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Reflecting on Functioning in Trigger Happy America

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ABSTRACT
Trigger warnings are posing serious threats to the ways that English educators can teach at the university level. If Aristotle – and Hillis-Miller years later – argue that literature must arouse and bring about catharsis, then proponents of trigger warnings are anaesthetising the power of words and watering down their ability to incite emotional responses and promote healing. By examining the relationship between proponents of the trigger warning and reflective functioning – a psychoanalytic concept that emerged out of the British psychoanalytic school – this article argues that English students and English educators who support the use of trigger warnings may suffer from poor reflective functioning. Individuals with poor reflective functioning have difficulty coping with their emotions as well as practising mentalisation during times of acute stress, which can be triggered in response to arousing interactions with texts. Finally, the article offers some suggestions for how English educators might use empathy, intentional self-disclosure and vulnerability as a means for enhancing reflective functioning in students and encouraging them to journey more freely and courageously into controversial, charged, and dramatic literary moments.

KEYWORDS
Trigger warnings; reflective functioning; trauma; aesthetic experience; violence; defence mechanisms; adaptive mental mechanisms; self-disclosure

Act 1: Silence

Silence is beautiful, if it's chosen.

Tom

I try to imagine a world where he doesn't hit her. Thirty miles from East Egg, Tom's party is in full swing on the top floor of his Morningside Heights' apartment. Mr McKee. Side cars. Copies of Town Tattle lie around like unconsumed pretzels. A painting of Mrs Wilson's mother hangs from above, staring down in ghostly observation of the squalid soiree.

As Myrtle storms out from Tom's bedroom screaming 'Daisy! Daisy! Daisy... I'll say it whenever I want to! Daisy! Dai – ', my mind suddenly inserts itself into the scene, and, because I'd prefer it otherwise, forces Tom to suppress his urge to break her nose. My imagination rescripts the brutal inevitability of the moment. Tom checks his rage. In this mental recreation, Tom empathises with Myrtle and pities the ashen indistinctness that not even Doctor T.J. Eckleberg and his overseeing eyes can salvage.
In my imaginary re-representation of the scene, Tom sees her for a moment as more than simply an object of sexual lust. He intuits her desire to be more than the forsaken wife of a gas station attendant. And so, rather than breaking her nose with an open palm, he attunes himself to the subtext. Tom is human and humane, decent, thoughtful, and perhaps even progressive. He realises that, despite their differences, Myrtle is a human being, too, and that human beings are complex. His eyes widen. He's learning….

There's only one problem with my re-creation. If Tom doesn't strike her, then he isn't Tom. In my re-imagined version of Fitzgerald's novel (Fitzgerald 2013), Tom doesn't exist. And what if he doesn't exist? If Tom's authoritative, arrogant, shiny-eyed, dictatorial nature vanishes, then Daisy isn't trapped in a self-psychological divide between her need for a fascist gaoler, and her whimsical wish for a romantic hero capable of freeing her. And if Daisy is not trapped within the grips of a fascist, then Gatsby has nobody to rescue. Gatsby, whose asymptotic spirit depends upon memories of a woman who is always just beyond his reach, never purchases the mansion, never stares at the green light, never gazes across the bay for his debutante ingénue.

Without the green light, there's no Gatsby. If there's no Gatsby, then whose parties does Nick attend during those steaming, Long Island summer nights? Without Gatsby, Nick doesn't have a story to tell, Francis Scott Fitzgerald doesn't have a novel to write, and the American literary canon is deprived of one of its most important contributions. If that happens, we are all the worse off. We drown with Ophelia in a pool of tears.

Writers: Their Worlds and Purposes

Writers weave intricate and interconnected narratives. All parts matter. Allen Savage, a renowned Broadway coach living in New York City, states that ‘generality is the enemy of art’ (A. Savage, personal communication, 11 October 2010). Seen through this lens, all decisions that a writer makes – and especially his most dramatic and incendiary ones – are chosen not haphazardly, but with a direct, embedded ligamental tie-in to every other action and reaction contained within the womb of an author’s narrative intent.

Just as Tom’s violent, open-palmed strike of Myrtle’s nose demonstrates a character trait that makes Tom… well… Tom… any well-delineated literary character maintains actions and follows patterns that serve to define, encapsulate, and represent them for the reader. Dustin Thomason (The Rule of Four, Twelve Twenty One) once referred to these as the ‘quotidian details’ (D. Thomas, personal communication, 17 March 2013) that give characters flesh, blood, and guts. Hamlet must overthink. If he does not overthink, and he determines to kill Claudius within the first two acts, then he isn’t Hamlet. Lady Macbeth must compel her husband to murder Duncan. If she doesn’t ask the universe to unsex her, so that she can assume the phallic power that her husband lacks, then she isn’t Lady Macbeth. If Oedipus doesn’t gouge out his eyes, if Ophelia doesn’t commit suicide, if Willy Loman doesn’t need to be liked, and if Stanley doesn’t tell Blanche that they’ve ‘had this date with each other from the beginning’ (Williams 1951, 162), then each of these characters gets stripped of the essential identifying traits that most define them (Shakespeare 1968; Shakespeare and Braunmuller 1997; Sophocles and Dawe 1996).

The better the author, the more mastery he or she has over his or her integration of the quotidian details that refine and delineate the rules of the game. Dante the writer was absolutely exacting about the nine circles he created for Dante the sojourner (Alighieri and Ciardi 2001). He was excruciatingly deliberate about when and how his protagonist entered them, and surgical about who he met along the way, how he met them, what they talked about,
and what lessons were learned in the process. As readers then, do we have the right to take things out from stories, omit details or moments that seem too volatile and too threatening? Isn’t a book a world unto itself? If we change the way the butterfly flaps its wings, doesn’t the cosmos crumble?

Enter: The Dragon

In recent years, a dragon has entered stage left into the liberal, seemingly student-centred landscape of many of America’s elite universities. It’s not clear who wrote him into the script, or how exactly he was cast for the show, but this reptilian force guised as protection for our students’ psychology has created powerful ripples that are, at the very least, modifying or shifting the way that instructors of literature can go about their business in the classroom.

I am talking, of course, about the trigger warning (TW), an ostensibly protective mechanism that proposes to safeguard students with traumatic pasts from the slings and arrows of potential engagement with dramatic literary content, such as violence, sexual abuse and perversions of power (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). More recently, trigger warnings have been used to safeguard minority identities, forecasting content related to race relations, gender and even American politics:

Whatever their original purpose may have been, trigger warnings are now used to mark discussions of racism, sexism, and U.S. imperialism. The logic of this more expansive use is straightforward: Any threat to one’s core identity, especially if that identity is marginalized, is a potential trigger that creates an unsafe space. (Levinovitz 2016)

In a 2016 interview with NPR, Hassan Jeffries, an associate professor of history at Ohio State, conveyed what he relays to his students at the beginning of each course: ‘This is hard history. It’s hard to talk about, hard to absorb. It’s filled with trauma, sexual violence, racial violence, visual images of murder and chaos. You may walk into my classroom and see an image of a lynching that was put on a postcard. This is America’ (Kamenetz 2016).

In some ways, the warnings seem to represent noble attempts at ensuring classroom safety, augmenting engagement and providing more comfort and security for psychologically fragile students and marginalised voices. And, in certain contexts, they clearly have merit. But the impact that TWs – and educational cultures that promote them – may be having on literature classrooms is far more complex, nuanced and problematic than many seem to realise. Literature, although it may contain elements of history and reality, is neither history nor reality. And although Shakespeare instructs us that great art is meant to hold the ‘mirror up to nature’ (Shakespeare 1603, 3.2.22), we must know that forecasting scenes of sexual violence, racial discrimination and power imbalance in a government class is not the same as a trigger warning for them when it comes to teaching literature.

Unlike history, governance or politics, literature is aimed directly at capturing the imagination and delving into an illusionary interplay with conflict and the taboo (Hillis Miller 2002). Since literature relies on this artistic interlay with itself, conscientious attempts at enhancing safety and security while reading texts may be causing unintended negative consequences that dumb-down, interfere with, modify, or even nullify the full-bodied, aesthetic engagement individuals can have with words and narrative. As analogised by the Tom strikes Myrtle narrative metaphor recounted above, the trigger warning, which permits students to disengage with, avoid or shy away from significantly dramatic, controversial
moments of the text, is changing the way that teachers teach books and altering the way that students read – and, likely, not for the better.

By inserting trigger warnings into the English classroom, several problematic consequences arise. These are just a handful of the potentially damaging impacts incurred when educators or academic institutions utilise or insist upon these warnings. Educators who use trigger warnings may:

1. Encourage students to avoid intense literary moments that they may perceive as too powerful or emotionally charged.
2. Deprive students from experiencing several of the critical, aesthetic and transformative moments in a text.
3. Foster a culture where student fragility is promoted over the development of resilience.
4. Depress artistic freedom by arbitrarily sanctioning what is and what is not appropriate for class discussion and student experience.
5. Handicap English teachers by censoring or casting certain literary moments as taboo.
6. Draw too much attention to controversial literary scenes, thereby offsetting the natural balance and order of the text.

I could go on. In subsequent pages, I will. Each of these, and others I have not discussed yet, pose very real threats to the way that English teachers approach literary pedagogy in the classroom. It is easy enough to understand why an educator who believes in the power and importance of full-throated literary engagement and trusts his own ability to present complex and challenging material to students might baulk at the suggestion that students are safer and better off when instructors forewarn dramatic content (analogous to what some might term a ‘spoiler’ in a different context). After all, part of literature’s power lies in the extent to which it shocks, dismantles, rattles or leads us into undiscovered countries. As Ingmar Bergman states, ‘I don’t want to produce a work of art that the public can sit and suck aesthetically... I want to give them a blow in the small of the back, to scorch their indifference, to startle them out of their complacency’ (as quoted in Vermilye 2007, 13). Educators have a right to execute approaches to literature that do precisely this... right?

Trigger Enforcement

Modern, secular, liberal education is supposed to combine a Socratic ideal of the examined life with a Millian marketplace of ideas. It is boot camp, not a hotel. (Levinovitz 2016)

In recent years, especially at elite American universities housing more liberal, seemingly progressive students and educators, it’s not so clear that this is the case. At some of America’s premier schools, instructors who push boundaries and choose not to trigger alert complex or controversial topics are coming under the scrutiny of administrators and bureaucratic figures who, whether for legitimate or paranoid reasons, fear that students who feel violated or re-traumatised by ‘irresponsible’ teaching practices may lambast the school’s reputation through social media, hold protests on campus or even litigate (see Miller 2015, Marcus 2015 and Flaherty 2014). Often avoiding controversial educational choices that might rattle psychologically fragile students, many highly ranked American institutions
are endorsing cultures where faculty members feel pressured to use trigger warnings in order to secure their jobs. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education argues that several institutions suggest that ‘professors who don’t use trigger warnings will be investigated’ (Piper 2016). The language is unambiguous: ‘It is expected that instructors will offer appropriate warning and accommodation regarding the introduction of explicit and triggering materials used’ (Piper 2016).

Trying to educate in trigger-sensitive environments can upend the work of professors who intrinsically believe that shocking, triggering, dismantling or engaging students in meaningfully stressful encounters with controversial or provocative content is endemic to the act of educating. ‘Edward Schlosser’, a professor at a midsize state school, recently pseudonymously published an article in Vox magazine titled ‘I’m a Liberal Professor, and my Liberal Students Terrify Me’. The 2016 article discusses how trigger warnings have negatively transformed teaching experiences for university educators. Below, Schlosser spells out the recent shift in educational politics that has occurred during his nine years teaching at the college level:

I have intentionally adjusted my teaching materials as the political winds have shifted. (I also make sure all my remotely offensive or challenging opinions, such as this article, are expressed either anonymously or pseudonymously). Most of my colleagues who still have jobs have done the same. We’ve seen bad things happen to too many good teachers – adjuncts getting axed because their evaluations dipped below a 3.0, grad students being removed from classes after a single student complaint, and so on. (Schlosser 2015)

And Schlosser is not alone. What are professors supposed to do if administrators are restricting or disallowing many of the essential elements that most define or encapsulate their work, thinking and aims?

As a means for protecting professors susceptible to these university pressures, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) came out with a statement suggesting that forcing professors to use trigger warnings represents a threat to academic freedom:

Institutional requirements or even suggestions that faculty use trigger warnings interfere with faculty academic freedom in the choice of course materials and teaching methods. (AAUP 2014)

The AAUP clarifies that teachers should have the right to determine whether certain material may warrant alerts to the student body, but takes a stand against administrative requirements that dictate mandatory trigger warning usage, claiming that administration regulation ‘constitutes interference with academic freedom’ (AAUP 2014). The AAUP further claims that university professors should have the right to judge whether content potentially threatens student well-being: ‘faculty judgment is a legitimate exercise of autonomy’ (AAUP 2014). The AAUP’s effort at protecting professor’s rights is noble, but is it enough?

How and Why Has This Come About?

Most current college students grew up in the shadow of September 11, with the specter of large-scale terrorism always looming and with a steady stream of soldiers returning home to grapple with their demons. It is no wonder that they feel that they, too, deserve security, even in the precarious and flimsy form of trigger warnings and safe spaces. (Heer 2015)

That many educators are receiving strong pressure to use trigger warnings on American university campuses is perhaps less clear than why the phenomenon has come about in
the first place. Australian writer and multi-disciplinary artist Jonno Revache traces the emergence of trigger warnings back to 1960, when people began to become more aware of the complications and complexities among war vets suffering from PTSD.

Trigger Warnings were introduced into our public consciousness initially around the year 1960. This was apparently when we got a grasp on the complexities of PTSD, and when our cultural understanding of PTSD stemmed mainly from the experiences of mentally ill war veterans, who came back from combat experiencing dissociation, ‘shell-shock’, flashbacks, as well as severe depression and anxiety. (Revache 2017)

Jeet Heer, a writer for the New Republic, expands on the relationship between trigger warnings and societal awareness of PTSD:

[The explosion of trigger warnings and the growth of safe spaces is best understood as a consequence of the expanded social and cultural role that PTSD has assumed in our society. The concept of PTSD rests on the importance of buried memories – memory traces – which can be reignited as flashbacks. (Heer 2015)]

In addition to what he has to say about their link to PTSD, Heer sees trigger warnings as echoing what he refers to as the ‘larger jitteriness’ (Heer 2015) that has marked American culture for decades, perhaps reaching a peak on 11 September 2001. The fact that today’s college students grew up in the terrorist wake of 9/11 may help to explain why many of them may feel entitled to heightened protective measures.

This ‘larger jitteriness’, which compels a heightened wish for protection, is something attorney Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt take up in their influential Atlantic article ‘The Coddling of the American Mind’ (2015). The authors link the emergence of the trigger warnings to two generational phenomena: (1) a shift in parent–child relationships, and (2) the emergence of social media. On the former, the authors explain:

Childhood itself has changed greatly during the past generations. Many Baby Boomers and Gen Xers can remember riding their bicycles around their hometowns, unchaperoned by adults, by the time they were 8 or 9 years old. (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015)

As crime rates began to rise in the 1960s and continued to climb through the 1990s, Baby Boomer parents began to feel more protective of their children. Kidnappings began to increase in the 1980s. The issue of security was not concentrated solely in the home – school safety became a public debate as well, with ‘dangerous play structures … removed from playgrounds’ and ‘peanut butter banned from school lunches’ (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). Then Columbine, the first school-related gun massacre in US history, occurred in 1999, leading to zero tolerance policies for campus bullying. According to Lukianoff and Haidt, Millennials received a ‘consistent message from adults: “life is dangerous, but adults will do everything in their power to protect you from harm”’ (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). This learned need for overprotectiveness has translated into classroom settings where students feel entitled to heightened levels of protection.

As a result, in a single generation, some of the authoritative and hard-nosed educational practices admired by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers gave way to Dewian, Montessorian models, where a perception of child psychological fragility became superordinate to the tough-minded, pull-up-your-boot-straps, hard knocks approaches to teaching that might build strength and resilience.

And then, by 2000, social media appeared. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, etc., suddenly created platforms for disenfranchised voices to leap out
from obscurity and reach a seemingly infinite cyber-audience. Millennials seized the opportunity, waging online crusades against perceived injustices, real or imagined: ‘Facebook was founded in 2004, and since 2006 it has allowed children as young as 13 to join. This means that the first wave of students who spent all their teen years using Facebook reached college in 2011’ (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). 2011… Just about the time that the trigger warning conversation began to take shape on US campuses.

But Isn’t Literature Supposed to Unsettle Us?

While some Millennials – and institutions that ‘protect’ them – are attempting to disarm many of the powerfully controversial literary moments, English classrooms are suffering. Why? Because literature, by definition, is usually rooted in tension. Most writers are taught to find, examine and navigate conflict. Instructing English educators to either water down, omit or forewarn heated topics or incendiary literary moments might be analogous to asking boxers not to throw punches, composers not to write crescendos or surgeons not to use knives or draw blood. Part of what makes English, well English, is the fact that it causes its readers to enter, dwell and experientially navigate the unpredictable underbelly of psychically repressed realities (Bruns 2011). If a book does not cause a reader to question his or her conception of reality, compel her to run wild into the fields, burst from the shackles of conformity, stand up to power, kill a father, marry a mother or tear out his eyes while wailing at the universe, then what is the purpose of reading in the first place?

In philosopher Simon Critchley and psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster’s book, *Stay Illusion: The Hamlet Doctrine*, the authors argue specifically for the therapeutic benefits of reading with *madness*:

> Not that we are above rashness ourselves, and if an approach shapes our interpretation, that we might dupe the reader by calling a methodology, then it takes its cue from Virginia Woolf. In her wonderful essay ‘On Being Ill,’ she writes: ‘Rashness is one of the properties of illness – outlaws that we are – and it is rashness that we need in reading … Illness, in its kingly sublimity, sweeps all that aside and leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself.’ (Critchley and Webster 2014, 4)

If English educators cannot push buttons, meaningfully agitate students, or present material that may challenge or threaten them emotionally, then what are they supposed to do with the canon, almost all of which exists so as to alarm, incite, disturb, shake up, etc? Since so much of the writing that has survived within the literary tradition deliberately sends characters into the nether regions of what is socially conceivable, it is almost impossible to imagine a book worth teaching that does not include some form of sexual, violent, political or domestic trauma – analogous to paying money for a fine dining experience featuring food without taste.

The trigger warning, by deactivating, dumbing down or numbing many of the inherent tensions essential for definitions and conceptualisations of literature, essentially compels educators to prioritise the efferent at the expense of the aesthetic (Rosenblatt 1994). Whereas proponents of aesthetic teaching believe that literary eruptions offer the best opportunity for transformative teaching moments, practitioners of the trigger warning inhibit, omit or avoid the explosion, thinking it too upsetting and potentially damaging for some students. In *Dialects of Freedom*, existential phenomenologist Maxine Greene argues for the psychological benefits of engaging with literature in a way that unsettles and dismantles us:
To break with the ‘cotton wool’ of habit, of mere routine, of automatism, is (as we shall see) to seek alternative ways of being, to look for openings. To find such openings is to discover new possibilities – often new ways of achieving freedom in the world. (Greene 1988, 2)

Can students break with the cotton wool of everyday experience, if educators are disallowed from shifting them from the comforts of their traditional psychological safe-spaces? Are alternative ways of being and new openings for discovery attainable when professors are compelled or ordered to avoid vortexes of conflict?

**Proponents of the Trigger Warning: Who are They?**

Pain in this life is not avoidable, but the pain we create avoiding pain is avoidable. (Laing 1960)

In order to better conceptualise the issue at hand, we need to more properly understand the thinking and intentions influencing the bureaucrats, students and professors at select institutions who believe in the efficacy and protective features of the trigger warning. What do they believe an English classroom should look like? How do they think students should engage with literature? And why do they believe they are doing more good than harm by alerting students to fiery literary content that may, in fact, promote the capacity for growth?

**A Preliminary Conceptualisation**

For those who derive great pleasure from engaging in the aesthetic reading process, who see arousal, shock, intensity and controversy as rationale for why we read, it is difficult to understand what causes certain readers to pull back, psychologically, when confronted with textual content that evokes challenging or psychologically complex emotions. What causes one reader to choose texts specifically because they will disarm, challenge, revolt or shock them, while another reader deliberately wants to avoid or protect himself against this type of literary experience? An argument of this article is that proponents of trigger warnings may suffer from poor or diminished reflective functioning (Fonagy et al. 1991).

Reflective functioning (RF) is a construct that emerged in the past quarter century within the British psychoanalytic school. RF originated in the mid-1980s at the University College of London, and can be attributed to Fonagy, Steele and Steele. Reflective functioning, which relates to an individual’s ability to mentalise (the ability to understand the mental states of oneself and others that promote overt behaviours), is relatively poor among individuals who claim that they want or need trigger warnings in order to feel safe with literary engagement. Let’s take a step back and define this concept.

**Reflective Functioning: What Is It?**

According to Steele, Murphy and Steele:

Reflective functioning is defined as the capacity to observe and think about mental states, in oneself and in others, in the service of building realistic models of why people behave, think, and feel as they do. The ability to give meaning to our own psychological experiences develops as a result of our discovery that minds typically operate behind human actions, and are influenced by actions of the other. Reflective functioning is a construct not unlike insight or psychological mindfulness and so has arguably been part of the psychoanalytic thinking since its inception. (Steele, Murphy and Steele 2015, 217)
In order to understand what reflective functioning is, we may also need to explicate what it is not. Fonagy et al. (1991) differentiate RF from a pre-reflective self, which refers to the ‘immediate – that is to say unmediated – experiencer of life’ (Fonagy et al. 1991, 202). This pre-reflective part of the individual possesses no ability to distinguish, separate or reflect upon the self that is dynamically engaged in the experience of life. This pre-reflective self lacks the cognitive mechanism necessary for pulling back the lens and examining or assessing the self as experiencer.

The reflective self possesses this very capability. Individuals possessing an RF component are capable of mentalisation, engaging in the ‘dialectic complement of the experiencing self’ (Fonagy et al. 1991, 202). The reflective self differentiates itself as observer and assessor from the self-construct that immediately partakes in the emotional and cognitive bulrushes of existence. According to Fonagy et al. (1991, 202):

The reflective self knows that the self feels, perceives, reacts, and so on. The reflective self reflects upon mental experiences, conscious or unconscious. It registers psychic life and constructs representations of feelings and thoughts, desires and beliefs. Most important, it is aware that its representations of its behavior and actions are shaped by the content of others’ mentation. It constructs an image of the self as observed and of the other as observing and in both cases includes a capacity to reflect upon such observations.

The reflectively functioning self exists as both experiencer and analyser of self-experience. An individual capable of reflective functioning is able to assess, analyse, seek understanding for, tolerate and work through the vibrant intensity of first-hand experience. He can pull back the lens and experience the self’s emotions and raw energies with a psychological distance that provides opportunity for reflection and analysis. He can ask and potentially provide answers for questions such as: Why am I angry? Why do I feel threatened? What is arousing or exciting me and what do I do with these feelings? Rather than existing simply as an emotionally blind slave to the undertow of human emotional responses, an individual with high RF maintains some degree of self-mastery and governance.

If high RF ensures the individual some capacity for coping with or handling life’s dynamic nature, the opposite is true for individuals with low RF. As a general rule, individuals with lower levels of reflective functioning may buckle (cave in) or explode (unhinge) during intense emotional periods, often going through life in a semi-suspended, dream-like state. Life happens to them, and they lack the ability to create metacognitive distance. Intrapsychic forces suffocate the self’s ability to frame things in proper perspective:

As Christopher Bollas (1990, 203) pointed out recently, this distinction is also apparent in the dream, wherein the self that experiences (the self as pictured in the dream) and the self that takes notice of the phenomenal self as it experiences (the dreamer) achieve separate and distinct mental representation.

Since low reflective functioning can suggest that an individual is relatively incapable of processing or making sense out of life’s intense events, Steele and Steele (as cited in Busch 2008) argue that attaining reflective-self functioning – a capacity that emerges during early childhood – represents a critical step towards achieving emotional development.

**Reflective Functioning and Trigger Warnings**

Since reflective functioning deals directly with how individuals are able to process and mentalise intense psychological content, a strong negative correlation seems to exist between
reflective functioning and one's need for trigger warnings in a classroom. In almost any emotionally rich English classroom, students will be triggered by dramatic literary content. This is what literature is supposed to do. George shoots Lenny (Mice and Men). Brother poisons King (Hamlet). Older man abducts and rapes young girl (Lolita). Travelling salesman cheats on wife (Death of a Salesman).

Students will react to these moments. Some of them will be triggered wildly, as perhaps they will have endured some unfortunate analogous experiences. Part of the job of good literature is to break deliberately from the moral and cultural codes we assume in society. And it is in these violation of norms that authors teach us important lessons about ourselves, the world we live in, our identities, and emotional complexities. If literature does not push the buttons of our emotional boundaries and startle our sensibilities, then it may not, in fact, be literature.

Both Hillis-Miller (2002) and Aristotle (Aristotle and Halliwell 1939) long-before him, argue that one of the primary functions of literature is to create emotional arousal. When students get aroused and are, therefore, triggered, how will they be able to handle or not handle these destabilising, though potentially growth-promoting, feelings? Students with higher reflective functioning will likely possess a keener ability to utilise mentalisation during intense emotional moments in the classroom. And the flip side, of course, seems true as well: students who claim that they need trigger warnings in order to cope with complex literary content likely will struggle with reflective functioning and therefore become overwhelmed and incapable of handling their emotions once triggered.

Starting with Empathy

What is wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote. (E.M. Forster 2009, 84)

What if what I am suggesting about trigger warnings and reflective functioning holds truth? What if some members of our student body do suffer from poor RF and therefore do believe that they need trigger warnings in order to better cope with some of the intense scenarios endemic to so much of the literature that gets prioritised in a standard English class? Can reflective functioning be taught in a classroom, or are we looking at a problem with no solution? According to Miriam Steele, Professor of Psychology and Co-Director of the Centre for Attachment at the New School in New York, it can:

Any time you step into a character’s shoes, which any meaningful engagement with literature demands, you are practicing reflective functioning. The more that you involve students in narrative vignettes or take them into powerful dramatic scenes, the more empathy gets activated and RF enhanced. (Steele, personal communication, 21 February 2017)

Steele makes an argument, here, for literature’s ability to enhance reader empathy. Individuals with low RF struggle to place themselves in other people’s shoes – lack the ability to understand the cognitive processes and emotional lives of others. The undigested intensity of their own mental lives overwhelms their ability to consider or accurately read what goes on in other people’s minds and hearts. Steele’s belief is that engaging with literature actually improves empathy, and that augmented empathy enhances RF. When RF is enhanced, students have a better capacity for handling intense content and may not require trigger warnings. But is there evidence for this?
Cognitive psychologists David Kidd and Immanuel Castano (2013) recently published ‘Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind’, an important article that appeared in *Science*. Theory of Mind (ToM) refers to one’s ability to attribute mental states – desires, intentions, knowledge, pretending, etc. – to oneself and to others, *and* to understand that other people have beliefs, desires, perspectives, and intentions that differ from their own. The study demonstrated that ‘reading literary fiction led to better performance on tests of affective ToM … and cognitive ToM … compared with reading nonfiction…, popular fiction…, or nothing at all … Specifically, these results show that reading literary fiction temporarily enhances ToM’ (Kidd and Castano 2013). Kidd and Castano's findings suggest that engagement with literature enhances ToM. Enhanced ToM correlates with enhanced empathy and therefore enhanced reflective functioning.

**A Willingness for Schwärmeri**

But empathy requires that we give ourselves over to the experience of the other. Avoiding, shying away from, or utilising impediments inhibits empathic response. If we aim to enhance reflective functioning and empathy among our students through engaging them in literature, then it may be counterproductive to implement trigger warnings, which can have the effect of behaviourally distancing readers from characters, words and charged narrative moments.

Empathy asks that we make ourselves vulnerable to texts, reading with what Kant referred to as *Schwärmerei* – a reverie or rapture of experience only achievable when an individual makes himself completely vulnerable to the world within the pages. In order for *Schwärmerei* to occur, we must completely suspend disbelief, and engage in what Michael Deguy refers to as an absolute ‘love affair’ (Deguy quoted in Hillis Miller 2002, 120) with the work.

If it is really the case, as I have argued, that each literary work opens up a singular world, attainable in no other way than by reading that work, then reading should be a matter of giving one's whole mind, heart, feelings, and imagination, without reservation, to recreating that world within oneself, on the basis of words. (Hillis Miller 2002, 118)

We cannot know exactly where a book will lead us; in fact, embracing this ‘not knowing’ is part of what makes the reading experience romantic and growth-promoting. Hillis Miller describes the ideal reader as a ‘monster of courage and curiosity, also something supple, cunning, cautious, a born adventurer and discoverer’ (Hillis Miller 2002, 122). If our students have the courage to become *monsters of courage*, then all is well. But what happens when they haven’t?

**But What About the Students that Can’t?**

Steele (personal communication, 21 February 2017) and Kidd and Castano (2013) argue that literary engagement enhances empathy. Hillis-Miller urges us to sacrifice our resistances and merge with the text. But what happens when our students lack these tendencies? Aren’t trigger warnings used, in the first place, specifically for those students whose personal traumas or complex psychological histories prevent them from feeling secure enough to read with unfettered freedom? It’s hard to enhance empathy in readers when students resist the type of aesthetic engagement with texts that brings about empathy in the first place. This is where the matter gets quite tricky.

How can we, as English teachers, present challenging, complex and potentially threatening content to our students while at the same time ensuring their psychological well-being?
and promoting their growth? How can we show them that we do not need to protect them from Tom's violent hand – that they already possess the mechanisms within to protect themselves? That engaging fully with literary content will strengthen them rather than overwhelm them? How can we assure our more fragile students that they will be okay even if they engage fully with the complex, psychologically triggering literary moments that activate their emotions and arouse them beyond a level where they feel safe?

**Teacher as Model**

And I – my head oppressed by horror – said: ‘Master, what is it that I hear? Who are those people so defeated by their pain?’ And he to me: ‘This miserable way is taken by the sorry souls of those who lived without disgrace and without praise.’ (Alighieri 1320, 3.31–3.36)

I think this is where the role of the teacher as guide becomes incredibly important. Literature is a dangerous game. Characters betray each other, kill, explore the taboo. While many of us conveniently find ourselves in caves staring at shadows that we think are real, literature turns us around and asks us to walk out into the day, shining natural light into aspects of the human experience that may shake us from the trees we feel the need to adhere to in order to cope with existence. In the scope of real world experience, most of us seek pleasure – not conflict. But literature, if it is any good, usually takes us into an imaginary interplay with components of human experience that we’d rather avoid in real life.

If we choose to go white water rafting, we hire a company that provides an expert rafter to help us navigate the rough waters, unpredictable narrows, and potentially perilous hazards. The same can be said for the instructor of literature. Just as Virgil leads Dante into the descending circles of the Inferno, literature teachers can facilitate student’s experience with complex texts, by themselves accompanying the class along the journey. But what does accompanying them mean?

What if teachers actively promote that it is acceptable to experience discomfort and emotional conflict in the classroom? What if teachers model Schwärmerie by reading portions of the text out loud and demonstrating an emotional giving over to the words and narrative? What if teachers actively protect their students from the criticism of their peers and encourage students to take the risk of personal exposure to heated literary content? What if teachers use their authority to teach students that being perfect or fully integrated is not a requirement for being self-sufficient?

So many students assume that being perfect is the only way that teachers will accept them. Maybe we need to explain to them that imperfection, fragility and vulnerability are not only okay but expected – that we, too, have vulnerabilities, imperfections and fragilities. Students often look at teachers as authority figures whose lives are impervious to hardship. Maybe if we intelligently model our own imperfections and vulnerabilities, we can compel them to feel safer and more comfortable with their own.

**Self-Disclosure**

To share your weakness is to make yourself vulnerable; to make yourself vulnerable is to show your strength. (Criss Jami 2017)

The past 25 years have featured a growing trend in modern psychoanalysis, whereby analysts selectively choose moments of self-disclosure. The traditional Freudian model presented the
therapist as a neutral, blank slate. Self-disclosure was widely discouraged. But in the past quarter century some psychoanalysts have become more open about disclosing stories about the self they believe might help their clients to feel more comfortable, safe and understood. According to Bridges (2001):

When psychologically attuned and patient centered, intentional disclosure opens space for deep therapeutic engagement between therapist and patient. It heightens self-perception, affective experience, and relational connection. (Bridges 2001, 21)

The key features here are attunement, patient-centredness and intentionality. I will share a story about how I used self-disclosure with intentionality, student-centredness and attunement with a group of adolescent students at a private school in Brooklyn, New York.

An Illustration

In a recent seminar I conducted with a group of adolescent English students in Brooklyn, I shared a non-fiction piece I wrote about my oldest son, who, five days into life, had to be admitted to the hospital because he had a bilirubin level of 31, and needed immediate intensive care to prevent permanent brain-damage.

There was method to my madness. These students were exceptional by most any measure – hard working, disciplined, respectful and conscientious... but I sensed that their will to be ‘perfect students’ was holding them back from taking the types of risks in their writing that might lead them further from areas where they felt safe and successful, and into terrain that would encourage them to take chances and grow.

I had tried to urge them to ‘use all the keys on the piano’ – something one of my former writing teachers had always encouraged in me – but their adherence to Ivy League aspirations, although allowing them to get the grades and test scores they wanted, were inhibiting their creative potentials. Enter: one of the scariest moments of my own life. I figured: if I have the courage to take them on this journey, then perhaps they’ll gain the courage to expand into less tidy and perfectionistic aspects of themselves.

So I shared my story – a 37-page non-fiction piece I wrote nine months after my son came out of the hospital. In all truthfulness, even though the outcome was favourable, it was one of the most difficult things I have ever written. As I shared the work, I walked my students through my own horrific encounter with a potentially life-altering tragedy. They experienced what it felt like for me to lie, curled up on a green, pleather seat in the pediatric intensive care unit, unable to sleep or eat for fear that bilirubin molecules were shuttling past my son’s blood brain barrier and permanently adhering to his newly developing brain. My students felt my worry, experienced my shock, and went through all the rounds of tests with me – two blood transfusions, hours of extensive phototherapy, a visit from the neurologist, haematologist, geneticist, etc.

During the two-hour long encounter with my vulnerability in a carefully considered and premeditated context – we read the story over the course of two class periods – I demonstrated to my students that I am not invulnerable, that I have fears, concerns and terrors – that life can take precious things from me, just like it can with them. In a thoughtfully considered, self-disclosing episode, I took myself right down off my pedestal as impenetrable authority figure and placed myself among them as co-experiencer of text, emotionality, suffering and learning. They were a group I knew well, and I had thought extensively about how my sharing this life-altering moment might help to give them the courage to take more
risks in their writing. I likely would not have given away such a personal story to a less mature group, but it felt like a way to crack them open a bit, and encourage them to feel more at ease with less idealised versions of themselves and their work.

When students say that they require trigger warnings, what they may actually be saying is that they do not trust their own ability to navigate complex emotional experiences that scare them. But if teachers can model the type of courage and vulnerability that is required to engage with complex and highly charged literary moments, they may compel more of their students to walk forward into less familiar and secure emotional space.

Surely, if I expect that they will journey with me into the recesses of Hamlet’s ‘too, too sullied flesh’ (Shakespeare 1603 [1968], 1.1.133), or suffer Blanche’s ‘date’ with Stanley, then they need to believe that I, too, will accompany them. Like the skydiver who straps himself to the back of his student during the free fall from 10,000 feet, the instructor of literature must journey, as Virgil did, with Dante into the deep vortexes of the Inferno. When students know that their teachers are accompanying them into what Joseph Conrad referred to as the horror (Conrad 1996), they are much more willing to go themselves. In this sense, the instructor of literature is utilising an emotional version of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development; scaffolding the progression into psychological places the student may not feel strong enough to journey into alone.

**Self-Disclosure for the Other—Not the Self**

Let me make one final point about self-disclosure. In the psychoanalytic tradition, self-disclosure is not performed for the purpose of processing one’s own life at the expense of the other (Bridges 2001). It is premeditated upon, designed and then utilised as a means of demonstrating that the authority figure is not afraid of showing that he or she has vulnerabilities, and is susceptible to many of the same emotions, liabilities and realities of the person he or she serves.

By sharing the story of my son with that group of students in Brooklyn, I was demonstrating that I was not perfect, that my life was not perfect, and that I did not need them to be perfect. Certainly, we know that the characters we read and discuss in the classroom are not perfect either. Yet think about how many educational models are designed around the premise of correct and incorrect. Part of what literature does is to liberate us from the stranglehold of absolutes (Bleich 1978), and allow us to experience freely within the myriad shades of grey that constitute more truthful psychological reality. By creating a learning culture where imperfection and vulnerability are acceptable, we encourage our students to feel more at ease with the imagined ‘unacceptable’ components of their own identities. And this is far more meaningful and powerful than giving students warnings that they are about to confront controversy. Life is filled with dangers, and they usually do not forewarn. Controversy is not something to threaten or dismantle our English classrooms, but something that can make our discussions, experiences, and reading more rich, dynamic and honest.

**Psychological Defenses: When All Else Fails**

Despite everything that I have said, some will still counter that by failing to use trigger warnings, we do harm to our students by exposing them to content that they feel is too traumatic or threatening. To these people, I offer that our students have innate psychological defences
(Freud 1993), and that these evolutionarily developed psychological features – designed biologically to protect against fears, trauma, anxiety – usually are sufficient. So even if it is the case that some members of our student body feel incapable of handling the intensity of certain literary moments, they may, in fact, already possess the innate tools to cope.

Sigmund Freud (Freud 1932) and then Anna Freud (1993) argued that our psychological defences are designed to protect us from perceived psychological threats. George Vaillant, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, describes these defences in a positive light, referring to them as adaptive mental mechanisms:

> These adaptive mental mechanisms ‘maximize gratification and allow conscious awareness of feelings, ideas and their consequences’ (American Psychiatric Association 1994, 752) ... If a person who cuts a small artery lacks the cognitive strategies (provided to health professionals through expensive education) to stop the hemorrhage and lacks the social supports of access to physicians (provided to the middle class through expensive health insurance), the person can still cope with the hemorrhage with inborn defenses. He or she can stop the bleeding through involuntary, transformative, and highly complex clotting mechanisms. Yet, such clotting mechanisms may be denied to royalty afflicted with hemophilia. In analogous fashion, when cognitive solutions and social supports are absent, the psychologically resilient from all walks of life – achieve similar homeostatic alchemy through involuntary mental defenses that alter perception of internal and external reality. (Vaillant 2000, 89)

As human beings, our students possess protective emotional factors that safeguard them from potential psychological harm. But if our best attempts at modelling courage and vulnerability break down, we must remember that students are adaptive. Dissociation, compartmentalisation, reaction formation, repression, intellectualisation, rationalisation, sublimation, etc., will involuntarily kick in and do a far better job, organically, we might presume, than any consciously crafted trigger warning. And this presumes, of course, that literature does indeed possess the innate ability to re-traumatise or pose serious psychological threat to our students. That’s an assumption, and something we need to examine more fully.

**Can Literature Re-Traumatis?**

Emery Gross, a psychoanalyst and faculty member of the New York Institute for Psychoanalytic Self-Psychology, claims that the problem with trigger warnings is that they presume that literature is, in fact, capable of doing psychological damage to students. Gross argues against this problematic assumption. According to Gross, proponents of the trigger warning utilise the practice because they want their students to be able to make use of intense literary material ‘in a productive way, rather than being overwhelmed’ (Gross, personal communication, 10 February 2017). He goes on to suggest that this mode of thinking assumes that we understand the therapeutic or counter-therapeutic impacts that literature may have on our students – something Gross believes is an ‘assumption that goes too far’.

The danger in assuming that literature may re-traumatise our students – something that has no support in research or literature – is that it prevents individuals from potentially benefiting from the possible therapeutic aspects that can occur through intense literary engagement, something bibliotherapists and writing therapists have banked on for centuries. King Ramses II’s ancient Egyptian library featured the following motto: the house of healing for the soul. Marcus Aurelius’ physician, Galen, upheld a medical library in the first century, ad. Moving ahead to the nineteenth century, Benjamin Rush preferred the use of literature in hospitals for ‘the amusement and instruction of patients’ (McCulliss 2012).
What trigger warning proponents may fail to grasp is the powerful good embedded in the very literary moments they condemn. In fact, in a Winnicottian sense, there is evidence that fictionally connecting with the dark passengers that trigger warning proponents shield us from can have a positive psychological impact. Reading traumatic literary moments is not the same as actually being victimised by trauma. And since literature is a form of adult play with transitional objects (Bruns 2011; Winnicott 1971), growth and resilience are far more likely outcomes than psychological damage. Literature possesses the ability to heal, but only if educators and academic institutions allow it to: ‘what hangs in the balance is the possibility for growth that students experience when they deal with difficult or challenging material’ (Gross, personal communication, 10 February 2017). Since the idea that literature may do psychological harm to some of our students is predicated on an untested assumption, we fly blindly and likely lose the opportunity for much good when we teach literature accompanied by unproven protective interventions.

And what if some of our students are particularly susceptible to some of the sensitivities that literature can induce? Gross argues that there is little ostensible down-side:

Are they going to have a psychotic break? The assumption is that people are so fragile that asking them to engage in intense material may push them over the top. I don't think that's the case. If that is the case, then it will likely happen anyway through any number of endeavors that people are exposed to. (personal communication, 10 February 2017)

None of this is said to be callous or insensitive. Students are people, and people have problems. But the idea that some or much of the literature that gets taught in American high schools and colleges can awaken or cause serious psychological damage feels far-fetched. Vaillant’s (2000) notion of adaptive mental mechanisms seems to support this claim as well. Our students possess built-in psychological coping strategies that help them during times of stress, discomfort, anxiety, etc. The bottom line, to some degree, is that on the scale of potentially damaging things to share with a class, literary stories, poems, plays and novels seem fairly low on the totem pole.

Our students should have the right to disengage, mentally and emotionally, if they feel that they need to. They should have the right to step outside of the room, tune out or even opt out of certain assignments or classroom moments if they feel that they cannot handle the personal intensity of the experience. But, for the most part, these instances are probably far more uncommon than common, and there is danger to over-protecting the plight of the few at the expense of the majority.

At the end of the day, we are trying to arm our students for reality – to build their resilience so that they can competently absorb and handle more serious threats to their psyche: the unexpected election of Donald Trump, the mass shooting of homosexuals at a night club in Orlando, a terrorist attack in Istanbul – these can invoke trauma. If our students cannot handle literary texts, then how will they be able to handle the text that CNN sends them, telling them that a massive earthquake in Nepal killed 9000 people and injured 22,000 others? Being over-protective, even if well-intended, does more damage than good.

The Over-Protective Crossroads: Where Do We Go from Here?

In the summer of 2015, while attending a talk by Columbia University’s Morse Professor of English Education, Dr Ruth Vinz, I watched as she projected a PowerPoint slide containing
the following simple phrase: What Can You Not Be Silent About? Next to the words was a photograph of Dr Martin Luther King, clad in his iconic black suit jacket, white button down shirt and black tie. He stared off to the right, his eyes steady, suspended somewhere between preoccupation and destiny. His eyes seemed to shimmer slightly, gazing at a world as yet to be created: his dream.

The words were simple enough: What Can You Not Be Silent About? They poked at my conscience. They weren’t asking me what I wanted to say; they were asking me what I needed to say, despite the fact that perhaps I was not encouraged to do so. At that particular point in my life, I was writing a novel, and I realised that I had to have the courage to more actively share the work, get feedback and eventually bring it to press for publication. The words stuck with me, even after I had finished writing the book: What Can You Not Be Silent About?

I believe that the English classroom is one of the most important places on Earth for our students and teachers to engage in fully-fledged, emotionally intense and uncensored interactions with, and discourse over, literature. Yes, I hold a certain bias about how and what can take place in an English classroom, but sometimes our biases emerge from wisdom and experience. An English classroom offers a place in today’s world where emotional intensity and full-throttle encounters with art, however controversial, are not only desirable but critically essential. For it is in the exchange with the deep vortexes of human controversy that minds are aroused, spirits are galvanised, and – as long as students feel safe, protected, heard and recognised – transformation becomes possible.

I’ve sat in the stands. The sidelines are not a safe space for discourse with literature. We need to create classroom worlds where students and educators get into the game, think, respond and play. There are no hard and fast rules. We may get thrown for loops, become unsettled, rattled, get blind-sided, and even hurt, but becoming unsettled is one of the ways that people learn – not all growth is convenient. And for educators who understand how to unhinge and unsettle to advantage, the potential for advancement and personal development is powerful.

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It’s 1925. The roaring twenties. They’ve just left his bedroom and are standing amid the debaucherous fray. Tom strikes Myrtle. The big, Herculean, arrogant, shiny-eyed fascist raises a fist and blasts his mistress across the face with an open palm. He breaks her nose. I cringe. The muscles and nerves in my neck tighten and then spasm. My pupils dilate. Veins bulge. But I can’t take it away. I’m not allowed to. I’m not Fitzgerald, so I don’t have that right. I’m not condoning the abuse, but I’m also not afraid of it. It gives us something to talk about.

As she stands amid the swirl of bubbling cocktails, piles of Town Tattle, and the ectoplasm of her own mother, lifted above the inebriated multitude and casting her tired eyes down in stunning disapproval of the panoply below, blood drips from Myrtle’s nose and stains the hand-knit carpet below.

It’s an ugly moment. It’s a horrifying and un-forewarned shock in the text. But it gives us pause. And shows us what we are and aren’t – and presses into the boundaries of what we might imagine to be possible. It unleashes the leviathan at the base of Thomas Hobbes’ conception of what it means to be human. The rough beast of Bethlehem slouches to be born.
And now we have something to talk about. And maybe the conversation will teach us something important. And maybe it’ll bring us closer. And maybe it won’t. And that’s a risk I think we need to take.

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Notes on Contributor

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