Teaching theological anthropology through English literature set texts in Catholic secondary schools and colleges

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Abstract
Catholic schools and colleges are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain and sharpen their distinctiveness in a climate of secularism, indifference to religion and the shortage of practising Catholics. This article argues that one method of bolstering Catholic schools’ mission integrity is to highlight one important feature of its identity – theological anthropology – and shows how curriculum delivery outside Religious Education syllabuses might contribute to its teaching. I take examples from two popular set texts in A-level English Literature to highlight how they might be used creatively to stimulate discussion of a defining feature of personhood within the Christian tradition, *imago Dei*.

Keywords
Catholic education, Miller, Othello, theological anthropology

Introduction: The ‘culture’ in which Catholic schools and colleges currently operate in England and Wales
The aim of this article is to advance debates about how English Literature texts can support and bolster the aims of Catholic schools in relation to pupils’ moral and
spiritual development, thereby helping them to achieve mission integrity. I choose one fundamental principle in Catholic teaching – theological anthropology – to explore this suggestion and on which to rest my discussion. The method chosen to achieve my goal is to offer a critical analysis of two literary works which I consider raise important questions about the nature of the self in illuminating and dramatic ways. I extend my argument by demonstrating how these works embed a correlation to the religious notion of *imago Dei* – that humanity is made in the image of God. The scope of the article is to set out briefly the cultural context in which Catholic schools currently operate in the UK, then to discuss the rich meaning of the term *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26) with the assistance of theologians’ insights, and finally to present a textual analysis of two set texts – William Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* – reading them through the lens of *imago Dei*.

Before outlining the inalienable dignity afforded to the human person within Christianity, it is necessary to describe the ‘culture’ and *zeitgeist* in which English and Welsh Catholic schools and colleges are currently embedded. There is no doubt we now live in a Western culture where religious beliefs and practice have been recalibrated (Bruce, 2011; Davie, 2010; Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Taylor, 2007, 2015, 2017). Taylor uses the word ‘secular’ to describe how explicitly religious forms of living are now one option among many. He argues that there exist three spaces or categories to describe this shift. The ‘middle ground’ is that space between those who do not hold a strong religious sense (the first category) and those who hold its opposite – a sense of God’s absence – resulting in feelings of alienation, *ennui* and even nihilism (the third category). Although such spaces are porous, like Mellor and Shilling’s (2014) four positions about secularization I delineate next, they nevertheless help us to frame what is happening in post-traditional cultures. Taylor suggests that a ‘post-Durkheimian dispensation’ has now occurred, by which he means that a given religious adherence ‘closely linked to their insertion in their society’ is no longer evident (Taylor, 2007: 487, 491). His hypothesis is that there has been a post-war, post-Durkheimian slide in our social imaginary which has destabilized and undermined the social fabric. The impact of powerfully enforced social differentiation, primarily through consumerism, errs dangerously into social approval and opprobrium which has a destabilizing effect on society. Conflict is provoked, advancing the collapse of a civilized order (Taylor, 2007: 488–492).

Mellor and Shilling (2014: 4–5) give another helpful analysis of the process of secularization in terms of four trajectories. The first position rejects the secularization thesis entirely; the second says that it was mistaken because it suggested that it resulted in the *irreversible* and *uniform* change to the religious landscape; the third is what might be termed ‘the resurgence of the sacred’ (Mellor and Shilling, 2014: 5) in myriad spiritual forms. The fourth espouses a strong secularization thesis and emphasizes the correlation between modernization and secularization with regard to the corrosive effects of religious beliefs and practice in ‘post-traditional patterns of individualism’ (Mellor and Shilling, 2014: 5). The authors’
hypothesis is that the four positions are less distinct than might first be conceived and that what is required is an interrogation of the socio-logic of modern societal changes to understand the phenomenon.

Readers need to keep in mind Taylor (2007)’s and Mellor and Shilling (2014)’s analyses of secularization as they read this article about the likely impact of such societal transformations upon Catholic education and how they might be responded to positively and pedagogically. Many philosophers and sociologists of education have claimed that schools have fallen victim to two enemies: neoliberalism and globalization (Arthur, 1995; Bryk et al., 1993; Grace, 2016; Pring, 2018). The force of the market, the justification of educational expenditure on education only if it secures economic benefit, the consumer choice mechanism that operates, the emphasis on competition and the drift to commodification, all lead to the conclusion that educational theories are now founded upon a monetary paradigm, a ‘human capital theory’, which de-humanizes the entire project. Senior managers and teachers can become (sometimes unknowingly) influenced by policies and practices which are in tension with Christian perspectives and slide towards relativism, self-autonomy, technical rationality, managerialism and consumerism. The ‘idols’ that start to be ‘worshipped’ here creep upon managers and teachers stealthily. The need for accountability, the temptation to keep up with one’s neighbour institutions and sheer survival can give the lie to the notion that academic ‘success’ and the prospect of pupils securing well-paid employment are not the central hallmarks of a good Christian school or college. Christian higher education has also not escaped these influences which undermine a confident sharing of a clear Christian vision for education and for society (Docherty, 2018; Furlong, 2013; Sullivan, 2019). As Furlong bluntly puts it, ‘Newman is dead’ and his vision of the ‘cultivation of the mind’, which is worth ‘seeking for its own sake’ (Furlong, 2013: 7) and which is itself ‘a treasure’ (Furlong, 2013: 118), has become extinct. He concludes, ‘Overall, a very different world from the financially secure self-governing community of scholars dedicated to the pursuit of truth’ (Furlong, 2013: 116) that used to exist is now evident.

In Bryk et al.’s ground-breaking and influential study of the shift in educational philosophy underpinning school education in America from the 1960s to the 1990s, they argue that Catholic education offers a distinctive alternative to non-faith education, which he refers to as ‘public schools’ (Bryk et al., 1993: 11). His contention is that the latter is ‘dominated by market metaphors, radical individualism, and a sense of purpose organized around competition, and the pursuit of individual economic rewards’ (Bryk et al., 1993: 11). In this, it is not dissimilar to the educational context in the UK. For these authors, what is at the core of Catholic education is an emphasis on the common good and the fostering of human cooperation in pursuit of this goal. This entails promoting an appreciation in pupils of their ‘social connectedness and individual responsibility to advance social justice’ (Bryk et al., 1993: 10). This is not simply a Christian ambition. The latest book by the former chief Rabbi in the UK, Jonathan Sacks, is entitled Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times (Sacks, 2020). In the Preface, he
writes, ‘The free market and liberal democratic state together will not save liberty, because liberty can never be built by self-interest alone. I-based societies will eventually die’. Clearly, those reductionist features of education centred around individualism and economic ‘success’ identified by Bryk et al. (1993) have, according to Sacks, exacerbated over the past 25 years.

This 21st-century reiteration of the need for a community-based core to education modelled on shared values endorses the stance taken in the 1930s and 1940s by one of the greatest of all Catholic philosophers, Jacques Maritain (1882–1973). He offered a distinctive educational anthropology based on the notion of the person formed largely by moral forces, socially connected to the rest of humanity and who has a spiritual life which can be encouraged and directed towards a greater good, rather than mere self-aggrandizement (Maritain, 1943, 1946, 1962). Emphasizing the virtues of love and wisdom, he argued for the common good and claimed that increasing secularization was undermining this pursuit. Schooling should form, by contemplative as well as practical means, a moral and spiritual disposition towards justice, courage, beauty and truth (Torevell, 2010, 2019a; Zajonc, 2016). Like Sacks, he offered a countervailing voice to educational thinking which denied there is any such thing as moral truth and which sees paid employment as the primary aim of education (Eagleton, 2015). I shall say more about the emphasis on employment in my critique of Death of a Salesman a little later.

Grace (2016) has been writing about market-driven philosophies of education versus more holistic ones for some time now. As early as 2002, Grace suggested that the major challenge for Catholic school leaders resided in this clash: ‘If a market culture in education encourages the pursuit of material interests what becomes of a Catholic school’s prime commitment to religious and moral interests? And if the calculation of personal advantage dominates how can Catholic schools remain faithful to values of solidarity and community?’ (Grace, 2002: 199). Such approaches affect detrimentally those schools which are in socially deprived areas and cannot compete with schools in more affluent neighbourhoods, who play the ‘market game’ more efficiently because they have the resources to do so. That is why Grace advocates a strong, explicit communication of the values Catholic schools stand for and is keen to encourage more research on how they might achieve ‘mission integrity’ (Grace, 2002: 189–204).

What implications has all this for faith schools and colleges? I wish to focus on one foundational element in this debate – theological anthropology and the nature of the self – in order to clarify my contention that Catholic educators need to highlight this feature if they are to embed Catholic principles within their institutions against the prevailing zeitgeist. Peachey is right to say that ‘What it means to be man or woman, and how we should live in a society that challenges our fundamental beliefs about humanity are the key questions of our time’ (Peachey, 2018: 95). Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI highlighted that, ‘in order to educate, it is necessary to know the nature of the human person, to know who he or she is. The increasing prominence of a relativistic understanding of that nature presents
serious problems for education, especially moral education, jeopardising its universal extension’ (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, 2009: 61). The Catholic position is clear: an understanding of personhood is never fully recognized without God’s grace. This fosters the recognition that all persons are created in the image of God (imago Dei). Pring (2018), in his defence of publicly funded faith schools, draws a helpful distinction between faith and non-faith schools in this regard, to suggest that robust distinctiveness about the nature of personhood is one strategy of survival for Catholic (and faith) schools and colleges. He is astute on the notion of ‘autonomy’, and its contrasting meaning within religious and secular contexts. The religious version of autonomy is very different from the secular one, as it relies on an understanding of the person drawn from sacred Scripture and tradition, and includes a form of reasoning which gives pride of place (pace Rahner, 1966, 1968) to a sense of ‘mystery’ to human life and a human ideal to be sought, based on revelation and the person of Christ (Pring, 2018: 87–88; Whittle, 2016). Human beings are not ‘independent’, in a secular sense, because they depend for their existence on God’s creative act of love and are sustained by their intimate relationship with God in Christ. Consequently, it is important to use phrases like ‘independent learners’ with caution, lest they undermine the distinctive theological anthropology involved in religious notions of the self.

This battle about competing understandings of the self is clearly associated with the era of ‘new atheism’ (Beattie, 2007; Dawkins, 2006; Hitchens, 2007), which swirls relentlessly around and challenges faith positions on this question. Ward (2019) argues like Pring, partly on anthropological grounds, why the study of theology and religion matter and why it is a crucial dimension of any rounded education. It is as much an examination of human beings and their aspirations, about who we are, as it is about what the word ‘God’ might mean. It is ‘a study of what it is to be human’ (Ward, 2019: 2). Human beings respond to their experience of the world in myriad ways, frequently articulating religious beliefs about that experience. His understanding is related to his contention that, although religious practice is clearly on the decline in Western Europe, the fascination with understanding subjectivity and what the self might long for and how it seeks fulfilment are as strong as ever before. This is reflected in the vast number of cultural forms in our postmodern culture (art, film, advertising, television, novels, architecture, video games, popular and classical music and jewellery), which deal specifically with value-laden, transcendent themes. God might be ‘dead’ in the traditional sense, but it does not require too much imagination to see new emerging forms and patterns of spirituality on the increase. As Ward contends, ‘Millennials were born into a world that is post-secular. That does not mean secularism is over. What it does mean is that the secular view of the way things are in the world is no longer the predominant one—if, in fact, it ever was’ (Ward, 2019: 43). His position echoes Mellor and Shilling (2014)’s third category of secularization.

Eagleton (2015) is less sympathetic to these new cultural forms of spirituality than Ward. He contends that postmodernity has banished any idea of the possibility of a stable self and there is nothing to be redeemed any longer (Eagleton,
Nostalgia for the numinous has finally gone, as consumerist humanity wallows in self-made, depthless pride. Unlike modernism, there is now no God to believe in, no God-shaped hole at the centre of the universe, no ‘longer any secret interior place’ in which She can be installed (Eagleton, 2015: 186). He goes on: ‘Depth and interiority belong to a clapped-out metaphysics and to eradicate them is to abolish God by rooting out the underground places where She has been concealing Herself (Eagleton, 2015: 186–187). Postmodern ‘culture’ is characterized by the depthless, the anti-tragic, the non-linear, the anti-numinous, the anti-universalist and is suspicious of all absolutes; it is thoroughly post-religious. Because of this, it implicates in its wake the concomitant death of humanity and the extinction of the possibility of a stable and universal self, as Nietzsche warned. There is no agreement on what constitutes a legitimate anthropology any more. As such, it is in direct opposition to religion, which always posits a universal humanity to which we all belong and share (Eagleton, 2015: 188). Even humanity’s so-called ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-determination’ are a fake – for the self is no longer coherent enough to be labelled as such (Eagleton, 2015: 189). What has occurred, owing to the emergence of ersatz practices of ‘spirituality’, is a ‘fetishistic cult of otherness, but no Big Other’ (Eagleton, 2015: 191). He adds cynically that, at the present time, ‘The point of spirituality is to cater for the needs that one’s stylist and stockbroker cannot fulfil’ (Eagleton, 2015: 191). Here we witness the fourth category of Mellor and Shilling (2014).

I have much sympathy with Eagleton (2015)’s position and some with Ward (2019)’s. The point of this article is not to side with one or the other, but to highlight what theologians and cultural theorists say about the world in which Catholic schools are embedded. What both commentators agree on is that Truth has become a contested word and many now base their lives and secure their meaning from extra-religious sources. Young people wrestle daily with insidious bombardments which tell them to seek solace in social media, well-paid employment and consumerism. This trajectory could not be further from the sentiments expressed in The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988). Education is ‘...not gaining power’, but communion with each other and ‘events, and things...not as a means of material prosperity and success, but as a call to service and to be responsible for others’ (Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988: para 56). Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI extends this by insisting that Catholic education ought to promote holiness in students to equip them to serve others, especially those in greatest need. When he visited the UK in 2010, he said, ‘What God wants most of all for each one of you is that you should become holy. He loves you much more than you could ever begin to imagine, and he wants the very best for you. And by far the best thing for you is to grow in holiness’ (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, 2010). He added, ‘A good school provides a rounded education for the whole person. And a good Catholic school, over and above this, should help all its students to become saints’. Students’ happiness depends not on ‘money, in a career, in worldly success, or in our relationships with others, but in God. Only
God can satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts’ (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, 2010). Arthur echoes this stance: the aim of the Catholic school ‘is to enable students to achieve their complete dignity as persons in a relationship with Christ’ (Arthur, 2013: 86) The primary duty on teachers, therefore, is rooted in a theological anthropology – the ongoing transformation and divinization of the self over time, which Eastern theologians term theosis.

**Imago Dei**

It is now necessary to consider in more detail the meaning and significance of *imago Dei*. The ultimate message, writes Dupré (1976), of the mystics was that the self is *essentially* more than a mere self, that ‘transcendence belongs to its nature as much as the act through which it is an immanent self to itself, and that a total failure on the part of the mind’s part to realize this transcendence reduces the self to less than itself’ (Dupré, 1976: 104). Martin Soskice (1995), in making an extended political point, reflects Dupré’s position: ‘the death of God results in us taking from women and men any claim they may have to be revered as participating in the divine economy’ (Martin Soskice, 1995: 65). She quotes from Buber to support this claim: ‘You that in accordance with its nature cannot become an it’ (Martin Soskice, 1995: 65). But an ‘it’ does happen frequently, as I shall show later with a reference to Iago’s misogynist treatment of Desdemona in *Othello*.

The Spanish 16th-century mystic, St Teresa of Avila, in her classic *The Interior Castle*, rests her spiritual theology primarily on the notion of humanity made in *imago Dei*. God, the Head of the castle, resides within each person’s soul and has a ‘magnificent beauty’ (St Teresa of Avila, 1980: 2283.1.1). She writes that ‘it is a shame and unfortunate that through our own fault we do not understand ourselves or know who we are’ (St Teresa of Avila, 1980: 2841.2). As Jantzen comments about St Teresa’s belief, ‘...her central conception is of the self as having great dignity and beauty, often unappreciated because of poor self-esteem’ (Jantzen, 2000: 688). St John of the Cross (1987) wrote along similar lines in *The Spiritual Canticle*, again with reference to the beauty of the mirrored image: ‘wherefore I shall be you in your beauty, and you will be me in my beauty, because your beauty will be my beauty, and therefore we shall behold each other in your beauty’ (John of the Cross, 1987: 275.37.1). This theology clearly has implications for notions of self-esteem and self-confidence, as I shall demonstrate with reference to my two chosen literary texts.

However, it was the earlier 12th-century theologians who really unpacked the full significance of *imago Dei* with verve (Torevell, 2007: 58–63). Many were fascinated by this belief and the blurring of that image through human failure (a fall I discuss later with reference to Othello and Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*). The French Benedictine monk, St Aelred of Rievaulx (1990), argues in *The Mirror of Charity* that because the human soul reflects the image of God, it is capable of participating in his wisdom and blessedness. In *Dialogue on the Soul* (1981), he
maintains that being made in the image of God, the soul vivifies and gives life to the body, suffering no corruptibility. He was one of the first theologians to distinguish between image and likeness. The divine image is gradually made perfect by becoming like God and only occurs by a bestowed gift which is gratuitous (impressa per gratiam) and added over and above (superaddita) the image. When this begins to happen, God’s grace brings the soul back towards its pristine condition before the Fall. The return is a journey back to who we really are, besides a return to the Father. This Prodigal Son motif was captured much earlier in St Augustine’s writings and in the Prologue to The Rule of St Benedict (White, 2008), and both influenced St Aelred. William of St Thierry, a contemporary of St Aelred, was also fascinated by imago Dei. In The Nature and Dignity of Love (William of St Thierry, 1981), he writes that it is important to remember that when the triune God created us in his image, he formed in us a likeness to the Trinity; both St Aelred and William of St Thierry were deeply influenced by St Augustine’s de Trinitate, the most illuminating of all descriptions in Christianity of how the self reflects the triune God (Gioia, 2008). Karl Rahner, in the 20th century, also shone a new light on theological anthropology with his emphasis on the innate orientation of each person towards the divine (Whittle, 2016). He claims that the imago Dei is best understood within the concept of the ‘supernatural existential’, which means that everyone has within them the gift of God’s grace which encourages and aids them to seek the divine or the Truth described as Mystery. He writes, ‘even when he does not “know” it and does not believe it, that is, even when he cannot make it an individual object of knowledge...man always lives consciously in the presence of the triune God of eternal life. God is the unexpressed but real “Whither” of the dynamism of all spiritual and moral life in the realm of spiritual existence...’ (Rahner, 1966: 180–181). All humanity is ‘spirit in the world’ (the title of one of Rahner’s books, 1968), because ‘they embody a thrusting elevation towards an infinite, unknowable horizon’ (Torevell, 2007: 151). The documents of the Second Vatican Council were significantly influenced by Rahner. Chapter 1 of Gaudium et Spes (1965) is entitled ‘The Dignity of the Human Person’, and its first section is devoted to a discussion of how humanity is made ‘in the Image of God’ (Flannery, 1992: 913–914). In a lovely summary of human nature, the document records how when a person ‘is drawn to think about his real self he returns to those deep recesses of his being where God who probes the heart awaits him, and where he himself decides his own destiny in the sight of God’ (Flannery, 1992: 915). So ‘when he recognises himself as a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being led astray by false imaginings that are due to merely physical or social causes. On the contrary, he grasps what is profoundly true in this matter’ (Flannery, 1992: 915).

Justifiable feminist critiques of the reception of imago Dei have been written. Ruether argues for a full recognition of the imago Dei in both women and men, as a corrective to the patriarchal anthropology of the Christian tradition (Ruether, 1992, 1998; Beattie, 2006). Fulkerson (1997) offers that as Christianity has focused on the maleness of Jesus ‘to characterise authentic human being and to limit the implicit universal reach of imago Dei’, a refiguring is necessary. Butler (1999) is
more provocative when she suggests that the setting up of a heterosexual binary occurs by those writers who perpetuate the view that there are simply two kinds of people – woman and man – and calls for much more recognition of gender fluidity. The history of misogyny and the violence against women can never be divorced from such historical underplaying of female identity as *imago Dei*. Iago’s treatment of Desdemona is simply one example of this legacy.

**Teaching theological anthropology creatively: The English Literature curriculum**

I now return to the central logic of my argument by asking how the cultural attack on Catholic educational principles might be countered effectively. In Arthur’s ground-breaking book, *The Ebbing Tide*, he argues that the curriculum in Catholic schools is largely secular and much work needs to be done to correct this (Arthur, 1995). His follow-up article, ‘The de-Catholicising of the curriculum in English Catholic schools’ (Arthur, 2013), stated that little has improved, and there is no available evidence to suggest anything has changed for the better since then. This claim is not underestimating the enormous pressure schools are under to be ‘successful’ in relation to the curricular set by secular authorities. However, it underpins how crucial it is to at least attempt to enhance spiritual and moral growth for students within the boundaries of such curricular, otherwise distinctiveness might be considered to reside solely in the establishment of a chaplaincy or the running of a good Religious Education department. Religious development cannot be divorced from the rest of the curriculum, because there is an intrinsic unity between revelation and other forms of knowledge (Newman, 2015), and persons have an inalienable dignity, for they ‘are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28). Arthur argues that many Catholic schools tend to adopt a ‘dualistic model’ of the curriculum which splits ‘education conceptually and practically into a religious section and a much larger secular part’; there is ‘little in the way of an evaluation of the secular context, far less a coherent response to the secularisation process in education’ (Arthur, 2013: 95). He concludes by suggesting that, because of this tendency, Catholic educational principles become little more than ‘historical memory’ (Arthur, 2013: 95). I think he has a point.

I now recommend one method for teaching theological anthropology with reference to two set examination texts in A-level English Literature. Thousands of sixth-form students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland study Shakespeare (2016)’s *Othello* and Arthur Miller (2010)’s *Death of a Salesman*. The opportunity is afforded here for those working in Catholic schools to offer interpretations of such texts which align critically with a Catholic philosophy of education rooted in a distinctive anthropology. This is a useful means of delving into this issue in a creative manner, without proselytizing or unhealthily persuading students that a theological position is the best or only one to hold. This is not a process of *eisegesis*, but of illuminating how literary works give rise to reflection on Christian
beliefs. Recent research indicates that Shakespeare was deeply influenced by his Catholic background and that an understanding of Catholicism is helpful in interpreting his work (Dutton et al., 2003). Interestingly, Miller came from a Jewish background (although he did not practise his inherited faith), and this aspect has become an important component of some recent criticism of his play (Bial, 2005). Insightful questioning and reflection would encourage students to see the spiritual and moral significance of such works. Teachers have the added advantage in using such texts to offer non-proselytizing works, which might be less off-putting than overtly confessional ones. Dramatists who create compelling literary forms open up questions about the significance of students’ lives, who they are and what gives their lives worth. Creative form matters as much as content, in drawing them into an exploration of selfhood (Eagleton, 2007). I will now say more about why I believe the texts are a judicious choice with reference to the exploration of theological anthropology.

The suitability of the chosen texts

Othello

Smith suggests that ‘Shakespeare appeals to us because it is about us’ (Smith, 2019: 210), and no clearer example is forthcoming than the tragedy of Othello. It centres on who we are and how we react in difficult times, in this case when we have been deceived by someone we trust. It has claimed importance because it is a ‘document in cultural difference and racialised identities’ (Smith, 2019: 210). A drama of the conflicted self, the audience witnesses how personhood can be uplifted or abused. Contextualized within the narrative of a black man in a white world, Othello discovers painfully the many layers of his own self – both good and bad – when that self is lied to and made to feel inept. Like Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman, both ‘heroes’ commit suicide as a consequence of this unfolding self-revelation. Both lacked sufficient moral and spiritual resources to draw upon to save their lives and, although Othello is full of remorse for his murderous deed, he cannot come to believe that he will ever be forgiven. He dies in despair, wishing cruel retribution on himself: ‘...Whip me, ye devils/From the possession of this heavenly sight!/Blow me about in winds! Toss me in sulphur!/Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!’ (Act 5, Sc 2, l 275–278). He believes his shattered self-image as a dignified warrior is irreparable.

Besides this interrogation about the disfigurement of a glorious humanity, students might be introduced to personal susceptibilities which have the potential to obliterate self-esteem. One such flaw is pride, the most dangerous of the seven deadly sins. By studying Othello with reference to Genesis 3, students can be introduced to how the proud fallen angel, envious by reason of that same pride which had induced him to turn away from God in the first place, encouraged Adam to gloat over subjects of his own, rather than be subject to God. The serpent enviously gloats over all those whom he wishes to deceive. St Augustine advises us
that he ‘sought to insinuate himself, by crafty suggestion, into the heart of man, whose unfallen state he envied now that he himself had fallen’ (Augustine, 1998: 606, my italics). He reminds us that the pride of the transgressor Adam was greater than the transgression itself. When he tried to excuse himself by blaming Eve ‘...she gave me of the tree...’ Nowhere here is there heard any petition for pardon, nor indeed, any plea for healing’ (Augustine, 1998: 611). The legacy of blaming ‘the woman’ is seen in Iago’s accusation about Desdemona’s propensity for marital infidelity: ‘She must change for youth...When she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice’ (Act 1, 3, l 350). Othello begins to echo Iago’s cruel misogyny when he describes his wife in Act 4, scene 2 as ‘false as hell’, a ‘weed’, a ‘public commoner’, an ‘impudent strumpet’, a ‘cunning whore of Venice’, wishing she had ‘ne’er been born’. He demands to know, ‘Why, what art thou?’ (Act 4, 2, l 33). His previous description of Desdemona’s love for him due to the dangers he ‘had passed’ and his reciprocal love for her – ‘I loved her that she did pity them’ (Act 1, 3, l 169) – is forgotten. Desdemona, in contrast, makes a humble, Christ-like answer: ‘Your wife, my lord; your true and loyal wife’ (l 31).

The analogy of Iago with the devil (the reversal of imago Dei) is clear. He is not far from the truth when the murdered Roderigo proclaims, ‘O damned Iago! O inhuman dog!’ (Act 5, 1, l 62). Iago decides ‘to abuse Othello’s ear’ (Act 1, 3, l 371) and, in demonic fashion, he uses intelligent insinuations to penetrate the core of Othello’s being: ‘there where I have garnered up my heart/Where either I must live or bear no life’ (Act 4, 2, l 56–57). Adam, Eve and Othello fall victim to duplicity. Iago is never what he seems. This reverberating theme throughout the play is heightened by the repeated dramatic irony of several lines which reinforce this truth: Iago’s ‘Men should be what they seem’ is echoed by Othello’s reply, ‘Certain, men should be what they seem’ (Act 3, 3, l 28–29). This is reinforced by Iago’s cunning suggestion to Othello that Desdemona might not be as good as she appears to be – ‘She did deceive her father, marrying you’ (Act 1, 3, l 209). Likewise, the serpent appeals to the vanity and vulnerability of Adam and Eve, insinuating doubts about the very nature of God. Students, by examining such lines, come to realize that pride, envy and deceit are inextricably interwoven and result in the undermining of the person God calls them to be. They become more aware of the history of misogyny, too.

John Cassian’s Conference 18 explores this notion of envy with insight: one of the brethren, like the brothers of the biblical Joseph, was ‘filled with the wish to sully the other man’s beauty, with some tarnish or stain’ (Cassian, 1985: 196–198). He claimed that the devout Abba Paphnutius had stolen his book from his cell, but in reality he had planted it there as evidence of his guilt. Paphnutius, although innocent, agreed to do penance for his assumed wrongdoing. Finally, the culprit, ‘the sly purloiner of another’s good name’, admitted his guilt and confessed his sin to Paphnutius, ‘whose reputation he had in jealous hostility sought to take away’; he received pardon from the Abba and was freed from his guilt (Cassian, 1985: 197). Paphnutius is held up by this moral action, as one who was mature in faith and to be followed as an exemplar. Although Coleridge famously suggested that
Iago acts out of motiveless motivation, for me the reason is clear – envy. Some productions seek to illuminate this by suggesting Iago’s envy of Othello’s promotion to the role of great warrior–commander; others infer that he is envious of Othello making love to the person he lusts after, Desdemona, and in some performances, when Iago is portrayed as a gay man, he is shown as being fiercely envious of Desdemona who shares her bed with the person with whom he wishes to sleep. Other points can be made about theological anthropology too. For the biblical commentator, Richardson, the serpent should be seen not as something external to our nature, but as a personification of temptation (Richardson, 1963: 71).

**Death of a Salesman**

Miller’s (2010) play is also about anthropology. I concur with Barker’s (2007) critique that the play’s central theme is the authenticity and dignity of the self, and in this it situates itself in relation to the Genesis teaching. He draws from Krieger to make his point that Willy, the tragic ‘hero’, searches within and finds ‘himself hollow at the core: because he has been seized from without by the hollowness of the moral universe whose structures and meaning have until then sustained him’ (Krieger, 1973: 15). The false rhetoric of capitalism which he himself employs in phrases like ‘Be liked and you will never want’ (Act One, pp. 25–26) to prop up his fragile, sinking self, only produce, writes Barker, ‘an ideological mystification’ of human experience that ‘bars the message from the experience which is to ensoul it’ (Barker, 2007: 38). Words are used in his employment context which appear sacred but are, in essence, devoid of any. He feels he has become an ‘it’, to reclaim Martin Soskice (1995)’s observation. Willy’s fight with his own feelings of worthlessness is revealed when he says to his wife, ‘I don’t know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I’m not noticed’ (Act One, p. 28). It is Linda who has the clearest understanding of who her husband is. She tells her son that ‘Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person’ because ‘he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him’ (Act One, pp. 44–45). Her words of warning, ‘He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog’ (Act One, pp. 44–45), have a chilling, ironic ring to them. The ‘culture’ of employment when his employers ‘loved him’ has gone – they are all dead or retired now. She adds, ‘He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no-one knows him anymore, no one welcomes him’ (Act One, p. 45). One might want to suggest Linda holds on to, more than anyone else in the play, the *imago Dei* within her husband as she chastises her sons for calling him ‘crazy’.

Because previous values no longer hold, there is a bitter sense of loss and of alienation within Willy. He loses himself not in the religious sense of an ascetic discipline in order to regain himself (Matt 16:35), but in the tragic sense that he has nothing left but to sell his own life for the misguided vestiges of an assumed dignity which will, he believes, be given to him and his family only after his death. The spiritual self is here shorn of any meaning, and he succumbs to the false
rhetoric of capitalist exchange; the self becomes another commodity to be sold in
the same way he sold them as a salesman. As Miller writes on this theme,
‘...man’s deprivation of a once-extant state of bliss unjustly shattered...’. It is
as though ‘once we had an identity, a being somewhere in the past, which in the
present has lost its completeness, its definiteness’ (quoted in Barker, 2007: 40).
Students might be introduced to how tragic situations like Willy’s bring about a
desperate urgency to apportion blame when the self is afflicted (Poole, 2005: 45).
Who or what is largely to blame for the tragic fall of Willy Loman, his slide into
anxiety and depression and his dark thoughts of suicide resulting in the final taking
of his own life? To whom or to what does the finger point? The hero/protagonist?
Forces or agencies with irresistible power beyond human control? Fate, fortune,
chance, the stars, history, heredity, loss of religious identity? Usually in tragedy it
is a combination of human weakness, coupled with a pressing social order.

Critchley argues that Greek tragedy ‘slows things down by confronting us with
what we do not know about ourselves’ (Critchley, 2019: 3), and the same is true of
modern tragedy. Audiences watching Death of a Salesman are probably alarmingly
alert to the fact that absolute self-knowledge is never possible. As Freud has
reminded us, ‘rational’ attempts to understand ourselves present a precarious road
to walk down, constantly threatened by hidden and inscrutable motivations and
‘irrational’ unconscious stirrings. The set design for the first production of the
play was by Jo Meilziner, who constructed many-levelled stages, intending to reflect
Willy’s mental state and which served to blur the past, the present and the possible
future, as well as indicating the deep layers of Willy’s sub-conscious. Despite the
plaintive sound of a flute and evocative stage lighting to signal temporal transition
(Brater, 2010: xviii), the audience becomes as bemused as Willy about the action and
whether it is taking place in the present or in the past, as the play conjures up a
dream-like remembering of past events, including repressed guilt about an adulter-
ous affair. Indeed, Miller (2010) from the very start gives advice to any director and
set designer: ‘An air of dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality’ (p. 7).
It is also seen early on in the first scene of the play when Willy tells his wife that while
driving, ‘...I absolutely forgot I was driving...five minutes later I’m dreaming
again...’ (Act One, p. 9). And finally, we are told, ‘He had the wrong dreams.
All, all, wrong’ (Requiem, p. 110). The audience enter the befuddled space of Willy’s
mind and identify with his confusions and bewilderments, as if they were their own.
In biblical terms, his recognition of himself as imago Dei was waning fast. These
feelings are enhanced by the claustrophobic looming apartment blocks that rob the
sunlight from Willy’s garden. Willy and the audience are trapped and there seems no
way out. And it is the trap of not knowing what is happening to oneself and what
constitutes the worth of that self.

Miller’s tragic hero presents the audience with someone who has to endure the
reality that he is no longer valued as an employee by a company he has worked for
over a lifetime. The creeping despair which leads to his eventual suicide begins to
appear once he becomes exhausted with his job and is no longer able to sell things
as he once did, but as the play unfolds, the audience becomes aware that his own
self-respect and identity are tied up very closely with his employment. Who Willy is is never far removed from the salesman he has been all his life, despite having a loving wife and two sons. Once his dignity as an employee begins to collapse, his own feelings of self-worth begin to cave in too. When Biff exclaims, with some accuracy, according to the social laws and terms of capitalism, that he and his father are ‘...a dime a dozen...’ (Act Two, p. 105), Willy defiantly retorts, ‘I am Willy Loman...’ (Act Two, p. 105). Here, we see a heroic defiance of fate, and it seems that Willy is able to mount his own moral attack against those forces which reduce human beings to numbers and faceless anonymity. Miller claims that what Willy wanted ‘was to excel, to win out over anonymity and meaninglessness, to love and be loved, and above all, perhaps, to count’ (quoted by Centola, 2007: 33). A tragic hero embodies and represents a challenge to a grim determinism by the freedom of choice s/he makes. Is Willy going to defy the odds and find a positive way forward, giving some hope to the audience that he will not be finally crushed? Remember, the audience do not know, despite the title, what kind of death Willy shall endure, but what Willy is unable to do is construct a personal identity of moral worth not associated with his employment. The phrase ‘I am Willy Loman’ is never really wrenched from his identity as a salesman. The title of the play and the iconic image of Willy walking onto the stage at the start of the play with his burdensome suitcase in hand endorse this equivalency which eventually leads to the catastrophe. Why can Willy not accept that his working life, on which he placed so much of his own identity, is over? And why can he not finally submit himself to a different future and find peace in this way? Miller partly answers these questions when he writes in *Tragedy and the Common Man* (Miller, 1949) that the genre ‘derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world...today the fear is as strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best’. Certainly, Willy has a deep sense of displacement, as his self-worth becomes terminally equated with a monetary ‘success ethic’.

The dark underbelly of the American Dream, and the nullifying, debilitating pressure of working in a capitalist system which has little regard for personhood, is never fully realized by Willy. We are told in the *Requiem* by Biff, his father ‘never knew who he was’ (p. 111). It is only possible to retaliate against the social forces and their bearing on human well-being when one is cognizant of their lethal potential and when one has a stable base of identity from which to fight them (Torevell, 2019b). Willy’s positive self-image disappeared. Miller originally conceived the Lomans as a Jewish family but decided not to pursue this. Instead he opted for them ‘As Jews light years away from religion or community that might have fostered Jewish identity, [the Lomans] exist in a spot most Americans feel they inhabit—on the side-walk side of the glass, looking in at a well-lighted place’ (Miller, 2012: 46). Taylor’s ‘middle-ground’ space, however, has enormous dangers attached to it which we see unfold throughout the drama. This is why Bial can add with some persuasion that, ‘In terms of the play’s narrative then, it is the lack
of connection to his Jewish roots that causes Willy Loman’s downfall. Having tried too hard to assimilate, to be well-liked, to be American, he is left with no core values or beliefs to call his own’ (Bial, 2005: 58).

The audience come to recognize themselves that Willy is dangerously close to self-destruction, a recognition to which he himself becomes gradually attuned. Frye (1957: 193) contends that what becomes acknowledged by the audience is seldom new; it is something which has been there all along and, by its ongoing reappearances and manifestations, brings the end in line with the beginning. We are first introduced to Willy’s dangerous driving at early moments in the drama and to the ominous, symbolic presence of the hosepipe. The audience begin to wonder, as these cumulative dramatic devices take hold of their consciousness, whether Willy attempted suicide much earlier before his last, definitive act at the close of the play. As Cave points out, ‘the nature of the recognition will inevitably depend on the mode of ignorance that precedes it’ (Cave, 1988: 70). In one sense, then, Miller prepares his audience for a final, dreadful disclosure off stage, even, paradoxically, if it comes as a shock – such dying is never accepted sanguinely. The title is the ‘before the action’ notification that death is unavoidable, but this does not mean that an audience will not sweat through the dark exigencies of Willy’s fate.

**Conclusion: Educating Catholic students**

As I have expounded earlier, Catholic schools and colleges are under enormous pressure to balance the need to maintain a Christian ethos, and thus their own survival, with the daily pressures and demands of government policies and insistencies, explicitly aligned to market forces and academic success. This is compounded by the growing secularization of society. I am not denying this is a tricky balance to maintain and is clearly a formidable challenge for senior managers to get right, but what I am offering is one pathway based on the teaching of theological anthropology centred on the richness of the texts students will study as part of their examination syllabus. Therefore, staff working in Catholic schools might wish to consider what educating their students in the Catholic tradition might entail in terms of curriculum delivery. Such a reflection will help them sustain the mission integrity of their school or college in which they work and save their mission statements from becoming mere marketing slogans (Cuypers, 2004). I have given one example of how this might be achieved by the judicious study of set texts in A-level English Literature. *Imago Dei* can come alive for students. Loving and educating our students by such brave moves is, as St Paul reminds us (1 Cor 13:1–13), never an easy matter, but it is a crucially important one.

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Note
1. The ‘Jewishness’ of the drama is associated with the sense of suffering throughout the play. Bloom (2007) suggests that Miller has captured in this text an ancient Jewish paradigm, which is also a universal one. He writes, ‘Willy Loman is hardly a biblical figure, and he is not supposed to be Jewish, yet something crucial in him is Jewish, and the play does belong to that undefined entity we can call Jewish literature …’ (Bloom, 2007: 3). It is true that in Willy we witness someone who seems permanently in exile and that the pain he suffers, like Jewish identity, is made sense of in the meaning it bears. Miller was asked by an interviewer if he was influenced by the Jewish tradition. He replied, ‘Jews can’t afford to revel too much in the tragic because it might overwhelm them. Consequently, in most Jewish writing there’s always the caution, “Don’t push too far toward the abyss, because you’re liable to fall in”’ (quoted in Bloom, 2007: 148). This Jewish refusal of nihilism and despair is not realized by Willy. However, Bloom’s contention that the coherence and strength of the play resides in its portrayal of a cosmos informed by Jewish memory is a significant one.

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