Standards Focus: Historical Context

The History of Book Burning as a Form of Censorship

One of the first libraries in the world was founded between 300-290 BC in Alexandria, Rome. This site became the largest collection of writings in the world. This historic library of nearly 500,000 texts was reportedly burned to the ground several times, although the reasons for the destruction are unknown. What has been reported, however, has been that throughout time those in power wanted their subjects to remain ignorant. By destroying books, they destroyed knowledge and history, and therefore kept their people under their control.

Perhaps the most famous incidents of book burning took place during the Holocaust. The Nazis viewed their enemies and their enemies’ beliefs and ideologies as the ultimate evil. On May 10, 1933, millions of texts were destroyed. Anything written that was against Nazi thought was ordered to be burned. Official lists of banned authors were compiled, the homes of those who were found in possession of the books written by these condemned authors were raided, and the books were burned.

From these organized bans and burnings, the Nazis effectively structured an extreme form of censorship and control. According to reports, many authors burned their own books to save themselves from persecution. Many were exiled from Germany and other countries; others committed suicide. The Third Reich publicly denounced opposition and threatened its people through propaganda.

During the 1950s Cold War, an intense fear of Communism spread across America. Those who were suspected of being Communists or Communist sympathizers were viewed as the ultimate enemy of the democratic beliefs of the United States. President Harry Truman’s administration banned access to certain magazines and newspapers in the United States. Literature viewed as “anti-American” was pulled from the shelves of colleges and universities across the nation. In 1953, Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee compiled a list of authors who were viewed as threats, prompting libraries nationally and internationally under American control to remove, and in some cases, even burn books by these “forbidden” authors.

More recently, the Harry Potter series has prompted numerous groups to protest, ban, and even burn these books because of references to anti-Christian beliefs such as witchcraft and sorcery. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Patriot Act was passed, outlining fifteen provisions toward protecting homeland security. One of those provisions allowed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to monitor and search the reading habits, including use of the Internet, email, and voice mail, of American citizens.

According to the American Library Association’s website, the FBI issued 140,000 requests to seize library information from 2003-2005. In 2005, the Library Connection, a group of non-profit libraries in Connecticut, received an official letter from the FBI to search and seize library records, along with a “gag order” to keep the entire incident quiet. The Library Connection sued and won in 2007 over the unconstitutionality of the gag order.

Even today, the struggle between intellectual freedom and censorship continues.
From time immemorial, books have been banned or challenged. According to the American Library Association, challenges are defined as “formal, written complaints filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness.” Today, books continue to be challenged, as parents and community members the world over find reasons they would like books to be removed from library shelves. The reasons throughout time are varied and numerous. Books have been banned or challenged for profanity, sexual explicitness, morbidity or violence, and mature themes, but also because books have “encouraged” lying, cheating, stealing, going against authority, and the use of magic and witchcraft.

In 2005, a total of 405 challenges were made against books. Reasons included sexual content, religious viewpoint, abortion, offensive language, unsuitability for age group, anti-family ideas, homosexual content, racism, and more.

The 20 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–1999
1. Scary Stories (series) by Alvin Schwartz
2. Daddy’s Roommate by Michael Willhoite
3. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou
4. The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier
5. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain
6. Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck
7. Harry Potter (series) by J.K. Rowling
8. Forever by Judy Blume
9. Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson
10. Alice (series) by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor
11. Heather Has Two Mommies by Leslea Newman
12. My Brother Sam is Dead by James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier
13. The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger
14. The Giver by Lois Lowry
15. It’s Perfectly Normal by Robie Harris
16. Goosebumps (series) by R.L. Stine
17. A Day No Pigs Would Die by Robert Newton Peck
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6. Fallen Angels by Walter Dean Myers
7. It’s Perfectly Normal by Robie Harris
8. Scary Stories (series) by Alvin Schwartz
9. Captain Underpants (series) by Dav Pilkey
10. Forever by Judy Blume

Source: American Library Association
www.ala.org
Standards Focus: Allusions and Terminology to Know

Part One: The Hearth and the Salamander

1. “It is computed that eleven thousand persons have at several times suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end.”: from Gulliver’s Travels (1726) by Jonathan Swift; a satire attacking England’s social and political problems.

2. “Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.”: a quote attributed to Hugh Latimer (1470-1555) a Protestant reformer who was burned at the stake; Latimer reportedly spoke these words to Bishop Nicolas Ridley immediately before their execution.

3. 451: refers to 451 degrees Fahrenheit—the temperature at which the paper in books burns.

4. Benjamin Franklin: (1706-1790) an American statesman, printer, inventor, scientist, and writer; Bradbury mentions that Ben Franklin was the first fireman in the newly established Firemen of America; later Beatty points out that the “rule books” have inaccurate information. According to Beatty, the Firemen were not organized until the Civil War, or when “photography came into its own.”

5. condensations: “Condensed” or shortened versions of larger texts or full-length literary works.

6. Dante: Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), an Italian poet known for his epic poem The Divine Comedy, which is Dante’s metaphorical trip through Hell; on his journey he sees those who have committed evil receiving justified torture.

7. digests: Reader’s Digest, founded in 1922, a family magazine which eventually (1934) focused on condensed versions of full-length novels from the 1930s to today; has been translated into over 20 languages and is distributed to over one million readers.

8. Faulkner: William Faulkner (1897-1962) American novelist and poet; won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949; known for his complex use of literary devices and for his discussion of racism in the South; it is also believed that he was an alcoholic.

9. Hamlet: a tragedy by William Shakespeare (1564-1616); Hamlet avenges his father’s murder after learning that his uncle murdered his father.

10. hearth: a brick- or stone-lined fireplace used for cooking and/or heating.

11. Little Black Sambo: a children’s book written by Helen Bannerman in 1899; the story of a little boy who has to sacrifice his clothes to tigers, but ends up outwitting them; the story has been considered controversial because of the word “Sambo,” which has become a racial slur in America.

12. Marcus Aurelius: Marcus Annius Verus (AD 121-180), a Roman Emperor and philosopher, known for his collection of personal writings, or Meditations, which focused on the idea of stoicism, which is surrounded by the idea that men should be free from passion, pleasure, or pain, and submissive to the natural laws of the universe.

13. Mechanical Hound: the Mechanical Hound is a machine that is “alive but not alive”; it is programmed to seek out anyone in the way of the firemen; it kills its prey by injecting the prey with morphine or other lethal substances.

14. Millay: Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) an American poet and playwright; the first woman to receive a Pulitzer Prize for poetry, known for her unconventional lifestyle, feminist views, and political philosophy.

15. moonstone: a luminous blue gemstone which is believed to be a holy, magical “dream stone,” thought to bring good dreams and beautiful visions.

16. phoenix: from Greek mythology, the phoenix is said to die in its nest, which it then lights on fire; from the ashes, a young, new phoenix is born.

17. radio shows (15 minute): fifteen minute radio shows are radio programs lasting fifteen minutes long; broadcast from the 1920s to 1950s, popular before the invention of television; shows included stories of adventure, comedy, drama, horror, mystery, musical variety, romance, music concerts, farm reports, news, and weather.

18. salamander: the mythological salamander is a reptile resembling a lizard; said to live in the depths of fire; according to mythology is able to endure fire without burning.

19. Seashell: small radio-like devices that people put in their ears to listen to a constant stream of music and talking.

20. Swift: Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), an Irish satirist known best for Gulliver’s Travels, and A Modest Proposal, both of which attack the political and social problems of his time.

21. tabloids: newspapers in a small format, giving the news in a condensed, often sensationalized way.

22. Uncle Tom’s Cabin: a novel written by American author Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852; one of the best-selling books of all time, the story is believed to have had an extremely profound effect on the view of slavery in the 19th century.

23. wall television: wall televisions are walls made up of television panels; these televisions take the place of real family, and in turn, real conversation; the television stations “fill-in-the-blank” with the customer’s name so that they really feel like they are a part of the action surrounding them.

24. Whitman: Walt Whitman (1819-1892) an American poet known for his break from the traditional poetry of his time to poetry written with a lack of meter, rhyme, or rhythm; his lack of conventionality and “rude” graphic depictions of human sexuality caused several of his poems to be banned.
Part Two: The Sieve and the Sand

1. “A dwarf on a giant’s shoulders sees the furthest of the two”: from Welsh poet, orator, and priest George Herbert’s (1593-1633) *Jacula Prudentum.*

2. “The folly of mistaking a metaphor for a proof...”: from French poet Paul Valéry’s (1871-1945) *Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci.* The quote is actually: “The folly of mistaking a paradox for a discovery, a metaphor for a proof, a torrent of verbiage for a spring of capital truths, and oneself for an oracle, is inborn in us.”


4. “A little learning is a dangerous thing...”: from Alexander Pope’s (1688-1744) *An Essay on Criticism.*

5. “All’s well that is well in the end”: refers to Shakespeare’s comedy *All’s Well That Ends Well.*


7. “Consider the lilies of the field...”: from the New Testament of the Bible, the book of Matthew, Chapter Six, verse 28. “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin.” From Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount.


9. “Half out of the cave”: refers to Plato’s *The Republic,* Book Seven, in which the idea “things may be beyond what they seem.” This idea created using an allegory in which people are imprisoned in a cave and only see shadows of the truth of what is actually casting the shadows. To them, however, the “truth” is the shadows.


11. “Job and Ruth and Willie Shakespeare: refers to the Book of Job (see number 40), the Book of Ruth from the Old Testament of the Bible, and William Shakespeare (see number 37).

12. “Knowledge is more than equivalent to force!”: quote by Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) from his fictional prose *Rasselas,* in which a Prince and three others travel in search of happiness.

13. “Knowledge is power!”: a quote by British Lawyer, philosopher, and essayist Francis Bacon (1561-1626) from *Meditations Sacræ* (1597).

14. “Oh God, he speaks only of his horse”: from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice;* a variation from Portia’s complaint about the Neapolitan prince: “Ay, that’s a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse.” Act 1, scene 2, lines 39-40.

15. “Remember, Caesar, thou art mortal.”: Roman Emperor Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44 BC), known for his pomposity and disregard to “Beware the ides of March” in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar; killed by his friends and colleagues, the Roman Senators. Could also refer to Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s (1809-1892) poem “The Ancient Sage” —“Thou canst not prove thou art immortal, no / Nor yet that thou art mortal—”

16. “sheep returns to the fold”: possible reference to Irving Berlin’s (1888-1989) song “When the Black Sheep Returns to the Fold.”

17. “Sweet food of sweetly uttered knowledge”: from Sir Philip Sidney’s (1554-1586) “The Defense of Poesy” in which Sidney argues the need for literature to inspire action.


19. “The Devil can cite Scripture for his Purpose”: also from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice,* Act I, scene 3, line 93; a reference to using what you can to make your point work to your advantage.


21. “They are never alone that are accompanied with noble thoughts”: from Sir Philip Sidney’s (1554-1586) *Arcadia.*

22. “This age thinks better of a gilded fool than of a threadbare saint in wisdom’s school”: from Old Fortunatus by Thomas Dekker (1572-1632), an English playwright.

23. “Truth is truth, to the end of reckoning”: a line from Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure,* Act V, Scene i, line 45.

24. “Truth will come to light, murder will not be hid long”: from William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice.*

25. “We cannot tell the precise moment when friendship is formed...”: Quote by James Boswell (1740-1795), a lawyer, friend, and biographer of Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), who wrote the Dictionary of the English Language in 1755. Quote comes from *The Life of Johnson,* Volume 3.

26. “Words are like leaves and where they most abound...”: from Alexander Pope’s (1688-1744) *An Essay on Criticism,* a series of poems contending that bad criticism is worse than bad poetry.

27. *Antaeus*: a God from Greek mythology, known for his strength as long as he was on the ground; Hercules found out the source of his power and lifted him off the ground until he died.

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28. **Caesar’s praetorian guard**: the Praetorians were soldiers who protected Rome and the Emperor; known for their unusual control over those they were supposed to protect; believed to have murdered Caligula and replaced him with Claudius.

29. **Caesarian section**: a surgical incision performed to deliver a baby; named from the belief that Julius Caesar was born by this operation.

30. **Cheshire Cat smiles**: refers to a fictional cat in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*; known for its wide grin, philosophical debate, and disappearing body (leaving only his grin). The Cheshire grin also hints at a sense of hidden mischievousness and mystery.

31. **Hercules**: the Roman equivalent of Greek mythology’s Heracles; known for his inhuman strength and brawn.

32. **Milton**: John Milton (1608-1674); an English poet and civil servant best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, which contemplates the punishment of Hell, and his Areopagitica, which condemns censorship.

33. **Mr. Jefferson**: Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the author of the Declaration of Independence.

34. **Mr. Thoreau**: Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), an American author and philosopher known for *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, the latter an argument for individual resistance against government.

35. **Pirandello**: Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), influential Italian playwright and novelist known for *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and *The Imbecile*; won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934.

36. **Plato**: Greek philosopher (427-347BC), a brilliant writer believed to have been a student of Socrates. Known for his dialogues and *The Republic*, which includes the famous allegory of the cave.

37. **Shakespeare**: William Shakespeare, English poet and playwright (1564-1616); known for his plays and sonnets read throughout the world, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and more.

38. **Shaw**: George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), famous Irish playwright known for his harsh social and political criticism; known for such works as *Pygmalion*, *Major Barbara*, *Arms and the Man*, *Man and Superman*, and *Heartbreak House*.

39. **Sophocles**: Sophocles (495-406BC) was one of the great Greek philosophers and tragedians (along with Aeschylus and Euripides); known for his famous plays *Oedipus* and *Antigone*.

40. **The Book of Job**: a Book from the Old Testament of the Bible; tells the stories of Job being tested by God—essentially questions the idea “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

41. **trench mouth**: An infectious disease producing mouth ulcers in the mucus membranes of the mouth and throat.

42. **Vesuvius**: a volcano near Naples that erupted August 24, 79 AD, burying the citizens of Pompeii.

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**Part Three: Burning Bright**

1. “And on either side of the river was there a tree of life...”: from *Revelations* 22:2-3 “On this side of the river and on that was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruits, yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. There will be no curse any more. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants serve him.”

2. “atom-bomb mushroom”: refers to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945.

3. **coat of a thousand colors**: from Genesis 37:3–4; refers to a coat given to Joseph by his father Jacob; Joseph’s brothers are jealous of the coat and pour goat’s blood on it to ruin it.

4. “Don’t judge a book by its cover”: an American idiom, stating that one should not judge the contents of a person’s character inside by what he looks like on the outside.

5. **Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he’s burnt his damn wings, he wonders why**: alludes to the Icarus myth from Greek mythology; Icarus was warned by his father Daedalus not to fly too close to the sun, since his wings were made of wax; Icarus was very curious, however, and ended up falling into the sea to his death because his wings melted.

6. **stuff of dreams**: possible allusion to *The Tempest*, Act 5, by Shakespeare “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on; and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.”

7. “There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats...”: Brutus’s line from Act IV, scene 3, of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

8. “To everything there is a season”: from Ecclesiastes 3:1 “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.”

9. **Abraham Lincoln**: (1809-1865) American politician and 16th president of the United States; best known for his work in abolishing slavery and for his untimely assassination in a theater.

10. **Albert Schweitzer**: (1872-1965), a German philosopher, physician, and humanitarian; awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

11. **Aristophanes**: (448-525BC), a Greek dramatist known for his comedies *Lysistrata*, *The Birds*, and *The Frogs*.


13. **Book of Ecclesiastes**: a part of the Old Testament; contains the reflections of “the Preacher” in which the idea of striving for anything is in vain, since we all are going to die.

15. **Burning Bright**: From William Blake’s (1757-1827) poem, "The Tiger": “Tiger, tiger, burning bright / in the forests of the night / What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

16. **Byron**: Lord George Gordon Byron (1788-1824); an English poet known for his creation of the Byronic Hero.

17. **cardamom, and moss, and ragweed**: a series of plants which are highly aromatic and may be used for spice or flavoring in foods.

18. **Charles Darwin**: an American scientist (1809-1882) whose theories explained the origin of species and natural selection; wrote *On the Origins of Species* in 1859.

19. **Christ**: Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christianity.


21. **Constitution**: the Constitution of the United States, the fundamental law framed in 1787, then ratified in 1789, and since amended many times throughout history.

22. **Dark Age**: the European Early Middle Ages, from about 476-1000; known for its lack of written literature, scientific advancements, and cultural achievements.

23. **Gutama Budda**: (562-483BC) a spiritual leader and teacher from ancient India and the founder of Buddhism.

24. **Jonathan Swift (Gulliver’s Travels)**: see #20 in Part One.

25. **Keystone comedy**: a short film of the silent movie era, featuring “Keystone Kops,” which were a team of comic policemen known for their antics and slapstick humor.

26. **Machiavelli**: Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (1469-1527); a key figure of the Italian Renaissance, known for *The Prince*, a landmark work on the history of political power.

27. **Magna Carta**: an English charter written in 1215, considered one of the greatest achievements toward democracy and an influence on the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

28. **Mahatma Ghandi**: (1869-1948) a major political and spiritual leader in India; known for his promotion of non-violence and truth.

29. **Marcus Aurelius**: see #12 in Part One.


31. **Phoenix**: see #16 in Part One.

32. **Plato’s Republic**: see #36 in Part Two.

33. **Schopenhauer**: Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), a German philosopher best known for his work *The World as Will and Reputation*.

34. **status quo**: the existing condition or state of affairs.

35. **Thomas Jefferson**: see number 33 in Part Two.

36. **Thomas Love Peacock**: (1785-1866) An English satirist known for his satire in the realm of novels, plays, poetry, and essays.

37. **Thomas Paine**: (1737-1809) an American revolutionary and intellectual radical known best for his pamphlet *Common Sense*.

38. **Thoreau’s Walden**: *Walden*, or Life in the Woods, written by Henry David Thoreau (see #34 in Part Two); one of the most famous works of non-fiction in American Literature.

39. **V-2 Rocket**: The first long-range liquid fueled missile carrying one ton of explosives, used first by the Germans in WWII.