

Teaching Sustainable Business Ethics by Literary Analysis

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Abstract. Fostering ecological awareness in studying economics is important, bearing in mind that business today is to maintain the sustainability of the earth's resources. This study examines Heinrich Böll's "The Balek Scales" and Tayeb Salih's "A Handful of Dates" to see whether the two short stories are suitable for teaching business and environmental ethics to both students of English and economics. Using content analysis method, this library research uses principles in sustainable business ethics to interpret the two stories. Data analysis shows that both stories exemplify concepts such as autonomy, integrity, justice, professionalism, and environmental awareness. This study concludes that the short stories discussed provide pedagogical tools to teach the basic concepts of professional and environmental ethics in the business world all students today need to know.

Keywords: *Ethics, Short Stories, Sustainability, Professionalism*

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INTRODUCTION

Literary works as creative arts provide context-specific and valuable references for social issues using fresh metaphors, imagery, and numerous literary devices to be easily remembered by learners (Cruz & Thornton, 2013; Davis, 2015). Character education and ethical behaviors can be implanted through literature studies. It would seem that (young) learners will likely learn best all things relevant to their day-to-day lives. This study would argue that literature may help create a more sustainable world through works that address such environmental issues as climate change (Clode & Stasiak, 2014), global warming (Gorman, 2008), and sustainability (Buser & Koch, 2014), to name but three. Literary works that call attention to the above ecological themes are efficient to cultivate people's awareness. When people are aware, it will be easier for them to participate in finding solutions for environmental problems. Numerous poems, novels, short stories, and plays written by concerned world authors not only provoke but also inspire people to take action to hold back earth degradation. For example, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson published in 1962 helped a few American states outlaw the use of DDT. Written in 2004, the Indonesian novel *Jamangilak Tak Pernah Menangis* [Jamangilak Never Cries] by Martin Aleida was inspired by the rayon factory pollution of the Asahan river as life source for people living around Lake Toba, Sumatra. *Unbowed* that won the 2004 Noble Price in Literature is a memoir exploring the connection between environmental conservation and good governance written by the Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai. Ecologically concerned literary pieces help create awareness that people and nature should live together in a mutualistic relationship.

It is therefore not uncommon to use literature to teach students of different branches of learning as shown by the wealth of studies on literature teaching across disciplines. The use of short stories to teach economics is a learning breakthrough for both students of economics and English literature (Ruder, 2011, 2014). Encouraging economics teachers to supplement the customary teaching methods with short stories. Ruder (2011, p. 29) further claims that some basic economics concepts like business cycles, non-monetary benefits and costs, market economy, supply and demand, etc. can be better grasped by diverse reading materials. Similarly, Schwarze, Peeples, Schneider, & Bsumek (2014) suggest the use of movies to introduce incentives and game theory, while Kish-Goodling (1998) uses other literary genres to teach concepts of loan and interests. This is to say that literature and popular culture provide interesting and interactive resources to teach basic principles, for instance opportunity cost as argued by (Luccasen & Thomas, 2010). Mindful of the fact that today's business should be eco-friendly, it is important to teach business and environmental ethics with which literature can play a significant role. A number of literary works impart morals and ethics that can be used to teach students of economics to be aware of and responsible for the gradually depleted earth.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applied literary analysis research method to examine two short stories to see how they are apt to teach sustainable business ethics to both students of English and economics. The stories include Heinrich Böll's "The Balek Scales" (translated by Leila Vennewitz) and Tayeb Salih's "A Handful of Dates" (Denys Johnson-Davies' translation, set in, respectively, Prague and Sudan. To interpret the short stories, the study used principles in businesses and environmental ethics by Salisu Barau, Stringer, & Adamu (2016) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (Anggraini, F. R. R., & Siswanto, 2016; Buchan, 2005) as theoretical concepts. To contextualize the texts, library research techniques by George (2019) were used to change imagination into insight.

This study also made use of neuroscience theory applied in literature, that is, using creative arts to activate human's nerve system to transfer short-term information to long-term memory for problem solving (Davis, 2015). Characters and events in a short story are not real-world examples. However, fictional characters may provide inspiration to motivate people to think critically about, for example, doing ethical and environmentally acceptable business. To quote but two studies, Michaelson (2005) and Van Buskirk, London, & Plump (2015), respectively, uses poetry to teach business leadership and Shakespeare's dramas to discuss moral conduct in business. Both studies show that literature expands understanding.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study proceeds to implementing the values in the two selected stories to principles in sustainable business ethics. The aim is to find out what values in both stories are resonant to principles in doing ethical business. Hopefully, the students' level of imagination can be heightened by continual exposure to such creative arts as short stories that are both entertaining and transformative.

To ease the discussion, the précis of the first story is of use. "The Balek Scales" is written by Heinrich Böll, the 1972 Nobel Literary Prize winner, about the rich Balek von Biligan's injustice towards the village children who gather wild mushrooms, hayflowers, spices, and other forest foliage to exchange with a few cents based on the weight decided by Balek, the sole owner of the scales in the neighborhood. A boy also known as the narrator's grandfather has revealed the Balek family's dishonesty. He discreetly places five pebbles on the scale to find out how much the scales are rigged before walking through the forest to find a pharmacy in the nearby village to weigh the pebbles. The boy finds the Baleks rig the scales down by 1.95 ounces per pound for their profit. Once he has told this discovery to his parents, those who have been deceived for years come to protest. In order not to lose face, the Baleks use their power through local police to stop the protesters; and the priest is requested to display the scales' precision publicly. The villagers' trust however cannot be brought back. They wittily sing praise for justice hymns to mock the Baleks when arriving for the Sunday service until the hymns are subsequently forbidden. We are told that all family members of the narrator's grandfather receive harsh punishment for having made the powerful Baleks humiliated. They all have to leave the village. Although their lives as exiles are much

harder, they never regret for having exposed injustice done for generations by one single family.

Trust and Respect

To begin with the first story, the business run by the Baleks scarcely complies with the business moralities found in 4 of 7 Caux Round Table Principles for Responsible Business, i.e. building trust, respect rules and convention, respect for environment, and avoidance of illicit activities (Young, 2003). The people in one small village in Prague where the narrator's grandfather lives mostly work in the flax shed, a rayon factory owned by Balek von Bilgan with dreadful condition for the workers' health: "For five generations they had been breathing in the dust which rose from the crushed flax stalks, letting themselves be killed off by slow degrees" (Böll, 1980, p. 133). They risk themselves for "during the day they would carry the flax stalks to the antiquated machines, with no protection from the dust and at the mercy of the heat which came pouring out of the drying kilns" (Böll, 1980, p. 133).

Next, the fact that the Baleks use the only scales in town to run their business without the deliberation of the stakeholders (e.g. plants collectors and customers of Frau Balek's small shop) shows that the business is not trustworthy. The scales is described as follows:

"[T]he old-fashioned bronze-gilt, ornate Balek scales did not look as if there was anything wrong with them, and five generations had entrusted the swinging black pointer with what they had gone out as eager children to gather from the woods" (Böll, 1980, p. 134).

Disrespect of rules is furthermore shown in Balek's self-made regulation of disallowing anyone to have scales in the house; and rule-breaking means unemployment – one cannot work in the factory or selling produce to the Baleks. The family is powerful, "so far reaching that no one in the neighboring village would give him work either, or buy his forest herbs" (Böll, 1980, p. 133). Alas, the villagers are oblivious that the Balek business has cheated them for five generations. Böll writes: "True, there were some among these quiet people who flouted the law, poachers bent on making more money in one night than they could earn in a whole month in the flax sheds, but even these people apparently never thought of buying scales or making their own" (Böll, 1980, p. 134).

Illicit activities are also clear in Balek's business. First, in order to lure children to gather mushrooms and aromatic plants to trade-in, Frau Balek gives each child a lemon drop of cheap variety (priced at one mark a kilo) while diverting the children's attention away from the scales the Baleks deceitfully use to weigh the produces. Secondly, the influential Baleks von Bilgan hire gendarmes, the semi-military force to protect their business. When protesters swarm into their estate, the gendarmes turn the situation into chaos killing and wounding several people. So powerful is Balek that the authorities from reeve to reverend side with the family to cover up the unlawful business activities.

Mentioned must be made here to teach accounting students the Whistleblowing concept (Anggraini, F. R. R., & Siswanto, 2016). Whistleblowing

means disclosure of information on unlawful and/or unethical practices in a company or an organization to parties capable of taking necessary action. In “The Balek Scales”, the narrator’s grandfather could have been a Whistleblower, had he been treated as a stakeholder. On the contrary, individuals or group of people in the story (Frau Balek, her assistant Gertrude, district officer, and priest) keep quiet about the family’s corrupt business, to say nothing of the Emperor who will confer a title to Balek von Bilgan on the New Year’s Day.

For generations, the wrongdoings they witness at work (both in the factory and the shop) have been left unreported. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) explains that people who possess ethical attitude and belief that the attitude is good will likely perform ethical actions when opportunity is available to do so (Anggraini, F. R. R., & Siswanto, 2016; Winrow, 2016). According to the theory, the more a person has an intention to take action, the greater the action will ensue. Buchan (2005) asserts that intention is correlated with the person’s motivation that indicates how much effort s/he takes to take action. Application of TPB is clear in Böll’s story here whereby the family-linked shareholders are habitually reluctant to report deceptions that have no direct consequences on their lives. In the story, Gertrude, in light of TPB, is an example of a shareholder whose moral integrity is not strong (Anggraini, F. R. R., & Siswanto, 2016). She makes no effort to report the wrongdoings of the Baleks.

To return to the environmental issue addressed in the story, unlike the Baleks whose rayon business provides no healthy environment for the workers, the villagers seem to enjoy their sustainable life style. They are contented with the rural life: “They ate goat cheese, potatoes, and now and then a rabbit; in the evening they would sit at home spinning and knitting; they sang, drank mint tea and were happy people” (Böll, 1980, p. 133). Living a plain and simple life, the village people come across as honest and far from being greedy. They work together amiably at their own (s)pace:

The children would crawl deep into the green darkness of the forest during the autumn when dampness drove the mushrooms out of the soil, and almost every family had its own places where it gathered mushrooms, places which were handed down in whispers from generation to generation (Böll, 1980, p. 132).

Other than ruthless inhabitants, thugs, and thieves, most people work quietly in the factory; no unruly children appear in the story but a shrewd one like the narrator’s grandfather. This is a story about injustice on earth where rich people like the Baleks and their supporters exploit the poor villagers. “The Balek Scales” is thus reflective.

Social and Environmental Justice

Similarly, the second story is useful to teach English readers as well as economics students about justice in moneylending business whilst paying attention to the professional and environmental ethics therein. “A Handful of Dates” by Tayeb Salih published in 1964. It tells of a boy who formerly admires his beloved grandfather until he discerns the hypocrisy of the older man. At first, comparing his

grandfather who is pure like water in the river he often goes for a swim, the narrator boy wants to be just like him when he grows up. He spends most of his time with his grandfather, helping him, and reading the Koran beautifully to him to make his grandfather proud in front of his friends. But the narrator's feelings for his grandfather change later in the story upon seeing how his grandfather unfairly treats their neighbor Masood. Disapproving with how Masood lives his life and calling him worthless and slothful for having so many wives, the narrator's grandfather takes Masood's land to pay his huge debts till two-thirds of his land goes to him. One day, the boy follows his grandfather to harvest the date palms that grow in what used to be Masood's property. Masood tells everyone to be careful not to cut the heart of the palm tree. Once the dates have been harvested, the grandfather starts to divide the harvest with the workers and gives a handful of dates to the boy to munch, but none is left for Masood. Worse still, the grandfather reminds Masood of his fifty-pound-debt to him. Terribly upset, the boy runs right to the river bank and throws up all the dates he has just eaten into the river as a rejection to his grandfather's cruelty to Masood.

In line with other studies claiming that "A Handful of Dates" is about a pious boy's growing pain after recognizing his grandfather's insincerity (Berkley, 1983; Dewi, 2017), this present study probes further into the cause of the grandfather's deceitfulness versus the decency of Masood the debtor.

The grandfather takes delight in giving loans to Masood for he is interested in owning Masood's land. He makes use of the young man's weaknesses, calling him spitefully as "an indolent man" (Salih, 2000, p. 60). Explaining about the reason why he hates such a man, the grandfather says this: "Yes, my boy, forty years ago all this belonged to Masood – two-thirds of it is now mine" (Salih, 2000, p. 61). The grandfather is craving for possessing most of Masood's land and neither is he sincere when lending money to Masood. Reading this story, the students can evaluate whether or not the borrowed money can be treated as a business debt to be secured by a piece of land, if seen from the moneylending and interest concepts. Hardly does Masood feel happy exchanging debts with his inherited land, although it is true that he unwisely indulges himself in personal pleasures at the expense of his mortgaged property. His personal loan is not of productive kind.

Further, set in a Muslim society, "A Handful of Dates" tells the reader about the grandfather's business deal with Masood. The students can weigh up the business ethics in the story, mindful of the culture that does not permit lending money with usury. To compare, using Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, one study reports the teaching of monetary economics whilst introducing such concepts as usury laws by John Stuart Mill and Alfred Marshall's interest of capital (Kish-Goodling, 1998). As a Christian, Antonio hardly cares about loan and interest, but this Shakespearean hero borrows from Shylock the Jewish to help his best friend Bassanio at interest; and failure to return the money is Shylock's bizarre penalty being a pound of flesh cut from Antonio's body. Here, by comparing the English play and the short story given, the students can delve deeper about the principles of integrity, trust, and compassion.

Further still, “A Handful of Dates” is pregnant with environmental issues. First, the much-married Masood is tenderhearted toward nature. Watching a worker cutting down the very summit of the date palm at will, he shouts, “Be careful you don’t cut the heart of the palm” (Salih, 2000, p. 61). At one time, Masood sees the narrator playing about with the branch of a young palm tree; the boy, feeling embarrassed, recalls Masood saying thus: “Palm trees, my boy, like humans, experience joy and suffering.” (Salih, 2000, p. 63). Now that two-third of Masood’s piece of land has gone to the narrator’s grandfather, it is uncertain what will become of the palm trees. It takes about four to five years after planting for date palms to reach full bearing and several more years to reap the harvest before their fruit production gradually declines. What can be inferred from the story is that the grandfather appears more interested in owning the land for other usages than growing the palm trees. The grandfather is eager to take over the land instead of helping Masood. The former takes advantage of the latter’s gullibility.

Salih’s short story clearly explains that people can easily sacrifice environment at the development altar. The story calls for the importance of sustainable business in today’s depleting earth. Nature is available for people’s need not people’s greed. The date palms will stop producing fruits due to people’s selfish harvesting. “A Handful of Dates” thus gives the readers a lesson about sustainable business ethics. Reading the story will help readers to exercise their ethical decision making. Written for general readers, young and old, the discussed stories provide narratives that promise to engage environmentally concerned readers with ecological issues they can identify with. The two stories may also provide insights into ethical business practices and sustainable economy. Suffice it to say for now that “The Balek Scales” and “A Handful of Dates” are suitable for students to muse about environmental and business ethics as shown by the following table.

Table 1. Business Ethics and Sustainability Themes in the Short Stories

Themes	“The Balek Scales”	“A Handful of Dates”
Autonomy	The villagers are not autonomous; they depend on the Baleks for living.	Masood has no autonomy over his inherited property due to his huge debts.
Honesty	The villagers do honest business; their children gather herbs to sell.	The narrator’s grandfather is dishonest for playing on Masood’s gullibility.
Justice	The villagers seek for justice because the Baleks unjustly cheat them for generations.	No justice for Masood. He gets nothing from the harvest whilst his debts yet to settle.
Mutual Benefit	The Baleks make profit by taking advantage of the villagers for many years.	The grandfather exploits Masood by swapping the debts with pieces of land.
Moral Integrity	The Baleks have none of it; the villagers are honorable.	Masood pays his debts despite the raw deal.

As shown in the table above, the two short stories illustrate conceptions of autonomy, integrity, justice, professionalism, and environmental awareness that students need to know. Indeed, teaching students today is to teach them environmental justice; and literary studies can be of some help.

CONCLUSION

Literary analysis to Heinrich Böll's "The Balek Scales" and Tayeb Salih's "A Handful of Dates" reveals that the world of fiction provides comparable and reliable narratives of how people conduct their business. Some are doing honest and ethical business, some other prefer cheating and double-dealing to exploit profits. Both stories are engaging and brief enough to read so that they can replace or complement business cases the students may encounter in their daily lives. Stories may allow students to understand such concepts as autonomy, integrity, justice, professionalism, environmental awareness, and many more. Given that they are fictional characters, any resemblance to real life hardly hurt any group or community of people. Both stories challenge stereotyping by showing that hypocrisy can be present in humans regardless of their beliefs. People of high economic and social standing can be ignorant of ecological balance when compared to ordinary, low-income folks who generally respect nature as God's co-creation.

This study has also shown that Ecohumanism is appropriately applied as a philosophical basis in literary studies as well as teaching principles of business and environmental ethics. Analysis to the selected stories shows that environmental ethics is a willpower that any community, business people, and policy makers should strive for to achieve sustainable living. Deliberate acts of respect and self-control are necessary for people today because only through this ethical behavior can sustainable business uphold the co-existence of human community members and the non-human ones. This study has shown that these two short stories with ecological themes are usable for research beyond literary fields.

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