

On Becoming a Teacher: May Sarton's *The Small Room*

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INTRODUCTION

What is at stake in becoming a good teacher? What is required to treat one's students well? Should one avoid personal relationships with them? Should one care for students only in their assigned roles as learners or should one be open to deal with them as individuals who may have serious personal problems that interfere with their human flourishing? How does one become a model of fairness in dealing with students who trespass against fundamental moral rules? What view of fairness should one adopt as a new teacher? And what is really central to having a positive influence on the students one teaches? Many of these questions are central to prospective teachers' effort to define their own professional identity as teachers; they are also questions that undergird May Sarton's classic novel, *The Small Room*.¹ In this novel, Lucy Winter, a first year English teacher at an elite women's college, confronts a case of plagiarism by the protégé of one of the campus's most powerful instructors. As the reader imaginatively enters Appleton College and its pre-women's liberation world of cocktail parties and self-reflective conversation, she journeys along with Lucy Winter, the novel's protagonist, in discovering what it means to become a teacher.

This essay aims to do two things: 1) show how May Sarton's *The Small Room* dramatizes the issue of balancing "caring and fairness" in Lucy's handling of the plagiarism incident; 2) tentatively suggest a few ways in which a complex novel differs from a case study (in an ethics course) as a medium for providing moral understanding.

BALANCING CARING AND FAIRNESS IN *THE SMALL ROOM*

At the core of teacher-student relations is a tension between two different moral orientations that are bound up with the teacher's effort to treat students well — the tension between being fair and being caring. What is at stake in these two orientations?

To be a fair judge as a teacher involves making judgments of students' conduct and academic performances without prejudice or partiality; it usually involves the impartial application of appropriate standards to this conduct. To be a caring person, on the other hand, one must accept the unique "otherness" of a student in a receptive, supportive, open and essentially *non-judgmental* way. Judging students fairly is bound up with the unequal power relationships existing between teachers and students and with one facet of this power relationship — teachers distributing one of education's most precious commodities, grades. It is also bound up with punishment of students for breaking accepted classroom or school rules. Unlike the unequal power relationship of judging, the caring relationship between teacher and student often operates on a level of moral equality, with at least one of the two struggling to understand and support the other in her humanness.

In May Sarton's *The Small Room*, the tension between being a fair judge and a caring person is revealed through background and foreground problems. The background problem for fairness is: should exceptionally bright students receive special treatment if they break the college's standard rules? The background problem for caring is: should Appleton College hire a psychologist to treat students with emotional problems? The central, foreground problem is how Lucy Winter should handle the plagiarism of Jane Seaman, a brilliant but emotionally troubled student, who seems to want to terminate a demanding protégé relationship with the college's most powerful research scholar, Carryl Cope. The novel raises two different but related problems: 1) What should Lucy do in responding to the plagiarism case? 2) What kind of wisdom is required to help one's students flourish?

At the novel's inception, Lucy Winter is a woman who is unsure of why she has chosen to be an English professor or what is involved in becoming one. While taking the train to Appleton College and thinking of her recently broken engagement to her fiancé John, Lucy sees a reflection of her face in the train's window. It seems as if "a stranger had loomed up out of the New England landscape to stare at her." She wonders to herself "What had she got herself into? What indeed?" Appleton College has been described to her by one of her colleagues, Hallie Summerson as "a close community" where the "personal element counts." Comparing Appleton to "a novitiate," Lucy ponders whether she would "find a true vocation" and whether she belonged "in this peculiar order."² Set in the late 1950s, the novel portrays a time when many female academics had to choose between marriage and a professional career — a choice Lucy would prefer not to make.

So, how does one introduce oneself to a group of strange students and survive the first period ordeal? This was Lucy Winter's first crisis. She decides to tell her American Renaissance class about the extraordinary teachers who made a difference in her life. Included among these teachers is Lucy's father, a person from whom Lucy received far too little care or tenderness — a fact she can not disclose to her students. After class, Pippa, a student who has recently lost her father, confronts Lucy with tears in her eyes. She has interpreted Lucy's persona as that of a professor interested in developing close, personal relationships with students. However, when Pippa reaches out for compassionate understanding from a caring adult, Lucy feels awkward and struggles to get away without getting involved; she is simply not prepared to deal with Pippa's emotional needs. Later she talks of the Pippa incident to Hallie Summerson, a trusted colleague: "I felt cornered. I don't believe in personal relationships between teachers and students, do you?"³ Lucy's early position, her recipe-like formula, for keeping students at a nice, safe professional distance, will soon be challenged after she discovers that Jane Seaman, a brilliant young protégé of medieval historian Carryl Cope, has plagiarized an essay by Simone Weil on *The Iliad*. What should Lucy do? What is the fair thing to do? How can she punish a student without understanding why she plagiarized the essay?

I invite my own students to interpret this novel in terms of the tension between caring and fairness; in so doing, I have them read Milton Mayeroff's classic *essay*

On Caring along with some of Nel Noddings's writings. I also have them read my own essay on fairness.⁴ These readings provide some conceptual basis for discussing both caring and fairness. Mayeroff, for example, suggests that there are three key ingredients in "caring": i) "being with" — which involves the empathic ability to put oneself in the other's shoes, see the world through her eyes, without losing one's own identity in the process; ii) "being for" which is the opposite of molding or shaping another to live up to one's own expectations or making the other's decisions for her; rather it is the effort to support the other in her efforts to become the kind of person the other chooses to be; iii) "being there for" the other, which involves being "on call" for the other and being willing to rearrange the priorities in one's life to respond appropriately to the other's need, difficulty, or crisis.⁵ Nel Noddings view of "caring" substitutes "engrossment" for empathy and emphasizes the receiving of the other, rather than the putting of oneself in the other's shoes. It requires not only apprehending the other's reality but a commitment to act in the other's behalf as "one-caring." Noddings writes: "The commitment to act in behalf of the cared-for, a continued interest in his reality throughout the appropriate time span, and the continual renewal over this span of time are the essential elements of caring."⁶ Caring for Noddings involves engrossment, motivational displacement, and some level of reciprocity. Her views, while different from Mayeroff's in some regards, clearly overlap with his.

In my own essay on fairness, I suggest a contrast between what I call a "juror model" of fairness and an Aristotelian equality model of fairness. In the juror model, the emphasis is on strict impartiality in the unbiased application of appropriate standards. In the equality model, the judge must consider Aristotle's three conditions of fairness: like cases should be treated alike; different cases should be treated differently; and different cases should be treated differently in proportion to the difference at stake. In the equality model, the burden of proof lies with the person suggesting there is a relevant difference that warrants different treatment; furthermore, fairness requires a proportionate judgment for how the difference should be treated.

After Lucy discovers the plagiarism, she must decide how to act. How can she balance caring with fairness? Ironically Lucy discovers that a very caring person lies within her, hidden only by the confusion about her proper role as a professor. In one of the novel's most powerful scenes, Lucy confronts Jane Seaman in her office and asks Jane to explain why she plagiarized the Weil essay. Initially, Lucy is not inclined to respond emotionally to the student and the interactions are quite tense as Jane initially denies her wrongdoing. In frustration Lucy explodes, "I didn't ask you here to argue. I wanted to try to help. If you don't wish to discuss it with me, that is surely your right." Finally Jane breaks down and confesses, but Lucy is not content until she finds what lies behind this self-destructive act. Jane responds with her hands flying up to her forehead, saying "the pressure, the pressure, the pressure." Then Jane's resentment towards her mentor Carryl Cope manifests itself, "From the time I first had her as a Sophomore she has been at me to produce, produce, produce. I'm not a machine."⁷ By the end of their interaction, the smug, defiant Jane has been

reduced to the condition of a young, frightened child: “How small, crumpled, and how very young Jane looked, bent over on the chair, hugging herself.” Lucy offers to “be there for” Jane as the judicial ordeal unfolds. In so doing, “Lucy was surprised to discover that she herself cared more than she would have thought possible a half hour ago.” And in the process of caring for Jane, she commits herself to Jane’s well being. “Don’t hesitate to come to the Faculty Club any time. I’ll always be there if you need me.”⁸

In caring for Jane, Lucy abandons her naive guideline of not getting involved with her students. But she is not presented with any new formulaic recipe for treating students well. In contrast, Lucy realizes that teacher-student relationships defy any kind of rule-bound guidance. What must replace recipe-like formulas is a new wisdom grounded in the complexity of teacher-student relationships.

It had been made abundantly clear in the last hour that teaching is first of all teaching a person....For she had come to see that it was possible, if one worked hard enough at it, to be prepared as far as subject matter went...but it was not possible to be prepared to meet the twenty or more individuals of each class, each struggling to grow, each bringing into the room a different human background, each...in a state of peril where a too-rigorous demand or an instantaneous flash of anger might fatally turn the inner direction. Was she, for instance, shutting out Pippa’s pleas for personal attention and response out of selfishness, fatigue, and unwillingness to give away anything of her inmost heart to a student? How did one know? How did one learn a sense of proportion, where to withdraw, where to yield? And she guessed, not for the first time, that there could be no answer ever, that every teacher in relation to every single student must ask these questions over and over, and answer them differently in each instance, because the relationship is as various, as unpredictable as a love affair.⁹

Lucy’s willingness to assume responsibility for Jane’s well being surprises her, especially because of her earlier view to avoid all personal relationships with students. Nevertheless, how to treat Jane fairly agonizes Lucy. Does Jane deserve special treatment? Is hers more than a simple case of plagiarism, deserving the standard penalty of being expelled from college? Lucy probes to discover the underlying motivation behind Jane’s desperate act of plagiarism. After Jane has admitted the wrongdoing, Lucy speculates out loud to Jane, “Perhaps you wanted, without know what you wanted, to be found out, because then the spiral could be broken.” “Maybe” said a small humble voice. “Yes, that’s true, I guess.”¹⁰ It seems that Jane’s act is really a disguised plea for help, a plea for help from an emotionally unbalanced young woman trying to escape from a spiral of increasing expectations created by a self-deceived but well intentioned mentor, Carryl Cope, who is not capable of giving Jane the one thing she really needs — love.

Can Jane receive a fair trial if her case goes directly to the Student Court? Does fairness consist here in a speedy rendering of the Court’s impartial verdict? Can the Student Court, listening to the extenuating evidence, fairly determine if there is warrant for a lesser penalty than expulsion? These questions may have run through Lucy’s mind, but she seems to have little faith in what she calls “strict justice.” Indeed, the procedural mechanisms of “strict justice,” requiring a quick and speedy trial by the student body, seem far too impersonal and uncaring to her. She tells Jane that she has tried to understand what was behind Jane’s “act of pure folly” before “the world steps in, the law, the code, the machinery if you will, takes over.”¹¹ The imagery of procedural justice seems incompatible with caring and compassion.

The problem of fairness in the novel has been complicated by an earlier case wherein the faculty decides not to suspend a brilliant math student named Agnes Skeffington for failing to come to her classes or turn in her work. Does academic brilliance in a student provide relevant grounds for special treatment? In the faculty battle over this issue, Carryl Cope, Jane Seaman's mentor, Lucy's new friend, and the most polarizing figure at Appleton College, argues persuasively for special treatment, based on her view that the purpose of education is developing intellectual excellence: "The point is...that we talk a great deal about excellence, and we pride ourselves on demanding it, but when we get what we have asked for, we become as confused and jejeune as a freshman in a course on ethics. We are unwilling, evidently, to pay the price of excellence. What is the price?...The price is eccentricity, maladjustment if you will, isolation of one sort or another, strangeness, narrowness. Excellence costs a great deal." Agnes Skeffington is granted an exception to the rules and a new rule is generated for students who do work "above and beyond the usual college standard."¹²

Against this background of "special treatment" for brilliant students, Jane Seaman's case is being interpreted by students and faculty alike. However, in Lucy's mind, Carryl Cope, the hard-driving research professor who gave Jane unlimited extra time and the free use of her library, will be on trial along with Jane. Thus, Lucy is not completely shocked when Carryl seeks to avoid a trial at all costs. Informing Carryl of the plagiarism, Lucy says, "I suppose it will have to go to the student council." Carryl's response is emphatic, "Those prigs! Not if I can help it!...My dear Lucy, we cannot afford to have a person of this quality blackballed for life, for that is what it would amount to."¹³ Thus, a cover-up begins; the Jane Seaman case does not go directly to the student council. Jane is ostracized by the student body and the entire campus is awash in rumors of favoritism and unfairness.

Lucy Winter is not comfortable with her role as an impartial judge. In the balancing act between caring and justice, her instincts push heavily towards caring. Nevertheless, she has, I think, accepted some version of Aristotle's equality model of fairness (although there is never any reference to such a model). She believes that a relevant difference exists between Jane's act of plagiarism and a standard case of it, and this difference warrants a different kind of treatment for Jane. For Lucy, Jane's plagiarism is a cry for help from an emotionally unstable girl. Lucy believes Jane needs psychiatric counseling not procedural justice. However, many of the students, including Pippa, see the cover-up as another example of partiality, favoritism, and injustice. Thus, Pippa tells Lucy, "They say it's a pure case of favoritism; if anyone else had done what Jane did, they would have been expelled...I don't understand...I don't understand any of it. Why should Jane get away with this? Why?" Lucy's response indicates that she has unwittingly taken on a new role in the fairness procedures — counsel for the defense. She responds to Pippa's indignant charge: "The punishment is so severe that it would mean the end of her education. Is the image of justice worth that? Don't you think what she has to bear from having been exposed, and from her own conscience is punishment? Should we snarl, rush at her, and tear her limb from limb because this is the rule of the tribe?"¹⁴ In her conversation with Pippa, Lucy finally confesses that *she is not sure what she thinks*.

When Lucy confesses her uncertainty to Pippa, Pippa's indignation is transformed into admiration for her caring Professor; as a result, a more open, sensitive relationship between Pippa and Lucy emerges.

Does Lucy balance caring and fairness well? The answer here is not clear. There is room for varied interpretations and interesting disagreements. My own view is that Lucy unconsciously disvalues procedural justice and the role it plays on the college campus; thus, there is no small measure of irony when ultimately Jane Seaman receives what might be considered "a substantively fair verdict" from the Student Court. Her case goes to trial after she has visited with a psychiatrist during her Thanksgiving visit home with Lucy, and based on the perceived need of psychiatric, she is granted a leave of absence until she is able to return to campus. Through this messy ordeal, Lucy does not see herself as "balancing the principles of justice and caring." *That is the moral superstructure I impose on the novel* for my students to heighten their awareness of the moral complexity of teaching. Lucy is simply muddling through a messy situation. She is simply acting out her character, discovering what it means to care for two people in conflict, Carryl Cope and Jane Seaman. In so doing she learns the painful truth that teaching involves "the care of souls."

LITERATURE AS A MEDIUM OF MORAL INSIGHT

In her presidential address last year, Betty Sichel spoke of stories' ability to increase moral awareness as well as "suggest moral standards, ideals to be attained, vices to be avoided, ways of living moral lives, and moral shortcomings to avoid." Professor Sichel, of course, was not referring to all stories but to those stories that we would count as "good literature." And, of course, not all good literature provides readers with moral insight. Thus, this question remains: What enables *The Small Room* to convey its moral insight? Moreover, what distinguishes this kind of novel from more decontextualized case studies used in applied ethics course?

The following remarks are reasonably tentative; they do not constitute what I think is necessary: a full-blown theory of literature and how it communicates its moral meanings. Nevertheless, several points can be made to distinguish a novel such as *The Small Room* from a case study one might find in an applied ethics textbook. In the case study, the picture of moral action conveyed is something like the following: A normal person faced with a difficult problem (for example how to handle plagiarism from an emotionally troubled student who has been pressured by her mentor to produce increasingly more sophisticated academic work) will assume the moral point of view, ask what is the morally right thing to do, and then engage in a process of moral deliberation that is fundamentally deductive and which leads to a moral decision that he/she can justify on moral grounds, that is, can provide convincing moral reasoning for why the action chosen was "the morally right one." Describing the Kantian project of willing one's actions to be universal moral laws, Bernard Williams suggests that a critical version of impartiality lies at its heart. He describes it as follows:

The idea of a rational agent is not simply the third-personal idea of a creature whose behavior is to be explained in terms of beliefs and desires. A rational agent acts on reasons, and this goes beyond his acting in accordance with some regularity or law, even one that refers to

beliefs and desires. If he acts on reasons, then he must not only be an agent but must reflect on himself as an agent, and this involves seeing himself as one agent among others. So he stands back from his own desires and interests, and sees them from a standpoint that is not that of his desires and interests. Nor is it the standpoint of anyone else's desires and interests. *That is the standpoint of impartiality.* So it is appropriate for the rational agent, with his aspiration to be genuinely free and rational, to see himself as making rules that will harmonize the interests of all rational agents.¹⁵

Here then is a picture behind the first picture — namely that of a person abstracting herself from her biographical condition with all of her interests, needs, projects, fears, relationships, and assuming the role of abstract citizen-legislator acting “impartially” so that all other abstract rational agents would be inclined to agree with the decision made. Of course, there is no guarantee that they would agree. They may interpret the situation differently. Moreover, they may connect general moral standards to the case at hand in somewhat different ways. Nevertheless, the second picture moves us in the direction of a particular version of moral living and moral agency — namely that of abstracted rational agents intellectually separating themselves from their own personal and cultural contexts in the decision making process.

A character, such as Lucy Winter in May Sarton's *The Small Room*, is no such abstracted rational agent, trying to separate herself intellectually from the personal and cultural contexts in which she finds herself. Lucy's moral dilemma, in fact, can only be understood by considering the *complicating* features of the messy situation she confronts: Carryl Cope's moral blindness to what Jane Seaman's emotional needs are; her own prior biographical experience of turning in a cheater to her teacher in elementary school and being ostracized for doing so; the realization that the college is debating whether to hire a psychologist and risk the financial beneficence of one of its key Board members. In the novel, *character is not reduced to an abstracted moral agent interpreting a simplified situation.* On the contrary, good novelists reveal character in its three-dimensional complexity, placing characters in dense, richly contextualized human situations, situations that lend themselves to multiple interpretations. There is a fundamental opacity and indirectness to the way literature reveals how characters make their own decisions. These decisions seldom seem to be the result of rational deliberation; rather they are portrayed simply as individuals acting out their own character in particular situations. Most of these situations have both background and foreground dimensions which illuminate their complexity and opacity. Moreover, some things are not always as clear to the characters as they are to the readers; and novelistic situations are seldom so clear to the readers that they would all agree on “what is really going on.” *We must also remember that literature reveals experience indirectly through figurative language, metaphorical descriptions, and dramatic dialogue.* As readers, we are being shown how things are, not told discursively what is more important and less important. Thus, we are invited to participate imaginatively in what is going on; in so doing, we are *invited to respond emotionally and not merely with detached reason* to the complex interactions between characters and situations.

In a rich, multi-layered novel, the interpretive question, “what is really going on with character X in situation Y?” brings the situational complexity into interaction with the motivational complexity of a character. When one speaks of “motivational

complexity,” it often makes sense to speak of both conscious and unconscious motivation. Lucy Winter, for example, unconsciously or subconsciously was motivated in part by the pain she experienced earlier in her life when she turned a student in for cheating. She is also motivated by her concern to have Carryl Cope avoid the painful humiliation of a trial. This motivational and situational complexity renders multiple interpretations of a character’s action possible, even unavoidable. Moreover, one central intention of literature that is absent from case studies, is a certain kind of wisdom — the wisdom derived from knowing ourselves, from knowing others, and from understanding situations in their full complexity. Lucy Winter’s journey towards becoming her own person as a teacher has her changing throughout the novel; she abandons preconceived views, assumes more responsibility for the well being of others, and balances her roles as teacher, colleague, and vulnerable young woman. The novel asks us more than “how should she handle the plagiarism incident” for that question is subordinated to this one: What does it mean to become a teacher? Other questions are also relevant: How should one live as a teacher? How does one balance the demands of caring and fairness? How does one acquire the wisdom to treat others well and flourish as a person? Lucy learns what many novels communicate: that personal growth comes through handling adversity and muddling through messy situations; that there are no recipes, no formulas, no simple guidelines for treating others well but that wisdom, good judgment, and a concern for others’ well being are critical here.

In conclusion, I have tentatively suggested several features of literature that distinguish it from case studies used in ethics courses: 1) it is not focused upon rational deliberation, especially the kind that abstracts a moral agent from his/her contextual conditions; 2) it relies heavily on both situational and motivational complexity; this complexity permits multiple interpretations of a character’s conduct; 3) it often strives to yield a particular kind of wisdom, a wisdom bound up with self-knowledge; and 4) it aims to communicate its meanings indirectly through figurative language, metaphorical description, and dramatic dialogue, and in so doing arouses emotions and not merely intellect.¹⁶

1. May Sarton, *The Small Room* (New York: Norton, 1961), 11.

2. *Ibid.*, 12-13

3. *Ibid.*, 39.

4. See Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring* (New York: Harper, 1971), 40-65; Nel Noddings, *Caring, A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 9-27; and Nel Noddings, “The Teacher as Judge: A Brief Sketch of Two Fairness Principles, in *Philosophy of Education 1990*, ed. David Ericson (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1991), 350-59.

5. Mayeroff, *On Caring*, 40-65.

6. Noddings, *Caring*, 16.

7. Sarton, *Small Room*, 100.

8. *Ibid.*, 104, 103

9. *Ibid.*, 105.

10. *Ibid.*, 104.

11. Ibid., 102.
12. Ibid., 69.
13. Ibid., 120.
14. Ibid., 133-134.
15. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 65-66, italics mine.
20. For interesting work on the way literature and stories communicate their meaning, see: Betty Sichel, "Beyond Moral Stories," in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997); Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Nel Noddings, "Stories and Affect in Teacher Education," unpublished paper; C. Witherell and Nel Noddings, eds., *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press); Deanne Bogdan, *Re-educating the Imagination: Towards a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement* (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1992). I am also indebted to papers on moral philosophy and literature presented by Susan Laird, Audrey Thompson, Betty Sichel, and William Blizek at a recent AESA symposium in Montreal, Canada, 7 Nov. 1996.