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Literature Overcomes Ignorance

When most people hear the word literature, generally the first thing that comes to mind is complexity. I never really thought about how literature could affect my life in any particular way. I was just thinking of how complicated it would be to go through a literature class, especially studying it in my second language.  In the study, “*How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation*”, the researchers argue, “Fictional narrative experience may have an important and profound impact on how people feel and behave in their daily lives” (Bal and Veltkamp 1). It makes me wonder what kind of impact something so complex could have and how literature could affect my life or someone else’s in order to change our behavior.

I was surprised by the way I was affected by literature throughout this semester, and so I decided to interview someone else to see the contrast of our feelings regarding some literary works. The interviewee, Justin Blum, 45 years old, was born and raised in the United States. After reading Wilfred Owen’s poem, “Dulce et Decorum Est”, Blum says,

The vivid descriptions of suffering, and the witnessing of this suffering by Owen, reminded me of the psychological and physical trauma that U.S. soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan experienced. While we can often see the obvious physical disabilities from war, we sometimes don’t consider the effects of the relative “invisible” traumatic brain injuries or other psychological trauma they may have experienced. This poem, in turn, made me think of the necessity of empathy for anyone with psychological trauma, whether it be from war or from local gun violence.

The poem affects Blum in an empathic way. With totally different approaches, *A Streetcar Named Desire* brings a different perspective to him. Regarding domestic violence and rape, Blum declares, “As a radiologist who sometimes sees only the physical consequences of this abuse (i.e. broken bones or internal bleeding), I often forget that the patient is a real person rather than only a series of radiographic images”. He explains how this play makes him think about his patients and “put them first” and ultimately results in a better patient outcome. Finally, Blum shares how *Everything I Never Told You* affects him, especially as a parent:

All parents have expectations for their children. Sometimes these expectations are in the best interests of the children, but often they may be misguided because of our own upbringing and past experiences. Ultimately, we want our children to have a “better” life than we had and we assume that we know what is best for them by pushing them in a particular direction. We often think of our children as smaller versions of ourselves, when they are actually completely independent beings. This novel reminded me that empathy from a parent, rather than imposing our “wisdom”, can be more powerful to create a “better” and more complete life for our children by allowing them to find their path rather than one chosen for them.

This novel clearly makes Blum reflect his actions as a parent and changes how he will try to behave from now on considering the impact it has had on him. The interview brought me new emotions and thoughts regarding literature. I am impressed with some similarities and, even more, with the differences we feel about these works.

Wilfred Owen’s poem, “Dulce et Decorum Est”, turned my world upside down by giving me a different idea of the ones who fought war. I have always said how much I disliked history and how it was my least favorite subject, yet I had never thought of how the past can affect my present-day life. For me, it was much easier to ignore all of it and to live in the moment. “History is in the past. Why would I bother to learn about it? It’s dead”. I cannot count how many times I’ve thought or said things like that. Reading and working through literature gave me an easier idea of how history is essential for me to live nowadays. The experiences Owen had in World War I made me feel small in this world. This young man vividly describes the horrors of war, the most memorable of which was the soldier’s death from chemical weapons. Owen writes, “If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood / Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,” (21,22). The horrors that he experienced before dying in battle made me realize how personal history can be and how it can be repeated. Owen’s suffering was not insignificant, and it cannot be forgotten. Literature awoke my interest in history. It was always easy for me to avoid talking about or studying war. Like many, I do not enjoy the feeling of talking about something so disturbing. In contrast to the title, “Dulce et Decorum Est”, the message Owen tries to convey is that dying for one’s country is terrifying and not as honorable and glorious as we traditionally think. Owen taught me a lesson that I will never forget. He spoke; I listened. His fear and psychological trauma would be forever following him if he had survived it, and now it will be forever ingrained in my mind. Every time I think about soldiers who have experienced war, I feel a deep respect and empathy, knowing the adversity that they experienced in their life. I feel deeply sorry for them.

Comparing how this work affects me considering my different cultural background, Brazil is not a country with a war-abundant historical past. Currently living in America, I could not understand the Americans’ patriotism. Owen’s poem takes place in Europe, and similar to the United States, they also have a past covered with millions of people affected by the war. “Dulce et Decorum Est” also made me understand why these people are so patriotic and passionate about their country. All the suffering involved by people representing their home is very significant for them.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* byTennessee Williams, among the many subjects implied, the one that shocked me the most was the men’s violence towards women. Stanley’s behavior brought me annoyance and disgust. Williams writes, “... ‘Every Man is a King!’ And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it!...” (131). Stanley was extremely chauvinistic and disrespectful towards women. This play made me realize how I am grateful for everything feminism has conquered. Domestic violence at that time was considered a family matter, the opposite of now. In one of the scenes, Stanley’s violence is also explicit when he punches his own pregnant wife. Nothing could be done back then about it, and Stella’s response to this act was typical: ignore it and keep living with him like nothing really has happened. Things are far from being good regarding domestic violence now, but at least we do have the option to look for help and resolve this situation. My empathy for the female gender is even more elevated after reading and watching this play.

The submission Stella presents in *A Streetcar Named Desire* annoys me as much as Stanley’s brutal behavior. As an example, Stella tells her sister about what happened on her wedding night saying, “[H]e snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light bulbs with it” (72). And then she concludes, “I was--sort of--thrilled by it” (73). This is how women usually acquiesced to male brutality at that time. Unfortunately, the role she is playing still represents many women nowadays. The play shocked the audience in the 1940s for showing strong scenes such as homosexuality; child abuse (by a woman); rape; mental illness and violence. But the least shocking part was Stanley’s violence toward his wife and her acceptance of it. It was something considered totally normal at that time. And this is the part that frustrates me because no one ever should accept this behavior, and women should be able to speak for themselves and be respected.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is also a famous play in Brazil. The domestic violence presented in the play reflects the society I was raised in. With men working while the wives are at home cooking and cleaning for them, psychological and physical abuse toward women happen frequently. This play also reminds me of this sad scenario we still live in and brought me many memories about it.

Celeste Ng begins *Everything I Never Told You* with the intriguing sentence: “Lydia is dead, but they don’t know that yet” (1). This sentence worked for me because I couldn’t wait to find out what happened to Lydia, who was the favorite daughter. All the discussions in class debated Lydia. What I did not know was how Lydia would not become the most important character for me, and how she being the main character would bother me. *Everything I Never Told You* is telling us that miscommunication can destroy many things. I do understand each character’s reasons for keeping secrets and acting the way they do. They all, except for Marylin, suffer racism and that leads them to be antisocial. Therefore, this story reinforces my empathy for all races or whatever differences among people in the world. However, Marylin, the mother, and Hanna, the youngest child, were the ones who prompted deep feelings in me. Marylin’s dream of being a doctor was interrupted by her pregnancy with Hanna, which explains why Lydia was her favorite and why she did not even notice the presence of her youngest daughter most of the time. Celeste Ng writes, “(What about Hanna? They set up her nursery in the bedroom in the attic, where things that were not wanted were kept and even when she got older, now each of them would forget, fleetingly, that she existed…)” (161). This novel describes the youngest daughter usually as quiet and forgotten. She sneezes under the table to listen to her family’s conversations and collects their objects as treasures. All she wants is to be part of their lives in some way, but they never allow her to. Ng adds, “Marilyn, laying four plates for dinner one night, did not realize her omission until Hanna reached the table…” (161). At first, it was hard for me to process a mother’s gesture like this toward her child. This book aroused my feelings as a daughter. It made me think a lot about how my mother treated me in my life. Every passage in the book about Hanna felt like a stab in the chest. It helped me to understand my mother’s reasons as well towards me. My mother once told me she got depressed when I was born. It was not her fault, nor was it Marylin’s. In the book, Celest Ng delivers a “happy ending”. Marylin and James realize they have a new chance to start over with Hanna, after realizing Lydia committed suicide partly under the pressure she used to feel from them. The climax of the book is the reason Lydia is dead, but for me, it was much more than that. Besides understanding my mother’s feelings and certain of her actions, *Everything I Never Told You* gave me one of the biggest lessons in life. If I ever become a parent, I will do my best to let my child decide what she/he likes and never show any preferences in case I have more than one child.

After taking a literature class in the United States, I was able to put my ignorance aside. I recognize I am open to new experiences, like reading new works that take place in the past, because I realize how much easier it is for me to understand history through literature, plus how the impact of the historical facts allow me to live everything I am living nowadays. It is clear that each story, poem, novel or any literary work can affect people in ways we can never imagine. A story told by someone so young in the war awakens dark memories in people connected to war, and differently, gives me a global perspective of their patriotism. A play showing the ugly truth of the 1970s, filled with violence and disrespect, can make a radiologist reconsider his treatment regarding his patients. In contrast, the play connects me with the society I was raised in and rouses me to think about how I can contribute to the defense of feminism. Finally, a novel can have the power to change a parent's actions and, especially, the power to affect me by creating a special personal connection with characters. While this connection transports me back to my own difficult memories, it also connects me to different people, and it helps me to understand their actions as human beings.

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