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Copyright or Copywrong?

Just recently, I had to read Hemingway’s short story, “Cat in The Rain” for my short story class. Since the work was not in our book of short stories, the professor asked us to find it online, read it, and bring it to class to discuss. Having read the story before, the professor was in shock after viewing our one and a half paged, printed out stories that we had brought to class. He was insistent that we were all missing half of the story, as it was supposed to be at least four pages long. Knowing that the Internet is not the most trust worthy place to get information, we all were quick to agree that we had probably found a shortened version of the story. Thus, assuming we were unaware of half of the story, the professor proceeded to fill us in on what we had “missed.” However, as he was explaining, we realized that we hadn’t missed anything at all. It was all there. It was all on the one and a half pages that we had printed out. But no matter what we said to the professor, he was too mind boggled to view our printed copies with any sense of authenticity.

To say the least, this instance poses a problem that our society currently faces. Although it is not exactly the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about copyright laws, this problem certainly relates to such. The intellectual property law, copyright, can be thought of simply as a means of protection for literary, artistic, and musical art forms. However, copyright laws seem to stem no further than to protect the *content* of the varying art forms (text, lyrics, etc.). Is this sufficient?

Imagine that copyright laws served as protection for more than just a work’s content. Imagine that instead of only protecting the text on the pages of books, copyright also protected the formatting, feel, and experience of reading books. How would the literary world be different?

Had copyright been created to protect more than just the content of a work, things would have been much better for readers and authors alike. There is something about the experience of reading a book that can only be captured through the physical read through of ink on pages. There is something about the feel of a book, the pages, the binding, and the cover that is an essential part of really connecting with it. And as you can see, from the above example, there is something about the formatting of a book that needs to be consistent in order for everyone to be on the same page (no pun intended) with the work.

Had these copyright laws been in order from the start, books would not have been robbed of their authenticity through the infiltration of Internet sources. Books would have been sold and widespread in print versions only. And authors would have gotten their messages across in the exact ways they wanted to, without worrying about others changing the format, or experience for readers. As Howard puts it, “printed books are the product of a press, but long before the type is set, it is the author’s vision and voice that makes possible a book’s existence” (Howard 91). It is that vision and voice that must be legally protected.

Unfortunately, in the world we live in today, copyright does not exist that way. With new technology, such as the Internet and e-books, printed books are becoming less and less popular. E-books are simply more convenient to get, take up less space, and are cheaper. However, these reasons do not make it ok for us to say goodbye to paperback books forever. From personal experience and the class blog, I know that a lot of people are not ready to switch over to reading novels, books, short stories, or even poems electronically. In reading from an e-book or other online source, the reader is very much detached from the work itself. The reader is unable to really connect with the work through highlighting, annotating by hand, or even just flipping through the pages. There is no longer a “hands on” relationship between the reader and the text; and that is a shame.

Switching from books to e-books not only robs readers of fully experiencing authors’ works, but also robs authors of spreading their original messages. Although books and e-books may have the same text, e-books will forever be reproductions of the real thing. Taking the words of Walter Benjamin, “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (Benjamin 223).

So I raise the question, why push for an electronic literary world with so many people against it? With the spreading of material over the Internet also comes more sources for piracy. Currently we are living in a world where pirating music is as common as teeth brushing. In his book, *Sound Recording*, Morton talks about websites and programs like MP3.com and Napster, as two examples of online sources breaking the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 (Morton 193-195); but over the years, many more music pirating sites have evolved. Since e-books and other online book sources are relatively new, they are not facing the piracy that the music world is. However, with time, piracy is bound to engulf the literary world.

The bottom line is, nothing is safe once it is on the Internet. And with the increased popularity of e-books and Internet books sites, the literary world is headed down a dark path. Copyright laws must be changed, or else “in the near future, it seems probable that paper will become a relic of the past. Ink will cease to exist, and books will become ephemeral items, held in the hand at one minute, and erased entirely the next” (Howard 154).

Works Cited

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