DEALING WITH DEATH IN LIFE AND LITERATURE

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Abstract
As teachers of English, we cannot escape exposing our students to emotional triggers in the classroom. When my student's father (a former classmate of mine) died by suicide, I found myself struggling with the ever-present emotional trigger of death and/or suicide in every major literary work scheduled for study that year. Death is unavoidable. Reading about death is also, apparently, unavoidable, but I was not convinced that violent death deserved so much of our literary attention, especially for this young man whose pain was raw and new.

Keywords
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I saw it on the news first. Between commentary on road construction and community happenings, the news anchor read a thirty-second blip of a story about a missing man. He was last seen on the afternoon of the previous day. He had been on a walk, but not really dressed for it. He had left the house in his sandals. The photo showed a familiar face. I knew him. I had attended high school with him. He was a great guy. Everyone liked him. I'd seen him just a few weeks before at our open house because his son was in my class.

About a week later, I attended his funeral. My old acquaintance, my student's father, had taken his own life.

The son missed a few days, naturally, and the administration requested schoolwork be sent home, including tests. Obliging, I sent home an exam over the novel we had just finished reading in class. The mom and the school would work together to ensure academic integrity. Testing fidelity, however, was not the thing that woke me up in the middle of the next night. Instead, the realization of what the son had finished reading and then analyzed on the essay portion of the test shot through my subconscious and shook me awake with such urgency my dog barked as if an intruder had burst through the door.

The week my student's father disappeared, we had closed in on the last ten pages of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

I love my job, but I despise teaching this novel. While I find beauty and power in Steinbeck's emotional use of description, I dread experiencing the tragedy of The Great Depression with these hopeless characters. Every year, I press our department to remove this novel from our curriculum or at least make it optional. As you can probably guess, I'm voted down every time.

My concern with this novel, especially as an addition to a long list of death-focused stories touting the hopelessness of humanity, had unfortunately and sickeningly come to fruition with the death of this boy's father. While my student was reading about Lenny getting his brains blown out by a friend he trusted and loved, he was also struggling with the very real and quite similar death of his own father—not by the hand of a trusted friend, but by his own. His father—the man my student and the community knew to be loving and kind, generous and funny—had violently removed himself from the world, too.

As much as we English teachers like to believe that reading about tough issues opens a door to healthy conversation for our students, what if that isn't always the case? What if reading about tough issues creates emotional triggers that inhibit learning? What if the school-wide knowledge of a father's suicide coupled with the uncomfortable analysis of an empathetic character's shocking death spawns crushing grief, anger, and confusion that the son is ill prepared to deal with in a classroom setting? Further, what if the next piece scheduled for study includes more suicide as Haemon grieves the loss of Antigone, and Haemon's mother grieves her son?

What if every single major work for the year included death, suicide, or murder? That's what we were up against. *Of Mice and Men*, *Antigone*, *Julius Caesar*, *Unbroken*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* rounded out the reading list. The topic, conversation, and analysis of death was unavoidable. Of course, in life it is also unavoidable. I couldn't remove the topic from my classroom, but for crying out loud, could the kid get a break? Could the teacher?

Until that year, I hadn't realized the extent to which we study death and suicide in the ELA classroom. Most ELA teachers understand the glorious blessing and burden unique to our subject area. We get to guide our students in discussion of truly important topics. We have this amazing opportunity to form places of inclusion in our classrooms. We can present novels, letters, speeches and essays to help students figure out where they belong. As societal norms change, we are able to speak more freely about Poe's drug addition, Fitzgerald's alcoholism, Dickinson's social anxiety, and Woolf's mental health. We can openly discuss the use of *they* not only as a singular pronoun but also as an appropriate pronoun. In fact, we worry about the anxiety triggered when we misuse it.

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Do we worry as much about anxiety caused by education's obsession with suicide and death-involved plots? Do we worry over the triggers aggravated by the continual analysis of death, death, death?

Dealing with death in real life is unavoidable. Reading about death is also, apparently, unavoidable, but I was not convinced that violent death deserved so much of our literary attention, especially for this young man whose pain was raw and new. Therefore, some weeks later, I changed my semester plans. *Julius Caesar* out, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in. A little humor and romance never hurt anyone, right?

Then along came Act II, Scene 2 and Act III, Scene 2 where Hermia threatens suicide as a way to cope with heartbreak. We were right back to the original conundrum, this time as a comedic use of hyperbolic emotional drama. I'm not sure that approach was any better than Steinbeck's supposedly justifiable and humane execution of a mentally impaired man.

Is it possible to dive into literature without the ubiquitous death scene? I must believe it is—I haven't figured out how to go about it yet—but I still believe. I'm not looking to avoid the subject altogether, but surely we can study storytelling and figurative language with a less death and suicide-obsessed literature curriculum.

This revelation has sent me on a quest for memorable, life-affirming, and well-written stories of joy and hope. My search illuminates the reality that every story poses some manner of trigger. Perhaps some educators see that as a good thing, as a path to empathy, understanding, and healing. Maybe it is. The whole truth is more than that, though. Sometimes, the grieving or scarred student is not ready for the path. Sometimes, the teacher isn't ready for it. Yet, we pull out the go-to Greek drama because it is already on the schedule. We read Steinbeck because we always have, and we can't imagine a sophomore English classroom without it. We analyze death and suicide as climactic plot points because death is unavoidable and so are standardized tests.

I don't know the answer, but I do know this: to study literature without triggers is an impossible task, but I believe we can do better. I believe I can do better. So, I strive for balance. Actually, that's not true. I strive to tip the scale in hope's favor because if I must analyze death and suicide as part of the literature curriculum, the very, very least I can do is offer hope in the face of it.

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Author Biography

Deborah Eades McNemee graduated from Friends University with a degree in Secondary English Education and from Wichita State University with a Master's in English. She currently teaches both on-level and Advanced Placement language arts courses at Andover Central High School. She has piloted creative writing programs in two different districts, encouraging her students to reach novel writing goals in cooperation with NaNoWriMo Young Writers Program. In partnership with The Big Read Wichita, her classes have hosted student-led events for seven of the last eight years. Her favorite part of teaching is seeing students who profess to hate English class learn to love reading and writing. She can be reached at eadesd@usd385.org.