

Lisa Ottum
 Assistant Professor of English
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Reading with Heart and Mind

The Problem: Integrating Students' Affective Responses to Literature into Literature Courses

In the 1940s and 1950s, a revolution known as “the new criticism” emerged in America’s English departments. Imported from the UK, new criticism was a methodology of reading and teaching literature—especially poetry—that distinguished itself from the “old” critical practices then in place at most institutions. Championed by scholars such as William Beardsley and William Wimsatt, new criticism aimed to assuage several problems that afflicted English departments. One was the perception among scholars outside English that literary studies lacked sufficient rigor. Hoping to lend the study of poetry a more “scientific” appearance, new critics sought to develop systematic ways of reading and writing about texts. A second problem was the changing student body. Thanks to the GI Bill, an unprecedented number of Americans were enrolling in college. Unlike previous generations of university students, this new cohort was more socioeconomically diverse—and therefore not arriving at college with the same background in literature and languages as their predecessors. New Critics hoped that by arming students with an “objective” set of procedures for reading, they might empower even the most underprepared freshman to read Blake, or Shakespeare, or Keats.

To achieve this ambitious aim, new critics established a number of core disciplinary precepts, many of which remain with us even today. Among these precepts was the notion that a reader’s emotional responses to a literary work, while interesting, are not ultimately important to that work’s meaning. Beardsley and Wimsatt coined the phrase “the affective fallacy” to describe the (misguided) practice of confusing how a text makes us *feel* with what it *means*; for these critics, a reader’s feelings were simply too subjective, too different, and too unpredictable to form the basis of an “objective” modern criticism. Even though most scholars no longer employ new criticism today, the role of affect in literature classes remains largely unaddressed. Indeed, for teachers of literature a perennial dilemma is: how do we affirm students’ affective responses to what they read, while at the same time introducing them to more analytical modes of reading?

I believe a solution lies within the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm, which is the basis of the project I describe below. For Ignatius, “experience” is the act of “tasting something internally”; authentic learning unites affective response with reflection. Hence Ignatian pedagogy assumes that “action”—the ultimate goal of all education—is possible only when students attend to their internal feelings: without feeling and imagination, thinking is incomplete. Transferred to the realm of literary studies, this argument has profound implications for the act of reading. To “taste” a novel, or a poem, or prose work “internally” is to “sense” it at some level beyond, or perhaps prior to, that of simply understanding the words on the page. Scholars might debate what precisely it means to “taste” Shakespeare or Milton, though to me, the salient point is clear: good reading is not simply an information transfer from page to brain. Reading literature exercises some part of ourselves we can’t easily describe, something numinous that exceeds the verbal. Reading only to understand is different from reading to understand *and* feel: I read nutritional labels merely to understand, but I read novels to “get” the plot as well as the myriad other layers of meaning and beauty they are meant to convey.

As an English professor, what I find most powerful about Ignatian pedagogy is its implications for reading and writing about literary texts. Ignatian pedagogy offers us a template for teaching reading that makes room for personal, affective, responses while preserving space for analysis. Students need not suppress or ignore their private experience of reading; to the contrary, they are invited to attend closely to

this experience and to use it as the basis for learning. Though I have always believed in the power of literature to move people, the Ignatian Mentoring Program has equipped me with a new vocabulary for articulating and defending this conviction.

The Project: Essay Assignment for ENGL 205

Each section of English 205 has a different thematic focus, which professors select; my section centers on the theme of “im/mortality,” and deals with topics including medical ethics, death and dying, and commemoration. The assignment I describe below fits into the second unit of the course: “The Ethics of Life Extension.” It is comprised of a series of class discussions leading up to a paper assignment; the sequence closes with a follow-up discussion session.

Some Background

As part of this second unit in this course, we read Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) a haunting and beautifully-written novel that explores mortality, sacrifice, and romantic love, among other themes. In brief, *Never Let Me Go* imagines a counterfactual history in Britain develops the ability to clone humans shortly after World War II, and begins raising cloned children in order to harvest their organs for transplants. The novel takes place in the late 1990s; the plot focuses on three young adults who grow up together at a boarding school for clones. Although the novel’s premise might suggest that it is gory or sensationalistic, *Never Let Me Go* actually reads more like a conventional coming-of-age story than science fiction. Ishiguro isn’t concerned with the science of cloning, or with the process of organ harvesting. Rather, his main interest is the characters’ struggle to reconcile their personal desires with their sense of duty as “donors”: Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are typical teenagers who wrestle with questions about identity, friendship, and sexuality. Cloning, therefore, plays a fairly minor role in the plot. The book centers instead on issues we all face at some point—namely, the difficulty of “letting go” of loved ones, and of coping with our own mortality.

Context

In keeping with the precepts of Ignatian pedagogy, my first task was to reflect on the assignment’s “context”—in this case, the attitudes and experiences about death that students might bring to our classroom discussions, and to their reading of *Never Let Me Go*. Like most young people, my students do not often think about mortality, which is only natural (and healthy) given their life stage. While some have lost grandparents or other relatives, most are lucky to have had relatively little experience with death; as one student commented, “We all know we’re going to die someday, but it just isn’t something that comes up in everyday conversation.”¹ In light of this context, I decided to begin by simply asking students to talk about death and dying. In class discussion, we brainstormed responses to the question: *what does it mean for someone to die “at peace”?* Besides offering their personal responses to this question, I invited students to brainstorm a list of cultural commonplaces about dying “peacefully.” I asked, “What do you think most people mean when they use this phrase?” In both sections of the course, we generated a long list of responses such as:

- Dying “at peace” = “with your affairs in order”
- Dying “at peace” = “surrounded by your family”
- Dying “at peace” = “satisfied with your accomplishments in life”
- Dying “at peace” = “not being in excessive physical pain

¹ One reason I selected *Never Let Me Go* for this unit of the course is that it helpfully disarticulates the problems of mortality from age and from illness: all of the novel’s main characters are healthy teenagers and twenty-somethings. Hence, the novel allows for discussions about death that seem more “relatable” to college students.

- Dying “at peace” = “not being confused”

Studying these lists, what we found is that our culture has a fairly clear mythology of what dying “should” look like (a mythology that does not, incidentally, reflect most Americans’ end-of-life experience). Armed with this context, students then turned to the novel.

Experience

I urged students to keep track of their emotional responses to the text, and supplied them with an informal system for marking up their texts. They made note of what moments in the text surprised them; what moments made them laugh; what moments made them anxious; etc. Because *Never Let Me Go* is divided into 3 sections, I asked students to also “step back” at the each section break and chart their emotional “journey” through the novel on a piece of notebook paper. In class, students read aloud key passages that they recall having had an emotional response to; they also shared their notebook paper charts in pairs.

Reflection

The next stage of this assignment sequence invited students to reflect on their emotional responses to *Never Let Me Go* by writing an argument-driven paper. The assignment prompt asked students to respond to the question, *what does it mean to die a “good” death?* drawing both on their personal opinion as well as evidence from the novel. To help students focus their arguments, I urged them to zero-in on just one of Ishiguro’s characters and to imagine this character’s experience offers us some teachable “moral” about facing death “correctly,” “incorrectly,” or something in-between.

This assignment had several key benefits, which I’ll outline briefly here. First, it allowed students to return to their personal opinions about and experiences with death; however, it forced them to go beyond simply stating their opinions. Instead, this paper asked them to “test” their ideas against the novel. Whether the character they selected affirmed or challenged their personal opinion, students had to acknowledge the position/s represented by the character; this, in turn, prompted them to quote the text itself for evidence to support their claims. A second strength of this assignment is that it caused most students to complicate their initial opinions. Among students I met with in the planning stages of their papers, virtually all found themselves challenged by the intricacy of the ethical dilemmas Ishiguro presents. One student, for example, had approached the assignment intending to argue that a “good” death “happens when you are at peace with your purpose in life.” As we talked over *Never Let Me Go* one-on-one, she began to think that the novel at least partly challenged this notion: what if our own sense of purpose differs radically from that imposed on us by (powerful) others?

A final strength of this assignment is that it asked students to think about Ishiguro’s characters as though they are real people. Some instructors would argue that it is dangerous to conflate representation and reality—and I confess, I myself am conflicted about muddling the real and the fictional, because doing so elides the role authors play in making literature “work” as *literature*. Yet in the situation I describe here, blurring the boundaries between real life and fiction was useful and actually aided students’ reflection experience. Instead of focusing on people they know, students were free to test out ideas about a difficult topic in the safer-seeming realm of fiction. Moreover, this approach allowed them to draw on their emotional responses as readers, and to use these responses as the basis of their analytical claims. Rather than beginning with an abstract claim about mortality, most students began with a troubling moment in the text—a moment that made them feel relieved, or frightened, or outraged. Thus, students’ empathetic responses to Ishiguro’s characters served as a springboard to their own recursive reflecting on personal experience.

The strongest papers developed sophisticated arguments about the definition of a “good death,” allowing plot devices and characterization to carry forward the writers’ ideas. To offer an example, here is an excerpt from an analysis by a student named Megan:

“Being content with the person you are at the time of your death is the main part of dying a good death, but to get to this point, there is a large step to take. This step is letting go of the past, possibly through self-acceptance or being exonerated of past problems. I do not think there is anyone that is completely happy with the person they have been their entire life, but it is possible to evolve and mature into the ideal self. However, in order to do this, letting go and accepting the parts you do not like about yourself is crucial. Ruth demonstrates this too in the novel. For example, for Ruth to die content with herself, she has to let go of the mean person she was in the past and accept herself for the better person she has become in her older years. Though, in order to do this, Ruth has to apologize for what she did to Kathy and Tommy. But once she does this, she is able to forget the past, forgive herself and move on with the new, nicer version of Ruth until her death.”

As this brief excerpt shows, Megan clearly used this assignment as an opportunity to develop her own thinking. She expresses personal convictions (“I do not think there is anyone that is completely happy with the person they have been their entire life”) and refers to the novel to substantiate these convictions. Instead of simply affirming a truism (we must “let go of the past”) she argues for why “letting go” is so vital (it reconciles us to ourselves).

Action / Conclusion

What I hope students have learned from this assignment is that reading literature is not simply a cerebral process—for literature, like other forms of art, demands our emotional and spiritual engagement, as well as intellectual effort. Too often, students approach college literature courses with the expectation that what they will do is simply analyze texts in order to discover these texts’ “hidden messages.” While the sources of this misconception are debatable, its effects on the literature classroom are clear: many students assume that their personal, affective responses to literature are unimportant in an academic setting. But imagine a discussion about *Never Let Me Go* that ignored the issue of readerly empathy—what would such a discussion look like? Emotion is vital to what makes literary discourse distinctive from other discourses. In the future, I hope that my students will read with open hearts and open minds.

Works Consulted

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. New York: Random House, 2005.

Wimsatt, W.K. and M.C. Beardsley. “The Affective Fallacy.” *The Sewanee Review* 57.1 (1949): 31-55.