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Emma Rose Wick

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Literary Fiction and Sympathy: How Reading Makes You a Better Person

Emma R. Wick

Honors Senior Thesis

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Advised by Professor Charlotte Witt

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Introduction

Literary fiction allows us, as readers, to become attuned to the experiences and hardships of the characters, and thereby introspectively understand the unique experiences of others. When you read, you come to *feel* for the characters, forming cognitive relationships to their hardships. This makes it feel as though you, too, are witnessing the lives of the characters with your own eyes. This is what makes literary fiction, I believe, a source for the development of sympathy. I will argue in this thesis that literary fiction enhances our ability to sympathize with others as a result of observing—and thereby coming to feel for—the perspectives of the characters by engaging in mental perspective-taking. As a result, we become able to sympathize with an array of individuals whose experiences are unlike our own, and which we may never understand otherwise. I argue that the ability to sympathize with others is valuable for the sake of being a morally good person, and for having an overall good character. This has value in and of itself, particularly from an Aristotelian perspective. I further argue that literary fiction can promote certain kinds of political action and motivation in real-life contexts by bridging important topics and issues—especially relating to social justice and injustice—with the literary imagination. This results from witnessing the experiences of characters in novels who have endured hardships similar to those that individuals or groups face in the world today.

Literary fiction refers to novels that are primarily character-driven. It is a category of novel which places significant emphasis on the style of writing, the experiences of the characters, and the overall themes, as opposed to focusing on the plot.¹ Works of literary fiction often cannot be categorized under a single genre, and thereby exists as its own subset of fiction.² The “classics” and novels of the Western canon fall under the category of literary fiction. These

¹ Glatch, Sean. (2021). “Literary Fiction vs Genre Fiction.”

² “What is Literary Fiction?” NY Book Editors, 2018.

novels attempt to address moral truths or questions, and are considered separate from other categories of fiction like genre fiction, sci-fi or romance novels. These categories of fiction are primarily plot-driven and sometimes lack the depth of character development which makes literary fiction particularly noteworthy. This is not to say that *all* genre fiction lacks depth; some authors of literary fiction whom we consider to be noteworthy and of “literary merit” have also written works that fall under the category of genre fiction—like Margaret Atwood.³ I wish to focus on works of literary fiction in this thesis because of their emphasis on character as they relate to overarching moral truths and questions concerning their major themes. I do not wish to discount the value of works of genre fiction, historical fiction, or even nonfiction. I simply believe that works of literary fiction are more relevant to the context of this thesis given their focus on specific character perspectives which we, as readers, can observe and sympathize with.

My argument will take shape through the discussion of a variety of relevant topics about sympathy, empathy, perspective-taking, among others. To begin, I provide an explanation of one contemporary account of sympathy which I will use as my primary definition of sympathy throughout this thesis. Sympathy is, primarily, a response that arises following the observation of another’s perspective or situation. My discussion of sympathy leads to an introduction to the concepts of positional thinking and mental perspective-taking, including what these terms mean and how the concepts relate to sympathy. Positional thinking involves, generally, the observation and exploration of a particular point of view that is separate and different from our personal perspective or point of view. Mental perspective-taking occurs in conjunction with positional thinking. Mental perspective-taking refers to our use of imagination to gain a “generous view of its subjects,”⁴ which leads to feelings of sympathy as a result of feeling for the subject’s unique

³ Literary Fiction: Definition, Characteristics, and Literary Fiction vs. Genre Fiction. *Masterclass*, 2021.

⁴ Nussbaum, Martha. (1991). *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination in Public Life*.

perspective. Positional thinking and mental perspective-taking underscore the idea, then, that literary fiction allows for an expansion of sympathy resulting from observing the perspectives of characters and coming to feel for them by mentally witnessing them.

I also make a distinction between sympathy and empathy by defining empathy and demonstrating how it differs from sympathy. The two terms are often used interchangeably, yet they are different emotive reactions at their core. Empathy and sympathy differ most distinctly in the way that sympathy involves observing feelings for another person and feeling an emotional response as an outcome. Under empathy, you physically experience the *same* feelings as the other person. I do not wish to claim that reading literary fiction does not evoke an empathetic response, nor that sympathy is a more favorable emotional response over empathy. Rather, my take on reading literary fiction focuses primarily on the perspective-taking of the characters, which relates more to the observation of feelings of sympathy rather than adopting another's emotions or emotional state under empathy.⁵ Further, I believe that there is importance to the context in which sympathy and empathy are aroused. Paul Bloom's *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* follows a similar train of thought. Rather than arguing against empathy altogether, Bloom asserts that we must be mindful of the limitations of empathy. I explore this critique to demonstrate how observing the perspective of another through literary fiction is unique from sharing the emotions of another under empathy. I explore this distinction, most particularly, because I do not believe that the sharing of the emotions of another occurs so spontaneously while reading literary fiction. I do not claim that sympathy is better or more

⁵ The terms "sympathy" and "empathy" may be defined differently depending on the context. A legal framework may define sympathy and empathy differently than I am defining them here, for example. I will be referring to sympathy and empathy strictly in terms of the philosophical and psychological insights provided by Adam Smith and Paul Bloom for the sake of clarity and connection to my argument.

valuable than empathy, but rather I wish to explore why sympathy and empathy should be treated as different emotive reactions in the context of this thesis.

My argument is supported, in part, by exploring works of literary fiction that I believe exemplify my argument. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is one such novel. The entirety of *Beloved* is riddled with gaps in the story, with missing pieces of the recounts of characters' experiences which force the reader to try to decipher the context of the story themselves. Morrison even acknowledged this tactic herself. She once claimed: "My language has to have holes and spaces so that the reader can come into it."⁶ By mentally observing the perspective of the characters in the novel, the reader comes to understand how certain characters feel and also how they view their world. The overall theme of racial oppression and discrimination in *Beloved* leaves the reader with a heightened sense of understanding for individuals who have faced (and continue to face) similar hardships. This evokes feelings of sympathy in the reader as they grapple with experiences unique from their own; experiences which they may never have observed beyond reading the novel. By sympathizing with the characters in the novel, the reader is more able to understand and feel for real people and their real experiences, even if they are foreign or unfamiliar to one's own. It is for these reasons that I believe *Beloved* is a relevant example of a work of literary fiction that evokes sympathy in the reader through the observation of the character's experiences.

I also explore *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Rather than focus on *The Color Purple* as a work of literary fiction alone, I contrast the experience of reading the novel with watching its film adaptation. There is a wide array of novels with film adaptations that I could have explored, but I have chosen *The Color Purple* because of how it highlights the struggles of Black

⁶ Serpell, Namwali. (2019). "On Black Difficulty: Toni Morrison and the thrill of imperiousness." *Slate*.

Americans prior to the Civil Rights Movement. As a White woman, I will never be able to fully understand or comprehend the experiences of Black Americans and the injustices they continue to face. *The Color Purple* is written in a way where the reader feels connected to its characters and is welcomed into their perspectives and mind frames. This can translate into motivation by the reader to fight against the sorts of injustices the characters face in real-life contexts. I argue that the film adaptation of the novel, while powerful, lacks the depth of mental perspective-taking of the character experience which I believe makes reading literary fiction valuable in its own right. My comparison between the novel and its film adaptation highlights, most specifically, how films expose their viewers to vivid depictions of the character's experiences which makes the viewer feel as though they are sharing the emotions and experiences for themselves. Novels, however, do not involve such vicarious sharing of emotion between the characters. Rather, they allow the reader to observe the experiences of the characters in a way that leads to the assessment of the character's situations and experiences in an ethically relevant way. There is a distinction, then, between the experience of watching a film and reading a novel in regards to the emotions they evoke. Films appear to evoke empathy, in particular, while novels seem to promote feelings of sympathy. Literary fiction is, of course, not the only means to enhance our ability to sympathize with others. Certain works of film, social media and public broadcasting are also powerful sources for conveying the perspective of others. I do not wish to discount the influence that other such resources have on promoting certain emotional responses in its audiences. Rather, I wish to argue that reading literary fiction is valuable in its own right; it provides a unique and lasting impression on the reader which motivates certain progressive thoughts and actions towards others in its own way.

My thesis is also supported by the work of researchers David Kidd and Emanuele Castano. Kidd and Castano conducted an empirical research experiment in 2013 which provides empirical evidence that reading literary fiction improves theory of mind (ToM). Theory of mind is, in essence, the ability of individuals to realize that people have thoughts and emotions outside one's own.⁷ This leads to the ability to make inferences about the mental states of others (i.e. their emotions, knowledge, and feelings about the world as they view it).⁸ The results found in the Kidd and Castano study, as they relate to theory of mind, help assess my thesis which says that reading literary fiction enhances people's sympathy. This is due to the connection between theory of mind and the characteristics of sympathy, both of which involve observing the perspective of another and feeling an emotional response as a result. I do not wish to claim that this research experiment proves the validity of my argument. Rather, my analysis of the research experiment helps demonstrate that there is a plausible relationship between reading literary fiction and the enhancement of certain sympathetic emotions. It also provides an empirical perspective to my thesis which conceptualizes my argument in an evidence-based manner, which allows me to further explore my argument from a more philosophical perspective thereafter.

There are certain ethical and political benefits that result from reading literary fiction which makes sympathizing with others valuable. The first benefit relates to an increase in the reader's ability to sympathize with a wider range of individuals. The ability to sympathize with others unlike oneself is valuable for the sake of being a morally good person, and for developing a morally good character. This is to say, namely, that the ethical benefit of reading literary fiction comes from being a better, more ethical person. This has value in and of itself, as Greek

⁷ Kidd, David and Emanuele Castano. (2013). "Reading Literary Improves Theory of Mind." *Science.org*.

⁸ Shamay-Tsoory, Simone and Judith Aharon-Peretz. (2007). "Dissociable prefrontal networks for cognitive and affective theory of mind: A lesion study." In *Neuropsychologia*, pg. 3054-3067.

moralists once emphasized. Aristotle, in particular, believed that an “excellence of character” was a human excellence that led to a good moral virtue. The philosophy of virtue ethics, too, supports the idea that developing a moral character—rather than acting out of duty or acting to produce the most favorable outcome—leads to a certain moral education which is valuable for the sake of being an overall good person.

The second benefit stems from certain political resonances which I believe result from developing sympathy for characters in works of literary fiction. Developing sympathy for persons unlike oneself can elicit motivation to combat instances where politics negatively affects persons with whom we feel sympathy for, resulting from witnessing the experiences of characters in novels who have endured similar hardships. Reading literary fiction can also provide context and understanding about certain political or social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement or the recent New Hampshire book ban.

On the whole, I wish to show that reading literary fiction enhances our ability to sympathize with others and, as such, contributes towards becoming an overall better person. The literary imagination not only tunes the reader into the lives of the characters, but also translates into a better understanding of the people and world around us. By observing the depiction of characters’ experiences through mental perspective-taking, we gain a generous view of a wide array of individuals and subsequently develop sympathy for them as we understand what it must be like to be in that situation or a situation like it. This has valuable effects that reach beyond the text, which I will explore henceforth.

Chapter 1

Sympathy, Positional Thinking, and Mental Perspective-Taking

In this chapter, I will provide an introduction to the concepts of sympathy, positional thinking, and mental perspective-taking. This will serve as a foundational understanding of the contents of this thesis as a whole. The definition of sympathy I provide comes from philosopher Adam Smith. His definition of sympathy is, in my opinion, the most fitting definition of sympathy in the context of this thesis. I will then provide an introduction to the concepts of positional thinking and mental perspective-taking, including what these terms mean and how the concepts relate to sympathy. I will discuss my definitions of positional thinking and mental perspective-taking as they relate to the definitions utilized by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who has discussed the concept of positional thinking in-depth in her own work. The elements of this first chapter will allow for a better understanding of how reading literary fiction enhances sympathy overall.

1.1 Sympathy

Before the nineteenth century, sympathy was primarily understood to be a perception and understanding of the distress or misfortune of others. The main focus of sympathy in this context was feelings of pity or sorrow for another's situation.⁹ Philosopher Adam Smith provided one of the few explicitly-stated definitions of sympathy at the time in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which I believe is the most fitting definition of sympathy for this thesis. Smith put it this way:

⁹ Pond, Kristen. (2010). *The Impulse to Tell and to Know: The Rhetoric and Ethics of Sympathy in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*.

“Sympathy is very properly said to arise from an imaginary change of situation with the person principally concerned... I consider what I should suffer if I was really you.”¹⁰ Smith believed that sympathy is a product of moral imagination, where we create an illusion of observing the perspective of the other person. There is an altruistic motivation to obtain an awareness of the situation, and a particular emotion may be aroused as a result of observing another’s subjective state. There is no true sharing of this experience or feeling at a cognitive or emotional level, however. This relates more to feelings of empathy, which I will detail in the next section. Sympathy is, primarily, a response that arises following the observation of another’s perspective or situation. The act of observing the perspective or experience of another is referred to as “positional thinking” and “mental perspective-taking” in the context of this thesis.

1.2 Positional Thinking and Mental Perspective-taking

When we engage in positional thinking, we contemplate the observation and exploration of a particular point of view that is separate and different from our perspective or point of view. The concept of positional thinking has been discussed in depth by Martha Nussbaum, who describes it as the “ability to see the world from the perspective of another” (Nussbaum 2007).¹¹ I will use the term ‘positional thinking’ to describe the observation of the experiences or perspectives of another at a specific point in time; particularly concerning characters in literary fiction. My use of the term is distinct from Nussbaum’s because her definition involves “seeing the world *from* the perspective of another.” This infers, in my opinion, that we are *taking* the perspective of another, and thus sharing in their experience by seeing the world in the same way that they do. This is more in line with empathy, which I will discuss in-depth in the next chapter.

¹⁰ Smith, Adam. (1759). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, page 317.

¹¹ Nussbaum, Martha. (2007). *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*.

I wish to demonstrate that positional thinking in the context of reading literary fiction is more closely related to, and more readily leads to, feelings of sympathy. This stems from us—the reader—coming to *observe* the perspective of the characters, and thereby coming to feel *for* or *with* them and their worldview; not sharing in the feelings of and/or observing the character’s experience for oneself. This distinction is important when we consider how positional thinking leads to an enhancement of sympathy. Positional thinking allows the observer to become attuned to how it must feel to be in that particular position, rather than feel for themselves what the subject is feeling. Sympathizing with another involves, primarily, an imaginary change of situation with the person principally concerned; considering what one would suffer if they were the subject.¹² Positional thinking and sympathizing with others seem, then, to go hand-in-hand. Given that reading literary fiction involves observing the experiences and perspectives of the characters, and forming an understanding of what the character feels at the time of the reading, positional thinking seems to occur similarly.

Positional thinking is a precursor to what Nussbaum refers to as “mental perspective-taking.” In Nussbaum’s work titled ‘*Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*,’ she refers to this mental perspective-taking as “metaphorical thinking,” where we use our imagination to gain a “generous view of its objects.”¹³ When we engage in mental perspective-taking we are not taking the perspective of another, but rather we gain a generous view of the subject which leads to feelings of sympathy for them as a result of feeling for their unique perspective. Positional thinking and mental perspective-taking underscore the idea, then, that literary fiction allows for an expansion of sympathy. This results from observing the perspectives

¹² Sayre-McCord, G. (2014). “Sentiments and Spectators: Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Judgment.” University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill. Philosophy.unc.edu.

¹³ Nussbaum, Martha. (1991). *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination in Public Life*.

of characters whose lives and experiences are unique from our own, and which we come to feel for through mentally witnessing them. For this thesis, I will refer to either positional thinking or mental perspective-taking when I describe any act where the reader of literary fiction observes—and perhaps also gains a generous view of—the characters within works of literary fiction. I will, thus, use the two terms interchangeably.

Positional thinking and mental perspective-taking allow us to not only perceive the perspective or experience of another person, but also grants us the ability to learn, understand, and infer their point of view by mentally observing their position. The perspective that readers of novels witness, and the feelings that arise from this witnessing, become the root feeling and emotion that the reader has about the given situation. Reading literary fiction allows readers to understand the situation of the character (or characters) and, in turn, become more sympathetic towards their position. Literary fiction also allows the reader to imagine what it must be like to be in the position of the characters. This, in turn, allows the reader to conceptualize the feelings of others and the challenges that they face. Observing the experiences of others through literary fiction, then, allows for an understanding of lives that are different from one's own—lives that may never be experienced otherwise.

Chapter 2

Empathy, Empathy versus Sympathy, and a Critique of Empathy

Now that we have explored the origin and meaning of sympathy, an understanding of empathy is needed to better conceptualize how and why empathy is distinguishable from sympathy. Let me preface that there is not a single, precise definition of empathy to date. This is due, in part, to the varying, diverse connections empathy has to emotion, cognition, and human

nature. There are, however, certain accounts that highlight empathy's defining features, which I will explore more thoroughly. Empathy serves varying functions depending on the context in which it is being discussed, making for a range of different types of empathy (i.e. emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, etcetera) as well as being employed differently within different disciplines.¹⁴ And so, while there is not necessarily a single "correct" definition of empathy, it is necessary to develop some sort of working definition dependent on the context in which it is being discussed. This ensures avoidance of a never-ending dispute about its terminological correctness, riddled with overlapping and sometimes contradictory explanations of the concept.¹⁵

In this chapter, I will provide a contemporary account of empathy which I believe highlights its most important defining features. Following this discussion, I will make a direct comparison between empathy and sympathy to demonstrate why they are (and should be treated as) separate emotions. This distinction will also shed light on the reasons why I believe reading literary fiction enhances sympathy more than empathy. This concept will also be supported by a critique of empathy which I will develop using the arguments of Paul Bloom, who makes a compelling argument about the limitations of empathy.

2.1 Empathy

The original German word for empathy was *Einfühlung*, which translates to "feeling into."¹⁶ *Einfühlung* was initially thought to result from observers imaginarily projecting themselves into the people, places, or things that they were perceiving.¹⁷ English psychologist

¹⁴ Baghramian, Maria. (2020). *The Value of Empathy*.

¹⁵ Preston, S. and Frans B. M. de Waal. (2002). "Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases." In *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, emory.edu.

¹⁶ Ganczarek, Joanna, et. al. (2018). From "*Einfühlung*" to *empathy: exploring the relationship between aesthetic and interpersonal experience*.

¹⁷ Titchener, EB. (1909). *Experimental psychology of the thought-processes*. New York.

Edward Titchener translated the German word in the early 1900s into the English word used today, “empathy.”¹⁸ Empathy is thought, generally, to involve the mirroring of the emotions of others. In consideration of another person’s happiness or misfortune, feeling empathy for their situation involves a sort of duplication of emotion. The emotions are exacerbated by feeling them for oneself, as though being projected into the subject’s body or environment.¹⁹ This allows for the sharing of others’ pains and pleasures, ‘feeling into’ and experiencing an imaginary bodily ‘displacement’ of oneself into another body or environment.²⁰ Empathy, thus, describes the human capacity to be attuned to the emotional states of others, not only understanding these secondary experiences but also *sharing* them through reflection and shared experience.²¹

A contemporary account of empathy is what is commonly referred to as the *Standard Account* of empathy. This account describes empathy as “a process or activity, where to empathize with a person, ‘A’, is to vicariously experience A’s internal experience.”²² From a logical perspective, this account can be understood more thoroughly in this way: “For a person P (the subject) to empathize with person Q (the target), (i) P is aware of and apprehends Q’s internal experience E (awareness condition); and (ii) P experiences E*, with E* being sufficiently similar to E, because Q is undergoing E (re-enactment condition).”²³ This account demonstrates the nature of empathy as reliant upon an individual’s internal experience, which is then directed at another person’s internal experience. This is to say, namely, that empathy is dependent upon the emotions and cognition of two or more people. Empathy does not simply

¹⁸ Wispe, L. (1991). *The Psychology of Sympathy*, New York/London: Plenum Press.

¹⁹ Lipps, T. (1903). “Empathy, Inner Imitation and Sense-Feelings,” in *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, 374–382. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

²⁰ Ganczarek, Joanna, et. al. (2018). From “*Einfühlung*” to empathy: exploring the relationship between aesthetic and interpersonal experience.

²¹ Frankel, RM. (2017). *The Many Faces of Empathy: Biological, Psychological, and Interactional Perspectives*.

²² Song, Y. (2015). “How to Be a Proponent of Empathy.” From *Ethical Theory in Moral Practice*.

²³ Baghramian, Maria et. al. (2021). *The Value of Empathy*. Routledge: New York.

involve person ‘A’ observing the state of another person alone, but rather it is also dependent on the emotional state of the recipient of the empathetic response. Another common contemporary view of empathy describes it as the process of experiencing the world as others do, while specifically *feeling* the pain of others, as opposed to maintaining a simple awareness of the feelings and experiences of others.²⁴ This definition of empathy has similar elements to Smith’s definition of sympathy, with the main difference being the act of “feeling the pain of others.” The defining feature of the empathetic experience is, thus, coming to share the emotional state of others.²⁵

2.2 Empathy and Sympathy: a Direct Comparison

Empathy and sympathy differ most distinctly in the way that sympathy involves observing feelings for another person and feeling an emotional response as an outcome, whereas under empathy, you physically experience the *same* feelings as the other person.

Consider the difference here:²⁶

Empathy:		Sympathy:
I feel what you feel	vs.	I feel a supportive emotion about what you are feeling
		or
I <i>feel</i> your pain	vs.	I feel sorry <i>for</i> your pain

It is important to understand the differences—no matter how subtle—between the meanings of sympathy and empathy. The main point of difference to remain aware of is empathy’s capacity to

²⁴ Bloom, Paul. (2016). *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*.

²⁵ Eisenberg, N., and J. Strayer. (1987). *Empathy and Its Development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁶ The formatting of this comparison chart is not my own creation, and was inspired by another source. The page I took inspiration from has been removed, so I am unable to properly cite it.

actively share in the emotional state of others, while sympathy involves a simple awareness of said state.²⁷ This sympathetic awareness allows one to recognize what someone may be feeling or experiencing, but there is no active sharing of emotion or experience, as occurs with empathy. This difference between sympathy and empathy is significant in the context of this thesis because, in my opinion, sharing the emotions of another does not necessarily happen while reading literary fiction. This is not to say that empathy cannot be evoked while reading literary fiction. Instead, I believe that the act of observing the perspective of another through mental perspective-taking leads more to feelings of sympathy since there is no true sharing or mirroring of the emotions of the observed.

2.3 A Critique of Empathy

Generally speaking, I do not wish to claim that sympathy is a better or more favorable emotional response over empathy. Rather, I believe that there is importance to the context in which sympathy or empathy is being invoked. Paul Bloom's *Against Empathy* follows a similar train of thought. Rather than arguing against empathy altogether, Bloom asserts that we must be mindful of the limitations of empathy. One such limitation is our unintentional biases which cause us to be selective with whom we empathize with. Bloom's research indicates that humans tend to empathize with those to whom we subconsciously feel the most similar. For example, a White person is more likely to empathize with another White person before they would empathize with someone of a different race, not because we do not care about the plight of people who are unlike ourselves, but rather because it is subconsciously easier to feel for people who we feel more similar to. From a similar token, empathy requires that we focus on individual

²⁷ Wispe, L. (1986). "The Distinction between Sympathy and Empathy: To Call Forth a Concept a Word is Needed," in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

circumstances. When we empathize, we hone in on one particular instance in which we share the feelings of that particular person or situation. While this is not necessarily bad, it makes for an additional bias that discounts the perspectives of others who may be affected by the particular situation, as well. As Bloom puts it, you cannot truly empathize with more than one, or up to a few, people at any given time. Even if we may *want* to empathize with a larger number of people, our capacity as humans to share the feelings of another is limited. This critique of empathy is not to discount the value of empathizing with others. Rather, this critique seeks to demonstrate why empathy and sympathy must be considered separate in the case of this thesis.

I believe that sympathy is more relevant to reading works of literary fiction in the way that it allows the reader to understand the emotions of a wide range of individuals, rather than necessitating a focus on one (or small group of) individual circumstances. Further, there is an ethical and political limit to empathizing with others. This is to say, sharing in the emotions of others (and even becoming overwhelmed by them) does not provide adequate information about the situation or experience to effectively respond to it. Empathy involves understanding the secondary experiences of others while also sharing them through reflection and shared experience.²⁸ Another person's happiness or misfortune is mirrored through empathy, leading to a sort of duplication of emotion. While this is not necessarily bad or negative in and of itself, it may lead to an exacerbation of emotion that can be unhelpful in certain situations. Sympathy prompts our actions in ways that are morally important because—rather than becoming absorbed into the subjective state of others—you can take into account the actions, motives, and other information that can promote the most favorable outcome for those involved. Consider the current experiences of the Ukrainian people affected by the war inflicted on them by Russia, for

²⁸ Frankel, RM. (2017). *The Many Faces of Empathy*.

example. Many citizens of the United States have ties to Ukraine, be it having relatives who are Ukrainian, knowing people who live in Ukraine, or simply sharing characteristics with Ukrainians such as skin color. A person who believes that the Ukrainian people look like themselves or someone they know would be more likely to empathize with them due to our own internal biases about person-to-person similarities, as Bloom notes. While it is useful to understand the plight of others—especially in such a barbaric situation—sharing the feelings of Ukrainians would most likely lead to becoming overwhelmed by one’s own emotions. From this perspective the ethical or political value of empathizing with the people of Ukraine might be limited; ethical reflection, especially pertaining to political thinking about the unfair and authoritative nature of the Russian president, may be clouded by intense feelings of empathy which makes an outside observer feel overwhelmed with fear and sadness. Rather than becoming overcome with emotion, sympathizing with the people of Ukraine would allow an outside observer to understand the situation and also be able to deliberate and assess a useful ethical response to the tragedies in Ukraine. There are, of course, an array of positive effects of empathizing with others. My intent is not to argue against empathy, but rather to demonstrate that sympathy and empathy may serve different purposes depending on the context in which they are aroused.

This chapter overall demonstrates how empathy and sympathy differ concerning the contexts in which they are being invoked and experienced. The contemporary account of empathy in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as well as the direct comparison between sympathy and empathy demonstrates why, in my belief, reading literary fiction enhances sympathy more than empathy. Bloom’s critique of empathy further demonstrates this point. Again, while empathy is not a negative emotion in and of itself, I wish to demonstrate that there

are potential limits to empathy that one should be cognizant of when deliberating the experiences or situations of people outside of oneself.

Chapter 3

The Empirical Evidence of How Reading Literary Fiction Enhances Sympathy

To support my claim that reading works of literary fiction lead to an increase in the reader's ability to sympathize with others, I will explore empirical evidence collected by researchers David Kidd and Emanuele Castano. Their research demonstrates that reading literary fiction leads to an enhancement of certain sympathetic emotions and motivations; theory of mind in particular. I do not wish to claim that this research experiment proves the validity of my argument. Rather, my analysis of the research experiment helps demonstrate a plausible measurable relationship between reading literary fiction and the enhancement of certain sympathetic emotions. This is due to the connection between theory of mind and the characteristics of sympathy, both of which involve observing the perspective of another and feeling an emotional response as a result.²⁹

Kidd and Castano were a Ph.D. candidate and advisor duo from The New School for Social Research in New York City, New York in 2012 and 2013. Interested in the quantifiable value of the arts and literature, Kidd and Castano performed five experiments that sought to measure the effects of reading literary fiction on its' participants.³⁰ The main focus of the experiments was to measure how literary fiction primed something which is known in the field

²⁹ Since I am not using this study to prove the validity of my argument, I do not assess any recreations or replications of the experiment. If I were using the study as experimental evidence to prove my claim, I would have needed to explore potential objections and recreations of the study to show that it is replicable outside of this single instance.

³⁰ The New School for Social Research. (2013). "Theory of Mind' Fostered by Challenging, High-Quality Literature." From newschool.org.

of psychology as “theory of mind” (ToM). In this chapter, I will provide an introduction to the concept of ToM, how it relates to sympathy, and how Kidd and Castano’s research study overall supports my claim that reading literary fiction enhances sympathy.

3.1 Theory of Mind

Theory of mind (ToM) refers to the ability of individuals to attribute mental states, knowledge, and emotions to themselves and allow them to realize such mental states of other people.³¹ In other words, theory of mind is the ability to make inferences about the way that others are thinking or feeling.³² According to Kidd and Castano, ToM entails “the capacity to identify and understand others’ subjective states...allow[ing] successful navigation of complex social relationships and help[ing] to support the empathic responses that maintain them.” There are two distinct types of ToM, known as affective ToM and cognitive ToM. Affective ToM involves detecting and understanding others’ emotions, while cognitive ToM involves inferencing and representing others’ beliefs and intentions. Theory of mind relates to sympathy, in my view, because sympathy is a response to the observations we make in viewing the perspective of others. Theory of mind allows us to detect such perspectives, and presents us with the ability to understand the perspectives that we respond sympathetically to. The detection of the mental states of others which occurs through ToM connects, in my belief, to the concepts of positional thinking and mental perspective-taking. ToM relates, generally, to our ability to sympathize with others through having an awareness of the mental states of others. The mental state of others refers to a person’s thoughts, beliefs, and overall outlook on the world around

³¹ Kidd, D. and Emanuele Castano. (2013). “Reading Literary Improves Theory of Mind.” *Science.org*.

³² Shamay-Tsoory, Simone and Judith Aharon-Peretz. (2007). “Dissociable prefrontal networks for cognitive and affective theory of mind: A lesion study.” In *Neuropsychologia*, pg. 3054-3067.

them. This state also involves, then, a person's perspective, and how they respond to their experiences. Positional thinking and mental perspective-taking allow the reader of works of literary fiction to understand the perspective of another by observing their experience, becoming attuned to how a subject views their world and, as a result, how it must feel to be in that particular position. It appears to me, then, that ToM is fortuitously involved in the act of positional thinking and mental perspective-taking; ToM allows the reader to acknowledge that literary characters have their own outlook on life, just as other humans do. Kidd and Castano's research experiment, thereby, helps to support my claim that reading literary fiction enhances the reader's sympathy due to how ToM relates to sympathy, positional thinking and mental perspective-taking.

3.2 The Research Experiment

To test the general hypothesis that literary fiction primes ToM, Kidd and Castano first compared the effects of reading literary fiction with reading nonfiction (known as Experiment 1).³³ They then shifted their focus to testing predictions about the different effects of reading literary and popular fiction (known as Experiments 2 to 5). In deciding which pieces of literary fiction to use, Kidd and Castano used a somewhat inexact process. They believed that prize-winning texts were more likely to embody general characteristics of literature than bestsellers of genre fiction (e.g., romance and adventure stories). And so, without a clear means of defining quantifiable "literariness", the judgments of expert raters (i.e., literary prize jurors) were used to decide which texts to use in the research experiments. The texts chosen ended up being selected

³³ Kidd, David and Emanuele Castano. (2013). "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind." From science.org. (The summary of the experiment in section 3.2 comes entirely from the information presented in the publication of the research experiment, and therefore footnote number 33 applies to all facts presented in section 3.2).

literary works of fiction by award-winning or canonical writers and they then compared their effects on ToM with reading nonfiction, popular fiction, or nothing at all.

Experiment 1 consisted of 86 participants who were randomly assigned to read one of six short texts (three literary fiction and three nonfiction). Next, the participants completed a false-belief test as a measure of cognitive ToM and an advanced affective ToM test—called the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test [RMET]—in which they were asked to identify facially expressed emotions. Participants' familiarity with fiction was assessed using the Author Recognition Test, which is an index of general exposure to fiction that avoids problems of socially desirable responses. Affect, engagement with the text (transportation scale), and demographic information was assessed also. For the cognitive ToM task, participants were asked to indicate the probability that a character would act according to the character's own false belief or the participant's true belief. Participants who failed to give probabilities and univariate outliers were excluded from the analysis. Probabilities were compared in a 2 (false-belief versus no false-belief condition) \times 2 (fiction versus nonfiction) analysis of variance (using ANOVA technology). There was no main effect for the type of scenario, which suggested no evidence of egocentric bias. The level of false estimates was low across conditions.

Scores for the affective ToM task were computed by summing the number of correct identifications of facially expressed emotions and analyzed using ANOVA, with condition and Author Recognition Test as between-participant factors. Scores were higher in the literary fiction than nonfiction condition. Higher Author Recognition Test scores (indicating more familiarity with fiction) predicted higher RMET scores. When entered as covariates; education, gender, age, transportation, negative affect, self-reported sadness, and average time spent on RMET items did

not significantly alter the main effect of condition. More time spent on RMET items predicted better performance. No other covariates approached significance.

The goal of Experiment 2 was to replicate and extend the findings of experiment 1 by using different texts and a different measure of affective ToM, the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy 2—Adult Faces (DANVA2-AF) test. Experiment 2 was also designed to directly differentiate between the effects of popular versus literary fiction. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three excerpts from recent finalists for the National Book Award (literary fiction condition), one of three excerpts from recent bestsellers on Amazon.com (popular fiction condition), or nothing at all (no-reading condition). Participants then completed the measure of cognitive ToM used in experiment 1 and the DANVA2-AF before completing the Author Recognition Test, the transportation scale, and demographic questions. Performance on the false-belief cognitive ToM task was analyzed as in experiment 1, but no significant effects were detected. There were three more experiments conducted that went through processes similar to Experiment 1. Experiment 1 ended up showing that reading literary fiction, relative to nonfiction, improves performance on an affective ToM task. Experiments 2 to 5 showed that this effect is also specific to literary fiction.

As could be viewed through the Kidd and Castano experiments, the reading of literature primes ToM because it provides readers with interesting and complex characters and encourages the readers to understand these characters' intentions and actions. These cognitive processes fall directly in line with the cognitive process involved in ToM, where a distinction is made between inferring and representing others' intentions and beliefs (i.e., cognitive ToM) and detecting and understanding others' emotions (i.e., affective ToM). Kidd and Castano claim that literary fiction is a particular sort of text that most effectively primes ToM because, according to their studies,

“the worlds of fiction...present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing the potentially threatening consequences of that engagement.”³⁴ The readers are encouraged to try to understand these characters’ intentions and actions, which trigger cognitive processes comparable to those involved in affective ToM. This is not the case with works of popular fiction because such works are primarily plot-driven, rather than character-driven. Thus, popular fiction is less likely to evoke affective ToM than literary fiction because there is no real need to detect and understand the character’s emotional state when the plot is so often laid out for the reader.

3.3 Analysis of Findings

The results of the Kidd and Castano experiment indicate that there is a correlation between the reading of literature and the expansion of theory of mind. Theory of mind and sympathy are related in that theory of mind involves the “capacity to identify and understand others’ subjective states.” This refers to people’s perceptions, feelings, judgments, and overall outlook on life. Literary fiction urges us to conceptualize the feelings of others and the challenges that they face, which relates to theory of mind’s ability to make inferences about the mental state of others. When we imagine the lived experiences of others through literary fiction, we become attuned to what an outside subject is feeling, how they view the world and, as a result, how it must feel to be in that particular position. This enhances the ability of the reader to sympathize with the characters as we become attuned to their mental states and feel motivated to pursue efforts that support the observed perspective(s). This is distinct from theory of mind enhancing our ability to *empathize* with others because we are not directly *sharing* the

³⁴ Kidd and Castano. (2013). “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind.”

perspective of another through reading literary fiction, but rather identifying and understanding what it *must* feel like to be the other person. This distinction is important to make because it demonstrates how theory of mind and sympathy are most related; they both allow the reader to make their own judgments about observed perspectives as they stem from our capacity to identify and conceptualize the feelings of another.

The results of the Kidd and Castano study, as they relate to theory of mind, help assess the argument of my thesis which says that reading literary fiction enhances people's sympathy. Again, I do not wish to claim that the research experiment proves the validity of my argument; I simply find it useful in understanding the relationship between reading literary fiction and the enhancement of sympathy. This stems, most specifically, from the connection between theory of mind and the characteristics of sympathy; they both involve observing the perspective of another and feeling an emotional response as a result. The contents of this chapter overall provide an empirical perspective to my thesis which conceptualizes my argument in an evidence-based manner. This is not the only perspective I will explore to support my thesis. Rather, the Kidd and Castano study demonstrates that there is a plausible connection between reading literary fiction and sympathy, which allows me to further explore my claim from a more philosophical, analytical approach from this point on.

Chapter 4

Exemplary Novels and their Effects on the Reader

When we read literary fiction, we imaginarily observe the perspective of the characters in the novel. The reader comes to understand how certain characters feel and also how they view their world. This leaves the reader with a heightened sense of understanding for real people who

have faced (and continue to face) real experiences and hardships similar to those read about. Feelings of sympathy are aroused in the reader as they grapple with experiences that are unique from their own; experiences which they may never have observed beyond reading the novel. I will demonstrate in this section specific ways in which I believe we come to sympathize with others through reading literary fiction. I will achieve this by discussing two examples of literary fiction—*Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker—which I believe exemplify my argument. Following a brief overview of the novels *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, I will reflect on how they evoke sympathy in the reader, and the value the reader gets from such development of sympathy. I will also contrast the experience of reading *The Color Purple* with watching its film adaptation. My comparison between the novel and its film adaptation highlights that the experiences of reading versus watching a movie are unique from one another due to the separate emotions the two arouse. The contents of this chapter demonstrate, on the whole, specific ways that certain works of literary fiction evoke sympathy in the reader, and why this has importance.

4.1 *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

Beloved is an exemplary novel for the point that I am making about how literary fiction provokes sympathy in the reader. The novel lays particular emphasis on character experience as its main storyline. While the overall plot has importance, *Beloved*'s primary focus on character is compatible with my argument that the observation of experiences unlike one's own through literary fiction promotes sympathy. I would like to begin my exploration of *Beloved* with a brief précis of its contents, and will then move more quickly into an analysis of its value as it relates to literary fiction and sympathy.

Beloved tells the story of a young Black woman named Sethe who escapes slavery to raise her family in freedom. The novel is told through the eyes of an anonymous narrator, who shares the experiences of the characters from their own perspectives. The narrator describes the character's accounts in a way that makes it seem that we, the reader, are reading the character's first-hand accounts of their lives as they experienced them. This means that the reader is not necessarily *taking* the perspective of the characters of the novel, but rather we are observing their experiences through their recount of memories and flashbacks. Morrison's work of narrative fiction forces the reader to grapple with the destructive nature of slavery as we view its toll on Sethe and those she loves. Sethe and other characters of the novel express outright how slavery affected their lives; for Sethe, it caused her to murder her own child to save her from being captured and sold into a life that Sethe knew she did not deserve. Other characters like Denver (who is Sethe's only living child) highlight how you did not necessarily need to be a part of the institution of slavery to be affected by it; Denver loses her sense of self as she tries to grapple with her mother's journey of redemption for murdering her own child.

We come to sympathize with each character as we learn more about their past and observe their unique perspectives and connections to people and events throughout the novel. The candid description of life for certain characters allows the reader to understand, most significantly, what life was like for young Black women within the institution of slavery; it was a life dominated by abuse, betrayal, and dehumanization. Sethe's recount of her experiences as a young enslaved woman cues the reader into what the experience of other enslaved women must have been like. This evokes feelings of sympathy in the reader as we feel pain and sorrow for the characters' hardships. In learning about slavery and its lasting effects in *Beloved*, we gain a better understanding of the importance of learning about the past and how it has a lasting impact

on society to this day. By mentally observing the experiences of characters like Sethe and others, the reader hears the voices of individuals who were denied the ability to speak out against the institutions that harmed them, and we become motivated to combat similar situations as a result. While I was unable to personally relate to being an enslaved person before reading the novel, mentally observing the experiences of Sethe, Denver and other characters in *Beloved* left me with an enhanced sense of sympathy for others who are, or who have been, in similar situations as a result of exposure to foreign experiences through such literary fiction.

4.2 *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

Another harrowing novel, *The Color Purple*, accomplishes a similar development of sympathy in its readers through its emphasis on character perspective. I will provide a brief précis of the work just as I did for *Beloved*, and will once again move more quickly into an analysis of its value as it relates to literary fiction and sympathy.

This novel examines the life of a young fourteen-year-old Black girl named Celie living in rural Georgia. Written only in letters to God, the novel is seen entirely through the eyes of Celie over many years as she endures substantial abuse and neglect by the men in her life. Celie's letters detail her journey in grappling with her sense of self and her relationships, falling victim to abusive gender roles and beauty standards which make Celie feel inferior and invisible for a large portion of her life. Celie begins writing her letters to God in an attempt to find peace and a sense of self. The letters become her way of expressing herself in a world where she is unable to due to harsh constructions about black womanhood in the early to mid-1900s. With the

structure of the novel taking an entirely first-person perspective, the reader can directly observe the perspective of Celie, allowing us to view life from her eyes and to have an understanding of her own feelings as she navigates her hardships. Major themes of abuse, poverty, social injustice, rape, forgiveness, and companionship demonstrate the struggles that African Americans faced in their everyday lives, and how faith helped give them power.

The Color Purple is another novel that highlights how reading works of literary fiction enhances our ability to sympathize with others. This novel elicited a sympathetic response from me, the reader, in a different (yet ethically valuable) way from my experience reading *Beloved*. One of the major themes of the novel is the oppression of African American women and the hardships they faced as a result in the 1900s. I am not an African American woman, yet I was able to relate to Celie's journey in navigating the world around her as a woman in a male-dominated society. As a woman myself, I understood Celie's feelings of longing for her experiences to be heard, and of feeling powerless as a result of gender oppression. The novel allowed me to mentally view the perspective of Celie, and I felt a sense of sympathy and understanding for the experiences of her and other African American women as a result.

The novel exhibits a social message about liberating women while recognizing other systemic issues pertaining to race and class. The reader becomes attuned to what characters like Celie and others are feeling, how they view their world and, as a result, experiences sympathy for how it must feel to be in their position. Walker's writing engages the reader in an intense literary experience which makes us feel as though we are living alongside Celie in southern Georgia. Despite being a White reader, I felt as though I had embarked on Celie's journey of self-discovery right along with her, which demonstrates the power of perspective-taking in reading literary fiction. When we read about the experiences of characters in novels, we see that

there are individuals in everyday life who endure similar struggles. We, thereby, come to understand and acknowledge the perspectives of a wide range of individuals and are motivated to stand behind them—just like we come to support and stand behind characters within certain works of literary fiction.

4.3 *The Color Purple* Film

The Color Purple is unique from *Beloved* in that it has a film adaptation of the same story. Reading the novel sparks the reader's imagination, where you become imaginarily immersed in the contents of the book as you picture the scenes in your head. While reading, you visualize the perspective of the characters through their eyes, gaining insight into the minds of the characters and their own unique feelings and perspectives. This is especially true in reading Celie's letters to God. The movie adaptation of *The Color Purple* explores Celie's life from the perspective of an outside observer. We *see* the feelings and perspectives that we had become immersed into in the novel. The film adaptation of *The Color Purple* differs most significantly from the novel in its lack of character depth. The film focuses on the overall plot of Celie's life, painting a picture of her experiences without exploring her candid internal monologue which we have access to in the novel. This is not to say that reading novels is superior to watching film adaptations of books, or even superior to watching movies in general. What I found in watching the film adaptation of *The Color Purple* was actually that I came to empathize with the characters of the film more than I did in the novel. When viewing the perspective of the characters in the movie the effect of the cinematography, music, and pace of the storyline led me to seemingly *feel* the emotions of the characters for myself. For example, when watching Celie's sister Nettie being forcibly removed from Celie's house by her husband in the movie, I could *feel*

the sorrow the two shared. This resulted, I suspect, from being able to visibly view the emotions of the characters in real-time. Rather than imagining the scene unfold in my head, I was an external observer whose emotions were swayed by the scenes unfolding before my eyes. I could physically feel a sense of pain from viewing similar pain on Celie's face. My heart was racing in the way that hers probably was, too. The difference between reading a novel and watching a movie, then, lies in the emotional response of the viewer. Movies allow you to *share* in the emotions of the characters, while novels allow for an understanding of the emotions without necessarily feeling them for oneself. I do not wish to claim that one is better than the other. Instead, I wish to show that reading literary fiction is valuable in its own right, as it provides a different experience to its readers which is separate from watching something like a movie. When we sympathize with the characters, we understand what it would be like to be in their shoes. Yet, we are not directly sharing their emotions, which allows us to evaluate their perspective without experiencing any sort of impairment by becoming overwhelmed with emotion. And so, while watching movies does elicit some form of emotional response, reading literary fiction provides an entirely separate experience to the reader which has value in its own right.

4.4 Analysis of Exemplary Novels

When we sympathize with the characters in such exemplary novels, it presents the opportunity to do two things: First, it allows us to understand situations that are outside of our direct experience, and thereby contemplate and assess situations that are different from our own in an ethically relevant way. The overall theme of racial oppression and discrimination in *Beloved* leaves the reader with a heightened sense of understanding for individuals who have faced (and continue to face) similar sorts of discrimination. Second, the sympathy we gain

through reading such kinds of literary fiction can act as a prerequisite for our reactions to similar situations like the ones we have been exposed to through literature. An individual may be motivated to engage in certain kinds of political activities which are motivated by sympathy for a character's situation, for example. This stems from a reduced likelihood to question the position of others in real-life contexts once we come to sympathize with a wide range of unique positions and people in works of literary fiction. The moral implications of this lie in the resulting emotional reactions to the misfortune of others, coming to understand harm and consequently being motivated to "do better" by it. This has importance because it leads to a society composed of individuals whose actions are motivated by our understanding of the feelings and experiences of others.

Sympathy has importance apart from the actions and reactions that it might inspire. Sympathy is valuable as a moral attitude because it focuses on the well-being of others, which is a social value that is beneficial to humanity as a whole. When we sympathize with others, we develop an understanding of the feelings and perspectives of others, which is vital to traversing the woes of society because it allows for a heightened sense of understanding of the needs of others outside of oneself. In the next chapter, I will explore specific ethical and political effects of sympathizing with others, which highlight the overall value of sympathy and being a sympathetic person.

Chapter 5

The Ethical and Political Effects of Sympathizing with Others

Certain ethical and political effects result from sympathizing with others that I believe give sympathy value. A primary ethical effect of sympathizing with others comes from becoming

a better, more moral person and developing a morally good character. This has value in and of itself, as Greek moralists once emphasized. Aristotle, in particular, believed that an “excellence of character” was a human excellence that led to a good moral virtue. The philosophy of virtue ethics, too, supports the idea that developing a moral character—rather than acting out of duty or acting to produce the most favorable outcome—leads to a certain moral education which is valuable for the sake of being an overall good person.

The second benefit stems from certain political effects which I believe result from developing sympathy for others, particularly through reading literary fiction. Developing sympathy for persons unlike oneself can elicit motivation to combat instances where politics negatively affects persons with whom we feel sympathy, resulting from witnessing the experiences of characters in novels who have endured similar hardships. Reading literary fiction can also provide context and understanding to certain political or social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement or the recent New Hampshire book ban.

5.1 Sympathy and Virtue Ethics: Being a Better Person

Being sympathetic means having a good moral character and being an overall good person. This is to say, namely, that the ability to sympathize with others unlike oneself is valuable for the sake of being a morally good person. This aligns with the thinkings of a variety of Greek moralists, such as Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. The major Greek moralists believed, generally, that being a good person and having an “excellent character” leads to a more happy, complete life.³⁵ Aristotle believes that “excellence of character” is one of two human excellences

³⁵ “Moral Character.” (2003). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

which lead to a good moral virtue—with the other being “excellence of thought.” In *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6, Aristotle defines the excellent character:

“Excellence [of character], then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us.”³⁶

Developing a morally good character through sympathizing with others is valuable, then, because the application of goodness apart from oneself means being a more virtuous person. Having a disposition of good character, one which is “concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us” is an overall positive condition to pursue, especially from the perspective of virtue ethics. Modern virtue ethics emphasizes developing good moral character, and being a more morally educated person. This is in contrast with other forms of ethics such as utilitarianism, which emphasizes following certain formulas which tell us how to act, or which tell us what makes an act good. Most often, an act is good under utilitarianism if it promotes the best outcome for the greatest number of people. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, is more concerned with the condition of people. Virtue ethics describes, most significantly, the act of understanding and developing a moral character, rather than acting out of duty or acting to produce the most favorable outcome. Being sympathetic by reading literary fiction focuses on the character of people (literary characters, in specific). This leads to a certain moral education which virtue ethicists and Greek moralists believe is valuable for the sake of being an overall good person.

Sophie Grace Chappell, Professor of Philosophy at the Open University (United Kingdom), also explains why it is valuable to be a good person and to have a good ethical character. The embodiment of goodness outside of oneself means attending to goodness “for its

³⁶ “Virtue Ethics.” (2006). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

own sake, in order to understand it.”³⁷ Further, embodying goodness with regularity makes room for new habits of thought that focus more readily and more honestly on things other than the self.³⁸ It “alters the quality of our consciousness,” and “anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism is to be connected with virtue.”³⁹ Perhaps most importantly, being a virtuous and morally good person allows one to “pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is.”⁴⁰ We can see, then, how sympathizing with people and experiences unlike our own through literary fiction leads to the development of a morally good character. When we observe the experiences of another, we are attending to the experience of others for its own sake, to better understand it. There is no longer a concern with the self, but rather only with the experiences of another and how this person (or persons) must feel to be in a given situation. When we view the world from a perspective separate from our own, we become attuned to the state of the world as it is. Sympathizing with others, then, involves observing the experiences of others in a way that discounts our own experiences. When we read literary fiction and come to sympathize with its characters, we become attuned to foreign or unique situations that we had no cognitive relationship to prior to reading. This contributes, I believe, to becoming more morally educated as a result of viewing the world from a variety of perspectives. This moral education contributes toward a good moral character and having a vested interest in the experiences of others, which we can achieve through sympathizing with others through literary fiction.

5.2 The Political Effects of Sympathy

³⁷ Chappell, Sophie Grace. (2006). *Values and Virtues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁸ “Virtue Ethics.” (2006). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

There are also certain political effects that I believe result from developing sympathy for characters in works of literary fiction. One of the most prominent examples of political action motivated by reading literary fiction could be witnessed in 1852, with the tremendous effect that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had on the attitudes of American citizens directly prior to the Civil War. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a work of literary fiction whose powerful depiction of the slave experience stirred sympathy in its American readers; so much so that it is thought to have helped precipitate the beginning of the Civil War.⁴¹ White readers in the North were particularly aroused by the novel's power and eagerly utilized it as a catalytic source of motivation during the abolitionist movement. Though a fictional story, the readers were able to imaginarily witness the effect that the institution of slavery had on the characters of the novel. The sympathy aroused for these characters brought a sense of humanity to the true experiences of enslaved people at the time. The influence that literary fiction can have on certain kinds of political action and motivation is, thus, tremendous.

Consider the effect that reading a book like *Beloved* or *The Color Purple* would have on someone engaging in modern politics or political movements. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is a very relevant example. One of the basic claims of the Black Lives Matter movement is that slavery is still with us today; it still exists as a form of oppression for African Americans and other people of color globally. Reading a novel such as *Beloved*—in which we view the lasting effects of being an enslaved person—enhances our understanding of the main claim of the BLM movement. By feeling sympathy for the characters in the novel, we are situated differently in our understanding of people who are in similar situations than if we had not read such a novel. Consider, for example, how many Americans reacted to the protests in the

⁴¹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Uncle Tom's Cabin," [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com).

Black Lives Matter movement. Many were compelled to say that the activists were acting in a destructive and harmful manner. Someone like myself, who has viewed the perspective of African Americans through certain works of literary fiction, has a better understanding of the emotions of those seeking justice than someone who has not had access to such a perspective. The actions of such activists are viewed as politically and morally reasonable considering the hardships that African Americans and their ancestors have endured for decades.

When we think of the ethical value of novels in this way, we can see how the enhancement of sympathy through literary fiction has important moral implications for the broader population. Think, in another example, about the connection between the BLM movement and how a high school student may react to the movement if they had read a book like *Beloved*. A young adult who read such a book would be situated in a way in which they understand the perspective of those fighting for justice in the Black Lives Matter movement as a result of sympathizing with characters in similar situations through literary fiction. The New Hampshire legislature does not want kids in public schools to read books such as *Beloved* or *The Color Purple*; books that detail issues of race that would allow students to understand, participate in, and overall support something like the Black Lives Matter movement. House Bill 1255, proposed on October 4, 2021, states the following: “No teacher shall advocate any doctrine or theory promoting a negative account or representation of the founding and history of the United States of America in New Hampshire public schools which does not include the worldwide context of now outdated and discouraged practices. Such prohibition includes but is not limited to teaching that the United States was founded on racism. A violation of this section shall be considered a violation of the New Hampshire code of ethics and code of conduct for educational

professionals and shall justify disciplinary sanctions.”⁴² This bill overall prohibits teacher advocacy on topics such as race and racism, sexual orientation, gender discrimination, among other topics. Criminalizing discussions about the realities of the United States as entrenched in racism and racist ideologies highlights precisely why such books *should* be taught in public schools; to teach why this is *not* a criminal matter. The New Hampshire legislator feels that such discussions are harmful for a variety of fallacious reasons. As *The New Hampshire Bulletin* newspaper notes, “right-wing critics have made a number of erroneous allegations about critical race theory.”⁴³ Such claims center around critical race theory being “Marxist,” that it intends to make white people feel guilty, among other allegations. *The Bulletin*, ironically (or, perhaps, not so ironically) notes that *Beloved* has been perceived as one of the top books to ban in the state of New Hampshire due to its ties to critical race theory. *The Color Purple* has also made the list of books that have been banned throughout the United States in 2021. *The Bluest Eye*, another book by Toni Morrison, also makes this list.⁴⁴

These book bans highlight, from one token, that our governments, schools, and certain populations have racist and oppressive ideologies embedded within the public imagination. This is a reality that makes the value of reading such novels all the more clear. Second, it highlights the potential of literary fiction to have a distinctive contribution to public life and society.⁴⁵ Novels such as *Beloved* or *The Color Purple* are viewed as dangerous and deserving of suppression in the eyes of many politicians and policymakers, yet there are many compelling reasons why books that detail issues of race should stay in—and be *encouraged* to be taught in—

⁴² “New Hampshire Legislative Service Requests.” From *The General Court of New Hampshire*.

⁴³ Pincus, Fred. (2022). “Commentary: Battles over book bans reflect conflicts from the 1980s.” In *The New Hampshire Bulletin*.

⁴⁴ “Frequently Challenged Books.” From *The American Library Association*.

⁴⁵ Nussbaum, Martha. (1991). *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination in Public Life*.

public schools locally and across the country. It is dangerous in and of itself to view novels about race as deserving of suppression; it represses a necessary dialogue about the experiences of African Americans and other people of color who need public support at this very moment. The moral and political perspective that you can get from reading these sorts of books is very valuable because it allows the reader to understand the perspective of a wide range of individuals in an ethically relevant way. Literary fiction welcomes readers into a unique situation where they can relate to the characters and develop sympathy for them without needing to be that person, without having the experience for themselves, and even without personally witnessing anything at all. When you have related to characters such as Celie or Sethe, then something like the Black Lives Matter movement and its claims about slavery being alive today begins to resonate on a more personal level. This translates into feeling sympathetic for the plight of others enduring similar hardships, and it makes the reader a more moral person as a result. I do not wish to claim that reading literary fiction is the best, or even most beneficial, mode of moral development or enhancer of sympathy for the reader. Rather, what I wish to show is the power novels have in bridging certain issues about social justice with personal imagination, something which can then be translated into prosocial behavior and action in real-life contexts.

Concluding Remarks

Reading literary fiction enhances our ability to sympathize with others and, as such, contributes towards becoming an overall better person. The literary imagination not only tunes the reader into the lives of the characters, but it also translates into a better understanding of the people and world around us. By observing the depiction of characters' experiences through mental perspective-taking, we gain a generous view of a wide array of individuals and

subsequently develop sympathy for them as we understand what it must be like to be in that situation or a situation like it. This has effects that reach beyond the text. Sympathizing with the characters of literary fiction can provide context and understanding to important social justice and injustice issues. It may provide motivation to mitigate harm brought onto others, and a variety of other moral and political effects. Literary fiction creates a bridge between the imagination and the real, tangible instances of human tragedy, suffering, and other pains and pleasures we witness throughout the world today.

Outstanding questions and concerns left unaddressed may be: does reading literary fiction *always* enhance feelings of sympathy towards people unlike ourselves? What would happen if we read about the perspective of someone who has done something objectively immoral, such as Adolf Hitler or a child molester? In response to such questions and concerns, I would like to say this: my overall intention of this thesis is not to claim that reading literary fiction absolutely, in every instance of reading a particularly noteworthy or well-written book, leads to the enhancement of sympathy in its readers. Similar to how people may not automatically feel for the experiences of every person they interact with in their daily lives, a reader may pick up a piece of literary fiction and not feel particularly motivated or moved by the characters' experiences. There are an abundance of explanations for why a reader may not feel sympathetic towards the characters of certain literature. Perhaps the reader has difficulty assessing the emotions of others, or simply disagrees with the contents of the literature as a whole. The list of explanations is innumerable, and I will therefore not reflect on it further within this body of work.

What I wish to show in this thesis, instead, is that reading literary fiction is *one* possible way to become sympathetic towards people unlike ourselves, in the ways which I have expressed

hitherto. Many of the lives we read about in literary fiction are comparable to experiences faced by real people. The observation of these perspectives can translate into feelings of sympathy for literary characters and people alike, and can also have certain effects on the reader's actions or beliefs beyond the book. Reading literary fiction is by no means the best way to enhance sympathy, and certainly not the only way. Instead, literary fiction is a distinctive source of sympathy enhancement which makes it not only a pleasurable pastime, but also a vector for positive change. The influence that literary fiction has on important and enduring issues is tremendous, and its potential for promoting overall good makes it a valuable endeavor both in and of itself and for the sake of being a moral, good person. The literary imagination is boundless, just like the opportunities that can come from reading it.

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