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On Teaching the Story of the Angry White Man

by Sharon Murchie



Sharon Murchie

This article discusses my journey while teaching two pieces of the literary canon that focus on the experiences of angry White men traditionally framed as tragic heroes. I explore how new framing of Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman and The Crucible can provide rich, authentic experiences for all of our students, and can pave the way for thoughtful and reflective conversations as we examine our own core beliefs and values.

The Context

Two decades ago, as a brand new teacher, I eagerly opened the cabinet in my new-to-me classroom and surveyed the stacks of Perma-Bound® possibilities. But my “suggested list of literary texts” was a literal downer. Every single book I was supposed to teach was written by a dead White guy about a White guy who tragically died. From Jay Gatsby, Arthur Dimmesdale, Willy Loman, John Proctor, Captain Ahab, Macbeth, Jim Casey, and even Piggy and Finny, the message was clear—the ELA canon was very, very White and very, very sad.

Since then, I have actively brought diversity into the curriculum. We read short stories written by and about a rainbow of genders and ethnicities; I’ve added choice texts and critical media literacy, and one of the two full-length books that anchors my curriculum is by Ta-Nehisi Coates. But dead angry White men, Willy

Loman and John Proctor, are still alive and well in my curriculum. Why? Because reading literary fiction teaches empathy (Kidd, Ongis, & Castano, 2016; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). And Willy and John are imperfect human beings, struggling in an unjust world, trying to find redemption and honor. If we can teach our students to read these stories and find empathy for these unlikeable men, we can help them to see beyond their own struggles and begin to view others more thoughtfully.

At least, that was my stance.

Lately, as I watch the news and hear the ranting and experience firsthand the “big mad” of the White guy (Rademacher, 2019), no matter how disenfranchised or completely empowered they are (Krugman, 2018), I question if my students and I can stomach listening to Willy’s and John’s rants any longer.

The Questions

Are these the voices I want to honor? Are these the stories my students need to read? Do these characters still deserve empathy? Do these voices still deserve a platform?

I have always honored the stories of Willy Loman and

John Proctor. No matter how unlikeable—and perhaps unforgivable—these men are, I truly believe that if we cannot find empathy for them, we cannot begin to mitigate the factors in our society that created and nurtured these men. If we cannot unpack the tragedy of these ostracized and terribly flawed men, then how can we begin to unpack the tragedy of the American dream? And if we cannot unpack the tragedy of the American dream, how can I explain to my students what Ta-Nehisi Coates means when he talks about “those Americans who believe that they are White” and what being a “dreamer” really means in his context?

I also believe that, as English teachers, it is up to us to challenge our students to critically investigate not only literature, but also the status quo; it is up to us to work for educational and social justice (Baker-Bell, Stanbrough, & Everett, 2017; Morrell, 2005). It’s our “social responsibility” to “connect our work to the movements for social change and transformation” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 295).

[I]t is critical for educators to lead the charge to both understand that these inequalities exist and to create strategies and actions to interrupt them. English and literacy educators are in a unique position to interrupt the violence, pedagogical injustices, and misrepresentations...The tools we have at our disposal (writing, visual arts, spoken word, and other modalities more readily accepted in English and literacy classrooms) provide an outlet to discuss, critique, and dismantle this violence. (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 294)

And yet...in the age of #metoo and #dontshoot, do I want to give space to the tragedy of the angry White man? Do I still value building empathy for him, when he seemingly only wants to step on the backs of others and not hold the door open?

After some deep soul-searching and hard conversations in my online professional learning communities and with former students on social media, I decided that this year might be the last year that Willy and John get a voice in my room. But for one more year, I

would teach these texts, and this time I would ask hard questions not only of the texts, but of my students, and of myself. To echo Sealey-Ruiz, I would treat this as an opportunity for “possibility and disruption—a space to begin to ask these questions and respond” (2016, p. 295). My questions began with “to what extent,” in order to avoid pro/con thinking and promote nuance (Brockman, 2016). To what extent are Willy and John worthy of sympathy? To what extent are they worthy of empathy? To what extent are they worthy of redemption? To what extent are these texts relevant today?

The Framing

I asked my juniors: What is literature? Why do we read it?

Their answers were both typical and thoughtful:

- Literature is boring stuff we have to read in English class.
- We read it to learn from history, so that we don’t make the same mistakes.
- We read the stories of others to understand viewpoints we wouldn’t otherwise hear or see.
- We read literature so that we can see ourselves in their stories.

These responses are reasons why I value the stories of Willy and John: their stories are stories that feel very familiar; yet we might not hear and see *all* the truths of men like them, at least not in such transparent ways, because of the limitations of our social circles and the filter bubbles skewing the news to our own particular political truths.

I also asked my AP seniors, who had completed this unit the previous year, if they felt that *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* were important texts to read, and to what extent. They said that Willy Loman irritated them, much more so than John Proctor. They felt that John was more noble (and hotter). And yet they noticed that we didn’t see John’s character in the story as much as Willy’s, and that John’s nobility was seemingly unquestioned by the author—and the audience. We tend to forgive John his “indiscretion” because

he was on the right side of history in the end. My AP seniors said that the American dream has changed, but using the plays as a lens through which to discuss the evolution of the dream is important. They said that they hated Willy. But they seemed to value his lens as a way through which to view our lives today, or at least as a comparison to our lives today.

Armed with this food for thought and the “to what extent” question stem, I began showing the 1985 film version of *Death of a Salesman* in class, pausing from time to time for critical reading of specific passages. Because both of these texts are plays, to paraphrase Sir Ian McKellen, I believe they “should be seen, not read.” Daily lessons during this unit are roughly structured with a connected writing-to-learn activity (5 minutes), watching the film with selected stoppages for critical reading and whole-class discussion (40 minutes), and an exit ticket (5 minutes). My exit ticket after the second class period of watching and discussing the play was this: “To what extent is this family’s story relevant or important today?” Surprisingly to me, not a single student said that it wasn’t relevant. They said:

- “There still are issues with men today that haven’t been fixed... ‘toxic masculinity.’”
- “I think it still deals with children struggling to have good relationships with their parents.”
- “...family is family [you] don’t get to pick and choose, that’s all you’ll have at the end of the day sometimes.”
- “It helps us understand that the economy is killing the people. From raising prices to cutting salaries, how is someone to survive?”
- “This family struggles with the mental health of a parent, their perception of the American dream, and the importance of loyalty.”
- “Because it’s like a normal family...they fight a lot and don’t have the perfect life they dream of...most people don’t.”
- “Willy’s really mean toward Linda, but she still defends him and loves him unconditionally. It’s relevant because she deals w/ his illness and knows to be patient with him.”

Framing it with “to what extent is this family’s story relevant or important today?” changed the conversation with students throughout this unit. In the past, when I’ve focused primarily on the American dream and Willy’s inability to obtain it, many students have just called him “old and crazy” and written him off. This year, they were much more engaged, as if my giving them the permission to deem the play not relevant increased their buy-in.

On a subsequent day, I asked students to think about race. The problems faced by Willy and John and their families are not the same as the problems facing minorities in our country, then or now. Had Biff been Black, his perpetual stealing would have landed him in prison if not worse, rather than just a short stint in jail. Had the Lomans been Black, homeownership was unlikely because of redlining policies across the nation. And the generational poverty and systemic racism affecting people of color in the United States has resulted in a staggering wealth gap: according to *The New York Times*, “Black families in America earn just \$57.30 for every \$100 in income earned by White families...For every \$100 in White family wealth, Black families hold just \$5.04” (Badger, 2017, para. 2). We can’t blindly teach the struggles of the White man chasing the American dream and watching his possessions deteriorate if we don’t acknowledge that these struggles are uniquely White, or as Coates would say, designed by and for the people “who believe themselves to be White.” The journal prompt I posted for students was: “Would the Loman family’s story be different if they were Black? Or Latinx? Or Asian? Or Native American? Or any other race? In 1949 AND 2018?” Student responses ranged from generalizations about “back then versus now” to specific discussions about the different struggles for different people in our country. Acknowledging that Willy and the entire cast of *Death of a Salesman* are White was an important step that I hadn’t taken before, and one that absolutely has to occur if honest conversations about varying opportunities and obstacles to the American dream are going to take place.

We also talked about abuse. Willy Loman is abusive to Linda. Students have always been quick to note that

Willy Loman is dismissive and rude; but this year, even if we could set aside his infidelity, we couldn't excuse his verbal abuse, when, at the end of Act I, he either interrupts her—ironically yelling “stop interrupting!”—or talks over her for daring to offer her opinion no fewer than nine times. And this year, when watching the Dustin Hoffman portrayal of this scene, we stopped and discussed the moment when Willy smacks something while he is sitting next to Linda on the bed; discussion erupted over whether he had slapped the bed, his own thigh, or his wife in that moment. Regardless, all three were deemed by students as out of control and unacceptable.

Likewise, launching into the 1996 film adaptation of *The Crucible* with this lens of the way the protagonist treated women provided a forum for a discussion on toxic masculinity that hadn't been there in previous years.

In the past, students have seemingly overlooked John Proctor's similar behaviors. He is, after all, more likeable than Willy Loman. John is not “crazy” and raging about cheese. He is more physically attractive in every film portrayal. His heartfelt pleas at the end pull at our heartstrings. But this year, although students still liked John better as a human being, they recognized his problematic and abusive behavior. They audibly gasped when he forcefully grabbed Abigail in a scene. They gave him the side-eye when he lectured his wife in Act II, “No more! I should have roared you down when first you told me your suspicion. But I wilted, and, like a Christian, I confessed. Confessed!” (Miller, 1976b, p. 52), as if he was somehow noble by confessing his adultery.

Not only is John verbally cruel to his wife, but his relationship with Abigail borders on pedophilia and is an abuse of power. In actual Salem history, Proctor was 60 and Abigail was 11; although there is no historical evidence of an affair, Arthur Miller believed that it occurred (Brooks, 2011). In Miller's retelling, the age difference is not so drastic; however, she is still only 17, was Proctor's employee, and is the clear leader of the town's girls. How much older than a “girl” is she

herself? She is younger than Monica Lewinsky, who was only 22 when she interned for President Bill Clinton (Bahou, 2018), and Williams is often blamed, much like Lewinsky was, for “seducing” the older man in a time of loneliness. The *CliffsNotes* character analysis online currently states, Williams “took advantage of a man's loneliness and insecurity during his wife's illness,” (Scheidt & Calandra, n.d., n.p.), clearly placing the blame of the affair on the girl, and not on the adult man in power. Is Proctor's behavior any different from the men who are easy to despise and reject, like R. Kelly, Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, and Kevin Spacey? Or does he fall into the category of men whose behavior we want to explain away, like Johnny Depp, Michael Jackson, and Dustin Hoffman? Do we gloss over Proctor's behavior like we've glossed over the questionable behavior of beloved artists and thinkers like Paul Walker, Woody Allen, Morgan Freeman, Elvis, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Sherman Alexie, or the hundreds of other men who have used their status and power to berate, harass, and assault those with less status and power? Do we give John Proctor a pass because he sought redemption and because the morality of his sacrifice outweighs the weight of his crimes? These rich conversations, sparked by students' reactions to the very fallible and very human John Proctor, allowed students to explore their own conflicting emotions as they are bombarded almost daily with revelations of abuse from their own idols—and in their own lives.

To what extent are Willy Loman and John Proctor deserving of empathy? Sympathy? Redemption?

At the end of the unit, we circled back to these framing questions with writing activities. Student responses were varied, thoughtful, and overwhelmingly endorsed the teaching of these specific texts and of this specific unit. Students noted that discussion of Willy's struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts could help students open up who might face similar struggles. They wrote about the themes present in the texts relating to wealth and power. They wrote about the disconnect between the courts, our government, and the church and the people they are meant to serve. They

wrote about how power corrupts. They wrote about our current political atmosphere. They mentioned the core beliefs and values in American society today. They wrote about capitalism. They wrote about love and loyalty and infidelity and our expectations of marriage. They wrote about pride and arrogance, regardless of social class. Most importantly? They wrote. They connected.

Going Forward:

Will I teach *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* next year? I honestly don't know...and that's okay. After all, "as educators, we must understand that we will not always have the answers" (Baker-Bell, Stanbrough, & Everett, 2017, p. 148). I think part of choosing the right texts at the right time involves understanding who our students and communities are, and that changes from year to year. For my students this year, these were the right texts. They needed to hear the angry White men. They needed to be made uncomfortable, and they needed to wrestle with the idea that human beings are complicated, fallible, and worthy of empathy. And I needed to wrestle with these ideas with my students and "become comfortable with being uncomfortable and vulnerable when engaging in conversations about racial injustice" (Baker-Bell et al., 2017, p. 148), as well as social and economic inequities and abuses. My students needed to see that all of us can and should work for redemption, but that there are so many other alternatives out there for ways to live our lives. They needed to look into the mirror and question the behaviors of their own heroes that they choose to accept or defend.

According to Morrell (2005),

A critical English education is explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations. It also seeks to develop in young women and men skills to deconstruct dominant texts carefully (i.e., canonical literature, media texts) while also instructing them in skills that allow them to create their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice. Further, critical English education encourages practitioners to draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices

of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation. (p. 313)

Instead of offering Willy and John up as tragic heroes, this year I offered them up simply as men, struggling in the world, like all of us. And yet, their struggles as angry White men are not necessarily our own struggles, and recognizing the limits of our tragic heroes is as important as recognizing their tragedies.

As we look to our national stage and gaze at the angry White men ranting and gasping and shaking their fists, we have the power to accept and reject as our conscience dictates. But we also have the power to build empathy within ourselves and our own circles. We have the power to choose to listen not only to the angry men, but also to those standing downwind. We still have a lot to learn from the angry White men about who and how we are—about what we will accept, excuse, and forgive—and about who and how we want to be.

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