

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

English department retires TKAM

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Senior Lexi Harrell clearly remembers the discomfort she felt one day in her freshman year Honors Written and Oral Communication (HWOC) class. As the class was continuing their unit on Race in America by reading “To Kill a Mockingbird” (TKAM), Harrell’s teacher was reading the novel out loud and said the n-word, which was written in the book. Her class was told beforehand that the word would be said, but Harrell feels that a teacher should never use the n-word — especially when none of the English teachers are Black. She was forced to hear this highly offensive racial slur in a classroom where she was the only Black student.

TKAM has been a novel taught in schools across the U.S. for decades due to it being an American classic and Pulitzer Prize winning piece of literature that discusses the problem of racism.

However, there are many controversies surrounding this novel including it being 60 years old, using the n-word nearly 50 times, being seen as a white savior story due to a white man being depicted as the only hope to help a Black man and having an author who is a Southern white woman, Harper Lee.

This raised the question at Prospect and around the country over whether or not this novel belongs in a high school curriculum.

According to Principal Greg Minter, the answer is that TKAM no longer has a place in the English curriculum and that the Race in America unit during Written and Oral Communication (WOC) and HWOC needs to include texts that fully capture the complex issue of racism. He specifically mentions that these texts should be more modern and written by authors of color to make sure all voices are included when discussing race.

“I’m not necessarily saying that I wanted to exclude ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ from being read necessarily,” Minter said. “But at the same time, I do think we need to be providing alternative texts and authors and so forth when we’re exploring topics in that area.”

The Division Head of English, EL and Theater, Adam Levinson, could not agree more with Minter on this stance and finds that the job of the English department is to look over the current pieces of literature they teach to get an idea of what voices are being left out.

Last May, Minter started working with Levinson to see how the freshman year Race in America unit could bring forward more voices to the table, and part of their solution was removing TKAM completely.

Since the removal of TKAM, Levinson began working with other English teachers to find replacements that are more modern



THE END: A teacher closes a cabinet filled with the English department's copies of Harper Lee's “To Kill a Mockingbird” (TKAM). Last May, Principal Greg Minter and Division Head of English, EL and Theater Adam Levinson replaced TKAM with five modern novels by authors of color to make the freshman year Race in America unit more inclusive. (photo illustration by Mara Nicolaie)

and inclusive. According to Levinson, each grade level has about two to five books being examined by teachers to determine what are the best novels to teach about the complexities of racism. All of these books have been published in the past 10-15 years and are all authored by people of color — fulfilling Minter’s idea of a more modern approach.

While she finds that this new change is tremendous for ethically teaching race in America, HWOC teacher Heather Sherwin states that this addition is only half of the perfect way to teach the racism unit. Starting this year, the Race in America unit is going to be taught by letting the students have a choice between five modern novels that have authors of color, according to Sherwin.

Sherwin endorses this plan and is excited for her students to have the freedom to choose their novels, but she said that one key piece is missing from this new plan: TKAM. Sherwin believes that the entire class should be reading TKAM together and afterwards move on to the modern texts.

The rationale to her thinking is that since TKAM is such a heavy and confusing piece of literature, Sherwin feels that it is her job to ensure that students are taking away the proper meaning of the novel and truly mak-

ing sense out of the complex problems with race that the book discusses at length. For example, one of the heaviest topics of discussion for TKAM is its use of the n-word — meaning proper education on the racial slur is critical to modern cultural awareness and the dispelling of cultural ignorance.

Sophomore Ella Mitchell feels that her HWOC class last year had effective education on the n-word due to discussions that spanned over two days.

On the first day, the class listened to a presentation and watched videos discussing the origin of the slur and its impact on people today. The second day included discussions with counselors who helped the students have their own discussions in small groups.

“If a conversation is going on in the world, you need to not be ignorant,” Sherwin said. “So learn something so you can take part in that conversation, especially today when people are often ignorant.”

Sherwin described these class periods as a “necessary awkward” because it forced students to open up and have thorough discussion about a slur that is not talked about much in a school that has a 75% white student body. With this lack of diversity, Sherwin believes it is crucial to make freshmen

break away from their “white bubbles” and start to understand the world as a whole.

Harrell could not agree more with this statement but still supports teaching TKAM; she feels that making sure teachers allow students of color to speak up about their experience with race if they want to is an effective way to spark meaningful discussion as well.

To be clear, Harrell does not want students of color to be pressured to perform this emotional task in any way, but she would like all students of color to have the possible platform. While these changes will not be seen for sure in the new curriculum, Harrell hopes the English department will take this into consideration.

Harrell and Mitchell both find that the new change of letting students share their voices more to the class would show how the problem of racism can be seen in Arlington Heights and Mount Prospect and overall make the classroom a much more open and personalized discussion.

“It’s hard to talk to people about [racism] when they can’t necessarily understand it completely,” Harrell said. “So I think it would be good to get adult, kid and student perspectives of color.” **P**

TKAM reintroduction needed in classes

Staff Editorial

Every Prospect student remembers sitting in their freshman Written and Oral Communication (WOC) or Honors Written and Oral Communication (HWOC) class on the day they began reading the famed novel — Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird” (TKAM). What seemed to start out as an innocent story of children getting into trouble in 1930s Alabama ended up being a timeless tale discussing the issues of systemic racism in America. However, the teaching of this novel was officially ended last May when Principal Greg Minter and Division Head of English, EL and Theater Adam Levinson made the decision to replace TKAM with five new novels for the Race in America unit.

These five novels have been released in the past 10-15 years and all have authors of color. The purpose of this decision was to bring a modern, diverse approach to teaching race in America instead of teaching TKAM — a 60-year-old novel that has 50 uses of the n-word and is written by a Southern white woman. Although this change is a better method of teaching race, HWOC teacher Heather Sherwin feels that removing TKAM is the wrong approach and instead argues that TKAM can be taught along with the modern novels (see “English department retires TKAM”).

Senior Lexi Harrell, a Black student who feels that the Race in America unit needed proper reform, states that the English department made the right call by implementing these new books. But, she agrees with Sherwin that teaching TKAM along with this new curriculum is more effective. Harrell is also adamant that a reintroduction of TKAM should include changes to the method of teaching — especially by allowing students of color to speak out about their experience with race if they would like to.

Although adding new pieces to the curriculum are the keys to presenting more perspectives in the race unit, many errors in the current unit demand proper attention and reform — especially if TKAM were to ever come back.

We, The Prospector, are thankful to Minter, Levinson and the many other members of the English department who have been putting in immense effort to address our school’s lack of diverse perspectives in the Race in America unit. Additionally, we praise their understanding of the necessity of having a modern approach to this unit with the perspective of a person of color. However, we feel that the removal of TKAM is not the correct way to teach the WOC and HWOC Race in America unit and request the English department and Prospect administration to reimplement it into the curriculum to go along with the new, modern texts.

When discussing the complex issue of racism, it is important to teach multiple perspectives from multiple time periods as a means of displaying to students how far society has come with racial discrimination and frankly, how far we still have to go. We do understand that TKAM is a heavy text with sensitive material — hence why we request the reintroduction to come with edits to the old curriculum and adjustments to how educators are teaching it.

To start off, it is time for our English teachers to stop actually saying the n-word aloud to the entire class when reading texts such as TKAM. When we attend a school where 75% of the student body is white and only 12% of the staff are people of color, it is inappropriate for a racial slur to be uttered by educators — especially when students like Harrell are so often the only person of color in their class.

When educators say a term as [heavy](#) as the n-word with grace when reading these older texts, it is normalizing the racial slur to the student body and indicates that students and teachers alike do not understand the word’s impact. When English teachers at Prospect decide to say the word in class, they explain that they are doing so in order to convey how casually the word was used in the 1930s despite how violent and aggressive the slur is. To be clear, no teacher enjoys using the word and they discuss with their class the slur’s origins beforehand.

While we do understand the importance of learning about this racial slur, the way the English department should be doing this

is by expanding the education on the n-word itself and making sure no teacher can say the word. Minter states that the English department has been doing a phenomenal job so far during the race unit, but he discourages teachers from saying the word. As a matter of fact, when Minter was an English teacher and taught TKAM at a more diverse school with a very small population of white students, he would not say the n-word.

“I just don’t think that it’s a word that particularly a person that is not of color — or not Black — should be using,” Minter said.

The purpose of the Race in America unit is to give students a cultural lens and teach them about how racism has been a part of American society for centuries, and it is crucial to understand novels such as “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” and TKAM need to be taught with these same procedures. The way this education happens is by discussing the impact of the n-word thoroughly and allowing perspectives of students and educators of color a chance to talk about their experience with racism.

Although the n-word and older, offensive language that demeans women and Black Americans is the primary reason TKAM was removed, another crucial aspect of this 60-year-old novel is the fact that it is seen as a white savior story. By definition, a white savior story is a piece of literature or film that depicts a white person who helps people of color and are often depicted as heroes, saviors or “the only hope” for it.

The reason TKAM is often subjected to this criticism is because of the character Atticus Finch. Finch is the white lawyer in Maycomb County, Ala., who defends Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, because he deems it the moral and ethical thing to do.

Because Finch does this in a predominantly white Southern town in the 1930s, his family receives criticism and hatred from a majority of the community because Finch is attempting to bring justice for Robinson. Many view this novel as Finch being the hero that was the only hope for the Black people in Maycomb County, but Sherwin argues that Finch should not be depicted as a white savior, and rather the bare minimum model for how white people should respond to racism.

“The message is not ‘Oh Atticus thank goodness for him because otherwise these poor ignorant, low-down Black people never would have survived,’” Sherwin said. “To me, the message here is that someone who was in a position of power stood up when other people could not. I think that’s the powerful message that I take from the book and that I try and communicate with my students.”

Harrell and sophomore Ella Mitchell both support Sherwin in her way of teaching her depiction of Finch and find that teaching about a white man who did what he deemed morally right in his position of power is a theme that still speaks true today. Although Finch is taught as being the model for how white people should be acting with race, the white savior narrative is still seen in Prospect’s curriculum through the essay prompts students are given.

If this editorial will convince the administration to reintroduce TKAM alongside the modern texts about race, the essay prompts for this novel must change. By making students write an essay about whether or not they think Finch is a good father, they are unintentionally pushing the white savior narrative by forcing all students to look at Finch as the focal point of the novel and, in many cases, see him as the hero.

The essay prompt should be revised and based around Robinson because he is often left out of the novel and should be depicted as the true hero of this story. Finch was doing his job and risking his reputation, but Robinson was a Black man being falsely accused of a serious crime and was brave enough to stand up to a racist system to fight for his freedom. Robinson is too often left out of the novel as one of the truly impactful, courageous

characters.

“Tom Robinson has no voice in the novel,” Minter said. “He’s a completely passive figure that has zero voice. And I think if we’re going [to teach that] in a school like ours, which is not very diverse, we need to be exploring issues of race from a perspective that’s not white.”

We agree with Minter, and according to Harrell, TKAM should be reintroduced with new reforms as a method of teaching race in an inclusive manner.

“I do think [TKAM is] a good book, and it teaches good lessons,” Harrell said. “It’s just along the fact that [the book] does contain a very complicated, sensitive, historical topic within it. And since that is the point of the book, it is something that needs to be addressed in an appropriate way.”

As one of Finch’s most famous quotes from the novel goes, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” This message is essential for Prospect students and teachers to truly harness and understand why TKAM cannot be removed completely, but rather complemented by modern texts.

“Are there other novels that [have meaningful discussions on race]? Yes,” Sherwin said. “But for this age group, it’s kind of perfect [because] it’s relatable, there’s children in there [and] it talks about a very specific time in our history. It is a great novel to open the door for further conversation. It’s not the only conversation, but it’s a great start.” 📖

