



2022

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Recommended Citation

Quimby, Janine M. (2022) "Do We Just Continue to Teach? An Examination of Teaching Through Tragedy by Teaching Tragedy," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 11, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol11/iss2022/10>

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Do We Just Continue to Teach? An Examination of Teaching Through Tragedy by Teaching Tragedy

On the twentieth anniversary of the devastating September 11th attacks, a friend and former classmate from high school posted the following in her Instagram story:

I thought 20 years would be a long time, but I have been irritable and in a bad mood all day. I think some things don't leave you. Even 20 years later. Where I was. Announcements over the loudspeaker. Watching footage on an old TV. Crying. I feel like a lot of people remember what they were wearing but I feel like I was in a fog and am missing whole chunks of time from those days after. My mom going in to help as an RN and being able to do nothing but hand out blankets and water. The ash on my car. Crying in the guidance office. The fact that my teachers were still teaching and we were falling apart in front of them. Maybe they didn't know what to do either.

I was a high school junior when 9/11 happened, and much like my classmate's post, I remember details in fits and starts: What I was wearing. The announcements. The tears. The fear. The attempted resuming of normalcy in classes.

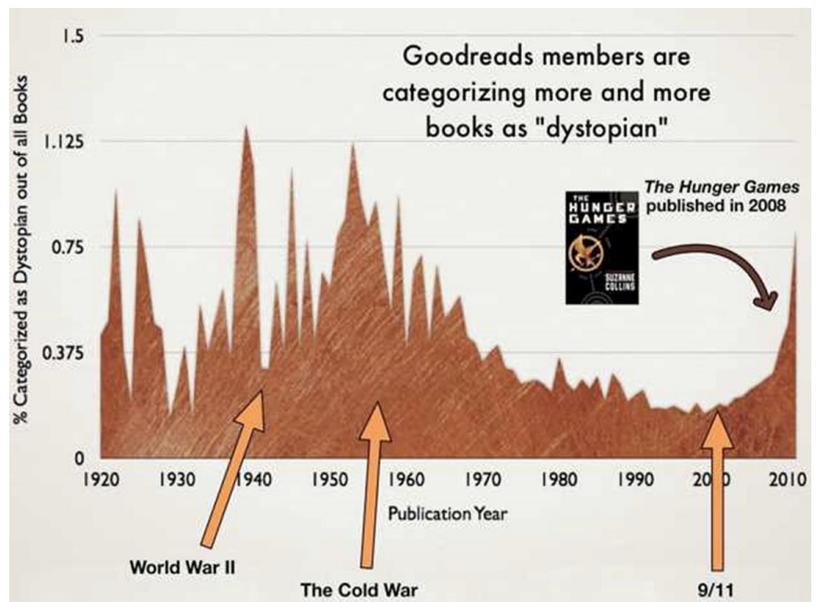
After reading her story post twice, I replied that I thought the pandemic elicited similar responses from teachers. We just teach. Tragedy after tragedy. I was a student twenty years ago when 9/11 happened, and I'm a teacher now. Two tragedies book-ending a path in education.

I began to wonder: *Is there a method to teaching during a tragedy?* Surely there's no playbook outlining what to do in the event of a terrorist attack or worldwide pandemic. Hours and hours of undergraduate and graduate coursework in education prepared me to teach reading and writing, to explore controversy in texts, to navigate difficult topics in literature, but not for this. *Could the way out of this actually be through reading?*

During lockdown in March 2020, our school district required us to check in with students daily; I used a Google Form that required students to update me on their progress in the class and to keep me informed on how they were passing their days. Their responses surprised me. Many students found their way back to reading. Some admit to scouring their parents' bookshelves amidst library closures. Others turned to TikTok (#BookTok) looking for the newest literary craze. Once we returned to face-to-face learning in September 2021, students brought that book-loving energy with them. Our media specialist admitted that book check-outs were at an all-time high! *Could there be something here?* I was eager to find out.

In my AP English Language and Composition classes, students have two marking periods of independent reading assignments. They have control over what books they choose for their two marking-period long projects. I imagined students wanted to retreat from the dystopian world we were currently inhabiting, horrified by what they saw and read daily. When I previewed their independent reading selections, I was astonished: *This Mortal Coil*, *The Road*, *Station Eleven*, *The Dreamers*.

I began looking for trends. In an infographic from the popular social media platform Goodreads titled “The Dystopian Timeline to *The Hunger Games*,” the author showcases a timeline with book publication years ranging from 1920-2010, complete with markers for World War II, The Cold War, and 9/11. After each tragic event, the timeline



shows a sharp rise in the publication of dystopian novels including *1984*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Delirium*, and *The Hunger Games*. Similar trends existed following the 2016 presidential election. In an article published in *The New York Times* titled “George Orwell’s *1984* is Suddenly a Best-Seller,” author Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura noted that *1984* “reached a 9,500 increase in sales” the week after the inauguration. Other classic dystopian texts such as *Brave New World* and *The Handmaid's Tale* also began climbing Amazon’s best-seller list.

These startling trends led me here: *Do we teach during a tragedy by reading about tragedy? Are students able to make sense of what’s happening around them by reading about dystopian heroes/heroines who come out on the other side of tragedy?* Slowly, I was beginning to realize that the answer is “yes.”

In class, students were identifying with Offred and Winston in ways they hadn’t in years past; they were, quite literally, becoming Katniss and Tris. Oceania and Gilead were beginning to feel like home; the characters’ plights were their plights. Whatever trend was unfolding around me, I needed to keep alive, as much as it pained me to feed tragedy with more tragedy. This is what they wanted. What they needed.

Reflecting back on reading both *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* for AP summer reading, one student noted that she “found [herself] relating to both Offred and Winston because they were both forced to confine themselves and limit social interaction with others, similar to the quarantine guidelines [they] had to follow. The way [the characters] described the feeling of being isolated and slowly losing touch with society was really relatable and [she] could kind of empathize with their feelings.” Another student commented that reading dystopian novels “in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic [...] greatly shifted [her] perspective of all the

unprecedented tragedies that have occurred.” She admitted that “when the coronavirus first started to spread globally, [she] was faced with a reality that did not seem real [and] was unaccustomed to watching the death toll rise by the hundreds every day and seeing ordinary people attached to ventilators to hold on to their life.” However, she also noted that “by following the characters in their dilemma to grasp onto their identity as well as act under the regulations of their community where everything seems to go wrong, [made her] feel better about [her] current lifestyle.”

Students continued to nourish their desire for tragedy. While examining books during an in-class Book Pass Activity—where students have one minute to sample a text by examining its covers and, briefly, its pages—multiple students asked for recommendations for books that would “make [them] cry.” Again, I was astonished. After nearly two years of lockdowns, alarming death tolls, and uncertainty, they wanted books that would purposefully move them to tears? I prodded a bit. I emailed one of the students outside of class because I couldn’t stop thinking about the request. *Why is it that despite all of the surrounding anguish and hardship she wanted to cry while reading for pleasure?* Her response was candid: “Honestly, I am not quite sure, [but] all I know is that I like the release that comes from crying at the end. It is a way for me to feel emotions without having to process my own, which in hindsight may seem unhealthy, but it is what works for me. I crave reading about heartbreak in order to relate my life to it, I read of family tragedies in order to prepare myself for life, I prepare myself by hardening my heart in self-defense. I am aware of the sheltered environment I live in; however, I have been forced to grow up too fast and books that make me sob, make me feel the age I am supposed to. So yes, the world is burning, our world is still shut-down, and war still rages on, but I desire to

be sad about the simple things in life. In this simplicity, I am able to find peace, a way for me to escape the storm around me.”

That’s when it hit me: Students were achieving catharsis from reading about tragedy. In defining “tragedy” in the *Poetics*, Aristotle recognized that it’s “through pity and fear” that the “proper purgation [*catharsis*] of [...] emotions” occurs (Harmon and Holman 82). While Aristotle’s definition of “proper purgation” remains ambiguous, many have come to define catharsis as the emotional release that accompanies reading tragedy. Pity and fear, however, are difficult to manifest without a proper connection to the characters. In “Catharsis in Literature,” writer Ritu Singh Bhal recognizes that a “significant part of what makes a work of literature cathartic [is that] the reader must have developed a strong identification with the characters. In other words, if readers aren't able to ‘assume themselves’ in the characters—if they feel they don't have any qualities or experiences in common—then they probably won't.” While my student recognizes that she’s lived a sheltered life, she still yearns for that emotional release because, in those moments, she’s able to “assume herself” in those roles. Simply, she’s able to *feel*.

The last two years have certainly demanded much from students, for within that time they’ve been expected to enroll, unwillingly, in virtual classes, fear close encounters with their own friends and family, and grapple with mortality in proximal situations. Could I really blame them for wanting to feel their age? After all, wasn’t my own experience with 9/11 fraught with some of the same harsh realities?

Similarly, other students used their independent reading to reflect on their mindset during the pandemic. One young man admitted that reading *World War Z* while in school this school year enabled him to keep things in perspective: “I think I had that perspective [to look for and

focus on the positive to continue to move forward] because I knew the situation was temporary, and that I anticipated this year to be back to ‘normal’ (which it almost is). In that way, the theme of *World War Z* mirrors my outlook during Covid—I maintained hope, and that is what kept me going even when I had no physical control over what was happening around me on a broader scale.” Considering the ways in which reading dystopian fiction has impacted her, another young woman thinks that students “gravitate towards dystopian novels in times of tragedy in order to mollify [their] own feelings about what [they’re] experiencing.” She elaborated further on dystopian world building: “Falling into a fantasy world creates distance between us and our hardships, allowing us to cope better. Oftentimes, reading dystopian novels returns to us a sense of control and a feeling of security over our own lives. As the pandemic ripped our lives from us and isolated us, dystopian fiction allowed us to divorce ourselves from our difficult world and remarry a realm where we are in control.”

While the world around me bounced from one catastrophe to another, I found myself reflecting on other tragedies in my curriculum. Aside from the work we do on dystopian literature, we also read *Macbeth* in my AP class. *Would teaching an actual tragedy benefit students or make them retreat?* I was willing to gamble on the former, and that’s just what I did. Only, I was going to add an additional layer: Instead of just reading a tragedy, we’d be performing it as well. This choice was as much for me as it was for the students. We were, after all, entirely on Zoom during the first year I endeavored to try out this performance-based instruction. However, this year— after more than a year of virtual instruction—I was eager to have all of my students in front of me. During each class block, students selected roles and performed all five acts of the play. There were laughs (the Porter scene!) and much annoyance (Why couldn’t Macbeth simply let his destiny play out?). The plot of a tragedy is high-stakes; so

too is living during a worldwide pandemic. Another student summed up the situation aptly: “Every time we performed *Macbeth*, and it was hard to hear/understand someone through their mask, I’d think about how we are starring in our own tragedy right now.” In being able to “assume themselves” in characters and their circumstances, students are able to forge deeper connections with those texts. The pandemic is their tragedy, and they are the performers.

At the end of our *Macbeth* unit, I returned to one of my initial questions: *Why, during a tragedy, do we turn to tragedy?* In my mind, I thought students would seek out a different form of distraction (romances or humor, perhaps). Whereas many people directed their anxieties, agitations, and trepidations aloud on social media, students wanted to *feel* and *experience* their emotions in real life. Catharsis—pure and purgative—was the avenue. In her article titled “Catharsis in Shakespeare’s Major Tragedies,” writer Fariha Khan recognizes that tragedy “arouses our feelings of pity and fear because we identify ourselves with the man’s sufferings and thus fear is awakened. The tragedy at first electrifies our emotions and then elevates our mind and broadens our vision. It liberates us from ourselves. Hence comes the refinement of our feelings and we find our mental frontiers opening up new horizons.” Through reading about tragedy and uncertainty, students experienced a catharsis they didn’t know they needed. When students feel as if they’re “starring in [their] own tragedies,” their fear has been awakened. While social media can offer an outlet, it rarely offers the emotional release so many young adults crave. Literature, on the other hand, can provide that release.

One student recognized the incongruity of reading more light-hearted books during a pandemic noting that “[t]hose upbeat feelings sometimes felt awkward, seeing as how [he and] most of [his] friends were kept at home more than usual [...] dystopia and tragedy often seemed to fit the mood of the world around [him] better.” Another student realized that “when [students]

see the world [...] idealized [...] through media and [then] see the world for what it really is as a result of true education, [they] realize that the world can be rotten sometimes.” Consequently, he found himself gravitating toward dystopian literature because “it isn’t so different from the world we live in.” Drawing upon trends in Young Adult literature, another young woman has enjoyed seeing how “dystopian fiction has grown, [and how] teenagers in a divided world can see themselves in [the] protagonists in extreme situations.” She also finds it “reassuring knowing that adults writing novels are attempting to convey these feelings of confusion about morality and individual place in the world [and that they] want for teens and children to be seen.”

There it was: students were using tragedy as a reflective mirror, holding up the texts as reflections of their inner thoughts and turmoil. They didn’t want an escape; they wanted to feel the somberness. The news numbed them; literature awakened them. Achieving catharsis allowed them to process tragedy, not merely witness it.

When I engaged with my former classmate (who also happens to be a teacher) about her Instagram story, I told her that I thought the only way to teach through a tragedy was to, in fact, teach through a tragedy. She questioned whether teachers should be “normal” in order to be an anchor through a storm. My reply was that teachers are pillars of normalcy, and that’s why people cling to us. Think about what happened when our worlds were turned upside down in March 2020, how everything we knew was upended when kids weren’t in school full-time. Parents around the country were demanding the return to brick and mortar teaching. We are anchors, but we’re also the bricks.

We are the one constant, and we will continue to teach through this tragedy and the inevitable ones that follow. We are the anchors. And we will continue to teach. That's all we know how to do.

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