

## 'Why is everything bad, black?'

Full disclosure: I can't actually remember which text it was that led to one of my students asking the question above. All I know is that it contained the word 'black', we were discussing it in class, and it's a question I have asked myself many times in the past. It might have been Shakespeare. Or an anthology poem. Or some extract from a gothic novel. I can't remember. I wish I could, because quoting it here would have been a far neater opening to this section than the one I'm fumbling through now. I suppose I could have just googled 'the word black in English literature', picked an example at random and gone from there. But I know you trust me and I wouldn't do you like that.

OK, full disclosure part 2: I just googled 'the word black in English literature'. It came up with a very interesting link to something called The Grammarphobia Blog that I'm wishing I had found and shown to the student in question. It's all about the history of the word 'black' as a pejorative in English language, skating through over 700 years of blackness being associated with sin, evil, stainage, malevolence, ill fortune, pain, bad omens, suffering and woe.<sup>1</sup> As a 'black' man, it's quite the cheerful read.



As a teacher of English literature, I deal a lot in the basic building blocks of narrative. Archetypal characters like the hero and the villain; chunky plot constructions like comedy and tragedy; and, of course, the contrasting binary concepts of 'good' and 'evil'. Goodies and baddies. Innocence and experience. Shining knights and dark monsters. Day and night. Heaven and hell. Black and white. It's in the Bible, it's in fairy tales, it's in the fabric of so many of our shared stories and myths. It's in history.

The canon is all about this dichotomy. At a basic level, stories exist to explore the triumph of good over evil. That's what tends to happen and that's what gets taught to children. Morality tales painted in broad primary colours. Poetry can be more subtle and thus more infuriating, but poetry is still often anchored by these same notions of goodness and badness, life and death, with figurative references to light and dark helping us to navigate the grey areas.

By the time an average British child experiencing an average British syllabus has reached sixteen years of age, they will have encountered numerous texts that reinforce the 'black = bad, white = good' ideology. And if they were paying any attention at all, they might stop to wonder what is actually going on. The cop-out answer is that black/white dualism somehow predates the kind of racism we associate with the modern age. That's one theory – that historic literature is distanced from the storms of racist inequality and therefore safe from our twenty-first-century finger-wagging. But the other theory holds more water – that white purity is an ideal that has been constructed and reconstructed over time, throughout history, in a process in which literature plays a key part.



The curriculum that I have been taught to teach inherently upholds the notion of whiteness as pure. That's part of its job description, surely, to help prop up the pedestal upon which whiteness (in this case white Britishness) stands tall. To do this successfully, blackness has to remain subordinate to the white ideal. Now, let's not get carried away, I'm not asking for an audit of every school-taught text for 'black is bad' references and subsequent removal of said texts into the bins of racially insensitive history. But I know the curriculum could do more to promote positive blackness as a counterpoint to all the 'white is light' imagery and 'white is right' ideology that we're fed at school from day one.

Imagine the alternative. Imagine a world printed on negative photographic paper where everything bad was white. Where a heart so black meant that you were a good person and white thoughts meant that you were slipping into despair. Where hell was full of blinding lights and angels smouldered in the depths of heaven. Where Juliet dimmed like the setting sun and William Blake threw criticism at the 'whitening', rather than the 'black'ning' church. Imagine if it was Coal Black and the Seven Dwarfs. I could go on.

### *Shedding light on the Enlightenment*

To go deeper for a moment, let's consider the Enlightenment: that period of time in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during which an intellectual and philosophical revolution took 'us' into the modern age of reason. Sounds good. I put 'us' in inverted commas though because this was a specifically European moment, historically highlighted by the white West



as the spark and start of rational thinking. The problem is that the world view that places the Enlightenment as sacred and pivotal to human cultural and intellectual development does so at the expense of recognising the African, Asian and indigenous American contributions – all those scholars, thinkers and creators who have been whitewashed out of the white, European grand narrative. In service of its own dominance, the white ideal continues to place itself on a racial pedestal, beneath which all others are inferior, exploiting the fictions of race for economic and social power.

Truth be told, I don't think the details of the Enlightenment are taught much in schools at all. The national curriculum includes this period as an optional component at Key Stage 3 in its 'ideas, political power, industry and empire' section, the first of nine bullet points, just above 'Britain's transatlantic slave trade: its effects and eventual abolition'.<sup>2</sup> But whether it's taught or not, the Enlightenment has a legacy that runs deep as the unspoken foundation of all education. I'd hazard a guess that most kids couldn't tell you much about Descartes, Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Kant etc., or what their specific contributions to intellectualism were. Even fewer could articulate the link between European white supremacy and thinkers who rationalised racism just when justification was required for the mass enslavement of African peoples. How convenient. Whether we are taught the specifics or not, anyone who was schooled in the post-Enlightenment West has been incubated in ideology that places these thinkers at the scholastic core.

This was certainly my experience. It wasn't until I began studying A-Level Theology that I was introduced to the heavy



hitters of the Enlightenment era, right at that point when my white, British, Christian education became serious enough to reveal the great who's who of clever, dead, white men, while simultaneously shielding me from the unpalatable truths of their deeply racist contexts (and often deeply racist ideas – remember, it was Immanuel Kant who, with a straight face, put different races into a hierarchy of human potential, with white people being the 'greatest perfection' of humanity).

It's worth noting here that Theology A Level is a definite step into an archly academic heritage, which is a polite way of saying that it's a course for university-bound nerds. (Hi.) It's the same logic that puts Latin on the curriculum in elite (elitist) education: the notion that true, truly valuable knowledge is knowledge that is steeped in European heritage. This is despite the fact that Arabic was more or less the principal language of knowledge until the fifteenth century. The Muslim contribution to intellectualism was so vast, so pervasive, that it was considered a tangible threat by Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros, the head of the Spanish Inquisition, who publicly burned thousands of Arabic books at the turn of the sixteenth century. Moreover, whole collections of Arabic books had previously been translated into Latin, including the modification of author names to more European-sounding personas.

Western intellectualism didn't start from nowhere. Much of it was written on non-Western pages that the West would later seek to modify, or destroy. Like a lot of university-educated people, I have been fattened on a diet deficient in non-European ingredients. Nothing of the seventeenth-century Ethiopian thinker Zera Yacob, whose reason-based philosophy predates



Descartes by three decades.<sup>3</sup> Nothing of the great scholastic heritage of Timbuktu, now Mali, with its immense, ancient libraries that dwarfed all comparisons. Nothing of the generations of knowledge and thought gifted to humanity by China, or indigenous communities of the Americas and Australia. I'm starving.

It wouldn't take many lessons for hungry history students like me to be shown that great contributions to human intellectual development are not exclusively white and European. You can do it in a paragraph, explaining how, for instance, the Moors brought all manner of ideas, modern inventions, expertise and scientific techniques into Europe via southern Spain in 711 AD, after which they reigned for some eight centuries. How Moorish Spain boasted over seventy public libraries in the tenth and eleventh centuries, while there were none in Europe at large. How universal education existed in Moorish society at a time when the vast majority of the Christian, European population were illiterate. It goes on. How Muslim scholarship was at the pinnacle of intellectualism long before the European dominion was engineered. How Muslim libraries dwarfed their European equivalents in size and scale. How the Moors brought Chinese innovations such as the compass to Europe, via Africa, and introduced Europe to paper and Arabic numerals (giving us the numbers 0-9), replacing the Roman numeral system (that helps us to understand which Rocky film we're watching).

Jokes aside, this isn't me point-scoring, or sniping to prove a point. These are facts of how we, as a global species, grew out of various contributions over time, across geography. Allowing



these narratives to be erased, marginalised or whitewashed out of existence does nothing but hold us back.

There is a need to expand literary universes. It's a simple but provocative idea; that we need to expose the many multitudes of non-white, non-European archetypes that are routinely overlooked by a default white curriculum. We need to go deep into every continent and unearth the cultural histories of all peoples to undo the whitewashing that Eurocentricity has done so well over the last few centuries or so. The problem here isn't simply that blackness is maligned by the white canon; it's that this canon doesn't look outside of itself enough to acknowledge non-white contributions to the human experience. This is a fundamental problem with the white curriculum. It presents the totality of all human experience as white and European, relegating other ethnicities to the historical footnotes.

There's a solution here, and it's so obvious that I'm worried that you might do a facepalm and accidentally lose your page. We need to normalise positive blackness and actively counter the negative connotations of blackness that leak from the pages of white history. Making the literature curriculum more diverse is a start, but we can go wider and further. We can make sure that black narratives are front and centre in every subject, spotlighting examples of non-white cultures and narratives that help shape the universal human.

Add it all up and the obvious problem is the most persistent: if racism and prejudice lurk in the zombie systems of British society, then suspicion will always be cast upon our country's supposedly non-British elements. Yes, we're living in Britain,



## Challenging the curriculum

and yes, Britain is an historically white country, but this can't legitimise a curriculum that speaks to white, Western supremacy in an increasingly diverse world. Going back into our shared global history to reveal hidden histories might feel like an act of sabotage, but that is only the case if you hold dominant whiteness as sacred. In actuality, it's an act of liberation that we need in order to go forward, together. If children were taught a richer, more honest history of human intellectualism, it would encourage a level of respect and deeper understanding of how we have arrived at where we are. We would have more respect for countries who have been othered by whiteness and, relatively recently, been controlled and thwarted by colonial exploitation.

Hm.

Maybe I should teach history . . .