

LITERATURE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE INDIVIDUAL

A Research Proposal Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement
for EDMA 5683

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Masters in Teaching Program
July 2011

Abstract

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Reading and the study of literature have a seemingly permanent place in all levels of education. Still, the question of why students, or readers of any age for that matter, should read literature has no clear and easy answer. Countless words have been written and research has been conducted on the value and utility of literature. Still, the relevance of reading a given novel or poem is not always easy to explain to students. Literature remains an individual experience, and as such, its more practical qualities and benefits are often less convincing than those found in the study of science or math, for example. Still, few disagree that literature and the other arts hold some type of innate power, and most classify this power as having a moral or societal value. As such, this research project studies the question: what is the ideal role of literature in the individual?

To answer the question, this project utilizes a philosophical approach, studying Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's *The Republic* for their thoughts on the role and nature of literature and the other arts. Both attribute literature, or poetry specifically in their case, with significant potential to emotionally impact the audience. They differ greatly, however, in how they think that power should be used. Aristotle ultimately sees this power as good, arguing that poetry can be instructional and help purify readers of negative emotions. Plato argues that poetry can empower these same negative emotions, proving detrimental to the individual and society as a whole. This author

ultimately falls more in line with Aristotle's thoughts, arguing that the emotional power of literature and the arts can be of great use if conducted and managed well.

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Introduction

In my opinion, no question is of greater importance to a student of any age than the question of relevance. When encountering any new learning, one immediately asks, "When will I use this?" Finding no answer or an answer that does not satisfy, the student moves on, disregarding the learning to some degree or another. This natural inclination to focus on what is obviously helpful and important is only exacerbated by an era where the difficulty of finding a job fills the daily news. It can seem frivolous to focus on anything that won't help one find employment. Education, too, is focusing more on teaching to standards, and the standards are then tested. Failure in these exams can mean a failure to graduate. Because of this direct link to graduation, these exams cement the skills they test as important, making them immediately relevant. Whether they retain relevance once the test is passed is another matter.

Looking further, a focus on relevancy has implications on what should be taught in the first place. Most, if not all, will agree that learning to read and write is vitally important for the long-term future of any student. Less clear is the importance of teaching literature, which accompanies reading and writing in most classes. Being an English major with a focus in literature myself, I sometimes wonder as to the point of all my reading and studying. I'm not directly helping people, like a doctor or social worker does. I'm not providing a service, like an accountant or construction worker might. My writing skills have been helpful in various jobs I've held, but my English degree and ability to understand literature have played no direct part in my obtaining any job.

What is the point, then, of studying and teaching literature? People have done so through the full course of human history, so it would seem there is some reason. Any book lover can give reasons for why they feel reading is important, some reasons more concrete than others. My own thoughts run along the same lines as literary critic Harold Bloom when he says that literature (and Shakespeare in particular in this instance) lets us “see what otherwise we could not see, since we are made different” and that “we read in search of more life” (2002, p. 4). While this is a beautiful notion, it’s not necessarily an easy one to convey to someone who has no love for literature already.

This project will look at various arguments set forth throughout history for the importance of literature. Since humans started writing, people have thought and written on literature’s importance, from societal, literary and educational viewpoints. I’m interested in those abstract ideas on literature’s value, but I’m also interested in whether the study of literature brings some tangible and vital skill or knowledge that can’t be found through the study of any other subject. I’m looking for an answer to that common question: why do I have to read this?

Literature Review

There is a great deal of writing about literature, ranging from critiques of poetry to studies conducted in classrooms and everything in between. In some cases, the purpose of the article or essay is very clear, such as looking at the effect reading as a child has on writing skills later in life. In many cases, however, writings about reading and literature blur the lines between different aspects of study, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. For example, an essay on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* can be

expanded to discuss literature in general, or in another direction to touch on social or psychological issues. With this in mind, a review of the research concerning reading and literature is both enlightening and frustrating. It is a broad and open field, full of insight but not always specificity. I looked at several different areas of research, starting with some pertaining directly to literature and working toward the social realm upon which writing on literature tends to fixate.

Literature's Benefit to Other Curriculum

When used in the teaching of other subjects, literature has very clear benefits. Elizabeth Gareis, Martine Allard, and Jackie Saindon (2009) make the case for using novels and other authentic literature to teach other subjects, such as history or science. While they are focused primarily on using novels in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, their principles are easily applied in any classroom. The chief aspect of novels and other types of literature that make them ideal for teaching other subjects is that literature involves stories. Whereas a student might struggle to remain interested in a textbook or worksheet, he or she can engage with a novel and find motivation to continue reading because of the story (2009, p. 136). This has factored into an increase in the use of educational novels and narrative-style textbooks in numerous subject areas (2009, p. 136).

Charlotte Huck's research underscores the benefits of the story, especially regarding its impact on children. Drawing literature into the teaching of reading can help cement reading as a lifelong activity, as well as increase a student's literacy levels (Huck, 1987). With recent changes in educational funding and policy, there has been a

shift toward reading as achievement, forcing students to increase their reading ability. While improving reading ability is certainly a worthy goal, it is often coming with the cost of divorcing literature from the reading process (Enciso & Wolf, 2008). Without the power of the story and the personal and social connections literature can bring, reading must stand on its own, and that means that it often loses its hold on students. According to Enciso and Wolf, test scores show that reading achievement is now lagging, and they blame it on literature being forced to take a backseat in current teaching (2008, p. 529). Moreover, Danielle Dennis argues that, while “score reports reflect students’ abilities to master grade-level content standards” (2009, p. 284), this information gained is incomplete and often unhelpful. Too often, test scores only tell where a student is in relation to the mandated standard. Unfortunately, Dennis says “these scores do not reveal why struggling readers are testing below grade level” (2009, p. 284), or conversely, why advanced readers are thriving. Her fear is that as teaching to the assessment becomes more prominent, instruction will become less individualized to specific students’ needs.

Beyond the natural attraction of the story, an added benefit is found when novels or other literature are used to teach other aspects of the language arts. Literature holds authentic usage of the English language and thereby contains most grammatical and stylistic topics that teachers might cover. The extended nature of the novel affords an opportunity to touch on multiple language skills within the same work. Literature also presents opportunities to focus on social topics and current events (Gareis, et al., 2009, p. 137). It can present different viewpoints to both historical and

current events with an authentic voice. Most significantly, literature can bring excitement and energy that textbooks are hard-pressed to match (Huck, 1987, p. 379).

Difficulties with Literature

Budget and policy changes are only some of the difficulties literature currently faces. With the advances in technology, many see reading as direct competition for video games, the internet and other technological gadgets. Tom Lynch (2009) writes that this idea seems accurate, and that reading is losing out in the race. New literacies (such as those listed above, typically related to technology and internet) are becoming more common, and teachers of traditional literature are not always doing a good job of explaining why literature (novels, poetry and the like) is important. Lynch writes that “teaching literature has never really had to justify itself” (2009, p. 12) before now, as it was entrenched in the tradition of more classical studies and held a focus on grammar issues. Now, the public is looking to English teachers for reasons why studying literature is necessary, and educators are struggling to find answers.

With these new literacies made possible by the internet and other technological advances, an emphasis on specific knowledge or content is developing. This is in direct conflict with the traditional teaching of literature, which “has always been use-less” (Lynch, 2009, p. 14). New literacies focus on information, whereas literature and its study are essentially about imagination. Lynch doesn’t offer any easy reasons for why the teaching of traditional literature is necessary, but he sees the imperative as being on literature teachers to find reasons and explain them to the public, and in turn to

incorporate new literacies into their teaching. His outlook is bleak, and he believes the teaching of literature as we currently know it will die out in the next century.

Another difficulty with the teaching of literature is determining and presenting motivation for students to read (Hodges, 2010). Looking at several reports, Hodges finds that while students are often polled on why they read, these polls seldom give opportunity for them to explain their answers (2010, p. 63). Consequentially, we are lacking in understanding what motivates students to read in the first place. This problem is exacerbated by teachers that are not always sufficiently familiar with children's literature and how to teach it. Furthermore, Hodges uses the report *English at the Crossroads* to show that while students were frequently encouraged to read widely, few schools studied had a coherent plan for how to implement that love for reading (2010, pp. 60-61). One school that did find a way to put structure to their valuation saw significant increases in reading engagement and achievement. For this school, giving students a choice about what they would read and then assessing and shaping coursework around those choices proved key. Barry Gilmore follows a similar course of thought, noting that students read less as they grow older, especially as they are in their teen years (2011, p. 47). Gilmore recommends giving students more choice in what they read, as well as using a wider variety of texts in the classroom. He says, "If schools don't validate student reading of many kinds, then students won't read at all, won't respect the act of reading, and worst of all, won't develop the capacity for critical reading" (2011, p. 48). Author and educator Kelly Gallagher agrees, advocating a 50/50 approach where "half the reading kids should be doing in K-12 should be recreational in

nature” (Rebora, 2011). Teresa Cremin goes a step further, making the case that teachers who read for their own enjoyment are better equipped to teach. She notes a lack of educator knowledge of what current students are reading for fun and thinks this deprives educators of an important role in recommending and discussing literature with students. Cremin writes that as teachers begin to read more on their own, they are able to “share their pleasure in it, develop readers who can and do choose to read, and invite them to participate in reciprocal reading communities alongside their Reading Teachers” (2011, p. 12).

Why and When to Read

Many great writers have written on the topic of reading. As might be expected, most of them argue for reading’s benefits (although not all of them do). The benefits they cite are numerous. Harold Bloom, one of the most noted literary critics of the past century, focuses on why to read in the preface and prologue of his book, *How to Read and Why* (2000). Bloom looks at the question, “Where shall wisdom be found?” (2000, p. 19), a theme that runs through much of his writing. His answer, unsurprisingly, is that wisdom can be found through reading the words of others; perhaps it might be better said that Bloom sees reading as a way to awaken the wisdom within oneself.

Bloom sees most of the benefits of reading as being personal. He argues that literature is a cure for loneliness, saying, “We read not only because we cannot know enough people, but because friendship is so vulnerable, so likely to disappear” (2000, p. 19). Bloom also sees reading as a way for the reader to prepare for change, providing a chance to see truths that resonate in the reader’s life, either now or in the future (2000,

p. 21). Bloom does not give much merit to the idea of reading as a way to change society, believing that “self-improvement is a large enough project for your mind and spirit” and admonishing the reader to “not attempt to improve your neighbor or your neighborhood by what or how you read” (2000, p. 24). One’s motivation for reading must also be personal, according to Bloom. Where reading is open to influence is in the what and how of the reading: “How they read, well or badly, and what they read, cannot depend wholly on themselves” (2000, p. 21), he argues, speaking of the general public. Bloom allows this statement to hang throughout the book’s preface with no direct response. Given the fact that he has written an entire book on how to read, however, Bloom seems to feel it is the educator or critic’s responsibility to teach others how to read well, and also to direct them toward those works that will benefit them most as individuals. Further, as the title of his book indicates, the how and the why of reading are linked, possibly indicating that Bloom is arguing that just reading is not sufficient; one must read well.

C. S. Lewis, another fierce twentieth century advocate of reading and literature, chooses a different but related path in his essay *Learning in War-Time* from *The Weight of Glory* (1949). Writing during the second World War, Lewis aims to answer those wondering how it is acceptable to continue learning (and reading) with the world locked in war and great atrocities being perpetrated miles away from Lewis’ England. Lewis argues that the situation in which he writes is really no different from any other situation, in that human life “has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself” (1949, p. 49). While World War II might be a more

severe case, humans always find themselves battling against death or injustice or something that instinctively seems more important than reading or learning in a university. Yet, according to Lewis, humans have always sought knowledge and beauty. Lewis argues that if humans have always pursued knowledge and beauty, this pursuit must be a part of human nature, and if this be the case, we should not neglect the pursuit even in the face of war (1949, p. 50).

Building on this idea, Lewis notes that in war, the closer one gets to the front lines, the more thought and talk shifts from the war itself toward other matters (1949, p. 51). He takes this as evidence that there is a cultural and intellectual nature to human existence that will exist no matter the circumstances. In spite of horrifying circumstances, humankind continues to turn to topics outside their situation: philosophical instead of military debates, discussions of art instead of war tactics. Even in the face of death, men and women read and discuss intellectual matters. Lewis' argument is that, since humans naturally turn to intellectual, artistic and cultural ideas, humankind should embrace every opportunity to seek truth and beauty. Given our natural gravitation toward artistic ideas, if we don't seek truth and beauty, they will be replaced by poorer thinking and lower forms of art. According to Lewis, there is never an era or a time when humans will turn from their quest for knowledge and beauty, so it is both important and natural to continue on that quest with the most focus and determination possible. In many ways, this idea mirrors Bloom. Lewis takes his arguments further into the social realm than does Bloom, but both hold to a belief that

learning and literature, and more specifically good literature, hold value to the individual as a way of self-improvement and enlightenment.

Literature's Moral Value

This theme of literature's moral effect is one of the most common topics in writings on literature. Most people feel a primary goal of literature in the educational realm is to offer some moral or social component to the education. Maria Takolander (2009) points out that the debates over the moral issues of literature date back to Plato and Aristotle, if not further. The moral component can take many forms. Often it is seen as a chance to broaden cultural and social perspectives. Rajini Srikanth (2007) uses novels set in different countries and cultures to help students in his classes understand those cultures. One difficulty this type of teaching presents is that teachers are typically not sufficiently expert in these cultures to help students fully comprehend what they're reading. Rajini believes this then becomes a time to "teach the journey" through the text:

The ultimate objective, from my perspective, is to get students to engage the philosophical and ideological questions that they ought to be raising at every stage of their journey to acquiring appropriate supporting information in the teaching of a literary text (2007, p. 198).

The reading is thus a chance to learn how to read literature, as the students work through the text with the educator, as well as a time to examine the cultural and societal aspect of what they're reading.

Some make stronger claims regarding both what literature is capable of and accountable for in the social/moral realm. It is not uncommon to claim reading as a national obligation (Wolk, 2009). The argument is that those living in a democracy hold an obligation to read, “and think and act in response to their reading” (Wolk, 2009, p. 665). Wolk writes that education is currently too focused on preparing workers instead of preparing students “to participate in the daily governance of our nation” (2009, p. 665). While social studies courses have traditionally held these responsibilities, Zhao and Hoge (Wolk, 2009, p. 665) found that of 300 interviewed students, 95% “did not think their social studies class was relevant to their personal life (p. 218)” (Wolk, 2009, p. 665). The burden then falls on all teachers to incorporate the necessary societal knowledge and viewpoints into their teaching, and one of the best avenues to accomplish this is literature.

Focusing again on the moral side of the argument, the idea is often present that literature holds a piece of what it is to be human. In this view, literature portrays humanity in all its beauty and differences, offering a common ground and opportunity for readers to learn and empathize with people and cultures outside of their own (Webber, 1925). Takolander approaches the social implications of literature by studying language and its aesthetic qualities. She first identifies the deep pleasure and ability to transport the reader to another place that reading can bring, terming this effect the aesthetic (2009, p. 168). Takolander notes that critics and philosophers have discussed this effect of literature since at least as far back as Aristotle. Many philosophers and literary critics have identified the aesthetic as a negative effect on the individual or

society as a whole, but Takolander sees its existence as confirmation of several ideas, when she writes, "The aesthetic (that quality capable of provoking an experience of transportation and transformation) is embedded as a natural potential within the virtual and imaginative space of language. Secondly, language is the medium of our being" (2009, p. 171). In this argument, language is the method by which literature transports the reader, which allows "not only cognition of prosaic and 'scientific' occurrences but also movement to a realm beyond the immediate and material conditions of our existence" (2009, p. 171). In simpler terms, language "allows not only self-definition but also self-escape" (2009, p. 172). Getting back to the issues of morality and social consciousness in literature, Takolander argues language as a force that binds society (2009, p. 174) and provides readers with both a personal identity and a social environment (2009, p. 175). Its ability to transport the reader can also present an opportunity to see that the reader and his or her social environment are not bound to each other (2009, p. 174). Despite these effects, or perhaps because of them, Takolander warns that aesthetic experience of literature can lead to violence or negative self-reformation. For these reasons it may be difficult to use literature as any form of moral education (2009, p. 174).

Summary

Much has been written on the value of literature. Literature has been found to have clear educational benefits. The most notable seems to be the impact literature has on the teaching of reading and other language skills, but the power of the story is beneficial in many different subject areas. Despite this, the teaching of literature is

facing threats from technological advances and from a change in educational priorities toward more quantifiable skills. Lying beneath all of these issues, however, seems to be the concept of literature holding some moral or social value. This can be seen and applied in countless ways, but nearly everyone who writes on literature mentions it, even if their focus is on something else entirely.

Research Question

I came to this research project looking for answers to the question, “Why should I read this?” What about a poem or novel or other piece of literature makes it worthwhile for a student or anyone else to read? Looking at different areas of research, there are myriad answers to this question. Some pertain to literature’s role in education, whether as an aid in teaching other subjects or as an integral part of a reading curriculum. While these arguments should certainly not be discounted, they are not likely to be meaningful to someone already uninterested in reading *Great Expectations* or *Crime and Punishment*.

It is possibly for this reason that most of the research on and arguments for literature focus on other aspects, primarily its social and personal effects. Literature tends to be a private thing, written by (generally) a single author and read by a single reader. Both the author and the reader experience their roles in the literature differently, depending on how it relates to each person’s life. With this perspective, I was left with questions on how literature and a person’s individual life interact. The primary question which drives this project is: what is the ideal role of literature in the individual? Secondary questions include:

What is this transformative effect literature and the arts are purported to cause?

How might the individual effect of literature and the arts carry over to society as a whole?

These questions present a means to examine literature as an entity and how we as humans relate to it. I may not be able to provide a specific reason for why to read something, but I believed these questions would bring a greater understanding of literature and its effects and characteristics.

Methodology

Methodology & Rationale

To attempt to understand and answer these questions about literature and its effect on the individual, I used a conceptual philosophical approach to inquiry. Using a philosophical approach means I looked solely at what philosophers have written on the subject. I did not conduct any type of tests or studies with students or readers, nor did I interview readers about their experiences. I believe this was the best mode of inquiry for my subject for a number of reasons. I have noted the first reason several times throughout this paper: people have thought and written about literature and its effects throughout recorded history. During this time, philosophers and critics have formulated ideas and positions that have been furthered and refuted by countless others. Reading even a few of these philosophers will provide a view that has tremendous depth and breadth. The second reason for a philosophical approach involves the personal nature of literature that I discussed previously. If I were to interview a number of readers about their reading experience and the resulting feelings, that information would

certainly be valuable and interesting. However, even with a broad and well-chosen sample of interviewees, their answers would be subject to not only their own personalities but also their experiences with literature. For the broader scope I took, a philosophical approach allowed me to encapsulate and synthesize many of these differences of opinion, but it also allowed me to move past them to see a more universal presentation of the debate. I believe this led to better understanding of literature's effects and how to work with those effects in an educational setting.

Sample

For my research sample, I began where western philosophy began, with Plato and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle took differing views on the value of poetry. Plato bans the poets from his ideal republic. Aristotle writes a whole piece, *The Poetics*, in which he analyzes poetry and defends the poets. I looked at these works and others to determine what contributed to their different views on poetry and the arts. A major benefit of studying Plato and Aristotle is that, while they have definite views on poetry and the arts, those views are just a part of constructs of the self and society which have been foundational to all western thought and philosophy that followed. Studying Plato and Aristotle gave specific insights on the arts, but it also gave the broad view of society and the self from which those specific thoughts were formed.

Instrumentation

In this project, I read primary texts from Plato and Aristotle. Throughout my reading, I took notes and journaled my general thoughts and reactions to what I read. Where necessary or beneficial, I supplemented my own understanding of these texts

with commentaries or responses from other philosophers. I encountered occasional difficulties understanding the material and using these secondary sources helped in understanding and also provided some measure of accuracy as I interpreted my findings and built arguments. Responses and interpretations by other philosophers and critics were also helpful in expanding on and clarifying arguments, as well as putting Plato and Aristotle's ideas in a more modern light, but my main focus was on the works of Plato and Aristotle themselves.

Analysis & Validity

Any good argument must be based on evidence. Rather than a study or test, my evidence was the writings of Plato and Aristotle. While reading their works, I watched for their thoughts on literature and the other humanities and how they proposed to treat the arts. I also studied their thoughts on the individual, particularly as it relates to the arts and education. The words and ideas of these philosophers present a warrant upon which I could make claims as to the relation of literature to the individual, and what role this relationship plays in education.

It would be naïve to think that my own biases were not in play in this project. As a lover of literature and an English teacher, I have clear thoughts about and belief in the positive effects of literature. I did my best to put these opinions aside, but seldom are we able to fully do so. Studying two philosophers who have differing views on the subject forced me to look at the issue objectively and understand both sides of the argument for and against literature. Additionally, reading other philosophers' and

critics' interpretations and refutations of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle helped verify and inform my conclusions and understanding.

Data

Aristotle's Poetics

It would be no exaggeration to call Aristotle's *Poetics* the single most influential piece of writing on literature and literary criticism. He aims to analyze poetry and to determine what makes poetic works effective. As he opens the piece:

I propose to treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each; to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same inquiry (Fergusson, 1961, p. 49).

Aristotle sees art as imitation, and both how and what it imitates is central to its nature and success as art. Aristotle establishes in Chapter 2 that the poet or dramatist has a choice in both what to imitate and how that object will be represented:

Since the object of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are (Fergusson, 1961, p. 52).

Of note, he says that Tragedy represents men "as better than in actual life" (Fergusson, 1961, p. 52).

Much of the *Poetics* is dedicated to classifying aspects of poetry and drama. For instance, in Chapter 3, Aristotle notes that there can be a difference in “the manner in which each of these objects may be imitated”, that being through narration or the poet presenting “all his characters as living and moving before us” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 53). While these classifications have played a vital role in the understanding and development of drama and poetry, they can grow tedious if read for reasons other than literary analysis. Of more interest for this project are some of the explanations and reasons Aristotle provides for his classifications. In Chapter 4, he provides reasons for poetry’s birth:

Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated...The cause of this again is that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general...Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, “Ah, that is he.” For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause (Fergusson, 1961, pp. 55-56).

Aristotle also argues that we have an “instinct for ‘harmony’ and ‘rhythm’”, and poetry’s meters are only a manifestation of rhythm (Fergusson, 1961, p. 56).

Later, Aristotle writes that “tragedy is the imitation of an action”, which makes Plot the most important element of a Tragedy, as “life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 62). Character is also important, but not so important as Plot, because “character determines men’s qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 62). Aristotle argues then that action should not exist to represent character, character is instead “subsidiary to the actions” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 63). Still, “character is that which reveals, moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 64). Thus, Aristotle argues that the two elements most important to an effective tragedy are Plot and Character, those also being the two elements most evident in daily life.

In Chapter 9, Aristotle aims to note the difference between poetry and history and in so doing provides a roundabout definition of poetry. A poet’s function is not to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity...Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular (Fergusson, 1961, p. 68).

Later, he notes that it is the story (that being the Plot) that holds the power, so that “even without the aid of the eye [to witness the spectacle or performance], he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 78). Indeed, a great deal of Aristotle’s argument is built around the ability of a well-constructed plot to accurately imitate life and thereby generate a

natural response from the audience. He also touches on the idea that morality is a central piece of poetry and drama. For instance, when speaking of character in Chapter 15, he writes that poets should aim for character to be “good”, meaning that character will be good if his or her speech or action is good (Fergusson, 1961, p. 81). Shortly after that, he says, “character must be true to life” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 81). He expounds on this when, comparing painters to poets, he writes that painters, “while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful”, calling for poets to do the same regarding man’s character (Fergusson, 1961, p. 82).

Catharsis

Of Aristotle’s views on poetry, the most discussed and enigmatic might be his idea of catharsis. Given the volumes that have been written on the idea, one would expect it would play a major role in the *Poetics*. Instead, catharsis makes but one brief appearance, in Chapter 6. Furthermore, translation of the term is uncertain enough that a different word, often perfection or purgation, is often used. In essence, catharsis is a medical term that the Greeks used to denote a purging within the body, generally referring to menstruation. Catharsis’ one mention in the *Poetics* comes at the end of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy; in S.H. Butcher’s translation, it reads, “Tragedy, then is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude... through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 61). Malcolm Heath offers a nearly identical translation, but changes “purgation” to “purification” (1996, p. 10). Bywater’s translation is slightly more complete and leaves the word in question as “catharsis”: “A tragedy, then is the imitation of an action that is

serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself... with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (1984, p. 2320).

While I will discuss catharsis in greater detail later in this paper, one should note that Aristotle identifies this catharsis as being part of a tragedy's identity; on this all translations are in agreement. According to Aristotle, tragedy, at least in part, exists to identify feelings of pity and fear and to purge or purify them.

It should be noted that it is likely Aristotle wrote more on catharsis for the *Poetics*, but that those writings have never been found. Aristotle mentions a second book in the *Poetics* that would deal with comedy, and it is likely that he spoke more at length regarding catharsis in this book. Unfortunately, what he might have written is left to empty speculation. The main reason to suspect this additional writing on catharsis comes from Aristotle's work *The Politics*. In Chapter 7 of Book VIII, Aristotle again mentions catharsis, this time translated as purgation. He declines to provide an explanation of what he means by purgation, saying that it will come in his apparently lost discussion of poetry. The context here is a discussion on the treatment of music in education. Aristotle admits that "feelings such as pity and fear, or, again, enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence over all" (1984, p. 2128). Speaking of those in religious frenzy, he states through music they find "healing and purgation" (1984, p. 2129). Aristotle seems to identify this process as ideal, saying, "Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a

manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted” (1984, p. 2129). Again, Aristotle holds catharsis to be innate to art and beneficial to those who experience it.

Art in Plato’s Republic

Where Aristotle aims to delineate what makes poetry effective, Plato’s only thought is whether poetry has a role in his perfect society and what role that might be. He addresses this question several times in *The Republic*. The most direct instance, and that which receives the most attention as literary criticism, comes in Book X. Written in his customary dialogue style, Plato starts the section claiming that “among all the excellent features of our ideal state, there’s none I rank higher than its treatment of poetry” (2003, p. 335). He refers to his decision to keep poets out of his perfect republic and to severely limit the type of poetry and art that shall be used to educate and entertain the young. His reasons for these ideas are multiple, but he focuses much of Book X on the idea of imitation and misrepresentation. Using a bed as his illustration, he constructs a chain of creation. Closely mirroring his allegory of the cave, he claims that there is one true form of the bed, which “exists in nature... made by god” (2003, p. 338), since no one else could have made it. Once removed from this true bed is the carpenter’s creation, not the true bed but a particular bed which represents some part of the form of the bed. Only after another link does Plato come to the artist, in this instance a painter but just as possibly a poet, actor, novelist. While the painter can create a bed, this bed is at best an imitation of an imitation, and “the art of imitation is therefore a long way removed from truth”, and furthermore, art “is able to reproduce

everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of a mere phenomenal appearance" (2003, pp. 339-341).

Plato's focus is on moving closer to truth. Since art is so far removed from the true representation of life and whatever the art portrays, he cannot allow it to be used without regulation in his republic. On top of the problem of imitation discussed above, Plato makes the argument that the poet knows little about what he writes. Homer, for instance, writes about wars, but he has never made a contribution to military strategy. Plato argues that "the artist who makes a likeness of a thing knows nothing about the reality but only about the appearance" (2003, p. 343). To put his case in different terms, Plato says there are three techniques for everything—"use, manufacture, and representation" (2003, p. 343). In Plato's eyes "the quality, beauty and fitness of any implement or creature or action [is] judged by reference to the use for which man or nature produced it" (2003, p. 343). If this be the case, the manufacturer will at least have direct experience with his creation and be able to fashion it in a way that will be of most use. The artist, on the other hand, "has neither knowledge nor correct opinion about the goodness or badness of the things he represents" (2003, p. 344). To conclude the section, Plato states that "the artist knows little or nothing about the subjects he represents and that the art of representation is something that has no serious value; and that this applies above all to all tragic poetry, epic or dramatic" (2003, p. 344).

Moving from his arguments regarding imitation, Plato next discusses poetry's appeal. He argues that within each individual there are different parts that can believe, experience or desire different things. Using the example of a man experiencing grief,

Plato argues that a good man who is able to “moderate his sorrow” will “be more inclined to resist and fight against his grief when his fellows can see him” than when he is by himself (2003, p. 347). Plato says this illustrates the competing impulses within man; he believes the impulse to resist and fight the grief is the higher of the two because it shows a greater level of reasoning. With this in mind, Plato argues that poetry and drama are more likely to deal with the baser impulse and to represent that lower side of humanity to its reader or audience, because “the reasonable element and its unvarying calm are difficult to represent, and difficult to understand if represented, particularly by the motley audience gathered in a theatre, to whose experience it is quite foreign” (2003, p. 348). On the basis of this argument, Plato passes his judgment, saying,

We are therefore quite right to refuse to admit [the poet] to a properly run state, because he wakens and encourages and strengthens the lower elements in the mind to the detriment of reason, which is like giving power and political control to the worst elements in a state and ruining the better elements. The dramatic poet produces a similarly bad state of affairs in the mind of the individual, by encouraging the unreasoning part of it, which cannot distinguish greater and less but thinks the same things are now large and now small, and by creating images far removed from the truth (2003, p. 348-349).

The last section of Book X brings Plato’s argument to a conclusion, with what he calls the gravest charge against poetry, that being that it “has a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters, with very few exceptions” (2003, p. 349). He starts

this argument in a similar vein as earlier, noting that Homer and others present suffering heroes as bemoaning their situations. Plato argues that this encourages the audience to be carried away by their feelings, when in reality it is preferable to bear grief and suffering in silence. Plato states that these characters should be regarded with disgust, when in fact they typically cause the reader or viewer enjoyment and admiration. Further, Plato argues that the “poet gratifies and indulges the instinctive desires of a part of us, which we forcibly restrain in our private misfortunes” (2003, p. 350). This is dangerous because, in Plato’s view, “what we feel for other people must infect what we feel for ourselves” and “if we let our pity for the misfortunes of others grow too strong it will be difficult to restrain our feelings in our own [misfortunes]” (2003, p. 350). This effect is not specific to pity and grief; representations of sex, anger, pleasure, and vulgar comedy have the same effect.

Finally, it must be made clear that Plato is not opposed to poetry itself. He admits to a great love for Homer and other poets; in fact, earlier in *The Republic*, he says that its educational system must use both true stories and fiction, and should even “start with fiction” (2003, p. 68). The reasons for Plato’s decision to remove poets from his republic are numerous, but they all center on the effects that poetry has on the individual if used poorly, rather than on any personal dislike for poetry. He even allows some poetry in his republic, but it must be “hymns to the gods and paeans in praise of good men” (2003, p. 351). He calls upon the poets and admirers of poetry to construct a defense of poetry, to prove “that they have a place in a well-run society” (2003, p. 351). Plato himself cannot do so, and says “it would be wicked to abandon what seems

to be the truth” and bow to the appeals of poetry (2003, p. 351). He concludes the section by stating that “the issues at stake, the choice between becoming a good man or a bad, are even greater than they appear, and neither honour nor wealth nor power, nor poetry itself, should tempt us to neglect the claims of justice of every kind” (2003, p. 352). As great as he might find poetry’s attractions, Plato will not let them distract from his perfect republic.

Analysis

Plato and Aristotle could not appear to be any more different in their approach to poetry. The two are in direct opposition on nearly every major point. Even their writing styles are strangely at odds with their positions, Plato’s writing engaging and poetic, Aristotle’s dry and analytical. I will look further at those differences, but it is important to first understand that beneath these differences, the two actually share a common view of poetry and by extension, the arts. Both find enjoyment in poetry on a personal level. Both take it nearly for granted that poetry can have powerful effects on the individual. The differences come in the conclusions Plato and Aristotle draw in response to these initial impressions and feelings.

It is intriguing that, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle devotes no time to discussing whether poetry itself is a good thing. Instead, he focuses solely on the internal workings of poetry, on what elements make poetry successful and effective. One of the main reasons that Aristotle can jump directly past a defense of poetry is that he sees imitation as instinctual to humankind. Aristotle notes that the human “is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons”

(Fergusson, 1961, p. 55). According to Aristotle, imitation is an opportunity to learn. Further, part of what makes poetry successful or not is its ability to accurately imitate life. Aristotle names Plot as the most important part of poetry, because “life consists in action” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 62). Readers can recognize the action, which gives it the ability to arouse within them strong emotions, whether they be good or bad. Secondary to plot is character, which “determines men’s qualities” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 62), and reveals “moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 64). Essentially, Aristotle is saying that Plot, or action, or whatever one would call those events that happen in life, exists to demonstrate the character of a man or woman. Plot and character are entwined, as those with good character will react well to devastating action when those with bad character would not. Still, it is the Plot or action which must closely imitate life. This is key, because an accurate imitation presents an opportunity for the reader to learn. As a reader sees a character react to a plausible, realistic situation, the reader is able to judge that person’s character and also consider how he or she might react in a similar situation.

Plato does not argue against poetry and literature having this potential. In fact, this potential is one of the reasons he warns against poetry. Where Aristotle sees imitation as a chance to learn, Plato sees it as a glorification of poor character. He notes that the heroes in great works of literature, particularly the classic Greek tragedies, indulge in grief and sorrow and other negative emotions. When faced with difficult situations that arouse these types of emotions, Plato would prefer that men and women minimize these emotions so that they can react with a greater level of reason. In Plato’s

perfect republic, reason and logic are the basis for everything. Plato is interested in how we live our lives. Moreover, he does not seem to trust that most people will live their lives in that rational manner for which he strives. In his perfect republic, emotions are minimized and dealt with rationally. Poetry brings emotion to the forefront, and thus poetry cannot be allowed. Similarly, he argues that those same readers or viewers who delight in seeing a tragic hero cry out in grief would keep those emotions to themselves in a similar situation. He writes, "The poet gratifies and indulges the instinctive desires of a part of us, which we forcibly restrain in our private misfortunes, with its hunger for tears and for an uninhibited indulgence in grief" (2003, p. 350).

It is hard to argue that with Plato's ideas on the matter, but the question is whether this is necessarily a bad effect. Literature certainly has the power to arouse negative emotions. Few would argue that readers often enjoy seeing a character act differently than they might act in the same situation. Plato gives little credit to readers' ability to deal with these emotions without giving in to them. He says, "Very few people are capable of realizing that what we feel for other people must infect what we feel for ourselves, and that if we let our pity for the misfortunes of others grow too strong it will be difficult to restrain our feelings in our own" (2003, p. 350). Aristotle seems to feel the opposite, which is why his concept of catharsis is so intriguing and oft-discussed. While he does not provide a full explanation of how catharsis works, the idea that literature can purge or purify those negative emotions it arouses is appealing and instinctive. Where Plato argues that literature takes the reader further from the truth, Aristotle says that imitation is universal, another idea that is difficult to argue. Aristotle

argues further that “no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated...The cause of this again is that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general” (Fergusson, 1961, p. 55). Where Plato sees potential for readers to lose themselves to their negative emotions, Aristotle sees opportunity for readers to learn through pleasure.

Aristotle and Plato would likely be in perfect agreement that some emotions can be detrimental to the individual and society. Fear, pity, sorrow, grief can all be harmful if they are not dealt with sufficiently. However, is it not possible, as Aristotle would likely argue, that literature and the arts can be a method of dealing with these emotions? Literature and art is indeed imitation, but I find Plato’s chain of imitation less than convincing. In theory, the ideas of the perfect form and art as an imitation of an imitation makes sense. In practice, there is little point in speculating on a perfect form which is essentially unattainable. The idea that inspiration must come from the gods before a true imitation can be created is ambiguous. Who is to say how that inspiration comes, and how would one recognize it if it does? It seems that the pleasure and recognition readers and viewers feel in response to art is argument enough that there is some truth inherent to that imitation. Art can certainly arouse negative emotions, as Plato argued thousands of years ago and modern thinkers such as Maria Takolander echo today. Despite these arguments, art has lost none of its power over time, and society is arguably in no worse shape than it’s ever been.

The question then becomes one of marshaling the power of art and dealing with the negative effects it can possibly generate. The role the arts play in society and

education has changed somewhat from the times of Aristotle and Plato to now. In ancient Greece, poetry was a major part of the educational system, and according to Plato, stories were used as a model for how life should be lived. This seems to be part of Plato's aversion to poetry. He refuses to give poetry a chance to have an all-encompassing impact on humanity with nothing to protect against its possible negative effects. I would be curious to hear a direct response from Aristotle on the point, but personally, I see poetry's current place in education as being more help than hindrance. The power and attraction of the story is well-documented and instinctual. People are drawn to stories, and this attraction can be a gateway to understanding, both in literature classes and other subjects. The idea of catharsis finds modern day application, as literature and poetry still hold the power to illuminate emotions as a means to deal with and purify them. However, Plato's warnings should not go unheeded. Literature still has the power to glorify and promote emotions and actions that could be detrimental to both the individual and society. At the same time, I believe humankind deserves a bit more credit than Plato gives it. Plato sees the vast majority of humans as incapable of resisting their baser urges, desires and emotions. Thus, he takes it upon himself to remove from his republic anything that might expose people to anything that might corrupt them. I take a slightly more positive view of humanity. Regardless of who is right in the matter, educators are in an ideal place to shape young minds, and literature and the arts can be an effective and powerful way to do so if used carefully and conscientiously.

Implications

In light of Plato and Aristotle's writings on poetry and the arts, I would recommend that educators acknowledge the inherent emotional power of literature and use it. For educators in math, history, or the sciences, this might best be done through story- or narrative-based texts. This should take advantage of the attraction of the story without the need to worry about ill effects from negative emotions. For educators in the humanities, the task is more nuanced. It is important for educators in the humanities to be clear in their purpose for teaching specific texts, whether they be stories, poetry, drama, or any other form of art. Students, if properly engaged, will respond to the emotional power of the art. If an educator utilizes a novel without providing a clear direction in the teaching, students will lack a framework within which they can couch their emotional and intellectual responses to the text. In practical terms, this might mean focusing on specific themes in the work, or perhaps utilizing group or full class discussions to determine what impact the text is having on different readers. The educator should both provide direction to students as they read, in an attempt to guide them toward those ideas the educator considers fruitful, as well as be available and ready to help students work through those emotions, feelings and ideas that they encounter unexpectedly. One of the great beauties of literature is that it has impact individual to each reader, but educators are often needed to help students understand this impact and learn what relation it plays to the reader's own life.

This project only begins to look at the effects literature and the arts can have on individuals and society. Plato and Aristotle created a starting platform of sorts for the

discussion, and their ideas and arguments are still as intriguing and persuasive as when they were written. To believe that the discussion ends with the two philosophers would be incredibly naïve, however, and educators and general readers alike would benefit greatly from further study on the topic. The conversation between Plato and Aristotle has been continued and broadened by countless critics, scholars, philosophers and educators. An interesting, if lengthy, course of study would be to follow the progression of thought on the subject up to the present day. Of particular interest within the broader topic would be studies of aesthetics and/or the morality of art. These are two of the more debated topics within the broader discussion of literature and art, and they both play a direct role in the teaching of the humanities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there are great benefits to the study of literature. It engages the mind in subjects that might otherwise be uninteresting to a specific student. It exposes readers to worlds and ideas that lay outside the realm of normal understanding. It presents the reader with new viewpoints, generating empathy and understanding. Still, it is difficult to provide a clear answer for why any individual should read any specific piece of literature. Reading literature is a personal experience, unique to the reader. Each piece of literature can raise emotions and ideas that can be powerful and even life changing. Plato and Aristotle are in complete agreement on this power. Even as they write from entirely different points of view, they give literature's power great credit. Where Plato and Aristotle disagree is on how to use this power and on whether it should be used at all. Aristotle is in support of literature, believing it capable of teaching

and helping purify readers of negative emotions. Plato believes this power is more likely to lead readers away from the truth and ensnare them in the weaker parts of their being. Plato's concerns shouldn't be discounted, but it seems that students and other readers would be better served if the power of literature could be somehow harnessed. The key to this in education lies with the educator and his or her ability to guide students through a text, helping them focus on appropriate themes and providing support as they work through the vast ideas and emotional responses literature can generate. The power of literature should not be seen as a dangerous element. Instead, educators should employ literature to open students to new worlds, both within themselves and in the world around them.

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