

THE HAPPINESS SHOP

A DRAMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Lindsay Price



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Why aren't middle school students full of smiles, hugs, and hi-fives? Aren't they too young to have problems? *The Happiness Shop* dives into the issue of middle school student depression.

Playwright Bio

Lindsay Price has been involved with theatre education for over 25 years as a playwright, adjudicator, workshop instructor, resource writer, curriculum supervisor, professional development creator, and keynote speaker. Her plays have been performed in schools all over the world with over 1000 productions a year.

Synopsis

Three middle school students find themselves in an odd curiosity shop. They don't know what it is, where they are, or how they got there. But that's no surprise. *The Happiness Shop* is not like any other. It is filled with Roppets.

A Roppet is not quite a robot and not quite a puppet. A Roppet is completely happy all the time. Full of smiles, hugs, and hi-fives. Isn't that all it takes for a middle school student to be happy? They're too young to have problems.

The three students soon learn that the Roppets do much more, as scenes from their personal struggles are played out in front of them. Blake is the tug of war rope in his parents divorce, Melanie's former best friends are viciously bullying her, and Wally is too different to eat in the cafeteria. The three have been brought to the shop to make a choice. Will they bury their problems, and perhaps become a Roppet themselves? Will they face their problems and stand up for themselves? Or will they do something else?

Characters

DR. D (Dompster) & DR. DEE (Dompster): Two deranged doctors. They run The Happiness Shop. They treat the Roppets like play things, and have no idea what happiness is. They're just interested in turning more and more students into Roppets.

BLAKE: Wants to be happy. Can he get his wish?

MELANIE: Bullied by girls who were once her friends.

WALLY: Sees through the façade of the Roppets.

BEZMO, BESME, LOOPY: Workers in The Happiness Shop. Bezmo is the senior assistant and Besme is brand new. She doesn't really know how things work. All three used to live in caves.

ROPPET ONE (Jordan): A Roppet at the shop. The show model.

(Blake's Story)

ROPPETS RUBRIK (6): A team of Roppets that act out memories.

BLAKE 2: A memory of Blake.

MOM: Blake's mother.

DAD: Blake's father.

MONSIEUR GRANT: A negative teacher at Blake's school.

MS. PERETTI: A concerned teacher at Blake's school.

DEPRESSION TROLL: That nagging voice in your head.

(Melanie's Story)

ROPPETS RAFTER (6): A team of Roppets that act out memories.

MELANIE 2: A memory of Melanie.

KELLIE, KENSIE, KELSIE: Ex-friends of Melanie.

PHOENIX: Backs Melanie up.

DEPRESSION TROLL: That nagging voice in your head.

(Wally's Story):

ROPPETS ROOKERY (7): A team of Roppets that act out memories.

WALLY 2: A memory of Wally.

DEMETER, AJAX: Wally's siblings. Constantly criticizing Wally.

COACH LYNCH: Wally's coach. More understanding than you might expect.

DEPRESSION TROLLS X3: Those nagging voices in your head.

Themes

Bullying, Friendship, Relationships, Individuality, Peer Pressure, Conflict Resolution, Self-acceptance, Self-image, What Is Happiness, Adolescence, Anxiety, Depression

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What does it mean to be happy?
- ★ What does it mean to be sad?
- ★ Do you believe you can be too young to be depressed?
- ★ What is depression? What causes it?
- ★ Do you know anyone who is depressed?
- ★ How do people deal with being depressed?
- ★ How do you deal with sad feelings?
- ★ Do others believe you if you say you're depressed?
- ★ Can you cure depression?

Pre-Read Activities

Identity Scene

- ★ In small groups, students will create a one-minute scene on the theme of identity. How will you visualize, "Who am I?"
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present.

Depression Monologue

- ★ Have students reflect on what it would be like to be free of depression. What would that look like? Sound like? Feel like? Have students turn these thoughts into a monologue of a character who is depression free.

Post-It Note Activity

- ★ Play the mirror game with students. Have them get into pairs. One is A, the other B. A is the leader; they go through a number of physical movements. B is the mirror image and the follower. They must mimic what A is doing. After a time, call out for them to switch. Now B is the leader and A is the follower.
- ★ Discuss with students what it's like to look in the mirror.
 - » Do you believe your mirror image reflects you exactly?
 - » Do you think other people see you differently than how you see yourself?
- ★ Students will write on Post-it notes the negative words they think of when they look in the mirror and the negative words they have heard from others about themselves. They are only allowed one word or phrase Per post-it.
- ★ Place the Post-its on a large piece of orange paper and hang them on the wall.
- ★ Students will then write positive words they have heard from others or think of when they look in the mirror.
- ★ Place these on a large piece of blue paper and hang them on the wall.
- ★ Review the sheets with students.

- » What words are repeated?
- » What words surprise you?
- » What words don't surprise you at all?
- ★ Direct students to write a reflection.
 - » What is it like to see the two sheets side by side?
 - » Are you surprised by the words your classmates wrote?
 - » How do they make you feel?
- ★ Have students pick one word from the positive sheet and one word from the negative sheet.
- ★ Direct students to personify these two words. Turn the positive word and the negative word into characters.
 - » What would their names be?
 - » How old would they be?
 - » What would they look like?
 - » What would they wear?
 - » Where would they live?
 - » How would they interact with their environment?
- ★ Students will write a one-page scene between the Positive Word and the Negative Word.
- ★ Have students share their scenes with the class.

Original Theatrical Moment

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute theatrical moment based on the concept of happiness. How do students define happiness? What makes you happy? Are there times when you fake happiness?

- ★ These moments can be traditional dialogue, tableaux, music, movement, or whatever students think best fits the situation.
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present.
- ★ Discuss afterward. What does happiness look like? Are students able to identify true happiness from fake happiness?

Happiness Reflection

- ★ Students will write a paragraph on what happiness means to them, what makes them happy, when they feel comfortable showing their happiness, and whether they ever feel the need to hide their happiness.

Fake Happiness Tableaux Series

- ★ Divide students into groups and have them discuss when and why they might fake happiness. What situations would they feel they “had” to be happy in? What situations do they think it’s easier to fake happiness in than show how they are truly feeling?
- ★ Based on their conversations, groups will create a tableaux series of three pictures based on fake happiness.
- ★ Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class.

Negative Inner Thoughts Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute scene between a character and their negative inner thoughts.
- ★ Create a persona for the inner thoughts. Are they someone the character knows? Are they fictional beasts?

- ★ Put the character into a situation where they are planning to do something (e.g., getting ready to go to the movies with friends). How will their negative inner thoughts talk to the character about this situation? Does the character fight or give in?
- ★ At the end of the scene, decide who wins. Does the character follow through with the situation, or do they decide not to based on what their inner thoughts have said?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *The Happiness Shop*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions.

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What are Besmo and Bezme doing when they enter?
3. What is Roppet One also referred to as?
4. What is the last thing Roppet One says before being zapped by the paddles?
5. What do the doctors say Blake, Melanie, and Wally are there for?

6. Finish the sentence, "To be a Roppet is to be _____."
7. What issue is Blake dealing with?
8. How does Monsieur Grant respond to Blake?
9. What decision does Blake make?
10. What issue is Melanie dealing with?
11. Who says, "I'm the one inside your head. I'm the only one who knows you"?
12. What issue is Wally dealing with?
13. What do Demeter and Ajax want Wally to be?
14. Where does Wally hide?
15. What does Coach Lynch do when he finds out?
16. What happens when the Doctor yells, "Pilcrow!"
17. What decision does Wally make?
18. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. What words were put together to make up the word "Roppet?"
2. In your opinion, why did the playwright make up this word?
3. It's repeated in the play that the Roppets are not robots. In your opinion, why does the playwright make this distinction?
4. In an emergency, the doctors shout, "Pilcrow." What does this word mean? Does it have a significant meaning? If not, why do you think the playwright uses an unknown word at this moment?
5. How are the words "happy" or "happiness" used in the play?

6. Some of the characters are not presented realistically. Why do you think that was?
7. Based on Melanie's language, how would you costume this character?
8. How would you costume the Roppets?
9. Analyze Wally's use of language. What can you infer about their character based on the way they speak?
10. Why does the author use a "troll" to represent negative inner voices?
11. What is the significance of the line, "Pretending to be happy doesn't solve anything"?
12. What is the significance of the line, "I'm not alone. I wish I had said that to Melanie"?
13. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called The Happiness Shop?
2. In your opinion, what happened to Melanie after she left the shop?
3. What is the playwright trying to say about happiness? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with happiness with what happens in the play.
5. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ How is happiness portrayed in the play? Do you agree or disagree with the portrayal?

- ★ Blake, Melanie, and Wally choose different ways of coping with their problems. What are they? Do you agree with their decisions? What are some problems they could face based on their decisions?
- ★ Have you seen other students act the way Blake, Melanie, and Wally do?
- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize it in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Set Design

- ★ There is no specific set design for this play. Have students write a description of their set vision or draw a colour rendering. How would you visualize the themes of the play?

Line Tableau

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a line from the play such as, "Pretending to be happy doesn't solve anything."
- ★ Each group will discuss and decide how they will visualize this line in a tableau. Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

Roppet Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups.
- ★ Now that they've read the play and seen the playwright's interpretation of a Roppet, students will create their own version of a Roppet. What is their version? What would it represent? What issue would the Roppet be used to solve?
- ★ Create a one-minute scene involving their own version of a Roppet.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act out a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Playwright Process

Playwright Lindsay Price talks about the origins behind writing The Happiness Shop. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of where a play comes from compares to the playwright's.

I wrote this play specifically for middle school students after a couple of eye opening experiences. First, I watched a 13-year-old boy deliver one of my monologues in a competition. The character in the monologues talks about his life and how his family treats him after a suicide attempt. The monologue was written for a 16-year-old character and the impact of seeing it done by a 13-year-old was huge. *Does suicide happen in middle school?*

Secondly the director of one of my plays shared a rehearsal exercise she did with her cast in which her middle school students wrote on Post-it notes the positive and negative things they say to themselves or hear others say to them. The negative board had three times more Post-its than the positive one. (The exercise is included in this study guide.) *Do middle school students get depressed?*

I'm the first to admit, until writing this play I did not fully believe that middle school students did get depressed. I thought depression didn't hit until high school.

That's when I started researching the topic. I found that not only do middle school students get depressed but it's often overlooked as laziness, and ignored because they're "too young" to be depressed. Many times the issue is never addressed.

I knew I had to bring this issue to life in a play. It was challenging to find the right balance because whenever you create theatre based on research, the play aspect has to come first. Otherwise, your characters are reciting facts instead of experiencing the issue. Another challenge is specific to theatricalizing depression — it can come across as very internal. Internal emotions are difficult to visualize. Again, the play aspect has to come first. I workshopped this play with various groups of students in order to test scenes and dialogue. It's important to get the play in front of students and have them act out the scenes. I need to hear them read the dialogue aloud as much as possible. I need to get their feedback. The workshop component is a big part of the writing process for me.

The objective of this play is to show students the different faces of middle school depression and the different choices made because of it. Not all the choices these students make are good ones. I feel that's important to stage. It's also important to stage a positive choice. The play ends with the message that happiness does not come from burying your feelings and pretending to be happy. Students suffering from depression are not alone in their feelings and they don't need to suffer alone.