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*The Giving Tree*  
Pedagogical Essay

## Introduction

The struggle is real. Defending the significance of using literature across the curriculum is something many instructors face—especially teaching “kid’s books.” Lessons, moral or academic, can be gained from any type or genre of literature. Children’s books specifically, even those as perceivably simplistic as works by authors like Seuss and Silverstein, hold a valuable and relevant place in the instruction of high school and even college-age students in a context not limited to Children’s Literature courses.

*The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein is an excellent example of a children’s book with a decidedly simple style. Uncomplicated language, uncluttered illustrations, and an elementary plot earn *The Giving Tree* the classification of “suitable for children K-2.” The book tells the story of a tree personified and her selfless love for a boy as he grows up and grows old. In the beginning, the boy makes crowns from her leaves, swings from her branches, eats her apples, and sleeps in her shade; the boy loves the tree, too. But through the years, he sells her apples for money, builds a house from her branches, and cuts down her trunk to make a boat and sail away, which is the only time the tree is unhappy. After a long time, the boy returns, and in his old age wishes only to sit and rest on the stump of the tree who loves him. This makes the tree happy.

## Background

Shel Silverstein is known for his versatility. His list of works include poetry, children's literature, screenwriting, songs for Dr. Hook, and articles for Playboy, among others. His talent runs the gamut, and his free-thinking style often drew negative attention from parents and teachers alike. In spite of this, children love his clever and lyrical stories and poetry.

Silverstein wrote *The Giving Tree* in 1962, and Harper-Row published it in 1964 after William Cole, an editor at Simon & Schuster, told Silverstein, "the trouble with this 'Giving Tree' of yours is that . . . it's not a kid's book — too sad, and it isn't for adults — too simple" (Paul). After its publication, the book faced harsh criticism. It was contested for its portrayal of the boy as purely misogynistic. It was accused of criminalizing the logging and deforestation industries. It was said to be all-around too depressing. And in 1988 at the Boulder Public Library in Colorado, it was actually banned by librarians for being "sexist" (Flocken).

### Ideas for Teaching This Text

A plethora of pedagogical opportunities for young elementary students arise from this story; lessons of giving and generosity, of the benefits of selflessness and altruism. But *The Giving Tree* offers teachers several opportunities for far more complex lessons in addition to the exercises commonly associated with a primary school classroom. Occasion for use of this children's work could arise at any level of education, including the university setting. Let us explore one example of an elementary-level lesson, and one lesson ideal for the college level.

An activity for a third or fourth grade classroom would begin with the teacher reading the story aloud to the class. The students would then be assembled into groups of five or six and asked to make a list of words to describe the tree, and a separate list of words to describe the boy. It would likely be necessary to give an example or two for each to get them started. They would then be asked to share their lists aloud while the teacher writes the words on the board, noting which ones recur most frequently and prompting students to describe why these words apply to each character. (“The boy is selfish because he never says thank-you...the boy is resourceful because of all the uses he finds for the tree...the tree is generous because of all she gives to the boy,” etc.) Once the list is on the board and is complete to the students’ satisfaction, the teacher would ask them who seems happier and more content at the end of the book: the tree or the boy. Can you be happy and sad at the same time? If you were the tree, would you be happy? Ideally, and perhaps with a little guidance, they would come to the conclusion that the tree is happier or at least more content than the boy. The students would then be asked to discuss aloud as a class what this means. What are the rewards of being an unselfish, giving individual? They would be urged to give examples of ways in which they are like the tree, or share a time they were unselfish. Then they would be prompted to journal, inviting them to brainstorm ways they could be more giving and selfless, and to write a note to the tree and another to the boy. They would again be offered the opportunity to share the letters aloud with the class. To take the lesson further, students could be assigned the task to follow through by implementing one or two of the ideas they had for altruism outside of the classroom, and then writing a paragraph or two to describe their experience.

The opportunity this book offers for the college setting is more complex. It could be used in the context of a sociology or ethics class, or analyzed in a literature or banned books class. Four to five copies of the book would need to be available, depending on the class size. Students would be read the book aloud, because we are never too old to be read to. Then students would be split into groups, ideally four to five people. Each group would be provided with a copy of the book and one of the following discussion/analysis questions.

1. What do you think of the tree? Altruism or martyrdom? What's the difference?  
Which does she portray?
2. Discuss the role of the tree from the perspective of a feminist; what has Shel done to piss them off? Is it a legitimate anger?
3. Who *does* this tree represent, anyway? What is the relationship portrayed? Mother and child? Mother Nature and the deforestation enterprise? God and humanity?  
Then, what does this mean in relation to the contesting and banning of the text?
4. Analyze the illustrations—the boy with his back to the reader at the end; the simplistic line-drawing nature of the pictures; how the tree changes over time; physical interaction between the boy and the tree.

After the groups have discussed their respective questions and considered the answers thoroughly, they would be asked to read their topic to the class and present their thoughts on said topic. This should catalyze further discussion among the class on each point brought forth. Obviously, the questions could be adapted to correlate with the specific course and its goals.

Literary merit exists in the most surprising places. To discount literature simply because it is labeled as children's, or worse, to avoid using literature across the curriculum altogether, would be a terrible disservice to students. Books need not be solely academic texts to make us think and to offer timeless and invaluable lessons, both for the head and the heart.

Flocken, Corinne. "'Bad Books : Censorship's Role Examined in Fullerton College Display." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 26 Sept. 1989. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.

Paul, Pamela. "The Children's Authors Who Broke the Rules." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 17 Sept. 2011. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.

Silverstein, Shel. *The Giving Tree*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. Print.