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BEYOND THE LIMITS OF THE LITERARY WORK: WHEN READERS BECOME CENSORS

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the evolving nature of censorship, focusing on its current manifestations in the literary world and its impact on children's literature. It investigates the rise of sensitivity editing, including the revision of classic books, as a modern form of censorship. Through a critical analysis, the study examines the role of sensitivity readers. Findings suggest a shift in censorship practices, increasingly centred on protecting cultural sensibilities. In this context, modern readers may act simultaneously as censors and as victims of censorship. The paper also addresses the posthumous changes of classic literature, driven by the publishing industry's desire to meet modern expectations, avoid controversies and maximise profits. Ultimately, the study argues against altering literary works to conform to contemporary sensibilities, emphasizing the importance of preserving literature in its original form.

Keywords: cultural studies, censorship, sensitivity readers, classic books, publishing industry, children's literature.

TRANSGREDIENDO LOS LÍMITES DE LA OBRA LITERARIA: CUANDO EL LECTOR SE CONVIERTE EN CENSOR

RESUMEN. Este artículo explora la evolución de la censura, centrándose en sus manifestaciones actuales en el ámbito literario y su impacto en la literatura infantil. Se investiga el auge de la edición por sensibilidad, incluida la revisión de libros clásicos, como una forma moderna de censura. A través de un análisis crítico, el estudio examina el papel de los lectores de sensibilidad. Los hallazgos sugieren un cambio en las prácticas de censura, cada vez más centradas en la protección de las sensibilidades culturales. En este contexto, los lectores pueden actuar simultáneamente como censores y como víctimas de la censura. El artículo también aborda los cambios póstumos en la literatura clásicas, motivados por el deseo de la industria editorial de satisfacer las expectativas actuales, evitar controversias y maximizar ganancias. Finalmente, el estudio rechaza la alteración de obras para adecuarlas a las sensibilidades contemporáneas, enfatizando la importancia de preservar la literatura en su forma original.

Palabras clave: estudios culturales, censura, lectores sensibles, libros clásicos, industria editorial, literatura infantil.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The destruction of the Library of Alexandria ordered by Caliph Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab in the seventh century, the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* established by the Roman Catholic Church in 1559 and the Tudor-Stuart licensing system in England serve as early historical examples of censorship. Traditionally defined as state-sponsored repression and the suppression of individual liberties (Shuger 89), early models focused on authoritarian impositions. However, the prior examples merely represent a subset of practices that restrict expression. Janelle Reinelt's definition, as "suppression of expression or information by anybody" (4), recognises that such control can be exercised by any group with power, extending beyond governmental prohibition. This form of regulation occurs not only through external after-the-fact pressures but also through internal, before-the-fact censorious decisions made during the creation process, which will be further examined in this article.

Some instances of repressive censorship, such as *die Bücherverbrennung,* i.e., the public burnings of "un-German" books in 1933; the 1989 *fatwa* calling for Salman Rushdie's death after the publication of *Satanic Verses* (1988); and the Soviet Union's ban on George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) until 1988 – now a bestseller in Russia, illustrate that the exercise of power to restrict access to knowledge is not confined to a single historical moment or institution. These examples emphasize that access to information is central to any definition of censorship, as it fundamentally relies on those in power controlling what others can know.

Understanding the nature of these censorious practices is critical for assessing their prevalent importance in today's world. While this subject gained considerable attention in the postmodernist academic literature, there is, however, still little research on literature as a representative space of before-the-fact suppression. Censorship succeeds precisely when its operations are not perceived and, thus, new perspectives are needed to address its impact, particularly when imposed for sensitivity reasons. Therefore, the objective of this article is to examine the role of sensitivity readers as censors from the perspective of Cultural Studies. This approach aims at uncovering pre-censorship's repercussions on literary works, with a focus on its impact on children's literature.

2. A DEFINITION OF CENSORSHIP

Censorship has played a crucial role in shaping societies and their access to information throughout history. This section constructs a comprehensive theoretical framework to define censorship by examining its multifaceted nature, and its underpinnings. By engaging with perspectives from Foucault, and New Censorship theorists, the discussion highlights how restriction is not merely repressive but also productive.

When attempting to offer a definition of censorship, it is advisable to notice the importance of including both socio-historical specificity and the multiplicity of experiences (Freshwater 225). The practice of censorship can vary across time, place and individuals. Censorship, therefore, is considered an ongoing process rather than a static object, as it is socio-historically specific as well as diverse. "Censorship is […] produced within an array of constantly shifting discourses, practices and apparatuses" and it embodies "complex and often contradictory relations of power" (Kuhn 127).

According to Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, discourse is a mechanism of control and governing medium of any institution (Foucault 1980). Foucault also considers that the disempowered have internalised power dynamics and, therefore, there does not need to be a constant external regulation. Those subjected to censorship might be complicitly contributing to the censorious system and its discourse as well (Freshwater 238).

Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Raymond Williams's insights further expand this discussion by framing culture as a dynamic network of shared and contested meanings shaped by power relations. Literature, for example, serves as a medium in which meanings are constantly changing and being challenged. Particular interpretations produced in a certain context gain authority and legitimacy, constructing a reality, whilst other meanings become marginal and even invalid. However, meaning-making remains "a potential site of struggle", as any sign can denote multiple meanings. Given the inherent instability of meaning-making, censorship becomes a "dysfunctional and self-subversive operation" (Freshwater 234), as both writers and readers have the power to create and contest various

interpretations. Namely, it could be argued that experimental writing with figurative literary forms such as irony, symbolism or allusion have been developed due to the existence of censorious processes (Bunn 42). These devices were used to create subtle forms of expression with hidden and double meanings within the literary texts, effectively avoiding censor's restrictions or prohibitions. Using Aesopian language, for instance, writers creatively try to evade and subvert the censorious forces. The very presence of censorious practices can foster creative subversion.

Building on these ideas, New Censorship theorists have extended the discussion arguing that exclusion itself generates new forms of speech and identity. Potential readers have the ability to read between the lines of a text that might contain a deliberate double structure of meaning. Nonetheless, the writing might become eventually too obscure (O'Leary 21-2). Notwithstanding that, the proliferation of interpretations ultimately undermines censorious forces. Resignification and resistance are integral components of the subversive process inherent in power itself. Foucault encapsulates this notion in *The History of Sexuality* by stating, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). The said resistance to power can strengthen the very existence of power as well. Therefore, a type of resistance to discourse is silence, the avoidance of a compulsory discursivity against dominant discourse. Wendy Brown proposes that silence also acts as a form of resistance to censorship since silence should not be perceived as merely the direct opposite to freedom (Post 8).

In view of the multifaceted nature of censorship and its relation to power and meaning-making to produce discourse, it is difficult to determine what precisely constitutes censorship. The postmodernist branch known as New Censorship Theory redefines censorship as productive and formative instead of being a mere repressive process. New Censorship theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler, shift the notion of censorship from "a negative, repressive force, concerned only with prohibiting, silencing, and erasing, to a productive force that creates new forms of discourse, new forms of communication, and new genres of speech" (Bunn 36).

Butler enhances our understanding of censorship in relation to discursive agency stating that censorship is "a way of producing speech, constraining in advance what will and will not become acceptable speech" (128). The Butlerian notion of *foreclosure* shows how censorship or any kind of excluded material act as prerequisites for the appearance of alternative subjects and forms of expression. "Censorship produces discursive regimes through the production of a domain of the unspeakable" (Butler 255). The formation of the subject is an outcome of the constraints on speech that define the domain of speakability and conditions of intelligibility.

Censorship has a productive nature since *foreclosure* refers to the act of naming and producing the unsayable or impermissible in order to exclude it. The censorious force has no absolute control over the censored text. The re-production of the censored material is a side-effect since the practice of censorship includes the

banned material. This leads to the performative contradiction in which the censored object increases the awareness of the excluded material. The ban on *Candide* (1759) by Voltaire and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) by D. H. Lawrence contributed to their popularity, sparking public interest and discussions about the reasons for their prohibition (e.g., Schatz-Jakobsen 2020). As Michael Holquist argues, this awareness is a hopeful sign that any restriction has gaps (15).

New Censorship theorists' attempt to redefine the concept of censorship risks turning it meaningless as it is theorized as an omnipresent force that is "the norm rather than the exception" (Post 2). Censorship is seen as a ubiquitous phenomenon. Holquist states that "to be for or against censorship as such is to assume a freedom no one has. Censorship is" (Holquist 16). The lack of specificity and the expanded meaning of censorship becomes problematic for analytical purposes. This postmodernist theory deems that even structural conditions function as censors, censorship being a part of communication. Bourdieu suggested that censorship is an unavoidable and inherent structural necessity present in every utterance. The structure controls the accessibility and form of expression; thus, censorship is present in every utterance since language is constituted by a process of selection and exclusion of words and discourse is the language used following certain norms (Bourdieu 137-8). This process lays the foundation of a historical product mirroring a particular power hierarchy (Bunn 37). In a similar way to Bourdieu, Stanley Fish contends that there is no true freedom in free speech as this process of selection and regulation is part of language (Freshwater 230).

Moreover, the debate over freedom of expression and speech remains central to discussions of censorship. The limits of freedom, or the lack thereof, are a contentious legal and philosophical issue that is further complicated by the absence of a comprehensive definition of these terms. Some scholars, like Janelle Reinelt, believe in the balance of freedom of expression and other rights such as respect or privacy (6). Others contend that the fundamental right of freedom of expression prevails over any other competing or opposing right. In most societies, however, there are certain limitations to the right of free speech. Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights highlights the primordial importance of this right including the "freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers" (12). Paragraph 2 of this Article clarifies the consequences of exercising this right which "may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society" (*ECHR* 2021). This clarification showcases the challenge in balancing rights to, for example, protect threatened minorities and the common good.

Given its intricate entanglement with power and discourse, censorship resists a singular definition. Theorists debate, but what remains clear is its integral role in shaping cultural and literary landscapes. This dual nature—both limiting and enabling—underscores the need for continued examination of how content regulation operates across different historical and social contexts, particularly in relation to literature and children's access to it.

3. TYPES OF CENSORSHIP

Censorship can be classified following different criteria. For instance, considering the scope of the censorious action, it can be total, partial or classificatory by censoring a particular group of individuals –some cultural products are censored for young age groups (Stephanous 42, qtd. in Grecco 131). For the purpose of this article, I will classify censorship distinguishing between censorious acts before or after the publication of the literary material.

Catherine O'Leary clearly discerns between the repression and suppression of an existing published work, and the prevention of the publication of a book. O'Leary enunciates that censorious acts can be rewritings, erasures and even incorporations of new material (8). Notwithstanding this, the majority of recorded instances of censorship have been prohibitions of literary works such as the US ban on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) (see *US v. One Book Called "Ulysses"* 1933) or the Australian prohibition to import Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948) from 1950 to 1966 (Moore, *The Censor's Library* 152). Additionally, some repressive bodies have imprisoned and even executed writers to prevent their ideas from spreading. This can be illustrated briefly by the imprisonment of Daniel Defoe due to his political writings in 1702, the murder of Federico García Lorca in 1936 and the killing of the columnist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 (Amnesty International). According to 2023 Freedom to Write Index, 339 writers remained imprisoned in 2023, predominantly in Iran and China (PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Center).

With respect to after-the-fact censorship, and using a liberal conception of the term censorship (that is, censorship is seen as an external coercive and repressive force), Janelle Reinelt classified censorious acts in five categories: corporate, religious, moral, political and military censorship.

Corporate censorship uses economic influence to secure and safeguard its interests. In fact, this type of censorship is becoming gradually predominant (Reinelt 6). Namely, in May 2023, Elon Musk, a seemingly free speech absolutist and owner of X Corporation, censored some social media accounts of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political opponents ahead of the US presidential election. In 2021, Dr. Seuss Enterprises made a corporate decision to cease publication of six children's books, including *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* and *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr. Seuss, due to concerns over racist imagery. This decision reflects how businesses shape the availability of literature based on perceived risks to their economic standing.

From the perspective of religious censorship, it should be said that it imposes a belief system restricting other worshipping practices. In Iran, non-Shia Muslim religious literature, like Yarsani or Christian books, are confiscated and banned. Even Sunni religious books are banned in Iran's Sunni areas (IRF Office 2022). Alleging real witchcraft, the *Harry Potter* series was banned in some American Catholic schools and libraries (Meadors).

Another type of post-publication repression is moral censorship, which establishes what is decent and adequate. However, reaching a consensus on what is morally and ethically correct is challenging since views vary significantly across individuals. In 8 C.E., the first documented example of moral censorship occurred when Augustus ordered a *relegatio* to exile Ovid because of "two charges, *carmen et error*, a poem and an error" (Ovid 2.207). The lengthy poem *Ars Amatoria* was censored due to its depictions of immoral practices, Ovid being "a teacher of obscene adultery, by means of a vile poem" (Ovid 2.211-12). Besides that, Augustus also enacted political censorship by suppressing criticism directed towards his political authority by reducing the *acta senatus*. Regarding children's literature, *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson was banned in some school districts, such as Penncrest School District, Pennsylvania, due to its explicit depiction of sexual assault, use of profanity and exploration of trauma (Linder 14; PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Center). On another note, the Texas State Board of Education mistakenly banned children's book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr., confusing its author with a Marxist philosopher who wrote *Ethical Marxism* (Adams).

Finally, the last type of after-the-fact censorship is military censorship which addresses acts of sedition and regulates public information that could favour the enemy. For instance, the 1917 Espionage Act enabled the US president to censor material that could potentially aid the enemy. Considering its anti-war stance, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* was banned at the Guantanamo Bay detainee library in 2009, reflecting efforts to restrict access to literature that critiques U.S. military actions and foreign policy. To complement Reinelt's classification, we could include social censorship in which a particular community has no access to some books due to economic or academic issues (Moore, *Censorship*).

Nonetheless, state censorship is still today the predominant type of censorship that arises in the collective imaginary. This type can be prior to or after the production of the literary work and it usually functions through the implementation and enforcement of laws. Institutions avoid the label of "censor" and refer to themselves as licencing authorities or classificatory bodies. This tendency hinders any attempt to successfully define and classify their censorious actions. As previously stated, censorship succeeds when it is imperceptible; hence, it fails when it is visible (Freshwater 238). Fairclough considers that the objective of an ideology is to become naturalised and legitimatised so that it is not noticed as such (91). This process is particularly effective when ideological control is embedded within institutions, where dominant narratives are presented as neutral universal truths. The less explicit it appears, the more smoothly it functions, shaping individuals without resistance. Children's literature, for example, serves as a medium for ideological transmission, presenting societal values, norms, and power structures in a natural way and, therefore, an unquestionable one. In this sense, censorship actively constructs reality by determining what is thinkable and sayable. By filtering what is deemed appropriate for readers, authorities seek to shape conforming citizens. It is my

contention that most censorious acts are driven by an ideological agenda and literature is one of the fundamentally first targets of any repressive force. In history, there are many illustrative examples such as the shelling and three-day burning of the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, which caused the destruction of two million books—including Ottoman manuscripts and 500-hundred-year-old cultural heritage. This deliberate cultural destruction commanded by Serbian nationalists revealed their goal of "ethnic cleansing", erasing any ethnic or religious collective memory. This example demonstrates the importance of literature as a producer of discourse.

Prior or before-the-fact censorship refers to restrictive actions done before the publishing. Before-the-fact censorship functions as a preventive tool to impede the publication of a text or a part of it. To hinder the publication of certain materials, some writers, editors, publishers and translators make adjustments to literary works. The motivations for censoring could be subsidies and rewards or potential fines and threats. Mainly, editors play the role of censors as they try to introduce textual material into the market by adjusting it to consumer demand. Book cover designs coupled with certain compelling topics and characters are selected to appeal to a specific target audience, i.e. for marketing purposes. These potential before-the-fact censorious decisions showcase the internalisation of power dynamics and structural discursive practices, as publishers conform to societal expectations rather than risk controversy or commercial failure. By prioritizing economic viability over ideological plurality, the publishing industry exercises a subtle form of censorship—one that is less visible yet influential in determining which narratives are amplified and which are sidelined. Besides, writers' selection of words can be seen as self-censorship, since there is a process of inclusion and exclusion. Aware of their audience, the publishing industry's preferences, or potential backlash, writers may consciously or unconsciously omit certain words, themes, or ideas to avoid controversy, rejection, or even legal repercussions. As Freshwater notes, the subconscious itself is deemed to be an internal mechanism that censors and whose process cannot be easily identified (232). This internal regulation means that self-censorship is often an inherent part of the creative process, shaping consciously or subconsciously the literary text. Creativity becomes both a site of resistance and compliance, allowing for expression while reinforcing boundaries.

Nowadays, there is a tendency to exercise self-censorship as a way to show respect for minorities and avoid confrontations (O'Leary 7). While this practice is often framed as an ethical responsibility to promote diversity and inclusion, it simultaneously raises questions about the boundaries between sensitivity and prohibitions. As a matter of fact, the rhetoric of diversity has become an emerging hegemony. Since it operates through a process of exclusion, it is regarded as oppressive, akin to traditional forms of dominant censorship (Burt xv). The paradox lies in the fact that, while diversity initiatives aim to amplify underrepresented voices, they may also lead to the suppression of some perspectives, narrowing the range of acceptable discourse.

This new dominant discourse of diversity has also led to the proliferation of sensitivity reasons to exert after-production censorship on new material as well as on classic literary works. Publishers, educators, and literary institutions engage in revisions, modifying language, character representations, and thematic elements to align with modern sensibilities. This practice, while well-intentioned, raises concerns about historical erasure and the loss of original authorial intent. Additionally, it poses the risk of homogenizing narratives, potentially depriving young readers of the opportunity to engage critically with complex themes and diverse historical contexts. The challenge, therefore, lies in striking a balance between fostering inclusivity and preserving the integrity of literary works, ensuring that censorship does not become a tool for restricting intellectual engagement rather than expanding it.

Despite numerous academic publications concerning censorship, we still lack a systematic understanding of how this deliberate sensitivity editing contributes to censoring certain themes in classic books. Existing research in Cultural Studies only recognises the critical role played by prohibitory censorship. Regarding editing as censorship of already existing works, I could only find a brief reference to punitive censorship exercised due to sensitivity reasons in *The Routledge Companion to Freedom of Expression and Censorship* (2024) and an article about the legal issues of copyrightable derivative books arising from revised versions of classic books (Smith). The remaining literature analyses prohibitions and book bans, as well as censorship in the process of translation (see Erlanson et al.; Moore, *Censorship*; Müller; Ní Chuilleanáin et al.; Post). Subsequently, this article shall now examine modern censors in more detail, using a Cultural Studies perspective.

4. MODERN CENSORS

Nowadays, there is still censorship similar to the publication control in the German Democratic Republic or the Hicklin test in the US. However, these forms of censorship have been largely replaced by the emergence of a new kind of modern censor, the reader. Anyone can become a censor today since anybody can submit complaints in public libraries, challenge books on reading lists or express their opinion on social media platforms. The role of readers is crucial, particularly in the hyperreactive social media landscape, which facilitates the organisation of communities with shared values. Professional critics and censorious institutions still wield significant influence, but they are not gatekeepers anymore. As it will be discussed in this article, the diversity discourse can influence the edition and publication of literary material. On the one hand, it promotes diverse books; on the other, it may censor certain narratives and voices.

In addition, there has been a recent disintegration of traditional political alignments in which liberals advocated for state regulation, while conservatives prioritized freedom of expression (Post 1). Modern censorship departs from the liberal versus conservative dichotomy, having been proved that the majority of citizens demand some type of censorious intervention. However, the prevalence of the polarised rhetoric of the "either/or" binarism identified by Holquist is present in

the collective imaginary. It is commonly assumed that conservatives favour censorship in order to safeguard children, protect religious values and censor obscene content, whereas liberals usually demand suppressing hate speech, violence and political incorrectness. Despite the apparent disintegration of traditional positions, the said tendencies are evident in the different censorious attitudes towards children's literature. From now on, the article will discuss the figure of the modern censor with a focus on children's literature and the emergence of sensitivity readers.

4.1. Modern Censors in Children's Literature

This section explores the role of adults and libraries as modern censors of children's literature, highlighting the challenges both children and censors face in today's digital age. Additionally, it will also examine the reasons behind the banning of children's books in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Modern censors have made children's literature their main target (Knox). A common reason for censoring texts including certain topics is the belief that they are developmentally inappropriate for young learners (Conradi-Smith). Story makers were already the target of censorship as early as the fourth century B.C.E. Stories have always been used to teach moral lessons and to entertain. In the *Republic,* Plato acknowledges the potential power of stories to shape the souls of children. They distort truth and endanger social stability. Precisely, this is the main reason why he removes poets from his ideal state and rejects the majority of their stories (Plato II, 376e-378e).

Today, the availability of certain forms of literature is restricted for children as well. Their access to books is deeply conditioned and mediated by adults. In addition to the fact that books are exclusively produced and distributed by adults, children's financial dependence and restricted mobility also limit their access to literature (Savolainen 209). Following Children's Literature criticism, Perry Nodelman argues in "The Other, Orientalism, Colonialism, Children's Literature" (1992) that children's literature follows the colonisation pattern, children being treated as "the others" by adults who dictate what is proper behaviour (30-34). The Jane Addams Children's Book Award exemplifies how some adult gatekeepers attempt to shape children's literature by selecting works that promote values such as social justice, peace and equality. However, its limited impact underscores the challenge these gatekeepers face, as educators and readers often avoid books with controversial or ethically complex themes (Caponegro). This highlights the tension between the adult-driven literary selection and the reception of such texts.

This control over children's literature is particularly evident in educational settings, where schools carefully select literature for reading materials for instruction (Conradi-Smith et al.). Recent topic-restrictive legislation in the United States has further impacted teachers' choices of literature, perpetuating the predominance of narratives featuring white heteronormative characters (Crisp et al.; Lammert). These

laws impose thematic limitations on classroom content, often promoting self-censorship, as teachers navigate personal concerns, beliefs, curricular objectives, and institutional pressures (Buchanan et al.). As Catherine Lammert argues, this situation "is imbued with deficit discourses around children's ability to engage with complex topics" (1). To counter these constraints, it is essential for teachers to adopt and model a critical literacy stance within instructional practices, fostering inclusive classrooms (Vasquez). This hierarchal structure and othering can be exemplified in the physical space of libraries. Libraries, particularly school libraries, were ideally conceived as an emancipating force for children where they could have the chance to independently read any book at their disposal. To illustrate this, the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 established, in the UK, provides the basis of libraries as being safe and inclusive public spaces. This ideal, however, seems to be contradicted by reality. Public libraries designate separated children's rooms, and they enforce governance rules, regulating reading by labelling age limits, implementing lending restrictions and dictating special opening hours for particular ages (Savolainen 212). In many cases, public libraries tend to avoid buying books that might be subject to controversy to prevent conflicts (Moore, *The Censor's Library*). Additionally, the code of silence in children's departments largely creates an unwelcoming and distressing atmosphere, although solemn silence might be appealing for some children (Savolainen). So far, the discussion has presented children's obstacles to access literature; nonetheless, modern censors also encounter a challenge, the Internet.

In this digital age, minors have nearly unlimited access to information through the Internet. Thereby, it is futile to seek to successfully restrict their access to written texts. Eliza Dresang's work *Radical Change, Books for Youth in a Digital Age* (1999) describes this new paradigm evinced by the fundamental transformation of children's reading experience. This shift is primarily a result of three principles, namely, digital access, connectivity and interactivity. In light of this paradigm shift, the impact of digital networks on the reading experience of children, and the difficulty of imposing restrictions should be borne in mind. Besides that, social media have also mobilized book challengers and supporters.

Sometimes not only are the texts subjected to censorship, but also the illustrations in them. In 2017, because of public criticism on Twitter, Little, Brown and Company, part of Hachette Book Group, decided to reprint the children's book *The Bad Mood and the Stick* (2017) by the American writer Lemony Snicket, changing its illustrations. In the book cover, Bad Mood, represented as a black cloud, was modified into a rainbow cloud to avoid racist implications. This example illustrates not only an instance of censorship but also a case of social media users' power influencing the decisions of a publishing house. Interestingly, many social media critiques often assess books they have not read and interpret passages taken out of context (Saksida).

Although the influence of social media has introduced new dynamics, the underlying motivations for banning children's books have remained notably consistent over time. The books' didactic purpose and their suitability are among

the most common concerns. Book challengers fear indoctrination and the subsequent moral decline of society. Most importantly, they want to make a symbolic statement of their power. For book challengers, the presence of a book in a public facility implicitly confers legitimacy upon the ideas present in them (Knox 176-77). Hence, parents, for instance, tend to seek institutional support to censor texts, arguing that certain books are not age appropriate or do not contain moral truths. They believe in the powerful short and long-term consequences of reading in children's behaviour; ergo, some parents demand a sanitized kind of literature, silencing particular voices and themes (Knox). In January 2025, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) dismissed book ban complaints, stating that such decisions fall under parental and community judgment. Acting Assistant Secretary Craig Trainor emphasised that the department is "restoring the fundamental rights of parents to direct their children's education" ("Ends Biden's Book Ban Hoax"). Indisputably, diverse books are one of the main targets, sexuality, religion, gender and race being the most challenged topics. Conversely, some adults demand more inclusive books, particularly in school and public libraries. The number of book challengers and bans has increased, while at the same time there has been a growth in books featuring diverse characters and topics. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Centre, 51 % of the documented books had significant Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) content in 2024. This marks an increase from 49% in 2023 and 46% in 2022. As a response to this upsurge, social media groups and organisations determined to withdraw these books, such as Moms for Liberty or MassResistance, have proliferated in the United States in recent times. Nevertheless, in the United States, banning books in public schools because of their ideas is a violation of the First Amendment following a Supreme Court decision, namely, the Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico. Despite this, a report by PEN America declared that 481 titles were banned in classrooms, and 253 book titles were banned in libraries in the 2021-22 school year (Friedman).

With regards to other countries such the United Kingdom, there is insufficient information about book bans in the twenty-first century. In comparison to book banning in the United States, censorship in the United Kingdom is fairly low. Nonetheless, the CEO of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, Nick Poole, told *The Guardian* that libraries have recently received numerous requests to remove books dealing with British colonial past, race and LGBTQ+ themes from libraries. Poole also affirmed that some librarians have faced personal threats for fulfilling their professional duties (Shaffi).

Book bans and the culture war in the USA could be prescient for the UK, since there has already been a rise in book challengers there. In 2008, the Museums and Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) published *Guidance on the Management of Controversial Materials in Public Libraries* (2008), commissioned by the British government in 2007. There has been a pressing need to revise and update this guide. Thus, in 2023, it was replaced by *Managing Safe and Inclusive Public Library Services, A practical guide* (2023), produced by the Chartered Institute of Library and

Information Professionals (CILIP). This guide provides assistance to librarians to protect the rights and freedoms of all readers. Nonetheless, the UK restricts some of the freedoms of the Human Rights Act 1998. To illustrate this, the Obscene Publications Act 1959 limits materials likely to constitute obscenity, while the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 and the Equality Act 2010 restrict texts which might cause racial or religious hatred in order to protect people from discrimination. The latter act is one of the most relevant pieces of legislation for librarians, since it forces them to provide equitable access to information and implement anti-discrimination measures. Regrettably, insufficient data regarding contemporary censorship of children's literature in the UK was found.

4.2. Sensitivity Readers as Censors

So far, we have determined the role of adults, libraries and digital media in shaping and restricting children's consumption of literature in the United States and the United Kingdom. As has been noted with the example of Snicket's book *The Bad Mood and the Stick* (2017), another layer of explicit restrictions occurs when editors and publishers intervene, making textual cuts and alteration in response to societal pressures (O'Leary 9). Subsequently, a new type of editor has recently emerged in the publishing industry, the so-called sensitivity readers. Given the newness of this figure, little research has been published analysing their role. E. Lawrence argues that sensitivity readers are not censors. This article, however, will consider sensitivity reading censorious since authors feel forced to oblige sensitivity readers. Furthermore, it will illustrate how sensitivity editing classic works is censorship, a new aspect which has not been covered by Lawrence.

According to Lawrence, the term sensitivity reader refers to specialized editors with an aesthetically privileged perspective owing to their social, gender, ethnic identity and sexual orientation as well as their first-hand experiences (36). The role of sensitivity readers is to review manuscripts focusing on stereotypes, cultural misrepresentations and prejudices that could feasibly result from writing cross-culturally. However, being part of a marginalized group does not necessarily entail being aware of the struggles of every individual within it. Thus, it seems problematic to rely on individuals to dictate what is accurate and appropriate, particularly since there are no detailed requirements to work as a sensitivity reader apart from belonging to a certain group. Sensitivity readers are hired based on their personal experience, cultural insight and expertise and can be found in professional network platforms, writing community referrals and databases such as Writing Diversely, Editors of Color and Inclusive Minds.

Needless to say, vetting manuscripts is nothing new. Publishing houses have typically employed at least one editor to examine textual material prior to the publication of a book. Nowadays, sensitivity readers are hired by publishers to revise children's and young adult books. This sensitivity editing tries to protect readers from the exposure to contentious language, misrepresentations of marginalized cultures and potentially harmful themes. This, however, could be identified as a

violation of the autonomy of readers (Lawrence 38). Sensitivity editing to sugarcoat the reading experience could reinforce the negative portrayal of the so-called "snowflake" generation. To make matters worse, there has been a boost in sensitivity editing in adult fiction as well. In 2022 *The Times* revealed that ten universities in the UK have removed books from reading lists and applied trigger warnings to others in order to protect students (Morgan-Bentley and Beal). Apparently, adults also need to be protected from sensitive topics that might appear in their readings. Nodelman states that ignorance causes more harm than knowledge (86). This suggests that shielding readers from challenging content may contribute to the very ignorance and intolerance it seeks to prevent, ultimately restricting opportunities for critical engagement.

Proceeding further, it is important to state that sensitivity readers participate in a consensual and collaborative project in which they construct new texts based on manuscripts. They are hired by writers and publishers to provide editorial input aimed at addressing issues such as stereotypes and cultural misrepresentations to ensure sensitivity and accuracy. Usually, sensitivity readers are consulted before line edits and proofreading and after a developmental editor. They revise word choice, character arcs and plot points in books featuring subject matters with which the writer is not intimately familiar. As censorship, sensitivity reading attempts to allow for a single interpretation, usually aligning the semantic form with the rhetorical implications (Holquist 22). This alignment can lead to a homogenisation of narratives. Nevertheless, sensitivity readers are consultants who merely suggest changes that the employer can either accept or decline (Lawrence 37). It is ultimately the publisher or author who decides whether to incorporate these suggestions, retaining control over the final product.

Despite this seemingly non-compulsory editing, many authors of children's literature may be forced to enlist sensitivity readers, driven by concerns about potential social media uproar and outrage. Hence, it can become a form of self-censorship to avoid conflicts, as O'Leary notes (7). For instance, writer Kate Milford hired sensitivity readers who shared a similar outbringing as the main character in her children's fantasy novel *Ghosts of Greenglass House* (2017). She is quoted as saying, "I find it scary writing outside my own experience" (Alter). Feeling scared, she had the need to resort to sensitivity readers to dodge public indignation. Certainly, today's scrutiny may culminate in a sanitised and homogenised literature since these attitudes may deter authors from writing about certain themes or perspectives. This circumstance resembles aforesaid early examples of censorship. Another contemporary example subject to controversy and panning occurred in 2020, when *American Dirt,* a new novel about Mexican migrants, was accused of cultural appropriation and stereotyped characters as it was written by a non-Mexican writer, Jeanine Cummins (Wheeler). Personally, I wonder whether writing beyond one's personal experiences isn't, in fact, an inherent part of writing fiction. Who is allowed to tell whose stories? All things considered, it seems that writers are persecuted for writing diverse books or for not writing them. Books will inevitably have detractors, as their ideas may be perceived as challenging or unsettling.

Instead of relying on sensitivity readers, there are other possibilities to publish diverse and inclusive books. It is my contention that minority writers should be encouraged to create works with marginalized narratives. The 2024 CCBC Diversity Statistics shows that 70 percent of the 3,619 documented books for children and teens included at least one white author. Even if the Own Voices movement has apparently gained momentum, authors from underrepresented communities remain sidelined. By the same token, more than 75 percent of publishing staff and literary agents are white, and more than 80 percent identified as heterosexual according to the Diversity Baseline Survey 2019 (BDS 2.0) conducted by Lee & Low Books. Employing sensitivity readers instead of amplifying diverse voices in the publishing industry upholds the status quo. Indeed, sensitivity readers are usually freelancers with a low salary, which underpins power imbalance. They have no financial stake in book sales, and they typically work on a project-by-project basis. Furthermore, their work can be emotionally taxing, particularly when reviewing content that directly relates to their personal experiences or identities. This exposure to sensitive material can contribute to significant mental and emotional strain in an industry that increasingly relies on outsourced workers.

This section has presented the figure of sensitivity readers in contemporary children's literature considering their powerful but also vulnerable position within the publishing industry. In the following section, a different facet will be examined, that is, the role of sensitivity readers in censoring written material of classic novels.

4.2.1 Classic Books and Sensitivity Readers

In light of the above, sensitivity readers simply reflect a societal response to the need for more diverse books to represent today's modern society. Nonetheless, following the literature examined in section one, the re-edition and cleansing of classic books could be deemed a form of censorship. While altering a published work without permission is illegal, copyright holders have the legal right to release revised editions, which may result in new copyrightable derivative works (Smith). That said, the difficulty in distinguishing the original work from the newly copyrightable material serves as a clear sign of censorious forces, indicating an attempt to suppress certain ideas or themes within the original text.

Contrary to expectations, this article confirms that editing already published books happens to be a common modern practice. Namely, in the USA Richard Scarry released a modernised edition of his children's book *Best Word Book Ever* (1963) in 1991 in which he deleted gender and racial stereotypes. In other instances, the author's heirs and copyright holders need to decide whether to make changes to the original work or not (Smith). By way of illustration, an expurgated edition of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) was published by New South Publishing in 2011. This new version replaced 228 references to the "n" word with "slave", also expunging words such as "half-breed" and "Injun". Another illustrative example could be the 1988 updated edition of *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* and *The*

Voyages of Doctor Dolittle in which Hugh Lofting's son accepted the removal of racial stereotypes (Lanes).

This editing of classic books can trigger detrimental consequences. It is important to highlight that classic novels reflect the time and cultural context in which they were written. Smith notes that classic books are part of society's shared heritage. Censoring parts of books can blur their original intent, fracturing the artistic integrity, and hindering a contextual understanding of the culture of the period (Lanes 8). In reality, artistic integrity and freedom of expression intersect with sensitivity editing, which becomes particularly pronounced when the authors are unable to provide input.

In the twenty-first century, prominent deceased authors have been the target of sensitivity readers. This sensitivity editing has not been publicly announced by the publishing houses. Instead, in most cases, they have included a note in the copyright page of the edited book. This note fails to guarantee that every reader is informed that they are reading a modified version of the book. In fact, this has been a motivation for public outrage and disbelief. It was not until *The Times of London* and *The Telegraph* reported in 2023 that it was uncovered that the new editions of Agatha Christie's detective novels published by HarperCollins included changes to accommodate the texts to modern audiences (Simpson). As an example, in Poirot and Miss Marple mysteries the "n" word had been deleted along with descriptions to ethnicity and physiques.

Ian Fleming has been the target of sensitivity editing and wokeness as well. In the 70th anniversary of James Bond, HarperCollins reissued 14 books. Originally, these books had been published between 1953 and 1966; therefore, it should not come as a surprise that some content may not have aged well. Even though Fleming's books are intended for adult readers, racial slurs and misogynistic language was removed from the new edition. The disclaimer in the books said that a "number of updates have been made in this edition, while keeping as close as possible to the original text and the period in which it is set" (Hall).

Penguin Random House has also engaged in censorship by amending and reissuing classic works, including P.G. Wodehouse's *Thank You, Jeeves* (1934) and several of Roald Dahl's children's books. The sensitivity editing of Dahl's books, recommended by Inclusive Minds, was intended to align these texts with modern audiences by excising language deemed sensitive in relation to mental health, gender, race, violence, and weight. However, the modifications have ignited controversy on social media, with critics arguing that the alterations constitute an assault on free speech and artistic integrity. Detractors contend that the changes deviate from Dahl's distinctive writing style, characterized by his use of grotesque, mischievous characters, exaggerated imagery, and a penchant of his protagonists for questioning authority. Moreover, the lack of transparency regarding the criteria for these modifications and the absence of any indication in the books that they have been altered further fuelled public outrage. It was not until *The Telegraph* published a report in 2023 that readers discovered the new editions had been censored (Cumming et al.).

Besides, the publisher Scholastic re-released a new sanitized digital edition of the *Goosebumps* book series by American writer R.L. Stine in 2018. After *The Times* report announcing the sensitivity editing (Ellery 2023), R.L. Stine publicly expressed on Twitter that he was not aware of the removal of mental health, ethnicity and weight references in his horror books first published in the 1990s. The seeming lack of communication between the editors and the author, and the latter's lack of awareness of the changes made to his work, add a new dimension to this topic. To develop a better picture of modern censorship, additional studies will be needed to examine cases such as Scholastic's editing of *Goosebumps* books.

Not only were new printed editions affected by this measure but digital editions in eBooks, such as Amazon Kindle e-readers, were also altered or deleted without notifying their owners nor offering them the possibility to decide whether to keep or change the editions. In 2009, George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* re-editions were deleted from Amazon Kindle platform because the digital publisher did not comply with the rights to sell them (Stone). On a similar note, last year, the British digital editions of Roald Dahl's children's books were automatically updated without notifying the e-book owners. There is a legal loophole whereby readers do not own the content but just license it from the content provider (Ugwu). In a manner similar to streaming platforms or app stores, companies such as Amazon hold the right to retroactively edit content, remove it and even unpublish it entirely, often without the reader's knowledge (Ugwu). This includes the modification of purchased book editions, which raises concerns about the limits of digital ownership. The ability to silently change or withdraw content poses significant ethical and legal questions for digital literature, particularly regarding authorship, intellectual property, and readership in the digital age.

Previous examples of censorship of classic or already published books based on sensitivity reasons have revealed the alarming pattern that has spread in the English-language literary market. Consistent with the literature, this article corroborates that repressive bodies, such as publishing houses, strive to succeed when their censorious measures remain unnoticeable (Freshwater 238). In the given examples, newspaper reports disclosed the editorial changes—in some cases, years after the publication of the censored version. Additionally, there is still not a considerable amount of literature concerning sensitivity editing on classic novels, particularly in children's literature. This gap highlights the need for more research into the long-term impact of such practices, as they affect young readers' access to original texts and the potential consequences for shaping their understanding of culture, history and social norms.

5. CONCLUSIONS

While censorship is multifaceted and difficult to define due to its very nature, it has been proved that it has undergone a recent shift, from marginalising minority groups to protecting cultural sensitivities. Censorship remains ubiquitous, and readers have become modern censors. Paradoxically, both contemporary readers

and children are also the victims of censorious actions. Readers can and, at the same time, cannot control what is being published or which aspects are altered in a book. Similarly, as it has been argued, professional sensitivity readers are in both a powerful position and in a vulnerable one within the publishing industry.

Based on the defining features of censorship, this article has shown how sensitivity editing is a form of censorship, and it has also confirmed that the sensitivity reading of already published books has become a common modern practice. The aim of sensitivity readers is to protect readers from exposure to misrepresentations, harmful topics and contentious language by providing suggestions. While some authors and publishers feel forced to oblige sensitivity readers to avoid public indignation, others are unconsenting parties, that is, they are unable to provide any input. Despite this, numerous posthumous changes have been made to such author's works. These alterations not only undermine artistic integrity and freedom of expression, but also transform the reflection of the writer's cultural context. The findings suggest that rather than creating new narrative worlds, the tendency is to revise and sanitise existing literature to maximise profit.

To conclude, books will inevitably have opponents, as their ideas may be perceived as challenging or unsuitable. If books are discordant with modern life, they should not be censored, expurgated or re-edited by sensitivity readers. It is the author's contention that books provide an insight into the past. If they are altered, censorship is re-editing the past and hindering a contextual understanding of the period. Our past history and literature must definitely not be airbrushed.

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