

ENG1D: Culminating Activity

A parent, on hearing that Mr. Jones has been showing the Michael Hoffman version of A Midsummer Night's Dream, sent the following letter along to the superintendent of schools for our family of schools.

New Concerned Parents Cooperative Committee
101 Anywhere Dr.
Toronto, ON
M1N 1N1

Saturday, January 09, 2010

Johanne Messner
Superintendent of Schools
Toronto District School Board, NE6 Region
5050 Yonge Street
Toronto, Ontario
M2N 5N8

Dear Superintendent Messner

It has come to my attention that the teacher of my son's Grade Nine English Class has been showing a video version of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in support of his discussion of Shakespeare's play. I have watched this particular version of the play (directed by Michael Hoffman) and find it offensive. The film does follow Shakespeare's play in general but this version is really just another example of Hollywood's attempt at making money using the same old tawdry tricks, which, in this case, involves taking a relatively innocent play and the beauty of Shakespearian language, and replacing them with a lot of nudity and implied sex delivered by Hollywood "stars" most of whom couldn't deliver two lines of iambic pentameter adequately if their Hollywood careers depended on it. The "fairy world" portion of the play opens, in this version, with the depiction of a wild party (there are no stage directions pointing to such an event in the play) complete with an assortment of bit players in various states of undress, and involved in a variety of clearly sexual activities. Act 2 scene 2 of the original play, a scene which, involved an exchange in which the character Hermia reminds Lysander that they are not yet married and that he should not sleep near her, turns into a sexually charged event with Hermia in her underclothes, an entirely naked Lysander groping at her breast, and a lot of suggestive and clearly sexual interaction occurring before Lysander is eventually told to move off and cool down. As Queen Titania becomes smitten with Bottom, the sexual overtones, both implied and visually explicit, are significant enough that it is eventually implied that Bottom is sexually aroused (again not in the original). We soon see full frontal shots of nymphs swimming and Titania and Bottom, physically involved in a way that is most assuredly not included in the stage directions. Finally, in the scene where Theseus finds Hermia, Lysander, Helena and Demetrius lying in the grass, all four are naked. The ensuing discussion takes place using the usual assortment of shots that have the characters hiding enough body parts to allow the movie to be pretty

much totally sexually loaded, while at the same time conforming to what, in Hollywood, passes for community standards.

But what about community standards? More specifically where are they in my son's school? And what do they include? It is the likes of this version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, along with the continuous onslaught of television shows, print advertisements, and Internet media serving up stories and sell "product" using explicit sexual behavior, that has some young women believing that they are not a meaningful person unless they attend school wearing as little as possible, and in a way intended to make them overtly and primarily sexual beings. It is this same overt and continued focus on sexuality that keeps young men totally distracted, which is to say not paying attention to the learning that is supposed to be going on in the classroom. And all of this by the age of fourteen? Kids in Grade Nine!

Superintendent Messner, as the Chairperson of The New Concerned Parents Cooperative Committee, I am herewith registering a complaint against the use of this movie and also against my son's teacher, his department head, the principal of his school, as well as you and the Toronto Board of Education. My organization intends to use this particular situation as a test case. Toward this end I would like to know:

1. What policies the Board has in place to protect my son from the continued use of overt sexuality within both paper and digitally based texts used within the classroom?
2. Who monitors these policies and what the process of monitoring includes?
3. What is being done, and what will be done to make sure that this sexual agenda is not dragged into our classrooms using another medium, i.e. the very clothes that students wear or do not wear, a medium which itself constitute another kind of advertising?

Our committee thinks it imperative that this set of questions be answered, and that a comprehensive set of policies and practices be put in place in order to address this problem so that our children can get on with learning instead of being inundated with narratives selling sex. We are not saying that sexuality should be swept under the carpet: there should be times and a place for this part of our children's lives. But the classroom shouldn't be that place. In the classroom students should focus on learning about other aspects of the world we live in. It is time that clear policies and practices be put in place to make sure that this occurs.

And the NCPCC is prepared to take whatever measures are required to make sure that a clear set of policies and practices are put in place. Our organization has recently received a significant endowment from several individuals and organizations that are concerned about the state of the classroom in Ontario today. We will have no problem using this money to take you, your teachers and school administrators to court for the dereliction of duty if needs be. So again: what are you doing, and what are you going to do to make sure that our students can get on with their education instead of watching the likes of Michael Hoffman's movie?

Yours Respectfully

Sandra Peck

Chairperson: The New Concerned Parents Cooperative Committee

On receiving this letter the superintendent promptly forwarded it to the appropriate authorities within the school board. Those authorities, being concerned about the content being addressed in this letter, and about the possibility of legal action, have decided that, although there is a policy in place, the policy should really be revisited, and so have decided to complete a review of this policy. As part of this review they have asked for submissions, from interested groups, into the whole question of sexuality in the media, and what appropriate classroom standards should include. And the members of the classes involved in the particular incident mentioned in Ms. Peck's letter (the students who watched the movie in class), have been asked to participate in this review process as well. More specifically, as a class we have been asked to provide two items:

1. A short essay which responds to one of the three question sets listed below. Your essay should conclude with specific recommendations as to what should be done and by whom, in the case of the question you are answering. In your essay you have been asked to refer specifically to Michael Hoffman's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an example, and to the concerns raised by Sandra Peck in her letter. You may, of course, also refer to any other texts (movies, books, magazines, advertisements etc) that will help you present your argument.
2. A short (maximum five minute) presentation in which you deliver your findings. Your presentation should include slides to show the media texts students see in their day to day lives. During your presentation you should explain how these texts affect students, and then what is appropriate in the classroom. Again conclude by explaining what should be done and how monitoring should take place.

Here are the questions to be answered. You will only respond to one of these sets of questions. No more than eleven individuals may respond to any one of these sets. We will use a lottery system to deal with any problems here.

1. *To what extent do media texts influence the way that students act at school, and, in particular the way that they dress? What limits should be set on the depiction of dress (and/or undress) in media texts used in high school classrooms and how should this be monitored, and controlled?*
2. *To what extent does the depiction of sexual behavior in the media affect the way that students act? What limits should be set on the depiction of sexual behavior in media texts that are used in high school classrooms, why should these particular limits be set and how should they be controlled or monitored?*
3. *Should different types of material be available to different groups of students on the basis of age? For instance should material that includes explicit sexual content be limited to groups of students of different ages? What limits should be set, and how should this be monitored and controlled?*

Rubric: Letters and Essays

Knowledge and Understanding/Thinking				
Responds to Question	Some attempt at responding to question but relationship between material presented and argument is not clear.	Discussion may stray from topic. Focus lost once or twice	Student is responding to topic but relationship of one or two ideas to topic may not be clear	Student clearly responds to question in a focused, organized manner.
Can describe the relationship between ideas being discussed	Limited understanding of relationships developed in class	Can describe relationship but may have a significant component missing	Can illustrate relationship with effective examples	Subtle understanding of relationship demonstrated using effective examples.
Communication/Application				
Inclusion of Examples Drawn From Text	Examples are present but may not be related to question being answered	Examples are present but connection to question is not entirely clear or some weaknesses evident	Examples are present and help answer question	Examples are present and fully support answer to question
Explanation of Examples	Some explanation present but not clearly linked to overall thesis	Explanation present but may contain gaps	Explanation shows relationship between examples and idea being explained	Thorough explanation of relation between examples and idea being discussed
Use of Ordering Strategies	Some order present but limited connections evident between elements of argument	Occasional but significant breaks in argument evident	Minor breaks in argument evident	Transparent: Argument is clearly developed and easy to follow
Thesis Development	Ideas are present but lack a focus	Thesis is evident but not developed entirely clearly	Thesis is present, and developed clearly	Thesis is present, addresses subtle points in a clear, well-organized manner.

Presentation Rubric

Assessment of (<i>Group Member Names</i>):

By:

Evaluator's Name:

Content:

<input type="checkbox"/> A clear, useful introduction	<input type="checkbox"/> An ordering strategy that helps listeners understand the material being presented	<input type="checkbox"/> Explanations of examples that help illustrate the points being made	<input type="checkbox"/> A useful conclusion that expands on the ideas presented , while improving the audience's understanding of the material discussed
---	--	--	---

Problems/Suggestions for Improvement:

Delivery

<input type="checkbox"/> Not reading <input type="checkbox"/> Eye contact with audience	<input type="checkbox"/> Limited "verbal twitches" ("ummm," "like" etc) <input type="checkbox"/> Positive body language	<input type="checkbox"/> Presented at reasonable speed	<input type="checkbox"/> Could be heard <input type="checkbox"/> Use of inflection
--	--	--	---

Problems/Suggestions for Improvement:

Mark (Level):