DOROTHY DAY: A LOVE OF FICTION AND HER LOVE OF THE POOR

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Abstract

Dorothy Day's love of the poor originated from reading novels that portrayed the poor as persons worthy of respect. The purpose of this paper is to explore the novels that Day read in her youth to learn how these led her to devote her life to living and working among the poor. Dorothy Day's encounters with poverty combined with reading novels opened her mind and heart to the realities of poverty. As a journalist and writer, Day described how the poor struggled to survive and how love is the answer to the challenges that poverty presents. The methodology will be literature-based. First, I will explore Dorothy Day's autobiography to discover the novels that she read from her youth. The novelists who captivated her mind and cultivated a religious heart include Charles Dickens, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and the Russian authors, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy. I will also show how fictional works could be used in educating young adults religiously to encourage love for the poor.

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) had a deep love for the poor as evidenced by her living with and working for the poor throughout her life. Her love for the poor is the direct result of her love of reading works of fiction-- specifically novels and short stories that portrayed the lives of poor people. Fiction has the power to portray truth because it captures reality with precision and depicts characters with sensitivity. This paper will explore the works of fiction that Dorothy Day read in her early life and that proved to be formative throughout her life. This will include specific works and how these works influenced her life. A secondary aim is to explore some of these novels to determine their value in educating young adults religiously, especially in terms of developing a love for the poor in a time when poverty is increasing in the United States of America and throughout the world.

Dorothy Day had learned to read by the age of four and her choice of reading material was largely determined by the books that her father, John Day, a writer and journalist, allowed in their home. John Day considered the classics as the only suitable reading material. Long before the distractions of the electronic age, this intelligent and highly ambitious young girl turned to the classics that were available and that she enjoyed reading. These novels touched Dorothy on a very deep level and opened her eyes to the world of poverty and more importantly, to the people who fought to survive despite extreme poverty.

THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION

Imagination is a key component in writing and reading. Authors are like an empty vessel as they await inspiration to begin the creative process. An event often serves as a catalyst for a creative journey of discovery and assimilation. Time and space are essential for authors to delve

into their unconscious. The creative process varies from person to person: some work from an outline that serves as a road map, but others discover that the characters seem to have a life of their own. Authors, in effect, are witnesses to characters' birth and the faithful scribes who record the details of their story. Imagination is wed with determination and discipline as the characters emerge from the authors' unconscious. They need time and patience to capture who these characters are, how they act and react, and the settings where the actions and conversations transpire. Readers also become part of the creative process by receiving and actively recreating in their minds the settings and characters recorded on the printed page. The reader is a co-conspirator with the author: accepting, rejecting, and playing with the imaginative world she or he encounters. Imagination, then, is the key to creating and understanding the world authors portray and readers explore.

An avid reader, Day made innumerable imaginative journeys. Her mind recorded the images, stories, and characters from the many classical works she read over many years. The Day family led a rather cloistered life. Their father frowned upon guests because he viewed his home as a sanctuary. On a practical level his career as a writer included writing a novel at home and he abhorred distractions. When he worked as a journalist, he would arrive home at 2:00 AM exhausted and in need of rest. Even his baby son, John, had to be moved into Dorothy's room so their father would not be disturbed by crying or fretting. His family honored the fact that he needed time and space to rest and work. John Day was the patriarch who enforced his belief that the proper place for women and children was at home, a safe place removed from worldly distractions. He did encourage reading the classics so that was a natural outlet for Day's mind and heart. Day's imagination grew incrementally as she devoured the works of fiction that were available at home (Day, 1952, 25-26).

Imagination played an important role when Day read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). When she read this novel, her family lived in Chicago, the setting for Sinclair's novel. While it dealt with the harsh realities of the meat packing and processing business, Day was captivated by the stories of the characters. At the age of fourteen, Day shared the responsibility for the care of her baby brother, John. It was to her room that the baby was carried when the father returned home in the wee hours of the morning. Every day after returning from school, she would wheel baby John to the park to enjoy nature. As she began to read *The Jungle*, she changed her destination to the poor district on the West Side. Upton Sinclair had walked the streets of Chicago and used the event of a Lithuanian wedding celebration that he had witnessed as the opening scene of his novel. Day reversed the process when she read *The Jungle* by picturing its characters as persons who were living and working in Chicago's poor neighborhoods. It was easy for her to imagine the traditional Lithuanian marriage feast, or *veselija*, of Ona Lukoszaite and Jurgis Rudkus, in the back room of one of the saloons she passed. The novel came alive as Day pictured the guests as they feasted on food and drink and danced for hours. Day could imagine the lively music, reminiscent of their homeland, and the participants in their best dress. Despite its great expense, this celebration was a highlight of their earthly existence for it provided memories that were stronger than the daily cares of life and the drudgery of their work.

Day wanted to see first hand the conditions of life for those who were poor. Like an explorer or the journalist that she would later become, she looked at their houses and the people who surged through the neighborhood. In good weather and bad, she and her younger sister Della explored block after block. As she walked, Day was imagining the characters, hearing their voices, sensing how they lived their daily lives. For Day imagination combined with action instilled a nascent sensitivity for people and all they endured.

Day used all her senses as she walked through poor neighborhoods. First, she would note what she saw—the streets, mothers with children, shopkeepers, the foliage, the houses with flower gardens and vegetables planted in the yards. She was aware of the smell of flowers and plants as well as the odors associated with cooking. Her daily walks were an introduction to the poor of the West Side. Day wrote in her autobiography that as a teenager her only experience of the destitute came from books. "The very fact that *The Jungle* was about Chicago where I lived, whose streets I walked" formed the basis for her knowledge of the plight of the poor and of workers. That combined with Day's reading other writers like Peter Kropotkin, "made me feel that from then on my life was to be linked to theirs, their interests were to be mine." In effect, reading works of fiction and later, essays on poverty and the necessity of respond to the problems that poverty presented, was in Day's view how she "received a call, a vocation, a direction" for her life. (Day, 1952, 37).

Day left the University of Chicago at Urbana to be with her family when they moved to New York. This city presented new challenges as Day sought work as a journalist. She walked the streets of the slums noting how her sense of smell was assaulted. The tenements exuded a strange odor that permeated the buildings and oozed from the walls and hallways into the streets. This odor was so strong that one's clothing absorbed it. She noted that mothers, in an effort to escape the stench, brought their young children outdoors to get the sun and breathe the fresh air. According to Day, the poverty in New York City was worse than that in Chicago for it was more extensive (Day, 1952, 51).

THE ROLE OF EMPATHY

To benefit from reading fiction a lively imagination needs to be informed by an openness of mind and heart. Dorothy Day had a deeply empathic spirit that was evident even in her early years. When her family lived in Oakland, CA, the San Francisco earthquake shook their home, caused untold destruction throughout the city, and changed their lives. She remembered how her mother and all their neighbors banded together to welcome those fleeing the fires that had erupted in San Francisco. She held that memory of their generosity--welcoming the people who arrived with little more than the clothes on their back. Her neighbors prepared meals and shared their food and clothing. Day considered their generosity a model of how communities should act on a daily basis. California opened her eyes to "the joy of doing good, of sharing whatever we had with others after the earthquake, an event which threw us out of our complacent happiness into a world of catastrophe" (Day, 1952, 21-22).

In terms of reading, Day exhibited a phenomenal ability to relate with characters at a deep level. Day identified with the immigrant families and the workers in Sinclair's *The Jungle;* she felt their joys and sorrows, and had a deep understanding of what they endured. Their sufferings were her sufferings; she rejoiced at their small triumphs. It is interesting to note that John Day's desire to protect his family from the distractions of visitors was counteracted by his encouraging his children to read the classics. When Day read these novels, she was exposed to a plethora of people, albeit fictional, and in the process related to these characters in the same way that she would have welcomed guests into her home. They engaged her so totally that she could imagine living in their neighborhoods. They also remained in her mind and heart. Years later she would make references to characters and situations.

The Jungle captured the attention of many people of her time. Day followed the exploits of this immigrant family as they sought employment in the meat packing plants of Chicago. They

were young and healthy, idealistic, yet practical. It would take the concerted efforts of all the extended family to pay for adequate housing and provide for the necessities of life. In the course of this book, Jurgis begins as a giant among men, eager and able to do whatever is asked of him. But the stockyards and meat packing plant are organized for profit; speed is valued over worker safety; the owners have no qualms about putting their workers' lives in jeopardy. The workers at the meat packing plant are assailed by smells and sights that turned stomachs. They are standing in animal blood, struggling to maintain their balance; working in buildings that were freezing in winter, sweltering in summer. Always there was competition—new immigrants standing outside waiting to be chosen for a job. Inevitably injuries or sickness that resulted from beastly working conditions laid workers low. Once injured, they had to deal with the loss of income and the fear of losing their job; they worried about not having the strength to return to work. There were also lay-offs with slim prospects for returning to work. These workers waiting in the cold hoping to be picked for work were similar to the animals being led to slaughter. Workers and beasts would soon be sacrificed in the name of profit.

Day also read that the main character in *The Jungle* embraced socialism. Sinclair's view of socialism presents it as more than a system of thought. Socialism literally saved Jurgis' life after he had endured all kinds of personal trials as a result of which he was depressed and facing personal destruction. Reading about Jurgis's encounter with socialism would have made a deep impression on Day. Over time socialism provided a community where he found support and a reason for living. Sinclair wrote compellingly and it is easy to see how Day who had little religious training, would agree that socialism was the way to save workers and the poor from despair, desolation, and isolation.

FROM POVERTY TO RICHES

Another author that Dorothy Day read was Jack London. Born in San Francisco and raised in poverty, Jack London had worked and traveled the United States and prospected in the Yukon. He was keenly aware of class differences and the sting of poverty. Jack London's *Martin Eden* (1909) was a novel that Day mentioned and which captured the realism of poverty. On his own since the age of eleven, Martin Eden became a man of action and a capable sailor. His contact with the family of Ruth Morse set him on a journey of discovery, one in which he had to utilize all his powers of observation to relate socially with wealthy people. The simplest things—which silverware to use at dinner and how to converse at table—were a challenge, but this was a young man with grand ambitions. He set out to educate himself with the help of Ruth, a university student and a few years his senior, and the public library. Martin became a self-educated man hungry for knowledge, especially poetry and later, the science of biology, and philosophy. He loved to write stories and articles which he faithfully sent off to magazines. The regularity with which they were returned to him made him think that there was no human contact, only a machine which redirected the manuscript to the author. Martin spent days reading and writing, working with a fervor that bordered on fanaticism. His affection for Ruth was his primary motivation for improving his language and seeking education. Essentially his goal was to overcome the deficiencies of his working class background and aspire to the rich class. As their relationship developed, Ruth made it clear that Martin needed to pursue a career. At no time did she, an educated, cultured person, recognize that Martin's writing was a career, perhaps because of the uncertainty of being paid for one's work as a free lancer or because she placed

little value on his working class background. The work of journalists was held in low regard and earning sufficient money to support a family was problematic.

Martin Eden was particularly sensitive to beauty. He had spent years abroad so he had experienced nature in all its varied hues. Etched in his memory were images of the beauties of nature, experiences that most people had never known. He had the ability to paint verbal pictures in his stories so his readers could vicariously share his experience. Martin was drawn to the beauty of Rose, an ethereal being who seemed to be from above, far removed from his world. Music such as Rose's playing the piano or the experience of a concert or opera moved him deeply. Poetry with its rhythmic use of language engaged his spirit. All literature appealed to his inquisitive mind and had a powerful hold on his heart. When he began writing, his stories captured the beauty and horror welling up in his soul. For Martin beauty was intimately linked to love. He was a lover whose heart thrilled to beauty. When he gathered the courage to share his stories with Rose, she wanted to know why he had not chosen a nicer subject. Martin recognized the abyss between his experience and hers. He was determined to write about life as he knew it in "its foulness as well as its fairness, its greatness in spite of the slime that infested it…" (London, *Martin Eden,* 125).

The life of Martin Eden had many pitfalls. In his quest for learning and love, he severely limited his sleep, gave up drinking alcohol, learned to exist on the barest minimum of food, relied on all sorts of ploys to pay rent and other expenses including pawning his meager possessions. His friends and family were oblivious to his deteriorating physical condition as they criticized him for not having steady employment. To them he was like the undeserving poor, physically able but stubbornly refusing to work. It is interesting to note that Dorothy Day wrote that when she was fifteen, the poor were labeled as "destitute…shiftless…worthless" for they had no talents and no ability "to make a living for themselves. They were that way because of their own fault. They chose their lot. They drank" (Day, 1952, 38).

Later when his works were published and he achieved fame and fortune, Martin was unable to forget how he had been abandoned and effectively left to die of hunger. Poverty had so wracked his body and depressed his spirit that he found it impossible to ignore the grudges that he bore toward those who had ignored him in his time of need, and who now sang his praises. He did remember his own, family and friends of his own social class, and used his new-found wealth to make their lives and work more humane. His psychic wounds were so deep that he could not find healing. No amount of money, no words of praise could fill the void in his heart. Success came too late. Extreme poverty and abandonment by friends and family for so long left an indelible mark on his spirit. He had become like the living dead and no amount of praise could revive him.

There are various aspects of *Martin Eden* that are reflected in the life of Dorothy Day. Like Martin, Dorothy was an insatiable reader who devoured novels, short stories, and essays. In addition, writing was a natural outlet. From childhood Dorothy had used notebooks to record events. Writing made the happy events last longer and helped ease the pain of loss. Day resumed this practice when she lived on Staten Island with the love of her life, Forster Batterham. Writing about the ordinary events of life was a preparation for her career as a journalist. Like Martin, Dorothy was sensitive to all forms of beauty. She mentions scenes of beauty as she walked through the West Side of Chicago checking out the scenes where Upton Sinclair set his novel, *The Jungle.* Throughout her autobiography she comments on simple things of beauty—listening to an opera on the radio, seeing the sun on the ailanthus tree that she saw from the window of her

room at the Catholic Worker in New York City. Day became an expert at finding beauty in every setting in which she found herself.

THE PERILS OF POVERTY

An author of primary importance for learning about the perils of poverty is Charles Dickens. Traumatized by his parents' putting him to work at age ten in a blacking warehouse, Dickens knew the pain of abandonment. Dorothy Day absorbed a love of the poor by reading his novels in her youth. This included learning about characters who were poor, the horrific conditions in which they lived often through no fault of their own, the scoundrels who took advantage of their penury and youth, the way society treated those who were poor by hiding them in poor houses and orphanages, or debtor prisons; the desire of those who were rich to arrange marriages to enhance their family's wealth and privilege or simply to prevent hardship and loss of status, the disadvantage for young men and women who had no dowry or assets to bring to a marriage, and the adverse effects of poverty on women and children who were deprived of their husbands and fathers, the breadwinner, by death. One sees clearly how consuming alcohol affects the family even as one realizes that the local tavern was a place for release from the drudgery of hard labor, a place where men could socialize and enjoy the company of their own kind, have a few laughs, and feel like masters of their fate even when their working conditions made them cogs in an economic system geared to profits at whatever cost.

THE LURE OF SOCIALISM

Dorothy Day absorbed ideas that led her to join the Socialist Party at age sixteen when she attended the University of Chicago at Urbana (Day, 1952, 39). As a college student she read voraciously and became more radicalized. While she struggled against religious feelings which she considered childish and an opiate, she nonetheless acknowledged that the masses flocked to church where they found comfort. Even she would frequent Catholic churches after working a twelve hour day as a journalist; she also was drawn to church after she had been socializing with her writer friends. Her presence in the back of the church was not for the purpose of attending mass; but she was drawn there perhaps for the peace and possibly following the example of the masses that flocked to the church (Day, 1952, 107).

Day was imbued with a strong sense of social justice from her readings during her college days and also from her contacts as a young journalist. She wrote how she could not understand why people worked so hard to remedy social ills when in fact they could have prevented them in the first place (Day, 1952, 45). This was the ever-present tug between charity and justice that Day resolved by living with the poor at the Catholic Worker houses and farms while she wrote in *The Catholic Worker* about injustices. She also gave speeches, marched, protested peacefully, and went to jail when issues of justice demanded stronger action.

EDUCATING FOR JUSTICE

While these novels and works of fiction presented truth in the actual and moral senses, how could these novels serve a similar purpose in the life of young adults? Adolescents are required to read many novels and short stories in English and literature classes. A familiarity with the plot, characters, setting, and author's background could serve as a gateway to explore

truth at a deeper level. An example would be Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). The aim would be to discuss the willingness of the character Sydney Carton to sacrifice his life. The seemingly relentless surge to death and revenge has a dramatic resolution that guarantees that Charles Darnay is reunited with his wife, Lucie Manette and their young daughter so they can return to England and escape the violence raging in France. Questions to be raised: Would the students have chosen this ending? What is meant by the scriptural quote, "I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shalll never die (Jn 11:25-26)? For whom might this be good news? Finally, why did Dickens begin this novel with the words, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…"? How does this apply to our time in history?

For those with a more advanced knowledge of literature, Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (1899) presents a character that also goes from rogue to hero. What would they advise Prince Dmitri Ivanovitch Nekhludoff—as a young man when he was about to seduce Katerina Mikhaelovna Maslova (Katusha); when he served on the jury ten years later that tried Katusha who was standing trial for robbing and poisoning a merchant from Siberia; when Katusha was sentenced to four years of hard labor in Siberia? How does society contribute to the wrongs committed by individuals? Would you act like Prince Dmitri in seeking forgiveness and redemption? What would you do differently?

In summary, the novels that Dorothy Day read as a young woman fed not just a lively imagination but a spirit in search of social justice. They opened her mind and heart to the sufferings of the poor and how society accepted structures that favored the rich and powerful. Years later, her conversion to Catholicism and learning Catholic social teaching built upon her conviction that those who were poor merited not just attention but loving care. Prayer based on scripture and attending daily mass would give her the strength to persevere in a life of service with and to the poor.

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