Teaching for Social Justice: Reeducating the Emotions Through Literary Study

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Many literature teachers and scholars today are committed to promoting social justice through both their teaching and their scholarship. Some of the most prominent critical approaches to literature in recent decades—Marxism, feminism, gay/lesbian/queer criticism, and postcolonialism—originated as efforts to combat injustices suffered by specific groups, while other approaches, such as psychoanalysis, semiotics, and deconstruction, have been given political and/or ethical inflections and recruited to assist in a more general struggle for social justice. During the 1990s, criticism was seen as taking a decidedly ethical turn (see Parker; Buell). Indeed, as Wayne Booth and others have observed, virtually all postmodernists and most other sorts of critics as well are concerned ultimately with questions of ethics and justice (see Booth 41–42; Siebers 5; Clausen 22).

But despite this commitment of critical and pedagogical activity 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 being pursued is incapable of doing so. The reason is not, as common sense might suggest, that the academic activity of literary study, pursued only by a very small and effete minority, is simply powerless against the massive evils of the world at large. For while it is true that literary professionals are small in number and slight in status, the fact that we teach—and/or teach others to...
teach—a significant number of the world's elite suggests that our access to power is not as minimal as our numbers and social position might imply. Although we do not hold the reins of power, we teach those who do—or, rather, who will someday. And since the ultimate power in a democracy rests with the people, and virtually all of the people in our democracy take literature classes, we literature teachers have the opportunity to influence them in ways that would make a real contribution to social justice.

Thus, if literary study has not significantly enhanced social justice—and there is no evidence that it has—the reason is not that literature teachers have no contact with power. The reason is, rather, that 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. Several largely unexamined beliefs have contributed to this failure. One of the most important is the belief that it is wrong to attempt to change our students, that doing so would be an imposition of our values and an unethical use of our power. Thus, the concern with ethics in literary study has focused on philosophical issues ("ethics") to the almost total neglect of social praxis, or moral action ("morality"). Because morality is associated with asserting values, passing judgment, and controlling behavior, many critics have viewed it as oppressive, immoral, and to be avoided. This is, however, an impossible task, since this very act of criticism is itself a moralizing act (see Krieger) advocating the alteration of others' behavior (that is, to stop moralizing). Moreover, by fleeing from the aim of changing behavior, including social action, ethical criticism has failed to yield any discernible social benefits. As Geoffrey Harpham points out, "ethical discourse en toto, with its proliferating distinctions, refinements, and theoretical delicacies, can be seen as a stalling action, a deferral of the moment of decision that reflects . . . a philosophical embarrassment at the imminence of a specific answer to a pressing worldly question" (x). The moral moment, however—choosing one behavior over another—is necessary, "because mere choice has, by itself, no ethical value whatsoever; without decision, ethics
would be condemned to dithering. It is morality that realizes ethics, making it ethical" (30). By ignoring issues of moral action, the "ethics" of contemporary ethical theory and criticism is in a profound sense not ethical at all (see Harpham 261).

Harpham locates the source of this exclusion of morality in critics' desire to maintain an identity of moral purity and self-righteousness, which they think they are doing by avoiding efforts to change other people's behaviors: "In various ways, contemporary thinkers try to preserve their self-righteousness intact by remaining on the margins, in the uncritiquable position of critique, avoiding the disorder and equivocality that attend worldly agency" (xiii).2 Such morality of self-righteousness, as Amelie Rorty points out, is basically worthless, because it produces no benefits, in contrast to what Rorty terms "significant morality":

[W]e can distinguish the morality of a righteous will, which involves the general commitment to do what is right for the right reason, from significant morality, which involves active dispositions to generate the morally appropriate intentions and to fulfill those intentions in well-formed action. . . . Significant morality . . . leaves the world a better place. (32)

Contemporary ethical theory and criticism, in their aversion to the idea of asserting values and changing students' behaviors, are instances of self-righteous morality rather than significant morality. This position is supremely ironic in light of the fact that the whole purpose of education is to change students in one way or another (see Tagg 39), which means that education as such inevitably entails a certain amount of "pedagogic violence" (Worsham 215). As currently practiced, literary pedagogy, like many other elements of education, contributes to the production of docile subjects for global capitalism through, for example, enforcing classroom punctuality, reliability, obedience, and subordination. Moreover, any social criticism or pedagogy that aims to contribute to beneficial social change must assume that it is both possible and justifiable to change students' behaviors. After all, what is the point of trying to alter students' knowledge, beliefs, or attitudes about certain
groups of people (women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and so on) if the aim is not to get the students to behave more humanely with regard to such individuals? And in any event, few literature teachers hesitate to proscribe racist, sexist, or homophobic behaviors in their classrooms. So the sanctimonious criticism that efforts to change students' values and/or behaviors is unethical is both hypocritical and an impediment to social justice—and, as such, one might also conclude, following Harpham, it is unethical.

We literature teachers must therefore overcome our inhibitions about changing our students' behaviors. Since we can't avoid doing so—at least not as long as we are doing any kind of teaching at all—we should forthrightly acknowledge that our job is to change our students' behaviors and turn our attention to the question of what behaviors we should try to change, and what means we should use to do so. Agreeing on which behaviors to change, and in what direction, might seem like an impossible task. But most literature teachers would probably agree that we would be justified in trying to change behaviors that produce avoidable suffering and injustice. Indeed, most teachers who want their teaching to contribute to social justice harbor beliefs or fantasies (however vague or even unconscious they may be) that their students will, as a result of their class, behave more justly toward particular groups of people.

The question, then, is how to get our students to behave in ways that reduce suffering and injustice—that is, to behave less harmfully and more justly toward individuals and groups who are currently suffering unnecessarily as a result of our students' and their compatriots' actions (including nonaction). This is a difficult question to answer, and our efforts to promote social justice through the study of literature have been impeded not only by our aversion to the idea of changing our students' behaviors but also by the fact that we haven't yet figured out what we need to change about our students in order to get them to change their behaviors. Most of our pedagogical efforts to date have focused on changing our students' misinformed and prejudiced beliefs about certain
groups of people. This strategy is pursued in three distinct but often overlapping ways. First is ideology critique, which involves (a) exposing unjust social structures, institutions, and practices and identifying the faulty assumptions, beliefs, and values (social Darwinism, patriarchy, racism, and hetereonormativity, for example) either embodied in or exposed by literature, that support these unjust social realities; (b) revealing the negative psychological and social consequences of these factors; (c) and (implicitly or explicitly) denouncing and rejecting these factors. Second is utopian modeling, which involves promoting alternative beliefs and values through (a) providing utopian texts—texts representing good societies—to read; (b) identifying utopian elements (characters, groups, relationships) in other texts; and (c) providing texts offering recognition and validation for members of oppressed groups. A third method of altering students' misinformed beliefs and attitudes is the inculcation of various theories—Marxist, Foucauldian, psychoanalytic, and semiotic, for example—that explain how these beliefs and attitudes, and human subjects in general, are variously constructed and manipulated by language or representation.

Such knowledge, we have assumed, will contribute to a reduction of injustice by changing the minds of readers and students, altering their knowledge, beliefs, and/or values in ways that will somehow translate into greater social justice—though we generally avoid thinking about how this will occur, since to do so would lead us to the realization that for such psychological changes to enhance social justice, they must produce significant changes in our students' social behaviors, including voting and other political actions. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that these practices have anything close to the impact that we would like for them to have (another reason we avoid thinking about these questions). Many students and readers simply dismiss the critiques of their beliefs, values, and behaviors, along with the new knowledge and values, that our classes offer. Other students accept these arguments and knowledge but experience little change in their attitudes, remaining indifferent, if not hostile, to oppressed groups and
individuals. And of the few students whose attitudes may be altered by the arguments and knowledge they encounter in our classes, many show little change in social and political behavior regarding the injustices that have been revealed to them, supporting political candidates and policies that are indifferent if not hostile to the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the uninsured, the addicted, the imprisoned, and so on.

The key reason for the failure of our current literary pedagogy to have a significant impact on our students' political and other social behaviors is that it is based on an inadequate psychology. That is, it assumes that behavior will automatically change if beliefs and attitudes are changed, and it assumes that beliefs and attitudes can readily be changed by presenting facts and rational arguments. Neither assumption is valid. The assumption that beliefs and attitudes can be changed by facts and rational arguments has been disproved by studies showing that students often maintain faulty beliefs (that capital punishment deters violent crime, for example) and attitudes (hostility toward gays) "even when confronted with clear and contradictory evidence," and that "they also tend to evaluate ambiguous information in a manner that bolsters preexisting views" (Cohen et al. 1151), not only waging counterarguments but also simply denying the validity of any disconfirming evidence, distorting it, refusing to pay attention to it, derogating its source, or responding with anger rather than thought (Zuwerink and Devine 932). In some cases the resistance is very subtle, virtually invisible, and even unconscious, but it is nonetheless effective. For example, people strongly invested in a particular belief or attitude often take pains to appear objective (to themselves as well as others) by collecting facts and considering logical arguments, but doing so selectively, in ways guaranteed to support their preestablished positions (Kunda 482).

**Emotion as the Key to Social Justice**

Moreover, even if students' conscious, declarative beliefs and values do undergo some modification as a result of critique, this
change may well be insufficient to alter their social and political behaviors. This is because behavior is often motivated and guided more by one’s emotions than by one’s conscious knowledge and values (see Lazarus 94). As Bernard Weiner reports, studies of the relative importance of thoughts and affects in determining behavior are virtually unanimous in concluding that affects are more important than thoughts (174). Thus, a fundamental reason that current practices of literary study are ineffective in reducing injustice is because the persistence of injustice is not due ultimately to lack of knowledge, lack of analytical skill, or even lack of the right principles or values; it is due to lack of emotional change. As Lynn Worsham observes, “our affective lives are largely immune to the legislative efforts of social critique and to the legislative gains of progressive social movements; . . . a change of heart does not follow, naturally or simply, from a change of mind.” What this means is that “if our commitment is to real individual and social change, . . . then . . . our most urgent political and pedagogical task [is] the fundamental reeducation of emotion” (216).

Reeducating emotion might strike some as a dubious goal for pedagogy, but as Worsham points out, the dominant forms of pedagogy are already massively engaged in forming students’ emotions, only they function primarily to form emotions that produce and perpetuate injustice:

[T]he primary work of pedagogy is more fundamental than the imposition of a dominant framework of meanings. Its primary work is to organize an emotional world, to inculcate patterns of feeling that support the legitimacy of dominant interests. . . . Pedagogy binds each individual to the social world through a complex and often contradictory affective life that remains, for the most part, just beyond the horizon of semantic availability, and its success depends on a mystification or misrecognition of this primary work. (223)

Forming students’ emotions would thus not be a new aim for pedagogy at all. Moreover, as Worsham also points out, cognitive theories of emotion, by demonstrating that emotion is a function of cognition, have “made emotion the explicit and legitimate object of
pedagogic work. Emotion, in this view, can be educated, reeducated, or miseducated" (224).

What emotions, then, should we aim to reeducate through literary study? Several moral philosophers have recently suggested that the most effective means of promoting social justice is to educate students to experience sympathy or compassion for people toward whom they now feel indifference. Social injustice, they argue, is due primarily to widespread indifference, the absence of moral emotions such as indignation, guilt, and most importantly, compassion. Arne Vetlesen, for one, contends that indifference to suffering and inequality is the greatest obstacle to social justice, greater even than prejudice and hatred (10, 211–12). Sandra Bartky makes a similar claim: “The relatively advantaged in the developed world are for the most part culpably indifferent to the miseries of most of the rest of the world as well as of the less fortunate in their own societies. . . . Most lead excessively privatized lives that lack any effective or persistent sense of political outrage” (188; see also Solomon 177).

What is needed to advance social justice, Bartky argues, is for sympathy to replace indifference. Richard Rorty takes much the same position. The fundamental challenge for the pursuit of social justice, he believes, is getting people to care about strangers, people with whom they have no relation and whose beliefs and behaviors they may even find objectionable. “It is best to think of moral progress,” says Rorty, “as a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. . . . Moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy” (“Ethics” 81–82). Rorty therefore advocates that educators focus not on moral principles or philosophy but on what he calls “manipulating sentiments,” or “sentimental education” (“Human” 73). Martha Nussbaum concurs, noting that “a broad compassion for one’s fellow citizens is essential to a decent society” (Upheavals 350). Robert Solomon is even more emphatic, insisting that “without care and compassion, there can be no justice” (225). “A sense of justice,” he says, “is first of all a matter of emotions, to be cultivated from our natural
inclinations of fellow feeling and molded into a durable state of character" (198).

From the perspective of these and other philosophers, the question of how the study of literature might contribute to the production of social justice is thus not a question of how it can inculcate new values, provide new knowledge, or develop new analytical skills but of how it might help people overcome their indifference to, and instead experience compassion for, the billions of people who live in misery on our planet. If literary study could systematically help students overcome their indifference to the suffering that surrounds them and experience compassion for the sufferers, it would make a significant contribution to social justice. Solomon argues that this is precisely what sentimental fiction such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does. "The manipulative sentimentality" of that novel, he says, "turned a morally flawed country around" (238), and fiction in general, he believes, "can be viewed as the exercise of our emotional facilities. . . . Allowing oneself to become teary-eyed about the tragic death of an impossibly idealized little Nell while reading Dickens . . . activates our sensitivity to actual tragedies. . . . [I]t stimulates and exercises our sympathies without straining or exhausting them" (Solomon 239–41).

Rorty, too, believes that reading "long, sad, sentimental stories" such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the best way to develop the capacity for such sympathy. This type of reading experience, Rorty argues, has contributed to "an astonishingly rapid progress of sentiments in which it has become much easier for us to be moved to action by sad and sentimental stories" ("Human" 81). Through enhancing our capacity to feel sympathy, "such stories," Rorty claims, "repeated and varied over the centuries, have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful people, to tolerate, and even to cherish, powerless people—people whose appearance or habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity" (80).

Nussbaum makes much the same claim for tragedy and the realist novel, arguing that "the very form [of these genres] constructs compassion in readers, positioning them as people who care intensely about the sufferings and bad luck of others" (Poetic
The spectator of Greek tragedy, she says, is taught to be compassionate: "Tragedies acquaint her with the bad things that may happen in a human life, long before life itself does so: it thus enables concern for others who are suffering what she has not suffered. . . . Contemporary tragic stories are analogous exercises of extended sympathy" (Upheavals 428–29).

I believe that these claims of Solomon, Rorty, and Nussbaum can serve as a basis for making literary study a more potent force for social justice. But for this to occur, their insights need to be developed more fully in two respects. First, we need a more systematic and comprehensive account of the nature of compassion (or sympathy), how it is evoked, and most of all, how the capacity and tendency to experience it can be developed. And second, we need to understand more precisely how literary study might contribute to the development of this capacity and tendency, in order that we might make the most productive choices in formulating our pedagogical strategies and practices. Such choices—concerning not only what texts to assign our students but also what kinds of reading, thinking, discussion, and writing to ask them to engage in with these texts—are not discussed by Solomon, Rorty, and Nussbaum, who appear to assume that certain kinds of literary texts (sad, sentimental stories for Solomon and Rorty, realistic novels and tragedy for Nussbaum) only need to be placed in the hands of readers in order to produce the desired results (see Nussbaum, Poetic 7, 10, 34, 66). As literature teachers, we know that this is not the case. And we also know that by promoting certain types of reading or interpretive practices—through the modeling effects of our own reading, interpretive, and analytic activities, through the questions we ask about the texts, and through what and how we ask our students to think, imagine, discuss, and write about these texts—we play a significant role in determining not only the mental actions our students engage in while under our tutelage, but also the mental structures, capacities, and habits they develop as a result of the repeated performance of these actions. We thus need to know what particular mental structures, capacities, and habits produce compassion, so that we can then try to
figure out how to promote the development of these structures, capacities, and habits through literary study.

How Emotions are Produced and Changed

First we need to understand more fully the nature of compassion, what causes it, and how it motivates actions that contribute to social justice. As Aristotle realized and cognitive psychologists have recently elaborated, emotions are produced by our continuous, largely automatic, and often unconscious cognitive appraisals of the implications that our circumstances (internal and external, large-scale and small-scale) have for our well being, including not only our physical integrity but our entire sense of self, or identity, which encompasses the other people, animals, and things that we experience as part of ourselves. Specific appraisals produce specific emotions, which include a particular physiological arousal together with a tendency to act in a manner that promises to maintain, defend, or restore our well being (Lazarus 39, 104). Thus, when we perceive our physical or psychological integrity to be in danger, we experience the emotion of fear, which includes an awareness of the danger, a heightened state of physiological arousal enabling us to respond quickly and forcefully to the danger, and an inclination toward the actions of either fleeing or fighting the source of the danger. When we perceive our identity as having been diminished by someone's willful action, such as a blow to our body or an insult, we become angry, which involves an identification of the perceived offender, heightened physiological arousal, and an inclination to harm the offender (Lazarus 217–39). Cognitive appraisal is therefore the key both to eliciting emotions and to changing them. Whenever a particular appraisal is made, its corresponding affective-physiological state and action plan are triggered (Weiner 257–60). And as long as the appraisal remains active, so does the emotion, including its arousal state and action tendency.

Social justice thus depends on the appraisals that are made of particular conditions—such as wealth, poverty, crime, and sub-
stance abuse—and of the individuals and groups involved in these conditions. The key appraisal in such circumstances is that of responsibility. If one judges people to be responsible for their own suffering or harmful actions, such as poverty, addiction, illness, obesity, or crime, then one will feel indifference toward them—or even anger, if one perceives their condition to be in some way a threat to one's own well-being—and such emotions will motivate one to withhold any assistance and perhaps even to harm such people. Conversely, if one perceives their situation or behavior to be caused by forces beyond their control, one will feel compassion and will be inclined to help them.

Numerous studies have shown that people both feel greater compassion and provide more aid when they perceive the cause of the other's suffering to lie outside the other's control, thus absolving the other of responsibility for the suffering. One study found that medical students were more likely to withhold distress-reducing medication from patients whose distress they judged to have been caused by events the patients were in some way responsible for (Weiner 61). Another study asked respondents to rate ten stigmatized groups on how responsible one judged them to be for their condition; the degree to which one felt affection, pity, and anger toward them; and the amount of blame, assistance, and charitable donations one would accord them. Those groups deemed to have little or no responsibility for their plight—victims of Alzheimer's, blindness, cancer, heart disease, paraplegia, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—elicited greater compassion and intentions to help than did those who were judged responsible for their problems (AIDS victims, child abusers, drug abusers, and obese people). Thus, the more responsible people are judged to be for their problems, the less compassion and help they receive (Weiner 62–63).

This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that altering the judgment of responsibility alters the degree of compassion and the inclination to help, as demonstrated by the finding that people responded to AIDS victims more with pity than with anger when contracting HIV was represented as being uncontrollable (for
example, through a blood transfusion), but responded with greater anger when contracting it occurred through a situation that was deemed to be under the control of the victims (sexual intercourse). This effect of the judgment of responsibility is also confirmed by ordinary experience and by simple thought experiments. Recall or imagine your response to a server who is inattentive and unresponsive to your table. You may feel annoyed or even angry, and as a result, you may give the server less than your usual tip and may even be inclined to register a complaint with a supervisor. Now suppose that another server, overhearing you complain as you prepare to leave your meager tip, apologizes for her colleague and informs you, “Her four-year-old daughter was killed in a car crash last week.” Your emotion probably changes immediately from anger to sympathy, and you probably reach into your wallet for a more generous tip. Why this change? Because the new information makes you realize that the server’s attitude and behavior are largely beyond her control, the result of her tragic circumstances rather than ill will on her part.

The same judgment of responsibility that determines our response in a situation like this also produces our responses to social problems such as crime, addiction, unemployment, and poverty. People who view poverty and unemployment as the result of laziness or lack of industriousness and perseverance—factors supposedly within the control of the individual—feel less compassion and inclination to help the impoverished than do people who see these conditions as caused by factors beyond the control of the individual, such as economic and social forces (Weiner 78–79). As Robert Lane observes, “The explanation of a victim’s plight . . . influences the observer’s emotions, which in turn influence the observer’s desire to help the victim, whether directly or by government policy” (478). More specifically, the dominant belief that individuals are responsible for their own fates is a major reason for the maldistribution of wealth in the United States (475).

Since compassion, a prime motivator of actions that produce social justice, thus depends on the judgment that the other is not
responsible, or at least not solely responsible, for his or her condition or behavior, a fundamental way to promote social justice is to increase people’s capacity and tendency to recognize the ways in which the other’s negative behavior or condition is beyond his or her control. This, then, is one of the main things that teachers wishing to promote social justice can do: help their students to understand the ways in which social problems such as poverty, unemployment, teen pregnancy, addiction, and crime are caused by forces beyond the control of the immediate bearers or perpetrators of these conditions.

One of the benefits of such a pedagogical aim is that it is much more politically neutral and ethically non-coercive than most interventions aiming at social change. It aims not to inculcate particular values, interpellate students into certain political positions, or demand specific behaviors from students. Rather, it aims simply to provide students with more complete, empirically and clinically validated knowledge of the causes of certain behaviors that currently elicit indifference or hostility from students because they lack an adequate understanding of the causes of these behaviors.

Studies have shown that most Americans have a decidedly biased view of the other’s responsibility, failing to recognize crucial ways in which the other’s circumstances and behavior are (at least partially) the product of forces beyond the other’s control. This bias, so basic and widespread that psychologists have dubbed it “the fundamental attribution error” (Försterling 83; Weiner 253), is the product of several invalid assumptions: (1) that an individual’s condition (poverty, for example) is primarily the result of that individual’s own behavior (including failure to act in a certain way); (2) that an individual’s behavior (criminal violence, for example) is caused by the individual’s intention more than by circumstances; (3) that the individual’s intention is caused by the individual’s character or disposition rather than by external circumstances; and (4) that the individual’s character or disposition is the responsibility of the individual and not of factors beyond the individual’s control. Each of these assumptions is invalid. Poverty, unemployment,
illness, and other conditions often occur despite an individual’s best intentions and efforts to avoid them; harmful behavior such as violence or substance abuse is often triggered by circumstances rather than intentions; it is often impulsive rather than planned or premeditated; and character or disposition is itself determined by the playing out of one’s genetic endowment in relation with the circumstances of one’s birth, neither of which is controlled by the individual, as is demonstrated by findings that the presence of various environmental factors dramatically increases the odds of developing a violent personality (see Garbarino).

Overcoming people’s faulty judgments about others’ responsibility requires countering the fundamental attribution error and helping people realize the full extent to which individuals' conditions, actions, intentions, and characters are all the product of factors beyond their control. How, then, can this be done? What causes this attributional bias on the part of so many Americans, and how can these factors be countered? The fundamental attribution error is largely the result of a quintessentially American ideology that emphasizes hyper-individualism, self-reliance, and social Darwinism. The role of this ideology in misattributions of responsibility can be seen clearly in the fact that the differences between attributions made by Americans and those made by Chinese, Japanese, and others become greater as individuals grow older and thus become more fully socialized into the dominant ideologies of their respective cultures (see Föörsterling 85). Direct evidence of the role of ideology comes from studies showing that people with conservative ideologies tend more than liberals to see negative life conditions such as poverty and obesity as caused by personal indulgence rather than factors beyond the individual’s control (Weiner 79–80). “Conservatives,” Weiner reports, “generally believe that individuals are personally responsible for their life outcomes” (76). As Weiner points out, following Lane, beliefs about causation and agency constitute a fundamental feature of every ideology and play a major role in determining the assignment of responsibility for conditions such as poverty and obesity (79–80). Thus, conservatives—whose ideology foregrounds personal
actions, intentions, and character and largely overlooks external, situational causes—tend, unjustifiably (see Lane 475, 488), to assign responsibility to the individual victim of such conditions, which results in feelings of anger or indifference toward such individuals, which in turn produces an unwillingness to help them and in some cases even a desire to punish them for their condition (see Weiner 78–82).

But, some readers will no doubt object, if the attribution of responsibility is a function of ideology, then what right have we to impose our view of responsibility—our "liberal" or "progressive" ideology—on our students? The answer is this: we have the right because the evidence supports our understanding of responsibility, our ideology. It is important to realize that not all ideologies are equally biased, arbitrary, or harmful. While certain simplistic versions of cultural relativism still pop up in the academy at frequent intervals—usually when faculty or students want to protect their own vulnerable positions by declaring them off limits to arguments—very few people consistently maintain that a position that takes into account only a small proportion of a phenomenon's causes is just as valid as a position that takes into account all of the known causes. Few people would argue, for example, that the position that heart disease was caused solely by the dietary choices of its victims was just as valid as a position that also took into account other contributing causes, including various genetically determined vulnerabilities of the victims, the amount of stress experienced by the victims, the amount of exercise that the victims get (whether by choice or by constraint), and so on. On the contrary, given the empirically verified existence of these multiple causes of heart disease, most people would see it as unconscionable if medical students were taught, "Some people believe that the individual victims themselves are solely to blame, while others believe that genetic and environmental factors beyond the individuals' control bear most of the responsibility; you are free to select whichever opinion you like."

The same logic applies to conditions such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, teen pregnancy, addiction, crime, and
violence. The fact that many conservatives in this country refuse to acknowledge the evidence here (as well as evidence about the origin of species, the age of the cosmos, global warming, and other environmental issues) does not mean that it doesn't exist or that teachers should bow to political pressure and pretend that a view founded on religious dogma is just as valid as a view based solidly on evidence. To do so would be the same as pretending that creationism and intelligent design are just as valid as evolution as an explanation of the origin of species, or that whether or not tobacco causes cancer, or high levels of lead or mercury cause brain damage and birth defects, is simply a matter of opinion. Insisting that our students understand the complete array of causes of social problems, rather than simply attributing these problems to their immediate bearers or perpetrators, is no more outrageous than insisting that medical students understand the causes of patients' symptoms.

Preventing Faulty Causal Attributions

Teaching our students to stop making the faulty judgments of responsibility that are preventing compassion and hence social justice requires that we address the cognitive factors that are producing their attribution errors. The key factor here is cognitive schemas that short-circuit their perception of the full battery of causes that are responsible for poverty, addiction, crime, and so on. A causal schema is a cognitive model of the interaction and relative importance of the various kinds of causal factors that combine to produce a particular type of event or state of affairs. It is a kind of matrix of all the various types of causes assumed to play a role in producing a specific type of effect, and it articulates the specific types of interaction that are possible among the various causes and between the causes and their effect(s).

Causal schemas, like all cognitive schemas, exert a profound influence on perception and judgment and hence on emotion and behavior. Cognitive schemas are generalized knowledge struc-
atures that govern most of our higher-order mental activities, including attention, perception, recognition, recall, judgment, expectation, fantasy, emotion, and hence behavior as well. We have cognitive schemas for virtually every type of object and situation we encounter, from rocks and chairs to individual persons and types of people, as well as for relationships of all sorts, including causality. Such schemas are essential for perception, understanding, and memory. By filling in gaps in the information available to us, they allow us to perceive a distant ball as a sphere rather than a disk and to make sense of snippets of conversation we overhear or movies or stories into which we enter at midstream, and they also enable us to assess the emotions, intentions, and even character of other people on the basis of their gestures, facial expressions, or speech. But while schemas are essential for mental functioning, they can also be harmful, because they often produce inaccurate perceptions, faulty memories, and distorted judgments, which in turn produce misguided actions.

Causal schemas develop out of our informal and formal experience and observation of covariation, the way in which one state of affairs, such as the illumination of a room, changes when another state of affairs, such as the position of a switch, is altered. Thus, experience teaches us that the illumination of a room covaries with the position of a light switch. Further experience and learning may teach us that the illumination of a room covaries not only with the position of the light switch but also with other factors, including the conditions of the light bulb, the circuit breaker, and the power line supplying our building. A causal schema takes all these possible variations into account, providing "an assumed pattern of data in a complete analysis of variance framework" and indicating how different types of effects are usually a function of various specific causes or combinations of causes (Kelley 152).

A causal schema functions as a framework into which we insert bits of information about a situation or event and then draw more or less adequate inferences about the causes or effects of this state of affairs. Causal schemas enable us to make various inferences about causes and effects even when one or more of the
causes or effects are not manifest—which is the situation of most everyday, nonscientific causal attributions. Thus, when a dimly lit room suddenly brightens, we may assume that someone has flipped a light switch, even if we have not observed this action. And when we flip a light switch, we may assume that the room is either illuminated or darkened, even if we don’t actually observe that effect. Of course, we may be wrong: the light may come on because power has just been restored to our building, and not because the position of the wall switch has changed, and so on. In such a case, our inference is wrong because the causal schema we have relied on—a schema in which the presence or absence of light covaries only with the position of the switch—is inadequate, failing to incorporate all the types of cause that can produce or contribute to an effect.

Such reliance on inadequate causal schemas is precisely what causes those fundamental attribution errors that produce anger or indifference rather than compassion. We know this because, as Harold Kelley explains, we can infer the presence of a particular type of causal schema from the causal attributions that a person makes on the basis of the (partial) information available (153). This means that whenever someone assigns responsibility for social problems such as poverty, unemployment, crime, or terrorism solely to the perpetrators of these problems, we can conclude that the attributor is operating with an inadequate, “truncated schema” of causality, which excludes not only the circumstances that may have triggered these actions but also, and more importantly, those factors that caused the perpetrator to be the type of person who would behave in this way (172). Thus, whenever someone views illness, unemployment, poverty, and even crime and terrorism as caused solely or primarily by deficiencies of the ill, the unemployed, the impoverished, or criminals or terrorists, respectively, we know that an inadequate, truncated schema of causality is operating. We know this because if the attributor were operating with an adequate causal schema, he could not rest satisfied with an explanation that identifies the immediate bearers or perpetrators of these conditions as their sole or primary causes. Instead, the attributor would
recognize both the situational causes that triggered the problematic behavior and the environmental causes that produced the character traits or deficiencies of the perpetrator. And if these situational and environmental causes were not evident, the more adequate causal schema would prompt the attributor either to search for them or simply to postulate them.

Most Americans' dominant causal schemas position the other person's motives or intentions as the ultimate causes of their actions. This is evident from the fact that when we identify a motive or an intention, we believe that we have discovered the ultimate cause of an action or condition and therefore do not bother to look for other causes (see Föörsterling 28). Such a conclusion is no more valid than concluding that all the lights and appliances in our building suddenly stopped working because all the electrical circuits in our building are faulty. But while we immediately recognize that this conclusion would be a woefully inadequate explanation of what caused the power outage, we tend to accept a similarly inadequate account of the causes of certain harmful behaviors. This acceptance demonstrates the effectiveness of the truncated causal schema in governing our perception and judgment regarding such situations. In fact, this truncated schema that locates ultimate causality in individual character and intentions is so prominent and powerful that people will infer intentions as the cause of behavior even where no intention could possibly exist. In a classic experiment, subjects viewed a short movie showing two triangles and a circle moving in different directions at different speeds. When asked to describe what they had observed, almost all the subjects said they had seen "intentional actions of individuals or animals," and on the basis of these presumed intentions, they attributed to these moving geometrical shapes personal characteristics such as strength, bravery, and shyness (Föörsterling 28-29).

Such responses demonstrate how the dominant, truncated causal schema locates all causality in the presumed motives, intentions, and personal traits of individuals and underestimates or ignores entirely all the antecedent and situational causes, which
are arguably the most crucial causes. This inadequate, truncated causal schema has the following structure:

![Diagram]

When this causal schema is operating—which in our culture is most of the time—one assumes that the most fundamental cause of harmful actions or problematic states of being such as crime, violence, drug abuse, and poverty is the bad character of the individual bearers or perpetrators of these conditions. This bad character embodies harmful motives, which issue in harmful intentions, which are themselves the immediate antecedents of the harmful actions. Or, in an even simpler version of this schema, the intermediate factors of motives and intentions are omitted and bad character is assumed to issue directly in harmful actions. Whenever such a causal schema is activated, it produces judgments of blame, which result in emotions of anger and resentment, which in turn lead to punitive and aggressive actions rather than assistance:
Causal Assessment: the other is responsible. Emotion: anger, resentment, hostility toward the other. Action: aggression or inaction rather than assistance for the other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Presumed Cause</th>
<th>Resulting Emotion</th>
<th>Consequent Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>Evil People (terrorists)</td>
<td>Hatred of terrorists</td>
<td>Wage war on and kill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>Bad People (criminals)</td>
<td>Anger at criminals</td>
<td>Imprison or execute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Lazy People (the Poor)</td>
<td>Resentment of poor</td>
<td>Make suffer or work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addiction</td>
<td>Self-indulgent (addicts)</td>
<td>Contempt for addicts</td>
<td>Imprison or let suffer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This truncated causal schema produces the fundamental attribution error—and hence lack of compassion and social justice—by rendering people blind to the root causes of social problems, causes that lie beyond the control of the individuals who are often blamed for the problems. In contrast, a casual assessment that takes the full range of causes into account produces dramatically different emotions and social actions:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Root Cause(s)</th>
<th>Resulting Emotion</th>
<th>Resulting Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>Identity-damaging social, economic and cultural conditions; personal traumas</td>
<td>Sympathy for terrorists' identity-damaging conditions</td>
<td>Alter identity-damaging conditions; provide identity repair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>Personal trauma, lack of opportunity</td>
<td>Sympathy for criminals' traumas and limitations</td>
<td>Prevent or heal traumas; provide opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Lack of jobs or resources needed to hold a job</td>
<td>Compassion for poor</td>
<td>Provide jobs, skills, economic aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addiction</td>
<td>Genetic vulnerability, trauma, and socialization</td>
<td>Compassion for addicts</td>
<td>Prevention or rehabilitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Blindness to root causes is due not to the absence of knowledge of these causes, lack of access to such knowledge, or even the lack of contact with such knowledge, but rather to the dominance of the truncated, distorting causal schemas promulgated by American ideology. Such truncated schemas exclude knowledge of root causes—and thus produce misattributions of responsibility—in several ways. First and most glaringly, truncated schemas—which include causal slots or categories for only the immediate, individual perpetrators or bearers of the problems—cause people to ignore or discount other causes that are quite evident and easily recognizable. The most widespread instance of this effect can be seen when people scoff at the very notion that problems such as crime, poverty, addiction, and terrorism have “root causes” that lie outside the control of the individual bearers and perpetrators of these conditions (see Aronson). Second, when root causes are not evident, truncated causal schemas fail to prompt a search for them. Rather than directing attention to the temporal and logical locations of root causes, truncated schemas direct it exclusively toward the immediate perpetrator or bearer of the problem, and when the relevant character traits are identified, the search for information ceases. And third, when information about root causes in a specific instance is not available, the truncated schema produces faulty attributions by failing to fill in these gaps in information. This response is analogous to the conclusion that all cases of heart disease and cancer are caused solely by the personal choices of the victims of these diseases (type of diet, amount of exercise, level of stress at work, and so on) and not by hereditary and environmental factors as well.

Because the truncated causal schema so effectively prevents accurate appraisal and thus precludes compassion and social justice, the most effective way to reduce social injustice is to replace this truncated causal schema with a more adequate, comprehensive schema. A more adequate and complete causal schema, incorporating all significant causal factors, distal as well as proximal, includes genetic and environmental causes of the individual’s character itself, as well as triggers of the individual’s
harmful intentions and actions that are beyond the individual's control. Such a schema can be represented as follows:

**Harmful Actions or States of Being** (poverty, drug abuse, violence)

- **Situational Triggers**
- **Harmful Intentions** (to freeload or harm others)
  - **Psychological Values, Sensitivities, and Vulnerabilities**
  - **Harmful Motives** (vengeance, ruthless self-advancement)
  - **Bad Character** (laziness, self-indulgence, hostility)

- **Environmental Factors**
- **Genetic Factors**
- **Traumatic Experiences**
- **Toxic Social Environment**

In contrast to the truncated causal schema, this one takes account of the root, temporally and spatially distant causes of harmful behaviors, such as childhood abuse, neglect, or poverty and the contemporary lack of work, status, or opportunity suffered by a violent offender. As a result, it produces a much different response. It prompts people, whenever they consider problematic behavior, to incorporate rather than ignore the root and distal causes of the
behavior when these causes are manifest, to search for these causes if they are not manifest, and to postulate their existence and thus "fill in the explanatory gap" when information about them is not available.

A dramatic example of the contrast between the truncated schema and the adequate one can be seen in the opposing accounts of the causes of the 9/11 attacks produced, respectively, by George W. Bush and the philosopher Ted Honderich. While Bush identified the cause as evil people—"terrorists," "people who hate freedom"—Honderich wrote an entire book laying out multiple economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological causal factors, past as well as present, that converged to produce the character and motivate the behavior of the individuals who flew the planes and those who supported them. Another example of the contrasting operations of truncated versus adequate causal schemas is found in the difference between the moralistic and the medical explanations of addiction. Whereas the moralistic explanation limits causality to the addict's moral nature and willpower, the medical model takes into account all of those causal factors that have produced the addict's moral nature and willpower, including the addict's genetic vulnerability to addiction, family background (such as addictive behavior on the part of other family members), current social factors (such as peer pressure to use addictive substances), and current life prospects (such as poverty and unemployment). Competing explanations of violence, too, can be traced to these contrasting causal schemas. The overwhelmingly dominant view of violence in the U.S. today is a moralistic one, which attributes violence solely to the bad character of violent individuals, whereas people who have investigated the causes of violence tend to advocate a public-health model that recognizes multiple causes of violence just as medical models recognize multiple causes of disease (see Cerulo 2; Gilligan).

To promote social justice—and indeed even to serve our own narrowest self-interests—it is necessary to alter those factors that are the real causes of the social problems. But as long as truncated causal schemas prevent people from even recognizing the root
causes of these problems, it will be impossible to formulate effective solutions to these problems, much less experience the compassion necessary to motivate the pursuit of such solutions. Thus, if we want to promote social justice through literary study, one of the most effective means of doing so is to help our students develop more adequate, comprehensive causal schemas in place of the deficient, truncated schemas they habitually operate with. Teaching our students to stop making faulty judgments of responsibility, which result in indifference, hostility, and harmful actions on their part, requires replacing their truncated, inadequate cognitive schemas of causality with more adequate causal schemas, schemas that take into account the full range of causes involved.

Replacing Deficient Causal Schemas through Literary Study

But is such a goal feasible for literary study? Is there any evidence that studying literature could promote the development of such schemas? And even if it were possible, would schema change be an appropriate goal for literary study? Such questions assume that literary study as currently practiced does not alter students' schemas. Even if this were true, it would be no reason why literary study couldn't or shouldn't engage in schema alteration. But the assertion is simply not true, because similar interventions into students' cognitive schemas are already central to literary study. Most current literary pedagogy already produces alterations in certain schemas, without, for the most part, either teachers or students recognizing that this is what is happening. The most fundamental aim of feminist criticism, for example, has been to replace a patriarchal schema of "woman" (as physically, intellectually, and morally less capable than "man") with a more adequate schema. Similar alterations of students' schemas of the subaltern are central to gay, lesbian, and queer criticism, postcolonialist criticism, and other critical perspectives.

In addition, altering schemas of perception, understanding, and analysis is central to all critical methodologies and interpretive
approaches to literature: whenever we teach our students to use a particular methodology or approach—whether it be New Critical close reading, semiotic analysis, deconstruction, Marxist analysis, psychoanalytic interpretation, New Historicism, or whatever—we are requiring them to develop and enact a new interpretive schema that involves new attentional scripts and processing routines for reading and analyzing a text. The aim of altering students’ schemas through literary study thus does not in itself constitute a break with current pedagogical practices. The crucial difference between current practices and the pedagogy I am advocating is not schema alteration as such but simply pursuing such alteration more self-consciously and systematically, and with regard to causal schemas rather than, say, person schemas (such as negative stereotypes of the “other”).

Any uneasiness that may remain about altering students’ cognitive schemas through literary study should be laid to rest by the fact that such schema alteration is arguably the most basic function of literature as such. Drawing on the Russian Formalist idea of defamiliarization as the quintessential effect of literary texts, Guy Cook has argued convincingly that the central function of literature, which distinguishes it from other discourses, is to alter our cognitive schemas. Noting that “schemata are . . . a potential barrier to understanding” and that “the mind must [therefore] build new schemata and adjust existing ones if it is to adapt to new experiences,” Cook asserts that literary texts “are different in kind [from other texts], representative of a type of text which may perform the important function of breaking down existing schemata, reorganizing them, and building new ones” (10). And he goes on to observe that such changes in cognitive schemas can result in social change: “The reorganization of schemata may have eventual social and practical consequences. Crime and Punishment may change our attitude to various phenomena in the world: to the murder of old women for money, to religion, to prostitution, or to poverty” (191).

The issue, then, is not whether literature itself or literary study could or should promote the alteration of students’ cognitive
schemas, for both clearly do so. The question is what kinds of alterations of what types of schemas are of greatest human benefit, and what is the best way to promote such alterations? I have already provided my answer to the first question. What remains to be addressed is the question of how: what particular pedagogical practices would be most effective in helping students to develop more adequate and comprehensive causal schemas?

To answer this question I turn to the field of schema therapy, where theorists and practitioners have developed a battery of interventions through which incomplete, distorted schemas are replaced with more comprehensive, adequate schemas, which produce personally and socially beneficial changes in perception, judgment, emotion, and behavior. These practices of schema therapy can be adapted to literary study, where they can promote the development of more adequate causal schemas.

The basic practices used by schema therapy to develop more adequate and comprehensive schemas are the following:

1. Educating people about the nature, function, and consequences of schemas
2. Helping people recognize the operation and harmful effects of their faulty schemas
3. Demonstrating the deficiencies of these harmful schemas
4. Helping people construct new, more adequate schemas
5. Having people rehearse the more adequate schemas to firmly establish them as the basis of cognitive processing
6. Replacing the dysfunctional processing routines (of attention, memory-search, information-seeking, imaging, etc.) that synthesize the inadequate schemas with routines that synthesize the more adequate schemas

These schema-altering activities can be incorporated into the study of literary texts, which in and of themselves often engage their readers in similar activities. The simplest, most direct way to
engage students in the cognitive activities that will develop more adequate causal schemas is to have them read literary texts that (a) demonstrate the nature and consequences of causal appraisals based on faulty, truncated causal schemas; (b) explicitly provide more adequate and complete causal appraisals; and thereby (c) engage their readers in enacting and constructing more adequate causal schemas. Protest novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Jungle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Native Son* are excellent texts with which to begin the schema-altering process, since they themselves promote this process in a fairly direct manner. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, for example, states quite expressly on a number of occasions that when slaves exhibit shortcomings or vices (ignorance, laziness, dishonesty), it is not they who are to blame but rather the conditions of their upbringing and the circumstances of their current existence, which are in turn the responsibility of the slave owners and ultimately of anyone else who supports, benefits from, or even merely acquiesces to the institution of slavery. The *Jungle* makes a similar point about wage slaves. When Jurgis arrives in America and almost immediately lands a job in a packing plant, he is contemptuous of jobless people and finds them culpable for their unemployment. In a relatively short period of time, however, both Jurgis and the reader are shown not only that most joblessness is not the fault of the unemployed, but that unemployment and most of the corruption of public officials and the exploitive and dehumanizing business and labor practices of the industrial giants that are the immediate causes of unemployment are themselves caused ultimately not by some inherently evil nature of the individuals involved but rather by the social Darwinist system of laissez-faire capitalism in which these individuals operate. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, likewise, readers are shown early and often that neither the destitution of the displaced Oklahoma farmers, nor the seemingly callous actions of the bulldozer drivers, law enforcement officers, and bankers who evict them from their farms, nor the brutality of the Californians who variously squeeze the Okies’ wages, demean them, deprive them of squatters’ rights, arrest them, and at times even club them to death can legitimately be
blamed on the individuals involved. And in *Native Son*, readers are shown both implicitly (through descriptions of Bigger’s chronic feelings of shame, resentment, and hopelessness, as well as his terrified state of mind when he kills Mary and Bessie) and explicitly (through Max’s courtroom disquisition on the effects that Bigger’s background had on the formation of his character) that the white people whose business practices and economic policies have produced the current and past conditions of Bigger’s existence are more responsible for the deaths of Mary and Bessie than is Bigger himself, who was simply doing the best he could under these conditions with the material, social, and psychological resources available to him.

Simply participating in the text’s construction of such comprehensive causal appraisals can be an important first step toward establishing a more comprehensive and adequate causal schema at the center of students’ processing of questions of moral responsibility and blame concerning real people as well as literary characters. In most cases, however, such reading will be no more than a first step, just as becoming aware in therapy of deficient schemas and more adequate schemas will usually not in and of itself be sufficient to establish the more adequate schemas as the basis of cognitive-emotional processing. To help our students establish the more complete causal schema as the basis of their cognitive-emotional processing routines, we need to do more than just have them read such novels. First, we need to help them recognize the operation, the inadequacy, and the harmful consequences of the truncated causal schemas that give rise to the condemnatory judgments of responsibility that are present not only in these novels but also in real-life interpersonal and social judgments that most people make and assume on a daily basis. We can do this by engaging them (through class discussions, informal writing activities at home or in class, or formal papers) in intensive and extensive attention to and reflection on the texts’ treatment of these issues and also contemporary implications and analogues of the texts’ treatments. We can direct our students’ attention to examples such as Jem and Scout’s hatred of and attack on Mrs.
Dubose because of her viciousness in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (99–103) or the brief scene in *The Grapes of Wrath* (221) in which a gas station attendant attributes the sorry state of the homeless Joads to the family's inferior character rather than to their circumstances. Since our students know from reading these novels that these characters' conditions and behaviors are beyond their control—because of morphine addiction in the case of Mrs. Dubose and because of the drought and the Great Depression in the case of the Joads—they can easily recognize the invalidity of the causal attributions made by Jem and Scout and by the gas station attendant. Thus, when we ask our students why Jem and Scout and the attendant felt hatred and disdain, respectively, they can recognize how these responses result from ignorance of the present and past circumstances of the supposedly inferior characters. If we then ask why Jem, Scout, and the attendant were ignorant, our students will be able to respond, "Because they didn't have all the necessary information (which we have) to make an accurate attribution." If we ask, "Why didn't they have this information? Was it because it didn't exist, or was it because Jem, Scout, and the attendant didn't think to inquire about it?" they can answer, "Because they didn't think to inquire." Our students will realize that the information was readily available from Atticus (who later provides it to Jem and Scout) and the Joads, respectively. "And why didn't they think to inquire?" we can ask, and then go on to help them understand the operation of causal schemas (or "explanatory models," or "ideal explanations") and how they direct—or misdirect, in this case—our perception and understanding. Through repeated experiences of this sort of analysis, our students will come to have not just a theoretical but also a procedural, experiential grasp of the operation and consequences of the inadequate, truncated causal schema that governs so many of our individual and collective reactions to others.

After our students have internalized such an understanding of the operation of causal schemas in the behavior of literary characters, we can help them identify the operation of these same schemas in their own reader-responses to certain characters.
First, we ask them to identify a character that they responded to with anger. Then we ask them why they felt such anger. Their answer will usually involve certain bad actions of the character, which they attribute to (manifest or presumed) bad intentions and/or character traits. After helping them to make these attributions explicit, we then pose the question of how the character came to possess these bad intentions and/or qualities, at which point will come into view the deeper, root causes of the character’s actions that are beyond the character’s control and even awareness. By having our students attend to and elaborate these root causes (either expressly stated by the text, or implied in the text, or merely inferred on the basis of general psychological knowledge) of the character’s nature and the external triggers of that nature, we help them experience the incompleteness of the schema they have been operating with and at the same time engage them in constructing and activating a more comprehensive and adequate causal schema. And after they have developed the fuller understanding of the causes of the character’s actions, we can ask them to focus and reflect on how they feel about the character now, in contrast to their original emotional response produced by the operation of the truncated schema.

An example is the response of anger that many readers understandably have toward the self-involved Emma Bovary when she heartlessly rejects the affectionate embrace of her innocent little daughter Berthe, elbowing her away with such force that Berthe falls and cuts her face. Asking, and helping our students to explore, why Emma responds in this manner can lead them to see both Emma’s action and her more general self-centeredness not just as an expression of her character but also as an index of her profound emotional neediness, pain, and emptiness, which are themselves produced and exacerbated by her own experiences of neglect, the most recent of which we have just witnessed in the uncomprehending dismissal with which her local priest has responded to her plea for spiritual ministration. Uncovering the various signs and causes, past and present, of Emma’s emotional desperation will significantly erode the degree of responsibility that
our students will be able to attribute to her for her indisputably unacceptable behavior, and we can help them register this point by asking them whether their feelings toward Emma have been changed by their new understanding. We can then direct their attention to the fact that the reason they did not arrive at this new understanding initially and automatically is because they, like the characters discussed earlier, were operating with an incomplete, truncated schema of causality that focused all attributional attention onto character and produced a sense of closure as soon as such an explanation was provided, thus excluding recognition of the root causes of Emma's behavior.

After our students have learned to detect the operation and recognize the inadequacy of truncated causal schemas in their own responses to literary characters, we can direct their attention to their own and others' hostile, aggressive, and resentful reactions to real people and ask them to identify and assess the attributions underlying these responses. We might tell them of a real case of child abuse, such as Andrea Yates' murder of her five small children by drowning them in a bathtub, and ask them to record, first, their feelings toward her, and second, their assessment of her. Then we can read them an account of—or ask them to research on the internet—Yates' familial, social, ideological, and psychological circumstances at the time of the killings, as well as her background, revealing how her psychological vulnerabilities combined with her environmental stresses to render her incapable of acting otherwise. The same point can be made using other instances of criminal violence, such as the case of Robert Harris, who was viewed as a kind of poster boy for the death penalty and who was described even by fellow inmates as "a total scumbag" who didn't care about life, about others, or about himself (Watson 131). After describing for our students Harris' brutal murder of two sixteen-year-old boys, we can tell them the story of Harris' upbringing: born two and one half months premature after his father kicked his mother and threw her down; hated by his father, who thought Harris was fathered by another man; desperate for affection from his mother, who resented him because of the violence his exist-
ence provoked in her husband; ridiculed at school for a speech
defect; raped three times while in juvenile detention for auto theft.
We can also read them his sister’s recollection of his childhood:

“He was the most beautiful of all my mother’s children; he was
an angel,” she said. “He would just break your heart. He
wanted love so bad he would beg for any kind of physical
contact.

“He’d come up to my mother and just try to rub his little hands
on her leg or her arm. He just never got touched at all. She’d
just push him away or kick him. One time she bloodied his
nose when he was trying to get close to her.”

“The sad thing is he was the most sensitive of all of us. When
he was 10 and we all saw ‘Bambi,’ he cried and cried when
Bambi’s mother was shot. Everything was pretty to him as a
child; he loved animals. But all that changed; it all changed so
much.” (qtd. in Watson 135–36)

After hearing how Robert Harris’ evil character was produced by
the heart-rending abuse he suffered as a tender-hearted and
emotionally starved child, most of our students will be unable to
hold him responsible for this character that produced such terrible
acts. They will be more likely to feel compassion rather than hatred
toward him, and experience an urge to help him rather than to
punish him. Such response experiences demonstrate to our stu-
dents the negative consequences of truncated schemas—how
blaming people for their conditions or behaviors produces unfair
judgments and unjust reactions toward them. Demonstrating the
causal factors that were omitted by the truncated schema respon-
sible for their initial judgments and emotional responses enables
our students to intuit immediately the ethical and practical need for
a more complete and adequate schema. Each such experience of
anger, hostility, or hatred, followed by a recognition, first, of the
attributions one has made that give rise to these emotions, and,
second, of the invalidity of these attributions in light of the newly
disclosed evidence concerning the external causes of the bad
actions will issue in a dramatic realization of the importance of
one's causal schemas, which produce such significant emotional, behavioral, and ethical consequences. And this realization will motivate our students to reject the epistemologically and ethically inadequate, truncated causal schema and establish a more comprehensive and adequate schema in its place.

In order to enable our students to fully establish the more comprehensive causal schema and then to spontaneously activate it outside the classroom when literature texts and teachers are not there to prompt them, we need to supplement their intuitive grasp of the nature and validity of this schema with a more direct and systematic engagement with it. To help them internalize the more complete and adequate causal schema that we have both modeled for them and engaged them in enacting in our analysis of literary characters, we can first present the comprehensive schema discursively, leading them to a recognition of how all human behavior is a function of character interacting with circumstances and of how no one is responsible for all of his or her own circumstances or (ultimately) any of his or her own character. We can also provide our students with a comprehensive causal diagram such as the one presented above and instruct them to include an account of each category of cause in their explanations of behaviors and evaluations of characters and people. Psychologists have suggested that relying on a diagram indicating all the major categories of causes for a situation or event can counteract the tendency to omit key categories of causation, which produces partial, inadequate explanations of behavior and events. Specifically, a comprehensive causal diagram “can help identify incomplete explanations and can guide the search for missing information,” thus countering the ways that “motivational biases” as well as “knowledge and memory limitations can prevent individuals from fully understanding all of an event’s causal relations” (Shapiro, van den Broek, and Fletcher 71–72). Having our students refer to such a diagram when constructing their explanations of characters’ behaviors will help them internalize all the causal categories, including those that are often omitted in their judgments of real people as well as literary characters.
Another effective means of establishing the more adequate, comprehensive causal schema is to promote the transference of this schema from another domain of cognition in which it is already dominant. Many individuals, including many of our students, employ more comprehensive causal schemas when they think about the causes of illness, computer problems, declines in the stock market, and even the failures of their favorite sports teams than they do when they make judgments about the causes of crime, poverty, substance abuse, and terrorism. To facilitate the transference of these more adequate causal schemas into the social domain, we can engage our students in comparing them to the truncated schemas that dominate thinking and feeling about such social problems. Such comparisons are particularly effective when, confronted with the conclusion that Bigger Thomas or Robert Harris cannot legitimately be blamed for his actions or character, our students object that since thousands if not millions of people have been subjected to similar environmental influences without becoming murderers, Harris and Thomas could have avoided becoming murderers too and are therefore solely to blame for their actions. Here we can show them the inadequacy of the causal schema with which they are operating by invoking a medical analogy to help them recognize the sorts of causes that their assessments of Harris and Thomas have omitted. One such analogy is with people who smoke. Most of our students will agree that smoking causes cancer, because they know that many people who die of lung cancer are (or were at one time) smokers. But they will also acknowledge that most smokers don't get lung cancer, just as most abused children do not grow up to become murderers. Why, then, we can ask them, do they believe that smoking causes cancer? In response they will explain that most smokers don't get cancer because they have the good fortune to be more resistant to the effects of smoking than the less fortunate, more vulnerable, cancer victims. We can then point out that criminals and other socially despised individuals are like the smokers who get cancer, only their case is the result of psychological rather than physiological vulnerability.
We can also use the example of a group of people who are exposed to toxic waste, pointing out that if only a few of them develop cancer, we don’t argue that because the majority didn’t get cancer, those who got it could have avoided it too. Rather, we recognize that the individuals who get cancer from environmental toxins, like the individuals who get lung cancer from smoking, are, because of genetics and/or earlier life conditions, simply more vulnerable to toxins than those who don’t become ill. We can then ask our students to apply this same logic to social toxins, which will lead them to the conclusion that if a group of people are exposed to social toxins and only a small minority become violent or impoverished or addicted, we should not blame these individuals either, because like the small group of people who got cancer from the toxic waste site or tobacco smoke, these individuals were simply rendered more vulnerable than the others by various causes that are too numerous, subtle, or invisible for us to discern and take account of. We can then emphasize to our students that they need to incorporate these causal factors into the schema they operate with in assessing individual responsibility and attributing blame.

After our students have understood and internalized the epistemological and moral inadequacies of the truncated schema and the greater epistemological and moral adequacy of the more complete schema, we need to help them develop the capacity to automatically activate the more adequate schema. The two basic ways of doing this are to repeatedly activate and utilize the more complete schema in situations that have heretofore triggered the old, truncated schema and to help them revise their processing routines so that they synthesize the more complete schema rather than the truncated one. The simplest way to have our students activate and rehearse the more complete schema is to assign them the task of analyzing negative literary characters and either finding, inferring, or positing (where the text is completely silent) the past environments that made them into the characters they are and the present circumstances that activate this character and produce the harmful actions. A more intense and extended enactment of the
comprehensive schema can be produced by having our students write literary accounts—detailed narratives and descriptions—of the circumstances that they believe might have produced the character’s negative qualities.

These activities of character analysis and construction can be pursued in relation not only to literary characters but also to characters from movies or television programs. A particularly fruitful instance of the latter is to have students imagine and write a narrative detailing the present insecurities, vulnerabilities, and compulsions and the past humiliations and brutalizations undergone by one of the ubiquitous criminals populating the numerous weekly police dramas. In addition to enacting the more comprehensive causal schema, writing such an account has the added benefit of countering the powerful reinforcement of the truncated schema provided by such television programs, which usually focus viewers’ attention on the evil of the crime and of the perpetrator and largely omit any information or question concerning the perpetrator’s own current torments or past victimizations, which constitute the root causes of the crime.

When our students have successfully established the comprehensive schema at the basis of their cognitive processing of questions of responsibility and blame concerning literary characters, we can give them similar assignments regarding real people, including murderers, rapists, child molesters, and other criminals in the news, as well as political figures toward whom they may feel animosity, such as Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, or George W. Bush, having them produce narratives of these individuals in which they provide detailed information regarding each of the causal factors included in the more comprehensive causal schema diagrammed above.

Finally, to ensure the automatic activation of the more complete schema rather than the truncated one, we can help our students develop more adequate processing routines, which will synthesize the more complete schema instead of the truncated one. The first step is to establish a metacognitive mode, in which one continuously monitors one’s negative emotional reactions to
characters and people. The second step is to establish a cue to pause whenever one notices (while operating in the metacognitive mode) a negative emotional reaction and ask the following questions, which will synthesize the more comprehensive causal schema:

What assumptions am I making about the cause of this character's or person's behavior?

What do I know about the character's or person's deficiencies that might have rendered him or her incapable of acting otherwise in the face of current environmental circumstances? If I know nothing, what deficiencies should I infer from the behavior?

What do I know, or what should I infer, about the character's or person's childhood environment that would explain his or her character deficiencies?

We can further help our students develop the more comprehensive and adequate processing routine by, first, having them keep a "schema diary," in which they record their reading and real-life experiences of enacting (or failing to enact) the more comprehensive causal schema. Real-life experiences of this sort can be found in gut reactions to discussions or news reports of current events, social problems, public policies, political candidates, and so on, as well as in gut reactions to objectionable interpersonal behavior.

Finally, we can instruct our students to follow this script when reading (and also when interacting with and assessing people in real life):

1. Picture the diagram of the comprehensive causal schema and fill in all the causal categories, especially those for root causes and external circumstantial causes

2. Make causal connections between a character's a) present circumstances and behaviors b) character traits and behaviors c) past circumstances and character traits
3. For every character or person you encounter, ask: What needs and vulnerabilities does this character/person have that may prevent him or her from positive behaviors and may even doom him or her to destructive behaviors? Direct your attention to, seek information about, search your memory for evidence of, and when information is lacking, imagine
   a) each character's present circumstances
   b) each character's subjective experience of those circumstances
   c) each character's past circumstances
   d) the effects of those past circumstances on character formation

4. For every negative behavior on the part of a character, ask:
   a) What fundamental need and subjective experience have produced this behavior?
   b) What past (childhood) conditions and experiences produced these character traits?

5. For every character or person you encounter—and especially for those that you deem to be evil, bad, or deficient—ask: How did he/she come to be this way?

6. For every feeling of anger, contempt, or disdain, and every desire, fantasy, or action tendency of punishment or aggression, ask yourself:
   a) What are the automatic attributions I have made that have produced this emotion?
   b) Have I omitted any crucial information in making this attribution? (Here refer to the comprehensive causal schema and check it for completeness.)

7. Practice these alternative processing routines in all your reading and in real-life assessments of other people and groups.

Through repeatedly enacting such a processing script, students will develop the attentional and connective capacities and habits that will lead them to automatically synthesize the more adequate and comprehensive causal schema rather than the truncated one
when they assess social problems and the individuals who are their immediate bearers or perpetrators. When they do so, they will take into account the full battery of causes that are responsible for these individuals' conditions and behaviors, including the root causes that are responsible for these individuals' characters. This, in turn, will produce feelings of compassion rather than anger and hatred, and a motivation and action tendency to attack the root causes rather than the individual victims of these conditions.

Promoting Understanding and Compassion

Such a schema-altering pedagogy would appear to be one of the best means available to realize more fully one of the most important goals of literary study: promoting understanding and compassion and thereby reducing prejudice and aggressive and punitive actions and policies. Much literature and literary pedagogy are already inclined in this direction. But at the end of the day, whether our pedagogy is congruent with or at cross purposes to current pedagogical practices or to the dominant rhetorical forces of the texts we teach is much less important than the kind and degree of benefits our teaching provides for our students and for the rest of the world. My argument is that the sort of schema-altering literary pedagogy that I have sketched out here is more likely to provide such benefits than other forms of literary pedagogy being practiced today, and for that reason alone we owe it to our students and everyone else to develop and institute such a pedagogy.

If the responses I have gotten to this proposal to date are any indication, pursuing such an agenda will encounter strong resistance. One objection I have encountered is the charge that I am trying to impose my values on my students. There are several points to be made in response. The first is that the manner in which I try to make my students more compassionate does not really involve imposing compassion as a value at all. Rather, it pursues the basic educational goal of correcting faulty understanding, by instructing students to attend to and take into account all the
relevant facts—in this case, all the causes of the behaviors of characters and individuals toward whom the students feel indifference or hostility. The only value being imposed here is the value of an adequate as opposed to a faulty understanding of the causes of certain behaviors and events. Correcting students’ faulty understanding in this case is no different in kind from similar efforts to correct faulty understanding that are central to ideology critique and that have long been established in literary pedagogy. The difference is that my strategy of correcting faulty understanding by developing more adequate cognitive schemas promises to be considerably more effective than ordinary ideology critique, which often (a) does not address the faulty understandings that produce hostility rather than compassion and (b) fails to produce significant changes in the faulty schemas that underlie and give rise to the faulty understandings.

The second point in response to the charge of value imposition is that while the pedagogy I am advocating is of course not value-neutral, neither is any other pedagogy. It is impossible for teaching to be value-neutral. Simply by accepting our salaries and teaching our literature classes, we are asserting that the study of literature is worth the time and money that it costs our students, their parents, and the taxpayers, and we are imposing more particular values with every text we select, every assignment we construct, and every question we pose in our classes.

Third, the value that guides the pedagogy I am proposing—compassion—is not nearly as controversial and partisan as some values and agendas informing literary study, since it is embraced by most major religious traditions as well as by both liberals and conservatives in the United States. In addition, the paradoxical value of value-neutral teaching that is embraced by those who criticize this pedagogy is arguably more harmful than the value of compassion, since the ideal of value-neutral teaching functions as a cover for various individualistic and libertarian practices that can be considerably more harmful than compassion. Indeed, true value-neutral teaching would have to argue that opposition to slavery, rape, murder, and so on is no better than the practices
being opposed, and even that value neutrality itself is just another value and thus no better than value imposition.

The schema-altering, compassion-promoting pedagogy I am advocating has also drawn fire for focusing on cognitive and emotional changes rather than on those material, structural, and political changes that are prerequisites for social justice. I do not disagree with the claim that social justice requires material, structural, and political changes. Such changes are clearly essential. What I disagree with is the assumption that such changes will come about by themselves, without significant changes in people’s behaviors—most crucially, perhaps, their voting behaviors—or that such changes in behavior are likely to occur without the sorts of cognitive and emotional changes my pedagogy aims to produce. I am focusing on cognitive and emotional changes not because I see them as a substitute for material, structural, and political changes but rather because they are a prerequisite for such changes.

A third objection that has been leveled at this pedagogy is that its use of literature is “ad hoc and utilitarian.” This is true. And it is also the way it should be. The purpose of literary study should be to make literature useful to students, rather than to make students serve Literature (for example, by “learning to love [or appreciate] literature”). I believe, with Kenneth Burke, that literature is fundamentally “equipment for living.” I also believe that our aim as literature teachers should be to use literature in whatever ways will best serve the end of enhancing the well being of our students and the world at large. People are the ends, literature is but the means, to be used in whatever ways are most likely to help people.

Another objection I have encountered is that I talk about students as though they were “subjects of experiments.” I suppose this is also true. But don’t all teachers inevitably treat their students as subjects of experiments? Don’t we choose our texts, formulate our writing assignments, and organize classroom activities with the aim of getting our students to respond in particular ways (even if those responses are as vague as finding the texts enjoyable or engaging)? And if our students don’t respond in the ways we want
them to, don't we often select different texts or alter our assignments or classroom activities with the aim of eliciting the behaviors we desire? In doing this, we are ipso facto treating our students as "subjects of experiments." Not to do so—that is, to "teach" without aiming to change our students in any way or without altering our practices when they fail to produce the desired changes—would not be teaching at all but merely a narcissistic performance of prefabricated routines.

Finally, some who have entertained my argument have balked at the very notion that students—or anyone else—should be expected to feel compassion for criminals and terrorists. One reader urged me, in a helpful spirit, to clarify my argument to assure my readers that this is not what I intend. But of course it is precisely what I intend, as the discussion above of Bigger Thomas and Robert Harris should have made clear. The fact that such an intention could seem incomprehensible to a literature professor is an indication not only of how far we still are from social justice but also, I would maintain, of why developing the capacity for compassion is so crucial.

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Notes

1. While some philosophers and critics use "ethics" and "morality" interchangeably, most draw some distinction between them, with the majority viewing ethics as a matter of theory and principles, and morality as a matter behaviors and also (in some cases) the codes or rules that either prescribe or proscribe specific behaviors (see Booth 42; Buell 14).

2. See also Siebers 11ff. and Berman 945.

3. An excellent example of each of these three strategies can be found in Schweickart.

4. Much of this account of causal schemas is drawn from Kelley.

5. The following account draws on Moskowitz; Crawford and Chaffin; Singer and Salovey; Trzebinski; Slap and Slap-Shelton; and Horowitz, "Person."

6. Studies have shown, for example, that when people witness or hear a report of a crime, they often fail to register and/or later fail to remember
significant facts about the crime, the criminal, or the victim because those facts are not contained in their schemas of the crime, criminal, or victim. And conversely, they often imagine and/or later "remember" features of the crime, the criminal, or the victim that were not in fact present but that are included in their schemas. In one study, subjects who were shown videos of staged convenience store robberies later "remembered" certain actions that hadn't actually occurred but that were part of their convenience store robbery schema (Greenberg, Westcott, and Bailey).

7. I find Cook's account of schema change, which focuses on the cognitive effects of literary form and style (see 181ff. and 253), to be of limited use in understanding how literary study can alter causal schemas.

8. This outline draws on Young, Klosko, and Weishaar; Beck; Russell and van den Broek; Horowitz, Cognitive Psychodynamics; Salovey and Singer; Wells; Teasdale and Bamard; Sookman and Pinard; Monk; Drewery and Winslade; and Abelson.

9. Such a strategy has been employed with some success in the field of law (see Westervelt; George Wright; Delgado; Falk) and, to a lesser extent, violence prevention (see Gilligan), where efforts are being made to import a medical or public-health model of analysis in order to provide a more complete and adequate grasp of the causes of crime and violence.

Works Cited


