



## English: Literature and Choices

### What if a literature class helped students to think about choices?

Katelyn's high school English class was studying *The Lord of the Flies*. She wanted to teach it in a way that was relevant to the students' lives but integrally connected to the text, so she decided to highlight a single issue for one lesson: Are we free to make choices?

"We normally cover the choices made by different characters, but I wanted to highlight this issue of choice. There is a lot of talk about freedom of choice in our society, combined with an attitude of resignation and a belief that we actually have little choice, or that we are not responsible for our choices. Sometimes the environment or our genes are seen as determining our behavior.

"I started with some relevant pages from celebrity magazines that I had selected to offer a range of kinds of examples, and we looked at the choices some people in the headlines have made. These are people with money and opportunity who would not be perceived as limited in their choices. We listed some of the choices they had made. The class then listed some of the things that restrict or enable our choices and discussed how far we might be responsible for choices we make. We explored the question, Did people with money, power, and opportunity make good choices when they had less restrictions?

"We identified key incidents in the text. We discussed how free or determined the characters were and how far they were responsible for their choices, drawing on our earlier discussion. In light of *The Lord of the Flies* and its biblical themes, I introduced the Christian idea that the gift of freedom to choose was given at creation but weakened by sin, so that it is now harder to make good choices. St. Augustine compared it to a set of scales where the pan labeled "bad decisions" is already loaded. The scales still work, but they are biased. This bias can be corrected by God's grace—his love and help—which leads to the possibility of forgiveness for bad choices. We looked at the text in light of this.

"Then I gave the students a choice. The basic task was to choose an incident and a character and to trace the results of that character's decisions, showing what alternative choices could have been made. Students were allowed to present this either as a flow

diagram with notes, or in continuous prose. We ended with a brief discussion of our freedom, choice, and responsibility, and spent a few minutes in reflection.”

## What’s going on here?

Katelyn **saw** her Christian faith as integral to understanding the text that she was teaching, particularly what faith had to say about choice and responsibility and how these connect to grace and forgiveness.

She **engaged** students in exploring the nature of choices by having them connect this theme in the literary text with the same theme in the society around them, and by asking them to both analyze and reflect.

She **reshaped her practice** by thinking about the questions to be raised and the combination of resources that might help raise them, by explicitly relating faith to the class topic and by allowing time for reflection.

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Behavior sometimes is blamed on our genes or our environment, and this can lead to an implicit or explicit assumption that we are not responsible for our behavior. Such an attitude leaves us with little **hope**. Without denying the influence of genetics or environment, the Christian **faith** maintains that we are responsible for the decisions we make, though in some situations our choice and responsibility are reduced. This offers hope of making right choices with God’s help.

## What difference does it make?

By highlighting choice, Katelyn drew her students’ attention to the issue of choices and behavior in the text, and to what Christianity has to say about this issue. This provided a way of honoring the text, connecting it with faith-related questions, and making it relevant to the students’ own lives.

## Where could we go from here?


Teachers could choose to focus on different issues from texts (e.g., forgiveness and reconciliation versus revenge) and highlight them in order to help students relate them to their own lives and to the Christian faith. This does not mean other aspects of the text have to be ignored; it's all about where the spotlight falls.

## Digging deeper

Throughout the Bible, people are called to make right choices with God's help and are called to account for those choices before God. This assumes a degree of responsibility for behavior. Cain is called to account for the murder of Abel. David is called to account for the murder of Uriah. Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats states that all will one day be called to account (Matthew 25:31-45).

In society, there is a way of thinking that sees people as determined by genetics, environment, and other factors, leaving them with little ultimate responsibility for their decisions. Within the Christian faith there is also a doctrine, God's sovereignty, that can be misunderstood as having the same affect. Christians balance human responsibility for our choices (Deuteronomy 30:19) with the sovereignty of God (Ephesians 1:11). If human responsibility is overemphasized, faith becomes living in our own strength. If God's sovereignty is overemphasized, the importance of our decisions is lost. Traditionally, Christians hold the two together: God is in charge, but we can make decisions and will be judged by God for those decisions.

Charles Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile God's sovereignty and human responsibility. "I wouldn't try," he replied, "I never reconcile friends."



*People see that the Bible teaches man's responsibility for his actions; they do not see how this is consistent with the sovereign Lordship of God over those actions. They are not content to let the two truths live side by side, as they do in the Scriptures. J. I. Packer*



**Previous:** Poetry and Revenge  
What if poetry made students thin...

**Next:** Literature and Faith  
What if studying a novel included l...

