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Literature as a Source of Empathy

In this paper I argue that empathy is only one idea about what the value of literature is, and that it is not a universal concept. In short, literature *can* produce empathy, but that is not necessarily always so, particularly in cases of people who do not experience empathy as an instinctual emotion.

This argument is worth making because in the study of the value of literature, disabled people and neurodivergent individuals need to be considered as part of the generalized “reader” and not as outliers whose interpretations of literature are considered statistically irrelevant. My argument takes into consideration human variation in values and particularly the inclusion of disabled and neurodivergent individual in the debate over what the value of literature is.

Literature as a Source of Empathy

Whether or not empathy is involved in the reading of literature is not something that is very contested. Many people read because they like the “escape from reality” that reading offers them. This escape, I believe, is often a result of empathy. The concept of stepping into another world and “becoming” the main character of a story is a feat of the imagination that involves what psychologist Martin Hoffman describes as “active, other-directed imagining” (Keen, 17). However, there have been many debates as to whether or not reading literature is a way of expanding the ability to empathize and in turn increasing altruism. In this essay, I argue that while reading often involves empathetic process and *can* help teach empathy, it is not a universal concept: some readers will become more empathetic after reading a book while other readers do not.

Many of the arguments in favor of teaching empathy state that empathy is vital for the development of morality. Others, such as psychologist Jesse J. Prinz, argue the opposite. Both of these sides make good points. On the one hand, empathy increases our ability to connect with others, to care for them, and, to an extent, we are more likely to help people who we care about and who are like us. We are more likely to donate to a fund searching for a cure to a disease a loved one had than to one we’ve never known anyone with, because the former is much closer to us and we can relate to the pain the disease causes. Empathy, this side of the argument then states, is vital for the development of morality because if we don’t know how to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, we have no understanding of others’ emotions and therefore no reason to

want to help them. If we cannot imagine another's suffering, we have no desire to want to ease it.

On the other hand, many theorists argue that empathy is inherently flawed, especially in its promotion of morality. Empathy, according to this argument, would be the reason someone in America might feel sadder for a friend whose phone broke than people suffering in North Korea. This person might have experienced a broken phone before, so they understand how frustrating it can be, and because it is more relevant to them, both as something happening nearby and as something the person has experienced before. However, this person is unlikely to know what is going on in North Korea at the moment, and even if they had, say, read an article about the atrocities there, it is not something they are being constantly reminded of, so it's easy to forget about it, particularly if the horrors are so shocking that they overwhelm the person, a condition called "empathic overarousal" (Keen 19). Another argument against empathy is that people often create false equivalencies in their attempts to empathize with another. Someone might try to equate their experience with being teased for having pimples to another person being teased for the color of their skin, even though the two aren't similar in the fact that one situation is racially motivated and the other is not. Theorists who argue against empathy as a source of morality point out that no two people have exactly the same situation, and therefore all attempts at empathy result in false equivalencies, which are ultimately self-centered attempts to make someone else's situation about oneself.

These dichotomic arguments about empathy both endorse the idea that rationality and emotion are entirely separate. I argue that this is not true. Suzanne Keen

discusses this false dichotomy in her book, *Empathy and the Novel*, where she claims, “Human empathy clearly involves both feeling and thinking” (Keen 27). The connection between logic and emotion is one that I feel is often overlooked in discussions of empathy. There can be and often is a logical element of the thought process encompassing empathy. In fact, when we teach children about the importance of sharing, we often invoke a logical thought process that appeals to the individual emotion. We ask a child who stole another child’s toy, “How would you feel if Sammy took your toy without asking you?” We expect the child respond with something along the lines of “sad” or “angry.” We then ask the child, “Do you think Sammy is feeling sad and angry because you took his toy without asking?” In this way, we are teaching children not only empathy but also logic. It is, admittedly, sometimes a flawed logic, as it’s based on the assumption that others will react to situations in a similar way that we would, but it appears to be useful in general situations.

Some books seem to be directed towards this method of teaching empathy, and often the way books are taught in school is intended to help children learn to be more empathetic. When I worked as a reading tutor in an elementary school, we would ask kids as they were reading, “How do you think this character feels?” and “How would you feel if you were in this situation?” It is a way of getting children to understand that other people have emotions similar to them, and also a way of getting them to engage with the text. Engagement is often why people enjoy reading - they enjoy feeling a connection to the characters, often an emotional one. That emotional connection is often based in empathy.

However, an increase in empathy is only one of many effects literature can have on the reader. I argued in the essay I wrote before the beginning of this class that the value of literature is that it makes people feel and it makes them think, and I still believe that to be true. Empathy can be a result when a book makes a reader feel or think. A cancer survivor reading a novel about someone going through the treatment process for cancer will likely feel empathy for the character because of how similar it is to their own previous experiences, dredging up memories of something they had gone through themselves. Someone reading a narrative of workers' experiences in Chinese sweatshops may feel empathetic towards the workers because they remember a bad job they had before and now have new knowledge about how much worse it could have been. All writing is based on the human experience - even science fiction stories or stories narrated by animals contain human characteristics because as humans we are unable to fully detach ourselves from human bias in our writings - so there is always something there with which readers are able to empathize.

To say that empathy is always a result of reading, though, is an overgeneralization. That theory doesn't take into consideration the fact that empathy is not a universal experience. There are many people who don't experience the emotional side of empathy. They may be able to experience the rational side, the side that uses the thought process of, "I wouldn't want this to happen to me, so he probably doesn't want it happening to him," but the 'instinctive' aspect isn't there. Just because some people are unable to empathize, though, does not mean literature has no value to these people. If literature is valuable to people who cannot empathize instinctually, empathy cannot alone be the value of literature. Suzanne Keen mentions that, "Some research

suggests that empathizers are better readers because their role-taking abilities allow them to more readily comprehend casual relations in stories” (Keen, xii), but I take issue with this. What defines a reader as “better” than another? People who do not empathize are no better or worse than those who do - they are simply different. To say that they are “worse” readers than others, particularly because a lack of empathy is often correlated with intellectual or developmental disorders, is to ascribe an ableist mindset of what a reader is supposed to be and how they are supposed to feel based on the false assumption that empathy is “normal” and those who don’t experience empathy are “abnormal” and are to be considered outliers who don’t count in the description of the “reader” as a general concept.

Empathy is most definitely an aspect of most literature reading. For many, it is the reason why they read - to connect with characters and immerse themselves in another’s life. However, to say that any one thing is the value of literature is to ignore the differences within humans, particularly those that apply to disabled and neurodivergent people. Literature has a different value to everyone who consumes it, because every human has different values. There are people who believe that literature has no value at all, and there are people who value it above all else. Any generalization about the value of literature cannot be true, including the generalization that literature is valuable because it teaches people how to become more empathetic.

Bibliography

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

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