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EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

Reading Through the Eyes of Faith: Introducing a Catholic Literary Lens to the English Language Arts Classroom

Julia French[1] *and Michael Macaluso*[1]

Abstract: Despite the proliferation and use of literary lenses in English Language Arts classrooms, one lens still seems to be missing from theorization, formulation, and thus practical implementation: religion. This absence is well-noted in the field, as positive depictions of Christian themes in books are rare and religion is rarely discussed as an identity marker that fosters growth and development. This article attempts to address that absence in two ways: first by conceptualizing and developing a Catholic literary lens that could be used in middle and secondary classrooms and second by offering practical suggestions for using this Catholic lens in ELA classrooms. The goal of this paper is to equip educators, and their students, with a starting point for reading through a Catholic lens.

Keywords: literacy, literature, faith, virtue, reading, literary analysis, Catholic social teaching, Christian values

While teaching students to read and write is a necessary and critical goal of the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, apt ELA educators will ultimately help students to use those skills in service of understanding and participating in the world. Freire and Macedo (1987) famously referred to this literacy framework as "reading the word and the world," and one popular way in which this approach has been taken up in ELA classrooms is through the use of literary lenses.

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Introduced over two decades ago by English education scholar Deborah Appleman (2015), the idea of literary or "critical lenses" arose out of the humanities-based, intellectual tradition of literary theory, which provides certain worldviews or ideological frames through which any reader can see "the world" of the text and determine its meaning and importance. In essence, the emphasis behind "lenses," as opposed to "theories," is a practical one – to front a plurality of perspectives and a multiplicity of analytic meaning and interpretation (a way of understanding multiple other points of view) rather than subscribing or committing to one way of seeing how the world works. Lenses, then, surface explicit or implicit values or patterns of belief that may inform any text and its meaning. Common and traditional theories applied to texts via lenses from this tradition include Marxism/classism, post-colonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism. But the rise of identity politics in general discourse and culture – particularly identity markers associated with difference – has elevated other critical social theories that foreground marginalized identities, leading to the introduction of a number of other literary lenses, such as those associated with gender and queer theory, African American history and culture, ableism and disability studies, power and privilege, adolescence, and even eco-critical theory, among others. Needless to say, there is now a number of literary lenses a teacher may choose to use in the classroom.

Theoretically, reading a text through any one (or several) of these lenes would assist readers in seeing how these theories play out in real life, thus making readers "enlightened witnesses" of the world (Appleman, 2015, p. 2). The use of these theories-via-lenses in classrooms has been well-researched and dubbed the "critical turn in English education" (Macaluso, 2015). Because lenses assist the teacher in making real world connections through literature, the assumption is that any ELA classroom that successfully integrates literary lenses into its reading routines will thus send students who are better prepared to approach life with curiosity, perspective-taking, and a healthy dose of criticism into the world.

Depending on what an educator wants to focus on or pull out of a given text, a class may utilize one or multiple literary lenses to approach a work from different perspectives. For example, reading a poem with a power/privilege lens may lead students to analyze how those in positions of authority impact those below them. When a subsequent reading of the same text, though, is layered with either a feminist or classist lens, the reasons as to why those authority figures hold power may become clearer. Are they in charge because they are male or female? Or is there a class element at play in the power structures? The combination of different reading lenses with a text can foster a richer discussion among students of key elements and connections that may otherwise remain buried, implicit, or even invisible in the language of the work.

Despite the proliferation of these literary lenses, one lens still seems to be missing from theorization, formulation, and thus practical implementation: religion. This absence is well-noted in the field, with literary scholars referring to religion as "the last taboo of young adult literature," as positive depictions of Christian themes in books are rare and religion is rarely discussed as an

identity marker that fosters growth and development (Cart, 2009; Campbell, 2015). This article attempts to address that absence in two ways: first by developing a literary lens around religion and second by offering practical suggestions to educators as a starting point for using a Catholic lens in ELA classrooms. Integrating the faith into subject areas like ELA is one practical way that Catholic teachers can help to make the faith come alive for our students. As a Catholic school educator and teacher educator at a Catholic University, we see this as our imperative and believe that this integration can be done thoughtfully and thoroughly through the introduction and use of a Catholic literary lens.

The Natural Link between Catholicism and Storytelling

There is a clear link between the study of literature and a Catholic worldview that supports the formation of a Catholic reading framework. For instance, in his book, *Educating for Eternity,* Salkeld (2022) explains that "to study literature and language arts, then, is to dive deep into what we are as human creatures" because we use language and stories to pursue meaning (p. 96). Our Catholic imagination is naturally infused with the sense that stories matter and the telling of them is meaningful in part because God taught and teaches through biblical stories. The parables of Christ demonstrate the great depth that stories can hold, and how new meaning can surface every time we return to them.

Inspired by this connection between Catholicism and story-telling, literature and language then are both interwoven deeply into our Catholic theology. Sharing this connection in the ELA classroom can inject new purpose into reading because it links the routines of the classroom to the deeper pursuits of storytelling: Why are we here? How should we live? Who are we supposed to be? The purpose of literary analysis then within a Catholic reading framework becomes even more meaningful because its quest is aimed at discovering meaning and finding the ends of God's threads in every story. Consequently, when we practice finding His threads in the stories we read, we can become more adept at finding them in the world and in our own life story. We all know that we are living in a story, and every story must have a storyteller. This is the sacramental worldview at work.

Stories as "Doors to More"

Literature Professor Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) famously emphasized that books have the ability to serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for readers: mirrors that reflect a reader's own experience, windows that enable a reader to glimpse a new perspective, or sliding glass doors that allow a reader to enter into a new experience. A reader may feel affirmed, valued, or enlightened, depending on whether a book served respectively as a mirror, window, or sliding glass door. In his book, *Doors in the Walls of the World*, Catholic philosopher, Peter Kreeft (2018) extends Bishop's thinking by doubling down on her metaphor: Books are sliding glass doors in the

very walls of our world that allow readers to see the bigger world as well as our own. They help us catch a glimpse of the mystery that lies just beyond the veil of beauty we encounter in the world around us. A story is "a Door to More," a taste of transcendence, a ladder to heaven (p. 24).

Catholic ELA teachers have the opportunity to open these doors to students, to show them the pathways available to them in the pages of a book. Teaching students how to read through a Catholic literary lens will prepare them to think critically about all stories they encounter in this world, but even more importantly, it will help them see the sacramentality of the world around them. In a world of glistening phones and gleaming tablets, Catholic educators should strive to help students wake up to the extraordinarily beautiful reality. In his recent letter "On the Role of Literature in Formation" Pope Francis (2024), underscored the importance of reading literature for the formation of the heart and mind of all Christians. Reading novels, he noted, can help readers find serenity, know others, face the challenges of life, and understand the world. He argued,

> Literature thus has to do, in one way or another, with our deepest desires in this life, for on a profound level literature engages our concrete existence, with its innate tensions, desires and meaningful experiences . . . The uniqueness of literature lies in the fact that it conveys the richness of experience . . . by expressing and interpreting its deeper meaning . . . [through] the mysterious and indissoluble sacramental union between the divine Word and our human words. (Paras. 6, 35, 44)

Literature, in other words, offers "the door to more." There is more to this world than meets the eye; we only have to show our students the doors to walk through. We argue that this approach to literature and vision of the world can be effectively fostered through a Catholic literary lens.

In Practice

How do we teach our students to read with eyes of faith? How do we help them spot these doors in the walls of the world and walk through them? The Catholic lenses outlined here will provide Catholic educators with a starting point for building a sacramental ELA classroom that explores the doors in the walls of the world through books. The key to these reading lenses, though, is that they should connect the content to a concept of faith and sacramentality and direct readers to think about their encounters with others and their inherent identity as a citizen of heaven.

Introducing the Lenses

The Catholic literary lens is broken-up into four sub-lenses that can assist educators in teaching students to read with eyes of faith. These four lenses include: virtue and vice, redemptive suffering, human dignity, and seeking after and are summarized in Table 1. The sections below provide an explanation of each lens, including a supplemental list of faith

Table 1

Dimensions of the Catholic Literary Lens

Lens	Focus	Questions
Virtue and Vice	analyzing how characters make choices and act in a given story	• Where do we see a character acting virtuously in this story? • Where do we see a character acting in vice? What do you think tempted them to do so? • What virtue does the character need to grow in? What advice would you give them to do so? • How has a character grown in virtue from the beginning to end of the story? What or who helped them grow? • Where does reconciliation need to happen as a result of a character's choices?
Redemptive Suffering	analyzing the conflict of a story	• Where do we see suffering in this text? • What does the character or people learn from this experience? Or what may they learn? • What caused the suffering? • How can we connect this suffering to that of Jesus, Mary, or a saint? • What advice would Jesus give to this person? What advice would you give?
Human Dignity	analyzing themes around inclusivity, diversity, equity, and justice to the foundational teaching of imago Dei	• Where do we see someone's dignity being lifted up in this story? • Where do we see someone's dignity being injured? • What circumstances led to those examples? • What would be our responsibility as Christians if we were there at that moment? What should we do?
Seeking After	analyzing for the restless desire in all persons for something more, for something that will satisfy the most inward desire of their heart	• Where do we see characters desiring something in this story? Why do they want that thing? For something that they get because of it? Why do they want that? • How does this character feel when they achieve their goal? What comes next for them? • When do we see people unsatisfied? • How do we decide what we want? • What are we looking for in our lives? • What will make us happy?

or theological concepts that connect to the lens and may be used in support of introducing or applying the lens to a given text. It also includes, perhaps most helpfully, a list of sample questions for each lens that the teacher may use to guide students' use of the lens within a text. A teacher can set up an anchor chart that will keep a running list of the reading lenses introduced and used throughout the year for student reference.

The Lens of Virtue and Vice

This lens lends itself to analyzing how characters make choices and act in a given story. It extends ELA standards on character development by asking students to consider the three dimensions of an act (similar to the criteria for mortal sins): the act itself, the motivations, and the circumstances. Educators can also consider tying in the following faith concepts to their lessons: the doctrine of original sin; the story of the fall with Adam and Eve; the temptation of Jesus in the desert; the Sacrament of Reconciliation; mortal and venial sins; divine mercy; and/or the parable of the prodigal son. This lens of virtue and vice should ultimately push students to consider the redeemability of humanity and our universal struggle with temptation and sin. Practicing a life of virtue is challenging, but by our trust in God's mercy, we can always hope for grace in the struggle.

The following questions may serve as discussion questions to guide students in reading through this lens. These questions can always be modified to be more specific to the text being read but generally ask:

- Where do we see a character acting virtuously in this story?
- Where do we see a character acting in vice; What do you think tempted them to do so?
- What virtue does the character need to grow; What advice would you give them to do so?
- How has a character grown in virtue from the beginning to end of the story; What or who helped them grow?
- Where does reconciliation need to happen as a result of a character's choices?

The Lens of Redemptive Suffering

This reading lens focuses on the conflict of a story, a crucial element to any good story's plot and character development. In honing in on the conflict, this lens not only considers the challenges and suffering a character might experience in a conflict, but also its redemptive quality. Just as you can't have Christ without the Cross, you cannot have suffering without a glimmer of redemption, even if that redemption is simply its unifying echo with the Passion of Christ.

When reading with this lens, students may connect the conflict and suffering in a story to the following faith concepts: the Passion of Christ; the Chaplet of Divine Mercy; the Resurrection; the Seven Sorrows of Mary; the Sacrament of Reconciliation and penance; martyrdom (for example, St. Maximilian Kolbe); the book of Job and the problem of evil; moral and natural evil; and/or the story of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and her "little way."

Questions that prompt students to read a text through this lens may include the following:

- Where do we see suffering in this text?
- What does the character or people learn from this experience; Or, what might they learn?

- What caused the suffering?
- How can we connect this suffering to that of Jesus, Mary, or a saint?
- What advice would Jesus give to this person? What advice would you give?

The Lens of Human Dignity

Novels and stories that focus on themes of social justice are very popular, and Catholics can extend the social justice movement even further by helping students connect these conversations around inclusivity, diversity, equity, and justice to the foundational teaching of *imago Dei:* we are all made in the image of God. Framing conversations of justice and equity in this way directs discussions back to the core values of the Church in emphasizing that every person, from conception to natural death, has inherent dignity because they were made in the image of God to be kings and queens in heaven. As Salkeld (2022) also notes, "There is enough tragedy and enough glory in every human story to write a book . . . we all have a story worth telling" (p. 110).

Consider weaving in the following faith concepts when reading a story through this lens of human dignity: the preferential option for the poor; The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' statements on racism; "The Story of Creation" in Genesis 1;[1] the pillars of Catholic social teaching; "The Parable of the Good Samaritan" in Luke 10; and/or the encounter of "Jesus and the Woman of Samaria" from John 4.

The following questions are examples of how an educator might lead students in a discussion that is centered around this lens of human dignity:

- Where do we see someone's dignity being lifted up in this story?
- Where do we see someone's dignity being injured?
- What circumstances led to those examples?
- What would be our responsibility as Christians if we were there in that moment? What should we do?

The Lens of Seeking After

This lens is the most abstract of the four discussed here because it is the most open-ended for students to understand. The lens of "seeking after" is about the restless desire in all persons for something more, for something that will satisfy the most inward desire of their heart. It is ultimately pushing students towards St. Augustine's conversion moment when he noted in *Confessions* that "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you" (Augustine, 1963, p. 1). The desire of our hearts is for union with Christ because we are made for Him, and this desire manifests itself in various ways as we live out our time in this world.

1 All scriptural references are from the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSVCE) of the Bible.

When reading a text through this lens, there are a number of ways that an educator or a student may interpret it. The idea that we are all "seeking after" could point to a variety of faith concepts. Some connections are listed below: our created purpose (union with Christ); the calls of vocation (meaning both a profession or career vocation as well as religious, married, or consecrated single vocation); the pursuit of truth; the desire for beauty and awe; "The Life of Man" (Catechism *of the Catholic Church,* 1997, Para. 1–3)

An educator might prompt students to analyze a text through this lens by asking the following questions:

- Where do we see characters desiring something in this story; Why do they want that thing; For something that they get because of it; Why do they want *that*?
- How does this character feel when they achieve their goal; What comes next for them?
- When do we see people unsatisfied?
- How do we decide what we want?
- What are we looking for in our lives?
- What will make us happy?

Recommendations for Educators

Determining which reading lenses to introduce in the classroom depends on context and content, but there are some pedagogical links that may prove helpful to consider when making those decisions. For instance, the essential questions of a unit may stem from the reading lens, or the choice of reading lenses may emerge from the essential questions the educator already has in mind or that arise from the text under discussion. Regardless, these Catholic literary lenses can help structure the planning and preparation of literary study and interpretation by providing a sense of direction in the kinds of questions and supplemental texts the class should wrestle with. At the very least, the questions suggested with each lens can and should be a practical starting point for educators. Introducing these questions to students – piecemeal at first but cumulatively tracking them through an anchor chart or annotation guide – will help them to take on a Catholic lens. With time, practice, and routine, the lens may become more natural, and students may ask those questions of both "word and world" in consideration of a richer and more virtuous life through literature.

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Appendix

This appendix offers two examples as to how different reading lenses guided Author 1's novel studies of both *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 2012) and *Front Desk* (Yang, 2019). The first is a sample unit cover page for *The Hobbit*, the classic novel that has been lauded in Catholic circles for its Christian theological parallels. The application of Catholic literary lenses is evident in the unit's goals, assessments, and core reading questions. Additionally, we have included a few snapshots of guided notes that were used to introduce Catholic literary lenses in *Front Desk*, a contemporary novel that follows a young girl named Mia and her parents as they try to achieve the American Dream after emigrating from China. While not explicitly infused with Christian theology, the use of a Catholic literary lens when reading Mia's story illuminates its potential for sacramentality.

A Sample Unit Plan for The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien

Table A1

Excerpts of an 8th Grade Unit Cover Page for Teaching The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien

Unit #1	The Hobbit
Unit Rationale	The Hobbit is our kick-off text for the year and will set us up to both review literary analysis basics as well as start building the more complex skills that 8th graders focus on in their ELA coursework. The Hobbit is a great novel for this because Tolkien's writing style is very clear and the basic literary elements are straightforward for students to grasp. This will provide us a launch point to review fundamentals like character, plot, setting, and theme and then use them as building blocks for exploring more nuanced skills like word choice, tone, imagery, and theme.
Unit Goal	Students will be able to (SWBAT) analyze how an author's methods of characterization reveal different dimensions of character identity and Christian thematic concepts (dimensions of identity include conflict, cultural, relational, moral, and material identity).
Unit Assessment	Students will (SW) analyze Bilbo's development by picking one of the thematic concepts discussed throughout this unit and storyboarding his characterization in three distinct panels that show his character during the beginning, middle, and end of his quest. Each storyboard panel will include a description of how the chosen panel's method of characterization conveys and supports their chosen Christian thematic concept as Bilbo travels "There and Back Again" from his Hobbit hole (possible thematic concepts include all the ones in previous lessons such as the power of humility or the emergence of unlikely courage and heroes). SW have access to the running anchor chart of thematic concepts as well as the parallel chart of characterization methods.

Lesson #		Lesson Objective Lesson Assessment	Core Questions:
2 Chapters: 1-2	Objective:	SWBAT analyze a character's inner conflict by breaking down their words, appearance, thoughts, and actions in order to draw inferences about their character.	How does Bilbo feel about going on this adventure? Where does he struggle? When have you struggled with a Baggins-Took tension? How does Bilbo display virtue in these chapters?
	Assessment:	SW analyze a character's internal conflict by using a co-created double bubble map to independently write a topic sentence that explains how Bilbo Baggins is divided by his homebody Baggins side and adventurous Took side based on Ch. 1-2. (This internal conflict will be referred back to throughout the novel). Possible thematic concepts: reluctant hero, responding to the call of vocation, courage in facing the unknown.	

Table A1 (*continued*)

Unit #1	The Hobbit		
7 Chapters: 9-10	Objective:	SWBAT infer characters' relational identities through the Scriptural allusions an author makes in a text.	What virtues do Bilbo and David share? Who helped both of these heroes in their unique circumstances?
	Assessment:	SW draw connections between Bilbo's relationship with the dwarves in the Hobbit by using the David and Goliath story in Scripture. SW break down the dwarves' initial perception of Bilbo and compare how it has developed given Bilbo's recent feats of conquest. SW use a structured 2 paragraph form to first compare Bilbo and David and then people's perceptions of them, using Hobbit textual evidence up through Ch. 10. Potential thematic concepts: courage may come from unlikely places, don't underestimate the underdog	
8 Chapters: 11-13	Objective:	SWBAT compare two characters' moral identities in the novel so far (through Ch. 13), focusing on the moral formation of one virtue and vice.	What virtues and vices do we see in our characters? How does Tolkien emphasize these virtues/vices in their relationships? How do virtuous and viceful actions impact human dignity?
	Assessment:	SW compare the character development and motivation of characters by preparing for and participating in a Socratic seminar. Examples may include Smaug and greed, Thorin's desire for vengeance and pride, Bilbo's humility and courage, Elvish hospitality) Potential thematic concepts: how does virtue affect the choices we make? How can we cultivate a virtuous relationship with each other and the world/nature?	

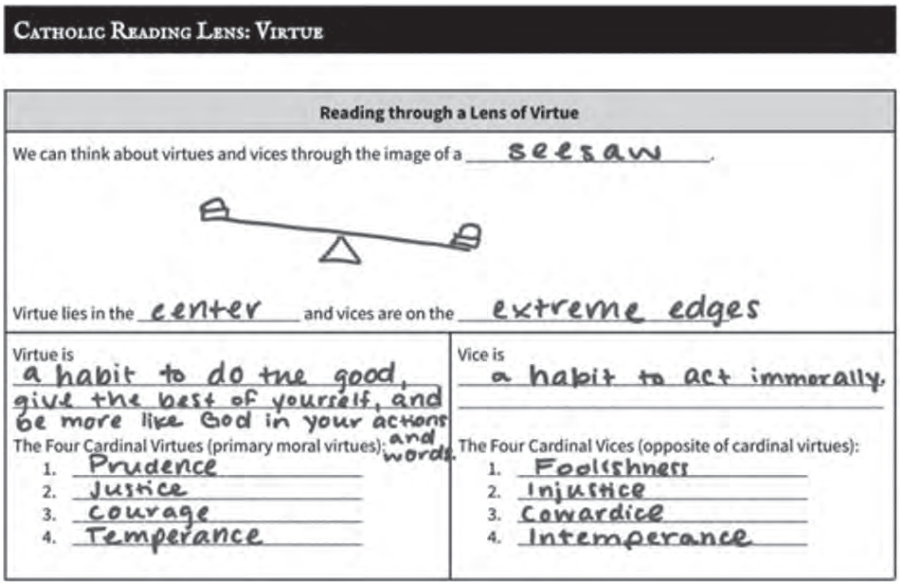
Table Note: These excerpts of lesson goals, assessments, and guiding questions for this unit focus on applying the Catholic literary lenses of virtue/vice and human dignity to the novel's content as students focus on analyzing theme, character development, and the author's word choice. The use of all four lenses can be seen peppered throughout the comprehensive unit plan, available upon request.

Examples of Lenses in Use

The following images are excerpts from guided notes that Author 1 has used in class with students. They are examples of how to introduce the Catholic literary lens and apply it to reading questions.

Figure A1

Introducing the Lens of Virtue and Vice



CATHOLIC READING LENS: VIRTUE

Reading through a Lens of Virtue

We can think about virtues and vices through the image of a seesaw.

Virtue lies in the center and vices are on the extreme edges

Virtue is
a habit to do the good, give the best of yourself, and be more like God in your actions and words.

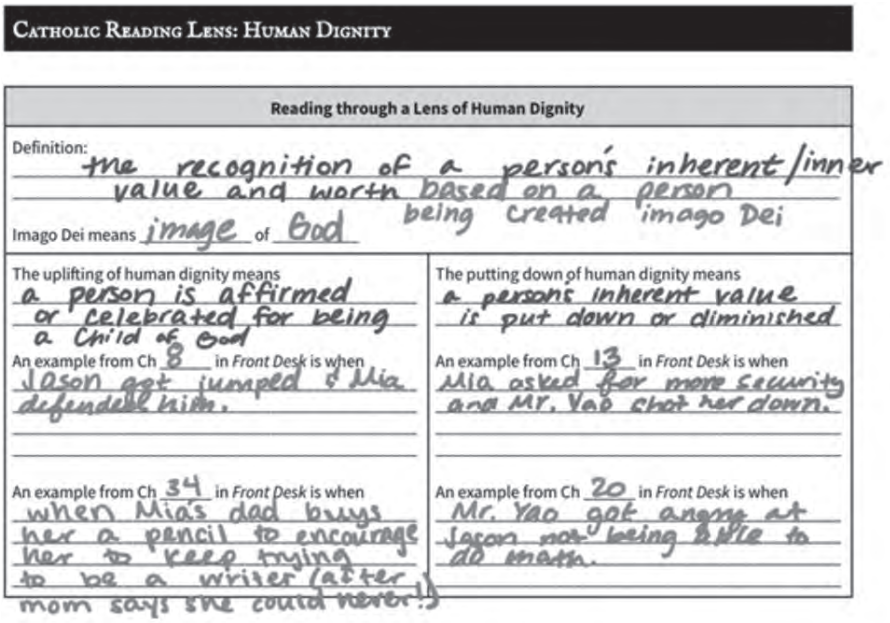
The Four Cardinal Virtues (primary moral virtues):
1. Prudence
2. Justice
3. courage
4. Temperance

Vice is
a habit to act immorally.

The Four Cardinal Vices (opposite of cardinal virtues):
1. Foolishness
2. Injustice
3. Cowardice
4. Intemperance

Figure A2

Introducing the lens of Human Dignity using scenes from Front Desk (Kelly Yang)



CATHOLIC READING LENS: HUMAN DIGNITY

Reading through a Lens of Human Dignity

Definition:
the recognition of a person's inherent/inner value and worth based on a person being created imago Dei

Imago Dei means image of God

The uplifting of human dignity means
a person is affirmed or celebrated for being a child of God

An example from Ch 8 in *Front Desk* is when
Jason got jumped & Mia defended him.

An example from Ch 34 in *Front Desk* is when
when Mia's dad buys her a pencil to encourage her to keep trying to be a writer (after mom says she could never!)

The putting down of human dignity means
a persons inherent value is put down or diminished

An example from Ch 13 in *Front Desk* is when
Mia asked for more security and Mr. Yao shot her down.

An example from Ch 20 in *Front Desk* is when
Mr. Yao got angry at Jason not being able to do math.