Roles of Affect and Imagination in Reading and Responding to Literature: Reclaiming the Humanities in the English Classroom

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"The world is not made of atoms. It is made of stories." - Muriel Ruykeser

“Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.” – C.S. Lewis

Introduction

To engage with literature is to engage in a kind of analysis; unlike any other medium, literature activates our metaphorical sensibilities to the myriad possibilities for our lives and our worlds. Further, when we engage with literature on a personal level, we begin to position ourselves in ways that allow for more critical theoretical approaches to reading. Our ability to engage with texts is inseparable from our capacity to feel vicariously, to imagine what is going on in the hearts and minds of others. As readers of literature, we are constantly provided with circumstances that ask us to reconcile what we initially expected with what eventually transpired. As a result, our transactions with texts are fundamentally about coming to terms with the comforts of the customary and the temptations of the possible. Literature offers alternative ways of seeing our worlds, understanding the lives of others, and glimpsing our own potentials for being.

Because a personal engagement in reading literature is requisite to assuming a critical lens on those texts, we believe that English teachers have a responsibility to provide students
with both the opportunities and the tools for “reading the word and reading the world” (Freire and Macedo, 1987), of helping students move beyond the “official knowledge” that the Common Core State Standards expect students to absorb (Apple, 1993). Such an approach connects the purposes of critical reading with those of personal reading. Further, we argue that reclaiming the humanities in English language arts education is requisite for the development of empathy and compassion—traits that are essential if students are to become critically engaged citizens. In our call for reclaiming the personal along with the critical, we align ourselves with the growing number of scholars dissatisfied with the trajectory of humanities education in both secondary and post-secondary contexts (e.g., Musil, 2015; Nikitina, 2009; Spellmeyer, 2003). Specifically, we contend that it is essential that we place an emphasis on the personal as well as the critical if we are to expect students’ literary explorations to help foster compassion toward others, democracy, engaged citizenship, and informed social and political activism.

In the following sections, we unpack this approach by exploring the vital roles that emotion and imagination play in reading literature, including the unique insights that affective and imaginative reading yields. We then highlight some of the ways that affective and imaginative reading both aligns with and constitutes an important foundation for more analytic and critical engagements with texts. We conclude by offering ideas for how teachers might encourage humanities-based forms of engaging with texts so as to contribute to our students’ development of more equitable and democratic forms of social life.

In this era of standards-based instruction and an increasingly homogeneous 6-12 English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum, it is important to explain what we mean by “literature.” We use the term “literature” to refer to the particular kinds of texts commonly read and discussed in secondary English classrooms: namely, creative narratives (e.g., novels and short stories), drama,
poetry, and nonfiction texts. Though widely available in multiple formats (print, digital, graphic, audio, video, etc.), the vast bulk of literary content now taught in secondary English classes comes in the form of anthologies that are themselves associated with high-stakes end-of-year standardized tests (White, 2012). While we might legitimately bemoan an increasing reliance upon abridged canonical texts in our children’s English classrooms, we recognize their appeal to educational policymakers; as Nussbaum (1995) notes, they are “morally serious yet popularly engaging” (p. xiv). Because of their breadth, these literary compendia nonetheless represent persistent forms of human need, desire, and conflict realized in specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. Some of this curricula—e.g., creative narratives, drama, and poetry—promote forms of ethical reasoning that are context-specific and generalizable. Our vision requires that English educators foster classroom spaces wherein students are encouraged to read and respond with both their hearts and their minds.

While a focus on reading with the heart as well as the head is far from revolutionary, it has been largely superseded by the trend in secondary English teaching to focus almost solely on critical inquiry. As the popularity of teaching literary theory, especially critical literary theory, in English classrooms has increased in recent years (e.g., Appleman, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; Wilson, 2014), theories foregrounded in the roles of affect and imagination have been increasingly eclipsed if not caricatured. Reader Response Theory, for example, has been largely eschewed as relativistic and pedestrian because it does not employ a grounded and prescribed critical lens. Such characterizations position the affective and the intellectual as mutually exclusive rather than as synchronous and symbiotic; as a result, students experience English classrooms wherein their feelings and imaginations are to be sacrificed to more “intellectual” approaches. We posit that this is an irony in that authentic critical approaches to reading literature require that readers
engage with texts via both the mind and the heart. Contrary to what many advocates of critical approaches to reading have suggested, engaging affectively and imaginatively with literature is not merely the exploration of one’s subjective experiences and beliefs. In reality, reading and responding to literature with emotion and imagination are requisite for a reader’s ability to re-envision sociocultural norms (a goal most often associated with critical approaches to reading and interpretation). It is only by moving beyond either/or thinking regarding interpretive paradigms—by engaging readers both personally and critically with literary texts—that readers become “cooperatively entangled” in powerful ways (Weinstein, 2003; Nussbaum, 1995). As English teachers, this cooperative entanglement should be our primary goal; it allows us to more fully exploit multiple ways of understanding ourselves and our world.

Engaging Affectively and Imaginatively with Literature: A Reconsideration Inspired by Narrative Theory

In stating that “There is no Frigate like a Book/ To take us Lands away,” Emily Dickinson succinctly highlights literature’s unique ability to provide the means by which we can participate vicariously in the lives and worlds of others. Stories—factual, fictional, and even poetic—offer glimpses into the history and cultures, social movements and individual struggles of those whom we would otherwise never meet; stories connect us to both humanity’s essential truths and to the transcendent (e.g., Bruner, 1986; 2002; Weinstein, 2003; Nussbaum, 1997). Not surprisingly, humanities-based approaches to education have long relied upon the reading of a relatively broad range of literature so as to broaden one’s focus, to foster empathy and compassion for others, and to prepare one for engaged citizenship (e.g., Spellmeyer, 2003; Musil, 2015). The humanities “remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going. Emphasizing critical perspective and imaginative response, the humanities . . . foster
creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds” (American Academy of the Arts and Sciences, 2013, p. 9). We contend that these noble goals—developing an understanding of worlds beyond our own narrow and immediate contexts—remain largely out of reach to readers who are unable or unwilling to engage with literature in a personal manner. An emotional investment in literary content is not only critical for reading persistence (Cothern and Collins, 2010; Guthrie and Wigfield, 1999), it is requisite for a reader’s ability to engage in more critical theoretical readings of literary texts (e.g., Greene, 1995). The literature instruction that we envision recognizes that is through emotion and imagination that we begin to yield the social and political insights so often thought to be the exclusive domain of reading critically. Even critics of this approach (see Bruce Maxwell, 2006) concede that engaging with texts emotionally and socially is essential to those texts’ abilities to engender more ethical and compassionate reader-citizens. Indeed, an emotional engagement with stories metaphorically takes students out of scholarly places and repositions them in spaces wherein they can engage with texts and with each other in things that matter to them—personally, socially, morally, and politically (New Literacy Studies citation). Spaces where students connect stories, characters, and situations to their own lives and experiences differ markedly from spaces in which they are queried about literary conventions or tasked with discovering specific ideological interpretations of texts. The latter is a purely intellectual endeavor that leaves students feeling isolated; the former brings students into constructive dialogue with texts and with each other: “It is at moments like these that persons begin to recognize each other and, in the experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another” (Green, 1993, p. 218).

The literary orientation we are advocating connects to the work of Robert Coles (1989), a psychiatrist and author of numerous books on the moral, political, and spiritual sensibilities of
children. Coles noted that by giving readers opportunities to move outside of their own limited experiences and perspectives to enter imaginatively into the lives of others, literary texts provide powerful opportunities for moral analysis. Cole believed that, much like the cognitive dissonance wrought by travel to new cultures and places (Festinger, 1962), literary journeys sensitize us to matters of commitment, context, and choice in relation to others. Via literature, the hopes, fears, struggles, and joys of literary characters can become part of one’s own habits of heart and mind; they offer us an invitation to explore the “vicissitudes of human intention” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13).

While highly instructive, these invitations to join in the lives and experiences of others rarely direct us into what to think or do. Instead they come as unencumbered gifts that open up vistas of what it means to be human and to act humanely. Thus, engaging in thoughtful literary critique is ultimately dependent upon our own capacity to feel and to imagine.

While we ask readers to reconsider the importance of affective and imaginative responses to literature in the context of secondary English language arts classes, we must also recognize two important caveats. First, it is clear that not all emotions are equally useful for understanding the experiences of others. As critics of more personal approaches to literary interpretation have cautioned, our emotions are largely inseparable from our own personal histories, cultural experiences, and economic backgrounds. Thus, what we ultimately take from any interaction with a text may be skewed by our own cultures and contexts. Second, while novels can reveal truths that would otherwise remain hidden to us, they can also serve to obfuscate or even misrepresent those truths. Storytellers can intentionally or unintentionally misrepresent the lives and experiences of others. Because readers can only explore others’ realities vicariously, they are all the more vulnerable to misinformation (a fact that has become all too obvious in recent years). In short, because readers use texts to venture to new places and ideas and because texts
can mislead, the “cooperative entanglement” of affective and critical perspectives are essential to each other.

Lost in Translation: Enjoyment and Investment in Reading

That literature draws upon and explores the landscape of human feeling and imagination is beyond doubt. Some educators, however, have characterized personal responses to literature as overly relativistic and only marginally appropriate to engaging critically with creative texts (cf. Lewis, 2000). Some have argued that the teaching of literature in secondary English classrooms suffers from the influence of a single authoritative perspective— the personal responses of each individual. Maxwell (2006), for instance, questions the efficacy of reading practices aimed at developing empathetic understanding or democratic ideals. He notes that students’ distinctively individual ways of engaging with texts might “deepen pre-existing antipathies” (p. 340), making them more vulnerable to the subjective influence of a teacher. Other advocates for more critical approaches to reading have critiqued personal and emotionally-based perspectives as insufficient to the task of understanding social inequities and issues of social justice. They hold that students need particular critical lenses in order to make clear the roots and effects of oppression. Deborah Appleman’s celebrated book Critical Encounters in High School English (2009), for example, suggests that “we give up the power of the text to transform” when we read from a personal or emotional perspective: “How can literature foster a knowledge of others when we focus so relentlessly on ourselves and our own experiences?” (p. 29). Citing Smith and Rabinowitz (1998), Appleman posits that it is only through the introduction of more ‘scholarly’ frameworks (e.g., historical, feminist, archetypal, post-structuralist, psychological, etc.) that “we bring attention to authorial readings” (p. 29). Throughout the calls for more formalized approaches to literary interpretation in secondary English classrooms, there is the strong sense that to read literature in
legitimate ways—to see the transformational power that is inherent in great texts—requires the sacrifice of the personal. Further, reading personally and critically is, this line of reasoning holds, paradoxical; because it is enmeshed with limited experiences and biases, reading affectively may too often lead to an inability to recognize the realities of others and how oppression plays out on those foreign to the reader. It is worth noting, however, that critical theoretical approaches to literary study are not themselves without paradoxes and contradictions. For example, any particular critical theoretical reading implies or invokes another. There are always limitations to any particular theoretical reading. Additionally, fictional texts have life-informing potentials that may easily be eclipsed by critical theoretical readings. Fictional texts always have a surplus of meaning. To deny the play of différance (Derrida, 1982) in reading and interpretation is to engage in dogma.

We (and others) believe that this movement is akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We hold that affective and imaginative forms of engaging with texts are requisite to cultivating a vision of social justice and democratic equity. Understanding or making ethical judgments about the circumstances of another people’s lives and actions can only occur from a position of having first participated in a personal way in those circumstances:

We need the imaginative ability to put ourselves in the positions of people different from ourselves, whether by class or race or religion or gender. Democratic politics involves making decisions that affect other people and groups. We can only do this well if we try to imagine what their lives are like and how changes of various sorts affect them. (Nussbaum, 2010, para. 6)

Literature, Nussbaum argues, both represents the tenets and tensions inherent in democratic societies and it makes these tenets and tensions palpable to reader/citizens; literature is critical to civic debate, social justice, and discourse in the public sphere because it makes us feel as well as
know. Ignoring literature’s ability to connect the theoretical with the personal is to deny what is arguably the most important reason to read it (Nussbaum, 1995). Similarly, in his book, A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life (2003), Arnold Weinstein notes that affective pathways ultimately serve as powerful, critical, and democratic tools because they orient us outwardly toward the experiences, lives, and worlds of others.

Although we fully acknowledge that affective and imaginative responses to literature are not the endgame—readers should indeed be prompted to question their own limited perspectives and biases and interrogate how both taint their understanding of the lives of others—we nonetheless believe that the kind of literary understanding that arises from affective forms of reading is fundamental to any reading experience, including a critical one. Using a variety of theoretical reading approaches is important and edifying, yet they need not—and furthermore cannot—come at the expense of the affective. Instead, we agree with humanist scholars who have argued that it is through literature that students become intellectually challenged and emotionally engaged in ways that have lasting value. Finally, we posit that critical theoretical reading is engaging and memorable only when built upon a foundation of deeply personal, affectively charged, and imaginative responses to texts.

From our perspective, affect and imagination are essential tools of both personal engagement and social/political critique. Although the language of literary theory provides a wealth of well-established benefits to how one might understand literature, these approaches to reading often have little relevance in the larger reading public, including school-aged students. If anything, such approaches come across as off-putting to casual consumers of literature. Many secondary English teachers and college professors employ “a specialized language and set of interests, as well as a massive theoretical scaffolding” (Weinstein, 2003, p. 425) for reading and
discussing literature. Because these constructs tend to be complex, take time to learn, and shun personal interpretations of texts, their use can actually serve to burden rather than engage students in reading. Even though the best of these approaches do not overly deny the affective and imaginative dimensions of reading, the latter is often depicted as an unwanted side effect to be avoided. Again, a deeper, more engaging approach to reading literature is one that incorporates personal identification as a vehicle for true self-extension and imaginative involvement with others both fictional and real. It is an approach open to exploring the possible selves and possible worlds that literature makes visible (Bruner, 1986). Based on this perspective, we hold that as teachers and professors of literature, we have lost our connection to the broader, book-reading public due to our preference for analysis in place of conversation, critique in place of exploration:

We go through the wrong motions, talk about the wrong things, and simply walk right by the actual treasures in front of us. We are warned to be “professional,” and above all not to be “confessional.” Yet, I have noted, over and over, the surprised look of interest and excitement in students’ eyes each time I become personal, each time I relate a point to my life, to their life. There is an elemental logic in play here, the logic of a species that is seeking the best nourishment it can find, that inevitably asks of what it encounters: What good will this do me? What is of sustenance here? And very often, we the professors come up short. (Weinstein, 2003, p. 427)

**Literature: A Voice for the Oppressed**

We believe that to read is more than to know—it is to feel and is thus requisite for empathy. As such, literary imagination and the emotional investment it requires are critical agents of democratic equality. As Paolo Freire taught us, it is through reading that the oppressed...
generate strategies for understanding and then rewriting the world. Novels, stories, plays, and poems portray people’s lives in ways that are emotionally evocative. When we read, we react emotionally to the lives of others, and our involvement with them gives us glimpses of modes of human understanding that are compassionate, ethical, and socially just. The insights garnered from our affective engagement with the characters portrayed in literary texts leads to forms of civic reasoning that are fundamentally good and true. Becoming emotionally and imaginatively involved is essential for the “critical analysis of moral and political thought, of our moral and political institutions, and of the judgments of others” (p. 76). It is through empathetic and imaginative processes that readers develop and cultivate literary imagination – a way of looking beyond the information given to recognize nuance and inferences, personal contexts and individuals’ motivations. All of these are essential for developing “an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own … and to have emotions related to that participation” (p. xvi). Emotionally-laden encounters with literary characters and their contexts help the powerful see the mistreatment of others as their own, thereby opening possible avenues of action on behalf of themselves and others.

Noted anthropologist George Marcus explains in *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* that dominant approaches to political analysis mistakenly assume that emotion limits one’s capacity to fully consider consequences, reasons for action, and analytic critique. This is analogous to the conventional wisdom dominating the terrain of literary studies today, especially as applied to the critique of personal response and engagement. Conventional critiques of emotion would have us believe that feelings lead to action without contemplation, that emotions passively happen to us without intention or control. Marcus reminds us, however, that emotionally-based communications are not only the lifeblood of politics, but also requisite
for reason and rationality. Enabling rationality and supporting critical analysis, emotion plays an essential role in creating and sustaining the conditions for reason. In the political arena, emotion is cooperatively entangled with reason. This is due in part because “emotions have more information about the state of the world, as well as our own resources, than is available to consciousness” (Marcus, 2010, p. 62). Further, because our emotions (more than reason) indicate when the usual has become strange, the interplay between emotion and reason is what interrupts comfortable habits, encourages public deliberation, and generates sufficient energy needed to translate new understandings into action. Drawing on Marcus’ insights, we claim that the ability to engage in thoughtful literary critique is predicated upon the ability to affectively and imaginatively participate in the realities of other’s lives and worlds. Engaging in a Marxist literary analysis of *Oliver Twist*, for example, requires readers to first enter imaginatively and empathically into the lives and worlds of the characters in Dickens’s text. Engaging in a feminist analysis of *The Portrait of a Lady*, readers must vicariously experience the worlds of Isabel Archer, Pansy Osmond, and other characters in the novel. Reading affectively as well as (if not as a predecessor to) reading critically, the nuances, contradictions, and vicissitudes that are part of any story’s characters become our own. In sum, imaginative participation in the lives of others is vital to humanities-based approaches to teaching that seek to connect education to the fostering of empathy and compassion for others, engaged citizenship, and democratic communities. Reading in ways that evoke affective and imaginative participation is not just compatible with the humanities, it is crucial to democratic forms of community that are rooted in a concern for the welfare of others—it is part and parcel of social justice. Individual identity, once construed as the major limiting factor associated with affective and imaginative reading, is now re-construed as an indispensable component of reading with an eye towards engaged citizenship. Using
literature to journey out of one’s own narrow paradigm is an “exercise in freedom, in negotiating
subjectivities and lives that are not our own” (Weinstein, 2003, p. 394). Feelings comprise the
“affective passageways” that lead us out, connect us, and serve as the basis for our
compassionate connection to others in the world. In the following sections, we explain how
affective and imaginative modes of responding to literature inspire the best of democratic ideals.

“We Protect What We Fall in Love With”: Literary Associations and Creative Outreach

Critical literary approaches start with the idea that conversations about literature are first
and foremost social, cultural, and historical constructions; that texts contain myriad unintended
assumptions, perspectives, and ideologies that require specific analytical tools to reveal taken-
for-granted ways of seeing and being that are themselves circumscribed by the contexts and
cultures in which they were written (e.g., Appleman, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Critical approaches to
reading highlight race, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc. as constructs to be explored as they are
revealed in the context of literary study. This approach has also been tied to how classroom
English instruction might inform students’ thinking and perspectives on matters of equity, liberal
democracy, social justice, and the possibility of social change. After acknowledging that “the
reading of some texts should be done without any theory or interpretation at all” (Appleman,
1990, p. 22, emphasis added), advocates for employing critical literary perspectives argue that
reading for social change is possible only when students are directed via critical literary
frameworks. High school readers, according to Appleman (2009), “need encouragement and
practice in reading culture against the grain, and resistantly” (p. 88).

As we have noted, an exclusive focus on critical theoretical practices without a
complementary focus on empathic understanding and/or tangible social action or advocacy seems to
us to constitute a serious failure of literature education and humanities education more broadly
(Nikitina, 2009; Spellmeyer, 2003). As teachers of literature, we believe that affect is a fundamental yet largely invisible fact of our lives. Similarly, literature conveys far more than facts or circumstances; rather, it is affect-laden in the sense that it “explodes with news about the world of feeling” (Weinstein, 2003, p. xx). Our stance does not mean that we wish to construe reading personally or empathically as little more than an opportunity to “identify” with the plights and experiences of characters. We by no means wish to diminish the epistemological benefits of emotional identification with texts; we instead seek to revisit and amend conventional wisdom surrounding the consequences of reading emotionally and imaginatively. We hold that while encounters with literature can be occasions for identification, they can also be invaluable tools for learning from and about the lives and worlds of others in ways that only literature affords. Literature repositions individuals—readers and characters—in relation to each other and thereby shows them as always and already connected rather than as fundamentally individual. In so doing, the revolutionary force of feeling has the potential to “reconceive what we take to be our actual contours, where you or I begin and end” (Weinstein, 2003, p. 7).

Only when both personal and critical responses to literature are valued in the classroom can students develop reading practices with political teeth—ones that transcend deconstructing cultural canons and entrenched practices of social inequality to seek ways to change the world, to go from social critic to social activist. As Louie Schwartzberg made clear in a now-viral Ted Talk, “We protect what we fall in love with.” Through literature, the affective leads to action. This has major classroom implications. Rawia Hayik (2016), for example, demonstrates how the combining of an affective imaginative with an analytic/critical reading of the traditional Cinderella story bridges critique and action; it challenges the gender stereotypes present in the story, helps students develop a critical understanding of gender and gendered relationships,
prompts readers to reflect upon their own gendered selves, and motivates them to engage in some kind of political action in the world.

Both affective/imaginative and critical analytic/orientations are requisite for mining the richness literature has to offer (Coles, 1989). As we teach literary theory and discuss literature with our students, we must not lose sight of the value of more affective and imaginative forms of engagement. Reading and responding to literature with our hearts as well as our minds certainly contributes to self-knowledge and personal growth, but it also constitutes the foundation from which to understand other worlds so that one can imagine and engage in activities focused on making the world more equitable, socially just, and democratic.

Engaging Change Through Literature

Numerous scholarly sources support the ways that literature invites readers to adopt critical stances and engage in work that transforms the possible into the actual. For example, in *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (a comparative study of the early stages of globalization), Benedict Anderson (2005) tells the story of José Rizal, the famous novelist and “founding father” of Philippine nationhood. He focuses on Rizal’s second novel, *El Filibusterismo*, because it went beyond simply commenting on the dishonesty of the church and imperial rule to engage his people’s collective imagination in change by depicting an alternative Philippines without Spanish domination: “What Rizal had done in *El Filibusterismo* was to imagine the political landscape of this society and the near-elimination of its ruling powers” (p. 165). His novel brought “into existence an ideal of Philippine nationhood which subsequently ignited the anticolonial aspirations of younger generations of Filipinos” (Campano & Ghiso, 2011, p. 2). In this case, fictional narrative was central to the process through which Philippine
citizens were able to imagine life without Spanish imperialism and to bring that vision to fruition.

The Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, noted a similar connection between affective reading and social action, specifically through the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. Bakhtin felt that the practice of evaluating literary works by means of literary theories is fundamentally misguided (Morson, 2007). Rather, Bakhtin aspired to what he believed was a personal responsibility to respond to literature and art from the perspective of his own life and then to use such judgment as a mirror so as to reflect and engage in change: “I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life” (1990, p. 1-2). Bakhtin saw literature as a means toward both connection to others and a connection to self—both of which are required if we are to enact greater change (i.e., Gandhi’s oft-quoted notion that we must “Be the change that you wish to see in the world”).

Closer to home, numerous stories have served to inform readers, engage them in social critique, and have so influence them emotionally so as to compel them to social activism. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, for example, was hugely influential in destroying the myth of benign slaveholding by helping readers connect to the suffering of those held in bondage (Goldner, 2001; Gordon-Reed, 2007; Hirsch, 1978). In 1852, Literary World said of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work that:

The Uncle Tom epidemic still rages with unabated virulence. No country is secure from its attack…No age or sex is spared, men, women, and children all confess to its power. No condition is exempt; lords and ladies; flunkies and kitchen maids, are equally effected [sic] with rage. (p. 355)
Uncle Tom’s Cabin did more, however, than inform widely; it so impassioned its readers that it influenced many of them to take action in abolitionist societies and even to support a civil war: “Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly,” [has been] one of the most successful feats of persuasion in American history. Stowe’s novel shifted public opinion about slavery so dramatically that it has often been credited with fueling the war that destroyed the peculiar institution” (Gordon-Reed, 2007, online). Literature changed minds, certainly. But it also served to help change the very structure of American society.

As should be clear by this point, we believe that seeing literature as catalyst for social change could and should be cultivated in U.S. classrooms. Much like advocates for critical literacy (itself a distinct literary interpretive paradigm), we hold close the tenet that while it is important to read with an eye toward recognizing social injustices, this should merely be the first in a step toward social activism. Examining the power of literature to influence change, Lewis (2014), documented some of the ways that students’ empathetic engagement with young adult fiction provided opportunities for interrogating the complex nature of their own cultural histories and ethnic identities and, taking action, to write about these identities and histories in ways that contrasted with the dominant discourses prevalent in traditional literacy instruction. More specifically, throughout book club discussions, immigrant students from Mexico frequently adopted and co-opted the feelings and experiences of fictional characters with similar ethnic backgrounds and used these as tools for leveraging and voicing their own emotional experiences and cultural perspectives as topics of literary conversations. In so doing, they legitimized the cultural experiences of the characters about whose lives they read and drew on those lives as the grounds for identifying, explaining, and valuing their own life experiences.
Although reclaiming the humanities in English language arts education may be centered around short stories or novels, it need not be limited to those media alone. Stories are told in myriad ways—many of them outside of “authorized” school texts (Apple, 1993)—and readers come to these texts in different ways and with different reading styles. Elizabeth Long (2003), for example, has highlighted some of the ways that cultural and institutional authorities (e.g., secondary teachers, college professors, book critics, etc.) shape reading practices both in and out of school by prescribing the ways one should read and study literature. Teachers and academics tend to assume that “everyone reads (or ought to) as we do professionally, privileging the cognitive, ideational, and analytic mode” (p. 192). Deeply rooted in this reading paradigm, English teachers at all levels tend to forget that reading can and should “insinuate itself into a remembering, daydreaming, wondering life” (Coles, 1989, p. 128). Weinstein (2003) notes that literature has the unique power to evoke the “seismic emotional and psychic reality underneath our true reality, one of nerves and visceral traffic that is hard to measure.” For him, fictional narratives, poems, novels, and plays are “notes from underground, or to put it another way, reports from the front” illuminating “our underground, our front … the repertory of selves we harbor within … all those ‘inside’ selves that are not on show, not included in our resumes or vitas” (p. xxiii).

Drawing on theories of socio-narratology (e.g., Frank, 2010)—a focus on what stories do rather than what stories are and emphasizing “watching them act, not seeking their essence” (p. 21)—our own research adds clarity to the perspectives outlined above. We employed a collaborative and participatory action research design (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) to work with a group of middle school language arts teachers to enact a humanities-based curricula rooted in affective reading that is itself focused on a general concern for the value of the lives of others. Inspired by the
hugely popular photography book *Humans of New York* (Stanton 2013), we collaborated with one middle school teacher to engage her students in a similarly designed project called *Humans of Boulder*. Seventh- and eighth-grade students took photographs of people from all walks of life whom they met on the streets of Boulder. These adolescent photographers had to talk with diverse strangers, learn a little bit about their stories, compose and capture images of them, and then write captions about them. In speaking about the experience, one of the seventh-grade students summarizes the impact of the experience:

I learned that you normally kind of might walk past someone and have a story in your head about how people came to be where they are. Like this woman [points to the photograph], she was homeless actually, and I think that normally you would just walk past someone who is homeless and think, “Oh, they maybe had an addiction, or they couldn’t keep it together and lost their job.” And you’re just automatically in a space where you feel like you need to judge them, because you don’t understand what they’ve been through because you don’t know, and you don’t take the time to talk to them. But when we interviewed her, she was actually really nice. And she has kids, and she was talking about the struggle of being homeless and how she really wants to support her kids even though she is in this space where it’s really tough to do that. But, um, I never would have taken the time if I hadn’t listened to these stories…if you just talk to people.

--Maggie, 7th Grade

The photographs and the short stories students generated from their interviews was a multi-genre language arts experience that offered students tangible and engaged understandings of the lives of others. Our examination of this process revealed some of the ways that students reconsidered the power of narrative for accessing the experience of others. Specifically, students
developed heightened awareness of the importance of empathy and imagination in coming to understand the experiences of a very diverse group of humans living very different kinds of lives within their own geographic community. In the process of developing greater understanding, students recognized how affective networks both connect individuals and force a challenging of assumptions (their own and others); they analyzed the role stories play in creating the conditions for our collective existence and make visible truths about the human experience; and they learned how stories help individuals re-imagine and rewrite maps of where selves begin and end. The knowledge gained from this experience then translated into a better understanding of the literary texts they were exploring (in this case, Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960).

This small study serves to support a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the importance of affective and imaginative dimensions of literacy and reading literature in school classrooms (e.g., Kamberelis, McGinley, & Welker, 2015; Lewis, 2014; McGinley, Whitcomb, & Zerwin, 2006). Kamberelis, McGinley, and Welker (2015), for example, studied how literature discussions might be re-imagined as places wherein students might imaginatively participate in the lives and worlds of others and thus expand upon their moral and civil engagement in their world. While reading and responding to the historical novel, *My Brother Sam is Dead*, students were encouraged to explore the emotional worlds that Sam and his brother Tim inhabited at the point in the story when it becomes clear that Sam will be executed for a crime he did not commit. Student readers linked their emotionally-based reflections to key social and political realities, such as weighing the good of the individual against the good of his society, the ambiguities often inherent in deciding guilt or innocence, the nature of martyrdom and the effects of conspiracy theories, and the differences between moral thought and legal thought. Again, reading prompted
emotion that prompted change—reading affectively made actionable some of the changes that
literary theories are designed to promote and support.

**Cooperatively Entangled: Embracing both the Affective/Imaginative and the Critical**

Compassionate participation in the lives of storied characters is an essential aspect of
literary reading that is both affective and critical. In the process of exploring the possibilities of
identifying with and participating in the hopes, dreams, fears, conflicts, and dilemmas of
fictional characters, readers cross experiential borders and develop insights into the realities of
lives they would otherwise never experience. This process is at once individually nourishing and
collectively beneficial; it results in fundamentally good modes of civic reasoning and extend our
potential for being with others. In this way, readers are better able to see that, very often, “truth”
is culturally and contextually based; the results of their affective reading experience show them
not just the world as it is but the world as it can be. This process is often labeled as dangerously
individualistic and self-indulgent (Pirie, 1997), intellectually limiting, and academically
restrictive (e.g., Bonnycastle, 2007). And, when done poorly, it can be all of these things. Yet,
reading in ways that turn back toward the self ultimately enhances rather than diminishes the
ability to connect one’s own experiences to those of others in viscerally and cognitively powerful
ways. Similarly, reading affectively promotes the self-extension through introspection. Stories
rouse the possibility that “other lives enter our own as richly and mysteriously as air enters our
lungs” (Weinstein, 2003, p. xxv). Cultivating affective and imaginative engagements with stories
can actually lead readers out of themselves and into the lives of others. The capacity for
recognizing the intentions and desires of others is linked to creating the conditions for our
collective existence. This, in turn, depends on our ability to organize and share our affective and
imaginative lives in narrative forms. Through affective and imaginative modes of reading,
individual experience is converted into “collective coin[s], which can be circulated … on a base wider than merely an interpersonal one” (Bruner, 2002, p.16). By entering imaginatively into the storied lives of others, one’s own solitude is disrupted, one’s ability to commune with others is expanded, and one’s potential for action is enhanced. A more holistic approach to the consumption of fictional narratives produces collective forms of consciousness, memory, and history. It is through this approach to literary study that the humanities can engender more ethical and compassionate reader-citizens—people who acknowledge the complex capabilities of the mind and the heart and bring out the best in both.

It is our hope that, informed by this perspective, English teachers might start to break down what we see as an arbitrary affective-critical reading dichotomy to envision the literature classroom as a both/and space. These are spaces where students are encouraged to engage in affective and imaginative responses to literature and to engage in analytic, critical assessments of language, text, and life. In these both/and spaces, readers’ affective and imaginative engagements become part and parcel of the ethical forms of analysis and the critical explanatory work that scholars like Appleman (2009) and others promote as the most important forms of engagement. Much like second-wave feminism’s cry that “the personal is political” (e.g., Hanisch, 1969), we propose that when engaging with literary texts, the personal is always already critical (or at least on the road to critical). Ultimately, without the loft of affective, imaginative, and metaphorical modes of understanding—which encourage us to envisage alternative modes of being ourselves and being with others—critical literary theory leaves us with little more than a book in our hands, arrogance in our minds, and ire in our hearts.
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