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His Dark Teaching Materials

Using Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* in a language classroom

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Abstract

Title: His Dark Teaching Materials: Using Philip Pullmans *His Dark Materials* as Teaching Material

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Abstract: This essay argues the usefulness in an English language teaching context of the novel *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman in terms of a project focused around ethics, morality and the quest for personal identity. It also aims to deepen school students' awareness of issues relating to gender, religion and ethnicity. Moreover, this essay explores the ways in which the novel can be used to help students form relationships with other people, not only in their school but also in their daily life. The pedagogical project using Pullman's novel will therefore allow students not only to discuss with each other in a meaningful, ethical way, but also to encounter different views of gender, ethnicity, identity and religion.

Keywords: *His Dark Materials*, Philip Pullman, identity, gender, religion, morality, teaching, language classroom

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Method.....	4
Thesis.....	5
The curriculum and syllabi	5
The national curriculum	5
The syllabus	6
The question of teaching literature.....	7
Using His Dark Materials as teaching material.....	7
Lyra as a character.....	9
Using literature in the teaching of morality	9
The question of identity and gender	10
Helping students develop their identity.....	10
Identity and gender	11
The question of ethics	12
Discussing ethics in the novel.....	12
Ethics of language.....	14
In the classroom	16
Discussing sin.....	16
Daemons.....	17
Identity in the classroom.....	18
Conclusion	20
References.....	22

Introduction

Every culture on the planet has developed ethical codes. An example could be the laws written on stone tablets being carried by Moses down a mountain, or a child being taught by its mother to shake hands with people when greeting them. Both are similar in that they form a moral and ethical code, laws and rules describing how to act towards other individuals. Yet these rules are hardly universal for all human beings on the planet. On the contrary, they are extremely varied and subjected to a lot of cultural and historical influences. One can hardly claim the existence of a single moral code that is considered fair and right by all human beings. This essay will not discuss the ethical questions of the modern world, but will instead open up the question of fictional worlds and societies. Since they are fictional worlds, constructed by authors and artists, their morality is especially interesting. What type of moral code exists in them? How did the author create it? What made the author choose that specific moral as the prime one? Does it have its roots in any religion? Where does that religion come from? What does it consider to be sin and taboo? Did the author create it, or is it based on an existing religion?

The questions are many, and the answers are difficult. In the case of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, (2011) the question becomes even more entangled; the novel is set in a fictional world, but one which is similar to our own and populated by humans and humanoid beings. That world is governed by a religion, similar to Christianity in our world but still an entirely different and independent religion. So where does that world's moral code come from? Is it sprung from religion, or from human values? Do the humans in the world of *His Dark Materials* have a different moral code than the humans in our world, or one that is very similar?

This question opens up many possibilities for discussion and further questioning, questions that can be raised in a language classroom. Can students perhaps learn something by comparing the fictional world of the novel with our own? Can they become more aware of the cultural, social and perhaps religious values that have affected their own values by looking at fictional characters in a fictional world? A world with moral values that are sometimes very similar, and sometimes completely different, compared to our own.

Method

This is an integrated pedagogical literary essay, as part of the C-level course in English. Therefore this essay is not a literary essay focusing on the novel, but an essay focusing on the

pedagogical aspect of teaching literature to students in Sweden. The literature that I have chosen is the novel *His Dark Materials* (2011) by Philip Pullman. I will discuss the pedagogical benefits and aspects of using the novel as a reading assignment and demonstrate what can be gained from using it. I will show the possibilities of discussion and evaluation that this book provides, and give examples of topics of discussion that can be raised in class.

The primary focus of this essay will be the moral and ethical aspects of the novel and how the novel could be used in a language classroom to teach students about morality, ethics and religion. I will demonstrate how I as a teacher would use the themes presented in the novel to make students aware of different aspects of morality. Because *His Dark Materials* is a novel that so deeply discusses religion, I will demonstrate how I would use this fact to raise a discussion about religion in class.

I will begin by stating what the national curriculum and syllabi say about teaching ethics and morality. After that, I will discuss why, in my opinion, *His Dark Materials* is a good tool for language teaching when used in a language classroom, lifting topics such as adolescence, coming-of-age, gender identity and self-perception, questions which are very relevant for students of that age. Then I will discuss the novel and the ethics of it from a religious point of view and mention the various traps and pitfalls that the teacher must avoid when discussing religious matters. Finally, I will mention some practical aspects of how the novel can be used in a language classroom. Because this is an integrated pedagogical essay, in each part I will focus on the pedagogical part of teaching the novel to students.

My target group is a class of Swedish students attending the higher levels of compulsory school, year 8 or 9. The students will be given *His Dark Materials* as a reading assignment spanning one semester.

Thesis

The novel *His Dark Materials* contains a lot of religious imagery and symbolism, as well as characters and situations of varying morality. It is therefore a good tool for teaching students about ethics and morality as well as helping them in their personal development.

The curriculum and syllabi

The national curriculum

The Swedish national curriculum's paragraph concerning the fundamental values of the school states:

The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that the school should represent and impart. In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility. Teaching in the school should be non-denominational. (Skolverket 9)

Further on, when discussing the purpose of the school, the curriculum states that:

An ethical perspective is of importance for many of the issues that are taken up in the school. This perspective should permeate schooling in order to provide a foundation and support pupils in developing their ability to form personal standpoints. (Skolverket 12)

The goals of the school are that each pupil [...] can consciously determine and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights and basic democratic values, as well as personal experiences. (Skolverket 14)

Thus, the teaching of ethics is something that is well-grounded in the basic levels of the Swedish school system. It is something that should be taught in all subjects and ages. Language is also an excellent tool for teaching ethics and morality because it enables people to meet and exchange ideas and experiences. Language and the teaching of language can be used as a way to teach various aspects of what it means to be a part of society. Language is also important in the development of personal identity and in allowing students to explore their culture, something which the curriculum acknowledges:

Language, learning, and the development of a personal identity are all closely related. By providing a wealth of opportunities for discussion, reading and writing, all pupils should be able to develop their ability to communicate and thus enhance confidence in their own language abilities. (Skolverket 11)

The syllabus

The syllabus states that the teaching of students in year 7 through 9 should include: “[The reading of] fictional literature and other fiction in spoken, dramatized and filmed forms” (Skolverket 34). This passage tells us that students should be given the assignment of reading literature during their school period. Nowhere in the syllabus is it written that students should read a novel, however novels are a part of literature and the paragraph quoted above indicates that literature should be included in teaching.

What the syllabus does say is that the teaching of English in year 7 through 9 should include: “Interests, daily situations, activities, sequences of events, relations and ethical questions” (Skolverket 34). Making ethical questions a part of teaching is difficult. Very often teachers simply do not have time to incorporate it, because of the amount of material they must teach the students. But raising a discussion about ethical questions in class is necessary,

in order to make students aware of the *ethical perspective*. Every student should be able to make individual and personal choices regarding ethical questions, and for that to happen the student must be aware of different points of view regarding an ethical question. By allowing students to discuss their points of view with each other, their perspective is broadened to encompass those of the other students.

The question of teaching literature

Using His Dark Materials as teaching material

As mentioned above, the national curriculum says that literature should be taught in the classroom, but it does not indicate which kind of literature. Nowhere in the national curriculum or the syllabus does it say specifically that a novel should be taught to students. But a novel is a work of literary fiction, something which the syllabus does say should be taught to students. The question is then, what kind of novel should the teacher choose? The fact that *His Dark Materials* is a fantasy novel should be used as an argument for, rather than against, its value in the classroom.

Even though a fantasy story is set in a fictional world, it is still a story about real people, with real emotions and real relationships. That is an argument the teacher has to clarify before the students in order to awaken their interest for the novel. The novel could just as easily be set in our own world; the characters' emotions would still be the same.

Fairy tales and strange worlds different from our own are things which I believe will fascinate and capture students' attention and make them continue reading it. As Robert Crossley puts it in his paper "Education and Fantasy" when discussing the benefit of reading fantasy literature:

What keeps successful fantasy from self-indulgence or the decadence of mere novelty is that a writer like Tolkien does not let the attention rest on the marvelous machinery, but directs the eye back to the richness of ordinary things. (286)

[...] fantasy is not only the beginning point of education but its abiding motive, always opening new possibilities, always affirming a process of thought. (288)

Crossley establishes not only the power but also the necessity of using fantasy literature in education. Fantasy broadens the perspective of the ordinary world and ordinary things, things which we miss appreciating because we encounter them every day. The world of *His Dark Materials* is very similar to our own, containing elements which might be considered ordinary but this only serves to increase the fascination of reading the book. The reader can almost

recognize him/herself as being a part of the world, and at the same time that world is so different from our own that we want to know more of it. Choosing a text which draws in the reader in this way is very important when choosing texts for students. If a text or work of literature is “meaningful and enjoyable, reading is more likely to have a lasting and beneficial effect upon the learners’ linguistic and cultural knowledge” (Collie & Slater 6). By allowing the students to read something which they enjoy, they will remember it longer and it will leave a deeper imprint in them.

The same writers mention that the most important part of choosing which type of literature to use in a classroom is to select something which will awaken the students’ interest, create an involvement with the characters and the world which the students are reading about. They say that literature is “valuable authentic material” which means that it has not been written with the “specific purpose of teaching a language” (3). *His Dark Materials* can be considered valuable authentic material, resembling the kind of literature which students will be reading and encountering in their adult life outside of school; literature created with fiction, not education, in mind.

An argument which could be raised is that the novel might become too alike reality so that students might “lose” themselves into the fantasy world and be unable to separate it from the real world. However I believe that students are accustomed to fairy tales and other worlds and know how to distinguish them from the real one. Students encounter fantasy every day, not only in literature but also in film and television. Looking specifically at traditional Scandinavian and Swedish literature, it is full of fantasy. Using examples such as Selma Lagerlöfs *Gösta Berlings Saga* and Viktor Rydbergs *Wampyren* one can demonstrate that Scandinavian literature has a long tradition of fantasy and dark, gothic and supernatural elements, as Yvonne Leffler argues (Leffler 12). Thus, I believe that students in a Swedish school will be familiar with the fantasy genre and will be able to see it as fantasy and not reality. This tradition might also help students accept the fantasy genre as a reading assignment.

Because *His Dark Materials* was written for younger readers of English and because it was written relatively recently, the language in it is not very complex and difficult. It can hardly be said to be simple, but neither is it too difficult. Collie and Slater write that when choosing literature to use in a language classroom, one must take care in judging the complexity of the language being taught in relation to the skills of the students. If the language is too difficult, the students will lose interest. Too easy, and they will not reach the goals of increasing their receptive and vocabulary skills. Therefore, *His Dark Materials* is an excellent choice for

students at higher levels of compulsory school, because of the range of its language. It is well adapted to the vocabulary skills of students of that age, and the teacher can choose which year s/he wishes to use the book in class, depending on the skill level of the students. What is important is that the book is introduced to students early, so that their skills in English are still low enough for them to gain something from it.

Lyra as a character

Pullman is very aware of his target audience when he is writing *His Dark Materials*. The choice of Lyra as the protagonist gives the students someone they can identify with, and all of her adventures enable the reader to understand her and know more of her personality. Since Lyra is a twelve-year old girl, she is not very far in age from the students that read the book and thus they can easily identify with her and put themselves in her situation. This is made even clearer because the narrators' point of view never leaves Lyra's perspective. The world is perceived through her eyes, enabling the reader to experience the events in the novel almost as if they are experiencing them themselves. Lyra is a very complex character, capable of experiencing deep emotional trauma, such as when Pantalaimon is attacked and hurt by the scientists of Bolvangar (Pullman 235) and displaying clever leadership and cunning, such as when she gathers the children to flee from Bolvangar (Ch. 15) or tricks the false bear-king, Iofur Ragnison (Ch. 19). This range of emotions that she displays make her an authentic character and increases the authenticity of the book, something which will increase both students' interest in the book and what they learn from it.

This process of identifying oneself with a character in the novel is very important to enable readers to get involved with the story in order to keep on reading. Collie and Slater note how a book draws one into the text, how the reader "begins to inhabit the text" (6). I agree that this driving force is necessary, especially with younger readers. The important thing about reading a text with younger readers is to keep up the momentum of their reading. Choosing a text with interesting characters that the students can identify with is the key to enabling them to continue reading.

Using literature in the teaching of morality

Literature is an excellent tool in teaching morality, because, as stated above, it is authentic and connected to the real world. Literature has always affected readers by exposing them to fictional worlds and societies, thus teaching them about moral values. Many authors have written their books specifically for questioning the reader's opinion and making him/her think

about their current situation. Nataša Pantić writes about this in her paper “Moral education through literature”, using the example of George Orwell’s *1984* that, “George Orwell would probably be surprised to learn that he did not want to tell us something about totalitarianism in his famous satire” (Pantić 410).

Furthermore, she writes that literature continues to speak to us even when it was written several hundred years ago: “A look to the past as a point of reference is useful when we attempt to recognize our own assumptions” (406). Even though literature represents the social and cultural values of the time in which it was written, it can still give meaning to us in the present when those values have changed. It can show us what morals were present at that time and allow us to relate to them. However, my opinion is that this historical reference is not necessary. Partly because of lack of time during a single semester, the teacher simply does not have enough time to look at all of the historical aspects of literature, but also because modern day morals are more relevant to the students to be aware of. The teacher still has to teach the students about different moral codes, but the historical perspective is something that has passed. Teaching students about cultural values in different modern-day societies will give them a better understanding of humans today, something which will help them in the future when they leave school. Collie and Slater write that literature offers “cultural enrichment, and state that; “This vivid imagined world [the novel’s] can quickly give the foreign reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society “(4). Raising students to be aware of these codes and preoccupations of modern society is the real purpose of the school.

The question of identity and gender

Helping students develop their identity

As human beings, we develop our own identity by comparing ourselves to others. We look at ourselves, then at others and note differences and similarities between us and them. By doing so, we establish who we are and what we are. Human characters in *His Dark Materials* have another aspect to their identity: their daemons. At one point in the novel a man explains to Lyra that eventually her daemon will settle into a single form, unable to change, and that form will reflect parts of her personality (Pullman 144). People are thus able to look at their own daemons to realize something of who they are, and they are able to look at other peoples’ daemons to know who they are.

In the novel Lyra is consistently afraid of Pantalaimon, her daemon, settling in a single form. Lyra will not choose which form Pantalaimon will settle in, he will. All daemons

choose what form they will settle in. Because the human has no power in this decision, their daemons will most likely reflect some deep and subconscious aspect of a human being. But an important thing to point out is the fact that a daemon settling does not have to have a negative impact on the person. Because the settling of a daemon is a step into adulthood, it brings with it growth and maturity. As quoted by Esther Berry:

The settling of a daemon into a single form with the onset of adulthood, Pullman tells us, represents not simply a loss of the power to change, of flexibility and fire; it also represents a gain in the power to focus, to concentrate and to understand. (Berry 270)

As Berry puts it, “Pullman’s daemon figure is an intriguing, complex construction of selfhood – a creature in a continual state of metamorphosis, of multiple bodies (270).” A prepubescent girl like Lyra, or a student, has not found her own identity and the daemon reflects this by constantly changing, especially when Lyra is angry or upset and cannot control her own emotions. Perhaps the daemon therefore represents every person’s search for knowledge about themselves, something which changes during childhood and which “settles” during puberty, when your daemon settles into one form.

When the book is read by students, this quest for identity and confirmation of oneself becomes even more relevant. Most students of grades 6, 7 or 8 will be around twelve to fourteen years old. If we imagine that these students were to have daemons, the daemons would not have settled yet or would be in the middle of the process. This is a good opportunity for the teacher to make the students think about what their own daemon would look like, to try to choose an animal that represents a deep and subconscious aspect of them. The challenge would be to try to identify with animals, rather than human beings and thus realize other aspects of their personality that they might not have thought of before. If this exercise is performed in group discussion, it opens up an opportunity for students to talk to their classmates, to see them in a new light and open up to them. They would share their view of themselves, how they think their daemon would look like but also encounter other perspectives of their personality.

Identity and gender

One important aspect of the novel is the fact that Lyra is a girl. Will that make it difficult for boys to relate to her as a protagonist, or make them hesitant in reading the novel? I think not. The novel has a way of working around this problem and that is Pantalaimon, Lyra’s daemon. Pan, as he is called, is male-gendered. Yet he is not an entirely different character, he is a part

of Lyra. Thus, he is always present by Lyra's side, undertaking the same adventures that she does and experiencing the same things and so becomes a reflection of Lyra's own masculinity. Lyra, and all the characters of *His Dark Materials*, become both male and female as they have something of both within them: the gender of their own bodies and that of their daemon. If Lyra can be considered a role model for girls, Pantalaimon could be considered one for the boys. But neither of this is completely true because, as mentioned above, Lyra and Pan are actually one and the same being. Two sides, one male and one female, of the same person. Thus, Lyra is a character that opens up possibilities for both boys and girls to identify themselves with.

Anneli Johnstone in her interdisciplinary paper *Following the Golden Compass* discusses using the novel *His Dark Materials* in a language classroom. She writes that Lyra is a character that young girls will have an easy task identifying themselves with, but I believe that the novel can and will offer the same amount of depth and possibilities of personal development for boys, something which Johnstone does not mention.

One thing that Johnstone discusses is the fact that the world of *His Dark Materials* reveals more traditional views on gender than ours, ideas that would perhaps be deemed "old" or "outdated" if they were present today. For example Johnstone points out that Lyra cannot accept the character Mrs. Coulter as a female scholar, simply because female scholars are rare in the Oxford of her world and when they do exist they are treated with contempt. Johnstone hopes that by reading a novel with strong, driven female characters, such as *His Dark Materials*, female students will build and strengthen their own identities as women. They will "...realize that women can manage traditional male tasks" (8).

The question of ethics

Discussing ethics in the novel

The plot of *His Dark Materials* centers on the abduction of children and the process of "intercision" being done to them (Pullman 317-318). Lyra considers these events disgusting and as the reader experiences the novel through her eyes, her opinion affects that of the reader. But the actions are morally questionable and can raise a discussion, something which a teacher must point out. Can the students see why the characters believe that the process is necessary? Can they argue for both sides of the matter?

Both Mrs. Coulter and Lyra's father Lord Asriel use the process, but they have very different intentions for using it. Mrs. Coulter believes that Dust, the fictional element of the

novel, has something to do with sin, and by cutting away a child's daemon before it has settled she hopes to prevent Dust from gathering onto the child, thus making the child immune to sin. In the story, sin is defined as Original sin, the kind of sin one can never escape, created when Eve was tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden (314-315). Lord Asriel, on the other hand, realizes that the process of "intercision" releases a large burst of energy. He uses that energy, killing Lyra's friend Roger in the process, to open up a bridge to another world inside of the Aurora, to allow him to escape from his own world (332).

Both of these characters have reasons for performing the process, reasons that, from their point of view, are morally justifiable. Is this kind of ethical thinking rational and viable? Can one argue from the point of view of these characters, and thus explain their actions? What events led them into making these choices? It is important that the class gets this kind of perspective of the events portrayed in the book and not only follow Lyra's line of thinking. The goal of the discussion is to raise the question of the ethical motives of the characters, a discussion about how sometimes a person might be convinced that the end justifies the means and also a discussion about the characters, their motivations and driving forces.

Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel are examples of two characters working for something that, according to them, will benefit mankind and help free itself from the oppression of religion and sin. In a way, they can be seen as freedom fighters, striving for liberation and freedom. On the other hand there is Lyra, a very humane character who witnesses and is personally affected by the cruel acts performed by these two characters. She becomes a way for them to see the results of their actions, a real person being affected by what they do. So the question that the reader, in this case the students, must ask themselves is: what is the driving force behind these two characters? What kind of morality makes them do what they do? Can the students picture themselves being in a situation where they believe that the end justifies the means?

What is important here as a teacher is not making the discussion into a question of "who is right or wrong?" That is not the relevant question. What is relevant is instead what this tells us about the characters and that the students understand that what they do is the right thing to do according to them. The students must formulate their own opinion of it, instead of just being stuck in traditional patterns of right and wrong. As a teacher one must challenge this pattern, and make the students aware that any ethical choice could be morally ambiguous, depending on your own prerequisites.

The teacher has to present the class with a multitude of different moral dilemmas, but should avoid the easy way of simply showing them to students. They must discuss the

dilemmas among themselves to establish a deeper understanding of them. Students should be allowed to imagine their own hypothetical situation where they have to take a moral stand, describe the choice that they would have made and argue why they would have done so. The situation could be brought up in class or discussed in groups to allow analysis and discussion.

Ethics of language

The important part of teaching both ethics and language is not only the content, what is taught, but also the form, how it is taught. What is important to remember is that learning is something social: as humans we learn in groups, we use learning to function in groups, we teach someone and learn from someone. It becomes especially apparent when discussing language, because language is designed to facilitate social interaction. I would say that learning a language is difficult, if not impossible, without interaction with other people. Because language is a tool for communication, one must communicate in order to learn language. Students should be placed in groups working together in order for them to learn. The teacher must be present to lead the group in the right direction, but should not give them the right answers; the students must find their own way of working and thinking. I want to initiate a dialogue with my students in the classroom, teaching language through dialogue and discussion. Dialogue between myself and them and dialogue amongst themselves. Olga Dysthe writes in her book *Dialog, samspel och lärande* that: “[...] it is the social group, the community which the individual is a part of that is the starting point of learning” (8, my translation).

Dysthe presents an example that deals with exactly this kind of situation (Dysthe 219-242). In it, the authors give several examples taken from a lesson plan. The students in the class are asked to solve a mathematical problem involving squares and triangles. The authors demonstrate that, by discussing amongst themselves and helping each other, the class is able to not only work their way towards a solution, but also to demonstrate the ability to pass that knowledge on to the others students, in effect taking the place of the teacher. By doing so, not only does another student receive the knowledge, but the student teaching and explaining also reinforces his own knowledge by retelling it and explaining it to someone else. This example clearly shows the benefit of classroom discussion, demonstrating that it not only enforces knowledge and learning but also opens up the possibilities of trust and dialogue by allowing the students to talk to and learn from each other.

Every individual in a community, in this case the classroom, should be seen and allowed to speak in the discussion, as well as provide adequate room for others involved. This is very

important in group-based learning and discussion. The teacher should be present to build up a relaxed climate of discussion, but not controlling it. By discussing and interacting with others, students develop mutual understanding and empathy, as well as learn social codes. They understand the need for having an open discussion and allowing other people space. As Seija Wellros writes, “A successful socialization always creates a group community.” (18). The only way for students to truly understand this is through applying it practically in interaction with other individuals.

Certain ethical rules are required to form this group community. Jens Allwood discusses in his paper the ethics of communication and conflict. He lists three ethical maxims that are necessary for cooperation to take place between two individuals. To summarize, these three are as follows:

- (i) They try not to force each other (make it possible for the other party to act freely).
- (ii) They try not to prevent each other from pursuing their own motives (help each other to achieve their motives). Since the urge to escape pain and to seek pleasure is perhaps the strongest of all human motives, this means that they should try not to hurt each other (make it possible for the other party to seek pleasure).
- (iii) They try not to prevent each other from exercising rationality successfully (make it possible for the other party to exercise rationality successfully). Since correct information, at least in the long run, is a precondition of successful rational action they should not lie but give each other adequate and correct information. (4)

These three prerequisites are the basic pillars of human interaction, as being necessary for cooperation to take place.

Allwood writes that an ethical communication is defined as communication where both parts are aware of the ethical code and respect it. One should for example allow the other person a measure of freedom in the conversation in order to uphold this ethical code. Allwood uses the example of the phrase “could you pass me the salt” in comparison with the phrase, “pass me the salt” (5). The first phrase opens up possibilities for the other person instead of being stated as a direct order. Thus it is considered more polite.

Allwood builds his argument upon the “Golden rule” i.e., “do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you” (4). His observations of this are particularly interesting in language teaching because language requires human interaction and human interaction requires an ethical code that dictates politeness. Making students aware of the golden rule and trying to follow it in the classroom is an excellent way of ensuring a classroom climate open for discussion. This does not mean that the golden rule should be explicitly explained to students, but rather that it is a rule that the teacher should follow in order for the students to

copy him/her. By following the golden rule and the three above stated maxims, the teacher builds an open, tolerant climate for ethical debate and discussion

In the classroom

Discussing sin

When discussing the word “sin”, many people will most likely associate it with religion, thinking that sin is something which religion does not allow. But sin is something that is worth discussing in an ethical debate, even if that debate is not primarily a religious one because sin has become synonymous with breaking not only religious enforced law, but also human law. Just as religion is created out of a social and cultural context, the matter of sin is subjected to social and cultural values. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word sin as:

noun

an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law:

a sin in the eyes of God

[mass noun]:the human capacity for sin

an act regarded as a serious or regrettable fault, offence, or omission:

he committed the unforgivable sin of refusing to give interviews

Thus, sin can be considered not only as a religious act but as an act condemned by society at large. The teacher might very well use the word sin in a language classroom, in both an ethical debate and a religious debate.

Anders Franklin has written a BA essay called “Aspects of Sin” in which he compares the classical definition of sin with that of *His Dark Materials*. In the novel, sin is something sentient. Franklin argues for this being the main difference between the traditional view of sin and that of the novel. Sin is a form of cosmic matter, perceived as dust-like particles and thus called Dust, and is what makes life-forms sentient. Daemons, as well as the bond between a human and their daemon, are made from Dust. Dust is still the embodiment of sin, but when matter becomes sentient it is given free will and the ability to choose what is good and evil. He writes that, “In Pullman’s multiverse, the essence of sin is consciousness, feeling and free thinking, which give rise to a variety of actions” (30). Thus Franklin states that Pullman’s Dust, called sin by the church, is neither good nor evil. It fuels sentient matter, which in turn can choose to be either good or evil. Dust is a tool in the hands of beings capable of free choice.

It is this aspect of free choice that students should be allowed to discuss. Is the ability to choose freely what makes us human? In *Fundamentals of Ethics* John Finnis writes that;

A choice is free if and only if it is between open practical alternatives (i.e. to do this, or to do that...) such that there is no factor but the choosing itself which settles which alternative is chosen.
(137)

Finnis continues along this line by claiming that there is no such thing as a free choice: it is logically impossible to be entirely independent of morality and other psychological values in order to make a completely free choice. Humans will always have some viewpoint or experience that will affect their choices. But Pullman's opinion is that sin is something that is required for human beings to think for themselves and be capable of free choice. It is something which makes us fundamentally human. Students can discuss both sides of the issue and form their own opinion. But the teacher must be aware there is a chance that some students in the class will practice a religion, for example Christianity. Those students might perceive their faith as being challenged and debated if they are given the aspect of "sin" presented as a metaphor of good. Once again, the focus is on allowing the class to discuss and debate their own different views and perspectives.

Daemons

A question that could be raised in class is the nature of daemons and their relationship with the physical body. In *His Dark Materials*, physically touching a daemon is considered a great taboo. Lyra speaks of it as a taboo greater than any other, as "the grossest breach of etiquette". This is explained when a scientist incapacitates Lyra by forcefully holding her daemon. Lyra is greatly affected by it, both physically and emotionally. Pullman describes it as: "She *felt* those hands...It wasn't *allowed*...Not *supposed* to touch... *Wrong*..." (Pullman 235). Considering the great taboo of touching a daemon, they are not considered a natural body part such as an arm or a leg but something more private, more restricted. By explaining this to students, one can start a discussion of what daemons truly are, and their role in the society of *His Dark Materials*.

From this starting point, it is possible to initiate a discussion of the social codes and rules that exist in our own society, and relate them to the world of the novel. Is it possible to imagine a scenario where a person would be allowed to touch another person's daemon? The students can formulate answers of their own and discuss them, building upon the fact that they all have different ideas and opinions of what a daemon is. By sharing those ideas with each other, the class can create a mutual image and understanding of what a daemon is and when,

and perhaps why, physical contact between a human and someone else's daemon would be allowed.

Using this image, it opens up into a discussion of physical contact in our own society. When is physical contact allowed, and in what type of relationship? Is there a kind of physical contact in our world that is considered "the grossest breach of etiquette", similar to touching someone's daemon? It might be that Pullman considered daemons and human/daemon interaction to be sexual in nature, so that physical contact with someone else's daemon is only permitted between lovers. The physical and emotional discomfort that Lyra perceives when a scientist grabs her daemon could almost be interpreted as a sexual violation. One can continue the discussion of sin by introducing the topic of taboo. What is considered taboo in our own society? Is there a connection between taboo and sin? In the matter of touching someone's daemon, it is a taboo created out of social codes rather than religious matters. Thus, taboo is not a mark placed only on religious matters but also social ones. The teacher might continue the discussion here by asking the class if there is such a thing as "social sin", that is a sin or taboo that has no relevance to religion.

Identity in the classroom

When discussing different groups of people in terms of social class, ethnicity, gender and religion, one always has a stereotype that is brought to mind when thinking of a member of that group. This linear style of thinking is the result of a need to define and categorize things, and can eventually develop into prejudice. The only real way to break a prejudice is by allowing someone to meet and interact with the individual that they have prejudices about. Students need to realize that all people are individuals, and therefore unique. Once again I would argue that language and language teaching is the tool to accomplish this. The teacher should create a classroom that is open and tolerant of discussion. That is expressed in the national curriculum, which states that:

No one should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment or other degrading treatment. Such tendencies should be actively combated.

Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures. (Skolverket 9)

The internationalization of Swedish society and increasing cross-border mobility place high demands on the ability of people to live with and appreciate the values inherent in cultural diversity. Awareness of one's own cultural origins and sharing in a common cultural heritage provides a secure identity which it is important to develop, together with the ability to understand and empathize with the values and conditions of others. The school is a social and cultural meeting place with both the opportunity and the responsibility to strengthen this ability among all who work there. (Skolverket 9)

The values explained above are fundamental values of the Swedish school system and should permeate every aspect of teaching, but it becomes especially relevant when it comes to language teaching because, as mentioned before, language teaching deals with individuals meeting and establishing conversation and relations.

As a teacher, it is important to be aware of how to implement these values in the classroom in order to create a climate open for discussion. To do this, the teacher must have some knowledge of how people interact in groups. Seija Wellros writes about this in her book *Språk, kultur och social identitet*, stating that “The name of the group contains all of the ‘qualities’ that members of the group are considered having” (Wellros 168, my translation). Wellros goes on to discuss why things such as prejudice occur, and talks about how human beings always seek a “them” in order to establish their own group, to feel a “we” in belonging to a group. She writes that, “One of the theories [discussed in her book] states that the separation of the social world into “us” and “them” comes from some kind of consequence relationship. Different groups seek one and the same goal which however is only available for one group at a time” (Wellros 171-173). This is a situation that the teacher should avoid; the class being divided into factions of “us” and “them”. The class might turn against each other, or they might turn against the teacher; perceiving the teacher as “them” and the class as “us”. This is a very difficult situation for any teacher, and should be avoided. If the class perceives the teacher as someone else, someone outside of their circle, they will treat him/her with alienation and hostility.

Something that Wellros does not discuss but is well worth mentioning when discussing a classroom situation is that this insecurity of perceiving “them” will affect the students learning. If the students see the teacher as “someone else”, they will feel insecure and uncomfortable, making the passing of knowledge from the teacher to the student more difficult. The teacher should present himself as part of the group and help the students respect one another as human beings in order to make them feel as safe and comfortable as possible.

Crossley mentions this by writing that, “...the teacher can neither establish someone's identity, nor define someone's relation to the universe, nor impart religious experience (292). I do agree that this is true, but only partly. The teacher has to be aware that s/he is a major influence over students and that his or her personality will affect them. The teacher cannot definitely establish a student's identity, but can and will affect it in great deal. The teacher must be aware of this and help students with this process of constructing one's own identity, giving them the tools to accomplish it.

A typical classroom today will most likely be multicultural, and thus the teacher will most likely encounter many different cultures and religions in the class, that all have different views of what is considered ethically just or unjust. Hedge underlines that this multiculturalism is a potential source of conflict and misunderstanding between the teacher and the student. She writes that “With regards to the multi-cultural classroom, insights into culture and learning style highlight the teacher’s need create a variety of learning activities to cater for the range of styles” (19). This is true, but the teacher also has an opportunity to use these experiences and cultural differences as a resource to open up discussion in class. One of those benefits could be using a student to explain his or her views of a specific matter or his/her country’s views or religious views.

By doing so the class will be able to see the actual person behind everything that is being said and not just learn the facts about it. The teacher can start a discussion about sin, and what different religions consider “sin” or “taboo”. From there the teacher can allow the students to discuss the differences and similarities between religions and what religion originates from. The focus should be on similarities and common factors between cultures and religions, instead of differences. The teacher should facilitate in the building of bridges between students by showing them that they are probably more alike each other than they think. By doing this they might perceive each other as equals and as humans, instead of someone who is “different” because of culture or religion.

Conclusion

Teaching students about morality and ethics is something that is necessary and should be a part of every subject. Unfortunately, in language teaching this importance is easily overlooked. Language teaching is an excellent platform for teaching students about different ethical viewpoints and perspectives and creating an understanding of different cultures. A typical classroom today will most likely be multi-cultural and this is a resource that the teacher should use. A resource of real people who can contribute their own, their culture’s or their religion’s opinion.

The search for personal identity and self-image is something that is relevant throughout a person’s life. It is a search started around puberty, at the onset of adolescence when one’s character “settles” just like one’s daemon settles. The teacher has an opportunity and a responsibility to guide students through that difficult time of their life and help them realize and understand themselves, as well as understand others. By allowing the students to read *His*

Dark Materials, they gain not only an understanding of themselves but also of other students and other individuals.

Through discussion with other people, the students form an image of themselves and build relations. Relations that will not only help them in a classroom situation but also develop them into members of society, which is the real purpose of the school.

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