Blessed Assurance

The challenge of a moral dilemma

ONE VERY OLD WOMAN seemed to peek from every door. Toothless, blue-black, her shy grin looked mischievous, a small head wrapped in the brightest kerchief. At some doorways, her hands might be coated with flour. At others she held a broom or some white man’s half-ironed white business shirt. She wore male work boots four sizes too large, the toes curled up like elf shoes. Sometimes she smoked a pipe (this was in the Forties). Her long skirt dragged the floor, pulling along string, dustballs. She asked, “What they want now. You ain’t the one from before – you a young one, ain’t you?” and she chuckled at me. I smiled and swallowed.¹

... One month into the job, nobody knew my name. I’d stayed “Assurance.” And my clients still looked pretty much alike to me. Maybe it sounds bad but, hey, they were alike. People started having names when I deciphered the last collector’s rotten handwriting. One morning, it yielded like a busted code. Then the ladies began standing out from one another. Oh, man, I couldn’t believe some of the tallies!

“Vesta Lotte Battle, 14 Sunflower Street – commenced payment on policy #1, Mar. 2, 1912, four policies complete, collected to date: $4,360.50.”²

... My ninth week on the job, all clients permanently broke down into themselves. There was the one missing two fingers, the one who always tried to give me geranium clippings for my mom, the plump one in the bed, the pretty young one in the wicker wheelchair, the old one in her metal wheelchair who wore a cowgirl hat, the one with the wig, the one who told the same three easy riddles each week, the one, the one . . .
BLESSED ASSURANCE: THEMES AND QUESTIONS

Moral awareness

Blessed Assurance continues the module on Moral Challenge, in which students explore fundamental moral problems and the strategies used to come to terms with them. The discussion of Endurance revealed a right-versus-wrong problem set in the context of survival: What is morally permissible under survival conditions? Although leaders have answered that question in various ways, using different justifications, for Shackleton the answer was clear: Everyone had a right to be saved; there would be no sacrifice of the few for the many, and his actions were consistent with that belief.

Antigone extended the students’ understanding of the shape that moral challenges can take, presenting a conflict in which duty to the gods and to family competed with duty to the state, each being a morally defensible aim. The principal characters were unshakably convinced of their individual positions, and the connection between their beliefs and the actions they took seemed clear and inevitable. The play thus presented to students a right-versus-right moral conflict: each side of the conflict has moral merit and can be translated into action that itself can be morally justified.

Blessed Assurance takes a step back from these moments of seeming certainty and allows students to examine a particular instance of the dawning of moral awareness and the struggle with whether and how to translate awareness into action. A challenge to injustice is at the heart of the story, but beneath it lies an essential moral concept. Before injustice can be perceived as a moral issue, we have both to identify and acknowledge its victim. Blessed Assurance allows students to explore this terrain, the very foundation of morality – our ability to perceive another’s humanity.

Dawning is used to describe the gradual coming to a state of awareness of the other, a nearly invisible process that – in this text at least – looks more like a shadow being pierced than a deliberate or intentional act of cognition. Is the acquisition of moral insight always like this? Probably not, though social psychologists have demonstrated how prevalent even unconscious biases are, and how they affect many aspects of decision-making.
What mechanisms allow bias, conscious or unconscious, to be overcome? *Blessed Assurance* details one example as it traces the evolving relationship between its nineteen-year-old white protagonist, Jerry, in a rural Southern town in America at the end of the 1940s, and Vesta Lotte Battle, one of the African-American clients from whom he collects weekly premiums for funeral insurance. Students follow Jerry’s transition from perceiving “one old black woman” to the many individual clients he collects from, and they watch as he allows himself to be moved, some will feel even transformed, by the presence, dignity, and acceptance he finds in Mrs Battle.

**A moral dilemma**

*Blessed Assurance* is not just about sentiment, but also about action — the translation of moral sentiment into action. *Antigone* exhibited conflicting duties among protagonists, and Jerry is likewise caught; but, where Antigone and Creon evinced conviction and certainty, Jerry finds doubt and indecision. He is torn between competing claims of duty and loyalty: to his family; to the business he works for; and to his clients. Jerry is thus the first character students encounter to wrestle with a true *moral dilemma*: a type of right versus right conflict consisting of obligations that are impossible to simultaneously satisfy. The story allows students to see that *translating moral vision into action is not a straight shot*. The youthful Jerry wavers, painfully, between opposing positions.

Jerry initially rebels against the insurance system of Windlass Funerary Eventualities by paying the weekly premiums owed by Mrs Battle and a small group of other non-paying clients who would otherwise lose their policies and their already-paid-for funerals. At the same time, Jerry wants to end his rebellion, a stance that forces him to lie to his boss and takes earnings that he needs to fund his college education and to support his sick parents.

Once Jerry discloses these payments to his boss and stops paying them, he appears to try to right the balance with wildly extravagant gestures: paying to have the body of Mrs Battle’s daughter transported from Michigan to be buried; offering his entire premium collection for a week, and his car, as a gift to an African-American church. One perceptive student described Jerry as “undershooting” and “overshooting” his moral obligations — and that disorderly lurching toward moral coherence and consistency may offer a vital lesson: Do not look for an easy path, either in deciding to act, or in determining what moral action consists in.

**Future impact of moral decisions**

Written in the guise of autobiography, *Blessed Assurance* is largely a retrospective narrative, allowing students to see the long shadow that moral action
(or inaction) casts, its ability to influence our lives long after an event is over. Time is a critical element in moral reasoning (the focus of the second module), which depends on the ability to forecast actions and to assess them, in the present, in light of their potential consequences. Hindsight is a natural extension of this assessment process in which, instead of guessing what the outcome of an act will be, we know with certainty what we did, which actions led to particular outcomes, and how at some specific point in time we judge the effect we caused. Alan Gurganus explores this process in *Blessed Assurance: A Moral Tale*.

It is not surprising that stories about moral challenge use the device of time to powerful effect. What we worry about in making moral decisions is not just what we think about them now, but how, in retrospect, we shall think about them in the future. Students will encounter stories told from a retrospective viewpoint at several points in the course, most notably in the novel *The Remains of the Day*, but also in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer*, and in the autobiographies of Kay Graham and Ben Bradlee. These stories are modeling a perspective – looking forward to be able to look back – that is central to students’ ability to make moral choices in their own lives.

**STUDENT ASSIGNMENT**

**READING:** *Blessed Assurance: A Moral Tale*, by Allan Gurganus (from *White People*).

1. How do you assess the business model used by Windlass Funerary eventualities, Inc., the insurance company Jerry worked for?

2. How would you describe Mrs Battle’s character?

3. What is the nature of her and Jerry’s relationship?

4. Do you agree with all of the actions Jerry took? Why? Why not?

5. Jerry looks back on his early decisions with some regret. Be prepared to weigh in on this argument, by agreeing, or mounting a defense of the ways in which Jerry might have been changed, for the better, by his actions.
CLASS PLAN OVERVIEW

Few, if any, students will be familiar with *Blessed Assurance*, and this novella stretches them individually and as a group. Except for the hardy outdoor types who could identify with the challenge of adventure in *Endurance*, students did not expect to find themselves in the Antarctic, or in ancient Greece. But *Blessed Assurance* – with African-American clients and a young white collection agent all contending with the social, economic, and racial stresses of a small town in the rural South of 1940s America – is close enough to be familiar to some who have handled similar pressures, even if they are of a different time and place.

This close-but-distant relationship to the characters is useful because this class (like the next, on *Things Fall Apart*) requires students to overcome their reluctance to talk about race, a central issue of the story. *Blessed Assurance* is nicely complex as a moral tale. Windlass Funerary Eventualities was founded by an African-American, so class discussion cannot become easily polarized; students recognize that the firm’s exploitative business model harms black funeral insurance policyholders, but also its white management and collection agents.

Overcoming a reluctance to broach the topic of race – which is central to the story – depends on how minority students are engaged in the discussion. I have found it helpful to raise questions that require all students to speak from personal experience and to exercise their moral imagination. One such question early in this class plan is *What does this product – a funeral – mean to the people who buy it?* The material in the student textbook bridges the divide, giving students with no or little understanding of American race

CLASS PLAN OUTLINE: DISCUSSION BLOCKS

1. Introduction: Why Does Jerry Thank Us for Reading His Story? (10’)
2. Assessing the Business Model of Windlass Funerary Eventualities (25’)
3. Assessing Jerry’s Job Performance (30’)
4. Understanding Jerry’s Relationship with Mrs Battle (20’)
5. Evaluating Jerry the Elder (20’)

BLESSED ASSURANCE

77
relations and African-American culture in the post-Second World War period a frame of reference from which to speak, and permission to enter imaginatively into the lives of the clients who pay, week after week, for the right to be buried in a manner of their own choosing. Minority students have often been generous in their answers, sometimes referencing their own experiences or those of their parents and especially grandparents. You will want to give time for these responses to come out, and to allow the follow-up questions that their classmates may ask.

Some students cannot readily identify with the racial conflict at the heart of the story, but for many there is a nearly equal sense of social stigma and shame in being poor; many students see in the young Jerry their own struggles or those of their families to overcome economic hardship. Jerry the elder is a tougher sell, and students frequently have difficulty empathizing with the remorseful fifty-nine-year-old narrator. Mrs Battle, however, reminds many students of encounters with deeply affecting adult figures. Overall, this rich story provides multiple subjects for identification and interpretation, and all students grasp the conflict Jerry faces.

1 INTRODUCTION: WHY IS JERRY THANKING US? (10′)

A way of opening the discussion

We are blessed in this course with powerful material. We’ve seen the power of the weather, of the gods, of choices made in dramatic circumstances. In this class we move to another kind of power: of choices made in everyday life among people transacting business, and the meaning that one of the participants attempts to construct out of them as he looks back on his life. Let’s start, very briefly, at the end of this tale, with Jerry the elder.

Questions driving the discussion are in bold

Why does Jerry thank us for reading his story? Why does he need us to be involved? Why not just judge himself?

Unlike Endurance and Antigone, which are written in the third person, Jerry narrates Blessed Assurance himself, changing perspective from the past, to the present, and back again. The need for summing up, for an accounting, is a principal motivation of Jerry’s story, and students do a good job of describing why, at the end, he thanks the reader.

Some students recognize a considerate, well-bred young man who, even in his fifties, continues to be the kind of person for whom please and thank
you seem to come naturally. Others reach for more ambitious explanations: “Jerry needs to share his burden – many hands make a light load;” “Jerry needs us because he is looking for redemption.” Students sometimes criticize Jerry’s account, “This is a selfish confession – he uses us – readers – because he wants to feel better.” The most sophisticated students characterize Jerry’s storytelling as “a way of reconstructing himself,” of creating his own life through the telling of it.

This opening discussion is a form of table-setting: getting some of the themes out in the open before they are discussed in more detail. It also enables instructors to assess how members of the class are viewing Jerry. Students can be critical of him, so these early intimations of sympathy are useful, and can be called upon when it’s time to consider Jerry as an adult if the discussion appears to be too one-sided.

2 ASSESSING THE BUSINESS MODEL OF WINDLASS FUNERARY EVENTUALITIES (25’)

In this discussion, you ask students to use the reading skills of description and analysis to examine the business of Windlass Funerary Eventualities. As with the prior two classes, you will establish the context of action before allowing students to move to judgment. And, while the ironically named business Jerry worked for may have been typical for its time, some students will remind the class that the exploitation of poor consumers is not unique. (For example, one student described the unsavory practice of selling household security alarm systems to residents of dangerous neighborhoods even as the firm acknowledged that customers would be unable to maintain the stream of payments required for ownership.)

What is being sold here? How do people pay for it?

Without prompting, students will raise the unfairness of Windlass Funerary Eventualities’ business model for insurance. Many are outraged by a scheme in which any two-week lapse in premium payments allows the entire amount previously paid to be forfeited to the company. This criticism can be refined by asking: How different is this from any other good – say, a mortgage, that gets paid for over time, and which is forfeited if the purchaser or borrower can’t repay it? The question forces students to distinguish a common time-based payment scheme from its design and execution in this instance. Students will then focus on the problem of a two-week lapse in payment as excessively stringent for poor consumers, and on the unfairness of forfeiting completely paid-for policies.
Some students defend the funeral insurance business, however. “I take a libertarian view. If customers know the terms of the deal, this gives them a way to pay for something they value and couldn’t otherwise afford.” Others acknowledge the benefits of such an approach, but suggest “there are some businesses you just wouldn’t want to be in.” Many are highly critical: “Just because a deal is legal and disclosed, does not make it moral,” and, “It’s horrible to take advantage of death.” Some students find the discussion of the business model of Windlass Funerary enlightening. “I knew I didn’t like it, but I didn’t know why!”

What does this product mean to the people who buy it?

The next question digs beneath student reactions to press on the nature of the product – a funeral – and what it means to the people who buy it. The question invites a more personal analysis, and African-American students can at times be seen to look among themselves as if silently asking, “OK, who among us is going to help out here?”

Patient instructors can be rewarded by enriching comments about the vital role of religion and the church in African-American communities. One student observed that paying for a funeral is “a way to control the manner by which we leave this world, even if we can’t control what happens to us while we’re in it.” Another contended that the insurance company’s clients understood the deal, but as children of slaves (highly likely in 1940s America) funerals had a particular meaning, representing “a better life after the sorrows of this one.”

Students are often careful to state that they are speaking for themselves, as well as (or possibly instead of) a group. A particularly good discussion is one in which minority students provide insight without laying claim to exclusive knowledge, allowing all students to exercise their moral imagination based on their reading of the story, their own life experience, and background information provided in the student textbook.

This discussion helps many students answer the question of motivation: Why would people this poor sacrifice so much for their own funerals? Until this question is answered, it is hard for students to empathize with the problem Jerry faces as he begins the task of collecting, week by week, from the residents of Baby Africa, as the African-American part of Jerry’s town is called.

This business was started by an African-American entrepreneur. Does that make it better? Worse?
If students haven’t already raised this point, you can deepen the discussion of racial tensions by asking students to consider that Windlass Funerary Eventualities was started by an African-American entrepreneur. How does this affect their analysis? Some students are offended: “The exploitation is worse because it’s a black entrepreneur.” Others observe that the firm is not just preying on poor blacks, but by using young white collectors like Jerry, the business is even more exploitative than it appears to be initially.

3 WAS JERRY GOOD AT HIS JOB? (30’)

The discussion of the business model of Windlass Funerary Eventualities leads naturally to an assessment of Jerry’s performance as a collection agent. This debate is a crucial part of the class, forcing students to come to grips with the conflicting ways Jerry’s performance could be evaluated. From which perspective should we make this assessment? The business? The clients? Jerrys?

What role do people like Jerry play in this product?

The first question extends students’ understanding of the business Jerry worked for by imagining what good performance as a collection agent might consist of. Students recognize that some of Jerry’s qualities fit this job very well. They point out that his desire to please, his courtesy, even his shyness make him the kind of person who clients would not be unhappy to see, and who might make the weekly search for the 50-cent insurance premium a less grueling ordeal. Others paint a darker picture. The ideal candidate would be “a machine,” someone who is “heartless,” “immovable,” “uncaring,” more motivated by pay than by the benefit he provides to clients.

Was Jerry good at his job?

Probes for “No” position

What wasn’t he good at? What are you basing your assessment on?

Students who take a No position – usually a majority – conclude that Jerry was not particularly good at collecting money. Worse, he didn’t follow the orders or advice of his boss, Sam, and allowed himself to become too involved with Mrs Battle, losing perspective on his duty to Windlass to collect from each policyholder. You can probe these students, How did Jerry decide which
non-payers to help? They then extend their criticism to point out Jerry’s inconsistencies – indulging some clients but not others, with no apparent criteria to guide his decisions. Students can be pressed to defend their position by reminding them that Sam observed, *He turned in the fewest non-payers of any young collection agent: isn’t that good from the company’s point of view?*

**Probes for “Yes” position**

**What was he good at? What are you basing your assessment on?**

Students who assert *Yes*, Jerry was good at his job, describe him as conscientious, compassionate, someone who extended himself: “He was friendly, kept at it, and was nice to people like Mrs Battle.”

**Did Jerry improve at his job? In what ways?**

Some students observe that Jerry gave the role definition of collector a personal interpretation, that, wittingly or not, some of his own self was inserted into the job, making it more pleasant, if not for Jerry, then for his clients. The fundamental question in this assessment (which would obtain for anyone serving as a collection agent) was how Jerry handled non-paying clients.

**Jerry blew the whistle on non-paying clients – that’s good – yes?**

Students taking the *Yes* position point out that Jerry finally did disclose the list of non-paying clients to his boss, and that the amounts that Jerry covered, while a drain on his personal resources, were not large.

**Did you approve of Jerry’s paying for Mrs Battle and the others?**

The discussion leads to a debate about how students judge Jerry’s actions, and, in particular, whether they approve of his paying some of his clients’ premiums. Some supporters offer the view that “At least Jerry tried; he didn’t just avoid the situation,” and he deserves credit for that. Others disagree; in their view Jerry was primarily (even if not exclusively) motivated by the pay he earned. Some students conclude that it is hard to judge: Jerry was “just a kid with more responsibility than he should have had at his age.”
Most of you were highly critical of this business. Why should we care if Jerry pays the premiums in such a crooked venture?

You can press the debate further by asking students why we should care about Jerry’s paying insurance premiums for a few (nine) policyholders, given their harsh assessment of how Windlass Funerary Eventualities does business. Further, Jerry’s actions can be seen as a victimless crime – the premiums are paid, clients are off the hook, and no one (except him) is harmed. Some students agree, asserting that it is hard to argue that the company is being hurt, since it is receiving the premiums anyway. Others object, pointing out that Jerry has created a way of doing business that cannot be sustained except through the good graces of young collection agents, hardly a promising proposition.

Why did Jerry start breaking the rules?

Students will recount the gradual process by which Jerry became aware of the humanity of his clients – the transition from seeing “one composite old black woman” to the recognition of the individual identities of each one. You can deepen the discussion by asking students to articulate the moral or ethical principle that seems to be motivating Jerry: What changes when we see people as individuals instead of as anonymous members of a group? Some students assert that morality is based on our ability to acknowledge the humanity of another; that is the start of a moral or ethical relationship with them.

4 UNDERSTANDING JERRY’S RELATIONSHIP WITH MRS BATTLE (20’)

Several factors conspire to change Jerry’s perspective on his African-American clients, but chief among them is his relationship with one client, Vesta Lotte Battle. It is of course possible to consider the humanity of others in the abstract, but what is it about a single person that becomes so compelling that it can change the way we think? This melding of the emotional with the rational or cognitive is an ongoing theme in the course, an important grounding for students in the foundation for moral sentiment, decision-making, and action.

What allowed Mrs Battle to influence Jerry so strongly?
The block starts by inviting students to describe how Mrs Battle is able to exercise so much influence over Jerry, a straightforward question that is none the less not easy to answer. How do you describe how one person influences another? How do you know? Physical acts are easiest for students to detail. They describe how Mrs Battle reaches out to Jerry in their first important encounter, ensuring that he gets the help he needs to change the tire on his car (something he did not know how to do). Tea with Mrs Battle becomes a feature of the weekly collection regime, an event Jerry treasures, saved as an end-of-day reward for collecting from the rest of his clients. By the end of their weekly meetings, Jerry uses his own money to bring Mrs Battle’s daughter home to be buried, and, after, writes a check for $200 as a donation to a local African-American church. How did these changes occur?

Mrs Battle’s extraordinary skill at mending broken china, identified by a sign of a tea-pot with the label “Can Fix,” is a metaphor some students use to describe the ways she helps Jerry: Mrs Battle “broke down the barriers between them;” she allowed Jerry “a space in which to define himself;” the dignity she gave to him, he returned to her; “she took the parts of him and made him whole.”

The discussion can be extended by asking: Is this all just embedded in their relationship? Is Mrs Battle compelling on her own? What is the nature of her appeal? Some attributes of Mrs Battle are easy for students to identify: her dignity, her composure, her honesty, her role as caretaker. Others are evident but harder to understand: How is it, for example, that she becomes a magnet for other people’s affection and trust? One answer seems to lie in her individuality and self-sufficiency. People feel safe with someone who is so consistent, so defined; because she makes choices for herself, she can be counted on.

Some of you see Mrs Battle in benign, almost loving terms. Did anyone see her differently?

Amidst the admiration and praise, you will want to create an opening for students who disagree, by asking whether anyone saw Mrs Battle’s appeal in different terms. This usually unleashes a number of comments from students who found Mrs Battle manipulative: even as she takes care of other people, she gets them to take care of her. How else to describe why Jerry pays her insurance premiums, and brings her daughter home for burial? The two seem to derive very different satisfactions out of their relationship. Mrs Battle’s help to Jerry is largely existential – it helps him begin to define himself. Jerry’s
help to her is largely instrumental – he helps her, so self-sufficient, in ways that she cannot help herself.

**Was the influence of Mrs Battle on Jerry a good impact? Bad impact?**

Students are usually split in their assessment of Mrs Battle’s influence. Some argue that Jerry becomes a better person, someone who can see, who is more open, who has gained a whole new perspective. Others focus on negative aspects. Jerry “appears to have lost control;” his decisions are “erratic.” Rather than having gained a new perspective, he seems to have lost his way and his sense of proportion. “Why should he – such a poor boy – use his own money to pay the weekly premium for non-paying clients?” Even harder to imagine: Why use his own money to bring Mrs Battle’s daughter home to be buried, money that he and his family need?

**If this relationship is so meaningful to Jerry, why does he include Mrs Battle on the list of non-payers he turns in to his boss, Sam? Even more confusing: if this relationship is so meaningful to Jerry, why does he say he slept so well after he turns the list in to Sam?**

The discussion is closed by a series of questions that purposefully take the flow in a new direction. These are difficult questions to answer; they require students to empathize with the conflict Jerry faced. It is easy to romanticize Jerry’s relationship with Mrs Battle and lose sight of the pressures that forced him to take a job as collection agent: his need to pay for his college education and to support his parents; the limited prospects for employment for a poor boy with no connections. In examining Jerry’s actions, students confront an example of a true moral dilemma: Jerry is unable to fulfill conflicting moral commitments to his employer, to Mrs Battle and other non-payers who are caught in an unfair system, to his family, and to himself.

Many students are sympathetic; one observed that “Jerry did more than I might have done under similar circumstances.” Others are pragmatic: Jerry’s actions were “not sustainable;” in their view it was better for him, the company, and even (some will argue) for the black policyholders if the status of their policies is brought to light.

But these answers don’t get to the psychological stresses of the conflict Jerry was living with, and other students will press on. “It’s reassuring to give in, even to an uncomfortable position, rather than live with uncertainty and the need to decide each time whether or not to cover the weekly premium for a non-paying policyholder.”
What did Jerry do after he turned in the list of names? Why did he do those things?

The final questions in this block move the action forward, since the story of Jerry the younger does not end with his handing the list of names over to Sam. After this, Jerry avoids Mrs Battle’s house, but continues collecting premiums for a few more weeks. During that time his behavior appears to become increasingly erratic. By accident, he comes upon the burial service for Pearl, Mrs Battle’s daughter, and is able to talk with Mrs Battle one last time. Later, he discovers that Mrs Battle has died and, apparently in response, he goes to a funeral at a black church for a woman he doesn’t know. Overwhelmed by a host of emotions, Jerry makes an offering to the church of the entire amount of his weekly premiums – all the nickels and dimes he has collected – as well as his premium book, and even the keys to his car. When the church’s pastor returns the car keys, book, and money to him, he writes a check for $200.00 to pay for a college scholarship for children of the church.

Students are asked to detail these surprising events and to offer their explanations for what Jerry is doing and why he is doing it. Students describe Jerry as in a “damned if you do and damned if you don’t situation,” in which he is torn between conflicting desires: to help the blacks in Baby Africa, to support his parents, and to pay for his college education – his own way out of a poverty not that different from the African-Americans he collects from. Students acknowledge the inconsistency of his actions, and begin to see these as a logical response, if a torn and divided one, to the situation he finds himself in.

5 EVALUATING JERRY THE ELDER (20’)

Many students come to the course with belief in the “sleep test” as a measure of the moral or ethical rightness of a decision. Recent brain studies show that moral problems stimulate both our emotions and our reasoning powers, so it is not surprising that we feel relief (and sleep well) at the resolution of a problem that causes us emotional distress (such as lying to a boss, or using our own money to cover others’ debts, as Jerry did).

At the same time, many moral challenges assume the shape of a moral dilemma – a conflict between opposing principles, commitments, and beliefs, in which a decision favoring one position inevitably means subordinating or even abandoning or repudiating the other. In these situations, as Jerry finds, our early ability to sleep soundly may very well be followed by a period – in his case forty years! – in which the other shoe drops, the one representing
the choice we couldn’t or didn’t make. Our sleeping and waking remain disturbed for the necessary reason that we could not satisfy the opposing choices we were faced with.

The last discussion brings students face-to-face with this situation, and asks them to make sense of how Jerry’s early decisions affected the person he became, and whether they, like him, end up condemning him for his actions of forty years ago.

As you know, Jerry judges himself harshly in retrospect for the decisions he made. He saw Mrs Battle for the last time at the funeral for her daughter Pearl, whose body Jerry paid to have transported back from Michigan. Jerry recounts Mrs Battle saying to him: “Fact is, been missing you more than we miss it, Assurance. You steadily helped me to find my Pearl, to get her back on here. Don’t go fretting none, child, you tried. – You gone be fine. I’m gone be fine.”8 If Mrs Battle can forgive Jerry, why can’t he forgive himself?

The first question is meant to re-open the empathy students expressed at the beginning of class, and they will revisit the difficulty of the choice Jerry had to make and the regret that he still feels about it. They ask each other, “Who can give forgiveness – is it only ourselves?” “Does forgiveness from others matter – and how much?” Some students are empathetic: “It’s worse because she forgave him!” To these students, Mrs Battle’s forgiveness – another sign, they believe, of her moral greatness – shows Jerry’s betrayal as all the more undeserved, and they understand why it might make his already severe guilt even more painful.

What do we know about what Jerry has done since age nineteen?

Few students respond positively to Jerry the elder, the narrator of the story. It is hard for them to identify with the fifty-nine-year-old near-retiree, and they cut him little, if any, slack. For these reasons, it is useful to ground this discussion in a little context-setting. Students will recall Jerry’s accomplishments in the forty years that have elapsed since his stint at Windlass Funerary Eventualities. Jerry didn’t just complete college, he went on to obtain a law degree and established a successful small-town legal practice. He achieved financial success by inventing a mechanical device useful to owners of Laundromats (stores with coin-operated washers and dryers). He married “up” to a woman from the part of town he always envied, joined a country club, built an expensive summer home, and fathered two daughters, each successful in her own right.
Jerry says this episode continues to haunt him. In your view, how was Jerry changed by what happened?

A few students observe that Jerry seems changed, at least in part, by his encounter with Mrs Battle and the conflict with Windlass Funerary Eventualities. Jerry opens his own chain of Laundromats to black patrons, even in the racially charged Virginia/Carolina region of the US South, and he volunteers as a consultant in a local brown-lung class-action suit against the cotton mill his parents worked in. But other students protest, noting that Jerry’s transformation was hardly complete. Some point out the irony of Jerry making his fortune on Laundromats, another nickel-and-dime operation that provides an essential service to the poor. Others point out the discomfort he feels over the relationship of one of his daughters with an African-American man.

What do you think? Is Jerry too hard on himself? Not hard enough?

You will want to press students to bring together the competing strands of Jerry’s life to a final assessment: Is Jerry too hard on himself? Not hard enough? Some students support his decisions. “[As a young man] he had three decisions to make: whether to take the job at Windlass; whether to turn in the names of the non-payers; and whether to put Mrs Battle’s name on the list. Each one of these decisions are morally defensible – he has no reason to feel bad about what he did.” Others feel quite sorry for Jerry: “He’d give anything he had to sleep well for just one night.”

But many (often, most) students push back. Jerry could have done even more with his life, given the substantial financial resources he amassed. They criticize his expensive summer home (called “Jerry’s Taj Mahal” by his wife), and wonder why, if he felt such regard for Mrs Battle, he should have negative reactions to his daughter living with an African-American man. Other students have difficulty accepting the realistically complex picture of Jerry that emerges: sympathetic to blacks but concerned about the relationship of his daughter with one; guilty about early acts yet willing to make his fortune on a business that serves the poor. These students judge Jerry as fundamentally unchanged, and give little or no credit for later decisions that stem, arguably, from Jerry’s early experiences and choices.

How would you characterize the nature of the moral challenge Jerry faced?

When empathy seems in short supply, you can turn to the board, on which the poles of Jerry’s choices are laid out, and ask students to characterize the
type of moral challenge Jerry faced. Students will usually respond by building on the right-versus-right conflict they encountered in Antigone. How, they may ask, is this different?

Usually a member of the class will observe that in Antigone the conflict between two rights was between two individuals, each of whom represented one of the “right” positions. Further, while Antigone and Creon were not able to reconcile duty to the gods, duty to family, and duty to the state, students explored in their discussion alternative scenarios that would have allowed all of these duties to be brought into alignment. That Antigone and Creon could not bring about this alignment was characteristic of them, not of their conflict.

Jerry, by contrast, carried the entire conflict inside him, and they will describe the conflict as a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” or “between a rock and a hard place” kind, in which no decision can be made which satisfies the requirements of the conflicting positions. You can offer up the label of a moral dilemma as one way to describe a conflict between mutually exclusive moral choices.

Using Jerry as an example, how do people seem to behave in the face of a moral dilemma?

Students return to earlier descriptions of Jerry’s vacillating and erratic decisions – trying first to satisfy the needs of Mrs Battle and other non-payers, and then to meet the needs of his parents, his duty to his boss Sam, and his own desire for a college education. And they will return, as well, to his regret that he couldn’t do it all.

Some philosophers talk about a moral residue that is left behind when we are forced to subordinate one set of moral goals or claims for another. Attitudes of sorrow, regret, and even repentance are to be expected when well-intentioned individuals, who want to live morally responsible lives, are forced to choose between moral goods. The last discussion is meant to expose students to this phenomenon, to help them become more realistic about the emotional toll that moral decisions can take, particularly in situations of moral challenge that take the form of a moral dilemma. The discussion also is meant to remind students of their earlier description of moral choosing as a clumsy, human endeavor, in which perfect certainty, like perfect comfort, is probably not a realistic goal.
Why thanked by Jerry?
Business model of Windlass Funerary Eventualities, Inc.
Jerry the Younger
Jerry the Elder

**Figure 6.1** Blessed Assurance roadmap

![Diagram of Blessed Assurance roadmap]

**Figure 6.2** Blessed Assurance board plan

![Diagram of Blessed Assurance board plan]

**NOTES**

2. Ibid., p. 200.
3. Ibid., pp. 210–211.
4. See the special issue of *Social Justice Research*, 2004, vol. 17, no. 2, for a literature/field review and new findings in the study, by social psychologists, of “ordinary unethical behavior” resulting from unconscious and therefore largely uncontrolled bias.
5. A moral dilemma is a situation in which “an agent believes that, on moral grounds, he or she is obligated to perform two (or more) mutually exclusive actions. In a moral dilemma of this form, one or more moral norms oblige an agent to do $x$ and one or more moral norms oblige the agent to do $y$, but the agent cannot do both in the same circumstance.” T. L. Beauchamp and J. F. Childress,

6 A highly likely occurrence, as detailed in the background in the student textbook.
8 Gurganus, op. cit., p. 230.