



The Role of Literature in Developing Empathy: A Critical Examination of Narrative Fiction and Emotional Intelligence in Adolescent Readers

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the enduring debate about the empathizing ability of reading narrative fiction but focuses on how this connection can be taken into consideration for secondary English classroom practices. The paper builds on cognitive and social psychology studies and literary theory to discuss the mechanisms that have been proposed to connect fiction reading to perspective taking and emotional understanding such as narrative transportation and simulation theory. It then reviews the evidence for and against these claims, highlighting that the effects seem to be highly dependent upon the type of text, reader engagement, and guided reflection. The focus shifts to the implications for the English teacher, who is not a natural empathetic reader of literary texts, and how the practice of materializing empathy must be explicitly grounded in discussion, character analysis and reflection by the teacher.



1. INTRODUCTION

The notion that reading fiction increases empathy is one that is repeated and asserted as often and confidently as any notion about the value of fiction. For a long time, teachers, librarians and parents have championed the reading of novels for the ability of fiction to help us "walk in someone else's shoes," and this sense has grown to be a topic of great interest for psychologists and literary scholars who wonder whether it can be supported on a scientific basis. The question is not only in the seminar room. When literature truly influences the emotional lives of the reader, then the decisions English teachers make regarding what to test and how to teach it have ramifications that go beyond the scope of literacy and comprehension.

This paper addresses that question specifically with regard to the adolescent reader and secondary English classroom. The years of adolescence represent a context of development that presents both a compelling stage to study the emotional and social impact of literature, and a set of challenges as a critical period for perspective-taking, identity formation and the renegotiation of social relationships. While at the same time, adolescents are the generation most likely to access literature mainly due to assigned reading rather than self-selection, suggesting that the empathic advantages associated with voluntary reading apply to the classroom context, as well.

The argument given here goes in a few steps. It includes a brief overview of the theoretical accounts that have been put forward to account for the capacity of fiction to foster empathy, principally the accounts of narrative transportation theory and the simulation account of fiction that has been developed in the context of cognitive literary studies. Second, it reviews the empirical evidence that addresses these claims and offers salient qualifications and caveats. Third, it examines the unique context in which literature's empathizing power seems to be most effective, such as in genre, narrative perspective, and reader engagement. Finally, it addresses pedagogical implications, suggesting that in schools, where empathy is a goal to be developed in students through reading literature, the teacher should go beyond mere assignment and take a more active and reflective stance toward engaging with literature.

It is not the author's thesis in this paper that fiction inevitably creates empathetic readers, as there is not enough evidence to support this claim, but that literature has a unique and valuable role in fostering empathy when taught with a focus on that objective.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Empathy and Perspective-Taking

Psychologists typically consider empathy to consist of two related but separable parts: an affective component (sharing or feeling the other person's emotions) and a cognitive component (imagining or having mental representation of the other person's emotions, beliefs, intentions, and point of view, which is also known as "theory of mind"). Most of the fascination of fiction's empathic power is to follow the thoughts of several characters, including perhaps one whose knowledge or values are very different from the reader's own, and one who is in a different situation in the world.

This observation has led several scholars to suggest that fiction serves as a practice space for the development of social cognition, which takes a low stakes approach. The argument (most clearly made in the cognitive literary studies tradition) goes that reading a narrative engages much of the same cognitive apparatus that is needed to negotiate real social



actions: what is going on inside other's minds, what the others might be thinking, what they might be feeling, and so on. In this perspective, the skills practiced when reading are not limited to reading, but transfer, at least in part, to social understanding in general.

2.2 Narrative Transportation and Simulation Theory

Two related theories are mentioned to account for this suggested transfer. The first, narrative transportation theory, proposes that when readers immerse themselves in the story world, they temporarily lose their sense of critical distance, as well as the sense of their own fates, leaving them emotionally connected with those of the fictional characters. In a similar vein, transportation theorists suggest that this absorbed state increases readers' vulnerability to the emotional and moral messages of a story by lowering defenses against persuasion, and perhaps emotional contagion.

The second model sees fiction as a means of social simulation. On this score, fiction provides readers with a scaffolded rehearsal of social experience: reader performs the act of interpreting others' intentions and feelings in a safe invented scenario, as a pilot does in a flight simulator. Both approaches are consistent with the notion that only when one reads a story with emotion and thought as opposed to reading about the lives of others does one acquire the ability to empathize.

2.3 Distinguishing Literary Fiction from Other Forms of Reading

A significant modification to this overall view is related to the kind of text used. There is some research that suggests that not every reading will have the same effect on building empathy, with literary fiction, which has complex characters, ambiguities, and requires interpretation of the text, potentially having effects that are not reliably simulated by popular or genre fiction. The argument is that literary fiction will generally not take for granted obvious ethical conclusions, and will leave the reader to "fill in the blanks" to make his or her own moral judgment, while more formulaic genre fiction, on the other hand, will tend to present characters and motives in more stable and predictable terms, so that the reader is left to make his or her own moral judgment.

This distinction is significant for classroom practice because it implies that the empathic value that is generally assigned to the concept of "reading" may be contingent on the requirements the text places upon the reader. While both could be fun and good for another purpose, they can't simply be swapped out for each other in terms of perspective taking skills.

2.4 The Concept of Empathy in the Last 50 Years

Contemporary psychology is not the first to recognize the value of literature in developing moral and emotional understanding. The value of literature in developing moral and emotional understanding has a long history in the philosophical and educational thought. Proponents of a liberal arts education have long held that literature cultivates the "narrative imagination", the ability to imagine the experience of a person different from oneself, and the emotions, wishes and desires that such a person might feel. On this older, more philosophical formulation, the importance of literature is not so much a psychological effect as that it affords a disposition of moral attentiveness to others, so moral sensibility is considered to be part of the responsibility of a good education along with more narrowly academic skills.

It is a philosophical tradition which anticipates in less experimental language much of what, since then, cognitive research has attempted to test directly. It is important to note,



however, that the scientific evidence of the moral benefits of literature is not decisive, as even if both the effects are weak or do not replicate, the case for literature as good practice in imagining other minds is just a case of what a humane education should consist of. The two traditions are not rivals, but are complementary, one ways to ask the question, the other asks it differently: one asks whether literature can measurably increase empathic capacity, and the other asks what kind of moral and imaginative formation is suitable for literature regardless of whether the measurement is taken of change.

2.5 POV and Narrative Voice

Another theoretical thread deals with the particular mode or modes of narrative that draw into perspective-taking in fiction. Various methods of achieving this, especially first-person narrative, interior monologue, and free indirect discourse (a third-person voice that provides access to a character's internal world through the character's own words), have been suggested as ways of enhancing the reader's understanding of the interior world of a character compared to the reader's understanding in ordinary social discourse. Novels regularly provide us with the ability to enter a mind that we could never achieve in social life – even in the most intimate relationships we have with other people are we able to directly get into their unspoken thoughts in the way that a skillfully told novel can.

This observation points to an additional layer of modification of the empathy hypothesis: perhaps it is not the genre narrative fiction per se that is most significant, but rather the specific approach to interiority and multiple perspectives – sometimes conflicting – that is most characteristic of narrative fiction. A novel that allows the reader to know more about one character's view of himself/herself than that character knows about himself/herself, or one that allows the reader to see more of another character's view of him/herself than that character sees him/herself, can plausibly require and reward more complex perspective-taking than a novel that presents the characters' views from a single, stable location. This is relevant to classroom applications of text selection, discussed further in the discussion of pedagogical implications below.

3. Methodology and Approach

The paper employs an integrative review approach, which incorporates the concepts from cognitive psychology, social psychology, and literary study, as opposed to presenting one original experiment. This is because the question to be answered, which is whether and how literature develops empathy, is intrinsically interdisciplinary, and no one line of study is enough to answer it. Review evidence from experimental studies measuring empathy or theory-of-mind following exposure to fiction, correlational studies that link life-time reading practices to empathic disposition, and theory and literature that helps elucidate the proposed mechanisms of fiction's effects.

The paper focuses particularly on three methodological issues that are evident in this body of work. The first is the difference between literary fiction and popular fiction as outlined above, as studies that cannot distinguish them between the two run the risk of combining effects that can vary in kind. The second is the distinction between an immediate, laboratory-induced effect (commonly measured after a single reading session) and dispositional empathy, which would be of most interest to the educator, who would deal with it over a much longer period of time. The third is the role of guided reflection and discussion, as another common feature of the literature is that the empathy derived from fiction is not a mere consequence of contact, but



is mediated by how actively and reflectively a reader interacts with the text. The third consideration is particularly important in the classroom context that inspired this paper, because it is in the conditions of engagement, not the condition of reading a text, that a teacher has a stake.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Evidence for an Empathy-Building Effect of Fiction

Several studies have found short-term benefits on theory-of-mind ability when participating in brief readings of literary fiction as opposed to nonfiction or popular fiction. The findings have also contributed to the notion that literary reading is a uniquely cognitive experience, and they confirm the theoretical prediction that the ambiguity and psychological complexity of literary fiction require readers to be more socially-cognitively involved in the reading process than other story types.

These experimental results are complemented by correlational research. Studies have investigated the relationship between any lifetime exposure to fiction, typically measured by author-recognition tests, and empathic disposition, and the general conclusion has been that there is a positive correlation between the two, consistent with their other factors controlling for general reading frequency and demographic factors. This is similar to the previously mentioned results that the habit of reading fiction over time (years rather than one occasion) is related to having an "empathic" orientation toward others.

The most impressive applied evidence is found in specific text-based studies that are conducted within educational settings. Studies of adolescents who read popular multi-volume stories involving marginalized or stigmatized characters have identified relationships between participation in such stories and a decrease in prejudice toward the actual groups represented by the characters, especially when the students discuss the stories and identify with the characters in the stories. This line of research is useful because it suggests that while reading is the mechanism, it isn't the only one, nor is it the one that matters here: it suggests that identification and discussion are mechanisms that matter.

4.2. The answers were complicated, inconclusive, and limited

There were difficult answers, no answers, and answers that were limited. However, the picture is not entirely positive. Replication of some of the best known experimental results have yielded inconsistent results; some replications have not found the original results or have only been seen under conditions more limited than the original. Early popular belief has been replaced by a more conservative view among researchers that the empathic effect of fiction is real but limited and variable, and much less durable than early popular accounts suggested.

Another issue related to direction of causation in correlational studies. It is also possible that those who are more empathetic are just more inclined to read literary fiction than those who are less empathetic, rather than reading literary fiction leading to increased empathy. While some experimental designs try to mitigate this effect, it remains possible that this is the case even in studies of long-term reading habits. Furthermore, most experimental research assesses effects immediately following a single reading session and there is genuine uncertainty whether the effects are long-lasting or whether they lead to lasting behavioural changes outside of the laboratory.



Combined, this evidence suggests that literary fiction can be used to briefly engage readers and, at least sometimes, enhance their perspective-taking abilities, whereas frequent literary reading may correlate with but not be definitively linked to an increase in readers' empathic disposition. The magnitude and duration of these impacts, however, rely significantly on variables in addition to exposure to a text.

4.3 How engagement and reflection might moderate

The most pedagogically relevant results of this literature review is that the effects of empathy are consistently strongest when reading is followed by some kind of active engagement, either in the form of emotional transportation by the story, or by identification with one of the characters, or by structured reflection and discussion after the reading. Passive reading or disengaged reading, which is often associated with compulsory reading classes that are read, rather, with little enthusiasm, has less and less reliable effects.

This discovery changes the “how” of the practical question for English teachers. The question isn't just one of what texts to assign and hope for empathy to develop, but how to design the reading experience – by posing questions, studying characters, engaging in perspective-writing exercises, and other activities – so students read texts in a manner that is reflective and identificatory, as the studies imply will lead to the empathy needed for learning benefits to follow.

4.4 A Classroom Illustration

Passive and active engagement can be differentiated through an imagined class setting, that is representative. One could use the novel that was assigned to two different ninth-grade classes in which it is read from the point of view of a character whose social conditions are drastically different from the social conditions most students experience. The novel is read primarily in first class, with only a few comprehension questions discussed, and a plot-based test at the end of the unit. The second class involves having students maintain a reading journal, into which they occasionally write with the voice of the protagonist; having students discuss the character's motivations and defend competing interpretations of the motivations; and having students end the unit with an assignment in which they relate the character's experience to a situation in their own lives.

None of the studies reviewed here would suggest that, as a group, students in the first class would demonstrate measurable differences in their disposition toward empathy after reading the same words and on the same pages as those of the second class. The second class, on the other hand, has received just the sort of identification and reflective interaction with which fiction is credited as its catalytic element in its empathic power. In one the novel is the same, in the other the pedagogy. This illustration serves as a reminder of a theme that is repeated throughout this paper: The book alone is not enough to bring the empathic outcomes that teachers might hope for literature to create.

5. Implications for English Language Teaching

The following are some concrete pedagogical implications that can be drawn from this review. First of all, it's important to consider the text you're selecting. In view of what seems to be its significance, psychological complexity, and moral ambiguity, teachers who wish to foster empathy through the use of literature have reasons for choosing literature where moral categories are not so easily discerned and where characters' motives are not explicitly provided



but must be inferred. While texts that are "simpler" or "more accessible" can be valuable and important, the goal of fostering empathy is a better reach through texts that leave interpretive work for the reader.

Second, the focus of discussion and reflection should not be accommodation ad hoc but as central as possible to the goal of developing empathy. The kinds of classroom activities that involve students in representing a character's point of view in their own words, arguing for different interpretations of a character's intentions, and writing as another character seem to be the processes that most closely match the processes the research identifies as conducive to empathic benefits. Units focused on silent reading followed only by a comprehension quiz will not achieve the empathic potential that can be offered by discussion-rich alternatives.

Third, teachers need to be careful about writing about a socially marginalized or unfamiliar group without scaffolding it. Studies of perspective-taking through fiction have shown that identification with the character is a crucial mechanism, and that identifying with a character isn't always automatic just because the character's background is different than the reader's; identification often has to be fostered through conversation, helping students notice similarities, as well as differences between themselves and the characters in the fiction. Lastly, teachers' expectations of the capabilities of literature must be realistic. The evidence presented here does not support the notion that the short-term effects of assigning empathetic novels is guaranteed to be transformative for the attitudes or behaviour of students. It does have the more modest but still valuable claim that if well taught, literary fiction, in an active and reflective engagement, is one of the more promising of the tools that can be deployed to develop skills in perspective-taking, and that these skills are the foundation of empathetic skills, and that these are not the only tools that can be used, and that their value lies not only in the text, but in pedagogy as well.

An related implication is that of the assessment. Empathy-building, therefore, is not simply a byproduct of teaching, but it should be viewed as a legitimate teaching goal and, as such, should be subject to some form of assessment, perhaps not of the standardized sort employed in the psychological sciences. Persuasive writing assignments from a character's point of view, assignments that have students cite and discuss an instance in which their first impression of a character changed, and assignments that prompt students to compare their own first impressions of a character's reasoning with his or her explicit reasoning, are reasonable classroom substitutes for the perspective-taking abilities that the research attributes to literary engagement. Such tasks may have the added benefit of being defensible on common literacy basis, as they also target close reading and analytical writing, and do not require teachers to make a choice between empathy-based goals and the more traditional ELA goals.

It is important to note that there is no need to sacrifice critical distance in favor of empathy in teaching. Students are not merely to identify with all characters without evaluating them, and a function of literature is to teach us to have sympathy and judgment, to know how a character feels and why he or she acts as he or she does, without necessarily approving of the action. Empathy is a more difficult power to develop, but if taught correctly, it is the power that is developed when a pedagogy is oriented toward empathy and not towards simple approval.

6. Limitations

There are some limitations to this review that should be noted. Much of the research to which the findings of this paper are drawn are of adult participants, typically university



students, and not adolescents, and the extent to which findings can be extended to the secondary classroom setting that drives this paper is limited. Moreover, much of the classroom evidence available on the subject of literature in the classroom is observational rather than experimental, and it is hard to determine the influence of the text itself, as opposed to the influence of the teacher, classroom, or program in which the text is taught. Empathy, as a construct, is multidimensional and studies differ significantly in both the operationalization and measures of empathy, making it difficult to synthesize findings across the literature in a single coherent picture.

7. CONCLUSION

Literature does indeed engender empathy: it's not a straightforward proposition and it's not a platitude, but it is a real possibility, albeit not absolute or without limits, and backed by a growing (though yet not comprehensive) body of research. Narrative fiction seems to be able to activate the same cognitive and emotional processes that are required in real-world perspective-taking, and habitual exposure to literary fiction is correlated with increased disposition to empathize, but these results are contingent upon the kind of narrative fiction text, the level of engagement required to read the text, and, importantly, the inclusion of language that reflects the reader's emotional response to the text, which in turn helps consolidate this response into a more enduring cognitive habit. The conclusion of this sort has a clear implication for English teachers: the empathic value of literature in the classroom is not just assumed by the reading list. It needs to be taught explicitly, using the texts that are psychologically stimulating, the design of the discussion and reflection tasks, and a continued focus on students' interaction with the perspectives they are invited to imagine in the literature. If this is done in this way, literature will be one of the more unique resources that will be available for English education to develop empathy, not because reading itself is an inherently transformative practice,

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