

CONFLICT

The things that connect us should be more interesting than those that divide.



ROBERT

OUR GRADE 10

English teacher claimed that all literature is about conflict – within the person, among people, or between humans and nature.

She then assigned us

to put each of our readings into one or more of the three conflict boxes.

We ought to have rebelled. We ought to have said it was nuts to reduce all of literature, and by extension all of life, to various kinds of conflict. But that did not occur to us.

We had all been brought up in a world defined as theatres of conflict: the free world versus the commies, righteousness versus sin, modern progress versus primitive misery, order versus chaos, us versus them, the Leafs versus the Habs. Most news stories were framed as one side against another. Science was the conquest of nature. Economics, sports, international relations, law and politics were more or less fierce competitions if not open warfare.

Besides, grade 10 was not a hotbed of critical thinking. Mostly it was a hotbed of hormones and insecurities. We were all far too consumed with winning peer acceptance and hoping for mutually enthusiastic carnal experience to notice that our main aspirations were focused on the opposites of conflict. We did not see that our own lives and fantasies contradicted how our English class and surrounding culture were framing the world.

Not much changed after grade 10 English. Conflict continued to be reported as the main story, though the old Cold War contestants were now joined by various clubs of old white guys facing the rising forces of colonial

liberation, civil rights, gender equity, transparent government, pollution control and rock and roll.

As before, our lives were only sometimes consumed by conflict. We slouched into adulthood with our uneven allotments of contest and struggle, sharing, experimenting, messing up, imagining, coupling, laughing, crying, goofing around and dabbling in the non-medical use of mind-altering substances.

Although our literature and movies

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often featured battles with the KGB, giant sharks and the undead, we also had Jack Kerouac, Jorge Luis Borges and Monty Python. We had birth control technologies and Woodstock. We read, saw and experienced life that for all its puzzlements and tragedies was far richer and more complex than any simple conflict narrative could capture.

Nevertheless, all that richness and complexity remains on the margins in a world that still favours the grade 10 English theme. The stories that get most attention today in literature, the news and in public discussion still feature the drama of conflicts – competing ideologies, interests and institutions; battles for political power and economic advantage; clashes of cultures; struggles for wealth and influence; and fights over technological superiority, jobs, markets and positions.

The effect is crippling. When conflict is the main frame for stories, it easily becomes the main frame for observation and explanation. We see

the conflicts and we miss or marginalize less dramatic developments and options that may serve us better.

We notice the wars and neglect the foundations for peace. We report dramatic cures but not anticipatory prevention, big individual disasters but not broader declines, criminal acts but not law-abiding cultures, noisy confrontations but not quiet collaborations or lasting agreements. We take sides in jobs versus the environment and miss opportunities

for serving both. We notice the basic winning and losing but overlook the more intricate world of ties and interactions.

The old English assignment merits an overdue rejection. Conflict is not the defining characteristic of life and literature. Nor are desire, fate, uncertainty, love, loss, power or any other single candidates. A limited focus on any one degrades the others.

Our new task is to recover the mix of other-than-conflict themes. We could start with the classics of literature – even the great conflict stories such as *Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad*, *Beowulf*, *Macbeth*, *The Origin of Species*, and *Green Eggs and Ham* – and see how much else is there. Or we can start with the daily news.

Either way, the results should prepare us a little better for grade 11. **AV**

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