Shades of Greene—A Pedagogy Of Pluralism: The Aesthetic Reality Of Literary Worlds

Shaireen Rasheed
C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University, Brookville, New York

Accessibility, which is a process, is often taken for a natural, self-evident state of language. What is perpetuated in its name is a given form of intolerance and an unacknowledged practice of exclusion. Thus, as long as the complexity and difficulty of engaging with the diversely hybrid experiences of heterogeneous contemporary societies are denied and not dealt with, binary thinking continues to mark time while the creative interval is dangerously reduced to non-existence.

—Minh-ha, 1991, 228-229

For Maxine Greene, critical pedagogy is not a standardized methodology but a process that accounts both for social, political, and historical conditions and for the perspectives and considerations of the participants of a given moment. In her words, “because the problems
of education are profound and [because] educators’ notions of the possibilities for change are limited by this constrained discourse of standardization, it is often difficult even to envision more humane, more just, and more democratic alternatives” (1996, 13). Few educators today, Greene states:

can escape the impact of cultural diversity or the sounds of newly audible ‘voices’ seldom attended to before. The implications for our conceptions of curriculum content are considerable. Questions are raised about the American tradition, about the American Dream, about what can and should be transmitted to the changing populations in our schools. In addition, with a growing awareness of multiple meanings in the various areas of study, teachers and administrators are beginning to seek out alternative ways of representing what is known and what the young are expected to respect and understand. Educators who have not been exposed to the nuances of changing approaches to the history of ideas and the history of the schools are unlikely to respond well to the challenges that increasing diversity now poses for them (1997, 390-391).

Greene by incorporating literature that reflects students’ lives, believes that education can begin to create a pedagogy that is relevant and meaningful to the multiple experiences and realities that students face. Throughout her numerous works, Greene illustrates what philosophy and education can learn from literature, which is precisely the business of catering to images of human dignity.

I will elucidate how Greene uses aesthetic literature to describe the human condition and uses literary texts to elucidate an existentialist relationship of human beings with their surroundings. By developing literary works to include the concept of existential freedom, I will further examine how Greene creates an educational pedagogy where students can perceive the world as always situated. And the situated person as Greene says: “inevitably engaged with others, reaches out and grasps the phenomena surrounding him/her from a particular vantage point and against a particular background of consciousness” (1988, 21). Freedom then becomes not only a matter of being, it becomes our experience in an embodied way.

Embodied freedom within such a context for Greene must be critical and self-reflective, a demand that students ponder what they imagine, that they articulate the principles that govern the choices they make as they live. What, after all, Greene asks, “is the relationship between imagination and moral life?” (Ayers, 1995, 319-328). She goes on to answer herself:

I try to connect it, for example, to a kind of face to face morality—the morality that finds expression in coming towards another person, looking...him or her in the eyes, gazing not simply glancing...it is a matter of affirming....[O]ne person is there for the other, looking him/her in the face, answering the social demand . . . .[S]ocial imagination involves looking at the world as if it could be otherwise (Ayers, 1995, 319-328).

Greene locates the condition for such a possibility in the realm of literary arts. Works of literature, according to Greene, allow the imaginative mode of apprehension to break with the stereotyped, the conventional, and the mundane. They empower the individual student to explore his or her inner horizons, to reflect upon his or her own consciousness and capacity for knowing. To be “literate” in this fashion, for Greene, is to be able to crack the codes that have kept secret so many visions of freedom and fulfillment, to allow the existence of created worlds (1974, 176).
Greene’s goal is to enrich and complement discursive accounts of classroom practice with works that involve readers not only with visions of the possible, but also with awareness of the contradictions and of the incompleteness that engage human beings in significant questions about their work and their world. These discourses involve us as historical beings born into a social reality. As individuals experience a work of literature through and by means of their own lived worlds, the realities they discover, according to Greene, “may well provide new vantage points on the inter subjective world, the world they share with others, the enrichment of the I, [leading to] an overcoming of silence and a quest for tomorrow, for what is not yet” (1976, 176).

In a mode of personal reflection, Greene exemplifies this view with an autobiographical story of possibility in which she explores the world of literature. Stories, she says, are what made her see alternate realities. It was through stories that she learned about “uncertainties,” learned to go beyond simply putting up with the ambiguities that were a part of her world. She learned, instead, to take these ambiguities or conflicts and work them over in her mind in a deliberate struggle to find meaning. Through story, Greene learned to understand ideas and to link them up to her own lived world of experiences. Through narratives, she came to understand the “autobiographical digging” that took place each time she remembered and reconstructed her experiences—through a new story process. As she explains:

Through story I learnt about uncertainty, and I learnt to do more than just tolerate the ambiguities that seemed so much part of my world, I learnt to take up those ambiguities or conflicts and work them over and over in my mind to find meaning, through story I came to understand ideas that were often abstract by connecting those ideas to my own lived experience. Through stories dignifying my mother’s and father’s experiences I came to appreciate [the] value of narrative—including books and other forms of aesthetic material. And I especially grew to understand that the kind of autobiographical digging that took place each time they remembered and reconstructed their experiences through story was not only valuable for them but also for me. Their practice had created in me the habit of imagining, digging deep, of remembering, of listening to stories, of assessing, of reconstructing, of questioning a particular construction and of reconstructing again. (1994, xvi)

To appeal to the freedom of the individual, to enable students to confront their own reality, imaginative art should, according to Greene, always be offered as present possibilities—as beginnings rather than culminations, as origins, rather than means or ends. And when such an imaginative dialogue is activated in classrooms, even the young are stirred to reach out on their own initiatives (1994).

Greene holds that the reader, as entrant into a created world who seeks to disclose to him or herself a world of value, cannot allow the imagination to be limited to one-dimensional seeing. If we open ourselves rather as imaginative, intuitive, sensitive, intellectual beings, we may discover what it is to create our own meanings intersubjectively with other human creatures. Thus, through literature, we can recognize openings in situations, and these openings make possible the kind of action or transcendence that allows the individual to go beyond what he or she has been. In “Literature, Existentialism and Education,” She goes on to say that, “since consciousness is intentional, always consciousness of something, the book presents a pre reality, or an aspect of the historical situation in which the writer lives his life” (76).

For Greene, to educate is to take seriously both the quest for life’s meaning and the meaning of individual lives. Through our accounts of the use of stories and personal narratives in educational practice, we can explore the centrality of narrative to the kind of
work that teachers and counselors do. Those engaged in the work of telling, writing, reading, and listening to life stories can pass through cultural barriers to discover the power of the self and the integrity of the other. In doing so, they can expand their comprehension of their own histories and possibilities.

Reading these works within the context of schools and education, students will begin to ask questions, pose problems, and think beyond and between the boundaries by which they are defined. Poems and novels and stories often address our freedom, invite us to move beyond where we are, to move beyond ourselves. Consequently, the purpose of art within the context of imagination becomes for Greene one that reflects a sense of possibility, creating spaces in which freedom can exist (1974, 80).

Greene believes that the space in question ought to be one infused with an imaginative awareness, to allow those involved to imagine alternative possibilities for their own becoming (1995, 39). It has to be a space in which individuals mutually discover, recognize and appreciate alternate ways of conceiving realities, consequently finding ways to make sense of their intersubjective world.

Imagination, for Greene, gives rise to glimpses of possibility, to what is not yet, to what ought to be. Any encounter, she says,

> with the actual human beings who are trying to learn how to learn requires imagination on the part of teachers and on the part of those they teach . . . [I]t takes imagination to become aware that a search is possible . . . [I]t takes imagination on the part of the young people to perceive openings through which they can move. (1995, 14)

She is of the opinion that imagination is as important in the lives of teachers as it is in the lives of their students, in part, she says, because teachers incapable of thinking imaginatively or of releasing students to encounter works of literature and other forms of art are probably also unable to
communicate to the young what the use of imagination signifies. If it is the case that imagination feeds one’s capacity to feel one’s way into another’s vantage point, then teachers may also be lacking in empathy. (1995, 36)

Consequently, one of the reasons Greene says she comes
to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is that, above all, which makes empathy possible. As it helps give credence to alternative realities, it allows us to break with the taken for granted and set aside familiar distinctions and definitions. (1995, 3)

Thus for Greene, a literary curriculum involves a process of enabling the young to make sense of their personal lived worlds and to build their own interpreted realities within a social order. The social order is crucial here, in that Greene recognizes that self knowledge cannot be cultivated in isolation from others: “the self can never be actualized through solely private experiences, no matter how extraordinary these experiences might be (1976, 74).” As she says: “To open up our experience (and, yes, our curriculum) to existential possibilities of multiple kinds is to extend and deepen what each of us thinks of when he or she speaks of a community” (1995, 39).

One way teachers can achieve this pluralistic sense of community is if they bring themselves into their schools and use their own lives, their knowledge, and their explorations as elements within the curriculum. Greene in turn puts this sense of personal connectedness into practice by situating herself as an educator when she says:

The quest involves me as a woman, as teacher, as mother, as citizen, as New Yorker, as art-lover, as activist, as philosopher, as white middle-class American. Neither myself or my narrative can have, therefore, a single strand. I stand at the crossing point of too many social and cultural forces; and in any case, I am forever on the way. (1995, 1)

Consequently, Greene advocates the encouragement of a dialogical “self-reflection” in teacher education curricula: “I am proposing...that teacher educators and their students be stimulated to think about their own thinking and to reflect upon their own reflecting” (1978, 176). As Greene says:

I am convinced that through reflective and impassioned teaching we can do far more to excite and stimulate many sorts of young persons to reach beyond themselves, to create meanings, to look through wider and more informed perspectives at the actualities of their lived lives. It seems eminently clear to me that a return to a single standard of achievement and a one-dimensional definition of the common will not only result in severe injustices to the children of the poor and the dislocated, the children at risk, but will also thin out our cultural life and make it increasingly difficult to bring into existence and keep alive an authentically common world. Granted, multiple perspective, make it all the more difficult to define coherent purposes in what many believe to be a dangerously fragmented culture, devoid of significant guidelines and generally accepted norms. Multiplicity makes it difficult as well to think about how we can love our children in Arendt’s terms and remain true to what we have come to know as practitioners. (1995, 172)

Many of the alienated students are forced into the position of distrusting their own voices, their own ways of making sense. At the same time, they are provided with no alternatives to allow them to otherwise tell their stories, formulate their narratives, or contextualize new
learning within the sphere of what they already know. Instead educators should be challenged to think of their work in imaginative, poetic, and narrative idioms. Regarding the importance of infusing arts in the curriculum, Greene states: “to speak of the arts in relation to curriculum inquiry is, for me, to summon up visions of new perspectives and untapped possibilities. Curriculum has to do with the life of meaning, with ambiguities, and with relationships. And, yes it has to do with transformations and with fluidity. (1991, 301-304).”

With reference to the search for meaning, which is a central motif of inquiry both in the arts and in curriculum theory, Greene believes that educators have a special role to play as she says that educators must “feel the importance of releasing students to be personally present to what they see and hear and read...[to] develop a sense of agency and participation and [to] do so in collaboration with one another” (1995,122). Within such a context, teaching is what occurs when a student begins to understand what he or she is doing in connection with his or her experience and interpretation of reality, as well as what allows such students to recognize errors and to propose solutions (Greene, 1973, 172).

Unless and until we can posit and imagine alternative possibilities we have no freedom, regardless of how unfettered we might feel. Suppression of the imagination, in fact, may be the greatest oppression. But according to Greene a free imagination, freedom of thought, is not enough to fully secure personal or public freedom. In order to be free it is necessary to engage in those actualities that bind us (Greene, 1988, 21). Freedom in the positive sense requires first imagining alternatives, then naming what oppresses us, followed by action to secure some named object of our desire. Freedom without choice is meaningless.

Consequently, literature as a mode of aesthetic education, creates spaces for students to question their preoccupation with human freedom and human growth. As a result, Greene says, we may “awaken others to possibility and [to] the need for action in the name of possibility” (1974, 20). But a major theoretical issue this poses is how to approach literature and reading in terms of cultural diversity and of the structure of the curriculum. Arguing against conventional wisdom and proposing aesthetic encounters that are bound to disturb if they do not simply confuse students. Greene requires that educators pay attention to a specific kind of literature:

I am asking that attention be paid to a certain literature that seems on the face of it irrelevant to teacher education, a literature whose critical elements have been effectively absorbed. The reason is, again, that literature may have an emancipatory function for people whose selves have been attenuated, who have forgotten the function of the ‘I.’ I do not see how individuals who know nothing about the ‘powers of darkness,’ who account for themselves by talking about ‘chance, circumstances and the times,’ can awaken the young to question and learn. (Greene, 1978, 176)

This implies that to celebrate world cultures it is not sufficient to teach courses or units on these cultures or to treat the texts as if the writer did not exist or as if the reader could examine only his or her own response to the text. We must instead unmask ignorance in the teaching of literature. There can be no expectation that the naive readers will comprehend cultural differences so long as all texts are treated as contemporary, genderless, and mainstream. Anonymity, in other words, is a dangerous fallacy. To see literature, ourselves, and our cultural whole, it is necessary to view texts as the works of real human beings, beings with both a past and a culture of their own.

Because passion, for Greene, signifies mood, emotion, and desire, modes of grasping the appearances of things, passion is for her “one of the important ways of understanding possibility” (1996, 14). And one way Greene believes students can experience passion is
through confrontation with works of art that evoke their emotions. Against this background, educators may also be inspired to search for a critical pedagogy of significance for themselves, consequently rendering conscious, as Greene says, “the process of making meaning, a process that has much to do with the shaping of identity, the development of a sense of agency, and a commitment to a certain mode of praxis” (1997, 390-391).

For Greene, multiple meanings and interpretations are central not only to theorizing but to seeing other ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world. She encourages students to read literary texts along such seemingly contradictory lines because she wants to “show the partiality of any single discourse or theory to explain the range of human possibility” (1997, 390-391). As a result, her work empowers people to rediscover their own memories and to articulate them in the presence of others, whose space they can share. But such a project, Greene points out, demands the exercise of imagination enlivened by works of art and by situations of speaking and of making. Perhaps through this we can at last derive reflective communities in the intercises of colleges and schools, freeing people to refuse the silences. As she claims, “we need to teach in such a way as to arouse passion now and then. These are dark and shadowed times and we need to live them, standing before one another open to the world” (1996, 29).

This dialectical process of writing and inquiry for Greene is both one of contradictory practice and full of contradictions. Like “ethno poetic or involved art,” writing for Greene that

breaks forms that have been institutionalized by tradition and privilege suggests a contradictory practice. Writing that infuses the blood and bones of the writer’s life with what she or he is writing reconceptualizes the notion of text as involved art, reconceptualizing the purpose of art. (1994, xv)

Thus, as Greene believes, this contradictory practice of writing and realizing becomes a search for authenticity in a “self whose goal is not power over others but the desire to
understand and invoke complicity” (1994, xviii). Moreover, it is through this same search for authenticity that teachers should approach their teaching—the same practice that helps them to have the courage to tell personal stories in order to help students think through particular theoretical constructs.

Because searching for authenticity or sense of self with others may be the way many of us imagine the possible and analyze the stories of our lives all the time. As it’s through a search for authenticity and selfhood that we gain perhaps the deepest understanding of others. (1994, xvi)

Greene’s advocacy is toward a dislocation of boundaries—a blurring of genres—in order to move away from either/or extremes that limit voice and tend to produce totalitarian discourse. By incorporating diverse literary texts into her academic discourse, in essence Greene is questioning the homogenization and standardization of language in the mass media, the schools, and other cultural sites. Implicit in her imaginative literary discourse is the centrality of the arts in school curricula. According to Greene, if we want the arts to help in disclosures and to promote critical awareness, if we want students to experience “the radical modification in the tension of consciousness that enables them to see what they would not otherwise see (as we make available a wide range of art forms), we surely need to keep the questions open and alive” (1978, 175).

In conclusion, I have tried to elucidate the way in which Greene, through incorporating literary texts into her pedagogical discourse, questions the homogenization and standardization of language in the mass media, the schools, and other cultural sites. Her imaginative literary discourse is predicated on the centrality of the arts in school curricula. Greene embraces the fact that through the awareness of aesthetic images students “can break with the taken for granted, with the ordinary and the mundane” (1978, 181). Our role as educators then, should be to encourage our students to become reflective thinkers. As Greene states:

There must be attending, there must be noticing, at once there must be a reflective turning back to the stream of consciousness—the stream that contains our reflections, our perceptions, our ideas. I am arguing for self reflectiveness and new disclosures, as I am arguing for critical reflection at a moment of crystallized habits. If the uniqueness of the artistic-aesthetic can be reaffirmed, if we can consider futuring as we combat immersion, old either/ors may disappear. We may make possible a pluralism of visions, a multiplicity of realities. We may enable those we teach to rebel. (1978, 182)

And indispensable to the development of such a progressive classroom is opening channels of communication that permit students to utilize the linguistic and cultural capital through which they give meaning to their everyday experiences. This means that students must be encouraged to recognize and interrogate the historical, semiotic, and relational dynamics involved in the production of diverse languages. As educators, Greene would like to see teachers make the full range of symbolic systems available to the young for the ordering of their own experience, by encouraging multiple readings of written texts and of the world, readings always unfinished and grounded in possibility. As she says:

I believe that teachers can release persons for this kind of seeing if we ourselves are able to recover and help our students discover the imaginative mode of awareness that makes the arts available. This is the point of the creative activities we foster in our classrooms and of the creative encounters we try to nurture with works of art. If we do not do our work intentionally, if we do not have a clear sense of what aesthetic perceptions and aesthetics objects signify, we are likely to deprive our students of possibilities. We may
leave them buried in cotton wool, and passive under the hammer blows of the fragmented, objective world. (1978, 186)

Greene believes that once the students’ spontaneity is nurtured and once young people are offered various opportunities to articulate their voices, new possibilities open. At that point, what is offered in terms of subject matter can be grasped more easily, since it is grasped from a lived location, grasped not as a given but from a point of view (Greene, 1994). And while such manifold student discourses always remain unfinished, they do offer new categories, hope, and commitment to the process of change to educators who believe that schools can in fact be changed and that their individual and collective actions can help deepen and extend democracy and social justice in society at large.

References


About the Author

Shaireen Rasheed is an associate professor of Philosophy in the School of Education at Long Island University. Her research interests include Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Existentialist and Continental Philosophy, Social and Cultural Philosophy, Post-Colonial Studies and Critical Pedagogy. She has a PhD in Philosophy from Columbia University. Her current research as a visiting scholar at NYU’s center for Gender and Sexuality focuses on creating a phenomenological ethics when discussing issues of liberal democracy. Her related publications include her book “An Existentialist Curriculum of Action.” (University Press of America, 2006) which contextualizes Maxine Greene’s educational pedagogy within a Sartrean tradition.