

Applications in the Classroom: Teaching Disney/ Pixar's *Inside Out* within the Tradition of Allegorical Personification

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ABSTRACT

Several years ago, I noticed that the widespread distinction between high and low culture was wreaking havoc on my classroom. My students would read and analyze texts like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Pride and Prejudice* with little to no prompting because (in their minds) these texts were already part of the recognized canon and it was therefore permissible to pick them apart and analyze them closely. But I would get strange looks when I asked undergraduates to think critically about how the mock-news programs *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* worked or when I asked them to discuss how the popular TV show *Once Upon a Time* adapts and revises certain fairy tales for its modern audience. Because of these looks, I started searching for ways that I could use popular culture to encourage my students to think about how literary forms and texts persist through time and about how they could turn their ever-sharpening acumen on the world around them. This article focuses on the use of Disney/Pixar's Academy Award-winning film, *Inside Out* (2015), as a powerful pedagogical tool for getting students to think about just how writers and filmmakers reimagine and reformulate earlier forms for modern purposes. I argue that instructors can usefully teach this film within the frameworks of literary precedent and modern film and, by so doing, encourage their students to think differently about texts they encounter every day.

KEYWORDS

Allegory, Personification, Popular Film, Disney/Pixar, Film and Literature

I recently taught a course at my home institution titled “Allegory from *Piers Plowman* to *Inside Out*.” The project of the course was to study how the allegorical form changed over time. We began by reading medieval allegories, including William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (c. 1370-90) and the anonymous play *Everyman* (late 15th century). Then we moved to the knights and ladies of Book I of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), a religious allegory that goes even further than Spenser’s in its use of empirical, concrete detail. In the final section of the course, the students and I turned to modern uses of the allegorical form. We read C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950) and watched Ingmar Bergman’s masterpiece *The Seventh Seal* (1957). Towards the end of the course, we also watched the very recent and very popular Disney/Pixar film, *Inside Out* (2015). We spent a great deal of time teasing out how this text works with and within the tradition of allegorical personification and, in so doing, treated the recent film as fundamentally (and surprisingly) connected to what medieval, early modern, and eighteenth-century writers were doing with the allegorical form.

Many scholars believe the allegory died as a viable narrative form shortly after the Renaissance.¹ *Inside Out* provides my students with a powerful example of how literary forms like allegory do not simply fade away. Writers, filmmakers, singers, painters, etc. continue to adapt those literary forms to their own historical and cultural surroundings, giving them new life even if doing so results in cultural products that look strikingly different than, for instance, *Piers Plowman* and *Everyman*. To give my students a strong sense of how modern writers and artists reconceptualize and reformulate the allegorical form, I taught *Inside Out* within two major contexts. The first was within literary precedent. I asked them to think through how the film compares to earlier uses of personified abstractions ranging from the medieval period to the middle of the eighteenth century. The second context was modern film. My students and I discussed Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (1957) before moving on to Pete Docter’s *Inside Out*. This article will work through my experiences teaching the animated film within these two contexts and then will open up to think more generally about how the film can be used to demonstrate to students how they can use their critical thinking skills to analyze the world around them.

The goal in working through my experiences is not only to talk about *Inside Out* in particular but to enter an ongoing conversation about designing a course syllabus that extends from the medieval period to the present day. My course ranging from the medieval *Piers Plowman* to the recent *Inside Out* models one such way: though it focuses primarily on Restoration and eighteenth-century British Literature, it focuses on a single literary form in order to encourage students to test their ability to think transhistorically. It uses my students’ current historical moment as a lens through which to see earlier texts, while also using those earlier texts as a lens for seeing—and reseeing—their own historical moment.

TEACHING *INSIDE OUT* WITHIN LITERARY PRECEDENT

The truly exciting thing about teaching a course like “Allegory from *Piers Plowman* to *Inside Out*” is that it encourages students to think about how literary forms and texts persist and adapt. When I went over the syllabus on the first day, I found myself mounting an argument: the course will push against the tendency they might have to regard texts such as *Piers Plowman* and *Everyman* as far removed from their own historical and literary moment. Reading earlier allegorical texts should improve their understandings of what is going on in more recent texts. The question, for me, was how to design a course that would emphasize the continuities as well as the discontinuities between older and more recent uses of the allegorical form.

I decided to begin my students with one of the most influential scholarly books on allegory to date, Angus Fletcher’s *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964, reprinted in 2012), coupled with the *Everyman*. Fletcher creates a spectrum between, on the one end, “persons” and, on the other end, personified

abstractions. Persons exhibit agency and self-possession: in Fletcher's words, the literary person has "freedom of choice in action" (Fletcher 65). The reader cannot accurately predict what the literary person will do from moment to moment based on their identity within the text. Personified abstractions, on the contrary, perform what Fletcher calls "*fated actions*" (33), which directly relate to what that abstraction embodies. *Everyman* gave my students some strong examples of how the notion of fated action works. The characters Death and Fellowship, for instance, speak and act in a way that is in accordance with what they represent. We are not shocked when Death asks Everyman to come with him to God or when he claims that everyone must die. Talking about death is squarely within Death's wheelhouse, as it is indicated by his name (Anonymous 39). We likely would have been shocked if Death resurrected a character or went to the supermarket because his name puts certain limits on what he can and cannot do and say within the play.

Fletcher does not mean for the distinction between person and abstraction to be hard and immovable. In fact, the reason Fletcher's formulation was so helpful for my students was that it was a flexible tool for thinking about traditional as well as modern uses of the allegorical form. My students regularly referred to Fletcher's book in discussing the vast majority of our texts, often placing particular authors' depiction of allegorical personifications on his scale between persons and abstractions. This was particularly true when they talked about Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Samuel Johnson's *The Vision of Theodore* (1748). The perpetual question was how different authors treated certain personifications: for *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for instance, my students reasonably argued that Christian and Hopeful are much closer to Fletcherian persons than are abstractions such as Obstinate and Pliable.

When my students and I turned our attention to *Inside Out*, we justifiably talked about how the film represents different personified abstractions, especially Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. Each of these personifications perform actions that are somehow associated with the concepts they embody, and in this way my students could readily see how *Inside Out*'s use of personifications is continuous with the fated agents they had encountered in earlier literary texts. For example, early on in the film Joy describes the use of each personified abstraction for the purposes of keeping Riley Anderson, the girl they inhabit, healthy and happy. She explains that Fear is "really good at keeping Riley safe," that Disgust "basically keeps Riley from being poisoned, physically and socially," and that Anger "cares very deeply about things being fair." In each of these explanations, Joy works through the benefits of Riley feeling each emotion from time to time. However, Joy runs into a problem when transitioning to Sadness, saying that "she...well, she...I'm not actually sure what she does." Joy's inability to pinpoint the usefulness of Sadness sets up the film because *Inside Out* is largely about Joy trying to figure out when and why it is important for Riley to be sad. My students worked through this scene and discussed how the movie opens by assigning real-life uses for each emotion besides sadness and by having each emotion act in accordance with what they represent.

Then, something very interesting happened. I prompted my students with the question, "Is Riley a fated agent?" Addressing this question required my students to apply the reading from Fletcher's book to the modern film. My students started to work through how the film represents the relationship between the actions of the personifications and the actions of the girl they inhabit. To help them push their ideas and questions further, I asked them to home in on a particular scene. They chose one that takes place relatively early on in the movie, after the Andersons move to San Francisco and Sadness starts to feel inexorably compelled to touch memories and give them an element of sadness:

[*Riley approaches a stairway*]

Joy to Sadness: Just don't touch any other memories until we figure out what's going on.

Sadness: Ok.

Joy: All right. Get ready! This is a monster railing and we are riding it all the way down.

[Joy turns around and looks at Goofball Island, which is functioning. Then, she looks back at the window representing Riley's eyes, to see what happens. Riley sits on the railing and looks down it with a smile, ready to slide down. Her smile suddenly fades away and Riley gets off of the railing.]

Joy: Wait, what happened?

[A core memory rolls from behind Joy and hits her in the back of her leg.]

Fear: A core memory!

Joy: Oh no!

[Joy picks up the core memory and turns to see that Sadness is where the core memory used to be and that Goofball Island is now down.]

Joy: Sadness! What are you doing?

Sadness: It looked like one was crooked, so I opened it and then it fell out.

[Joy puts the core memory back in, and Goofball Island become functional again.]

Riley— who is walking down the stairs sadly—stops, gets back on the railing and slides down it.] (Docter)

My students and I were in a position to appreciate how truly bizarre and perplexing this moment is, precisely because we had encountered such a wide variety of personified abstractions by this point in the course. Riley has very little agency. *Inside Out*, in fact, duplicates the idea of fated agency so that 1) the personified abstractions themselves only perform actions that are in accordance with what they represent and 2) the person whom they inhabit can only act in accordance with what those abstractions do. *Inside Out* thus features a range of characters who are compelled to action. Riley wavers between sliding down the railing and sullenly walking down the steps because of the actions performed by Joy and Sadness, just as these personifications are tied to certain actions because of their identities. The movie, to take this slightly further, brings the actions of Riley and the personifications into an analogy with one another.

I ended my session on *Inside Out* by asking my students what the movie gets out of expanding the notion of fated agency so common in allegorical personification to include even literal characters. My students pointed out that the movie effectively makes Riley's actions redundant. We watch the events happening in Riley's mind and then we see how those events manifest themselves in Riley's behavior: there is thus a significant lag between the world of allegorical personification and of literal persons. It shifts the Fletcherian scale that ranges from persons to abstractions, making Riley into more of an abstraction than a person by shining a light on Riley's inability to behave in a way independent of her emotions. My students, for instance, focused on that strange moment in the film when Anger, Fear, and Disgust decide to put a light bulb in the control panel—which encourages Riley to run away from her parents and go back to Minnesota—and are

then unable to remove it. At this point in the narrative, the emotions are not able to stop what Riley is doing nor is Riley able to get the idea of running away out of her head.

Together, Fletcher's scholarship and literary precedent provided a fruitful, flexible framework for thinking about the place of *Inside Out* within the tradition of allegorical personification, and any successful framework needs to be flexible because this flexibility is what will encourage our students to connect seemingly disparate texts.

TEACHING *INSIDE OUT* WITHIN MODERN FILM

In the section on contemporary uses of the allegorical form in my class, I started by giving students three films to analyze: *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Inside Out*. The point was to give students three examples of dramatically different uses of the allegorical form. *The Wizard of Oz* creates a set of corresponding figures, using characters in Oz to register commentary on literal persons. The first eighteen minutes of the film focuses on real occurrences in Dorothy's life. For instance, the film describes a series of scenes revolving around three farmhands: Hunk accuses Dorothy of acting as if her head were filled with straw; Zeke tells Dorothy to have courage, before he saves Dorothy when she falls into a pigsty; and Hickory is described as "tinkering" with an old contraption instead of fixing the wagon. The movie uses the language of these scenes to justify representing these characters as, respectively, the scarecrow, the cowardly lion, and the tin man. My students and I talked about how the film modifies the kind of political allegory we encountered in texts like John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), using characters to comment on and even criticize literal persons. We also talked about how *The Wizard of Oz* manages the transition from Kansas to Oz, using the shift into Technicolor as a way to distinguish the literal events in Kansas to the allegorical events in Oz. The point was not to classify the movie as an allegory—since there is not nearly enough evidence to do so—but to think about how the movie uses various components of the allegorical form without necessarily being an allegory in and of itself.²

The Seventh Seal was especially fruitful for returning my students' focus to personification. This movie toggles back and forth between the literal journey of Antonius Block, a Swedish knight who is returning from the Crusades during the breakout of the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe, and a chess match between Block and Death. Death makes eight appearances in the film, most of which take place in the last thirty minutes of the film. He is introduced from 4:01 to 5:25; he masquerades as a priest from 19:15 to 23:30; he continues his chess match with Block from 57:26 to 58:44; he kills Skat, an actor travelling with Jof and Mia, by cutting down a tree from 1:08:43 to 1:09:55; he poses as a monk from 1:15:36 to 1:15:50; he continues his game with Block from 1:22:04 to 1:25:10; he claims the lives of Block and his friends from 1:32:07 to 1:34:15; and he lead Block and the others in the Dance of Death from 1:35:20 to 1:35:37. For the majority of the film, no one besides Block and Jof is able to see Death, whose invisibility keeps him somewhat separate from the literal persons.

The Wizard of Oz and *The Seventh Seal* use two fundamentally different ways of managing the distinction between the literal and the allegorical. The first uses the convention of the dream vision—so popular within the allegorical tradition—and the transition from black-and-white to Technicolor to keep Kansas and Oz mostly separate from one another. The second uses Death's invisibility in order to keep his actions distinct from those of literal characters like Block, Jöns, and Jof. The desire to keep the literal separate from the allegorical—here, manifested in two modern films—very much emerges out of the eighteenth century's focus on literary decorum and correctness.

Like *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Seventh Seal*, *Inside Out* distinguishes allegorical from literal characters, though in a slightly different way. It does not, like *The Wizard of Oz*, create a dream vision that comments

on real-life occurrences nor does it, like *The Seventh Seal*, focus on a mostly invisible personification that comes in and out of the story. *Inside Out*, rather, toggles between the intrapersonal world of Riley's mind and the interpersonal world of Riley's surroundings. The first of these worlds is strikingly mechanical, with fixtures such as a major control panel, an apparatus that moves the core memories from Riley's eyes to a small compartment in the middle of her mind. The latter of these, on the contrary, is inhabited by other people who—the movie shows from time to time—are behaving in certain ways because of their own thoughts and emotions.

What did my undergraduates gain from analyzing *Inside Out* within the context of films such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Seventh Seal*? They gained a stronger sense of how certain elements of the allegorical form have been appropriated for visual storytelling. Allegory is not merely a form of writing. It is, on the contrary, a narrative form that cuts across literature, art, music, and many other kinds of cultural production. They also improved their ability to work from two different frameworks—one from literature and one from film—in order to better understand a single modern text. By the end of my students' discussion of *Inside Out*, the fields of literature studies and film studies were much closer to circles on a Venn diagram than distinct disciplines.

I believe, first, that one of the most important jobs of college-level instructors is to push against the all-too-common distinction between high and low culture and, second, that the use of popular culture within the classroom is an invaluable tool for pushing against this distinction. Working against the distinction is so important because it encourages students to think critically about the world around them. Instructors need to find ways to point out to their students that they can analyze anything critically, including recent texts and films, television shows, and the advertisements they encounter on trains and subways. A lot of what I do in the classroom involves emphasizing the complexity of the texts making up our surrounding environment, whether the text is an eighteenth-century poem, a modern novel, a song released this year, or a recent film. Setting up a course similar to my "Allegory from *Piers Plowman* to *Inside Out*" is one such way to do this because in asking students to connect a wide range of seemingly dissimilar texts, it asks students to develop the skills they will need to turn their ever-sharpening acumen on the world at large. By the end of the course, my students had been trained to see the ongoing relevance of the allegorical form and had started to understand the ways in which contemporary writers and filmmakers reformulate, rather than abandon, traditional narrative forms. They had also improved their ability to think critically about modern culture.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The notion that allegory dies is ubiquitous in literary criticism. For particularly influential examples, see Edwin Honig's *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* and Michael Murrin's *The Veil of Allegory: Some Notes Toward a Theory of Allegorical Rhetoric in the English Renaissance* and *The Allegorical Epic: Essays in its Rise and Decline*. Marilyn Francus, more recently, argues for the demise of allegory in *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity*, 41. For a brief discussion of accounts of allegory's supposed death, see Gary Johnson's introduction to *The Vitality of Allegory: Figural Narrative in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, 1-5. Only relatively recently have scholars begun to rethink the supposed demise of allegory. See Jane K. Brown, *The Persistence of Allegory*; Theresa Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory*.

[2] I introduce my students to the scholarly debate about *The Wizard of Oz* as a monetary allegory but do not go through it in much detail. This is a conscious decision on my part, because there is not enough evidence to argue that *The Wizard of Oz* itself encourages reading it as a monetary allegory. But for some influential discussions of how the film may be an allegory in this sense, Henry Littlefield, "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism." Bradley A. Hansen provides a counterargument in "The Fable of the Allegory: The Wizard of Oz in Economics," *Journal of Economic Education*.

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