

“Everybody has their Stereotypes”

By Charlotte Lawrence

Massachusetts education officials triggered uproar Friday, March 27, with their release of a controversial MCAS prompt that was ultimately pulled from the 10th grade English Language Arts exam. While the inflammatory language and racist attitude of the main character in the

Several groups in the Boston area, including the Boston Teachers Union, New England Area Conference of the NAACP, and the Massachusetts Teachers Association have called for the test to be revoked entirely, as the trauma caused by the question could have possibly affected students' performance on the rest of the exam.

The prompt required students to write from the perspective of Ethel, a character in Colson Whitehead's "The Underground Railroad" who hides runaway slave Cora in her attic, and who,

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reading infuriated local education organizations such as the Massachusetts Teachers' Association and the Boston Teachers' Union, students at Milton High were upset for a different reason: the loss of credit for a question that many believed they had performed best on.

The effects of the taboo prompt can still be felt today, as the tenth graders that took the English MCAS have yet to receive their final grade for the test, and any credit they may have earned for the question will be disregarded.

The reading was called into question two days after Milton High sophomores took the exam when several students in Boston Public Schools told their proctor that the prompt made them uncomfortable. According to WBUR, Boston's local NPR news program, Massachusetts Teachers Association president Merrie Najimy emphasized the trauma that this question wrought upon these students, saying in a statement that, "[the question] was traumatic for them, so this group of educators had to conduct counseling in their classrooms as a way of helping their students cope."

In response to criticism of the prompt, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education commissioner Jeff Riley pulled the prompt the following Sunday, saying in a letter to superintendents that, "Out of an abundance of caution and in the interest of student fairness, we have decided not to use the results from this particular question as part of students' scores."

according to the Massachusetts Teachers Association, "is openly racist and betrays slaves trying to escape."

The behavior of Ethel in the novel prompted Whitehead to issue a statement: "Whoever came up with the question has done a great disservice to these kids, and everyone who signed off on it should be ashamed."

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Students in Mr. Young’s sophomore English, however, viewed the prompt differently. Many argued that the interpretation of Ethel’s behavior was subjective, and could be viewed many different ways. In fact, her mysteriously brusque behavior opened the door for many students to apply insight to her backstory and reasoning.

Henry Hall emphasized this point, drawing from a comment Ethel made to Cora demanding that she shower. “There were two kind of ways you could write it...”, Hall explains, “...which is that Ethel made Cora shower for racial reasons or you could write it like, ‘Oh, she couldn’t look at her because she was nervous and she made her shower because she smelled.’ “

Students who read the prompt took into account the setting of the story and used context clues to create a backstory and explanation for Ethel’s behavior. Vivian Kwong and Anna Hoey acknowledged the time period of the novel and Ethel’s unique circumstances that could affect her aggressive attitude. “One of the points I made in my essay actually...” Hoey commented, “...was how if she were to get caught, her entire family could die.”

Vivian, meanwhile, described her entry as, “... slightly racist just because there’s that prejudice for everyone... That’s just how it was back then.” D’Lani Sweeney agreed, commenting, “Everyone has their stereotypes.”

Other students created their own reasons for Ethel’s cold demeanor, crafting elaborate backstories and applying investigative reasoning to the prompt. It was for this reason that the loss of credit for the prompt was especially frustrating. D’Lani explained, “I put her not being able to look at Cora as like she’s done this before and she’s had little kids that haven’t made it into freedom and their faces

stay with her so she wasn’t able to make that type of connection with Cora.”

Sophie Boucher made a similar point, arguing, “It kind of seemed like she had to be a little racist to survive almost... I think that’s what protected her in a way because if she got too emotionally involved it could lead to her downfall.”

In reflection, many students in Mr. Young’s class still maintained that the prompt should not have been pulled. “Even now with them saying something I still don’t see the racism at all- it depends on how you write it,” D’Lani concluded, “I want them to keep [the essay] because that was a really good essay.”

Sophie agreed, saying, “I’m definitely mad it’s not counting anymore. I feel like they should do something along the lines of if you want it to count it will count and if you don’t want it to count it doesn’t have to count. It’s definitely bad that they put it in there in the first place, but I don’t like that you put in the effort and now it’s just gone.”

Included is the section of the novel that tenth graders were given to respond to. There are several inflammatory comments in the passage, including when Ethel tells Cora that she smells and refers to her as “You stupid thing.” Additionally, as noted by Whitehead himself, Ethel reveals herself to be a villain later in the story (though students taking the English MCAS had no way of knowing this considering the small passage they were given).

What are your thoughts on the passage? Do you believe it should have been pulled? Write your thoughts and comments to the editor at elephantintheroom2017@gmail.com.