the “Me Too” movement. I believe this book to be harmful and unnecessary. It displays that women are liars who, without the love and attention of a man, have no direction and accuse them of doing something they have not done. This plays on the idea that women are crazy, scorned, liars who only want the love of a man. In the play John screams, “You are pulling Heaven down and raising up a whore!” (Miller). This goes back to the idea that all that women want is the love of a man. Why is Abigail the whore when she was underage and John Proctor was over forty years old with a wife. Abigail, the main female character, is central to the plot, yet her entire existence and motive is based around a man. In this play Abigail starts to assume this position of revenge, “I will not, I cannot! You loved me, John Proctor, and whatever sin it is, you love me yet!” (Miller). John gets to be their hero and savior of the book but he should really be shown in a similar light to Abigail. He had an affair with a teenage girl. This play overall fails to give Abigail the chance to be anything beyond a scorned woman.

Another influential author is JD Salinger. His novel *The Catcher in the Rye* has been read by most of us. Why is a book about a rich, hetero, white man complaining so important to us? It goes back to the idea of being misunderstood. Everyone thinks they are misunderstood when most of the time we just feel entitled. The main character in this work, Holden Caulfield, is not misunderstood. He is not marginalized and his story is told. It has been told and it will keep getting told, so we should hear other stories told from a new perspective. The articles written about this book were mostly written by men. One article when talking about Salinger and his deep connection to the book said, “When I was a prep school boy down in New England Secondary school, I used to hang around the Menemsha Bar trying to pick up girls” (Gordon). The author of the article shared his own stories to show how important this book is and how much he related to it.

JD Salinger as a person had a romantic relationship with a fourteen year old girl when he was 30 years old. His voice in literature is one that we do not need anymore. Maybe at the time in which his most iconic book *The Catcher in the Rye* came out it mattered. It mattered at this time because it talked about the mental struggles of being a teen. It reached people like great art does, and maybe it still reaches people. However, I think the greater majority of people, especially young people, have no connection to books like this because it is very male centric. Most people who are reading this book are also not very wealthy. Some things about the teenage experience are universal but it could be shared in a new way and from new people.

In *The Catcher in the Rye* we have followed the story of Holden Caulfield, a rich, white, straight man as he runs away from his boarding school and complains about how everyone around him is a “phony” and how hard his life is. It is not to be said that because he is all those things, greatly privileged, that his life cannot be hard, it is just a story that we have heard so many times before. There is a quote from *The Catcher in the Rye* that stuck with me, “Game, my ass. Some

game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right—I'll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game" (Salinger). I think there is a lot of truth in this quote, but I also find this quote to be ironic. JD Salinger himself grew up wealthy and became successful, he got to play the game. He never had to think that his talent would not be enough. Holden Caulfield is also privileged. There is this idea of how hard it is for men because they do not feel as if they can express their emotions and they have to be tough, and they face such a great burden. These are all issues that they have created for themselves. Holden Caulfield has no disposition for struggle, which is not to say that someone like him cannot or will not, it is just to say that his circumstance does not make his life harder. We should be participating in literature and discussion that creates spaces for voices of people who have something to say about our world, who have an experience that can be shared to make others think and to spark empathy. JD Salinger's most famous work only relates to a very select, privileged group. It is important to start hearing other voices in the classroom. As a world we hear so much from the white male, so maybe we should try to spotlight other, more relevant voices instead.

Another author I just do not understand is F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway's novels portray women in a very offensive light. Hemingway popularized the word "bitches." In *A Farewell to Arms* the main female character dies in childbirth. She is a heroine but this stresses the idea of her worth. Her life has less value than the life of a man. There is somehow an idea that Hemingway actually loves women. In a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "If you leave a woman, though, you probably ought to shoot her. It would save enough trouble in the end, even if they hanged you" (Hemingway). His most famous book, *The Old Man and The Sea*, tells a message that is very clear but not very relevant. It's about persistence again through the

perspective of a white man. Books like *The Great Gatsby* are not the only books that talk about things like class. We could learn about the failures of the American dream from marginalized people and authors who have experienced first hand these failures.

There are more important authors to be read. These people have had a remarkable impact on writing and people, but that can be acknowledged without their works constantly being consumed. Most American teens do not relate to *The Great Gatsby* or *The Catcher in the Rye*. We do not have to relate to every piece of media we consume but in school we should especially be learning about something new. We should be hearing from voices who speak for something. We can learn about class and mental health in books that are not through the perspective of the white male.

These authors are frozen in time. They are part of a time in America where something like mental health was not widely talked about, at least not in the way it is today. So of course it makes sense that something like *The Catcher in The Rye* would have a great impact. The problem is that we are not in that time anymore. We know it is hard as a teenager and as a human being. We have acknowledged all the things Salinger stresses in his book and all the points he hit could be talked about with a voice from someone new.

Miller's impact is frozen in a slightly different way. He has made a lasting impact on literature and theater. His plays are impactful and are not completely offensive. *The Crucible* is a true story, however it is not completely historically accurate. It has been twisted slightly to fit his own narrative.

The author of a book is so important. We are hearing their thoughts, it is their words completely unfiltered because it gives them the power to influence the author greatly. Especially if the reader is being told these are some of the most important literary works. So why does it

benefit us to read books written by abusers and misogynists? It simply does not. There are other authors and other stories. One of these authors is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. One book of hers that I found particularly important was *Americanah*. This book tells the story of a woman who immigrated to the US to attend college. Another important book of hers is *Purple Hibiscus*. This tells the story of a young girl who grew up in Nigeria. This young girl grows up in an extreme, abusive Christian household. Her father is abusive and this book also talks about class. It talks about class in a way more meaningful than books like *The Great Gatsby*. This great novel talks about the power wealthy men have and violence against women. It also talks about religious extremity as well as simply being a teenage girl. Another important author that should be read is Ta-Nehisi Coates. One book of his is *Between the World and Me*. This work is a letter to his son and it talks about the realities of being a black man in America. It talks about the things he has always had to consider that white people have not. He also talks about gender and how women are mistreated in every community. This work also touches on sexuality and discrimination of all types. Books like these are far more important and impactful than having yet another group of students read Holden Caulfield's adventures while complaining and running around New York.

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