

The Ethical Summons Extended by Le Clézio's "Martin" and Other Casualties of Peer-Victimization

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This interdisciplinary essay investigates J.M.G. Le Clézio's short story "Martin" from the collection entitled *La Fièvre (Fever)* from the lens of recent empirical studies related to bullying. The 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature creates a rending portrait of the physical and cerebral anguish suffered by casualties of peer-victimization. The profound inner turmoil experienced by the protagonist Martin mirrors the searing pain felt by millions of innocent victims around the world on a daily basis. Although the nefarious, long-term effects of bullying are often dismissed by misinformed individuals as a reflection of "boys being boys," research unequivocally demonstrates that bullying is a global pandemic that should be taken seriously. In this disquieting narrative from the early part of his illustrious career, Le Clézio extends an ethical summons to the reader which compels us to think harder about the dire social consequences of bullying. Specifically, the tragic *dénouement* leaves little room for ambivalence concerning the author's position related to the anguish experienced by casualties of peer-victimization. In "Martin," it is the destabilizing realism that attacks the sensibilities of the reader the most. Although this text is a work of fiction, it deeply resonates with the reader given that deplorable incidents, which leave deep inner scars, like the one described in "Martin" occur far too often all across the globe. When analyzed in conjunction with the disconcerting research compiled by international scholars from around the world, "Martin" is an invaluable tool that allows us to catch a small glimpse of the unbearable torment felt by the victims of these heinous crimes.

Many international researchers have affirmed that bullying represents a global pandemic that is diminishing both the learning environment and the quality of education all around the world (Olweus, 1991; Menesini, Modena, & Tani, 2009). Moreover, the existing plethora of research related to peer-victimization unequivocally underscores the persistent ramifications of peer-aggression for those who are victimized. The profound trauma experienced by those targeted by their sadistic classmates is often irreparable and can result in the creation of unproductive, dysfunctional members of society (Oh & Hazler, 2009). Indeed, the phenomenon of bullying has many

adverse psychological, social, ethical, legal, and economic consequences for both the aggressor and the victim (Konishi & Hymel, 2008). Given the current crisis status of school violence, it is imperative to embrace a multi-disciplinary approach to ameliorate the situation and to ensure the safety of millions of defenseless children.

Hilsberg and Spak (2006) propose that literature offers an invaluable opportunity that allows both bullies and potential perpetrators to empathize with their victims on a deep, personal level. In addition, a rending narrative also has the capacity to compel bystanders to take action and to no longer be complicit in the oppressor-oppressed paradigm. Perhaps no other contemporary author is as sensitive to all types of human suffering as the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature, J.M.G. Le Clézio. The Franco-Mauritian author's depiction of the anguish experienced by the protagonist Martin is alarmingly realistic and emblematic of the challenges faced by many of today's youth in educational systems all over the globe. This exploration of a relatively neglected text in Le Clézio's diverse literary repertoire will discuss how Martin fits the profile of a typical victim of peer-aggression and it will identify the distinct types of violence from which he suffers. This investigation will also designate the responsible parties who contributed to this tragic situation and to the fateful end of the narrative. Lastly, suggestions based on pedagogical research for improving the quality of Martin's life will be provided.

Before delving into the issue of peer-victimization as it relates to Martin's plight, it is important to place the short story in its proper literary context. The text "Martin," published in 1965, recounts the social struggles of a child prodigy who possesses an impeccable intellect. Although Martin achieves international notoriety at a young age because of his immense academic talents, he possesses extreme social awkwardness that renders him defenseless against sadistic bullies who brutally torture him in the heartrending end of the narrative. The final image of an adolescent emphatically imploring God to remove him from this cruel earth destabilizes the reader and compels him or her to break out of the ontological shell of indifference and to be more sensitive to human misery.

Bullying is defined as "the systematic abuse of power among peers or siblings with adverse effects on mental health in a significant number of victims" (Woods, Wolke, Nowicki, & Hall, 2009, p. 307). At the end of the

narrative when Martin is uncharacteristically attempting to be a “normal” child as he is playing in the sandbox, Pierre and his group of followers interrupt these ephemeral moments of peace. By means of their numeric and physical superiority, this band of delinquent adolescents imposes its will upon the socially inept genius. As he feebly attempts to escape, his tormenters repeatedly insult and physically intimidate him. As the narrator posits, “Les rires recommencèrent; Martin voulut se lever à nouveau. Cette fois, Pierre le repoussa du pied, et il manqua tomber à la renverse dans le tas de sable. Martin assujettit ses lunettes. ‘Laissez-moi passer’, dit-il [...] ‘Alors, tu n’as pas entendu?’ continua Pierre; ‘je t’ai demandé si on ne t’avait jamais dit que tu avais une grosse tête’” “The laughter began again; once more, Martin tried to get up. This time Pierre pushed him back with his foot, and he nearly toppled over in the sand. Martin straightened his spectacles. ‘Let me pass,’ he said [...] ‘Well, didn’t you hear?’ Pierre went on; ‘I asked you if no one had ever told you you’d got a big head’ (1965, p. 168; 1966, p. 172). It is evident from this passage that the aggressors derive much pleasure from the suffering that they inflict upon Martin. However, while they are laughing at the expense of the child prodigy, the protagonist is full of inner turmoil. Martin is an easy prey for Pierre and his fellow predators who take advantage of their corporal prowess to subjugate and to humiliate a physically weaker human being. Undoubtedly, the victimized Martin meets the traditional criteria associated with peer-aggression.

Not only does Martin’s profile match that of a quintessential sufferer of bullying, but his tragic case also concretizes educational research that divides victims into various categories. Borntrager, Davis, Bernstein, & Gorman (2009) distinguish between what they refer to as “direct” and “indirect” aggression. According to this team of pedagogical researchers, “*Direct* aggression is comprised of physically aggressive behaviors (e.g. hitting, kicking, pushing) and verbally aggressive behaviors (e.g. name-calling, taunting) directed at another individual” (2009, p. 122). Indirect forms of peer-victimization are more covert and include behaviors, such as hurtful rumors, gossip, and group rejection (Borntrager et al., p. 122). Since Martin never makes a concerted effort to belong to any specific peer group, he is clearly the victim of direct aggression. Furthermore, both the malicious physical and linguistic nature of Martin’s domination has already been established.

Borntrager et al. (2009) also separate bullying victims into “passive” and “provocative” casualties. As asserted by the aforementioned authors, “Passive victims exhibit an anxious, insecure, withdrawn, and cautious profile. They tend to be rejected by peers, may be described as lonely, sensitive, possessing a low self-esteem, and may be at greater risk for internalizing disorders, such as anxiety and depression” (2009, p. 123). As the name implies, provocative victims often instigate the aggressor(s) thereby inflicting pain upon themselves (Borntrager et al., 2009). Martin is a passive victim as outlined by Borntrager et al. (2009) because he does nothing to encourage the physical and verbal assault that he receives. Martin is nonchalantly playing in the sand, when “C’est alors que, tout d’un coup, par-derrière, Martin reçut une pelletée de sable” ‘It was at this point that a spadeful of sand suddenly hit Martin in the back’ (1965, p. 167; 1966, p. 171). After one of the perpetrators pelts Martin with a handful of sand for no reason but that of sinister pleasure, Pierre introduces himself and the rest of the group before the veritable ordeal begins.

It must also be noted that Martin suffers from severe bouts of depression that appear to be chronic in nature. During one such time period, Martin rarely spoke to anyone including his parents for months. As the narrator elucidates, “En tout cas, tu vois, il a changé vraiment depuis quelques mois. Il ne nous parle plus. Avant, à table, il nous expliquait des tas de choses” ‘In any case, as you see, he really has changed in the last few months. He never talks to us nowadays. Before, at meal times, he used to explain heaps of things to us’ (1965, p. 137; 1966, p. 138). Although Martin is not a typical adolescent and the reasons for his depressive state are rather complex, social rejection by peer groups seems to be a contributing factor to his uneasy state of mind.

The type of debasement inflicted by Pierre’s group is also consistent with research related to gender and bullying. Martin’s group of tormenters is largely comprised of male adolescents. Since Martin suffers from direct aggression, this finding is hardly surprising given that “previous research suggests [that] girls tend to report more experience with indirect or relational forms of bullying, such as spreading rumors and social isolation, whereas boys tend to report more experience with physical forms of bullying, such as pushing and hitting” (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O’Brennan, 2009, p. 215). Of the nine group members who victimize Martin in the sandbox, only two of

them are female adolescents. Although this relatively small number might appear to be insignificant, perhaps it also reflects a disturbing trend which indicates that an increasing number of females are engaging in direct forms of peer-aggression (Henington et al., 1998).

Now that Martin's status as a victim of peer violence has been clearly delineated, current pedagogical research along with the story itself will be further probed to determine how the protagonist found himself in such a socially vulnerable position. The first sentence of the text is quite revealing and it also sets the tone for the rest of the narrative. As the author declares, "Au cours des années qui suivirent sa naissance, les Torjmann avaient consacré tous leurs efforts et beaucoup d'argent à faire de leurs fils une sorte de génie. Aujourd'hui, en dépit de tout, Martin Torjmann était à douze ans un assez beau spécimen d'hydrocéphale" 'During the years subsequent to his birth, the Torjmanns had devoted all their efforts and a great deal of money to making their son into a kind of genius. By now, in spite of everything, Martin Torjmann, at the age of twelve, was a pretty fine specimen of the hydrocephalic type' (1965, p. 132; 1966, p. 133). From the very first phrase, it is evident that Martin suffers greatly because of a parental obsession. Although the intentions of his parents seem to be irreproachable, their methods for raising their son are questionable at best. Martin will achieve tremendous academic success at any early age because of his parents' monomania, but to the detriment of his social development.

The Torjmann's will later realize the error of their ways when it is far too late to rectify the situation. By forcing their son to focus solely on intellectual pursuits, Martin's parents have deprived him of his childhood and they have rendered it impossible for him to interact with others in society. Moreover, Martin is exhausted both mentally and physically because of all of the lectures, interviews, and debates in which he is expected to participate. Therefore, Mr. Torjmann repeatedly asserts that his son needs a break from the spotlight of childhood fame. However, Mrs. Torjmann poses the following question to her husband in response to his demands: "Est-ce que tu crois que notre fils peut vraiment se reposer maintenant? Tu vois, j'ai l'impression qu'il n'arrive pas" 'Do you believe the boy can really rest, now? You see, I have the impression he can't manage to' (1965, p. 136; 1966, p. 138). Although Mrs. Torjmann agrees with her husband that it would be therapeutic for Martin to relax in the French countryside, she

insists that Martin is incapable of allowing himself to rest. The Torjmann's have created an intellectual machine whose wheels are constantly in motion.

In addition to Martin's parents, various types of bystanders also contribute to the protagonist's anguish. Summarizing pertinent research related to the so-called "bystander effect" or "Genovese syndrome," Oh and Hazler (2009) pinpoint four distinct categories of bystanders: assistants, reinforcers, outsiders, and defenders. As the label implies, assistants facilitate aggressive behaviors by assisting the group leader. Restraining the victim is an example of conduct associated with an assistant. Reinforcers encourage the most powerful member of the clique to continue the destructive behavior either verbally or by paralinguistic means. Outsiders, who represent the majority of bystanders in most situations, remain neutral to both parties involved. As the term indicates, defenders align themselves with the victim and challenge the aggressor (Oh & Hazler, 2009).

In the main incident of bullying recounted by the narrator of "Martin," it is possible to identify both assistants and reinforcers that comprise the group of tormenters. It is important to note that it is actually an assistant who instigates the violence and humiliation. As the principal orchestrator Pierre reveals, "*Le type qui t'a envoyé du sable, c'est Bobo*" "The boy who kicked sand at you is Bobo" (1965, p. 167; 1966, p. 172). Knowing that he has the support of his companion Bobo, Pierre assumes the leadership role and ultimately controls the situation. Additionally, other members of the clique force Martin to the ground as Pierre reflects upon how to derive the most pleasure from this experience. After Pierre whispers his diabolical plan to his coconspirators, the assistants aid their leader in the execution of this scheme. For the amusement of Pierre and his assistants, Martin is deprived of his glasses and forced to dig for them in the sandbox only to discover in the end that one of the other adolescents has been hiding them in his pocket the entire time.

The main perpetrator of this harassment also benefits from the assistance of reinforcers. While Pierre is verbally insulting his victim, the other participants acknowledge their approval of this behavior by laughing, dancing, and jeering. As the narrator affirms, "*Immédiatement, ce fut du délire; tous se mirent à s'esclaffer et à sauter sur place, en poussant de vilains cris d'animaux [...] Ils continuèrent à rire et à danser sur place*" "Immediately, pandemonium broke out; they all began shrieking with laughter, jumping up

and down and uttering hideous animal noises [...] They went on laughing and jumping about' (1965, p. 168; 1966, p. 172). The positive feedback that Pierre receives from his peer group motivates him to continue his aggressive actions and to create new sinister games to amuse his audience. Unfortunately for Martin the nightmare will endure for quite some time given the lack of outsiders and defenders. At no point during the incident is Pierre encouraged to stop, and the narrator does not indicate the presence of any neutral parties.

Another potential contributing factor that permits this unfortunate series of events to take place is pervasive mentalities that continue to persist in society. Instead of decrying violent and disturbing behaviors, many adults fail to recognize the severe long-term consequences of bullying. They dismiss acts of unspeakable violence and harassment as a natural part of the maturation process. As Hilsberg and Spak (2006) explain, "In an environment where bullying is accepted as a rite of passage or an experience in character building, aggressive behaviors will flourish and perhaps even lead to an increased level of school violence" (p. 24). What type of positive life lesson could Martin possibly learn from this humiliating and debasing experience? The end of the narrative clearly underscores that the only "character-building" message that Martin receives is that a life full of such misery is not worth living. When Martin emphatically declares in the final passage, "Dieu, ô Dieu! [...] Si tu es là, si c'est cela que tu veux, viens, prends ma vie! Emporte-moi! Emporte-moi!," "God, oh God [...] If You are there, if that is what You want, take my life! Carry me away! Carry me away!" he is clearly indicating that he would rather be removed from this earth than to "learn" in this manner (1965, p. 173; 1966, 178). Like many other victims of peer-aggression, Martin longs for the sweet release that death would bring. Given the unequivocal, positive correlation between bullying and suicide, the tragic unraveling of the tale is hardly surprising (Brunstein Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007).

Recent research has also suggested that the solution for ending the vicious cycle of violence might also lie within the perpetrator himself. Studies conducted in Italy by Menesini et al. (2009) irrefutably demonstrated a positive relationship between psychological disorders and perpetrators of bullying. Although they admit that such investigations are controversial, the findings of this team of Italian researchers were clear as "bullies presented

more serious psychological problems in externalizing symptoms, with significantly higher scores than those for victims and uninvolved individuals” (Menesini et al., 2009, p. 127). For the reader of “Martin,” this association is to be expected as only an adolescent with severe psychological issues would derive immense pleasure from the systematic torture of another human being. Furthermore, children like Pierre are prone to continue this sort of aberrant behavior their entire life (Smith, 2004). Consequently, many Pierre’s of the world fill prison cells all across the globe.

Returning to Martin, the sensational nature of modern media outlets might have also contributed to the protagonist’s plight. Martin became an overnight celebrity because children with exceptional or unique talents produce favorable ratings and sell magazines. Although this exploration has focused mainly on the protagonist’s tragic encounter with Pierre and his group of followers, an interview with the acclaimed journalist Bernard Ratto is a central part of the narrative. Whereas Martin tends to downplay his accomplishments, Ratto is perhaps too melodramatic when he lauds the academic prowess of the adolescent. When Martin discusses the current state of his studies and outlines his plans to complete his baccalaureate at twelve years of age, Ratto responds, “je ne pense pas qu’il y ait exemple d’une chose pareille dans l’histoire de l’enseignement” ‘I don’t think such a thing has ever happened in the whole history of education’ (1965, p. 139; 1966, 141). Although Martin’s achievements are undoubtedly impressive, the journalist’s comments are slightly exaggerated to the point of being sensational. It is doubtful that Ratto is truly interested in the protagonist’s life. The media exploits children like Martin on a regular basis, regardless of the consequences, because it is a profitable practice. Moreover, many parents allow the media into their homes for economic reasons without reflecting upon whether it is in the best interest of the child.

The heartrending dénouement of the narrative leaves the reader to ponder if better days are on the horizon for Martin or if his situation is hopeless. Current research in the field suggests that socially challenged adolescents like Martin tend to be repeat victims of peer-aggression. The best manner in which to teach Martin to thwart other potential bullies would be to improve his understanding of social relationships. Summarizing the dilemma of Martin and other awkward adolescents, Woods et al. (2009) affirm, “Poor emotion abilities shown by relational victims may be one of the contributors

to why they are repeated targets of victimization by peers at school. Relational victimization relies heavily on understanding the dynamics of the peer group and the subtle manipulation of social behaviour” (p. 310). If Martin were to be given a more balanced, eclectic education which allowed him to interact with others, it is possible that the protagonist would develop coping strategies that would allow him to protect himself. However, since Martin is already twelve years old, the reader is left to wonder if it is too late to divert Martin from the path of depressive and suicidal behaviors. In comparison to his peers, Martin possesses little understanding of how to interact in society and the learning curve might now be insurmountable.

Given the severity of the bullying crisis that now plagues our school systems, many educators are making concerted efforts to ameliorate the learning environment for victims like Martin. The actions of researchers like Hillsberg and Spak (2006) should be lauded and must be emulated for the situation to improve. The aforementioned individuals devised a plan to eradicate peer-aggression by means of incorporating anti-bullying units into their academic curriculum. With literature as the focal point of their efforts, other instructors from various disciplines, such as history and music, also contributed to this project (Hillsberg and Spak, 2006). Since schools reflect the culture and values of the community that they represent, eliminating pervasive, destructive, and counterproductive mentalities starts in public, educational systems (Kosciw et al., 2009). Systematically decrying bullying as an unacceptable form of violence is what is necessary to eradicate societal misconceptions of the phenomenon. Without direct action all of the Martin’s of the world will continue to suffer and to deplore their very existence.

More political leaders also need to become involved and to mandate harsh penalties upon disturbed youths like Pierre who amuse themselves by torturing others. Although many school systems have indeed adopted anti-bullying measures, non-progressive school systems have to be forced into compliance. Adolescents like Martin in “hostile climates” that glorify certain types of aggressive behaviors should be protected by an international zero-tolerance policy that is strictly enforced (Kosciw et al., 2009, p. 984). Any educational system that refuses to comply should lose funding or be placed on probation. Although such efforts might seem draconian, they are necessary to create a safe academic environment for all students. Society as

a whole would also reap the benefits of such tactics, since many aggressive behaviors that are learned in adolescence continue to persist through adulthood.

As current research has clearly noted, it would also be advantageous for perpetrators like Pierre to undergo psychological screenings and to receive appropriate treatment for their disorders. Although no parent likes to hear that their child needs the assistance of a mental health care professional, it would also be in the best interest of the aggressor to deal with his or her issues at an early age. Otherwise, the violent behavior will continue to persist and it will have many serious repercussions later in life, such as incarceration. Comprehensive legislation targeting bullying not only spares potential victims, but it also serves as an invaluable opportunity to prevent future acts of violence.

“Martin” is also the story of a childhood lost because of a parental and societal obsession. Many children like Martin are ruthlessly exploited by our capitalist, consumer society that values the amassment of material wealth sometimes to the detriment and debasement of other human beings. Martin is not appreciated as a person, but only as an intellectual machine that fascinates the general public and generates considerable revenue. The protagonist could relate to childhood stars and beauty pageant contestants whose worth only translates into dollar signs. Unfortunately, the foundation of our entire economic system makes children like Martin easy prey for those who are obsessed with the accumulation of monetary possessions.

In conclusion, the short narrative “Martin” by J.M.G. Le Clézio renders the profound anguish and trauma of victims of peer-aggression accessible to a wide audience. The realistic nature of this work disturbs the reader and compels him or her to empathize with all of those who have suffered greatly by the hands of another. The experiences of Martin also mirror the struggles of millions of children from all across the globe who confront daily challenges that no human being should have to face. The final gesture of the tale in which Martin curses his very existence and implores God to alleviate his pain should be interpreted as a moral summons that urges parents, educators, administrators, politicians, students, and bystanders to take a stand against violence. At the turn of a new millennium, it is time for the defenders of the world to suppress the aggressors once and for all.

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