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# Adults React When Students Write About Violence

Rita E. Paye

High school students will write about violent acts such as murder, rape or torture. When they do, it is in imitation of or in response to personal experience, a story or media exposure. One student may write Stephen King-ish stories of gruesome mutilation; another imitates Poe, while a third writes a poetic response to *Time* magazine stories of politically or religiously rationalized sadism. One student who wrote a particularly graphic piece did so to protest censorship of his own poetry. Such expression does not seem to be gender related.

When students do write about violence, language use concentrates on creation of shocking images and evocation of student-perceived ironies. Such responses are frequently criticized when published in junior high and high school. Criticisms include:

*"I just don't want to promote that sort of thing. They get enough ideas on their own." (a high school vice principal in charge of discipline)*

*"Kids are exposed to enough of this. Why can't you publish more uplifting things?" (a parent)*

In some schools, such criticisms lead to censorship. In many more, they lead to self-censorship by the teacher. When asked whether or not they would publish a particular piece with a violent theme, most educators respond with an "I" statement.

*"That's terrible. I don't want to be responsible for publishing such garbage." (a high school journalism teacher)*

*"I just don't select that sort of thing for inclusion." (a high school literary magazine sponsor)*

*"Even though it's well-written, it's too violent. This is more appropriate for the college level. I'd tell this student to wait and try to publish in college." (a high school literary magazine sponsor)*

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**"When students do write about violence, language use concentrates on creation of shocking images and evocation of student-perceived ironies."**

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School personnel are sometimes more concerned with their own image or the image of the school and its smooth operation than they are with individual student self-expression. They fear looking like they promote violence. This comes as no surprise when one remembers that historically censorship has primarily been exerted for political purposes, and schools are very much into being politically correct.

What about the needs of the individual writer? What are we teaching the ones responding to violence personally or vicariously experienced? Are we to publish personal writing only if it expresses an approved theme such as love and "not select" a negative theme such as hate? The issue is, of course, not so simple.

Hate will be published if it is hatred of Mondays but not of moms. Love is not OK if it is love of blood. If a student writes a piece, for instance, about SOSAD (Save Our Sons and Daughters, a Detroit-based anti-violence group) detailing the homicide of a teenager to attract readers to a theme opposed to violence, most teachers call that a good hook and publish it. This student clearly states, rather than implies, her main point, an acceptable one to authorities, so the piece is publishable. If a student writes an ironic piece about homicide using cats instead of humans, that too is generally acceptable. If a student merely describes a scene personally witnessed or just imagined, without comment or implied censure, it is not.

The issue of violence in student writing then clearly revolves around the word "gratuitous." If it does not moralize, it is "gratuitous." The objection to "gratuitous violence" makes a piece unpublishable to many as does the fear that a piece may "give them ideas." Law enforcement, like student code of conduct enforcement, concerns itself in part with "copy cat crimes." Generally, this objection is to a piece which details a particular type of murder, rape, or suicide. If the victim is innocent, the violence must clearly be unacceptable, and the writer is expected to clearly state this theme rather than suggest that violence is "sweet!" If the victim is not innocent, s/he deserves to die/be mutilated, but the mutilation cannot be expressed in full detail, much like sex in old movies. A graphic description is considered unnecessary and thus gratuitous. If the victim is innocent, but the reader can easily infer a lesson, then the violence is not gratuitous. The more important the teacher or principal feels the lesson to be, the more graphic the description allowed, much as photos of gruesome car accidents are posted in high school hallways to scare students away from drunk driving.

Adults often overlook the simple fact that acceptable to authorities often means acceptable to students, who are generally less rebellious than adults suspect. Teen editors are generally chosen for their sense and reflection of prevailing values. But students raised on TV violence or who experience violence in their homes and on their streets appear to be less concerned with the effects of fictional or written violent acts upon them as readers than are adults raised in a paternalistic world. Students often express the need to protect adults from the real world, the violent world they see every day. They do so by "cleaning up" their writing. They do not submit a piece they fear inappropriate. Many teachers say "good." But that is another idea denied expression by an older generation, like so many of the authors whose works we teach, unacceptable in their own time, now revered.

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Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" depicts society teaching violence as a tradition to their young. Some adults censor violence out of student writing in an attempt to counter such societal influence. When the ones writing about violence are not the perpetrators but the viewers and, in some cases, the victims, such censorship becomes a second form of violence. It causes even deeper wounds. Adults opposed to censorship's mental violence invariably recount stories of being censored in their formative years. Although most can explain why their statement was not accepted in that different time, whatever made the piece unacceptable then rarely still applies. Every year the standards change depending on the political situation, the adults involved, and the breadth of what has gone before.

My experience has taught me that it is not violence authorities abhor. If they did, we would not have war or inter-scholastic competition. Adults fear overthrow of their own traditions, many of which are *not* the traditions of their

parents but have taken on the weight of correctness. They fear that the young will find anarchic violence is as fun as roller coasting or haunted housing; will learn that the adrenaline rush which causes horror in one causes elation in another. Knowledge of this truth comes to every generation at the same time it learns to cherish life. How much better for authorities to accept the dichotomies of life and death and to accept well-written student reflection on either.

If a particular student seems prone to writing about violence, the teacher needs to seek out ways to channel the interest. It seems to me that some censors of pornography are obsessive and seek an excuse for reading titillating materials. This may be the case for some students. In any case, action may need to be taken. A student who is experiencing violence may need to be given books which suggest solutions or referred to Social Services' new Families First program.

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If no immediate physical threat of violence appears to exist for the student, a teacher needs to take a less literal view. Experience of fantasy may be experience of symbols; perhaps her father did not really lock the student writer in the attic. He just grounded her for months. He didn't really dismember her mother. He just chipped away at her self-confidence daily. She is not advocating violence, but using it as a symbolic expression of "the hideously evil face" of rage that SOSAD uses to teach peace and conflict resolution in the schools because she has not yet learned those lessons or coping skills, or finds them inappropriate to include in her written response to isolation. The student may intend to shock to discourage, much as history teachers show holocaust movies to shock students away from organized violence.

If teachers believe in catharsis they will encourage students to read and write about brutality to expunge their fears. Encouraging a student

to read a Stephen King novel is similar to encouraging a graphically violent poem. Stephen King says he writes about his own fears. Student writing of violence is as acceptable as the classroom use of "Time Magazine's" several pages of photos of starving Somalians. Certainly students find such photos and prose both nauseating and frustrating. The responsibility of the writing teacher is to accept a student's description of violence without moralizing. Discussion of the roots of violence and possible solutions is appropriate. Getting a student who has only seen the film to read *A Clockwork Orange* and discuss the role of the hippocampus in life is an achievement suitable for pride in a teacher.

Yet literary magazine sponsors and principals agree to "disallow" violent pieces. A murder mystery is allowed because it is already in the literary canon. Political torture, though not new, is a more recent and very disturbing subject of literature, from Kafka to Kozinski to *In The Time Of Silence*. The new threat, the frightening threat to authority is the suggestion that the tortured do not acquiesce only to save themselves but because they learn to love the torturer, or that murderers may never see themselves as wrong, let society do as it may. Such modern interpretations of the criminal mind are unfamiliar to many older readers and, in fact, go against the canon. Exposing the student to thoughtful collections such as "Granta" will be more nurturing to intellectual development than saying a piece is unacceptable, not because of poor writing, but because of its violent theme. When the student responds to an event, or seeks answers to its meaning without confronting disapproval of authorities for her seeking, she need not shut up, need not lose her voice like Ariel, the mermaid who wants above all a place in society.

Perhaps censorship of "gratuitous violence" is more than an attempt to be politically correct. It is a symptom of lag time between the creation of literature and its general acceptance as "truth" within a society. Most adults are not "up" on Y. A. novels; they often judge based on what they were reading at the same age. It may also be symptomatic of adults' literal reading of student work. The most powerfully written pieces are more apt to be

"disallowed" because they are more believable to the adult. Adults need to remember that the brain is fully mature at about the age of twelve. Thus, junior and senior high students are fully capable of irony and metaphor. On the other hand, adults need not read sex and violence into *everything* teens write.

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Five percent of my middle-class high school students claim to have seen violent acts such as knife fights, brutal beatings, and gunfights. They have seen violence not only go unpunished, but gain for the perpetrator great rewards. Authorities who reject violence as a societal truth do not accept the students' justification, "But, Teacher, that's just the way it is," and seek a more traditional expression of violence within the strictly controlled framework of a murder mystery, where the perpetrator always gets caught and punished. Piggy's death in *Lord Of The Flies* has been acceptable for student reading because Golding made it clearly unacceptable violence, but students today may see and write about violence as it occurs, more like the naturalists, without comment. Why should boys like Jack, who see violence as an option, be denied expression? When such a character can only be "the bad guy," the evil in all is denied. It is always within the teacher's power, if power must be an issue, to balance it with an

expression of the lesson authority desires. Adults need to keep in mind that, like scientific "truths," the definition of what is bad or undesirable changes from generation to generation.

The wise teacher and principal will speak to the student positively:

*"These images are exceptionally clear. Can you tell me why you chose these in particular?"*

*"When Toni Morrison [Oates, etc.] writes about this kind of thing, she..."*

*"This is a very insightful piece, but many readers might miss your point. Can you make your theme more explicit?"*

The rationale of inclusion needs to be clearly expressed to students, administration and community. Protecting some fictional person somewhere from some imagined harm must take a back seat when dealing with a real live student with a real need to write about violence.

If the student cannot find a way to address adult concerns, and his peers find the piece worthwhile, it should be accepted. For adults to deny publication of such writing is blind, as William Golding wrote of the World War II era, for "man produces evil as a bee produces honey." Art requires balance. It is invalid and irresponsible to represent only good without showing its corresponding evil. In *The Fable of the Bees* in 1714, Mandeville supposed that, without evil, society would be "spoiled if not totally dissolved." Student expression mirrors society.