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EDUCATION

Literature's Emotional Lessons

Grappling with the way books make students feel—not just analytical skills—should be part of the high-school English curriculum.

By Andrew Simmons

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I'd drawn a little tombstone on the board. I was in the middle of leading a class of 10th-grade English students through Piggy's death scene in *Lord of the Flies*: the rock, the shattered conch, Piggy's long fall, the red stuff flowing out, the twitching legs. The corners of her eyes bubbling, a 15-year-old girl dashed for the door.

When I spoke with her after class, the student explained that she identified with Piggy. Being studious, fearful of bullies, and a bit of an outsider, it upset her to casually discuss his violent death. Piggy's demise was not the symbolic death of order or logic, but the murder of a kid like her.

In my experience teaching and observing other teachers, students spend a lot of time learning academic skills and rarely even talk about the emotional reactions they may have to what they read—even when stories, as they often do, address dark themes. The Common Core Standards push students to become clinical crafters of arguments and masters of academic language. While these are essential skills to possess, the fact that my other students appear perfectly comfortable not acknowledging and discussing emotional responses to literature may be as revelatory as this one student's teary dash from class. Inundated with video games, movies, and memes, teenagers often seem hard to shake up. Characters are fictitious abstractions, and, without actors to bring them to life and makeup and digital tricks to make the drama feel real, students may strictly do the analytical work teachers expect without the interference of a significant emotional response. That's a bad thing. An emotional response should be part of the curriculum.

Since August, my 10th- and 12th-grade literature students have read about pre-adolescent boys who bully and murder one another; a man, fearing shame and betrayal, who smothers his wife and commits suicide; and another man who hangs himself as colonizers pulverize his culture. They've also read about a woman who kills her baby daughter so she won't experience the physical and emotional horrors of slavery. They've been introduced to a man who shoots a guy on a beach because the sun is in his eyes, relishing, as he later marches to the gallows, the prospect of incurring society's hatred.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Wisdom Deficit in Schools

MICHAEL GODSEY

There's a Perfect Number of Days to Work From Home, and It's 2

AMANDA MULL

How to Break a Phone Addiction

ARTHUR C. BROOKS

These stories should be familiar. My colleagues at public, charter, and private schools also build study units around *Lord of the Flies*, *Othello*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Beloved*, and *The Stranger*. A 1990 Center for Teaching and Learning survey identified the 10 most commonly taught texts in high school; 1990 was a long time ago relatively speaking, but all but one of the texts are still taught at my school today. Pearson Education, Inc. advises that high-school students read more than half of the texts I am required to teach in a year. And Appendix B of the Common Core Standards lists fiction "exemplars" that hedge toward personal, political, and societal tragedies like *The Great Gatsby*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *The Scarlet Letter*. All this is to say that high-school students don't exactly do a lot of light reading.

English teachers don't teach these important stories because they want to batter students with the darkness in human nature. Or because they want to remind them of history's hideous chapters or emphasize the absurdity of existence. Academic goals aside, fellow teachers told me they want to help students cope with real life—even when portions of that reality are unpleasant and disturbing. In the right hands, the important stories, grim plots and all, do that. Researchers who have studied emotion and cognition extensively, Patrick Hogan of the University of Connecticut and Keith Oatley of the University of Toronto, further suggest that literature can play a vital role in helping people understand the lives and minds of others, and that individuals and communities can benefit from that ability along with literacy and analytical prowess.

"It's easy to see the trends of death, war, destruction, and oppression in our current society," said Ray Ramirez, a friend of mine from graduate school who teaches high-school English. "There's a certain level of honesty reflected in art which deals with the psychological, social, and emotional fallout of such violence."

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Such themes may also make art better. “Good writing tends to focus on difficult-to-deal-with themes because those are the themes difficult to understand,” said Jeannine Thurston, a coworker who has taught long enough to have been one of my high-school English teachers. “Emotional complexity translates into an artistic value.”

Books should never be viewed strictly as opportunities for students to learn skills, but in school, they often serve this purpose. In some classrooms around the country, teachers may present books in a bubble, isolated from the contemporary context and students’ frenzied interior worlds. Better, the Common Core-friendly approach encourages teachers to create units of study in which students read nonfiction along with fiction. One might pair Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, a well-known primary source slave narrative, along with excerpts from *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* and *The New Jim Crow*. A work like *Beloved* becomes a way to address the corrosive legacy of slavery that haunts Americans today—and not just a challenging work of literature that pushes students to expand their powers of comprehension and analysis.

Yet while such a unit may be rigorous intellectually, it is arguably incomplete unless students tangle with the book’s emotional core. Along with amassing skills and wrestling with ideas, one should react emotionally to *Beloved*. It’s a story about suffering and healing, the fragmentation of identities and stories and then the potential for their reassembly through the love and labor of a community of survivors. A teacher should help students process the book’s depiction of characters’ traumas, guiding them toward greater empathetic heights—and therefore maybe preparing them to play a role in repairing one of America’s most gaping societal wounds. In 1993, Toni Morrison told *The Paris Review* that she had wanted *Beloved* to make the history of slavery “truly felt” by readers, to “translate the historical into the personal.” If the Pulitzer-winning narrative does this, then shouldn’t the teaching of it recognize the personal, emotional relationship with the book as important, too? While few authors write books designed to be enjoyed on their philosophical or political merits alone, in a school setting you probably wouldn’t guess this were the case. Standards rarely address it; administrators rarely explicitly encourage it; few people pay consultants to give presentations on it at staff meetings. To do the work mandated by the Common Core well (which, for a good English teacher, is nothing particularly new), it may be helpful. To make students kinder and more conscientious citizens, it’s perhaps imperative.

In 2011, Keith Oatley published an article in *Scientific American Mind* called, "In the Minds of Others" in which he explains how fiction helps readers understand people. "The process of entering imagined worlds of fiction builds empathy and improves your ability to take another person's point of view," he writes. "It can even change your personality ... The emotional empathy that is critical to our day-to-day relationships also enables us to picture ourselves living as the characters do when we read fiction."

"Literary study should ... provide us with many complex models for understanding and responding to others and to ourselves," said Patrick Hogan.

As an example, Hogan cited *Othello*. "I read *Othello* as concerned principally with shame, humiliation, and a sense of attachment betrayal," he said. "In studying the play, it is crucial to explore the nuances of these feelings. The fictional frame allows students to work through the autobiographical feelings more fully, and often more honestly, as there is deniability."

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Good teachers often incorporate the ideas voiced by Hogan and Oatley into their craft. *Othello* allows my class to review high-school courtship patterns and the insecurities on which they thrive. *The Stranger* encourages students to contemplate how the meanings that they attach to relationships, responsibilities, and ambitions may be arbitrary and inauthentic—fine lessons for those nearing graduation. There's a pretty clear line to draw between *Lord of the Flies* and the boorish pack mentality of teenage boys.

Thurston, my coworker, suggested that many students comfortable sharing their own emotions might fail to apply the messages embedded in literary texts to their own environments. "I'm worried about the girls who suffer from anxiety but are simultaneously catty and wretched to one another," she said. "Where's that coming from and how do we educate that?"

Echoing her sentiment, Shaun Bond, another coworker, talked about "the discrepancy" he notices in students' condemnation of characters' behavior and their own actions. "I show students real-life stories about adults enacting their ignorance

and hatred on the world," he said, "And I tell them to imagine those adults at 15 years old, reading *Lord of the Flies* themselves. Clearly, those adults have ignored the lessons their English teachers once toiled to instill."

It balloons into a broader discussion about the purpose of an English education. English teachers—at least the ones I know—want to churn out thinkers who wield power through language. We want them to love books, but also to survive. We want them to read a lease in 10 years and know what they're getting into. We also want to turn out good citizens who practice in the streets and at the office what they identify as moral and good in class, people who do not cheat, manipulate, abuse, and unfairly judge others. English teachers, it seems, are in a unique position to impose some degree of emotional and moral rigor on the curriculum.

Yet this program of emotional and moral rigor is informal, if not imaginary, and entirely unstandardized. I don't know many teachers who prefer not to have control over what and how they teach, but if one recognizes that literature helps people understand one another and can improve our individual and collective health, it's a bit telling to see this prerogative unmentioned in the standards providing guidance to teachers.

When we spoke, Oatley bemoaned the notion that classwork focused on emotional responses to literature might be seen as "soft." Some people get suspicious when academic courses drift into the fuzzy realm of feelings. At the high-school level, standards have to be quantifiable and, as Oatley pointed out to me, "technical skills are the easiest things to test." A lot of English teachers I know wish this were not the case. Most of them believe that an emphasis on standards-based test-result-centered accountability strips an English education of creativity and personal expression. It may also deprioritize the point of reading.

If educators want students to come away from their study of literature with more than just academic skills and content knowledge, maybe policy-makers should rethink their approach to testing. Emotional health might be hard to measure on a large scale by traditional testing methods, but it's far from squishy, and certainly no less tangible than the technical skills education-policy framers seek to standardize. After all, one only has to live on a violent, beleaguered planet and watch the news to know we are troubled. And one may only have to read fiction to understand that solutions can spring as readily from love and empathy as logic.