

Rethinking Melancholia

Jessica Lee Hochman
Pratt Institute

James Stillwaggon and David Jelinek's essay poses an interesting question: can melancholia serve as a mediation within the sphere of education? Using the film *The Corn is Green*, they respond to the concern that critical pedagogy is not a panacea of social justice education, and tends to reproduce domination in the classroom even as it strives to emancipate. Implicit in the critical pedagogue's goal of promoting student freedom is the desire of their students to emulate their example in order to meet educational goals, which the authors note is metaphysically no different from traditional classroom models. They quote Judith Butler, who notes that in a moment of loss, the ego may incorporate the lost object into itself as a method of overcoming that loss, and they name this position "melancholy." However, for Butler, following Sigmund Freud, melancholy is more than the sadness attributed to feelings of loss; it is distinct though related to mourning.¹ I would like to highlight this distinction because I think it may help mobilize elements of Stillwaggon and Jelinek's critique of critical pedagogy. It may also help educators think about ways in which the consideration of social factors and notions of gender that Butler considers throughout her work on mourning and melancholia may both complicate and enrich the use of such films as objects-to-think-with for teachers and philosophers of education.

For Freud, the work of mourning is done through the externalization of the mourned object so the mourner can relinquish that object and get on with life. One mourns a lost person, object or ideal, and upon completion of the process, or externalization of the lost object, returns to her/his initial reality. It is the possibility of such a return that Stillwaggon and Jelinek seem to reject, since their claim is that neither Lily Moffat nor Morgan can ever truly return to their initial states prior to their interactions, both pedagogical and interpersonal.

For the melancholic, the process takes a different turn. The melancholic's loss is unconscious. As mourning without end, melancholia turns us away from the external world into the psyche. The melancholic lacks the language to externalize what is internal, and therefore mourns the lost object privately and constantly. Freud notes, "in grief, the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself."² The goal for the melancholic becomes retaining the lost object: the past remains present in an attempt to fill this emptiness.

In *The Corn is Green*, it strikes me that Morgan's process resembles mourning, while Moffat is relegated to the space of melancholia. Morgan, who goes to Oxford, externalizes his loss through his study. He has changed roles with his teacher, as Stillwaggon and Jelinek point out. He has grown from the loss. Moffat, on the other hand, is stuck in the melancholic loop. She remains in the mining town and is left to care for the object of the love that she shared with Morgan, through the proxy of Bessie: their baby. Stillwaggon and Jelinek rightly point to the tendency of the melancholic to live a life that contains a kernel of the treasured past, and that

melancholia is connected to a search for knowledge. It is what cannot be said, that must go unsaid, because of the sanctions against desire between teacher and student that nurture Moffat's melancholia while Morgan is free to mourn and proceed with life.

Freud's relation of melancholia to the unconscious through one's knowledge of, "*whom* [my emphasis] he has lost but not *what* [Freud's emphasis] it is he has lost in them," adds an important wrinkle to Stillwaggon and Jelinek's analysis of the film through the frame of melancholia, and perhaps to their critique of critical pedagogy as well.³ If the loss that brings melancholia is itself unconscious, how can we articulate such losses at all? If we follow Freud, it is critical to announce the internal to start to heal, but the difficulty here is the subtle matter of moving from the knowledge of whom (or, an identification of what) is lost, to an expression of what was lost ideologically or psychically. The development of a concept of what was lost and a mode of expressing that loss is bounded by the objective reality into which the recovering person must enter in order to proceed with healthy living. This seems to be where education can intercede, and Butler's work provides some helpful insight about how we can learn from attempts to express such inexpressible loss.

Freedom within critical pedagogy, as critiqued by Stillwaggon and Jelinek, occurs as "an emancipation from that takes place under the auspices of a more primary domination by," which seems more like melancholy as understood by Butler. She presents melancholia as a foreclosure of love; on one hand, it is an attachment substituting for one that is broken or gone (Freud's whom); on the other hand, it stands in for the impossibility of the subject's attachment to the object that is now gone (Freud's what).⁴ Butler describes this foreclosure as the loss of the object you were never really allowed to love in the first place, and cites the losses associated with the AIDS epidemic as such losses, noting society's refusal to acknowledge the possibility that gay couples have loving relationships.⁵ Under such conditions, Butler notes that the ensuing melancholia is a foreclosure that is the very condition under which social existence is possible for anyone who is not part of the heterosexual norm. This certainly seems true of the love between Moffat and Morgan: it is both unarticulated and impossible.

Butler also notes that society's response to the practice of mourning AIDS deaths is to vanquish melancholic responses: the melancholic, in other words, serves as both self-regulating and socially regulative. Moffat, whose presence in the town is both regulative and regulated by her loss of Morgan, is a melancholic figure because her love cannot be articulated, and yet her existence in the role of teacher is itself regulative. This seems to be the difficulty with critical pedagogy that Stillwaggon and Jelinek express, but it seems limited to the teacher's side of the dyad. Ironically, the teacher, who occupies a seat of supposed power, is undermined by her own desire, yet the student enters a liminal space between the familiar life they knew and the new world of Oxford, which is not melancholic at all.

The melancholic's lost object remains in flux, so its meaning is constantly being negotiated. Some, such as David Eng and David Kazanjian, have interpreted this to

mean that melancholia opens the possibility of a silenced past gaining the capacity to speak through a sort of melancholic counternarrative, rather than being put to rest like the object of mourning.⁶ Stillwaggon and Jelinek hint at a similar hopeful view of melancholia. I think Butler would respond that although it is indeed interesting that those who make the melancholic turn develop counternarratives, they do so not just because they are at odds with their emotional processes, but also because they lack the language or social capital to express their losses within a society that does not accept their loved object as valid. The social dimensions of Butler's argument are essential to her work, particularly her reading of Freud, and Stillwaggon and Jelinek's essay overlooks this.

One such consideration that the authors do not mention is the gendered roles that Moffat and Morgan assume in the film. As a woman and a teacher, Moffat is relegated to the educational sphere, and even though her erudition may place her above the folks in town, she remains in her station. Morgan on the other hand ascends from the bonds of his community and of her love, and although he mourns the loss, he leaves it all behind (including his own child, as Stillwaggon and Jelinek point out!) for life at Oxford. The authors point us to Moffat's claim that Morgan's duty is to the world, not the child, and I think this speaks volumes about the inequality inherent in the roles they are playing. While Morgan fulfills a duty to the world, Moffat is tied to the town for the deal that she made to save his soul. The film ultimately upholds the traditional gender roles and the traditional role of the teacher in ways that reinscribe domination.

Morgan's desire for the comfort of home, yet his excitement about the possibilities that an Oxford education can provide, do not signal a melancholic turn. However, the authors' larger point, that the nexus of competing commitments as a site of both embracing and resisting the familiar and the unknown, opens a new avenue for rethinking critical pedagogy and student-teacher dynamics in general.

1. Stillwaggon and Jelinek cite Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999). However, for a more comprehensive treatment of Butler's thoughts on melancholia, see other works by Butler, including *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); and *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

2. Sigmund Freud, *General Psychological Theory* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1963), 167.

3. *Ibid.*, 166.

4. Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 24.

5. Some, like David Eng, question Butler's critique of Freud's strict distinction between mourning and melancholia, asserting that the two are instead linked. Melancholia is a precursor to mourning, existing before the object of mourning is externalized, and it is this process of internalization that forms the ego as a distinct psychic identity. I am more interested in the ways she pushes Freud to consider more social factors, but this reading is worth noting, since it may relate to Stillwaggon and Jelinek's. For Eng's full argument, see "The Value of Silence," *Theatre Journal* 24, no. 1 (2002): 85–94; or his introduction (with David Kazanjian) to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), their edited collection of essays that explore culture practices around mourning and melancholia.

6. Eng and Kazanjian explore this idea in the introduction to *Loss*.