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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE (LITERATURE) CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE (LITERATURE) CLASSROOM

By

Alyssia Rowan Ashkevron

The purpose of this thesis is to examine from a pedagogical perspective the relationship between moral development and literature. It makes use of (existential_ philosophy, (decentering) literature, (critical) pedagogy and moral development research in psychology and philosophy to explore the relationship between the student and the teacher as well as the student and the text. Hopefully it will also provide some useful suggestions about how to create an ethically conscious environment within which students can learn and grow. Given the inherent connectedness of these issues, I argue that there is an underlying necessity for teachers, especially literature teachers, to critically discuss the implications for moral development in their classrooms.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those instructors who helped me to transcend my existential angst, while showing me what it was to teach and to learn. Also to my family and friends, whose patience, love and support made it possible for me to believe in the universal.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by *MLA Style Guide* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you may remember this: sitting in English class watching the eyes glaze over as the professor waxes eloquent on the many virtues of Shakespeare; a few students though, the 'New Criticals' of the generation, leaning forward in their seats, riveted by the ideas being passed onto them. I remember being told, more than once, that Shakespeare would always be important because he captured humanity. The strongest emotions and hardest decisions a person could feel or make could be found in *The Complete Shakespeare,* thus, his works were timeless, priceless recordings of the deepest moral dilemmas mankind will have to overcome. It was the strength and reality of the emotions and conflicts that the piece evoked, reflected, validated, and questioned that made us as readers understand the value of the text as more than mere fiction. I believed every word of it. Still, I wondered why some students were captivated while others were so bored if the themes are so universal.

Are Shakespeare's themes as universal as my English professors thought? Maybe not. I know several graduate students who would argue against the idea. Part of this may be because many of the new ways of examining literature require us to be skeptical about the values presented in canonized texts – the idea of a universal value can be threatening to the truth of feminist theory, queer theory, and a number of other orientations to life that until recently had been largely marginalized in English curriculum and discussion. In the face of this kind of diversity, the works of Shakespeare have been modernized, retold, and redefined in a number of ways. Some fans of the original works may feel scandalized by the effort to place Shakespeare's works into modern contexts in order to

reach a more diverse audience than ever before. However, making Shakespeare's works available to a diverse audience can add credence to the claim that the themes within them have timeless universality. A message can be universal but it must still be presented in a form that can be understood by people who have diverse backgrounds and different levels of intellectual and moral development, even if that means that occasionally a story has to be reduced to what my grandmother might call a 'teeny-bopper flick.'

The argument of this thesis does not really have anything to do with Shakespeare's works per se, but rather deals with the idea that there is a universal form to moral development that can be encouraged to develop through the experience of literature. It explains how educators can use the knowledge of certain developmental empirical studies, philosophical principles, and ethical theories to create a lasting effect on both their student's academic success as well as their mental health and spiritual well-being. To make my case, I will bring together information from three different disciplines, moral development research, existential philosophy, and literary theory.

DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH

According to developmental constructivist research there are certain sequential patterns of cognitive, emotional and physical development that affect moral understanding. According to the theory, these patterns are experienced by everyone, and they often occur within a specific age range but require the presence of certain types of circumstances to stimulate the developmental process. Also, as people develop in one area they are likely to be propelled along certain lines in other areas of development, because, for instance, cognitive and moral development are highly correlated and overlap in the stages. The idea that cognitive functions and moral agency are linked has roots in Platonic philosophy, as well as modern developmental psychology.

Among some of the important theorists who work with the moral-cognitive model of development are Piaget, Kohlberg and Perry. Because moral development and cognitive development are linked, and because effective teachers often must concern themselves with the cognitive development of their students, understanding this link is important because it suggests that teaching affects moral development by stimulating cognitive development, which is a necessary prerequisite. Other reasons that instructors, especially instructors of literature, should concern themselves with moral development will be discussed at length later in this paper.

Although I believe that the need for ethical literature exists at all levels of education, I will focus largely on a group to be referred to as "adolescents." The label, while generally referring to a specific age bracket consisting of high school or college undergraduate students does not exclude based only on age or matriculation, but rather

also uses developmental achievement markers that apply to this stage of development. Thus, my first task is to explore the origin of these developmental markers.

According to all three theories mentioned above, the developmental marker for the lowest stage of development in this line has been transcended by most adolescent students who come into a college instructor's classrooms, although remnants of its legacy can still be heard in some adamant assertions. This stage is characterized by complete faith in what they have been told is right, in short, unquestioned obedience to authority, and is often associated with a childishness indicating need of a "reality check." The belief system of this stage is based upon a combination of two important forces: the individual's personal desires and the opinion of an unquestioned authority that controls satisfaction of their desire. Kohlberg (See Cooper or Kohlberg) calls this step on the developmental ladder the level of "preconventional" thought.

People operating at the preconventional level of development are motivated by egocentric understanding of desires, that is, they are acting based solely on what they want and fear. Respect for right and wrong is based on a desire to stay on the good side of those authorities who control their ability to get what they want. This is the level at which children may decide that it is alright to take someone else's candy, because they want it, but that it is not alright for someone else to take their candy, because they want it. Alternately, these children may decide that it is not alright to take someone else's candy, not because the other person wants or owns it but because if their mother or father finds out they themselves will be less likely to receive candy in the future; avoiding punishment is a primary motive in the child's decision. In short, preconventional morality is a morality based entirely on personal hope of reward/approval and fear of

punishment/disapproval. Their understanding is egocentric, showing no comprehension of the other as an independent person who has importance in their own right.

A student operating at Kohlberg's preconventional level would be unlikely to contribute to a true discussion because such an act is intersubjective[1]. Rather, this student is more likely to state his or her belief in a way that implies total correctness and unerring certitude as well as to be intolerant of other viewpoints or multiple interpretations. Alternately, this may be the student prone to agree with the teacher that, "Yes, Shakespeare touches upon the universal beauty and despair of the human condition," but never once feeling free to disagree, denounce, or deviate despite an incomplete understanding or a valid, but different, viewpoint. Even instructors who may not feel that it is their obligation to help their student became a more sophisticated moral agent can acknowledge the benefit of having a classroom willing to move outside of this egocentric bubble and either critically evaluate their own responses or be willing to consider options beyond those that the Authority publically proscribes or validates.

Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development is far more focused on the developing high school and college student, which represents Perry's own interest in that age group. In short, Perry's subjects tended to be adolescents rather than people spanning a range of ages as in Kohlberg's research, and this focuses his research on issues that are of importance to this period in the life span and are thus directly relevant to college teachers. According to Perry, the authority in the developing adolescent's budding moral agency shifts to the peer group and the tribe during this stage of development, which makes the adolescent who transcends to this stage a better community member than the

[1] "Between subjects" – it requires the participation of more than just the self, since the other is seen as an equal with their own right to participate.

child. The level to which individuals allow authority to control their actions and reactions and the type of authority to which they respond are important parts of moral development not only because they are connected with the development of various stages of autonomy and personal responsibility, but also because of the dangers of the banality of evil and moral drift that can result from the confusion of living in a pluralistic society.

When people have not achieved moral autonomy, banal acts of evil due to the influence of malevolent authority are far more likely to occur. The banality of evil is a term used by Hannah Arendt (See Cooper or Arendt) while working as a reporter covering Adolf Eichmann's trial for war crimes against humanity. It refers to "evil that results from motives that are not in themselves wrong in a proper context but that seem excessively thoughtless, trite, or careless as moral motives in complex contexts that require a careful evaluation of right and wrong" (Cooper, 80). In the case of Eichmann, he was called banal because he followed the dictates of authority in the name of "duty" with no effort to evaluate or distinguish the differences between community level duties and universal moral duty.

Moral drift is related to the banality of evil, but it is not necessarily related to authority-sanctioned decisions, although the effort to please authority can quite often be a contributing factor. Moral drift is the slippery slope of ethics which results from a series of small decisions made without attention to where the small decisions are leading (Cooper, 77). It is responsible for a great deal of morally wrong behavior, that many times began with an apparently innocuous order from Authority but ended with a person participating in immoral behavior, and then the confession that shows they are startled by what they have been participating in. For a modern example, one might call to mind the

guards at Abu Ghraib prison and how they drifted into progressively more brutal behavior even though they were not evil people at the start, and the dismay they showed after the fact when they realized what they had done.

Perry's scheme explains how adolescent students move away from the egocentric tendency to rely solely on Authority, or the preconventional assumption that there is one answer that is right and the Authority is likely to have it. Perry focuses more on the adolescent shift to the new authority of peer pressure and the desire to please the local group by standing up to more traditional authorities. In either case, the similarities between Perry's scheme and Kohlberg's model are not coincidental. Each model stresses the importance of the authority figures, teachers and parents, to the original conceptions of morality. Thus, like Kohlberg, Perry's stage one, basic duality, assumes that all questions have one right answer, which the Authorities know and are responsible for teaching to others. It is relatively natural for people to bury their more selfish urges in order to receive the rewards of following conventional morality (such as the child who does not take his playmate's candy because doing so might result in losing his own candy), but when a person begins to follow the established mores of the group for reasons outside of personal convenience Perry agrees they have moved into Kohlberg's conventional level.

Moral agency is a muscle that needs to be stretched; a capacity that needs to be exercised, otherwise sophisticated moral agency will not develop. A person cannot wake up one day to find themselves at the final stage of being a morally autonomous being. Moral development is a process of growth. Thus, most people, guided by the wisdom of their community and a capacity for self-reflection that leads them from overly egocentric

motivation, eventually find themselves in conventional morality. They understand and cherish the norms and rules of their community and have an ethnocentric commitment to these norms. Because decisions about social-political issues are determined by local community standards, as long as the socially committed person stays within their community they can lead a productive, relatively stable moral existence.

However, we live in an increasingly globalized world, and the communities which we participate in are becoming more and more pluralistic. The local details of the morality of one culture's people is perhaps only about 40% applicable to another culture's people, and ethical decisions for everyone should not be the outcome of Venn diagrams or "common man[2]" judgments from only one locality. The community that is able to exist within an ethically ethnocentric bubble with no interactions with "the other" is an endangered species, if not already extinct. The growth of value diversity is leading to a tumult of confusion, uncertainty, and under-evaluated moral decisions.

The ethnocentric classroom environment is one in which little discussion is generated. This is because the community of the classroom feels pressure to agree with each other, or perhaps they do agree with each other, as in a small cult. Unlike the preconventional student, a conventional student does not agree because he wants the favor of his teacher or fears the consequences of speaking out against her. Rather, the conventional student has internalized the values of the group, identifies with those values, and sees him/herself as one with the group. So his/her responses will often be in agreement with the classroom community or the people from that community that he/she

[2] A claim by Lord Patrick Devlin of London, 1965, that morality should be determined by the feelings of the common man on the street and that "a society has the right to enforce the morality prevailing within it, irrespective of the critical soundness of that morality, for the sake of preserving social cohesion." *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford Reference Online, s.v. "public morality"

most identifies with. Instructors are faced with an entire classroom that finds agreement on the interpretation or response to a particular novel or question. This is admirable if the classroom community is healthy, troubling if it is a community based on rejection of the other. It is also not a problem to them as long as they don't want to discuss nuances, other possibilities, or to reach out to community members (students in the classroom) who have perhaps internalized an ethical system or interpretation that they are not really comfortable with.

Conventional level morality is not necessarily the product of peer pressure, although it might look like it. Peer pressure can be the result of egocentric level thinking, which acts in a particular way to elicit a particular response from the Authority figure, in this case the group whose approval is sought. Just as often, adherence to conventional morality does not feel like pressure at all, but is simply the internalized belief structure of the group to which the person either belongs or wishes to belong. People try to mold themselves into the community member they want to be considered to be[3] and so are less prone to exhibit qualities outside those of community members. For instance, a bright student who is prone to speaking up in discussion may become less likely to share their opinion aloud as they become comfortable with the classroom community, rather than more likely to speak up as instructors often assume, because talking aloud is not the norm in the classroom community, and so without conscious decision not speaking up evolves which is contrary to the desired behavior.

It may not be an ethical decision to choose whether or not to speak up during a class discussion, but to take the side of the unliked antagonist, or to defend the actions of an antihero might be. The classroom community setting has to be one in which people

[3] "Nice Girl, Good Boy" stage 3, level 2 of Kohlberg's model

feel comfortable enough with each other to share individual responses but still respect the other's right to share his/her beliefs. This sort of discussion between opposing points of view is the kind that can lead further up the developmental ladder.

Conventional morality is not simply made up of individuals trying to become idealized community members; although this is an important step. They have now prioritized and have placed their private wants beneath what is best for the community. This community could be very big or very small, but it is a necessary part of their dawning moral identity as "social" beings. That is, ethnocentricism is an important moral advance over egocentricism. The individual now understands that he cannot skip baseball practice simply because he feels like going to get an ice cream – the team needs his presence to practice to the fullest and the teams needs are more important than his private desire for ice cream.[4] However, just because he understands this does not mean he would sympathize with another baseball team needing the practice field in the morning because their usual evening time would not work. The ethnocentric needs of his own team trump consideration of what might be "right" or "fair" to a different ethnicity if the situation were reversed. However, as the boy continues to become invested in the baseball community he may come to see all members of all teams as important to being a baseball player, even though his own team is a rival to them during play. As a person decenters, their interests move further and further from the egocentricity of the preconventional stage, and begin to encompass a greater percentage of human beings. It is possible to transcend the ethnocentric level and take up a universal perspective that includes everyone, even if many people struggle with this developmental agenda.

[4] Of course, value priorities are presupposed and some personal needs can override or be employed, for instance, suppose he needed to go to the doctor. After all, he has a right to life, and the team needs its players healthy, and also it is in their best interest that he not pass the bug to anyone else.

The need for decentering to better fit a pluralistic society and a globalized world is fairly obvious. The ability to understand and defend the motivations of the text's antagonist is a compelling argument for decentering, but it is not the most pressing. In order to understand the world on a global level, people have to move beyond the confines of conventional level morality, to recognize the differences that exist within the community and then to recognize the greater sameness that exists side by side with the diversity. The postconventional level of morality is able to extend the sense of community developed at the conventional level, so as to encompass a wider range of people based on universal values that unite a shared humanity, or capacity for universal empathy. The person operating at the postconventional level not only understands but also cares about the abstract ideals of humanity (Cooper, 120f). This sort of enlightened, universal morality does not develop without help.

One developmental factor that is standard across models of development is the importance of the experience of disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is often a highly unpleasant experience during which individuals are faced with new troubling situations where the ethical principles that normally guide their decisions are no longer easily applied. Disequilibrium is a consequence of pluralism, since it leads to value diversity and conflicts that challenge the stable beliefs of a conventional order. Disequilibrium comes from being out of sync with such a challenging environment – it provides motivation for us to develop new skills that can help people transcend their previous ethnocentric orientations and perspectives so as to get back in a state of equilibrium (Cooper, 104). As the word implies, the individual who experiences disequilibrium loses their sense of stability or balance, and the feeling of belongingness or spirituality that

often accompanies membership in a community becomes tenuous, leaving the individual feeling alone and confused.

People are always making small adjustments to their world view and these adjustments are most frequent at the adolescent level when a variety of changes force an individual to confront his/her beliefs about the way the world works and to reconsider certain complex notions such as "love," "justice," "morality," "right," "wrong." Simply because a student is not taking steps that are immediately noticeable does not mean that they are not constantly redefining their world. Many high school students are facing the prospect of leaving home and entering adulthood, and many college students are facing the challenges of adulthood. If their everyday social encounter with disagreements over proper definitions for moral concepts were not enough, they receive countless instructions and new information from a variety of media sources, advice from new and often radically different Authority figures (remember your first "this is college/high school" speech?), and pressures to try to assimilate and/or reject certain patterns of meaning that they had previously been unaware of with those values they had already completely internalized.

Once individuals encounter a challenge to their current frame of reference development occurs (or fails to) based on how they respond to that challenge. If they transcend, then disequilibrium was a positive force that motivated them to decenter and develop. (Alternately a person may respond to the disequilibrium in any number of negative ways that halts or hinders development. The unhelpful responses will be discussed in greater detail later.) Perry summarized the wonder of the disequilibrium that leads to decentering by referring to it as the drama that accompanies "the variety and

ingenuity of the ways students found to move from a familiar pattern of meanings that had failed them to a new vision that promised to make sense of their broadening experiences (Skipper, 34).

In Perry's model, which focused heavily on the role of Authority (instructors being one of the main examples because Perry dealt specifically with students), disequilibrium occurs when the student encounters a multiplicity of Authorities who are poorly qualified to provide answers (perhaps because they do not know how to help students discover answers on their own they refrain from helping at all). Instructors may give diverse answers or vary their responses in ways that force students to abandon the concept of basic duality for more shades of grey. This may be represented in a professor who doesn't know the answer to a question, or perhaps answers an empirical question incorrectly according to the textbook. It may also be represented in various instructors disagreeing on the same issue, whether that issue is something fairly empirical or largely opinion based. The problem is enhanced when instructors refuse to engage in meta-level discussion about the phenomenon of authoritative disagreement. It is a mistake for authorities to point out problems and then end the discussion, when in fact that should be an invitation for discussion at the meta-level. (I will further discuss the issues of levels of discussion in a few pages.) Because these kinds of issues that call for judgment are more likely to engage students in the throes of the decentering process, teachers who are aware of this opportunity can capitalize on this in order to be more effective mentors inside and outside of the classroom.

The importance of discussing the nature of types of value judgment in the classroom, especially the literature classroom, cannot be underestimated. If the Authority

makes a point of introducing multiplicity into discussions about interpretation, context, and bias then the classroom will be more conducive to helping students decenter and progress in both healthy spiritual and moral development. Clarifying ways in which the Authorities can act as facilitators on these journeys and why it is so important that they do so is the ultimate aim of this thesis. Many times Authorities are responsible for students entering what Perry calls the multiplicity stages (See Perry, 1970) which is a very important part of the developmental process. But as students become bogged down in the possible "rights" that seem to accompany unevaluated subjective answers that flow from their preconceptions, teacher mentoring and a good teacher-student relationship, as well as carefully chosen curricula, are even more vital to encouraging positive decentering rather than allowing the student to stagnate in an indefinite state of negative disequilibrium. I am going to refer to disequilibrium that does not lead to further development as "negative disequilibrium." Negative disequilibrium should be avoided in the classroom, and instructors should be working actively to free students from its clutches. The purpose of disequilibrium is to encourage spiritual, cognitive and moral development and disequilibrium that fails to meet that purpose has no place in a safe learning environment.

The hope is that eventually students will move further away from egocentric focus on themselves and/or their ethnocentric focus on their very tight local community that is vital to their survival and be able to encompass and participate in larger communities. The decentering process is part of a quest for answers where students no longer rely only upon local Authorities for answers but rather seek to understand how the Authorities arrived at them in the first place. In short, the new authority becomes the

postconventional theoretical understanding that can be discussed so as to help people with diversity. However, there is a very important transitional stage on the way towards eventual postconventional (theoretical) consciousness that causes additional confusion in college students. This is a stage where it is possible for someone to get side tracked and delay their developmental transition. The stage is referred to as relativism.

Relativism is the belief that all answers are "relative" and is often a first transitional reaction to the realization that multiplicity exists. This reaction is a movement away from an orientation that is held by most conventional people. When confronted with a question about their meaning-making, conventional people will slip into what is called the standard-person problem. This problem occurs when a person takes their own experience as the standard for everyone, that is, it is the belief that everyone else is the same as "me," and that reasonable people will believe and feel the same way I do. The level of conventional morality supports this tendency by providing a community where everyone operates under the same cultural values and moral code. As a person decenters, however, awareness and exploration of a multiplicity of beliefs about "right" answers leads to an understanding that what is best for some may not be best for others because of their different background. In response to this awareness individuals enter disequilibrium and may react in several ways. Often they dismiss the other person as unreasonable/ unintelligent/ unenlightened etc. The other extreme is to adopt a viewpoint that stresses the inherent "rightness" of any choice, thereby validating their own as well as the all value systems that challenge it, no matter how contradictory.

In short, when people are asked to move outside of the standard-person problem bubble and realize that the things they believe are not necessarily adequate for all other

people, they have a tendency to be overcome by this revelation, at least for a little while. Most people are raised to believe in absolutes, and they base those absolutes around the community they belong to. As they mature and transcend beyond egocentricism the majority of people move into a tribal ethnocentric mindset that sets them up for the standard person problem. They begin to understand their actions as motivated by laws which are treated as absolute principles that are important to their community and assumed to be the absolute best for the entire world.

Decentering, so as to transcend the limitations of the standard person problem and strive for the stance of an objective observer when attempting to discover why there are certain principles that exist in all societies which make other cultures equally morally sound and perhaps even superior from the moral point of view, is an act which understandably can cause conflict with those who have not yet begun to decenter. The conception that there could be universal values that trump one's own tribal values is challenging and can cause confusion. To deal with this confusion people need to develop a metatheory[5] that can explain why the standard person's previous assumptions that treated laws as though they were moral absolutes were mistaken. In short, in the face of encounters with pluralism, local judgments or norms of right and wrong can no longer simply be assumed to be the absolute truths that can guide us – the principles of the community are now called into question and appear to be merely one option among many. Community members are left to wonder what they would feel and believe if they had been born into a different community. This uncertainty is cognitive disequilibrium as

[5] The ladder of abstraction for ethical decisions moves from simple acts to the background beliefs that justify them, in the hierarchy of justification the progression is: Act → Law → Principle → Theory → Methatheory (theory about theory) Cooper, 37

it occurs in social life – the same disequlibrium that literary experiences and the contradictory choices of Authorities can bring about.

It is because of this kind of transitional disequilibrium that community members (especially adolescents) come to distrust their feelings about universals or absolutes and begin to gravitate towards the metatheories of subjectivism, relativism, and pluralism. This can be a very dangerous time since people in transition are vulnerable to the manipulations of demagogues who promise a new certainty without testing their beliefs with critical public dialogue. However, with the help of Socratic authority figures who have already transcended this developmental place, students can gain new insights through the experience of multiplicity. New-found autonomy can emerge when the student learns to make value judgments after critical public dialogue, rather than blindly accept the idea that all principles are equal under the aegis of pluralistic tolerance and/or relativism. Relativism creates its own disequilibrium since people of conscience find it difficult to say that Hitler is just as right as his victims who are claiming they have a right to life. Some values are simply contradictory. In short, by experiencing the disequilibrium that comes with relativism one is motivated to take the final steps towards a positive decentering. Learning to make value judgments that reflect an autonomous moral capacity develops from using critical, reflective cross-cultural dialogue as part of the process of exploration, and this cannot be overlooked simply because of a desire for a seemingly smooth transition.

It is important to develop a postconventional sense of moral agency, because moral muddle can result if one has not developed an expanded, decentered worldview. The easy route is to simply accept a principal of uncritical super tolerance, but that

ultimately leads to a super-tolerant non-judgmental stance which halts meta-level discussion. Relativism is at least useful in that it is an attempt to develop a metatheory that can account for diversity. However, when confronted with pluralism there are many other unhelpful reactions that a person might have, ranging from conceptual bigotry (an effort to maintain the narrow worldview by ignoring the considerations that could lead to discourse), to future shock, to decidophobia, to moral cynicism (an orientation that assumes that even if higher ethical values do exist knowing them is unnecessary because people will always act on selfish motives regardless) (Cooper, 76). This sort of hopeless despair and cynical fatalism about moral decisions is the direct result of the confusion that comes with negative disequilibrium and disillusionment. Perhaps even more damaging then these reactionary responses, however, are the reductionist metatheories of subjectivism, emotivism[6], and cultural relativism, each of which assumes from various angles that there are no moral principles to be found in the world that could have transcendent status.

Subjectivism assumes that all moral values are actually just reflections of personal taste or the feelings of a specific individual, whether these feelings are egocentric in nature or not. Subjectivism does not allow for rational discourse about the moral status of actions, meaning that any action a subjectivist takes can be justified merely as another 'different subjective feeling.' The confusing nature of value diversity thus can lead to the very unintuitive response that a bully is justified in his decisions, because moral right is merely personal taste (Cooper, 91). However, as mentioned above, this will cause

[6] Emotivism is a subjectivist theory that claims all value judgments are only emotional responses which lack cognitive content.

disequilibrium as well, since one will be forced by social life to eventually establish socially justifiable priorities.

Cultural relativism is not as damaging a response as subjectivism because it employs some evaluative tactics that allow for value hierarchies within a given culture. However, it precludes the possibility of cross-cultural universals because it argues that ethical values can only be judged within the boundaries of the culture to which they are relative. Thus, there are no morally 'right' principles that transcend cultural boundaries because the metatheoretical stance of relativism precludes this option. Cultural relativism is not egocentric or even ethonocentric in nature, but those who follow its tenets are not able to break into postconventional thought because of the way they are sectioning off morality. Also, similar to the bully who protects himself with subjectivist theory, cultural relativism serves as a shield that can protect unjust cultural practices from critical commentary by the larger world, because relativists often claim that one outside of the tenets of a given community has no grounds for judging the actions within that community or of any other different community[7].

The ability to make value judgments that establish priorities among values calls for reflection about what is better, higher, truer, *more* right. This rational critical capacity which has evolved over thousands of years is what saves pluralism and tolerance from subjective relativism. It also allows us to critically discuss systems that we suspect are wrong even if those systems exist outside the parameters of our own community. The moral point of view[8] (MPofV) that is favored by philosophers in the ethical literature

[7] Treatment of females in other countries :: corporate policies in our own

[8] The moral point of view is favored by professional ethicists who work in pluralistic settings. In mainstream philosophical literature the moral point of view is based on a standard of impartiality that is

maintains that a transcendent moral judgment must strive to be impartial. That can only be achieved through cross cultural discussion that strives to find universally agreed upon good reasons for moral judgments, this kind of reason shows respect for all people who are affected by policy decisions (Cooper, 33). The goal now is to discover how this postcoventional capacity develops and how instructors can help to foster an environment that is conducive to the growth of this kind of moral point of view. Instructors should care whether or not the student's orientations to the world expands rather than shrinks in a bubble of confusion, despair and existential angst. The experience and discussion of literature, specifically certain types of literature,[9] can be especially useful in forwarding these goals.

One thing that teachers should be aware of concerning Kohlberg's three levels is that although people may be operating on one level fairly consistently, they may at any time act lower than their primary level in a given situation. Kohlberg's system allows for slips or "bad" judgments, because although he respects the correlation between intellectual capacity and moral understanding, he realizes that the reactions of individuals are complex and not dependent only on intellectual development.

Kohlberg argues that most people operate at the conventional level most of the time. However, some people never reach the conventional level, or get there only for brief snippets of time. Furthermore, each level consists of two stages; the first stage is an entry point into the level while the second stage indicates a greater level of understanding

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maintained by the following criteria: The MPofV1) rational according to public standards, 2) something that could be agreed to by everyone affected, ie: have universality, 3) subject to self-critical public debate, and 4) must promote empathy and respect among all people. (Cooper, 33)

[9] Types discussed in greater detail later, beginning on page 24

and sets the stage for a movement towards further decentering, or at least a full immersion in that level of moral reasoning.

What determines the rate at which a person "climbs" the ladder of moral understanding? Several factors are involved. As previously mentioned, both cognitive development and moral development are more likely to occur in people who are experiencing properly timed disequilibrium. Depending on a student's cognitive aptitude, a disequilibrium-inducing event need not be one they experience in a direct manner, which is why literature can play a vital role in moral development. The experience of other life-worlds, with their new conflicts and moral ambiguities will awaken in a person the need to assimilate the sort of ethical guidelines or understanding that would enable the person to integrate the new life-world, resolve the conflict, or clarify the ambiguity so as to achieve a new sense of equilibrium. Literature predisposes readers towards decentering whenever it endeavors to engender genuine concern for the other by making the story and its characters interesting and compelling.

It is easy to see how compelling literature can facilitate decentering in a person of high cognitive capacity and emotional stability. *Experiencing* rather than simply reading will begin a subconscious process that invites a reader to create and exist in an imaginative world that is ethically consistent not only with the rules of one's own community but also other communities, leading towards an ethical understanding that is increasingly universal in nature. James Baldwin spoke of this quality of literature: "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me the most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had

ever been alive" (qtd. in Huck, et al., 455). Experience of ethical dilemmas through literature is not only useful for those who have not learned to transcend the earlier levels of moral understanding; literature can also serve as an application of abstract ideas to concrete events in the life of characters, thus providing situations for a moral agent to experience and judge rather than keeping morality focused in abstruse principles. As an illustration, think about the way religious leaders use parables and stories to teach the lessons of their faith.

Teachers have a profound effect on when students seek enlightenment and how far they look for answers, as well as what answers they find (at least in the earlier stages of development when teachers are obvious representations of respected Authority). Teachers also influence whether students continue to read and explore value orientations different from their own. It is unsurprising, therefore, that they have an effect on students' moral and cognitive development and existential stability. "As the 'primary agents of socialization' peers and faculty members exert the most influence on students' academic and social concepts (Skipper, 36)."

In cultures based on oral storytelling, this authority is represented by those who pass on the stories, deciding what the younger generation needs to know as well as what lessons they should be getting from the information they are being told. In the classroom setting, the curriculum is decided by the teacher, administration, and faculty, and the student oftentimes does not look beyond the texts provided or classroom discussions initiated until much later in their own development. Since one of the primary factors in later development is the interaction with the teaching Authority figures and the meaning-making that arises from the discussion of the chosen literature in classrooms, it is

unsurprising that "studies over the past four decades has continued to show that the teacher is the critical factor in success in learning" (Braunger and Lewis, 55). It is vital that instructors recognize that there are also lessons about values that they are teaching, intentionally or not.

Furthermore, instructors play another vital role in development that is barely affected by their literature choice or the discussions that stem from it, but that do affect student's perceptions of both. English instructors are one of several groups of teachers most likely to interact with the personal lives of their students through journals, personal reading responses, classroom discussion, learning logs, and extended paper assignments. Because of the frequency of personal encounters that involve reflection on values, the teacher-student relationship between English students and their professors is often much stronger, with a rapport being developed much earlier in the semester than is the case in large, impersonal, empirically based classes.

The precise reason that value neutrality is so difficult in the English classroom is also why it is important that instructors are careful to examine the messages they are sending – the more the student trusts in their authority as well as the assumption that that teacher has a good will, the less likely they are to begin questioning and reflecting, unless they are encouraged to do so. The student may come to internalize without reflection the teacher's opinions and ideas about literature not only because of the way it is taught and the authority of the one teaching it, but also because of the individual's personal regard for that teacher.

To summarize, because moral development is linked to cognitive development, which increases as students encounter various information and problems to solve in their

classes; and because moral development can be greatly affected by the decentering that can come from the study of literature due to the amount of judgeable, relatable, material; and because instructors serve as the authority who influences the initial responses that students have to the world and the new experiences of it within the classroom, it is reasonable to assume that the way instructors teach their students will affect the way their students learn and develop in general.

LITERATURE WITH EXISTENTIAL THEMES

One way to address ethical and developmental concerns in the classroom is to carefully choose literature with existential themes. Because many people do not quite understand existentialism as a philosophy, they tend to view it as a nihilistic approach to the universe. On first glance, such an approach might seem ill-suited for curing negative disequilibrium, but closer examination will prove otherwise. It is possible for a text to deal with existential themes and concerns without falling into the nihilistic assumptions that accompany the common conception of existential philosophy. In all likelihood most literature that deals with ethical themes is also working within the basic precepts of existentialism because the concerns addressed by existentialism are fairly inescapable in any normative study of human socio-psychological development. The primary "given" of existentialism is the inevitable confrontation with the meaning of one's own existence as one proceeds along the path of human development. The claim is that adequate understanding of one's own existence requires the necessity of viewing one's existence as being prior to the *essential definition* (essence) that describes one as an individual being. In short, the existential motto is: "Being precedes essence." This means that the main existential task of an individual is to choose an essence, that is, the meaning of one's life.

The study of existentialism forces recognition of fundamental ethical issues because its chosen subject matter concerns the normative meaning of individual lives. In order to contemplate the state of being that is personal existence, people must become aware of their place in the world and be able to "dwell upon unpleasant subject matter: nothingness, anxiety, dread, anguish, absurdity" (VanCleve, 28). These topics are not the

subject matter of conventional happy people, but of those who have come to recognize during the struggle to overcome disequilibrium, that nonbeing is a necessary component of being, thus, being aware of the phenomenon of existence, life, requires that humans must also be paradoxically become aware of (and responsible for) the meaning of nonexistence, death.

Existentialism has been called a "primarily literary philosophy" because the exploration of its themes and tenets often finds better outlet in literature than in abstract theory or conventional day-to-day life (Barnes, iv). The confusion that exists when one first considers existentialism has much to do with the popular misconceptions that relate it to *nihilism*. Existentialism thrives on the "strong feeling and belief that the external world of things, ideas, and people are absurd beyond belief, and beyond endurance" (Barnes, vi). Oftentimes textbook definitions that attempt to capture this philosophy, which is designed to confront the confusion that results when trying to understand the essence of human consciousness, must necessarily fail to convey the underlying "answer" that existentialism offers. Part of this lies in the fact that the "answer," which is highly individualized in nature, results from the choices a person makes while living his/her life, and may not even have the form of an answer for those who do not live that life.

One prominent existential philosopher, Karl Jaspers, claims that every positive is accompanied by a negative, and that all happiness must be balanced with an understanding of the grief that represents its other side. Since "only man is open to liberty, possibility, transcendence and hence to shipwreck," his true "purpose" must be aligned with confusion regarding that purpose (Barnes, 72). Existentialism stresses the importance of individualized solutions to questions about meaning and purpose in life.

Each person's unique position in the world is the result of all previous attempts to take responsibility for the authenticity of his or her actions and choices.

The individualized quality of existentialism might make it seem similar to subjectivism. This is not a completely inaccurate comparison, since the concerns of existentialism do tend to mirror subjectivist concerns in many ways. These concerns emphasize the importance of the individual's participation in their own meaning making. In short, authenticity can not be imposed from without as we find in people at the conventional level of existence. Authentic meaning in one's life must be created by the conscious choices and actions of living individuals – i.e., existence precedes essence. It is highly unlikely that all people can be represented by one set of conventional laws and still be free to be the 'manufacturers' of their own destiny. Both subjectivism and existentialism then *could* be viewed as trying to explain why individuals must assert their authority over their own existence – to give personalized meaning to their actions by choosing them specifically, rather than leaving them to be predetermined by conventional societal mores. The goal of the existential protagonist is to define his own world, and many of the effective ones do this while creating a value system that is not actually egocentric so much as an individualized piece of existential ethical truth. As Sartre says, existentialism is a humanism, which means that the existential hero must consider the effect that his personal choices have on the right of other people to make their own existential choices. This existential ethical theme is missing in subjectivism.

Kierkegaard, the first existentialist by many accounts, tried to encourage his readers to participate imaginatively in situations where "decisive choices were demanded and where there were never enough good reasons for saying that one alternative was

absolutely right and the other wrong" (Greene, 64). It's no coincidence that an engaging classroom discussion often concerns a topic that shares this criterion, since teachers like to emphasize those places where there are dilemmas that have no easy solutions and pass over the many areas where there is universal consensus. Existentialism thrives on this awareness and concern over moral ambiguity. Human disequilibrium, ethical dilemmas, and the conflicting obligations that concern them exist at the roots of existentialism. The existential reader must come to terms not only with his own existence and the possibility of its absence but also with a conscious awareness of the affect of his choices on his own meaning and the existential freedom of others. Only by developing a meta-level understanding of life's complexities can he confront and make sense of the absurdity and grief that life so often represents. Van Cleve Morris, professor of educational philosophy, sums up the ethical nature of existentialism nicely:

> This, after all the nausea has cleared away, is the overpowering theme of Existentialism: the project of living one's life in such a way as to be deserving of something better than nothingness and obliteration; to confront nothingness, to *deny* nothingness, by filling it up with a life that ought never to be lost or annihilated. (29)

Thus, to encounter existential themes is to meaning-make; existential literature serves a dual purpose by providing ethically ambiguous scenarios and plots and also by forcing examination of the greatest source of negative disequilibrium: the fact that existence ends in nonexistence. This knowledge can make it difficult for someone already in confusion to feel as though their decisions have any meaning or relevance, which can lead to responses like subjectivism, relativism, and nihilism.

In many existential texts it seems that the protagonist operates on a very egocentric level as a being alienated from society. This is not because of inadequate cognitive development; in fact, oftentimes the protagonist is extremely smart, and that is

where his trouble begins. The protagonist feels separate from society because he is asking questions which other conventional people have not yet begun to ask. The existential hero generally determines that the rules of society do not apply to him because he feels they are for conventional people and he has transcended this comfortable unquestioning orientation. Again, this may seem highly egocentric or subjective, but usually the existentialist text will provide an "answer" that transcends that immature orientation and is beyond what the first experience suggests. Existentialist protagonists must work their way through disequilibrium, sometimes to emerge with a discovered answer, and other times becoming entangled in existential angst from which they fail to emerge. In either case there is a clear lesson, or perhaps better, a lot of room for speculating about what an answer to the existential confrontation might be.

"How can I explain my place or part in the world?" "Who am I, what is my purpose?" These questions are very personal, but they are not necessarily egocentric, they are the kind of questions adolescents ask when they begin to move into the infamous transition called an "identity crisis" – which is one of the first examples of an existential crisis in human development. Egocentric persons do not feel doubts about the meaning of their identity; they simply determine who they are by what they want and by what is best for them. Someone who wonders about their place in the *world* is rather seeking not to lose their identity in the midst of decentering forces. They want to be useful, not only as a community member, but as a feeling being *in the world.* Their problem is that they are not quite sure how to go about doing that. Many times the task of decentering requires a loss of identity for a time, which results in disequilibrium. Few people can

experience the way they understand things changing without it amending their perception of themselves as well.

The "who am I and what am I here for?" is a stage that most people undergo, not once, but many times during major life transitions. One of the most obvious and identified points is adolescence, and society will oftentimes call this uncertainty a 'natural part of development.' Many people recognize this step, although not as many are able to see its roots in the disequilibrium that is caused by pluralism. Sometimes the searching individual can find an identity within a group and be content, and as a society we are generally accepting of this end to the quest. The person is not motivated by solely egocentric factors, nor are they constantly on edge from existing in a state of disequilibrium. However, until people begin to identify with the universal human community, globalization and pluralism will still work to break down their comfort barriers by exposing them to things outside their local community experience.

Existential texts like Albert Camus' *The Plague,* Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov,* or Sartre's *The Wall* all offer different starting places and points of considerations to readers on a quest for identity and an understanding of the big Truth. However, many times these texts are considered too advanced to be given to students when they are first experiencing their own identity crisis. What students may need is not more doubt but the stability that comes with increased ethical awareness (even awareness of conflict, because disequilibrium can be felt without being identified) that helps smooth the decentering experience. This is where books that have not necessarily been hailed as "existential" because they do not seem as intellectually or

philosophically sophisticated are going to prove their usefulness as existentially themed literature that can help the young on their existential journey.

Existential angst, or what might be called negative disequilibrium, shares symptoms with a number of mental health maladies that are known to plague adolescents in great numbers. Depression, anxiety, thoughts of suicide, mood swings, temporary god complexes, and generalized feelings of discomfort and disassociation can all be tied to the confusion about purpose and meaning that is existential angst. Existential crises are not abnormal, and occur many times throughout a person's life as they follow the cycle of equilibrium, to disequilibrium, to equilibrium, to disequilibrium, back to equilibrium, etc. For children and adolescents, however, existential crises can be much more devastating than for mature adults. The young have fewer resources to help them deal with crises and will need more nurturing from adult teachers. The "problem novel" of the current era can serve as a way to help them confront troubling and confusing themes in a safe environment like the classroom (as long as the classroom has a mature and understanding teacher, willing and able to help guide them through their confusion and despair.)

The problem novel is a relatively recent development in young adult fiction, especially in its current incarnation. One common misconception is to mistake most or all of young adult fiction as a problem novel. The problem novel aims to be "realistic fiction" and often involves dark, semi-taboo topics as "cutting" (self-mutilation), suicide, abuse, parental abandonment and neglect, eating disorders, and moderate to severe mental illness. Sheila Egoff, a children's literature critic, characterizes the problem novel as having, among other things, a protagonist who "is alienated from the adult world, and often from peers as well," a first-person narrative, an urban setting, and parents who are

absent—"either physically or emotionally" (Gilman). Some adults feel that these novels are "too dark" and that their themes are inappropriate for their target age groups. One mother, and professor, voices her worries that for families and lives with all their "parts more or less functioning" the possible "effect[s] of hitting a kid with stories about abandonment and loss" (Feinberg). She further argues that texts which are meant to "help children enlarge their frames of reference while seeing the world from another perspective" often leave them feeling weighted down, depressed, anxious and sad. This is the opposite of the hoped-for result, but it does not negate the usefulness of problem novels. It does, however, reinforce the importance of the helpful authority in navigating the maze of development. An authority who can take the time to discuss the implications of the themes of the novel and to turn those themes into a learning experience focused around decentering of the kind that would be stimulated by a "functioning" relationship. With proper discussion, despair can be avoided and the reader can be turned toward hope which will foster the kind of empathy and understanding mentioned above without serving up "too much, too often, too early" (Feinberg).

When used properly with focused guidance and moral attention, problem novels can reach adolescent readers more effectively than many other kinds of literature. These novels can get them interested, concerned, and, most importantly, critically engaged in thinking, questioning, and meaning-making. This is because these texts focus specifically on the sorts of issues that are on these students' minds. Even in the case of well-adjusted, fully-functional, and rosy home environments, adolescents will doubtless encounter plenty of these issues through their friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. For those students who have a more direct knowledge of these topics, an ever-increasing

percentage[10], these books offer them an outlet through which they can come to terms with their sorrow, frustration, feelings of powerlessness, pain, fear and, most of all, lonely isolation. When used properly, the texts can be a friend, comforting, validating, and providing answers, help, even friendship. Discussion of the themes in a safe environment allows students to confront some of their problems with the sympathetic ear of an authority who, by helping them make sense of the text, may be able to help them make some sense of their personal difficulties, or simply provide the adult support that will make their transcendence less painful.

Some have referred to the use of problem novels as "bibliotherapy," but they wonder about their true helpfulness. This is because it is not only the experience of the text, but the personal meaning and moral messages that are derived from the text that will determine its true usefulness to both education and development. While there may be some people who can decenter through the experience of the text without engaging in an intersubjective, critical dialogue about its implications, they are not the standard. Many people, when they find a book that they absolutely love, feel the need to discuss it with others, even when the book is unassigned pleasure-reading that requires no more investment than they choose to give. This drive to communicate stems from our social nature. Even when we make meaning by interacting solely with a text, that meaning is something we want validated in our community. We wish to find other people to discuss our new-found revelations, to listen to our ideas, and to respond, question, argue, agree (or even disagree). For the younger reader this stage of discussion, while it may not be as

[10] See the Statistical Handbook on the American Family by Bruce Chadwick and Tim Heaton for some specific examples.

sought out at first, is even more important – it is imperative to the development of a decentered consciousness that meaning-making be accompanied by dialogue.

There are many critics of problem novels who have a number of very valid concerns (such as those mentioned above) about their subject matter, portrayals, and audience. However, when properly addressed, many of these concerns should give teachers relatively few problems accessing the useful aspects of the literature in their classrooms. One of the concerns mentioned by several of these critics was that problem novels are not good literature. Recently when I was at the International Reading Association conference in Atlanta, Georgia, one of the presenters who was an author himself mentioned that at least ninety percent of the books on the market weren't good literature. He wasn't really telling us anything we didn't know, but his follow-up was what made the difference. He said something that resembled (roughly paraphrased) the following: "That's why you're here though, because you are teachers who care about that other 10%, about finding it, and making it available to your students." Of course some of the problem novel options are not good literature – the genre has become very popular and mainstream, which means that while there is a lot of easily accessible and new material that deals with ever-current issues there is also a need for weeding and evaluating before an instructor takes a problem novel into the classroom.

In one of her articles, Sheila Egoff refers to the problem novel as the "mockingbird" of life and literature in one of her articles. She says that they are a "beguiling imitation" of the "real thing," but that they "are not literature because they do not extend a reader's experience; indeed they put blinkers on it. They are mimicking life, not enriching it." She doubts that problem novels have "breadth beyond the immediate

problem," or that they come from a "fine, rich, well-stored mind" or have any hope of "convey[ing] real life" (Egoff, 245, 240). Her points have merit, but they also require some deliberate overlooking of certain developmental aspects of problem novel literature. Several critics of the problem novel condemn its lack of realistic substance, while contradictorily pointing to its realistic portrayal of certain aspects of life. The problem, generally stated, seems to be one of being stuck in an immediate point, rather than having overarching meaning. However, the problem novel, with its immediate applicability and specifically-situated conflicts, rather than being an example of vague, amorphous existential encounters, is more accessible for many adolescents. Furthermore the specificity of its themes do not have to preclude overarching existential implications. Again, the challenge is to find the text that will do the most for the student, in terms of both cognitive and moral development and problem novels are a good option, but they are not the only one.

When choosing a book from the "problem novel" genre, teachers should find one that offers a message of hope, an answer, or some sort of triumph. The story does not have to be a happy one, and the problem does not necessarily have to be solved in order for the text to have merit. However, if the protagonist can find a light, an answer, a friend or mentor in the form of a helpful adult, a commiserating buddy, or a way out and away from the bad situation than there is a message of strength and hope. Just because that message is not the same one that earlier incarnations of children's literature may have sent does not mean that it is any less valid. The idea that we may be moving away from traditional children's themes represents just one of several misconceptions about the "problem novel."

It has been argued that before the problem novel, dubbed the "loss of innocence" in Children's Literature, children's literature was an attempt to define what the society would ideally like for its children. Gail Murray, author of *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood,* points out that in the move away from idealized realism to the problem novel era, society

> Recognized that children could not always be protected from the dangers and sorrows of real life; they might be better prepared to cope with pain if adults did not try to protect them from it.… The boundaries that had protected children and adolescents from adult responsibilities throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century became much more permeable.… Such previously defined adult issues as sexuality and suffering entered the realm of childhood. Or, as Anne Macleod sums up: "By the middle of the 1960s, political and social changes leaned hard on the crystal cage that had surrounded children's literature for decades. It cracked, and the world flowed in. (Murray and Macleod, as qtd. In Feinberg)

The realism in the problem novel reflected the tumultuousness of an increasingly complicated way of life due to the collapse of the insular community and the rise of pluralism. Later the novels would tell the stories of children in other countries, reflecting the trends of pluralism on the global level, and sowing seeds of tolerance and empathy for those who are culturally different. Simply because the novels tackle immediately relevant social problems (as their names imply) does not make their thematic impact any less significant than more "child-appropriate" texts of earlier eras. Furthermore, the realism of the texts may reflect the loss of innocence in children's literature, but it is not the loss of innocence amongst its readers, merely a reflection of the changing society, which in familiarity can arguably offer some solace.

Bibliotherapy, Feinberg warns, must be approached with caution, as must most things that are important. Literature is not a self-help clinic, but it can provide very important experiential components for readers. It can provide solace, escape,

perspective, friendship, mentoring, life lessons, or merely a story. Hopefully, if the text is worthy, the student ready, and the teacher prepared, it will be a little bit of all of the above. And even the darkest of problem novels, when approached from the right angle and with the right attentions and discussions, can serve a purpose that ultimately implies hope: normative moral guidelines, directives towards a just society, indignation, outrage, empathy, and a drive to improve that which is lacking and to fix that which is broken.

Feinberg's article ends with the assertion that she has found the absent component in the problem novel. She claims that they all lack an open destiny, which she explains by quoting an unnamed Grace Paley story:

> It's from a line in a Grace Paley story. She describes how she hates stories that move from point a to point b, toward an ending that's fixed before starting out. You know, contrived. She says she hates that absolute line between two points"—and then I lower my voice, and recite—"'… not for literary reasons,' she says, 'but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life (Feinberg).

It is my opinion that a problem novel does not necessarily preclude an open destiny, and that certain problem novels, for certain people, and may in fact offer it. However, the problem novel is misunderstood as a genre, much like existential literature. Like existentialism, it tends to be viewed negatively because of the sort of dark themes and existential angst that is explored, not merely glossed over or shoved under the metaphorical carpet. That being said, even with open destiny, the subject matter that tends to be explored in these novels, is not necessarily healthy in large doses. Day in, day out, with no variety and no critical discussion to place the literature in a broader context, it is fairly likely that students would indeed come to despair in their English class, as Feinberg reports of her son. So, in response, there are other types of literature that offer similar benefits, but which, because of the way they deal with realism, tend to offer more

visible "open destiny." This is literature with general existential themes that lead in the direction of postconventional consciousness.

Some of what is sometimes called "fringe-genre" literature is the most rich, engaging, beautiful work that authors can produce or readers could hope for. This literature is called "fringe" however, because it is not typically cannon, and, occasionally contrary to reality, is believed to be enjoyed by only a small portion of readers. The authors of the referential text Children's Literature in the Elementary School, who devote a good portion of their volume to the contemporary realism novel note that "This [human-ness and fuller understanding of themselves and their own potential] is not a function unique to contemporary realism. Other types of books can show children a slice of the world. Some fantasy is nearer to truth than realism…" (454,455). Indeed, fantasy literature has a lot to offer, and can have all the perks of a problem novel while sharing few of the downsides.

Fantasy and Science Fiction are both fringe genres and they often get lumped together because of similarities in writing style, theme, and a frequent tendency to overlap. As fringe genre literature both have a lot to offer in terms of metaphorical extensions and social commentary. Fantasy literature particularly makes use of moral dilemmas, and tends to feature protagonists who, as the books progress, become very self-aware of their moral agency. Science fiction, oftentimes dealing with futuristic or altiverse reflections of society is more blatant in its commentary and engages readers in social criticism via empathy with the protagonists. These are generalizations, but useful

ones; they make it fairly apparent how even stereotypical fringe genre literature has a lot to offer as ethical texts (and oftentimes existential) texts.

As for open destiny, few genres are better equipped to provide that than the fantasy/sci-fi genre which can manage to do it while still tackling dark themes and controversial topics. Many young adult fantasy stories feature protagonists from our world who find themselves escaping from unpleasant home situations (like those that are "too much" in the problem novel) and finding themselves in a world where they can be in control and make a difference. Later the protagonist will often return to the world that had previously been a source of despair with a new outlook and understanding of his own existential choice and authenticity. Other fantasy novels deal with worlds that are not our own but still manage to portray, vividly and accurately, some of the most emotionally *real* journeys and decisions. These may be about social issues, or about realizations that conscious choice can have more than one form.

Sometimes the text will provide this and more, such as Mercedes Lackey's *The Last Herald Mage.* Vanyel, the protagonist, while being the hope of his country, must struggle with the hatred of his family, his feelings of isolation, the loss of his soul-mate, his own homosexuality, and his visions of a death he cannot avoid. Vanyel's budding sense of moral agency propels him down a line of destiny towards a horrible end, but by the end of the trilogy he has come to terms with, and taken control of, his destiny. He does not seek to change his fate, because he consciously chooses the life that would lead him there, thus the apparent predestination becomes instead an exercise of moral autonomy, free will and conviction. And, of course, in the end there is something more

waiting for Vanyel that the reader is able to experience through the text; but even if there weren't the story would not be one of existential despair, but of existential heroism and hope.

Possibly the most important thing for a teacher to remember when selecting texts for the classroom is to offer as much variety and as many options as possible, for a number of reasons. Not every text is going to reach every student. Some students may feel that the problem novel is oppressive, but find hope of life within the pages of a fantasy novel. Another student may feel that the fantasy text is too far-fetched, which will keep him or her from extending his or her empathy for the text's protagonist. Some students will respond best to archetypal stories, while others will find that which is less familiar (in template) the most moving. Some students will enjoy classic or canonized texts, while the language and time distance may alienate others. Teachers must be able to weed through countless books to find the gems that will convey an ethical imperative and lead a student to moral development and higher understanding. Not only that, but they have to be able to do this for a variety of genres, so that they can reach a greater number of students. Also, it is important that the subject matter and approach does not become too static to have impact (eventually, the same stock situations, conflicts, and resolutions will begin to lose their affective power). Another reason to add variety (besides that it is the spice of life) is that students will respond better to required reading if they have a say in it. If at all possible to do so, let the class (or even the individual students) choose between one of two books, perhaps each dealing with the same theme but from a different background and approach. For instance, both the "problem novel" *Cut* by Patricia McCormick and the fantasy/science fiction *Virtual Mode* by Piers Anthony deal with

issues of self-mutilation and depression in adolescents, but the themes are dealt with in very different ways. By granting students options teachers are simultaneously less likely to alienate them with "required" reading, and more likely to engage their interest (and investment) in at least some of the classroom selections.

Taste and local conventions are important during the development of early individual identity, and they are pieces of individual truth, but the last piece, that capital T sort of truth, remains hidden until disequilibrium forces the individual to go looking for it. Truth with a capital T, the big one, cannot be subjective, and yet it must be subject-achieved. That is, Truth cannot be a matter of personal taste, nor can it be the standard, the norm, the conventional society-chosen law or principle unless the society happens to be an advanced postconventional society that has learned to make room for individual and group diversity. Of course we are still struggling to outline the boundaries of that kind of society, and utopian literature often deals with this theme.

The truth with a capital T is what people in existential crises are searching for, but it is not something that can be created by one person, for that would make it ultimately subjective, relativistic, a lower case truth. Truth must be *discovered* through cross cultural intersubjective investigation of the things which already exist, sought out in the value systems that are part of all societies. Like the existentialist hero, the individual must understand the societal system in order to have any hope of restructuring their piece of it. In short, an individual cannot attain Truth alone, his or her discovery must come in response to something already in place and be part of an intersubjective search with other existential heroes. For this to occur, the systems in place must be given proper respect and tolerance while still being open to criticism, suggestion, and question. On either side

of the road to decentering there is trouble – one side is too open an environment which fosters theories with no applicability to real situations – theories where sadists and bullies are as justified in their actions as saints. The other side is too rigid, too afraid to explore the area outside its bounds because those boundaries are what the local community is based on, and the community does not wish to tolerate individuals who are trying to decenter. This is the side of conceptual bigotry and stifled growth.

It is so important that instructors provide an environment where students can walk between these sides, down a path that allows them freedom to explore but doesn't let them wander alone. This isn't to say that some people wouldn't make it through without the instructor's help, but instructors are still obligated to offer assistance, especially in the field we call "humanities" – otherwise what is the point of having an instructor, are they there only to cause confusion rather that offer help in finding a path to resolution? All people *should* be willing to aid others, but especially instructors - they must understand the importance of their position of authority, and of the unspoken judgments and beliefs they pass on. Those who have the privilege of receiving the respect and regard of those who rely upon them for knowledge about the way things are and how they work have a duty to treat that respect and regard with care. Their obligation is to fulfill the role of facilitator and to allow for discussion of the concept of a higher truth without engaging in propaganda. Instructors must not pretend that there is no answer, rather they need to impress upon their students that the answer will only make sense if they can discover it for themselves while engaging in critical dialogue.

Existential and ethical literature should do several things for its readers. It should pinpoint a dilemma of consequence whose theme will often be related to the human

understanding of existence and the world. It should also further clarify the complexities of an issue, since people experience it either by considering an example of proper or improper reaction (and the consequences therein) or by discussing the issue in a way that grants further insight into the options. It needs to provide characters whose stories and lives are so compelling that readers can experience the uncertainty of the protagonist, and share in his or her possible triumph over despair as they read.

If literature succeeds in these tasks it will leave an indelible mark upon the mind of the reader, since the reader's impressions about how to react and experience the ethical dilemma (and the world) will be altered. Although this alteration may be subtle it will become stronger the more students are exposed to ethical literature, giving them a base on which to stand as they confront their own ethical and existential crises. They may not be aware of having been prepared for some of life's hardest lessons, but they will find themselves connecting to a character or a story that resonates within and can be recalled later when they encounter similar circumstances. The study of ethics is intersubjective; literature can provide intersubjective *truth* if not concrete "reality." The student of literature in a classroom where ethical value judgments are explored is a lucky student indeed; they may not have all the answers, but they will at least have considered the questions and become aware that there are ways to proceed in searching for answers.

APPLICATION STRATEGIES

How can a literature teacher help students decenter and avoid negative disequilibrium? There are exercises that can be useful, especially in the hands of a teacher who has carefully planned course content and is actively trying to facilitate development and/or encourage critical dialogue. Critical literacy is very important to development, because it encourages students to question and analyze, without which the best of lessons can fall flat. So, application ideas for ethical judgment, meaning-making, and moral development in the classroom must necessarily begin with ways to get students engaged and thinking critically. One approach that is risky but looks promising is deconstruction.

Deconstructing Bias

In terms of critical thinking and critical literacy, deconstruction *as an exercise* can be extremely useful. Ultimately deconstruction must be approached with caution in learning situations, because it can conflict with the goals of literature (at least as they are discussed in this thesis). To read is to make meaning, and to read good literature is to be consistently revising the ideas that we already have about the world. This is the reason reading requires value judgment. Deconstruction asks readers to separate themselves from meaning, not in a way that decenters but in a way that isolates. Readers are to examine the inherent assumptions that are being made about the meaning of symbols in their lives, language, history and society. This could be an exercise in critical thinking if at the end there was an attempt to reconstruct the deconstruction. To try to reject meaning, however, and not merely become more aware of the assumptions behind the

symbols of meaning or to extend them, is an entirely different thing. Light and dark are fairly universal symbols and to try and pretend that a person can use them in a neutral fashion by separating oneself from the background biases that have been placed upon these concepts can be similar to claiming that meaning is a subjective property that can be created by one individual. That would make the terms of language arbitrary personal choices rather than the result of societal development. So a person cannot use light as a symbol for being unenlightened, nor can a person use dark as a symbol for enlightenment.

Deconstruction, like subjectivism, can be very harmful to the search for Truth. If everything is just arbitrary or biased symbology resulting from a dominant culture then it undermines the search for core human responses. This can lead to the self-defeating reactions to pluralism mentioned above, eg. Decidophobia, cynicism, nihilism. The meaning that individuals often derive not only from literature but also from the world is diluted by doubt and the search for purpose disappears. So, while I strongly advocate the use of some deconstructive ideas in the classroom to create the positive disequilibrium that will get students critically thinking, I believe that a teacher has to be very careful how they use deconstruction or they will end up teaching a hidden curriculum of arbitrary relativism instead of literature.

Exercise: Deconstructing Symbology

The following illustrates one exercise involving symbolic meaning and language bias that might get some very interesting responses and generate a lot of thought in the classroom without the risk of creating a meta position of relativism. First, a teacher should introduce briefly the idea of deconstruction, in simple terms, by pointing out that

there is bias that exists in language. Next the teacher can introduce the idea of a group of people who wish to exist in a community as individuals but without taking on any prior deconstructible social identity. For instance, you tell students to imagine that they are people who have decided to create a community in which they are all equal in status, but separate people without prior meaning attached to who they are – they are just pieces of a whole. They have decided to disassociate themselves from the outside society and so have abandoned their original names in favor of labels that have not been socially constructed. The task of the class then is to discover a system whereby they can identify each other, but without setting up any inherent biases or previous meaning. If the class seems utterly confused, ask them whether or not this new group of people could simply be numbered "1, 2, 3 …" to create a value neutral labeling system. If they have understood any of the discussion their immediate response should be negative, since such a system would imply the superiority of certain individuals who receive preferred numbers. Letters would yield the same result even if randomized, for instance no A, but rather a B, an N, a K, an L, and a P would still contain assumptions. With these examples the students should come up with some really interesting ideas and also find themselves critically thinking and deconstructing the background assumptions behind each other's ideas.

One answer that they might come to is that of random nouns. This was one option that my students discussed for quite a while. Some nouns, they decided, would not work: "light, dark, shadow, candy, and almost any noun that can double as an adverb. However, what about words for things like "tree, cat, river, water, rainbow, grass?" Some of these terms seemed to be more neutral to the students, but after discussion it

became clear that there could still be judgments made based on the social construction of the terms. A person with the label "tree" might be a strong, steadfast, individual, perhaps aged, or highly traditional, maybe a bit stubborn. Any sort of animal word quickly met elimination because it could not be separated from the characteristics that were assumed to be attached to the class of animal and the various symbologies (such as the zodiac) that built upon those. Rainbows might remind people of Christian mythology – they might symbolize promise or simply the joy of sun after a rain, or maybe they would make someone think of leprechauns and pot of gold. Bodies of water tend to imply purity, femininity, youthfulness, cleansing. The idea of the exercise was not to discover a truly neutral system, but to learn something about the way people think and react and how the things that they have done before will determine their base assumptions about the meaning of terms, and that all communication requires intersubjective understandings of meaning. This sort of exercise leads very well into discussion about writing and reading because it heightens awareness of the necessity for having judgment contained in language. Students often expect that complex ideas cannot be value neutral, but they rarely think of the judgments that are also behind simple word choice.

Exercise: Deconstructing Connotation

A discussion on connotation and denotation, using a thesaurus and a charted value-line on the blackboard can also be very useful. For instance, judging uses of a word and trying to come to a consensus about the emotional impact supposedly "synonymous" or similar words might have. There is a difference between phrases like "father" and "daddy," or "house" and "home." Prior judgment is already such a large part of language use that with the right sort of guidance students can learn to employ critical thinking, that

is, become sensitive to background value judgments in every classroom discussion. This sensitivity to value laden context should expand their moral and cognitive abilities and ensure a lively discussion that will be more productive, rather than just circular.

I mentioned this exercise not because it teaches value judgment but because it makes students more aware of the judgments that exist in all of their assumptions about language (and thus the world, which we experience intersubjectively through language). It is a great starter activity for breaking down certain assumptions about neutrality and objectivity, and it also thoroughly engages students. For instance, at the start of any discussion an instructor can provide an idea or statement which then can be broken apart or connected. Deconstructing ideas and language can be an important critical thinking marker that indicates higher cognitive awareness. The ability to connect ideas and discuss those connections is not only critical for deconstruction but also is important to higher moral capacity and "spiritual" well-bring. When making sense of the world things have to be connected rather than simply isolated, they must be woven together rather than only broken apart. The function of deconstructing has to serve reconstructing, a more sophisticated, more aware, new set of connections. Students can be architects of meaning or morticians of meaning; I believe that a picture of the world that denies its complexity and underlying assumptions is incredibly unhelpful to our students. Likewise I believe that to show them only that which is corrupt, biased, broken, and artificial is to spread the disease of disequilibrium that leads to cynicism, nihilism and banality. Since this disease is already a rampant one, instructors need to help students find meaning in the world, rather than bury it.

I ask my students to be aware of their biases and of the times when the language, diction, cadence, punctuation, flow, formation, etc. affects them so that they can become aware of how meaning is constructed. Growth is not arbitrary, but a construction – a deconstruction should not destroy growth, only reveal the path that leads to it. Instructors should not want students to view the text as a collection of parts arbitrarily or roughly stamped together. The importance and meaning of all the individual pieces is derived from the interconnections that make the total – and the whole is more than the sum of the parts. However, such is only the case when the piece can be examined not part (→) to whole, or whole (→) to part, but rather  cyclically.

Exercise: Deconstructing Stock Archetypes

One decentering exercise that can be a lot of fun, highly engaging, and allow for lots of student creativity is the "other side" exercise. Oftentimes ethical literature reaches a student because it touches on universal themes that allow them to identify with the protagonist who is experiencing the things that they have experienced. The protagonist's responses are similar enough to their own responses, their own feelings and actions that they are able to understand and sympathize with the protagonist's situation. Part of Shakespeare's genius was to present universal themes that made his characters familiar to his audience. When a student does not connect to a character in the story on a personal or experiential level it makes decentering through reading a harder process. Either the character is too different and thus not sympathetic to the reader and he remains alien or excluded, or the character is unsympathetic for other reasons. This sort of literary encounter can still be a moral experience as the student considers what would have been

right, better, more likeable, smarter, etc. but it is unlikely to be a decentering experience because the student will dictate a "better" or "higher" path for the protagonist that is simply a reflection of their own community ethics and personal background. So, it is useful to have the student take the antagonist and try to turn them into a protagonist by telling a different story about their background.

Students are often familiar with this type of experiment, and many of them seem to find it highly enjoyable. This allows them not only to explore the story from the viewpoint of characters that they may prefer, but also to consider biases, critical literacy, and dominant culture and how this affects the stories that we know. The highly acclaimed *Wicked* by Gregory Maguire (who also wrote *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister, Mirror Mirror, Son of a Witch* and many other similar novels) has recently become a very popular Broadway musical. *Wicked*, "the untold story of the witches of Oz," tells the story of Glinda the Good, and Elphaba, the Wicked, from a vastly different point of view. Its main villain is not the society-labeled "wicked" witch at all, but the wizard who is using Elphaba's differentness to turn the munchkins against her. This allows him to continue his rather wicked plans without her interference. The story follows the same basic outline as *The Wizard of Oz,* but consistently turns the plot in on itself by switching the circumstances involved, and by making Elphaba, and not Dorothy (who indeed, has very little to do with *Wicked)* the central character. This allows the play to emphasize the positive side of her relationships with other well-known characters, such as Glinda and The Wizard.

Wicked is an excellent example of the growing urge to hear the other side of the story. It also has very obvious metaphorical extensions that are meant to propel critical

reflection on "real-world" society. Analysis and deconstruction of traditional constructions, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, can help people to decenter and include a larger population in their moral concerns. When reconstructing and meaning-making students may come to realize that principles are universal only if they include everyone; a post-conventional principle orientation aims at inclusion, not exclusion. Good examples for this sort of exercise are not limited to books or musicals, nor are they limited to recent history. The strategy is one that resurfaces through time, and is aimed at creating an emphasis on that which would not be expected or known.

To begin, we might take a list of classic fairytales and discuss retellings which we have heard. Tales from the wolf's side of *Three Little Pigs* or stories like *Wicked* where the "evil" character was truly the best even though popular conception had denied it. There are a number of movies, songs, musicals, stories, plays, short fiction anthologies and poems with these themes. Perhaps if the class can find a classic fairytale which they have not seen "redone" then the teacher can assign them homework in which they adapt that tale by taking the other side. More advanced students of English might discuss adaptations of Shakespearean dramas. For instance, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Miles* is an example of the retelling in a different perspective, since it is *King Lear* from the viewpoint of the various daughters. After the idea has been introduced and students realize that the retelling from a story with a twist is something that is all around them they will often get very excited when asked to do so. The goal of course is to get them to overcome the standard set by the traditional account by practicing a new version of perspective taking, so they can see the underlying humanity in all positions.

To broaden focus and increase inclusion, assignments could be to rewrite any story (whatever the media source) from the point of view of a different character in the traditional piece. It could also be to take whatever text is currently employed in the classroom and explore the pieces that are missing from the viewpoint of supporting characters. Some students may simply fill in gaps that occur in the narrative of the dominant power structure (in this case, the narrative of the main character and those things which are important to advancing his or her plot). Other students however will rise to the challenge of refitting the facts by turning the story on its side - - - making the incredibly obvious something other than what it seems – and yet still plausible. For instance, an excellent example can be found in the French film *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not*, which portrays a relationship and all the events within it from the viewpoint first of the man, and then of the woman, replaying the same window of time but with a truly shocking twist ending. This will surprise students and get them in the right frame of mind for their own manipulations.) There are many examples of this theme in almost every form of media. The great thing about this exercise is that as old and as done as it is, it manages to be new and different for students every time. It also gives full control of the story and meaning making to the student, removing the pressure of a "right answer" while still forcing them to pay close attention to all the important details.

The reason I mention this exercise is because it allows the students to play around with value systems and to question society, authority, themselves, and the assumptions that are under all of these. Also, it can be a lot of fun and can challenge them both mentally as well as creatively, while developing and honing their moral senses by helping them step away from egocentric and ethnocentric preconceptions. One thing that these

retellings are often great for is "the override." This is a conception in moral theory that explains why setting aside a prima facie rule is not a violation of the rule when a more important, higher moral consideration is in conflict with the prima facie rule. That is, an override is employed when the prima facie (default theory)[11] rule in a value system conflicts with some other rule due to the fact that a situation is unique. An override is dependent upon there being good reasons that would be agreed upon by the impartial yet interested outside observer if he had all the facts that the person who is employing the override had. A lot of time overrides involve morally grey territory which is great for discussion. For instance, if one student decides that her villain is really the hero because by destroying the entire village she wiped out the plague that would have spread to the entire country, then she would be using an override devised to emphasize how the utilitarian notion of the greater good can be employed to override the prima facie rule that one should not commit mass murder. She would have to explain, however, that if the override works, then the apparent mass murder was not really murder.

The student might feel fairly confident in this override, but another student may argue that this is not an appropriate decision, either because they are operating under a different ethics system or because they do not feel the situation warranted the override for some other reason. Exploring reasons, and reflecting on the way both students debate their points, is a great learning opportunity. In terms of classroom applicability it helps the student to write a more convincing story, a more sympathetic protagonist (in this case the villain), and it reinforces the idea that the audience should not be assumed to be suffering from the standard person problem. Furthermore, students can use this

[11] "On the face of it" – that is the rules that generally exist and work. Those that would normally be applied but cannot because of the complexity of the situation.

revelation to improve their own writing. While reading the author's background and biases can be considered and in writing the audience's backgrounds and biases can be considered. All of these things promote critical literacy, improved critical thinking skills, wider sympathy that includes more people, confidence in group discussion, willingness to evaluate their world and the world of others, and of course, a wide range of other cognitive and moral skills that will be useful outside of the classroom.

Exercise: The Veil of Ignorance

The Veil of Ignorance is a term coined by John Rawls to try and explain the abstract levels of thought required by those who strive for a post-conventional moral point of view. It can be related to the exercise discussed above, but it also can be used in a classroom to encourage critical thinking and empathic insight into other points of view. The idea that Rawls created was to imagine that principals of justice are to be chosen from behind a veil of ignorance which clouds our mind so we have no access to our individual experiences, perceptions of self, or personal details about our private life. In short, the veil allows us to "forget" who we are. It says: you could be any of the persons affected so take each position seriously. This encourages people to take up the impartial perspective of the moral point of view (Cooper, 260). The idea is not to be ignorant of society, or of the needs or interests of society in general. Behind the veil we know about being young or old, black or white, male or female, rich or poor, etc. we just don't know to which category we belong. The question being asked is: what social institutions or principles of justice would be considered to be ultimately fair by anyone who didn't know his or her own position. The veil of ignorance is a hypothetical structure meant to keep people honest and impartial when considering moral issues so that they can make

universal empathic decisions that most reasonable people could agree to in the same set of circumstances.

The veil of ignorance can be used in literature discussions in many ways. It can be linked to "the other side" ideas generated from the above suggestion because it forces the student to consider the effects that choices and beliefs have on all points of view. In some situations, such as fables or simpler fairy tales, there may not be a point of view that can lead to universal empathy (wolves have to eat, however, what pig wants to be eaten?), but in more complex literature this exercise in hypothetical perspective taking can yield some interesting responses and discussions. Questions such as the following can be asked about most stories. *Which characters, if any, make their decisions in ways compatible with thinking from behind the veil? How can you tell? What sort of things might have been different in the story if, before acting, antagonists were to think and act according to principles that would be chosen from behind the veil of ignorance? Do you believe that this decision would have been an improvement in the story, or is it really necessary to the plot (or authenticity of the moral/ emotional aspect, etc.)for this character to act in a more selfishly (or ethnocentrically) motivated manner? On first read-through which characters are sympathetic? Once you consider the events of the story from behind the veil does your sense of sympathy change?*

The veil of ignorance is a useful idea when working with abstract ethical principals, and the concept can be adapted to highlight ethical decisions, ethical characters, and most importantly ethical conundrums, heightening a student's awareness of their own moral agency and its relation to a decentered moral point of view. Also, it can be a great springboard for a class-wide discussion about sympathetic characters

versus faceless antagonists. Different students will have different responses, and that is a beautiful thing because it creates an opportunity for critical reflection and discussion. This allows the instructor to be aware of and participant in the development of his or her student, and to guide them away from stagnating in a state of negative disequilibrium.

Exercise: Anticipation Guides

Reading specialists will tell you that the most important part of the reading process is often prereading. Students who begin to anticipate, predict and question a story before they are halfway through it will retain more information, will be far more actively engaged, and will spend more time considering the assignment as part of a larger whole. There are several very good prereading strategies to get students interested early in an assignment, and each of them has certain benefits. I believe that the anticipation guide strategy (Herber) is one of the best choices because it also provides room for lots of ethical discussion. Anticipation guides consist of four to eight statements to which a student has to either agree or disagree. These statements must be in some way related to the story and be matters requiring judgment rather than empirical knowledge. They are often controversial, and are statements that the average person would feel the need to qualify when checking their "agree" or "disagree" box. Many times the question will be one that has to be interpreted through the lens of the individual's community ethics system. These characteristics are what make anticipation guides so useful, not only to reading comprehension, retention, and engagement, but also to the development of ethical awareness and discussion in the classroom.

When students are forced to take a yes or no stand on a question that they feel is not a black and white issue, the discomfort causes them to examine their core beliefs

about the world and the way it works. When asked to explain why the issue cannot be resolved with a simple yes or no, the exercise requires them to evaluate their convictions when they try to articulate their "because" explanations. Also, many times when students wish to qualify their response, it gives them an opportunity to consider the concept of the override since they have to ask, in what situations do the ideas we generally cling to lose their trumping power? To give a feel for how an anticipation guide can work in the classroom, I will mention a couple of very obvious examples. Anticipation guide statements will have to be more complex or unfamiliar when the literature warrants it, but these simple examples will serve for the purposes of illustration.

Sample Statement: *It is wrong to steal.* Most students would agree that it is wrong to steal. However, while reading *Les Miserables* they might feel that Hugo's protagonist was justified in stealing the bread and was grossly overpunished. Their end ethical belief might be "it is wrong to steal unless the object being stolen is absolutely necessary for the survival of the thief." However, the teacher (or another classmate) might then suggest a case where a criminal is being chased by the police and ends up stealing a car from someone in order to make his getaway. When different scenarios are tested against the qualified statements ethical grey areas emerge almost constantly until the student learns to prioritize moral principles.

Students who longed to qualify the original statement will do excellent in debates about ethical decisions, hypothetical counterarguments to the statements, and protagonist and antagonist actions in the text. Other students may not have as much concern over moral ambiguity because they feel confident in their ethics system. By providing a safe environment for the possible breaking down of that system (or at least amending) as a

result of disequilibrium that comes from the exploration of options, or perhaps the identification with a character who defies their statement response (for instance, causes them to be sympathetic to stealing when they had answered that stealing is unequivocally wrong) instructors can aid students in finding their reconstructed, non-subjective, non-Authority granted, Truth. Students who become interested in anticipation guide questions will also be more aware of ethical conundrums in the literature they are reading, because the anticipation guide will slightly alter their thinking, making certain connections and points of curiosity more readily available in the days directly following it.

All of these application techniques can be helpful in the classroom, but the biggest difference is going to be the teacher and the teacher's approach to learning. As Maxine Greene said: a

> teacher can only be present to his students if he appeals to their freedom. He can only be present if he himself is engaged in searching and choosing, if he is committed, and if he cares. The teacher of literature certainly wants his students to realize how criticism can open works of literature to them; he wants to communicate some awareness of the norms that govern attentive reading. Most of all, he wants to help his students feel that outside his talk and their talk, something exists on its own – beckoning each person, soliciting each one to stop dissembling and refusing, to uncover what is real for him. The teacher, having identified himself as a lover of art and freedom, can only offer possibility. He can only try to free his students to love in their own way. If he succeeds … there will be movement towards meaning, assertions of freedom. People will be learning to rebel. (84)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine from a pedagogical perspective the relationship between moral development and literature. It makes use of (existential) philosophy, (decentering) literature, (critical) pedagogy and moral development research in psychology and philosophy to explore the relationship between the student and the teacher as well as the student and the text. Hopefully it also provided some useful suggestions about how to create an ethically conscious environment within which students can learn and grow. Given the inherent connectedness of these issues, I argue that there is an underlying necessity for teachers, especially literature teachers, to critically discuss the implications for moral development in their classrooms.

I have argued that some postmodern teaching methods run the risk of stranding students in negative disequilibrium by alienating them from a space that encourages critical reflection on values by claiming that all value decisions are only an exercise in personal taste. Those types of metatheoretical positions assert that all value judgments are illustrations of a preconventional level of moral development. However, as argued in this thesis, there are other options. For instance, it is possible to transcend the limitations of the preconventional level, by decentering so as to move through the stages of moral development, e.g., going through the conventional level and eventually achieving the postconventional level of universal consciousness, which represents ethical autonomy and maturity. The point is to arrive at a place where the "moral authority in [the individual's] life has become the guiding ideal principles of abstract theory that prescribe how we all ought to ideally treat each other." (Cooper, 121)

Pluralism on a cultural level is important for stimulating the move toward post-conventional levels of consciousness. However, because cultural pluralism is confusing it is too often translated into a type of cultural relativism by those struggling with developmental disequilibrium, which challenges students' intuitive feelings about the necessity for absolute universal moral values. In reaction to pluralism, too often people settle for a misguided sense of multiculturalism by presupposing that we must tolerate every manifestation of culture. Then, rather than operating at a post-conventional level of critical public debate, people begin to condone "wrongs" that occur in another culture because they feel ill-equipped to comment on other cultures. Uncritical acceptance of every instance of pluralism alleviates the burden of disequilibrium, but it does so by allowing the individual to hide behind a reductionist arbitrary uncritical acceptance of all forms of social existence under the banner of respect for multiple interpretations no matter what form they take.

As mentioned previously, disequilibrium is imbalance, a situation where a person's conception of the world is out-of-sync with new information that challenges what he or she has previously believed, lived and experienced. I have argued that in order to understand why some individuals are unable to decenter and why the relativistic atmosphere of recent times contributes to this inability, we must first seek to understand the nature of the state of negative disequilibrium. The thesis discusses a branch of literary and philosophical study that is devoted to the subject of negative disequilibrium and the quest of the individual to transcend and achieve higher levels of understanding. Many of the mental health problems that plague adolescents have definitions or symptoms that are synonymous with or contingent on those traditionally associated with

existential angst. I argue that the growing popularity of ethical text-heavy genres, such as the "problem novel," an upgraded bildungsroman, serves to demonstrate that it is not just the so-called "intellectual" who is plagued by negative disequilibrium/existential angst, but also your average adolescent.

Since disequilibrium is the result of individuals' conceptions of the world being out-of-sync with new information that challenges those conceptions (imbalance), transcendence from and through it must be subject-achieved, or in the words of Jurgen Habermas, growth must result from transcendence from within (Cited in Cooper, p. 166). Effectively, this means that understanding of higher truths that have cross cultural validity, or the universal concepts behind universal moral Truth, must be subject-achieved but never subjective, because no universal can be subjective.

The main argument of this thesis is that instructors can use principles of critical literacy to encourage students to understand the world from many angles, allowing them to make value judgments and discover truth while in the process of decentering. This will contribute to the student's intellectual and moral development. Instructors have an obligation to act as facilitators to a truth that must be "discovered" but not "mandated." This facilitation thereby reaffirms that an individual understanding of the truths behind human life can be found without destroying the concept of universal truth. If instructors, especially literature instructors, introduce a higher concept without defining it and ensure that a critical methodology flourishes within their classrooms, then their students will be much less likely to mistake multiple interpretations and theories about the text as evidence for a reductionist ethical relativism.

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