

# *A Work of Non-Literary Merit*

By Julia Barry

Hampshire High School, Hampshire County

2<sup>nd</sup> Place (Grades 11-12)

Honorable Mention Recipient

2009 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship

Through the insistent efforts of my English teachers, it has come to my attention that some writings possess “literary merit.” I am not sure of the exact definition of “literary merit,” but by reading—against my will—so called examples of this mysterious quality, I have formulated a hypothesis as to what it actually is. My grand theory is that “literary merit” is a feature of certain pieces of “great” literature that make reading them an endurance test of mental pain thresholds.

Prior to discussing the content of books of literary merit, I must say that they offend me before I even consider their substance with how they look, the way they sound when opened, and their incomprehensible syntax. First, most prints of these books have strangely unattractive covers. Be it the squash and pumpkin color blend surrounding bristly, ugly little pig heads on *Animal Farm*, or the violent red providing a backdrop for an unsettling German Expressionist painting on *The Metamorphosis*, these covers are like glossy poison dart frogs warning you away from imminent pain and death. When these books are opened, their rigid spines crackle restlessly, as if reluctant to expose their pages’ contents to criticism. The pages themselves shuffle stiffly, their edges brownish yellow and rippled. Whether this is caused by age and disuse, or toilet water from unsuccessful attempts to flush them, I don’t hazard a guess. After the complete sensory displeasure that these books cause, you’d think that English teachers wouldn’t go so far as to make us read them, but they do. Here is where the suffering truly begins. The reader must fight through pages of paragraph-long sentences written in the dialect of centuries

past. Occasionally, pages fused together by the drool of a previous victim, or possibly toilet water, must be forced apart. By the end of this maddening effort to find the end of a sentence and separate stubbornly stuck pages, the reader is traumatized. In fact I feel that studying works of literary merit in English classes may be responsible for the “emo” movement of the twenty-first century.

For those of you not familiar with the term “emo,” it is used to define a sector of today’s youth. Emo kids favor black clothing, facial piercings, and strangely colored hair. They often sit in the dark corners of the cafeteria listening to loud music involving a lot of screaming. I used to think that emo individuals were just sensitive types trying to express their feelings. Now I suspect they’re reacting to being forced to read works of literary merit and have found that painful piercings of their body parts help distract them from the more painful act of reading a work like *Macbeth*. I do believe that these people have the right idea for dealing with post-literary merit distress. I have resolved to join them in their corners and stick a safety pin through my eyebrow. There’s really no other recourse after reading this literature.

The frightening thing is that it’s not just high schoolers being traumatized to the point of needing Prozac. Small children are also exposed to literary merit. Who doesn’t remember the tale of *Black Beauty*? This book tries to teach lessons in kindness through multiple painful deaths and horrendous animal cruelty. After being forced to read this I couldn’t look at a black horse for several years without crying. In middle school, youngsters are treated to the tortured orphans of *Oliver Twist*. The children in the story are bullied and abused and one character ends up strangled. “Please sir,” I’d like some more psychotherapy and antidepressants.

As we students age, the death toll in books of literary merit increases. Witness *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s much admired work which is taught in many high school classes. In five acts,

employing a horrific mix of swords and poison, Shakespeare adroitly kills off the entire royal family of Denmark. In yet another of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, the separated and desperate lovers must watch their feuding families try to kill each other. Not surprisingly, numerous characters in this tragedy, including young Romeo and Juliet, are murdered or commit suicide. *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* it isn't!

Now let's consider Orwell's cheery little novella *Animal Farm*. The pigs found in these pages are unlike the sweet Wilbur of *Charlotte's Web*. No, these are power-hungry, murdering porkers. They enslave their fellow animals, and just when I had gotten over *Black Beauty*, they send the poor old workhorse, Boxer, to the glue factory to be made into some quality Elmer's.

Literary merit must also be acknowledged in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. While I could tell you that lots of people die gruesomely, and the entire reading experience is akin to simultaneously getting a root canal and passing a kidney stone, I feel that enough conclusions about content can be drawn from its title.

A lesser known work of literary merit is Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." This tale examines the wretched life of Gregor Samsa. One morning after years of slaving to support his ungrateful family, Gregor awakens to find that he has transformed into a giant, roach-like insect. That's rock bottom, right? No, that comes at the end of the story when Gregor dies from the combined effects of starvation and an infected wound inflicted by Gregor's own father.

Why do English teachers make us read these dark, depressing works of literary merit? I've just had an epiphany: perhaps English teachers don't make students read works of literary merit to torture them. Maybe they make us read them to help us realize how much bloody worse our lives could be. No matter how bad my life gets, my and my boyfriend's families aren't engaged in a fatal feud (yet), the only pigs in my home will be the bacon on my breakfast plate,

and—on any given morning—I won't wake up as a colossal cockroach. Hold the Prozac and the safety pin—I'm feeling better already!