

Good Stories and Moral Understanding

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Michael Katz uses a good story, *The Small Room* by May Sarton, to illustrate how literature can provide moral insight for students that case studies do not seem to be able to stimulate. His remarks on literature's role in an applied ethics course are tentative, as he points in the direction he thinks is necessary for further development: "a full-blown theory of literature and how it communicates its moral meanings." I am very pleased to be able to respond to this paper as a way of further encouraging Katz's participation in the development of such a theory. My experiences with case studies corroborates his.

Katz reminds us that good literature affords us the opportunity to get to know characters who seem alive and complicated, not abstracted rational agents. A good story teller takes her time and makes her characters seem real, by adding layer after layer of contextuality. S/he does not report on an event or people, as a scientist or historian might, but offers the readers/listeners the opportunity to "imaginatively participate" in the story through the use of descriptive, metaphoric language. Thus the reader becomes emotionally involved in the story as well as intellectually involved. The reader is encouraged to bring her own contextuality into the experience and relate the story to her own experiences, rather than trying to pass a judgment on what should be the right course of action from a distance, as case study approaches tend to encourage readers to do. All of the layers of contextuality in good literature make room for readers to offer many interpretations and possible ways to understand the situations and characters in the story.

Let me illustrate Katz's position concerning literature's valuable contributions to moral understanding by offering a different interpretation of *The Small Room*. The interpretation I offer is one that also points to tensions between caring and principled justice, but not by showing the problems inherent in a principled approach. Rather, I offer an interpretation highlighting problems inherent in teachers' efforts to be caring with students. I seek to demonstrate problems with "caring" through the example of one of the other professors in the story, Carryl Cope.

Katz describes Cope as Jane Seaman's "self-deceived but well intentioned mentor," as someone who is "not capable of giving Jane the one thing she really needs — love." Yet, we find in *The Small Room* evidence that Carryl does in fact love her student and tries to give her love by giving Jane her time as a teacher. She tries to feed Jane's mind by opening her personal library, spending hours in conversation, and encouraging her. She made sure other faculty were aware of the gifts Jane had to offer. But these acts of caring are apparently not enough, as a female faculty member, and too much for the female student. We find from Jane's psychiatrist that Jane was seeking love from a teacher which she never received from her parents, and that Jane saw in Cope the lost love of her father. "What Jane wanted from Professor Cope was the sort of love and approval that confirms the Other. Jane received books

and higher expectations along with the sense that not she, but some power not honestly her own, was the basis of her value in the professor's eyes."¹

Jane is caught plagiarizing a paper by the new faculty member, Lucy Winter. When Lucy tells Carryl what has happened, Carryl feels responsible for having maybe pushed Jane too hard. Carryl moves to protect Jane from the mills of justice and the sure expulsion she will face, by using her own prestigious position at the university to remove all copies of the publication as well as swaying the President not to try Jane. By doing so she risks the scorn of her fellow colleagues and the rest of the students, thus possibly losing the one thing that is most precious to talented professors, their reputation. In the end Carryl must apologize publicly to her colleagues, all because she cared about Jane.

I submit that Carryl Cope was caught in a double bind as a senior female professor, expected to be what Kathryn Morgan calls "the bearded mother" by her students and faculty, scholastically rigorous and emotionally supportive.² What she was able to give Jane would have been acceptable for a male professor. However, the cards are stacked against women in academia, and I'm not so sure times have changed so dramatically between the 1950s and today. As Pagano describes women in academia: "The female professor is simultaneously locked in and locked out... She is a woman who certifies male knowledge and is constructed as an object of that knowledge... Either we are locked out or we are plagiarists."³ Carryl is a brilliant female professor who has learned how to "plagiarize," meaning she learned from the male voice of higher education, and uses it as if it were her own. She represents a surrogate patriarch, who thinks and acts like a man, in order to succeed in the male-shaped world of academia. Pagano describes Jane's crime as "the perfect female crime" because academic women often express the feeling that they are impostures. "Insofar as we speak in our work the language of the exile, are we not all of us plagiarists?... Jane's act can be seen as an attempt toward a radical reenactment of what it means to be a woman in the academy and as a protest against exile."⁴

Others accuse Carryl Cope of wanting to re-create her own image through Jane's brilliance, of wanting to reproduce herself through her student's future. Is this desire to see the best in her student a form of narcissistic love? Is this "love" dangerous and destructive to students, After all Jane ends up not being expelled from school because it is determined that she needs psychiatric care and she is sent to a mental institution. Or is it the case that Carryl does not really care for Jane, as Lucy apparently does, but rather manipulates her? Pagano warns us:

But stop in the name of love. For this capacity to love may be the source of violence in education. As teachers and scholars, we attempt to appropriate ourselves by imposing perspectives on others, students and colleagues, who are simultaneously attempting to appropriate themselves in similar fashion in their dealings with ourselves. There is always the danger that our wholeness depends on the other serving as mirror.⁵

I suggest that Carryl Cope was in a no-win situation as a brilliant senior female professor at an all girls school in the 1950s. The double-bind for Cope is that she is a woman speaking a man's voice to a female student. Rather than Carryl being able to help her student, she causes Jane to feel more like a fraud, and Jane's act of pliarism becomes just an angry exaggeration of what she suspects she has already

been doing. Carryl has become so good at speaking male words she does not feel a need to protest against their usage anymore. If we look at how caring has been defined by Mayeroff and Noddings, and others such as myself, we can understand that Carryl was not able to care for Jane as Lucy was. She was not able to be for Jane, supporting Jane's becoming who she wanted to be, although she certainly tried to do so. Lucy is a good example of a person who cares, in that she was able to be with, be for, and be there for Jane and Carryl (as well as others in the story). But will it be so easy for Lucy to show she cares the longer she remains an academic? I found Lucy easy to identify with, but because Lucy learns to love Carryl Cope, I found myself also trying to appreciate and understand Carryl's perspective. Because of Lucy's generosity we are better able to understand Jane and Carryl in sympathetic ways, and better able to understand the tragedy women (students and teachers) face in academia.

In order to understand this perspective, we have to be able to look for more context, including the context within which May Sarton's *The Small Room* was written. We need an enlarged view, and this is exactly what makes good literature an excellent source for moral understanding. I have taken this opportunity to attend to Carryl as a way of modeling what caring means. I hope my response has added to your desire to read *The Small Room*, as Michael Katz (and Pagano) enticed me to do. Both papers should stand as examples of the value of good literature in helping students understand more carefully and appreciatively the moral issues and dilemmas teachers face. Hopefully this response also serves my purpose of encouraging Katz, and others, to do the hard work of developing "a full-blown theory of literature and how it communicates its moral meanings."

1. Jo Anne Pagano, "Teaching Women," in *The Education Feminist Reader*, ed. Lynda Stone (New York: Routledge, 1994), 252-75, 261.

2. Kathryn Morgan, "The Perils and Paradoxes of Feminist Pedagogy," *Resources for Feminist Research* 16 (1987): 50.

3. Pagano, "Teaching Women," 272.

4. *Ibid.*, 263.

5. Jo Anne Pagano, "Taking our Places," keynote Address to the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, Indianapolis, 1994, 9.