ENGLISH

Studies in Fiction

Anne McCarty, M.F.A.
Mentor: Trudelle Thomas, Ph.D. (English)

For the Ignatian Mentoring program, Trudelle Thomas and I taught a Studies in Fiction (124) class concurrently during the spring semester of 2008. Previously, in the fall, Trudelle introduced me to many Jesuit concepts. The ideas that we felt most drawn to and inspired by included: "Discernment;" decision making based on the rational and the emotional; "Cura Personalis," educating the whole student; "Mysterium tremendum," a sense of wonder and exploration. It was incredibly freeing to know that discussions I'd been having in class, ones a part of me considered tangential, were actually central to the work, and mission, of a professor at a Jesuit institution. Now, when spiritual or personal issues arise in class, I feel more empowered to engage these subjects and have a more complete vocabulary to approach these subjects.

For the spring semester, we chose several stories and a novel to teach in both our classes. Our focus was to include moral and ethical issues within the intellectual and academic discussion. Below are several examples of questions we would pose either as part of the discussion or as a writing prompt, or a combination of the two. I would ask students: *"Now that we have looked at the author's views on this issue, what are your views?"* Two stories that work particularly well in this context are the first two on this list. For example, Hawthorne's character Young Goodman Brown has seen what he thinks to be evidence of the prevalence of evil in the world. This story easily relates to our current experience of seeing so much suffering and cruelty, often via the media. Though we may sympathize with Brown's despair and lack of faith in humanity, is it the right choice for him to completely isolate himself? This story allows us to ask why Brown believes bad news so readily. Even though Brown initially rejects to join the devil's cult, he ends up believing everything the devil says. Because the devil makes believing in goodness equivalent to being foolish and naive, Brown believes that sin is prevalent and the devil is omnipotent. The devil has won by convincing Brown that to take action against wrongdoing is futile.

Text: "Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Was Goodman Brown right to turn away from humanity? Is that our only choice in world in which evil exists? Although Goodman Brown does not join the devil's cult, does he believe hat the devil tells him? While Young Goodman Brown may despair, should he give up faith? Why was Brown so curious about sin even when he seems so pious? Once he has knowledge of evil, does he have some responsibility to fight against it? How does he handle this responsibility?

Text: “A Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Alan Poe

Why does the narrator kill the old man, even though he claims to love him? What else is he trying to kill by killing the old man? What happens when he realizes no one can rid themselves of old age, death, and morality? How does he truly feel about living in a world void of any limits, rules, or morals?

Text: “Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe

What happens to a character who tries to live entirely without morality, one who bases his sense of justice on pride and revenge? Although Montresor tries to act as if his murder of Fortunato is a victory over his enemy, what is Poe saying about the nature of violence? Is Montresor ever truly free of his victim? Do even seemingly amoral characters have some morality?

Text: “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Do people have a right to control each other, even when they feel it is in the person’s best interest? When is it a moral act to determine one’s own course in life? Who controls your life? Does Jane ever contribute to her own powerless position, her own “institutionalization”? How does she try and assert her own will?

Text: *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner

Why does Addie feel that there is no purpose to life? While her life offers them no meaning, her death forces her children to face the mystery of existence alone. Without any religious, spiritual, or emotional framework, these characters are in a void. What are they missing that would help them to grieve and make sense of death? Who has taught them how live?

Text: *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner

How do Dewey Dell and Darl lose their identities even before they’ve started to form them? Why are they so afraid of human connection? What happens to characters who focus so intently on their individuality, freedom and pride? What kind of effect does their isolation have on them?

Text: *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison

This novel is full of historical and literary allusions, from African-American folklore to Greek myths to fairytales. When Milkman is ignorant of the past, he has no hope for or interest in the future. These characters, while trying to form their own life stories, are informed by both the factual past and its fictional stories. What stories were you told as a

child, either fiction or nonfiction? What kinds of moral, spiritual, cultural meaning does storytelling convey? In a literate society, does oral storytelling still have a role to play?

This last example I hope to turn into a larger assignment in subsequent semesters. Once, after class, a student told me his version of Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby. He felt the best line had been left out of the telling of the story. "Do you remember," he said, "what Tar Baby said to the fox? 'And Tar Baby, he didn't say *nothin*'.'" While it's great to talk about oral versus literate societies, it would be even better to have students to share their own oral heritage and see how it may have informed their own ethics and worldviews.

Another idea I hope to use in the future would include reading Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." In this story, a sacrificial child is imprisoned so that others may live a utopian life. We could consider current situations this story might parallel, for instance, modern slavery. We could incorporate readings and do some of our own research on a topic of the students' choosing.

My discussions with Trudelle about teaching literature also led to ways we could incorporate Jesuit concepts into our writing courses. Some of our ideas focused on vocation. A writing assignment in a 101 English Composition or a 115 Rhetoric course could consist of research about the vocations of others and an exploration of their hopes for their own life's work. The Ignatian process of discernment, which includes the intellect as well as emotions and desires, could provide an initial framework. Although my writing courses previously have included other types of writing besides the academic, I now view these kinds of assignments as a way to educate and care for the student as a whole person.

The best part of the mentoring program is seeing the thoughtful and enthusiastic responses from students to these kinds of discussions: like every human being, they want to explore the big questions. I have always read, in part, to find answers about life, and I need to remember that many of my students are doing the same. Before the mentoring program, it didn't always occur to me to tell students why I read. By including more into our discussions about the value of literature beyond the intellectual, I involve more of myself in my teaching. I hope I am involving more of the student.