Sugar and Spice and Everything…. Creative

According to the band Pink Floyd, students in the education system are simply “bricks in the wall.” Students in the classroom are mindless drones reciting information given to them – all the while missing what life has to offer. Students in today’s educational system have become desensitized to the method of factual learning and miss a whole other side and viewpoint on life. In Charles Baxter’s “Gryphon,” a “peculiar” substitute teacher is assigned to an elementary class and teaches them lessons quite contrary to what is normally taught. The students, who are accustomed to lessons on Egypt and arithmetic, are introduced to new and fabulous topics such as magical diamonds and reincarnation. This substitute teacher, Miss Ferenczi, has a profound impact on the main character in the story, a young boy. Miss Ferenczi catches the boy’s interest when she first steps into the room, and this boy is quick to believe Miss Ferenczi’s lessons on creativity. Baxter suggests that creativity is superior to education and that the young children should look at the world around them through creative and open lenses.

The idea of creativity and how it effects the children is solely carried out by Miss Ferenczi, the substitute teacher. Cynthia Billy, in her critique of Baxter’s Gryphon, notes how Miss Ferenczi’s persona and appearance affects her ability to influence the students, saying: “Miss Ferenczi is more creative, more engaging, than the “regular” teachers” (Billy 1). Miss Ferenczi is, in fact, more creative, more engaging because of her visual representation of herself to the world. One major way Miss Ferenczi translates her message of creativity and a sense of
“rebellion against the institution,” is her attire. When she first enters the class, the students were “surprised when a woman we had never seen came into the class… carrying a purple purse, a checkered lunchbox…” (Baxter 277). This intentional visual from Miss Ferenczi helps to assert herself as a creative, colorful person. Miss Ferenczi’s attire acts a sort of stepping stone for her lesson of creativity to take off and rocket into extremes. These extremes are Miss Ferenczi’s lessons she gives to the students. The students are in awe – all they can do is “just stare at her.” The reason the students are frozen in wonder is that Miss Ferenczi is such a stark contrast to the education system and its devout commitment to factual memorization. The students are accustomed to the same dreary lesson where there is absolutely no spark of imagination or creativity, so it is reasonable to just stare at a colorful woman who comes to teach creativity.

The second example of Miss Ferenczi’s attire supporting her creative dogma is the attire she wore the following day. Miss Ferenczi, an older school teacher, supposedly a professional, arrives to school with “her hair down and twisted into pigtails, with red rubber bands holding them tight one inch from the ends. She was wearing a green blouse and a pink scarf….” (Baxter 284). Miss Ferenczi’s attire proves her “free-hippie” spirit, and her desire to indoctrinate the kids in the lessons of creativity and uniqueness. Miss Ferenczi’s choice of dress highlights her lesson on creativity, but, more specifically, her youth and pure spirit. Miss Ferenczi’s dress shares strong similarities to that of a young school girl; a young, free spirited school girl full of new and unique ideas. Miss Ferenczi’s attire is a visual stimulant to the students that reaffirms her ideas of creativity and abolition of the “norm.”

The second example of Miss Ferenczi’s lesson of creativity and its effect to the students is what she says in regards to death – words said after a forty-five-minute lecture on all the other fantasies of the world. Miss Ferenczi, leaning over towards the students, her voice growing
softer, tells the students: “There is no death. You must never be afraid. Never. I have seen this truth with these eyes. I know it because in a dream God kissed me” (Baxter 285). Miss Ferenczi, after an entire lesson of mythical diamonds and mythical creatures, takes on a certainty of life, being death, and completely alters the student’s view on this known fact. Miss Ferenczi takes death, and end to life, and puts her own creative spin on it – saying death is simply a transition in life.

It is important to understand that Miss Ferenczi is intentionally altering these ideas that are known to be facts, and adding a little bit of fiction to them. This is how Miss Ferenczi establishes her credibility among the students and gets her message of creativity across, by mixing fact with fiction. Miss Ferenczi is intentionally going against what the students have been taught and know to be true, and challenges that with her own ideas, which are “fabulous.” In an interview, Charles Baxter gives his own interpretation of Miss Ferenczi and what she says to the students. Baxter says [in regards to Miss Ferenczi]:

She seems to feel that young people should be exposed to exotic facts and possibility of this sort. And of course, it's possible to read the story with Ms. Ferenczi as something of a gryphon herself--half in this world, a world of concrete objects, and half out-of-this-world (Luxon).

Baxter reasserts the idea that Miss Ferenczi is in fact trying to entice the students into the world of mythically and creativity, primarily through “exotic facts and possibility of the sort.” One such exotic fact being that death is simply a “transition.” This idea that death is merely a transition is preposterous to the reader, but the students believe her ideas on death because Miss Ferenczi has already captured their attention through her attire and has established her ideas as credible by mixing them with facts. Another interesting point in Baxter’s evaluation of Miss Ferenczi as being “half in this world… and half out-of-this-world.” This idea is a perfect explanation of how Miss Ferenczi constructs her lessons; Miss Ferenczi’s lessons are half fable
and half-truth. The truth is used to establish herself as credible to the students, and the fable is a way to plant a seed of creativity in the student’s minds. Miss Ferenczi’s lesson on death is a perfect example of how Miss Ferenczi combines elements of fact and fiction to persuade the students into believing her own ideas of creativity, which is a stark rival to their current educational system consisting of factual memorization. This idea that Miss Ferenczi combines elements of fact and fiction to both entice the students and establish her own credibility is defended by several critics.

In her critique of *Gryphon*, Molly Winans too finds Miss Ferenczi’s lesson on death and its relation to her entire lesson to be skillfully done, saying [of Miss Ferenczi’s lesson on death], “Her secret is to find a strange truth around which to coil her elaborate, wild "facts"” (Winans 2).

Again, the idea of Miss Ferenczi’s combination of fact and fiction, specifically in her lesson on death, illustrate how she can combine the two to ultimately press her creative agenda. Miss Ferenczi’s lesson on death is the ultimate example of her open-minded view on the world and how creativity is triumphant and superior to factual learning.

The last example of Miss Ferenczi and her lessons of creativity to the students is when she uses tarot cards to tell the children’s fortunes. This may be Miss Ferenczi’s strongest tool in recruiting the students to the theology of creativity. The young boy raised his hand, and Miss Ferenczi told him his fortune. She gives the entire class a chance to see into their future: “She did the same with Bobby Kryzanowicz, Kelly Munger, Edith Atwater, and Kim Foor” (Baxter 287).

It is important to note how Miss Ferenczi does not simply tell the students about what tarot cards are, but she allows them to try it out for themselves. Miss Ferenczi’s allows them a taste for this alternate outlook on life, hoping they will crave more of it. The students do crave this outlook, especially the young boy. Miss Ferenczi’s use of tarot cards is an important tool she uses to
enchant the children in the forces of magic and creativity, those which are in such contrast to education.

Charles Baxter’s “Gryphon” illustrates the idea that education is not the only way someone can learn about life, but rather creativity is the way people should approach the world around them. Miss Ferenczi protests the education system and teaches the students the dogma of creativity through her attire, her lesson on death, and her use of tarot cards to tell the students’ fortune. Perhaps, if everyone were creative, humanity would be a far happier, albeit less factual, place.
Works Cited


