



Why Literature Matters

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Why Literature Matters

Tim Gillespie

Why should we teach literature?" is the question on the floor. The pragmatists, clear-eyed and realistic, are unsure literature has sufficient value. I'm attending a before-school staff meeting of teachers from various disciplines to discuss restructuring the high school; morning light sifts through the classroom windows. Here as elsewhere, pragmatic demands of the workplace direct much of the discussion about school reform. Literature, it strikes me, has a hard time adapting itself to this language of "job-force literacy."

Here is the pragmatists' argument: No one *needs* literature to be a productive worker, competitive in the global economy. In fact, one can be highly successful in the marketplace with no knowledge whatsoever of literature; real-world examples are plentiful. The important reading matter of the future will be *information*, and the main reading skills *information-gathering* and *information-processing*. Literature is more rightly regarded as something like opera—an arcane art form, a spice of life, to be sure; a seasoning. But not a main course. So, since literature is not *essential*, why should it be such a major part of the curriculum?

My friend Gloria wonders how she is going to revamp her literature curriculum to fit one of the school's newly-stipulated career pathways. "If the theme around which I am to organize all my curriculum is Travel and Tourism," she asks, "how am I supposed to get literature in? What happens to *Romeo and Juliet*?"

"Maybe your kids can make a travel brochure for Verona?" a colleague tentatively suggests.

"The question is," says a pragmatist, "who really *needs* to know about Shakespeare these days? This is an enthusiasm, a leisure-time pursuit, but not a necessary skill for the twenty-first century."

Another English teacher earnestly tries to make a claim for literature as part of our cultural heritage. As she talks, the words *cultural literacy* leak from her lips. Immediately,

other English teachers challenge her: "Wait a minute! Whose culture? Which books?" We quarrel about the literary canon, tradition, exclusion, multiculturalism. Meanwhile, I notice, the pragmatists, ever oriented to the future, are looking at the clock and rolling their eyes skyward. *See?* I imagine them thinking, *these book lovers will endlessly argue about which literary angels fit on the head of a pin; meanwhile, the real business of the world goes on unaffected.* So, our own in-family English teacher disagreement scuttles the discussion. The meeting winds down with a shuffle of dissatisfaction. The issue of the literary canon, though critically important, nonetheless eclipses the larger question, without which it appears trivial: Who really, in this modern world of commerce, needs literature of *any* kind?

The question stays on the floor. Teachers start to leave. The first period bell rings, and students pour in. One drops her eight-pound literature anthology at my feet with a clunk.

WHO NEEDS LITERATURE?

In the months since that early morning meeting, these questions stick with me: Who really does need literature, anyway? What's it for? How do we justify its centrality to the English curriculum? They are reasonable questions, I think. Next to claims for helping students learn what it takes to get a job and do meaningful life-long work, literature *can* appear extraneous. The discussion pressed me to re-examine my belief in the importance of literature. I want to have sensible answers to offer the pragmatists.

After much reflection, I decided that the most traditional claims for literature are the ones I am most eager to defend. Primarily, I believe literature is justifiable in the modern curriculum for its contributions to the cultivation of imagination and of empathy. To my way of thinking, these *are* crucial skills for the twenty-first century, essential for our thriving, pragmatic to the core.

Why, then, is literature so easily devalued in the conversation about communications skills of the future? Clearly, traditional claims for the functions of literature need

Practically speaking, does anyone need literature? The author says yes.

reasserting and updating. More importantly, though, I worry that, in the words of the literary character Pogo Possum, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” That is, I fear we too often neglect to address in the contemporary English classroom those habits of imagining and empathizing that seem to me literature’s greatest benefit and value.

Let me elaborate on these themes of imagination, empathy, and teaching practices.

IMAGINATION AND EMPATHY

President Bill Clinton often uses a line that registers with me as a teacher: “Children can’t be expected to live a life they can’t imagine.” We rightly worry that many youngsters’ lives are circumscribed by poverty, discrimination, low expectations, cultural insularity, and other conditions that may render them unable to see beyond the limits of their immediate horizons. Literature does offer—inexpensively—a vision of other lives and other vistas. One of its potential benefits is to enlarge a reader’s sense about the many possible ways to live. This enlarged sense seems to me an important part of our traditional national ethos. Hope for a better world and belief in the possibility of re-making oneself or improving one’s situation breed optimism and elbow grease. (Need I point out that these qualities have economic implications?) We have rich testimony about this imaginative function of literature.

In the lovely essay, “Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession” (1990), for example, Sandra Cisneros writes of her childhood, of checking out from her neighborhood library Virginia Lee Burton’s classic *The Little House* seven times in a row, of being entranced by books such as *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Through those books, she says, she was transported to other worlds, instructed about other people and possibilities, offered hopefulness, and inspired to be a writer herself.

Richard Wright tells in *Black Boy* (1945) of being forced to pretend he was checking out books for a white co-worker, since Jim Crow laws didn’t permit him to borrow the books himself. In these forbidden works, Wright found himself electrified by the fiery writing of H. L. Mencken, which gave him the idea that words could be effectively used

as weapons. Mencken led him to Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, then to Theodore Dreiser’s fiction, then to novel after novel that revealed to him new ways of thinking about his own circumstances and the wider world:

I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different . . . it was nothing less than a sense of life itself. (272–74)

In a speech made at last year’s International Reading Association conference and reported in *Reading Today* (1994), editor Walter Anderson, who grew up in a violent, impoverished environment, said his place of solace and retreat was the library: “I could open a book, and I could be anything. I could be anywhere. I could be anyone . . . I read myself out of poverty long before I worked myself out of poverty” (1).

This is the first argument I would like to offer for literature, its capacity to stimulate the imagination, to offer different perspectives and wider worlds that the young reader can wander at leisure and experience in safety, without pressure or judgment. We read ourselves imaginatively into other lives and by this act expand the pages of our own.

If we keep following the track of our imaginative response, other arguments for literature emerge. As a reader, I read not only to *find* myself, I also read to *lose* myself. Swept along by the magic of narrative, I give myself over to other lives, landscapes, points of view. In this experience is the cultivation of a deeper form of imagination, the empathetic identification with other humans, often people quite unlike ourselves. Through literature, readers travel to different locales, to the past and to the future, and learn during their travels about other cultures and peoples. Literature offers students diversity that their neighborhood may not. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has said, “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world” (1991, 1). And literature can be a form of this habitation.

The effort to understand advances what Percy Bysshe Shelley called the “moral imagination,” a capacity to occupy another

mind and feel the emotional pulse of another heart. "Moral" is a tricky word here; people such as former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett are speaking much lately about the moral value of stories, but I hope the moral opportunities of literature aren't oversimplified. Literature does not teach morals in a didactic way; rather, it gives us a chance to *experience* moral dilemmas. And quality literature does not oversimplify the dilemmas of the world. Unlike the glib, materialistic, quick-solution vision of life offered on much TV, literature portrays lives that have complicated problems and tough choices, and invites us to engage with them, to imagine living out life's vexing dilemmas along with the characters we meet. By its truthful portrayal of life's complex moral choices, literature draws us in, submerges us into a story, and summons our imaginative power to identify with characters. Literature thus might be one antidote to the disease of disconnection that afflicts us. Assaulting someone, tagging a wall with spray paint, sexually harassing another, or yelling a racial slur are all acts that show an incapacity to empathize, to imagine another's deepest responses, to consider the real consequences of actions on others. In the fractious world we inhabit, empathy is a much-needed skill, and literature is a form in which we can practice this skill.

CONNECTIONS TO THE CLASSROOM

The fuzzy relationship between my belief in this empathetic function of literature and my classroom instruction came into clearer focus for me last fall. After I agreed to help judge a fiction-writing contest for exceptional high school writers in my state, I found on my front porch a cardboard box filled with 121 manuscripts, averaging about ten pages apiece. For the next two weeks, I kept the box in my car. Wherever I went, whenever I could, I read stories: during lunch break, in the quiet of late night, waiting for soccer practice to finish.

Reading all this student fiction offered equal parts delight and dismay, and caused me to ask myself again one of the first questions of the educational endeavor: Why are we doing this? What on earth is the value of having students *write* fiction, or poetry, or any form of literature? And this, of course, sent me back to my ruminations about the

value of *reading* literature. So, even when the contest was over, I kept lugging around that box.

There was much to admire in those 121 stories, particularly the ample display of sophisticated writing craft. Lots of the young authors had mastered the trick of writing attention-getting leads, high-impact beginnings that grab readers by the collar and yank them into the story. Many stories were ripe with sensory images and detailed descriptions. Many had snappy dialogue. Someone, I thought, has been talking with these students about literary technique.

Yet in all this exercise of writerly craft, I felt a kind of emptiness. What seemed missing from too many of the stories was that rare experience of getting inside the skin of another human being. When I think of the fiction I love, I think of vivid characters, from Jane Eyre to Marie Kashpaw, Yury Zhivago to Huck Finn to Will Tweedy, Scout to Sethe to June Woo. These are people I have come to know well. In their engaging stories, I learn something about them, and, through them, others and myself. A handful of the students who entered the contest did create such absorbing characters in their stories. I won't soon forget the dying farmer in one student's story who leaves his home and starts hitchhiking with his dog to see the country in springtime bloom one last time. And I won't soon forget the young girl in another story, living a constricted life as a servant on a turn-of-the-century Oregon ranch, dreaming of escape to the nearby town to the only life that seems a liberation, that of a barmaid. For the gift of allowing me to come to know and understand these lives, I was exceedingly grateful to these students; this was the delight of judging the contest.

The dismay came from the shortage of such vivid characters and what I felt was an insufficient exploration in many of the pieces of characters' motives, complexities, and changes. What I mostly found was non-stop action, special effects, and great gobs of violence in many forms. Characters in various stories were: shot, knifed, hit by a truck, killed in an earthquake, attacked by killer midgets, beaten with an ax and fireplace poker, bashed with a sledgehammer, stabbed with a broomstick, eaten by crocodiles, conked on the head with a gravestone, ripped up by a grizzly bear, and on and on. I

know we live in a violence-drenched culture, and I believe writers have to confront the given world and deal with their deepest fears and desires, but I was still taken aback by all the violence. My surprise was less about the quantity than about the poorly-imagined quality of much of it. Most of the mayhem in these stories was unnecessary, unearned, emotionally flat, painless, and lacking consequence, like what we see in so many movies and TV shows.

Reading this work from some of the best writers in my state caused me to re-think my claim that literature can enlarge our capacity for empathy, that reading fiction—and writing it—offers us a chance to imagine how another human might live, think, dream, and feel. Believing fiction to be a means for practicing moral engagement, I was concerned after reading this small sample of stories. I wished more of these young writers' imaginative and empathetic skills were as refined as their technical skills.

TECHNICAL PERFECTION VS. MORAL INSIGHT

My thinking on these issues was deepened when I re-read Ralph Ellison's essay "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (1964) not long after he died. In the essay, Ellison criticizes modernist writers who seek "a technical perfection rather than a moral insight" (38) and frets about excessive absorption with literary technique and what he sees in modern criticism as a confusion of technical sophistication with significance. This intrigued me, coming from the pen of a great literary technician and innovator, author of the sophisticated and experimental *Invisible Man*. Yet, I mused, Ellison's novel speaks eloquently to me not because of his mastery of innovative form and technique, but rather because of the movingly-rendered human being who calls out from his invisibility, trying desperately to be known.

This thread of thought led me to consider my own teaching. I looked at some of the writing resource books on my shelf, and I looked at my own habits as a teacher of creative writing. The sight was striking: both tended to stress, in Ellison's words, technical perfection over moral insight. That is, more time was spent on writing techniques than on the human issues in students' stories. I realized that my students need more than

just hints on technique when they are experimenting with fiction. Tips on writing a catchy lead, using sensory details, or "showing instead of telling" may be less important to young fiction writers than support for imagining what might be motivating another person, paying closer attention to human interactions, and portraying life in its full complexity. I need to focus on the people in my students' fiction, not just on technique.

Don't get me wrong; I love the craft-talk of writing, and I enjoy sharing authors' lore with students. Young writers are interested in colorful language, dialogue, rich description, inviting leads, all that good stuff. Yet craft in writing must serve content; technique ought to be employed not for its own sake but in the service of some truth the writer is pursuing. When a fiction writer is using flashy tricks but lacks feeling for the characters, it feels like manipulation to the reader, a lack of commitment, style without substance. We miss much in our teaching if we don't address deeper reasons behind the devices of writing. For example, I have told students in past classes to "describe characters using lavish details," as if this were merely a rule to follow or another rhetorical device for the writer's bag of tricks. It is more, of course. Offering characters in their fully-detailed complexity is not just straining for effect, it is tendering respect. To treat our characters respectfully is to make a generous effort to get to know them well, the same way we show respect in our nonfictional walking-around life.

What I want to learn as a teacher of fiction-writing, then, is how to help young authors cultivate this spirit of generosity. Instead of just teaching craft, I need to talk to them in ways that challenge them to learn more about their characters: Why did that character do that? What's motivating her? What do we know about her background, her dreams, her fears, her wishes? I would like to discipline myself so my first responses to a piece of fiction would center on the qualities of empathy and understanding: What's at the heart of this human you are working to portray? And if you do decide to knock around or kill off this character, how will you make it so we all feel the true hurt?

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LITERATURE AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

All this thinking about writing finally brought me back around to literature. I'm ready to talk to the pragmatists now. Here's what I will say:

The calling of literature is to explore human experience in all its dimensions and possibilities. Literature deals with our most pressing concerns—family, death, religion, love, good and evil, destiny, will, justice, character, courage—issues not often covered in an Applied Communications or Business Writing unit. Information most often represents human experience in abstract and generalized forms: facts, statistics, data. Literature represents human experience in the very specific individual terms of a story or poem.

Furthermore, literature offers a different form of learning than just processing information; it requires us to experience, to participate. Works of literature are not just *about* human issues; the power of literature is that it makes issues come alive for the reader. Think of the experience so many young readers have with Anne Frank's diary. What is learned of the Holocaust in that little book is learned in a powerful, moving, profoundly intimate way. With chillingly evil insight, Hitler's propaganda minister Josef Goebbels said that a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic. We must, of course, confront the statistics about the Holocaust, we *must know* the information that millions of lives were taken. But to fully understand, we also must *feel* the tragedy of single deaths, experience the loss in a way we can shed a tear over, put faces on those numbers. That is the function of literature.

Many younger readers, it seems to me, already know this. As a parent and sometime teacher of elementary schoolers, I am often amazed to see what can happen when avid young readers plunge into literature. They may cry when the dogs die in *Where the Red Fern Grows* or the father comes home in *Sunder*. They feel in their marrowbones the awful injustice of racism when they read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. They share pioneer hardships with Laura Ingalls Wilder and rehearse the demands of friendship with Katherine Paterson. They care desperately about the fate of characters, laugh out loud, gasp, sigh, get scared, or shiver as they read.

This is the way we want students to experience literature, a way that allows them to exercise their empathetic imaginations.

Think, then, about how literature is often taught in high school: Outline the plot. Identify the theme. Detail the setting. List main characters and supporting characters. Comment on the structure of the work. Note descriptive and supporting details. Analyze the mood. Look for certain literary techniques: irony, symbolism, author's signature style. Consider the narrative point of view. Define this work in terms of the Seven Major Plots, the Seven Forms of Ambiguity, Four Universal Themes, Kohlberg's Stages, Bloom's Taxonomy, whatever. Write up some biographical info on the author. Answer the questions at the end of the selection. Make a list of new vocabulary words. And on and on. I am as guilty as anyone.

Jumping too quickly into these kinds of follow-up activities, we miss the boat, I think. Certainly there are formal and aesthetic issues to explore in all works of literature, and I want my students to have a vocabulary of literary analysis. But if that is my primary or only instructional concern, the pragmatists are completely justified in questioning the value of the literature curriculum, their criticism correctly aimed. A skill at formal literary analysis may be useful for a few college courses, but it is not a highly marketable skill, nor a cornerstone of workplace competence, nor something most folks need as they walk around in their adult lives.

If the heart of literature is its exploration of human experience, consideration of the formal and aesthetic properties of a work of literature must be secondary to consideration of the social values and ethical dilemmas presented by the work. Bertolt Brecht once said he didn't want people to leave his plays thinking about the theater, he wanted them to leave his plays thinking about the world. In like fashion, our students want to use literature to think about the world, not just to think about the formal aspects of literature. To explore the deepest human concerns is why people read literature, and why they write it. That is what enthusiastic younger readers know, and that's what we don't want to stifle in our high school students by focusing too soon or too much on technical elements of literature.

The skill our students most need to learn from literature in this pragmatic go-getter of a society is how to better understand themselves and others.

It behooves us then, to start our discussion of every work of literature open to the human issues dramatized in it. Our first questions oughtn't to be about form, vocabulary, or literary moves. We have to give students a chance first to chew over the quandaries of the characters, the questions of right and wrong they face, justifiable and unjustifiable actions, admirable or antisocial qualities, choices and limitations. (In this way, as both Sandra Stotsky and Robert Coles have pointed out, civics and social inquiry can become the province of literature study as much as it is of the social studies curriculum.) In our classrooms, we have to use literature's main attractions, the opportunity to try out other lives and connect with other humans through the exercise of imagination and empathy.

To sum up, the main claim for literature that I want to offer to my workforce-oriented colleagues is this: We need literature to learn to get along. Literature and life converge in the field of human relationships. What characterizes quality literature—refusal to stereotype or generalize, fidelity to the whole complicated truth in all its breadth and subtlety, energy and inventiveness, eloquence, paying careful attention, discomfort at pat answers, and a generosity and sympathy with others—also characterizes thoughtful life. The great dangers of our *fin de siècle* period—nihilism, barbarism, the inability to acknowledge the humanity of others outside one's own tribe, cynicism, boredom—are perils literature attempts to combat.

So let's be clear-eyed, realistic, pragmatic. Who needs literature? We all do.

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Salibelle Royster. 1944. "Two Decades a Teacher of English." *EJ* 33.10 (Dec): 551.

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS: INTERCONTINENTAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

At its September 1994 meeting, the NCTE Executive Committee approved an Intercontinental Staff Development Program. The program will involve three NCTE members (one each representing the elementary, secondary, and college sections) and three teachers from the Eastern Transvaal Province in South Africa. The six participants will develop a critical-thinking teaching model to be used in learning and teaching English language arts. The participants (South African and American) will spend approximately two months spread over a two-year time period in on-site intensive study and workshop presentations on the two continents. The tasks will include the identification of pertinent research in language education and in cross-cultural studies, an exploration of the relationship of culture to teaching and learning, and the creation of effective instructional strategies. Travel and food and lodging expenses to and from South Africa will be paid by NCTE.

The application deadline is **January 15, 1995**. Persons interested in applying should request a form from Sandra E. Gibbs, Director of Special Programs, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801-1096.