

## **What Movies Teach Us About Teaching: Excellence and Maleficence in The Classroom**



### **I Remarkable Teachers**

Most of us have had at least one teacher over the years who stood out as having made a profound difference in our lives. Film portrayals of such teachers help crystallize for us the qualities that make for pedagogical success in the real world. The following analysis of a quartet of remarkable cinematic teachers examines what makes some of them wonderful, as well as how otherwise terrific teachers can be monstrous. Two of the educators are exemplary in their ability to reach students who resist and doubt them. They are able to win over the reluctant students by dint of their willingness to change their pedagogical perspectives and adapt to the needs and interests of their pupils. To do this, the exemplary instructors must possess an array of virtues, ranging from openness and responsiveness to humility and courage.

To highlight these virtues through contrast, I will discuss a pair of teachers in the movies who captivate their students but who are ultimately destructive. They are not bad or weak teachers in a conventional sense; they are passionate, knowledgeable and charismatic. These alluring qualities make them more dangerous than run-of-the-mill or ineffective instructors. The harmful teachers serve as revealing foils for the ones whose instruction

is truly edifying.

Besides their strong character depictions, the films are chosen for the symmetries they provide. Both pedagogical pairs, constructive and destructive, include a man and woman from films both recent and classical. Genuine instructional excellence is displayed by Katherine Watson (in Mike Newell's *Mona Lisa Smile*, 2003) and Mark Thackeray (in *To Sir, with Love*, James Clavell, 1967). The flamboyant but destructive teachers are Terence Fletcher (in Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash*, 2014) and Jean Brodie (in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Ronald Neame, 1969). Analyzing the qualities of this group of extraordinary teachers necessitates eliding some important plot details and relationships among the films' characters. Brief summaries should provide sufficient context to appreciate the virtues and vices that help account for the actions of the teachers and the trajectories of their stories' plots. The focus will be on the more contemporary characters, Watson and Fletcher, treating Thackeray and Brodie as providing "supporting evidence" for my core claims.<sup>1</sup>

Although Mark Thackeray (Sidney Poitier as "Sir") is thrown into a rowdy, working class school in London and Katherine Watson (Julia Roberts) is a newly appointed art history lecturer in a posh women's college, they face similar challenges. Each must contend with students who are skeptical of them: their person, background, and abilities. Thackeray must deal with pupils from a lower socio-economic and educational class than he, whereas Katherine Watson's problems are the reverse. In order to overcome the social distances separating them from their students, these exemplary teachers must jettison their prepared curricula to respond to the instructional needs of their students. In modifying their approaches, Watson and Thackeray are able to reach their pupils and win them over.

Exploring the strengths of character that enable the pair to navigate their turbulent classrooms so successfully shows what makes them exceptional, while the deep flaws of otherwise charismatic teachers explain why these individuals fail their students in such monumental ways. Terence Fletcher (J.K. Simmons) teaches jazz at a renown music school and Jean Brodie (Maggie Smith) is in charge of adolescent girls at a private school in Scotland.

Both are passionate about the arts (music and painting, respectively), and genuinely wish to share their passion with their students. Similar vices, however, keep them from being the fine teachers they believe themselves to be.

Fletcher and Brodie are egocentric individuals, attuned only to their own views, values and needs rather than those of their students. The students exist more as a means of self-gratification than as worthwhile in themselves. This arrogance is the basis for their other vices, and teaching failures. Because they are so sure of themselves, they never engage in self-examination or question their teaching methodology, as both Watson and Thackeray do. As a result, neither Fletcher nor Brodie truly pays attention to what students think or feel. Instead of eliciting the views or interests of their students, the teachers impose their opinions and tastes on them. Reveling in their considerable authority, Fletcher and Brodie both propel students to their death--the most dramatic extreme of their unintentional harmfulness. The varieties of harm they do are painfully ironic, since both see themselves as helping their students to excel.

## **II Virtue and Vice in the Classroom**

The success of the excellent teachers under discussion rests on a handful of virtues: openness, responsiveness, humility and a bit of courage. As noted, Watson and Thackeray realize early on that they need to scrap their teaching plans in order to benefit their pupils. Sir sees that his lower class charges need lessons in life--how to function effectively in an adult world of work and non-violent interaction. On her first day, Watson discovers that the privileged girls have already mastered the art history book that was to have been read over the entire course. Momentarily abashed, she soon improvises challenges to their prejudiced thinking about art. Adaptive behavior is called for in several ways: when students question a teacher's view; when a particular strategy or technique is not working; and when a new idea occurs to the teacher or emerges in classroom interaction.

But such adaptation begins with openness. We cannot modify our behavior towards others to constructive effect unless we first perceive how

these individuals are reacting to our initial actions. Openness entails a kind of attention, one especially alive to the experience of the individuals with whom we are interacting. Nel Noddings portrays the attentiveness needed for caring teaching as “receptive attention.”<sup>2</sup> Teachers with this virtue habitually set aside their own interests and preconceptions in order to understand what their students are saying and thinking, as well as what they care about. Ideas about what should be taught do not keep these educators from making themselves accessible to their students’ interests and feelings. In the words of Gabriel Marcel, open teachers are “disposable:” they make themselves available to their students.<sup>3</sup>

The satisfactions that follow from such openness distinguish exemplary teachers from those who fall short of the mark. The intrinsic reward of instruction that issues from receptive attention is found in the very responses of the students themselves: it is internal to the instructional interaction.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the manner in which their students appreciate the efforts of the teacher fulfills the promise of the teacher’s attention to them. The teacher needs no outside or extrinsic payoff (such as student scores or awards) because her openness reaps the immediate delight of students wholeheartedly engaged with what she offers.

As suggested, openness needs to be accompanied by responsiveness: a readiness to act on what is perceived as the needs, successes, and problems of the students. The responsive teacher seizes upon what her openness has disclosed to tailor her behavior to her students’ perplexities and enthusiasms. Her receptive attention leads to educationally efficacious action. Openness and responsiveness are, therefore, mutually reinforcing. The openness is animated by the readiness to respond to what is perceived; the eagerness to best educate her students motivates the openness. Openness without auxiliary responsiveness would be little more than curiosity or fact-gathering, and responsiveness without openness would be guesswork, as the teacher would have no experiential basis on which to shape her behavior to the concrete demands of the actual students before her.

To take student experience and interest seriously, and be willing to give it priority over one’s own, requires humility. Both Watson and Thackeray

are quick to see that student reactions to their previous mode of instruction do not bode well for future success. To realize that they must change their strategy almost before it's begun requires humility. Humility disposes us to appreciate and respect what is valuable in a world that exists independent of ourselves. As Sara Ruddick describes it, "Humility is a metaphysical attitude one takes toward a world beyond one's control."<sup>5</sup> People with humility admire human achievement and natural grandeur; they are humbled by these things. Thomas Hill astutely views humility as "an attitude which measures the importance of things independently of their relation to oneself."<sup>6</sup> Nancy Snow claims that humility leads us to recognize our human limitations, while experiencing worthwhile features of the world that extend beyond us. The emotionally appropriate reaction to such realization is feeling suitably appreciative of the human or natural good.<sup>7</sup>

On the positive side, humility includes a realistic awareness of our strengths, as well as of our limitations. Norvin Richards cogently argues that the absence of self-inflation in humility does not demand a false, denigrated perspective on oneself. For this reason, writes Richards, humility includes an accurate assessment of oneself, coherent enough "to resist temptations to overestimate oneself and one's accomplishments."<sup>8</sup> Accurate positive self-regard is crucial to the success of Watson and Thackeray, as they must have faith in their own talents to tackle their pedagogical tasks with new and untried agendas.

Of the two vicious extremes with which humility is paired by Aristotle, arrogance (rather than self-deprecation) is more pertinent to understanding the ways in which Fletcher and Brodie short-change their students. Arrogant individuals expect other people to defer to them, and have a dismissive attitude toward the opinions of others, while exalting their own views.<sup>9</sup> Arrogance involves a sense of entitlement from, and disdain for, others. As Valerie Tiberius and John Walker note of Henry Kissinger, the arrogant person believes that other people should drop what they are doing, ignore the needs of others, and serve him.

But Tiberius and Walker do not interpret the arrogant person's sense of superiority as a moral one; here, I think they are mistaken. The belief

in their own “human excellence” that puffs up arrogant people is either equivalent to moral superiority, or implies it. Their excessive moral self-evaluation, then, leads these individuals to “arrogate” rights or privileges to themselves that are not truly theirs. Kissinger believed that “students should consider themselves lucky to see him,”<sup>10</sup> and this is precisely the attitude Fletcher and Brodie express in their dealings with their students (and other teachers, in Brodie’s case). These teachers pay little attention to what their students need or want, nor do they question their pedagogical methods.

Along with humility, it takes some courage to depart from what at first seems like a viable instructional approach. As the willingness to take reasonable risks for the sake of valuable ends, courage requires enough confidence to overcome one’s fears or reservations. After all, re-envisioning and then revising a teaching perspective and syllabus is risky; one risks scuttling a large investment in time and energy for an uncertain or unsatisfying outcome. The teacher must then have enough faith in his or her resourcefulness to take the plunge into uncharted waters. Something like pedagogical humility and courage are needed for Watson and Thackeray to first identify the reasons for the unpromising response of the students, and then adapt to their needs and interests.

Openness and courage are also at work here, the second signature behavior of excellent teachers. Besides adapting to their students’ needs and interests, exceptional teachers are adept at questioning. Openness is needed in asking good questions of students, because questions arise in response to what is going on with them, including how they react to what has already transpired. Questions open an inquiry, and seek understanding. The teacher tries to get students to see how and why their understanding is incomplete, including their self-understanding: to question how well they know their own opinions. A productive question probes, penetrates the thinking and feeling of the students and begets further, worthwhile, thought and feeling.

Asking good questions also aims to help students learn how to formulate their own questions. When self-formulated, questions put students in a dual relationship with themselves: they are both negatively and positively

oriented toward themselves. They are first aware that there is a gap or deficiency in their understanding; but, the awareness of this inadequacy is positive, as it initiates a remedial quest by means of a fresh question. Grappling with the challenge of formulating a productive question, students begin to see something of why they do not understand. Provoking the self-reflexive relationship of students to themselves and helping them to begin their own intellectual quests is part of what Socrates means when he describes his educational work as midwifery.<sup>11</sup>

The teachers role as midwife (in prompting students to self-reflection and self-questioning) is amplified upon in Martin Heidegger's conception of the dialectic between teacher and student. He writes, "Teaching is a giving... but what is offered in teaching is not the learnable, for the student is merely instructed to take for himself what he already has... the taking of what one already has is a self-giving and is experienced as such... The most difficult learning is to come to know all the way what we already know."<sup>12</sup> When students formulate questions that illuminate an inquiry, their self-reflection enables them to draw upon what they grasp partially or obscurely to generate a more complete, clear conception. The gifted teacher is able to discern the state of her students' partial, occluded thinking and, like a good midwife, facilitate their labor toward greater comprehension.

Unless the teacher is truly paying attention to what the students are experiencing and expressing, she will not have a vital basis for posing an energizing question. Instead, she will have to fall back on a preconceived, packaged set of questions that may not speak to the concrete needs or preparedness of these particular students in their present situation. Asking evocative questions also takes some courage on the teacher's part, because she do not know how (or whether) the students will respond. Teachers risk having the question fall flat, and also risk being surprised, caught without a ready response to the students' reaction to the question. Questions venture into unknown territory, and teachers have to be courageous enough to sally forth intrepidly, without the security of a scripted answer. Of course, some questions will be fairly routine; however, insightful teachers are able to generate unanticipated questions, improvising on the spot in the face of

student perplexity, and the questions in turn evoked from them!

The best efforts of the destructive pair of teachers are sabotaged by the vices that correspond to this cluster of virtues. It never occurs to Fletcher and Brodie to change their teaching methods to better suit their students, because their perception of the students is so thoroughly skewed by their self-absorption. They rarely solicit opinions or judgments of taste from their students because they only place stock in their own taste, in what is valuable in music (jazz) and art (painting) respectively.

For both Fletcher and Brodie, teaching is a performance. Interaction with students is more about securing the adulation and power they crave than about encouraging experimentation and discovery. Free to impose their wills on their students, these extremely talented but morally deficient teachers are actually insulated from recognizing failure or taking genuine risk. Though Brodie mouths the (etymologically-grounded) idea of education as a leading out, her approach is to put in: to put her ideas and tastes into her girls (who are rendered the “crème de la crème” thereby). She wants to reproduce herself in everyone around her, as emblemized in the portraits painted by her former lover, Teddy Lloyd. All of them bear her likeness, at once humorous and macabre, whether adults, children or animals!

Both Fletcher and Brodie are imposing and intimidating, and cut dashing figures. Brodie carries herself regally, glamorously attired, while Fletcher dresses in a black muscle tee-shirt. Where Brodie airily dismisses views that diverge from her own, Fletcher curtly corrects his young musicians, while making a bicep-bulging fist. The title *Whiplash* explicitly refers to a jazz chart that is played in the film; however, it can also be interpreted as describing Fletcher’s pedagogical *modus operandi*: he verbally whiplashes students, demanding to know, e.g. whether the tempo at which they were playing was too slow or too fast, behind or ahead of the correct beat.

The egocentrism of Brodie and Fletcher is revealed in their signature speeches. Brodie generously talks of giving her prime to her girls, reflecting her self-delusion. Fletcher tells of a young Charlie Parker being brutally pushed to greatness, thereby justifying his own brand of trial by fire. They reinforce these speeches with proprietary treatment of the arts to which

they are respectively devoted. Brodie haughtily brushes aside a student's opinion of Da Vinci as the finest painter by asserting that it is Giotto, which is her favorite. Fletcher repeatedly reprimands students by intoning, "Not *my tempo*," as if he owned the beat.

As mesmerizing and inspiring as Fletcher and Brodie are, they are damaging teachers, the more so for their charismatic passion. Their lack of pedagogical humility and personal courage blinds them to the interests and needs their students actually have, rather than those they distortedly perceive or project.<sup>13</sup> A generous interpretation views the self-absorbed pair as believing that they truly care about their students and are acting for the sake of their education. On this interpretation, Fletcher and Brodie are simply mistaken, unable to see past the exalted conceptions they have of themselves.

### **III Loss and Betrayal**

It may be significant that the effective teachers we are examining are both new to their schools; whereas, Fletcher and Brodie have become virtual institutions, with brightly burnished reputations. Humility and self-examination might come more readily to those who are less secure in their ability or place. Both Watson and Sir are subject to student scrutiny and challenge that neither Fletcher nor Brodie have to face. As a result, Fletcher and Brodie wield a power over students that exacerbates their vices and contributes to the deaths of their pupils.

Echoing her own authoritarian predilections, Brodie champions the dictatorial regime in the Spanish civil war, encouraging the least accomplished girl in her set, Mary MacGregor (Jane Carr), to join her brother in the armed conflict. After Mary is killed, Brodie is admonished by her most perspicacious student, Sandy (Pamela Franklin), that Brodie did not even realize that Mary's brother fought on the side of the Resistance--not the fascistic forces supported by Brodie. Disaffected because Brodie has slighted her in projecting futures for the girls in her clique, Sandy denounces Brodie to the dowdy Headmistress, who has long chafed at Brodie's high-handed treatment of herself and other faculty. Brodie has finally given the

Head sufficient grounds for dismissal.

Brodie is unconventional in ways that seem to express a genuine dedication to her students. She organizes educational trips, regular tea parties, and excursions to the country estate of her sometime beau, Gordon Lowther (Gordon Jackson), the music teacher. The girls bask in the extra-curricular favors, and readily follow Brodie's lead in the classroom when she substitutes her own agenda for the school's more traditional curriculum. They hang on her every word and thrill to her personal stories of Italian vacations and romantic loss. Her real motivation is to ensure an adoring audience for her performances.

Brodie's demise at the Marcia Blaine School for Girls is foreshadowed by her inability to keep stringing along Lowther. Desiring the formal union that Brodie refuses to enter into, he proposes to a more suitable faculty member. Brodie is taken aback when she discovers she is unable to keep Mr. Lowther in tow, just as she is stunned to learn of Sandy's alleged betrayal.

Besides revealing Brodie's role in Mary MacGregor's tragic death, Sandy has also usurped Brodie's place with her former lover, Teddy Lloyd (Robert Stephens)--the art instructor and painter. Sandy thereby demonstrates a greater flair for the boudoir than the more conventionally pretty student whom Brodie officially anointed "the great lover." When she sees the portrait he has been painting of her, Sandy recoils and mocks Lloyd, as it resembles all his work in duplicating Brodie's face. The motif of a star student betraying and then usurping the fabled teacher also serves as the climax of *Whiplash*.

The two rebellious students are arguably their teacher's best: motivated and smart, talented and adoring. Because they feel under-appreciated, overlooked, or misused, they are emboldened to blow the whistle on the teacher they had once loved and wished, above all, to please. Where Sandy takes Brodie's place in the bedroom before she exposes the teacher's fatal influence on Mary, Andrew Neyman (Miles Teller) takes over a band competition after denouncing Fletcher during his school's inquiry into the suicide of a former student of Fletcher's.

Although we root for him, there are unattractive aspects of Andrew's

character. His drive leads him to ignore or shunt aside important moral dimensions of life. For example, his ambition and haughtiness prompt him to callousness with his cousins at the dinner table; he ends a budding romance because “he wants to be great” and has no time for the sweet girl; and, drumming so intensely that he bleeds, he berates himself as a “piece of shit.” Fletcher invites Andrew to play with his first tier band and although he tells him to relax and have fun, Fletcher’s approach to instruction seems designed to create anxiety. He rarely praises musicians for playing well, never suggests creative alternatives, and does not solicit the musical interpretations or preferences of his pupils. Whereas gifted teachers ask questions to promote understanding and self-exploration, Fletcher’s are intended to browbeat and humiliate.

He asks whether Neyman is off-tempo by “rushing” or “dragging,” “rushing” or “dragging,” and even slaps the boy’s face to punctuate his interrogative torture. Fletcher’s demeanor may motivate, even inspire, but it also intimidates. This is evident when he pits three drummers against one another in an effort to please him and win the top slot in the studio band. When he chides a student for being off, he makes a slowly curling fist, and proclaims, “Not my tempo.” The ominous list of Fletcher’s possessives underscores how much of his teaching is about himself rather than the students. Besides the repeated beat of “not my tempo,” we hear: “my band;” “my part” (only on loan to you); “my drumset;” and most importantly, “my reputation.” The entrancing but hurtful pedants come before their students.

Where Brodie is too close, too intimate with her girls, Fletcher is too aloof--a god delivering the divine word on jazz from on high. He tells two stories, one to justify his pedagogical principle of pushing students to the edge, and the other to show how his interpersonal sensitivity complements his musical acumen. For the magnificent saxophonist Charlie Parker to become great, he first had to be humiliated by his band leader throwing a (drum) cymbal at him, and by being laughed off the stage. He then fought back with hundreds of hours of work to become the legendary “Bird.” Fletcher argues that Parker simply refused to be discouraged by this rough treatment; had he quit, obviously, he would not have had what it took to

excel. Fletcher's analysis tautologically justifies the way he rides his students relentlessly. Any student who cannot rise above the denigrating treatment must lack the necessary fortitude. Only the strong thrive.

The Parker story and the pedagogical principle it illustrates insulate Fletcher from failure as a teacher; courage is never demanded of him. Students who cannot flourish under his merciless tutelage were always destined to fail anyway. By definition, exceptional students will be spurred on to succeed by Fletcher's barrages of mockery and criticism. Like Miss Brodie, Fletcher judges and categorizes his students from on high. But that is not how he understands himself; he sees himself as a kindly despot who can reach out to the talented student left overlooked by other faculty.

Fletcher pauses before one practice session with his students to tell the story of Sean Casey. Casey had been struggling, and was discouraged by other teachers, but Fletcher saw his drive. He gave Casey a chance and pushed him to great success, eventually with Wynton Marsalis's exalted band. In somber tones, Fletcher tells his students that Casey recently died in a car accident. He appears all choked up and says, "I'm sorry;" however, we later discover that Fletcher has lied. Not only did the boy commit suicide, but his parents blame Fletcher for the emotional problems that led to his death. As with Sandy's undoing of Miss Brodie, Andrew's testimony to his (former) school's administration about Fletcher results in the firing of the authoritarian teacher.

What precipitates Andrew's repudiation of the iconic jazz master, as well as his own expulsion from the school, is a harrowing sequence of events. Late for a major competition, Andrew gets into a serious auto accident but tries gamely to play through his bloody injuries. Seeing that he cannot even hold the drumsticks, Fletcher dispassionately tells him that he is done. Andrew snaps, launches into a profanity-laced tirade, and physically attacks Fletcher on the concert stage.

Sometime later, Andrew runs into Fletcher, who is playing piano at a jazz club. Andrew's testimony has gotten Fletcher fired, and he has set aside his drum kit. But Fletcher's amiable conversation at the club persuades Andrew to join a new band the teacher has organized for yet another

musical competition. Andrew sees a second chance, a reprieve from his jazz exile. Yet once again he is deceived by Fletcher, who misleads him into thinking that he will be playing pieces from his former school band, only to announce on stage that they will be using charts with which he is completely unfamiliar. Like the great Charlie Parker, Andrew is run off the stage, after having been informed vindictively by Fletcher that he always knew of the boy's betrayal.

Like Parker, Andrew returns--not a year later, but immediately. He strides back to the drum set and interrupts Fletcher's address to the audience by commencing to play and announcing the tune to the band, "*Caravan*, I'll cue you." Fletcher is taken aback. Approaching Andrew, he growls, "I'm gonna gouge out your fucking eyes." Andrew plays as if possessed, bringing the whole band enthusiastically along with him. When Fletcher asks him what he is doing, Andrew replies, "I'll cue you," and Fletcher starts nodding and conducting Andrew. The apparently feel-good ending features Andrew enthralling fellow musicians and audience, and eliciting spirited cooperation from the initially irate Fletcher.

We might thereby conclude that Fletcher's abrasive style has indeed whipped Andrew to greatness. Back at the club, Fletcher had fleshed out the Joe Jones-Charlie Parker story and confided to Andrew: "I was there [at the Shaffer Conservatory] to push people beyond what's expected of them." Andrew's defiance, and star turn at the end, can be seen to vindicate Fletcher's pedagogical philosophy. However, there are several aspects of the narrative that suggest the opposite: that the talented boy has triumphed despite Fletcher's imperious and devious manner. First, Andrew's commitment and zest for the music certainly intimate that he did not require manipulation and brow-beating. He plays the drums ferociously, from the opening to closing scenes, even when his intensity bloodies his hands.

Fletcher's lying and manipulation are what makes his philosophy and approach suspect. His lie about how former student Sean Casey died is a basis for doubting the rest of his account of his relationship with the student. Fletcher also deceives Andrew about which jazz pieces will be played at the competition, to which the teacher lures the boy he views as betraying him.

Indeed, Fletcher is willing to sabotage the band's performance, and the professional prospects of its members, for the sake of exacting revenge on Andrew. Then, too, when Andrew returns to the stage and begins playing, Fletcher is not gratified by the success of his demanding, demeaning strategy. On the contrary, he is furious with Andrew and threatens him hyperbolically with eye-gouging.

Fletcher's strategy, to ruthlessly cull extraordinary musicians from the herd, certainly leaves the less-than-great students in the lurch. They will not learn much from him. The ploy about producing a jazz giant is more about gratifying Fletcher's ego than about helping students discern greater depths in their music, and in themselves. Finally, the examples of the inspiring but nurturing teachers that follow provide further reason to think that Andrew's talent might well have blossomed without the demeaning approach of Fletcher.

#### **IV Humility, Adaptation and Rapport**

In her first day of teaching art history at Wellesley College in *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), Katherine Watson is overwhelmed by her precocious and privileged students. Presenting art slides to the class, Watson is hit with a battery of expert answers as the girls have already read the semester's entire text. This display of expertise by her students reinforces Watson's insecurity in tackling the prestigious school with her modest credentials. By the next class, however, Watson shows her resiliency and ability to adapt on the fly. Offering slides of art that is not in the book, she catches the girls off-balance, encouraging them to think for themselves--outside the box, and the book. Unlike Brodie, Watson genuinely wants to hear what the girls think and feel. She shows her students "Carcass," by Soutine--an unsettling, side of beef with intense reds against a dark background. Asking, "Is it any good?" Watson assures them that there are no wrong answers. The class starts giving their opinions: "It's not art;" "I think it's grotesque;" "There's something aggressive about it, and erotic." One student asks, "Is there a rule against art being grotesque?" And another wonders whether there are standards.

Watson improvises a new syllabus in response to her students' hyper-preparation. They know books, and how to accept what they are told is good, but can they think and judge for themselves? Amidst the energetic class interaction, Watson prompts the girls to consider basic questions: what is art; what makes art good or bad; who are the experts of taste? For the rest of the semester, Watson will urge them to open their minds, about art and about themselves, especially about their traditional roles as women. For Watson, art and feminism are entwined; the iconoclastic power of art resonates with the movement to liberate women from the social norms that stifle their freedom and creativity.

Watson's commitment to helping her students rely on their own experience and taste emerges again when she gives a star student a C for a paper on Brueghel because the girl did not give her own opinion but "referenced an expert." Yet Watson does more than ask Joan (Julia Stiles) to think for herself. She also gives help and direction, "Brueghel was a storyteller. Find the stories. Break them down into smaller pieces. You might actually enjoy it." Joan is pleasantly surprised that her teacher is giving her "another chance," because, for Watson, learning and discovery are more important than assigning grades.

Watson soon campaigns to have Joan apply to law school. Although she eventually chooses to forgo Yale in favor of domesticity, the young woman insists that she has not unreflectively settled for homemaking. Joan's subsequent defense of her decision against Watson's disappointment discloses the narrowness of the teacher's feminism. She criticizes Watson for stereotyping housewives as people who do not use their minds, and lack depth or serious interests, reminding the teacher that she had said the girls could be anything they wanted. This is a form of educational success, as much as if Joan had followed Watson's lead and pursued a career in law. As with Thackeray, Watson wants interaction in school to make a difference in the rest of her students' lives. When formal education is successful, the lessons learned carry well beyond the classroom.

Questioning Joan about her life and career is natural for Watson, who questions her initial teaching plan, a marriage proposal and then, finally,

whether she wishes to return to Wellesley when invited back (albeit with stringent conditions). In contrast, Fletcher and Brodie never question their life plans, teaching methods, or the impact they have on their students, even when their actions do serious harm.

Watson takes her class on an outing to an artist's loft. Entranced, she approaches a painting by Jackson Pollock that is on display. Her students are apprehensive, lacking an authoritative framework within which to view the ground-breaking work (the film is set in mid-fifties), and voice the hope that they will not have to write a paper on the expansive canvas. Watson again counsels direct experience: "Do yourself a favor. Stop talking and look." This reinforces her message that the girls must trust themselves and put aside concern with school assignments or grades. Watson tells the girls, "You're not required to write a paper. You're not even required to like it. You are required to consider it." We see her students really looking at line, color, texture, layers of paint, brushstrokes, having recourse to their own experiences and reflections, rather than to authority and traditions of taste. The students will later debate the meaning and value of DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, relying on their own responses rather than well-regarded texts.

Following Soren Kierkegaard, we should understand Watson as working for her students' edification. Kierkegaard understands edification as building up or "up-building," from its root meaning in "edifice."<sup>14</sup> Where Kierkegaard construes the building up as promoting *agape* (i.e. Christian love, as distinct from erotic love or emotional affection), exemplary teachers develop their students' ability to think for themselves and make decisions of taste themselves. In keeping with the architectural figure, Watson and Thackeray try to provide a solid foundation and support for their students' efforts at making sense of the world, and of themselves.

Unlike Fletcher, Watson offers direction and insight about the art she loves. Discussing Van Gogh, she tells the girls that "he painted what he felt, not what he saw." Where Fletcher never indicates possible variations in performance, or tells his students what to listen for in the jazz, Watson suggests that Van Gogh's brushstrokes "seem to make the night sky move." She proceeds to note that contemporary packages of paint-by-the-numbers

of Van Gogh's work purport to make everyone artists. We see the irony in the commercialization and standardization of an artist who simply could not conform to traditional artistic standards. Watson seems to be implying that the artist is a role model for the students, who also have the choice of whether to conform to what other people expect of them. (Watson is shortly delighted when the girls' give her their own, idiosyncratic versions of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers-by-the-numbers*.)

The long-simmering feud between the tradition-bound student, Betty (Kirsten Dunst), and Watson erupts when the student attacks Watson in the school newspaper for being against marriage. Watson rejoins with a slide presentation of advertisements that depict women doing domestic drudge work. She contrasts the education the girls are getting, using Chaucer as an example, with an ad that says "A girdle to set you free!" She ruefully tells the class that she gives up, "You win," and suggests that they are wasting their education and their brains. Besides raising the immediate issue of women and education at mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Watson is embodying a crucial virtue of good teachers: as with good art, they challenge accepted norms, in an effort to get people to think for themselves. Watson is soon ironically vindicated, when Betty files for divorce from her philandering husband, breaks free of her suffocating mother, and tells Watson that she may herself look into law school.

When fall enrollment for Watson's class goes through the roof, the administration invites her back. The restrictive conditions attached to her future employment, however, convince the art historian to decline the offer. Although Watson had initially coveted working at Wellesley, she learns that it is not the best place for her to be an educator. On the other hand, Thackeray chooses to remain at the high school; having discovered his true vocation, he declines the engineering job he had thought he desired all along.

## **V Learning What to Teach**

Mark Thackeray in *To Sir with Love* is an impeccably dressed, well-spoken engineer, biding his time and making ends meet by teaching working class London high school kids. Amidst the unruly, unresponsive students,

Thackeray is at sea, trying to stick to the standard curriculum, teaching such subjects as math and geography. Then he has a sort of epiphany, and utters the word, “Kids.” Thackeray dramatically throws the traditional school books in the garbage, calling them useless, and tells the students that things are going to change.

Informing his pupils that they may call him either Mr. Thackeray or “Sir,” he promises that he will treat them as “responsible adults.” Sir will augment the standard high school fare with “life lessons:” comportment, respect, proper form of address, and hygiene. The educational goal is to prepare his students for civilized life. When the students ask what they will talk about, Thackeray replies: “Life, survival, love, death, sex, marriage, rebellion. Anything you want.” To scrap his class preparations and adapt to the everyday needs of his students, Sir must first be open--to their interaction, speech, and values.

Because Thackeray is discussing subjects that are inherently interesting to the students, they are engaged; their hands shoot up when asked what they want to discuss. One student asks how you know a boy is the right one? Thackeray admits that he’s never been married, and, in turn, asks what a girl should look for in a man. Overcoming resistance from the school’s principal, Thackeray finally gets a museum trip approved. When the kids show up for the outing scrubbed, nicely dressed, and eager, Sir quips, “For a moment, I thought I was in the wrong classroom.” After the trip goes well, Thackeray teaches them cooking, saying “This is survival training,” and explains that he was poor too. He soon enlists a friendly female teacher to help his girls with makeup as well.

A teaching moment occurs in gym class, where the instructor pushes a heavysset boy who falls trying to perform on a piece of apparatus. Another boy threatens the insensitive teacher, but Thackeray, quickly summoned by a student, intervenes in the nick of time. Alone with the boys, Sir explains that Potter (Chris Chittell), who was sticking up for the maligned student, would be viewed as the aggressor and could have gotten into serious trouble--especially as an adult, outside of school. It is not just about the teacher pushing the overweight boy; it is about self-control and dealing with

anger in a responsible way. The boys erupt when Sir tells Potter that he has to apologize to the bullying teacher, and protest that the teacher should apologize to the heavy set boy.

Sir says that his business is with them, not with the teacher. He asks Potter whether he's a man or a hoodlum. He points out that if Potter apologizes out of fear (of reprisals) then he's a child, not a man. In this life lesson, Sir offers the alternative of being a (responsible) man, rather than a (violent) hoodlum or (cowed) child. Sir adapts his thinking, and tailors his teaching, to address what he sees as ineffectual modes of coping with problems. He questions the students and offers them choices.

Taking over the gym class for the former teacher, Thackeray is inveigled into boxing with the recalcitrant, wise-cracking student named Denham (Christian Roberts). Having absorbed several blows, Sir thumps Denham smartly in the solar plexus and immediately regrets it. Later Denham asks why Sir did not follow up his punch with more. Sir answers that hitting does not solve anything, and suggests that Denham get a job teaching younger boys to box.

Thackeray is soon delighted to be offered the engineering job he had long sought after, only to be strongly encouraged by his colleagues (including the crusty cynic of the bunch) to continue teaching. Sir dances with the infatuated Miss Dare (Judy Geeson), whom he has counseled to forgive her mother's indiscretions. He is visibly moved when the students give him a present, and the film's title song is sung for him. Unlike Watson, Sir decides to stay at the school, for he has found his true calling. Both have learned a great deal about themselves, and maybe that is ingredient in all truly fine teaching. Excellent teachers are engaged in a process of authentic self-discovery, thereby helping students explore their own deficiencies, preferences and personalities.

Undergirding the sparkle and charm of Thackeray and Watson are the virtues that enable them to be exceptionally effective educators. Genuinely open and responsive, they appreciate their students' needs and creatively meet them. Thackeray and Watson are humble enough to recognize when they should change their approach when necessary, yet confident enough in

their abilities to take pedagogical chances for the sake of student success. When otherwise spectacular teachers, such as Fletcher and Brodie, lack these virtues, they are liable to fail their students in spectacular ways.

## Joseph Kupfer

### Notes

1. As a helpful reader has pointed out, there are a host of interesting cinematic treatments of teachers and teaching, such as *The Paper Chase*, *Dead Poet's Society*, *The Chorus*, *The Class*, *Educating Rita*, and *The History Boys*. Although each of these films would repay serious investigation, I hope the reader will be sympathetic to how the quartet of movies I've chosen is especially suitable for the angle on teaching I take.
2. Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp.15-16
3. *Ibid.*, p.18.
4. *Ibid.*, p.19.
5. Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in *Mothering*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanfield, 1984), p.217.
6. Thomas Hill, *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.112.
7. Nancy Snow, "Humility," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol.29, 1995 pp.203-16.
8. Norvin Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.25, no.3, July 1988, pp.253-59, p.257.
9. Valerie Tiberius and John Walker, "Arrogance," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.35, 1998, pp.379-90.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 382.
11. See Plato's *Theatetus*, 150D. It can also be seen as part of Socrates' injunction to know thyself.
12. Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967), W.B. Barton and Vera Deutsch, Trans. , p.73.
13. As Iris Murdoch puts it, talking of love, "The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy." *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p.91.
14. Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row),1962), especially "Love Builds Up" (part 2, Chapter 1), pp.206-7.