

A Depressing English Curriculum

By Jason Toporowski

A couple of days ago, I wrote my Grade 12 English exam, then took a moment to reflect on what I'd learned – some grammar, essay format, and a lot about the three major literary works in the curriculum: *Hamlet*, *The Lord of the Flies*, and *Death of a Salesman*.

I couldn't help but feel as though my Grade 12 English experience was rather depressing – a feeling I know a lot of my fellow students shared – not because of the teaching (that aspect of the course was excellent), but because of those three works. While my teacher made a valiant effort to focus on the positive aspects of them, the general tone remained sombre.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, his uncle kills his father and then marries Hamlet's mother. Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, betray him, and in the last scene, Hamlet, his uncle, his mother, and Laertes, the nobleman who has morally wounded Hamlet, all died violently – a very depressing finish.

In William Fielding's *Lord of the Flies*, a group of English school-boys become abandoned on an unoccupied island without anyone older than 12. The boys quickly descend into savagery, worshipping a beast they are sure is prowling the island, and kill two of their own. The book nears its end with the line: "Ralph wept for the end of innocence (and) the darkness of a man's heart."

Not exactly uplifting stuff.

But, believe it or not, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* may be the most depressing. The play focuses on Willy, who lives in a fantasy world revolving around his two sons, Biff and Happy. Throughout the book, he is contemplating suicide, lying to himself, and lying to his boys, and when Biff finally tries to pull Willy from his fantasy world to face the truth, Willy kills himself, hoping the insurance money will help Biff realize his potential.

In all three books, there's at least one death. In two of the books, suicide is considered, and in one it is carried out. In the book that doesn't contain suicide, its young characters carry out malicious murder. Each book focuses on the possibility of evil, depression, and betrayal of trust.

So the question is: Why are we teaching this in Grade 12? Why would the focus of an entire course, which is mandatory, be on death and depression? I could understand if one of the books was of this depressing nature, but all of them?

When you consider the fact that suicide is the second leading cause of death for teenagers and that for every completed suicide, there are roughly 30 attempts that fail, it doesn't seem all that logical – especially when the rate of depression in adolescents is widely considered to be about

20 per cent among the general population. It makes you wonder what educators are thinking.

While it would be ridiculous for me to say that Grade 12 literature is causing these suicides and depression, it certainly isn't helping. Why a focus wouldn't be placed on the good aspects of life, possibly an uplifting story that involves the pursuit and attainment of goals, is beyond me.

I don't agree with those who point out that in order for us to truly appreciate the lives we have and understand the failures in our society that could occur, we need reminders such as these books. Turn on CNN for an hour; read the front section of a newspaper; listen to a news radio station and you will be instantly reminded that not only is our world imperfect – but that many real live issues are out there threatening us.

Maybe our Grade 12 curriculum, if it is set on creating awareness for issues, should focus on current, real issues – using newspaper articles and reports, instead of such works.

I was taught a great deal, my teacher was brilliant, but my classmates and I agreed the Grade 12 course would be better revised.

And I didn't even get into the other two books we read – George Orwell's dark political commentary *Animal Farm* and Aldous Huxley's futuristic *A Brave New World* – both of similar tone as the other three.

Let's take depression out of the curriculum and replace it with inspiration.

After all, what do they always say about us? That we're the future. I don't think our future should be this depressing.

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