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The Importance of Literature

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The Importance of Literature

Abstract

"We engage in story to better understand ourselves and the people around us."

Posting about experiencing literature and its value from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-importance-of-literature/>

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Comments

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Luke Hawley

I went to school to learn how to write, not to learn how to talk about what people had written. So, when I was first tossed in front of a freshman literature class, I just regurgitated my own experiences in lit classes. It went about as well as you might imagine—regurgitation in place of education borders on indoctrination, and my current students would probably name “EDUCATE, DON’T INDOCTRINATE” as one of my top five sayings.

So, I had to go back to the beginning of education: the *how* and the *why*.

We start with *how*: How do we read? How have we read in the past? How is literature usually taught? How might we respond to it? (The course is officially titled *Responding to Literature*, which gives me all sorts of pedagogic wiggle room.)

My favorite part of the semester is when we get to the *why*. I usually start my students with a quote from John Gardner, a holdover from my creative writing studies. In his book *The Art of Fiction*, he’s writing about the balance of interest and truth in the stories that we consume and the problem of enslaving books to learning objectives. He writes, “To treat great works of literature in this way seems a little like arguing for the preservation of dolphins, whales, chimps, and gorillas on the grounds of ecological balance.” From there, we move to [Adam Gopnik](#), who says that literature “remains the one kind of time travel that works,” then through Annie Dillard’s point that “people who read are not too lazy to flip on the television; they prefer books,” and on to Saint Flannery O’Connor’s *Mystery and Manners*, in which she argues for a thoroughly anagogic reading of things—in which reading is simply an experience, the “participation in the Divine life.”

At this point, I am impressed with myself. Surely, they will understand the inherent importance, the intrinsic value in engaging all sorts of literature.

But then, we read Raymond Carver.

I love Carver—his efficiency, the strangeness of his domestic situations, the staccato of his sentences. My students, on the other hand, are not so sure. We read *Cathedral*, Carver’s most well-known and, thus, anthologized work. It’s a pretty thin story, they say. A narrator—one of Carver’s deadbeats—shares an evening with Carver’s wife and her blind friend, who has come to visit after the passing of his own wife. They commune over food and booze and then move to the living room to smoke pot and watch PBS. And at this point, I almost always have a student who says, “Why are we reading this?” What is left out—but heavily implied—is *Why should we read about people like this? Who are nothing like us? Who we don’t want to be?*

And, we have arrived at the real *why*.

It’s not in Gopnik’s time travel or Dillard’s dichotomy of books and television. Rather, we engage in story to better understand ourselves and the people around us. It’s an act of identity wrapped up in the practice of empathy. The narrator at the center of *Cathedral* is skeptical of just about everything connected to the blind man—why he doesn’t wear sunglasses, why he has a beard, why his wife’s name was Beulah. Why he’s coming to visit Carver’s wife. But at the end of the story, after a single evening of dinner and drinks, he finds himself trying to describe the cathedrals in the PBS documentary playing on the television, first in words—their spires and buttresses—and then in drawing, the blind man’s hand over his hand. He’s trying to give the blind man his experience, what he sees, trying to translate that experience to someone who will never have it. And that is the *why* of literature, the *why* of story. It draws us together in spite—or maybe because—of our differences. We find ourselves having the same anagogic experience as the narrator of the story:

“I had my eyes closed. I thought I’d keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do.

‘Well?’ he said. ‘Are you looking?’

My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything.

‘It’s really something,’ I said.”