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From Manresa to Oxford: Identifying the Ignatian Vision in Twentieth-Century British Literature

The Ignatian Mentoring Program gave me the opportunity in fall 2004 to get to know an amazing colleague and new friend, Gillian Ahlgren. In addition to discussing Ignatian spirituality, Jesuit education, and effective pedagogy throughout the year, I used our time reading two useful Ignatian texts, *Inner Compass* and *Teaching as an Act of Faith*. From these discussions and readings I chose to make modifications to both of the literature courses I would be teaching in spring 2005: Literature and the Moral Imagination (“Longing and Obsession”) and Senior Seminar (“The Inklings”).

My Literature and Moral Imagination course was designed to introduce students to a range of literary texts, mostly novels and short fiction, that focus specifically on longing and desire as distinctly human, and sometimes conflicting, traits: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, *Equus* by Peter Shaffer, *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, *Sula* by Toni Morrison, and *Till We Have Faces* by C. S. Lewis. In the Senior Seminar we read works from a group of medievalists writing in Oxford in the 1930s and 40s known as the Inklings. Although this writing group provided C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Owen Barfield with a forum for debate between very different thinkers, their collective writings, we learned, represent a world view that uniquely combines medievalism, literature, and theology.

My changes to the courses took three main forms. First, before the semester began I made changes to the reading lists. For the Literature and the Moral Imagination class I included C. S. Lewis’s theological novel *Till We Have Faces*, and instead of having the Seminar students read only literary criticism and fiction, I included some theological pieces, including Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man* and *The Screwtape Letters*. Before my discussions with Gillian, this was something I was unsure of how to do.

Second, in order to encourage thoughtful exploration of these new texts, I decided to have the students write more regular response papers. In a setting where lower points were at stake for their ideas, student were free to explore the spirituality suggested by the texts. This allowed us to move into deeper discussions of all the texts, and also increased the likelihood of students incorporating some of the theological texts in their final project. After introducing basic tenets of the Ignatian Vision early in the semester, I also had students write a specific short essay at the end of the semester asking them to identify connections between the texts and the Ignatian ideas. Without this breadth of writing for the students, they might have been tempted to stay in the areas they were most comfortable with: literary texts and literary criticism.

Third, for the Senior Seminar final project I encouraged students to use the response papers as a way of building toward their final essays, and to bring in outside sources beyond the four main authors in the course. Final questions to consider for the final project, for example, included not simply “What shaped Tolkien’s writings?”, but “How might one synthesize Tolkien’s catholic perspective with other English authors writing at the time—authors who think in radically different ways than any of the Inklings?”

What follows is the handout I created to help synthesize for the students the key points I had been learning about Ignatian spirituality. Taking the time to create this handout was, in many ways, the most valuable task of the entire semester for me.

“What do we mean by the Ignatian Vision?”

It’s a Way of Knowing God

A. Ignatian Theology

1. Sees life and the whole universe as a gift calling forth wonder and gratefulness.
2. Gives ample scope to imagination and emotion as well as intellect.
3. Seeks to find the divine in all things—in all peoples and cultures, in all areas of study and learning, in every human experience (and for the Christian especially in the person of Jesus).
4. Cultivates critical awareness of personal and social evil, but points to God’s love as more powerful than any evil.
5. Stresses freedom, need for discernment, and responsible action.
6. Empowers people to become leaders in service, “men and women for others,” “whole persons of solidarity,” “building a more just and humane world.”

It’s a Way of Knowing the World

B. Ignatian Teaching

1. Dedication to human dignity from a Jesuit faith perspective.
2. Reverence for, and an ongoing reflection on, human experience.
3. Creative companionship with colleagues.
4. Focused care for students
5. Well-educated Justice and solidarity.

It’s a Way of Knowing Ourselves

C. Ignatian Learning

Building the habit (a process) of discernment:

1. Being attentive; conscious learning begins by choosing to pay attention to our experience. Through close attention we learn to find God in all things.
2. Being reflective; reflection is the way we discover and compose the meaning of our experience. Reflection is a kind of reality testing.
3. Being loving; love calls us to consider our relationship to the world and to ask “how are we going to act in this world?” and “what does the world need us to do?” Love shows itself more by deed than by words and consists in communication. We are potentially in love with the whole world.

Compiled from the following resources:

“Living the Mission of the University,” Ignatian Programs, Xavier University.

“Communal Reflection on the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education,” the Jesuit Conference Board.

“A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education,” Ignatian Programs, Boston College.

Here, then, are the writing assignment sheets that asked students to respond to one of our texts specifically in terms of a key Jesuit idea:

205—Literature and the Moral Imagination; Longing and Obsession

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Lewis, Schaffer and the Ignatian spirit—a short writing exercise

Choose one feature of the Ignatian vision from your Ignatian handout; there are fourteen key features identified (A. 1-6, B. 1-5, C. 1-3).

For Wednesday, March 16, you will turn in a typed, two-paragraph discussion (about one page) in which you discuss this one aspect of Ignatian beliefs in relation to the two authors we are currently studying, Peter Shaffer and C. S. Lewis. In the first paragraph you will make a claim about where Shaffer seems to agree and disagree with this belief in *Equus*; and in the second, how Lewis appears to agree and disagree with it in *Till We Have Faces*. Choosing one of these beliefs carefully will yield a more effective essay.

This short writing piece will be graded according to the same five criteria we have used for your longer essays: strong, well-shaped analysis, effective organization, clear writing style, useful textual support, and technical clarity.

499—English Senior Seminar: Oxford’s Inklings

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Situating the Ignatian Vision Among the Inklings’ Beliefs

Select one of the fourteen aspects of the Ignatian vision described in your Ignatian handout (A. 1-6, B. 1-5, C. 1-3).

For Friday, April 1 (two weeks from today), you will turn in a typed, one to two-page essay in which you explain how this Jesuit idea is exemplified either 1) in one of the Inklings’ writings (pointing to at least two of his works), or 2) in multiple works by the Inklings (at least two works by two different writers). Although the primary focus of this essay will be showing how two or more of our texts exemplify one of the Jesuit beliefs, you have the option of pushing your discussion slightly further—how does the Jesuit idea presented here seem not to fit exactly with the Inklings? For example, how does Lewis not merely *emphasize* imagination, emotion, and intellect, but balance them in a unique way? How does Williams’s call for love suggest a radical kind of theology? Does Tolkien suggest an alternate way of understanding “God in all things”? Choosing the belief carefully will help in yielding a more productive essay.

An additional way of thinking about this assignment is to select two of the Ignatian claims and describe how they come together in a unique way in one of the Inklings’ writings.

This short writing piece will be graded according to the same five criteria we have used for your longer essays: strong, well-shaped analysis, effective organization, clear writing style, useful textual support, and technical clarity.

Students met the challenge of this writing assignment in extremely articulate ways, and I present, in conclusion, some of the highlights of their responses:

“Ignatian theology states that the divine can be found all around us. The Jesuits teach that a Universal respect for God is a respect for God in all things. Although they did not specifically base their stories on this ideal, both C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams incorporated this idea into their works.”

“Throughout his life, Ignatius tended to emphasize the importance of suffering and pain in order to fully realize the human potential and the identity of God and Jesus. . . . Examples of his personal search through suffering can be found in his long journeys he made without shoes after his leg had been nearly destroyed In Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis the Jesuit idea of moving closer to God through suffering is evident.”

“Being an Ignatian student requires the ability to build a process of discernment, and an aspect of that discernment is being reflective. . . . C. S. Lewis allows his characters in his book *Till We Have Faces* to be reflective on their experiences and change themselves for the better.”

In *Equus*, Peter Shaffer agrees with the Ignatian fundamental that believes teachers must provide focused care for their students. Shaffer presents Martin as a person who serves others through his work. So, in a way, Martin is teaching Alan how to find meaning in his life.”