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Behavior Column

Telling the difference

On the first day of my postmodernist literature class last semester, the teacher warned our class about the novels we would be reading. He warned us that the ideas presented and the way they were presented were provocative, both in how they would make us think, but also because the material had scenes of sex and violence and some had strong language.

After warning us about the literature, he said that if any of us were not comfortable with the material, this was probably not the right class for us.

He also said that although we would be reading and discussing these hard scenes, he said he didn't think there was any better place for these novel discussions, because we could combine them with our beliefs and standards, making it a safe environment.

I didn't have any problem with the warning my teacher gave us, and I decided to stay in the class. The girl sitting next to me, however, came to class the next day and said she had been offended by what we had read. I asked her why she hadn't heeded our teacher's warning and she said she didn't want to take one of the other literature classes.

For the rest of the semester, I had to hear how each novel we read was inappropriate, at least to her.

The English Department website has a statement explaining the use of explicit works. It says, "just as daily life teaches and refines us through experience with opposites, so literature often works by means of conflict." It then asks that students not judge these works based solely by the subject matter.

This is what being an English major entails, looking past the explicit scenes and finding the beauty of the languages and the great themes within.

Some of these English majors, and other students as well, think that just because they go to a private, religious college, they won't have to read explicit works. I myself did not know how censored these classes would be. But when I found out that we would still read these works, I was not worried. I trusted that my professors would help me work my way through the hard scenes to find meaning within the texts. But there are those students who are so stuck in the idea that BYU-Idaho is a moral bubble that they are offended whenever we read something that they think is inappropriate.

The same thing happens in art classes on campus. Older paintings, especially Renaissance paintings, glorify the human body, which means that the subjects are nude. Some consider this to be pornography, because they think that any time a person is naked, it is automatically bad. Instead of seeing the intricate details that sculptures and painters have put into their subject, they see something they think is risqué and too racy for a BYU-I class—or they don't see anything because they refuse to look at the painting.

Art and literature have the ability to open up our minds and do exactly what the English department says it will, "refine us through experience." Sometimes the way this is done is through showing scenes and language that make us slightly uncomfortable. But this doesn't make art pornographic.

Pornography leads a person to spiritual numbness; art leads a person to spiritual enlightenment. This is a very distinct difference that some overlook because they are too busy being offended.

I met another girl last semester who told about her favorite sculpture titled "The Rape of Persephone" by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Even though this sculpture features nude subjects and is about an uncomfortable situation, this girl told our class that this sculpture had moved her to tears. She understood the difference between pornography and art, and she wasn't worried about being offended.

She was more focused on what this piece of art made her feel and what she learned from the experience.

Instead of being completely turned off from art and literature that present ideas of sex, violence and explicit language, students need to learn this moderation. They need to realize that what they are being presented with does not reflect their morals necessarily, but somewhere within the piece of art or literary work, knowledge and truth can be found.