

## LITERATURE AND SOCIAL AWARENESS\*

RENATO L. PUENTEVELLA, S.J.

At the outset let me clarify something. I am taking the term "social awareness" in its broader context or meaning, for the first part of this talk. I take it to mean, being conscious of other people aside from me, of not being wrapped up in myself. Since as teachers we are dealing with adolescents, creatures who are still immature — in the sense that their primary, and oftentimes their *only*, concerns are with themselves — this broader understanding or acceptance of the term is necessary before we go into its more sociological connotations.

Let us start by saying that teenagers are extremely sensitive when it comes to violations of their dignity. This is especially so when they feel that they have become victims of injustice. If you are not one of those "terror" teachers, but instead are an understanding, tolerant, sympathetic, thoughtful, even affectionate, mentor — what a howl of protest anyone of your students will raise against you if you have done him wrong. And yet this same martyr, this same victim of alleged persecution, this same aggrieved champion of a lost cause — how unfeeling, how callous, he can be when it comes to violating *your* rights! For example: A student fails to hand in an assignment on a designated day. Two or three days later, on a special holiday, he comes into the campus with the late assignment. He is unable to hand it to you because there is no class that day, but with a little effort on his part he could easily have located you. In the next class, he blames you. *He* had brought the assignment but *you* were not there! Does this sound familiar to you? Good! Welcome to the club.

Another aberration peculiar to teenagers is their brazen presumption. You set an appointment with a student. He does not show up. The next day you ask him why he did not come. "Oh," he says, "I was held up by traffic. I knew I was going to be late. So I did not come anymore." In his mind he has a perfectly legitimate excuse, so his conscience is clear. He is even surprised why *you* are making such a fuss about it. By some sort of ESP *you* should have known why he was late. So you have wasted half an hour waiting for him, and at the end you wind up the culprit, the *verdugo*.

This is what I mean by adolescents being in a bind, a mindset, focused entirely on themselves. I usually tell my students, the moment you stop thinking of yourselves, the moment you start thinking of others, you have become adults, you have become mature.

Perhaps this "immaturity" can be partly explained by our own Filipino culture. Most of us come from families in which the father rules with an iron fist. His word is law. There is no referendum to his constitution, much less

\* Adaptation of a talk given to the College English teachers in Notre Dame University, Cotabato City, November 19, 1986.

amendment. We grow up cowed, fearful of our own voice. This is where inferiority complex starts. This is where we get stuck with a poor self-image. For years we suppress what we really think and feel. We conform. We acquiesce. We do not speak up. We are afraid to make mistakes. By the time we finish high school we are drab, colorless, spineless. individuals who would rather keep the peace, at all costs, than rock the boat.

Let us examine at least three areas in which this immaturity manifests itself. First, somewhere along our process of growing we have picked up the notion that to say "thank you" is demeaning. We are actually ashamed to say "Thank you!" We say "T.Y." instead, making a joke of it. The person who accepts it may take it seriously, and we are happy if he does. Or he may think it "corny", in which case we are saved the embarrassment. So we leave it ambiguous. We do not want to put ourselves on record, we do not want to sign ourselves on the bottom line, as being truly grateful — openly, unabashedly, unshamefully, proudly — GRATEFUL! So we say "T.Y."

We are also ashamed to apologize. We consider it a great humiliation to make an apology. We are so insecure in our self-image that we think our reputation will be shattered to smithereens if we admit to a mistake. We feel it unmanly, unladylike, to be found less than perfect. Worse, we think less of the person who apologizes. We are embarrassed for him. We make such a national virtue of saving face when, as a matter of act, it is not worth the saving. The truth would serve us better.

Perhaps this shame in acknowledging our fault, saying "I'm sorry", stems again from our culture. As much as possible we want to avoid confrontation. So when we have hurt somebody, and we do *feel* sorry for it, we talk again to the person as if nothing had happened. If the other person answers, that means that he has accepted the implied apology. If he does not, we can pretend that he has not heard us.

It is also our shame as Filipinos that we cannot rejoice for or with, another. We are great at consoling a person in sorrow. It is natural for us to share in his grief, shed tears with him. But to be happy in his joy, to be jubilant with him in his success, this we find hard. Somehow we feel ourselves diminished by his good fortune, pushed off center-stage by his prosperity. You remember Max Soliven's little story about the crabs inside a basket in San Francisco? Someone shouted, "Look out! Those crabs are crawling out of the basket!" "No they're not," replied the owner. "They're *Filipino* crabs. As soon as one crawls out, the rest will pull him back!"

I am recounting to you these unpleasant traits of ours because these are qualities of character that are immature, whether the person is grown up or not. They are traits that keep us from becoming a great nation. If we find them in ourselves now, we certainly will find them in our students, who are actually images of our younger selves. There are probably other qualities about ourselves that we recognize as immature and which we would like to correct. If we look at them honestly enough and accept them for what they are, perhaps we can be tolerant of them when we observe them in our students.

I am essentially a freshman English teacher, with an added upperclass English course thrown in each semester. My principal preoccupation is to get my students to *read*. As such, the stories we take up in class are short and simple, like Alejandro Roces' "My Brother's Peculiar Chicken", Saki's "The

Open Window"; or they are long but thrilling, like Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game", or Henry Syndor Harrison's "Miss Hinch." In general, these stories have very little social content.

We do have stories that could be tapped for social awareness, stories whose values transcend the merely personal. "Lament", for example, by Anton Chekhov tells the story of Iona Potapov, a sled driver, who has just lost a son. He tries to tell his passengers about it, but none of them want to listen. At the end he is forced to share his grief with his horse.

I connect this story with Lino Brocka's movie, "Miguelito" — in which a 17-year old boy discovers that his real mother was a nightclub hostess who has just been released from prison. This is the first big crisis of his life. His heart is broken. He is terribly lonely. He does not go to his father or to his foster mother, to a guidance counselor, a priest or a nun, or to any adult. He goes to another teenager.

I ask my students, have you known such loneliness in your life? How did you get over the experience? Who helped you overcome your loneliness? I narrate to them the two instances in my life when I had felt lonely. Both happened during Christmas. The first time was in 1959, shortly after my Ordination, when I was assigned to Gettysburg, Maryland on a Christmas call. All the priests of the parish had gone home that Christmas Eve and I was left all alone by myself in the rectory. I could not leave the house, even just to roam around the block or go "window-shopping", because a sick-call could come any moment. Even with the TV and a stocked refrigerator, I still felt miserable.

The other time was in Manila, a few years ago. An Ateneo de Davao student, learning I was in Manila, invited me to his home for Christmas Eve. He himself left the house, stranding me with his family and relatives. Have you ever felt alone in the midst of company — when you know that you do not fit there and that people talk to you sheerly to be polite. secretly they wish you were not there so they could enjoy themselves better, and you yourself wish you were somewhere else? It is a frightful experience.

In their first semester in school, college freshmen, are usually lonely. Your chief concern as a teacher should be that of adjustment. You should see to it that your students gradually conquer the feelings of homesickness, shyness, timidity, fear. Your class is a mixture of graduates from exclusive, as well as from public and barangay high schools. Your first task is to create a community out of this hodgepodge, to build up trust and confidence among them so that they will not be afraid of being laughed at whenever they make a mistake. Tell them to laugh *with* one another, not *at* each other. Tell them, they are going to make mistakes anyway, later on, why not make those mistakes now, in your class, where they can be sure of understanding and support, encouragement and compassion, among their own classmates and you, their teacher?

For those with inferiority complex — and you will be surprised how many of them there are — tell them the story of "Charley", the movie made from the short story, "Flowers for Algernon", which won for Cliff Robertson the Oscar Award. Charley is a moron, the butt of jokes among his factory pals. He becomes the guinea pig for a scientific experiment which gradually improves his intelligence, even to genius level. One day he is eating in a restaurant when a moron kitchen help drops a tray of food. Everybody laughs. Everybody —

except Charley. He bends down and helps the moron pick up the spilled food. Charley sees in the moron the kind of person he once was.

Empathy. Putting oneself in another's place. Charity. We are here to help one another, not to pull each other down. Also this lesson: our greatest weakness can become our greatest strength. Our very difficulty in mastering a subject will force us to greater effort to explain that subject to somebody else who does not know. In turn, we clarify the subject to ourselves, we develop our power of elucidation, of expression. Our shyness and timidity will make us more approachable to others as shy and timid as we.

In Ateneo de Davao we are fortunate not to have racial or religious discrimination. Chinese and Muslims are treated equally with Filipinos and Christians. To show our students, however, that such social injustice does exist, we study Gilda Cordero Fernando's "Sunburn," about a newly-married Filipino couple in America who are refused the rental of an apartment because they are not white. The story ends on a note of irony: the Statue of Liberty towering in the mist, the words on her door proclaiming:

"... Here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand a mighty woman with a torch . . . From her beacon hand the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. "Keep your ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cried she, with silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . ."

Another story of racial discrimination, but with a delightful twist, is Somerset Maugham's "Mr. Know-All." The narrator is a British snob, the proper English gentleman, supremely secure in the sense of his own security. To his dismay, the Englishman finds himself berthed in the same cabin with a Mr. Kelada, a Levantine from, probably, Lebanon. He is exasperated with Mr. Kelada's aggressive *bonhomie*, his air of knowing everything. One evening a discussion arises between Mr. Kelada and Mr. Ramsay of the American Consular Service. Mr. Kelada claims he would know a real pearl when he sees one. Mr. Ramsay challenges Mr. Kelada, on a bet, to assess his wife's pearl necklace. Sure of his judgment, Mr. Kelada is about to declare its genuineness when he sees the terror in Mrs. Ramsay's eyes. He admits his mistake and pays the hundred-dollar bet. Later, an envelope, with a hundred-dollar note, is passed under their cabin door.

"Were the pearls real?" asked the narrator.

"If I had a pretty little wife," said Mr. Kelada, "I shouldn't let her spend a year in New York while I stayed at Kobe."

"At that moment," confessed the Englishman, "I did not entirely dislike Mr. Kelada."

So there is something good, even in the worst of us. Or, in more complicated prose: "Within the most violent and degenerate man there remains some element of decency and tenderness, some aspiration toward the kind of life and the set of values which he has, apparently, repudiated." This is the theme of that sentimental short story, Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" — about the regeneration of a whole mining camp by an Indian baby. The same theme is developed in Robert Louis Stevenson in his essay "*Pulvis Et Umbra*."

Perhaps we can pause here for some quiet reflection. Let us try to recall our past experience as teachers. Let us try to remember the faces of the students we had taught. We have no trouble remembering the bright ones, the pretty ones, even the naughty ones. It is those who were quiet, so quiet we hardly knew

they were there; the diffident, the tremulous, the helpless, the hopeless. What ever became of them? Did we ever really try to find out what went on inside those heads, what problems plagued them in the family, in school? Did we make an honest effort to dig out the real gold hidden in the dark recesses of each one of them, buried beneath the rubble of their mediocrities?

We now take up the stricter definition of the term, "social awareness", as the consciousness of, the concern for, the unfortunate or the marginalized; the awareness of the unjust social structure responsible for their oppression and the determination to dismantle them.

There are a few stories in our literature course that help freshman students acquire this awareness. "The Washerwoman's Day" by Harriette L. Simpson, for example. In it, a little white girl tells how their Negro laundry woman dies of pneumonia contracted after taking off her shoes and scrubbing the kitchen barefooted. A group of white women bring roses, give six of them to Laurie Mae, the dead woman's daughter, feeling very self-righteous about it. After everybody has left the cemetery, the little girl sees Laurie Mae take the white roses one by one, throw them in the mud and push them out of sight with her foot and rake the mud over them. The life of her mother, this bundle of an illegitimate child in her arms — all these to be paid for with six white roses! It is the same inner rage against an unjust social structure that drives the gardener Elias in Luis V. Teodoro, Jr.'s "The Adversary" to lead a mob through flood and rain against the Secretary, their adversary; that prompts Sofia in the movie, "The Color Purple", to answer "Hell, no!" when asked by a white woman whether she would like to work for her.

We also touch on the poverty aspect of social injustice, so often exploited in our Tagalog movies. "Because We Are So Poor." by Juan Rulfo, gives us the story of a small boy worried because the cow which his father has given to his twelve-year old sister, Tacha, has been carried away by the river. Now her chance of marrying is slim and she may wind up a whore, like her two other sisters.

"Hunger in Barok" by N.V.M. Gonzales narrates an incident in Mindoro during the two or three months of the year when there is half-famine. Pare Crispin, a tenant; tells his landlord, Mang Cesar, that he is thinking of leaving his *kaingin* because of drought. Shyly he asks for some rice. Mang Cesar replies he has no rice to give, except seed rice. Pare Crispin accepts it. Next morning Mang Cesar visits Crispin's hut, expecting to find him and his wife pounding the seed rice for food. Instead, he discovers the hut empty. The entire family is up in the clearing, planting the seed rice. We could point out the spirit of self-sacrifice latent in even the humblest of our people. We could observe that the poor are capable of giving up the enjoyment of an immediate satisfaction for the sake of an ultimate, greater good.

This story should remind us of the present hunger in Negros. Give a situation on the state of the sugar industry in Negros and ask the students to bring to class newspaper clippings and magazine articles on the plight of the sugar workers.. Here, for example, is a poem by Alexia Gunther Bowley, an American church worker-organizer who had spent some time in Negros:

## A QUESTION OF FOOD

The soldier demanded santol, langka, all the eggs.  
 They took a short break in the feasting to murder him.  
 They tore open his empty stomach  
     laying him among the sugar cane  
     that he couldn't touch in life.  
 They tore up the bananas and cassavas  
     planted perilously by mothers  
     of empty children  
     in the eyelash of land  
     between the fence and the river.  
     Her eyes were not empty,  
     there were tears enough to  
     fill the river,  
     to bloat the empty stomachs  
     of the children.  
 They were afraid that determined men  
     in rugged red would fake the  
     fine finished wood table and turn it over,  
     sending platter and plates of savory meat  
     crashing gravy on the finished floor  
     for the dog who already  
     ate meat every day.

Sometime in their first or second year, our students undergo an exposure program. They are sent to live with a poor family where they learn the hardships of life at first hand. I tell them about my own exposure in Negros some years ago when for two weeks, with two other Jesuits, I moved from *hacienda* to *hacienda*, often on the sly, to get to know the lives of the sugar cane workers. My other exposure was in Navotas, Rizal, with a Dutch and a Hungarian Jesuit. For six days we lived with a family of five in a shanty, 10 feet by 10 feet, over a swamp. We were in the midst of the action when the Metrocom came to dismantle the hovels and the squatters fought them with rocks. The confrontation ended when we were drenched by the water hoses of the fire department. Although in our school, formal feedback from the students' exposure experiences is processed by the Ateneo Student Exposure Program (ASEP), the students can share those experiences with their classmates and thus enrich everybody's social awareness.

More insidious than hunger or poverty is the evil of materialism or consumerism, because it saps the spirituality of the young without their even being aware of it. The craving for material success, glorified in such TV serials as "Dynasty" and "Falconcrest", disorients our youth from the goals we have set for them — being men and women for others; dedicating themselves to the ministry of their fellowmen, service to the nation.

D.H. Laurence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner", a fantasy, underscored the insanity of this money-madness and makes an unforgettable impact upon the reader. The protagonist is Paul, a boy "emancipated from a nursery governess" yet "too big for a rocking-horse". He is concerned over his mother's constant need for money, her lack of luck. So he rides his rocking-horse "to where there is luck." The rocking-horse empowers him to predict the winners of horse races. He wins money on the bets he places, which he later gives to his mother. But the luck exacts a murderous toll — Paul pays for it with his life.

The love of money is the root of all evil. The love of what money can buy can make a man lose his soul. This is the theme of F. Sionil Jose's "The God-Stealer". Philip Latak, an Ifugao corrupted by the soft life of the city, returns to the Mountain Province. With him is Sam Christie, an American Peace Corps volunteer, on his way back to the States and hunting for a souvenir. Philip steals his grandfather's god for Sam. The theft breaks the old man's heart, he dies. Philip realizes what he has done, stays to carve another god.

Shortly before this, in a conversation with the Reverend Doone, who managed the Mission, Sam Christie had asked, "Can a man lose his soul?"

"You have seen examples," Reverend Doone smiled wanly. "In the city — people corrupted by easy living, the pleasures of the senses and the flesh. The mass corruption that is seeping into government and everything. A generation of soulless men is growing up and dictating the future . . ."

"How can one who loses his soul regain it?" Sam came back with sudden life.

"It takes a cataclysm, something tragic to knock a man back to his wits, to make him realize his loss . . ."

For Philip Latak, that cataclysm was the death of his grandfather. What will it be for the countless young men and women who are losing their souls to consumerism? Perhaps "soul" is too theological a word to bandy around. Substitute for it "ideals," "integrity", "Holy Grail", "altruism" — whatever it is that means selflessness, dedication, generosity, service.

The false values of mass media. The tinsel virtues canonized by the latest song hits. "Vanity of vanities — all is vanity!" That seems to be the message. And nowhere is it more strikingly driven home than in the oft-anthologized story of Ivan Bunin, "The Gentleman from San Francisco". The protagonist, 58 years old, a retired American millionaire, reminds us of the rich fool in the Lord's parable who said: "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:19-20) The Gentleman from San Francisco dies of a heart attack in the library-room of a hotel in Capri during a world pleasure tour. People no longer care for his wealth or his social position now that he is dead. His body is transferred from his sumptuous room to a cubby-hole; it is stuffed into an oblong box for English soda-water and shipped back to America in the hold of an ocean liner.

The Gentleman from San Francisco makes a fitting contrast to "The Doctor of Lennox," the chief character in an inspiring story by A.J. Cronin. Carry is the Doctor of Lennox — in his youth, crippled, stuttering, poor, but in the end a force

permeating the whole countryside, wise and gentle, blending the best of science and nature, unsparing, undemanding, loving this work he had been born to do, conscious of the place that he had won in the affections of the people, a man who had refused defeat and won through to victory at last.

These are the social values I try to teach in my classes. As to the methods employed, several come to mind: (1) The Interview Method, in which students are asked to interview certain people coming from different social strata. A freshman student from Ateneo de Naga, where I taught for a while, wrote a term paper based on her interviews with prostitutes in the city. (2) Family Interview,

in which students interview their mother to get the family income and expenses. (3) Role-Playing, in which a real life-situation is presented to the class. This situation may be taken from a short story not yet studied. Students are given roles and asked to resolve the conflict in class. (4) Talk show, in which four to five students are chosen as TV guest panelists to discuss the morality or theme of a story.

In the final analysis, however, it is not any one method that will implant social awareness in the minds of the students. It is the teacher himself. If the teacher is a man possessed with a mission, if he is an apostle caught up with the love of God and neighbor, if he is a person who believes that teaching is a ministry, a service, and who lives not for himself but for others, we will not have to worry about communicating social awareness to his students. From him, "it will flame out, like shining from shook foil," gathering "to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed," as Hopkins would say.

Love always does.