Science, Values, & the Novel: an Exercise in Empathy

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The Doctor, 1887
Sir Luke Fildes, Tate Gallery, London
• “One of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”

Empathy

- **Empathy:**
  - “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.”
    - Cognitive
    - Affective
    - Somatic

- **Theory of mind:**
  - “The capacity to identify and understand others’ subjective states is one of the most stunning products of human evolution.”
    - Definitions are not fully agreed upon, but this distinction is:
      - “Affective” and “Cognitive” empathy are independent from one another.
Can one teach empathy?
Reading novels?

• Literature as a “way of thinking”
  – “Literature’s problem is that its irreducibility ... makes it look unscientific, and by extension, soft.”
  
  – For example: “‘To be or not to be’ cannot be reduced to ‘I’m having thoughts of self-harm.’”

  – “At one and the same time medicine is caught up with the demand for rigor in its pursuit of and assessment of evidence, and with a recognition that there are other ways of doing things ... which are important.”

“Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind”

• Randomized experiments demonstrated:
  – Reading literary fiction led to better testing for affective and cognitive ToM

• As compared to reading:
  – Nonfiction
  – Popular fiction
  – Nothing at all

-- DC Kidd & E Castano, Science 2013; 342: 377-80
Are you empathic?

• Some tests from Kidd & Costano:
  – Advanced affective ToM test
    • “Reading the Mind in the Eyes”
    • Try it! – https://socialintelligence.labinthewild.org
  – Cognitive ToM test
    • “False belief test”
      – Predict probability that character will act on basis of character’s false belief versus reader’s true belief
Recent Experience at Geisel: “Science, Values, & the Novel”

- Inspired by:
  - Teaching of Robert Coles, MD
  - Thinking about the doctor-patient relationship
  - Need for intergenerational communication
  - Alfred Hitchcock
Science & Values as a MacGuffin

What is a MacGuffin?

- "It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' And the other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin'. The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well,' the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,' and the other one answers, 'Well then, that's no MacGuffin!' So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all."
  – Alfred Hitchcock, Lecture at Columbia University, NYC, 1939

- Hitchcock claimed his films were in fact not what they appeared to be on the surface.
Write (and teach?) what you know...

• Alan’s two-headed MacGuffin
  – (First?) Novel:
    *The First Days of August*

• Science & human values are inseparable
“Science, Values, & the Novel”

• Geisel Enrichment Elective (2015- )
• MacGuffin:
  – values underpinning science & society
• Every semester, starting fall 2015
  – (Sabbatical this spring 2021)
• Enrollments
  – From 1 to 11 Geisel 1st and 2nd yr students

The Maltese Falcon, 1941
Written/directed by John Huston
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
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| 2015-16 | *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Ken Kesey  
*The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy  
*Arrowsmith*, Sinclair Lewis | *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley  
*The Heart of the Matter*, Graham Greene  
- Shorts of criticism & commentary |
| 2016-17 | *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf  
*Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway  
*A Wrinkle in Time*, Madeleine L’Engle | *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee  
*Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene  
*Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, John LeCarre |
| 2017-18 | *Flowers for Algernon*, Daniel Keyes  
*Arrowsmith*, Sinclair Lewis  
- Short stories, Anton Chekhov | Writing workshop with texts: *Reading Like a Writer* by Francine Prose, works of Anton Chekhov, and others |
| 2018-19 | *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy  
*All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr  
- Short stories, Anton Chekhov | *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley  
*The Tempest*, William Shakespeare  
*The Boys in the Boat*, Daniel James Brown  
- Shorts: Kurt Vonnegut, John Stuart Mill, Anton Chekhov |
| 2019-20 | *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald  
*Beloved*, Toni Morrison  
- Shorts: Ernest Hemingway & others | *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery  
*The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery  
*To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf  
- Shorts of fiction & commentary |
| Fall 2020 | *Arrowsmith*, Sinclair Lewis  
- Shorts of fiction & commentary | << BREAK >> |
Reception

• Comments from this past fall class (2020):
  – “Great book. Great discussions. Lots of fun and stress relieving!”
  – “I liked thinking and talking about how Sinclair Lewis saw and criticized the medical field. It was fun to try to get into the mind of Lewis who seemed so cynical about so many things, yet also so correct.”
  – “I really had a good time.”
Can one teach empathy?

Yes.
One of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.

-- Francis Peabody, MD