

Escape: The destination and the struggle

I used to enjoy English as a subject; literature lived purely in the novels I revelled in. However, I saw a distinction between English as I explored it in and out of school. English out of school lived in rich and diverse worlds brought to life by authors who put an extraordinary amount of care into creating engaging stories with characters so real they occupied my dreams. However, English in school effectively tested an ability to comprehend texts and draw some meaning that, although interesting, had no bearing on my life or the real world. Thankfully, my last English teacher before high school challenged this belief. She used a diverse array of texts like short stories and “whodunnits”, and combined them with activities such as writing our own “whodunnits” and screenplays—using the texts as springboards rather than subjects of intense dissection. Her style very much complemented my perspective of literature: pushing me to use my love for stories to delve deeper into the plot, imagine different ways a story could play out, grasp at characters’ motivations, and create my own theories about why a story plays out as it does. She completely transformed the way I viewed English to be a unique subject worthy of genuine exploration.

As I ventured into English class in high school, my beliefs about English were initially reaffirmed as my ninth-grade writing assessments focused on gaining deeper insight into the plot. Our exploration of stories was guided by a quote from one of Neil Gaiman’s essays, “Without our stories we are incomplete”, suggesting that the stories we engage ourselves with form facets of our identity, and studying them like a dissection does both the story and yourself a disservice. Perhaps it was this sentiment that led our “literary analysis” to exist in the plot of our stories, with prompts like: Did Odysseus truly love Penelope? (From *The Odyssey* by *Homer*), or Was Antonio really a necessary character? (From *Twelfth Night* by *Shakespeare*). This analysis was a natural extension from the analysis I subconsciously performed in eighth grade but never expressed into words. Just like in eighth grade, I fell in love with the stories we read in class and loved analyzing the plot to gain further insight into the story.

What? You egg? [he stabs him]. Tenth grade English class was, by far, the most (academically) challenging experience I have ever gone through. Analysis no longer lived in the plot but was extended to attempt to interpret a truth about the world, which I found positively depressing. This drastic difference from the analysis I had consciously and subconsciously performed for most of my life surfaced in my mind only when, in 75 minutes, I tried to write about a truth of war that could be learned from *All Quiet On The Western Front* by *Remarque*. What I wrote in those 75 minutes is best described as the combination of a dumpster fire and a train wreck. This was not an isolated event; every timed writing assessment (except for one) ended with me riding the bus home, feeling dejected and disappointed in myself. And as I rode the bus home, I reflected and realized that I (typically) enjoyed the text we read, I felt connected to the characters, the story was engaging, but I hadn’t conducted any analysis as I read the book. As the year passed, I found it difficult to simultaneously be invested in the story and conduct analysis, until I had become so frustrated with my performance that I considered a solution of severing any connection I had with an assigned novel and reading it purely for analysis. This, in no way, can be attributed to my teacher, she tried to help me, but I wasn’t ready to help myself.

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We continued to read novels, and as I picked up *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, I initially fell back into my old habits and fell into the plot - I recognized that while I may never empathize with Moira, I can sympathize with her feeling of being crushed and resigning herself to a fate in which she has even a small semblance of control. As the summative drew nearer, I lurched back to reality and laboured over crafting a thesis and arguments, which ultimately fell flat when I was asked to set my phone (which housed my collection of arguments in written form) aside in the middle of my presentation. At the end of the presentation, my teacher explained that nobody studying *The Handmaid's Tale* had brought up how women of higher classes systemically oppressed women of lower classes, which is one of the most common techniques oppressive governments use to maintain power. What I found most shocking was that the point she had just brought up was exactly what I wanted to communicate (and thought I had communicated) in my second argument, which meant that not only was I unable to deliver a coherent presentation, that I was unable to communicate the basic premises of my arguments. After working so hard and for so long to try and extract arguments from the text, realizing that I had failed in the most basic respect was more than demoralizing. Literary analysis felt like trying to divine a truth out of a story by dissecting it as if it hadn't played out in your thoughts, as if you didn't feel like you knew the characters even a little bit, as if you hadn't fought the struggle with the characters, as if you hadn't felt like the story had taught you something, even if it was as simple as remembering your past because you'll need it in the future, and as if you hadn't just spent a year recognizing that stories were an integral part of your identity. Tenth grade English was an uphill battle from start to finish that I felt like giving up over and over, and I still don't know why I got up each time and thought that if I really tried, something would be different.

Given that it's only the start of the semester, I have no way of knowing how my story of English will play out: I wish I did, but I don't. Reading once was an escape from my reality, the destination I could run to when I wanted to live a different life. However, while the stories had their own stories to tell about reality, searching for them, instead of letting them come to me after more reflecting, became a struggle. Now, I fear stories, not because I don't love them anymore, quite the opposite - I still very much love stories; I'm too afraid of convincing myself that the struggle to divine truth about our world is worth the effort, because I know I will convince myself, and I know I'll feel dejected, emotionally and mentally exhausted, and disappointed just as I felt in tenth grade when I continually fell on my face despite my best efforts.