In Search of Lessons: What Students Look for in Stories

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This paper explored students' search for lessons in stories. Using the generic label for narratives that students encounter, the inquiry focused on the question, what do you look for in stories? A total of one hundred forty-eight students from six sections responded. Coming from two World Literature and four Philippine Literature classes of undergraduate courses (out of the 10 first semester course offerings on introductory literature), these students were mostly in their sophomore year in college; their ages ranged from 17- 22, with a few aging up to 28 years old. Their answers explicitly revealed that indeed students look for lessons. Even when some students look forward to aesthetic pleasure, they also look for lessons. Interestingly, lessons for the students mean something that has a positive impact. In addition, a considerable number manifested their intention to "apply" the lessons and insights they learned as "guide" to live their lives. The results strongly suggest that students' reading experience in stories may benefit from ethical inquiry as stories have powerful (ethical) invitations. To literature teachers, this study offers to (1) overcome the discomfort at dealing with lessons and to embrace the opportunity to help students develop an ethos that is in Wayne Booth's words, ethical at its center; and (2) to teach students to read both efferently and aesthetically as Rosenblatt suggests. While the result of our students' reading experiences may not be immediately detected, the aim is for teachers to constantly provide opportunities for instances of ethical engagement and confrontation.

Keywords: ethical criticism, efferent reading and aesthetic reading, lessons, invitations

INTRODUCTION

As literature teachers, we often shy away from discussing "lessons" in narratives. In like manner, we try to avoid teaching students to look for

lessons in stories hiding "lessons" in discussions of the political-economic—gender, class— and the psychological. At least most of the time, we make it a point not to voice the word lesson in our discussion. It is much safer this way, for to venture into moral lessons would invite a whole range of issues, not the least of which is censorship of works. This is a tricky place most teachers do not want to confront. Thus, looking for "moral lessons" sufficing in the elementary and high school English classes are now seen in the collegiate classroom as expressive of naïveté and uncritical thinking. Students who assess a literary work against questions of good and bad actions/worldviews are perceived as less astute than their counterparts who simply enjoy the text without hunting for its ethical value.

Moreover, most of the time we impose on our students what we think is good literature and how to enjoy it best. We do not need to ask them because in the words of a colleague, we know what is best for them. But what if our own students actually look for lessons in literature? If so, what are these lessons? Is looking for "lessons" in literature particularly in narratives a legitimate form of inquiry inside the collegiate literature classroom? As teachers, given our ambivalence and discomfort toward the word lessons, how can we address this desire for lessons in the classroom?

RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

We love to tell stories and we love to listen to them in equal measure. This is because "[t]elling and consuming stories is a fundamental human activity" (Gregory, 2005, p.38). Evolutionary psychologists argue that imagination is a fundamental trait in human beings. We have evolved to be capable of "fiction-making;" unlike animals whose thought processes work upon response to stimulation, we can make supposition, inferences, and mental experiments (Gregory, 2011). For neuroscientists, telling stories is the culmination of our ability to understand the because, the idea of causality. It is the product of our impulse to make sense of the world and the part we play in it. Also, we listen to them because we want to "confirm our belonging to a group and our commitment to the values of our society" or use them to question and defy such values (Rosenstand, 2005, p.157).

As stories are fundamental, ethics is also "primal, not discretionary." There is a close connection between narratives and ethics. This is precisely the reason why when we assess literature we cannot avoid ethical questions.

“[E]thics lies at the center of and derives from the nature and requirements of sociability itself” (Gregory, 2011). “If ethical questions arise as a natural consequence of first-hand interactions and sociability, then they will also arise as we meet and interact with fictional characters” (Gregory, 2005, p.41).

John Gardner (2005) claims that “art is civilization’s single most significant device for learning what must be affirmed and what must be denied.” In this sense, art therefore must be thoughtfully crafted so that it becomes worthy of imitation, enlightening of some truths of the human condition, and encouraging of positive perception of life. Art becomes life affirming “when it has a clear positive moral effect.” Thus, for Gardner “true art” is by “its nature moral.” Moral art for Gardner is not didactic, for true art and didacticism are “immiscible.” It is the kind of art that “tests values and rouses trustworthy feelings about the better and worse in human action.”

Arguments against Ethical Criticism in Literature

Over the years, however, the word moral has achieved quite a notoriety equated to a set of thou- shall-not’s. Most often, we hear critics intoning what is a superior story over another or how a story must be taken off from the reading list because it encourages bad behavior in students. What we get then is a prescriptive reading list and a prescriptive reading of the texts. On the other end of the spectrum are critics who think that literature and lessons or morals are incompatible. By tradition, it was Plato who called for the banishment of poets from his Republic, claiming that poets are incapable of truth and thus are a bad influence to citizens.

Unlike Plato who saw ethical concerns in literature, others simply refuse to acknowledge ethics in literature. As Oscar Wilde has said, ‘there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all’ (as cited in Posner, 2005). Critics believe that to venture into ethical criticism means to destroy true art, the domain of the aesthetics, for true art ‘occupies a different moral space’—a place far superior than mundane every day cares and realities (Steiner, as cited in Booth, 2005a). Thus a work should not be immediately refused because it manifests morally objectionable views as the author and his work are different. Literature too has nothing to do with a person’s character. Ultimately, reading literature does not in any way produce better people. Thus, the true gauge for assessing a work is not the ethical but aesthetic (Posner, 2005).

Another concern that resulted in ethical criticism's almost demise is the notion that we can only gain knowledge from facts not from values. Since ethical criticism is most often relegated to the domain of values then ethical criticism can never be objective as values are subjective. The subjectivity may be based on personal preferences or cultural conventions. A given community may have a different set of values from another. Hence, a criticism of a literary work using ethical criticism may be valid in one community and found obnoxious in another. This idea of irreconcilability of values is perhaps the sturdiest hurdle of ethical criticism (Booth, 1988). This fact versus value controversy has prompted critics to abandon ethical criticism because from this standpoint all literary evaluation using ethical criticism is in Northrop Frye's words at best 'one more document in the history of taste' (as cited in Booth, 1988, p. 28).

As a result then of this verdict, there emerged a threat that critics fear—the threat of censorship. If and when ethical criticism is given space in literary theory like it had been before, others fear that there is no stopping everyone from deciding to ban works thought of as unfit because everyone can decide what is best reading, what is superior literature. A bigger threat is when the right to decide is given to those who are in power. When this happens, critics who are for "pure art," fear that much will be lost from readers and literature alike. Therefore, the ethical must be confined to philosophy as the aesthetic is to literature and literary theory.

Arguments for Ethical Criticism

This ethical and aesthetic divide for Nussbaum (as cited in George 2005; 2003) is detrimental to both fields. For Nussbaum, philosophy can benefit from literature as literature presents the complexities of human life while literary theory can profit from the rigor of ethical inquiry. Much is at stake if literary theory continues to ignore ethical criticism; after all, literature matters to us because it arouses ethically and socially relevant questions. This admission that literature matters because of its inherent textual power is for some critics untenable. For these critics, it is untrue that a work has an autonomous power and value outside of the reader and a given community. Booth (1988), however, believes that while it is true that a text may appear to be inert until a reader comes along, the text too determines its value; it places value upon itself by choosing what to do. The reason why each literary work has a "distinctive

potential power" is that "it has been made intentionally (p. 92)." A work is laden with intentions from the act of telling the story and from the language itself. Also, language is literature's vehicle and since language is most often loaded with ethical judgments, it will reflect views on "how to live and how not to live" (Booth, 2005a). There is never a neutral language or a neutral assertion.

This is why stories have a special agency of bringing across messages and ideas. Prose fiction's relation to ethics is most evident in its characteristic of lending out "states of experience" for the reader to participate in (Newton, 1995, p.7). Since most fiction is a representation of life and life is fraught with ethical concerns, it follows then that literature reflects these concerns. Thus, rendering moral judgments in works and on their characters is simply inescapable. While we may be influenced by our environment, there is "a dimension of choice to all forms of human conduct" and "conduct is always subject to moral and ethical evaluation." This holds true for literary characters as well (Gregory, 2005, p.40). Moreover, the text has the capacity to bring about "actualized intentions"— the inferences that readers make from the ethical choices presented in a work. This actualized intentions come from intents of the works itself. Thus, if the text has intentions, then the reader has the right to think about the [moral] choices inflicted by the text on him. The reader has the right to determine whether the choices presented in the text are good ones or bad and ultimately refuse the text's impositions (Booth, 2005a).

Stories, after all according to Newton (1995), are a "participatory act" composed of the "Said" and the "Saying." Following Genette's triadic model, Newton considers the term narrative as composed of the story or the signified content, the narrative or the signifier or narrative text, and narrating or the narrative act. Newton is particularly interested in the narrating as he refers to it as the "saying." In analyzing Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Newton sees the act of narrative as the domain that invites ethical performance and confrontation. The "saying" as opposed to the "said" or the [moral] proposition is a temporal situation that afford ethical encounter binding narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text. They are provoked, called upon and asked to respond to the urgency of the narrative. For Newton, narrative is ethics. In this act, readers submit their very selves, feeling, and thoughts to the implied author, 'thinking the thoughts of another as if they were their own. This invitation may be refused by the reader. Paradoxically, however, the reader has to be engaged on some level so he can refuse the implied author (Booth, 2005b). It is at this very moment that

the reader makes a "moral stance" which is developed through empathizing with the characters in literature. Such stance may be influenced by standards outside of the self, but it is always something personal developed out of feeling what the characters feel, thinking their thoughts, and deciding whether s/he, the reader, will accept or refuse the character's supposition (Yehoshua, 2005).

This importance laid on the coming together of reader and text is similar to Rosenblatt's (1988) transactional theory. Indeed, Rosenblatt's transactional reading is an appropriate tool to evaluate stories' ethical effects on the reading experience of students. She posited that in the two stances that one takes in reading— efferent stance (one wants to carry away something) and aesthetic (one is involved in the literary experience)—the reading of literature must fall in the middle of the continuum. Rosenblatt (1993) further stressed that these two stances, as both aspects of meaning, must be involved, for they are "always present in our transactions with the world." In addition, reading becomes meaningful when we move back and forth from the efferent and aesthetic continuum Booth (1988) also believes that while it is worthwhile to read for lessons, readers must also enjoy the pleasures the text offers.

Furthermore, Booth (2005a) observes almost everyone (i.e. defenders and attackers of ethical criticism) grants literature its power to influence behavior in people. In Broth's (1988) own study "The Company We Keep", he asked respondents whether their ethical education was in a way shaped by the stories they have read. Most of the respondents agreed that when they were truly engaged in the act of reading, stories did influence their ethical stances. This influence is more potent when one is young. This is because "stories are our major moral teachers" (Booth, 2005a, p. 27). Also, there is no other form of art that invites so much cognitive and ethical participation from the readers. Gregory (2005) sees the ethical import of imaginative transpositions between readers and fictional characters. In stories, we can transcend life's limitations of time and space. Stories provide us a rich and imaginative representation of the human life and we learn from them.

So what is ethics in stories? How must ethics mean? Newton (1995) describes ethics as the "radicality and uniqueness of the moral situation itself, a binding claim exercised upon the self by a concrete and singular other whose moral appeal precedes both decision and understanding." Ethics for Newton is the narrative situation itself that imposes binds on the text and reader. For Booth (1998) ethics refers to the whole range of human characteristics and habits of behavior, virtue and vice. To pursue the ethical means to pursue

virtues, a kind of excellence that is praiseworthy and creates better selves.

Booth (2005a) admits that "ethical criticism" can never be simple. He further acknowledges that most often when we hear the words 'ethical' or 'moral', these are "reduced to the narrowest possible moral codes." What is most important in ethical criticism is the "overall effect on the ethos, the character of the listener" (p.18). It is, in other words, the idea of the lived experience of the reader in the act of reading.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive research on what students look for in stories. Although this project started out as a preliminary introduction to my course and students' introduction of themselves without the added pressure of being subjected to their classmates' judgments, it decisively took a different route. I wanted to know my students' reading habits and preferences in the hopes of re-assessing my reading list particularly on fiction. Thus, I asked them to write about the following questions: what stories do you like to read and what do you look for in stories. I use the word stories to refer to the generic label for narratives that my students encounter (online stories, novels, non-fiction, even movies).

When I received their responses I found out that more than half of them mentioned the words "lesson," "meaning," "moral," and "insight". I wanted to find out if the same holds true to other students who are taking up general literature courses in other sections with others teachers.

I then collected data from other undergraduate introductory courses in literature. I focused on the second question: What do you look for in stories? There were six sections, a total of one hundred forty-eight students that responded to the study. Coming from six sections (two world literature courses, Literature 22; four Philippine literature courses, Literature 21) of undergraduate literature courses (out of the 11 first semester course offerings on introductory literature), these students were mostly in their sophomore year in college; their ages ranged from 17- 22, with a few aging up to 28 years old.

Working on their responses, firstly, I listed down the number of students who explicitly stated "lessons" in their answers in the first category (a). Then, I sorted other responses to the following categories based on their common answers: (b) insights, realizations, meaning, (c) themes, (d) happy endings, (e) inspiration and transformation (f) guidance and application to life, (g)

personal relevance, (h) aesthetic experience. A student may have mentioned discovery, insights, and guidance in the same response. For example, a student may have mentioned both insights and guidance in his responses. In this case, the responses, insight and guidance were listed under respective categories--one under the category realization, insight, meaning and another on guidance and application. Except for those listed in the first category (moral lessons), other respondents had more than one entry in the rest of the categories.

I excluded the titles of books mentioned as well as other unrelated responses. In addition, I did not look into respondents' cultural background, gender, age, and social class. While they may be significant data that reveal students' preferences, I believe that they can be aptly addressed in another study of their own.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of 148 students, 47 (31%) explicitly mentioned that they looked for "lessons" or "moral lessons; " 30 responses were inclined to "realizations and reflections," "meaning," "discovery," "moral and spiritual insights," "deep insights about life," and "insights about the human experience;" others (4) looked for big themes and "strong messages" such as "love," "hope," "justice," "truth," and the "triumph of good vs. evil." There were 13 students who preferred "happy endings;" 16 rooted for stories that "inspire dreams," "motivate," "have a positive impact," "help [them] approach life in a positive way," and "change one's life," "views," "perspectives," and "perception on how important life is." Twenty four wanted to use and apply what they learned as "guide" and "answers" to "real life." Six wanted stories that they could personally relate to. Thirty-two students were concerned with stories that thrill, entertain, and "make [them] feel that they [were] inside" to "imagine as one of the characters," know "what it's like in the character's place," "compare [their] life to the character's," and "compare the character's experience to [their own] and see if [they're] doing it right."

(a) lessons/ moral lessons	(b) realizations, insights, meaning	(c) Themes	(d) happy endings	(e) inspiration and transformation	(f) guidance and application to life	(g) personal relevance	(h) aesthetic experience
47	30	4	13	16	24	6	32

Stories as sources of lessons

From given data, it is clear that students had pre-conceived notions of a preferable story as 31% of the 148 respondents explicitly stated they wanted stories with "moral lessons." In less subtle terms, 30 responses mentioned realizations, insights, inspiration, transformation, and definition of what life is and how it is to live, while 16 wanted stories that inspire, motivate, and transform. Since students looked for lessons or insights in the stories that they wanted to read, let us first take a look at what these lessons were for them. From the responses of students, it can be said that they view "moral lessons" as possessing positive impact that motivate and inspire them to change their perception. The following are the words of these students:

> *"When I read stories, I look for its moral lesson and insights into the human experience."*
>
> *"I look forward [to] the moral lesson of a certain story, and how it will change my views in life."*
>
> *"I want a story to have content, a moral, that maybe I can apply in my daily life."*
>
> *"I look for stories that could also make me realize what life really is."*
>
> *"I usually look for stories that answer how a person lives a good life…."*
>
> *"Of course I look for… stories that mainly make me happy, but it would be a better choice if that story gives you a moral lesson and teaches you to be a better person."*

While it may be difficult to point out what particular lessons these students needed, it is clear that the lessons here referred to something that would fall under the "range of virtue" that Booth refers to as admirable and praiseworthy. Also, it seems that lessons and insights, for these students approximately meant the same thing: something positive and potentially transforming. Both lessons and insights here then meant positive impact. For

example, four students preferred stories that had content. Particularly, they liked stories that were morally serious such as those that contained themes as "justice," "love," "truth," "hope," and the "triumph of good over evil." These are themes that have, in the words of Matthew Arnold, "high seriousness." It is the kind of lessons that students prefer to "use" in their lives for knowing how it is to live and to living life well. Ascribing unto stories a practical role, twenty-four (24) students showed what they did with lessons they gleaned from stories--their application to real life.

> *"In stories I'm looking for moral lessons that could preferably teach and guide … [me] all throughout life's journey."*

> *"As a reader, I want to gain more knowledge about life and hence by reading books I will be able to gain lessons that I can apply to my life. This will help me become a better person."*

The responses of these students yielded a vital admission that stories do not only influence readers in the act of reading but that they are potential sources for character-building as students turn to them for "lessons and insights." And hence in this respect, ethical inquiry is indeed a legitimate form of criticism in the classroom. Even in the desire for aesthetic experience, one student said she compared her own experience to that of the character to see if she was doing it right. This surrender to the ethical effects of stories reminds literature teachers once again the Horatian platitude: that literature instructs and delights. This surrender too brings to the table once again the idea of creating better characters in students. While this thought may have been supplanted by postmodern ideas questioning ethical criticism's legitimacy, it is important to note that in the contemporary ethical criticism, the focus is on invitations and the narrative situation that entails ethical confrontation, not on a rigid moral prescription (although it is undeniable that there are values that are universal-valuing life, showing compassion and love, aspiring justice for all).

Why do students turn to stories for lessons?

The answer lies in what Newton (1995), Gregory (2011), and Booth (2003) see in stories: "invitations" and "offerings." Stories "create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator

and listener, author and character or reader and text" (Newton, 1995, p.13). For students, these stories offered them these invitations to be part of an engagement. It is worth noting here that while 47 students explicitly stated that they looked for "moral lessons" or "lessons," 30 suggested for insights and meanings (which achieved approximately the same meaning as lessons as they too were potentially transformative). While a large number of these students looked for the moral proposition or the said, some of these students (32) preferred the aesthetic experience, and 24 of the 32 students mentioned that they both looked for entertainment and lessons or insights.

> *"For me I read books not just to be entertained but also to have insights and learning that can be applied or related to real life situations."*

> *"I look for entertainment because I just want to entertain myself by reading. I also look for moral insights because it is a way for to reflect on my life."*

The lessons that the students looked for then (I would like to believe) was not "a set of meta-theoretical ideas or pre-existing norms" (Newton, 1995, p. 13) that they could carry away after every reading. Rather, it was the lived experience that was a result of the transaction of reader and text once the reader accepts the invitation. Literature and stories in particular extend to the reader the following: invitations to feelings, invitations to belief, and invitations to ethical judgments (Gregory, 2011). All the responses of the students manifest a willingness to accept such invitations. When students said they looked for stories that inspired and made them realize things, they were actually saying they were willing to accept the invitation to belief. When students looked for stories that showed them how to live, they were also in a way saying they were willing to accept the invitation to ethical judgment.

How do these students accept such invitations?

It is through what Gregory (2005) calls "imaginative transposing," the "vicarious imagination." As students engage in the act of transactional reading, in a give-and-take relationship with the text, they momentarily suspend their own consciousness and take that of another. In the words of these students, they looked for stories that "make [them] feel that they are inside," a part of the

world of the story; they try to "imagine [one of] the characters," to know "what it's like in the character's place," "compare [their] life to the character's," and "compare the character's experience to [their own] and see if [they're] doing it right." It is interesting to note as well that students who manifested desire for the vicarious experience also look for lessons:

> *"I look for lessons in non-fiction stories because I would like to gain wisdom through other people's experiences. I believe that I may not be able to experience things first-hand but probably through other people, I will learn what they have also learned from their experiences."*

> *"…I look for morality [sic] because I think all books have [issues on] morality so after [I] read a book, I always try to compare to my life and main character's life."*

When students imagine as one of the characters they actually imaginatively inhabit another's consciousness, identifying with the character's thoughts, emotions, and ideas. In this inhabiting, the readers again are invited to negotiate their feelings, beliefs, and judgments with those of the character. Certainly it is ultimately the reader's choice to accept the invitation or decline it. If the reader sees the invitation as offering something of worth then he/she engages.

What then are the pedagogical implications of this study?

This study offers two things to teachers: to overcome discomfort at dealing with lessons and to embrace the opportunity to help students develop an ethos that is in Wayne Booth's words, ethical at its center; and to teach students to read both efferently and aesthetically. Mark Bracher (2006) in his article Teaching for social justice: Reeducating the emotions through literary studies pointed out that "despite our commitment…to political and ethical ends, there is little evidence that literary study has made much difference in the injustice that permeates our world, and there is good reason to believe that literary study as it is currently pursued is incapable of doing so." This is because as teachers "we have not figured out how to take sufficient advantage of the access we have: the opportunity to change the hearts and minds of our students." We are placed in the impossible position of advocating for change, and yet we are reluctant to effect change in our students because, paradoxically, we think that it is unethical to do so.

Charles Paine (1989) calls for us to embrace our "role as manipulators." Although Paine is primarily advocating for a sophisticated relativism as equal to radical pedagogy, his point may be appropriate here. The idea of transforming students must start with a change in attitude. Perhaps another reason why we never achieve our goals is because we have not really believed we can effect change. We have not taken ourselves seriously. The word "manipulator" has an unsavory taste for it entails an imposition that ethical criticism as well as other forms of criticism objects to. Yet, there is some truth in this. Do we not exercise a certain level of manipulation in the classroom? The act of teaching itself is in some ways a form of imposition, even in choosing what texts to include in the syllabus, or charting the direction for a discussion entails a certain level of control in itself. For how do we help students develop a selfhood when we have not acknowledged that we can help? To refuse to embrace our roles is to refuse to help and teach to transform. We are once again pulled back to our own contradicting theories and pedagogies, straitjacketing us and stopping us from moving forward. Such paralysis is handed down to our own students who think that the literature classroom is a place where we discuss theories and nothing more. When outside the classroom, they revert back to their old selves content with their affluent comforts indifferent to the social realities they once read in literature and from which they experienced discomfort. Indeed several times, we face this vey nemesis of paralysis and indecision. At the very best, our classrooms have become merely a site for discussions, though intellectual but unfruitful. In one classroom discussion, one student asked me if the act of the character— sleeping with a married man— is justified for the purpose of claiming her place in her new home (as the story is one of Diaspora). How do we answer questions like this in the face of postmodern theories and think of the students' welfare at the same time?

Perhaps, we have to qualify the word manipulator here, perhaps "influencers?" Let us just say that in order to get rid of our discomfort at the word lessons we must think of ourselves as inevitable influencers to our students' hearts and minds, and in this respect, we are in a way manipulators. To embrace this role is to recognize that we are in the position to change our students, and from the perspective of literary education's goal, that role is justified.

Along with this role, we too must recognize the danger of this invitation. We are vulnerable to self-proclaimed judgments. But if embracing this role comes with a reflective attitude, then we can somehow check ourselves from

this pitfall. Let us take our reading list as a starting point. Our reading lists according Booth (2003) are "ethical constructs". Since they are "constructs" they can certainly be "reconstructed." An open attitude to collaborative teaching and discourse may help teachers achieve goals. We can review and share our reading lists and syllabuses with teachers handling the same subject. This can open up a dialogue on what might possibly be helpful to students in their search for lessons and insights in literature classrooms. Note here the suggestive language might not the prescriptive should. We can share readings to each other and observe how students respond to these readings: are they motivated to ask questions/ are the texts personally relevant to students/do they bring up ethical concerns and discussions / are they receptive of each other's opinions and thoughts?

Our hesitation to embrace this position is perhaps based on inadequate understanding of our own students. We often think that when we, ourselves, make judgments on character's choices, our students receive this judgment uncritically. While this may ring true in students whose very values we have just confirmed through our judgments, other students will not easily accept for their own values come into play when they read and interact with us. What is more important here is our willingness to embrace the inevitability of our roles as influential to students. We must embrace the opportunity to help students develop an ethos, to cite Booth again, ethical at its center. Like the critics cited in this paper, I too believe that the overall effect of literature on the character of students or any reader for that matter cannot be "conclusively demonstrated" (Booth, 2005). But as teachers, we take calculated risks so to speak because students seek for lessons, inspiration, motivation, insight, realization, guide and answers. Unlike theorists and critics, teachers are not afforded the luxury of editing. Once inside the classroom, we are bound by time and space. On a personal note, reflecting on students' answers, I feel suddenly wanting, yet to shy away from this is cowardice as Booth enjoins us to "seek selves for ourselves as teachers that…will change students in ways that we are sure are most useful to them." Our seeking of selves requires that we acknowledge first that our role involves so much influence on our students who, in this study, are seeking selves.

Our job is made easier because of the stories themselves. As students inhabit the consciousness of characters, they are inevitably forming their selves and the self is never static. It is evolving and transforming by acts of negotiation, acceptance, and refusal. As students identify with characters they

are in a way negotiating, testing their own experiences against those of the characters, making up their mind whether to feel what the characters feel, to believe the characters, or to resist them altogether. Students are engaged in the process of accommodating new friends (to use Booth's metaphor of friendship) or declining unpleasant acquaintances. These stories' offerings are powerful in that they present moral complexities and ambiguities that may have been absent in other forms of character teaching tools. More importantly, literature (or stories in specific) teaches students "effective casuistry" (Booth, 1998). Hence, lessons here are not the simplistic moral codes, but the outcome of the casuistry, the students' choosing one virtue over another. It is a complex process of discriminating which virtue is best and which virtue is most useful. In this transaction, students build an ethical center, not a fixed set of rules of ethical conduct. Rather it is "a range of 'virtues,' characteristic habits of behavior considered admirable." It is building a better self (Booth, 1998). Changes occur in perspectives and feelings, and on judgments, and these changes add up and we are the sum.

Reading stories with insights is different from mere willingness to read stories with insights. My point here is that engagements with stories may be difficult to achieve given our students who seem to have developed an aversion to reading. This will challenge our capacities. The first thing to do for students to experience fully a story is to get them engaged. There is no other way to do this other than close reading or engaging the aesthetic tactics as Gregory Marshall puts it. To come face to face with the characters and to inhabit the world of the story requires students' surrender to the workings of language. We must revisit with rigor once again with our students the skill of formal analysis and explication.

I suppose our task is not really to teach our students to look for lessons. This leads me to my last point on the study's pedagogical implications. Our task is to teach them how to read both efferently and aesthetically. It is through close reading that students discover meaning. A reading that is meaningful effortlessly glides back and forth from the efferent and aesthetic and back again. They can both look for lessons and enjoy the text's language and form.

Based on the respondents' answers, it can be said that with the exception of those who looked for both lessons and aesthetic experience, students read efferently. They read with the determined aim to look for something they could carry away. In their words:

"I look for stories with lessons. Stories without lesson are nonsense."

"…Stories without lessons are not worth reading."

Indeed, an alternative organization of the results would look like this: 127 responses partial to efferent reading and 45 responses on aesthetic reading.

A. Lessons (127)		**B. Aesthetic Experience (45)**	
moral lessons	47	Excitement and thrill	7
realizations, insights, meaning	30	entertainment	22
themes	4	vicarious experience	3
inspiration and transformation	16	happy endings	13
guidance and application to life	24		
personal relevance	6		

While these responses do not conclusively determine the kind of reading students do, they are helpful at best as reminders to teachers to practice ethical criticism responsibly in the classroom. When literary evaluation of a story or any text is reduced to merely a hunt for "moral lessons" then we risk losing the merits that aesthetic experience delivers. Morality or ethics in this sense becomes trivial and "cornball morality leads to rebellion and loss of faith" (Gardner, 2005, p.4). Thus it is necessary to make a move from the old ethical criticism's overt focus on "lessons" to the new focus on "invitations." Inevitably, when students accept the invitation, they enter the world of the story alone. We, as teachers, wait for them when they exit.

Our students may be, alone, solitary in reading but discussing our understanding of the stories is not at all solitary but discursive and dialogic. The classroom provides this site for discourse and dialogue. And the main aim for this dialogue is clarification. We open up discussions not just to test students whether they read the assigned text (admittedly, we do this often), but also to help students clarify confusions. Thus, in classroom discussions, our role shifts to prompting questions, helping students make sense of their own understanding of the experience and clarifying thoughts that previously confused them. It is at this instance that we can help students by referring them back to the text, pointing out metaphors, and asking them critical questions. There is no better way to do this than employ the formalist approach. In fact, it may be helpful to prepare general guide notes before students read the stories

so that they will not have to read with the sole purpose of looking for lessons.

However, it is not as well helpful for students when we deny them the lessons they seek by shutting all discussions about ethics. If it means mentioning and acknowledging "moral lessons" in the discussion, then so be it. We can open up a discussion on what they think is the better action, behavior, and decision. The point is that it has to be a balance of ethical and aesthetic pursuits.

When we continually provide students the opportunity for ethical confrontation through the stories we assign, we help them interact with life itself because literature offers our students a description of the human condition. In stories, we help them prepare their own actions and decisions when they go back to the real world. When such relationship of literature and life continues in our students' cognition and emotion, they develop "'habits of the heart:' the typical patterns of our intellectual, emotional, and ethical responses" (Gregory, 2005). These habits will hopefully make for our students better decision makers, holding the power of choice, of timshel (Rosenstand, 2005). Ultimately, these habits we hope will create better selves in our students in the long run.

CONCLUSION

Among other things, this study has given hope to a literature teacher like me. The course that we teach is and will most likely remain relevant in the face of so much technological changes. Literature still matters to students. This should cause us to reflect on the best pedagogical practices that afford opportunities to students to become their better selves. Indeed if we truly are student-centered then our students' concerns matter and figure in our pedagogy. Since they look for lessons in stories that they can somehow use in their lives, then great care must be taken in constructing reading lists, preparing discussion guides, and in mediating classroom discussions. Also, we emphasize once again close reading or the aesthetic tactics. As students read, we must develop in them the ability to read both efferently and aesthetically. They can read both for the purpose of carrying away something of value (lessons and insights) and for the aesthetic enjoyment the text offers. While the result of our students' reading experiences may not be immediately detected, the aim here is for teachers to constantly provide opportunities for these kinds of ethical engagement and confrontation. When students develop the habit of confronting ethical and

social questions, they develop attitude and perception change, even changes in ideologies. Our role as teachers, much to our chagrin, entails so much risk and responsibility. Yet, can we dismiss our students' plea for stories that show them "how to live?" It is cowardice to turn away from this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several studies may be conducted from the data gathered. Factors such as cultural traits, gender, and social class may be looked into in determining students' motivation in reading stories. As gender, age, and social class determine in several ways our characteristics and habits, researchers can have several similar studies on these factors. Another potentially interesting study is a correlation of students' reading ability and their preferences. A third promising project and perhaps the most interesting one is a phenomenological study on student responses to ethical questions evoked by a particular story.

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