

*Can anyone think that there is more understanding to be gained about the human heart from Freud than from Shakespeare—that the studies of Dora or the Wolf Man approach anywhere near to the profundity of understanding embodied in Macbeth or Lear, with their unflinching elucidation of man's (and woman's) capacity for evil? Can anyone think that the studies of Margaret Mead or Alfred Kinsey tell us anything nearly as true as Ovid or Turgenev? Does the sociobiology of E. O. Wilson or Richard Dawkins tell us any more than we learn from Homer or Virgil?* — Myron Magnet

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## WHAT USE IS LITERATURE?

**Myron Magnet**

Aristotle perhaps didn't go far enough when he said that tragedy was more philosophic than history, concentrating as it does on what might be rather than merely on what had been. He might have gone on to say that tragedy—or, more broadly, literature—is more philosophic even than philosophy. It is a form of knowledge that draws on all our ways of knowing, rather than on ratiocination alone. And it is a more intense form of knowledge, since, unlike philosophy, it isn't constantly taking its own pulse, or checking its instruments, anxiously asking itself how it can know this or that. As Dickens would say, it just goes and knows it.

Two or three decades ago, the belief that literature was a repository of knowledge—and important knowledge—was usual enough for critics to take it for granted. At the very least, everybody understood that literature was a storehouse of documentary knowledge. We could learn about how others lived—the Greeks, the men of the Middle Ages, our own contemporaries: how they judged one another, what they considered good manners, how they fell in love, what their family life was like, how they structured their society,

when they dined, how they grew up and took their place in the world of adults.

But that was only the beginning. Literature also teaches us more about psychology than the psychologists can. The inner life—and its relation to the outer appearance, from which it is often (and proverbially) very different—is literature’s special subject. It is a particularly complex subject, with its interweaving of motives and impulses, as appetites grapple with ideals, as consciousness both registers and distorts external reality, as natural promptings intersect with social ambitions, and the universal in our nature takes on the fashion and the garb of a particular age.

Here literature’s weakness—that, unlike philosophy, it is unsystematic—becomes its great strength. It mobilizes all our faculties of knowledge at once: not just our ability to analyze the outer world but our introspection and intuition as well. We can understand what is going on in the hearts of others because we know what stirs our own hearts, and what could stir them. When a writer imagines his characters’ inner drama, his description rings true to us because we have felt similar impulses or imagined analogous situations, and, further, can identify sympathetically with something beyond our ken. We grasp intuitively the complex internal mix: the simultaneous interplay of feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and hopes, of conscious and subliminal impulses—as pity combines with social anxiety, say, or with eros or vanity or sudden insight to impel a character to behave as he behaves. Literature is the great school of motivation: it teaches us how, out of the complex welter of impulses churning within us, we make the choices that define us and seal our fate.

And it dramatizes for us the consequences of those choices. Do they lead to happiness or misery, decency or not—and for whom? What do the high-handedness of Menelaus and the anger of Achilles produce? What dire offence from am’rous causes springs? What results from the choices of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina? What happens to the soul of a man who kills a “useless” old pawnbroker—or, at the urging of his wife, the king of Scotland?

These choices have ramifications not just for individuals but often for the whole social order. So it is on many levels that literature asks: How should we live? What is the right life for man? And to ask such questions, it must ask the further question: What is human nature, and what guideposts and constraints does it set for the kind of life we can choose? How do we realize to the full the potentialities for excellence and happiness that nature implants in us?

Therefore, to add to its rich complexity, even while literature is exercising all our ways of knowing at once, it often is also taking two simultaneous perspectives, the personal and the social—and examining (at least implicitly) the ways in which the two realms intersect with and affect each other. As in music, many different voices interweave to create one larger harmony, transcending the sum of its parts.

Literature is a conversation across the ages about our experience and our nature, a conversation in which, while there isn't unanimity, there is a surprising breadth of agreement. Literature amounts, in these matters, to the accumulated wisdom of the race, the sum of our reflections on our own existence. It begins with observation, with reporting, rendering the facts of our inner and outer reality with acuity sharpened by imagination. At its greatest, it goes on to show how these facts have coherence and, finally, meaning. As it dramatizes what actually happens to concrete individuals trying to shape their lives at the confluence of so many imperatives, it presents us with concrete and particular manifestations of universal truths. For as the greatest authors know, the universal has to be embodied in the particular—where, as it is enmeshed in the complexity and contradictoriness of real experience, it loses the clarity and lucidity that only abstractions can possess.

Well, you may object, if this is what literature's insights amount to, then it is a realm of opinion, not knowledge. And just such doubts have been eating away at the confidence of literary critics, with growing force, over the last quarter century. In the face of science, with its spectacular practical achievements and its unequivocal experimental truths, what claim had literature—admittedly fiction—to a kind of truth? Wasn't it just fantasy, interesting perhaps, but ultimately ephemeral and useless? And if anyone wanted to know about the world that literature supposedly elucidated, we had the "human sciences"—studies like sociology and psychology and anthropology—that brought the rigor and authority of science (as its practitioners claimed, at least) to what literature handled in so amateur a fashion.

But we should take the claims of the human sciences, even sometimes of the harder sciences, with a certain skepticism. Too many "studies" and "reports," with tables of data in small print appended, have purported to reveal truths about welfare or policing or sex education but in fact have revealed nothing but the initial prejudices of the "investigators." For me, the epiphany came when I interviewed the nation's leading climatologists for a magazine arti-

cle on acid rain (about which I knew nothing) and discovered mostly ideology, not knowledge—among scientists. When I also learned some years ago that academic paleontologists at that time couldn't hope to get tenure if they questioned the theory that a giant meteor explosion had caused the extinction of the dinosaurs—thus providing a model of what a so-called nuclear winter would produce—my own skepticism took on a certain wryness.

The social scientists have a mantra: “The plural of anecdote is not data.” I think they are mistaken. An accumulation of accurate stories about how the human world works, stories that provide an account wrapped in an interpretation, adds up to knowledge, better knowledge than we can get elsewhere. Data are meaningless until we can articulate a story that makes sense out of them, and literature makes sense out of the data of human experience.

Can anyone think that there is more understanding to be gained about the human heart from Freud than from Shakespeare—that the studies of Dora or the Wolf Man approach anywhere near to the profundity of understanding embodied in Macbeth or Lear, with their unflinching elucidation of man's (and woman's) capacity for evil? Can anyone think that the studies of Margaret Mead or Alfred Kinsey tell us anything nearly as true as Ovid or Turgenev? Does the sociobiology of E. O. Wilson or Richard Dawkins tell us any more than we learn from Homer or Virgil?

An exquisite little poem of Tennyson's, called “1865–66,” sums up this point infinitely better than I could do:

*I stood on a tower in the wet,  
And New Year and Old Year met,  
And winds were roaring and blowing;  
And I said, “O years, that meet in tears,  
Have ye aught that is worth the knowing?  
Science enough and exploring,  
Wanderers coming and going,  
Matter enough for deploring,  
But aught that is worth the knowing?”  
Seas at my feet were flowing,  
Waves on the shingle pouring,  
Old Year roaring and blowing,  
And New Year blowing and roaring.*

What's wanted is wisdom: the ability to see into the heart of things. This is the kind of knowledge that Plato describes so poeti-

cally in that most literary of all philosophical passages, the allegory of the cave: the knowledge that sees through the world of appearances to the Truth, of which the appearances are but an emanation—a knowledge that requires a lifetime of reason and study to attain but that comes finally in a flash of intuition, because the Truth is in us, in an inner nature we can glimpse by introspection and intuition, as well as in the world. And this is the knowledge—a knowledge, one might say, that resides in our souls as well as in our minds—that great literature embodies.

It is a knowledge that has its practical uses, too, no less than scientific knowledge; for if it doesn't build computers or space shuttles, it builds civilizations. It defines what it means to be human, dramatizing the values and ideals, the web of culture, that differentiate us from the beasts.

Consider four very brief examples. Start with Sophocles, since *Oedipus Rex* really does stand at the beginning of our tradition. Here is a work in which the author stacks the deck just as much as you can possibly stack it. A man commits two terrible crimes—universally terrible, not just bad by the standards of this or that society. But he didn't know that he was committing them; he didn't know that the man he killed was his father or that the queen he married was his mother. Not knowing what he was doing, he certainly didn't intend to commit these crimes. Furthermore, he was fated to do those terrible things, as oracles plainly stated at his birth. So with every kind of extenuating circumstance surrounding his actions, was he responsible?

Sophocles answers a resounding Yes. What it means to be human, he shows us, is that you take responsibility for your actions. In a world of uncertainty and chance, where so much is out of our control, this is the only way we can assert that we are moral creatures with free will, whose doings have meaning, rather than being just part of the mere flux and confusion of brute creation. This is a hard doctrine, but one that has undiminished resonance for us in our own era, whose search for extenuation and victimization diminishes rather than ennobles all it touches. And it is this acceptance of responsibility that makes Oedipus truly a tragic hero, with equal emphasis on both those words.

Now flash forward two millennia to a dramatic world that seems as though it belongs on another planet, the world of Mozart's magical comic opera *Così fan tutte*—"They All Do It." Its libretto, written by Lorenzo da Ponte, who also wrote the libretti for *Don*

*Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro* before ending up in New York as Columbia's first professor of Italian, tells the wonderfully silly story of a bet two handsome young men make with their cynical older friend. Your two girlfriends, the older man says, whom you claim to be paragons of faithfulness, will not stay true to you if put to the test. Pretend to be called off to war, then come back disguised as noble Albanians, woo each other's girls, and you'll see.

Well, you know the result. But when the boys pretend to go off to war, the girls sing such a piercingly sweet lament of loss and farewell (for we are in a realm of literature-plus) that you know their love is real, even though they later fall for the supposed Albanians and so prove—temporarily—unfaithful. And the opera's point is that, yes, from one point of view, one good-looking boy is much like another; still, from another point of view, the person we choose is unique and special and the only one for us. We are creatures of animal instinct; but as we marshal that indiscriminate instinct into an act of discriminating and binding choice, we transform the natural into the human and create a new realm of feeling and meaning in the process.

*Cosgrave*; gets performed somewhere every year, and Jane Austen's *Emma*, published a quarter century later, is just as perennial: Gwyneth Paltrow stars in the recent movie version of it, and Alicia Silverstone played the same character in the adaptation *Clueless*. No wonder this story has lasted: its title character is adorable—irresistible despite her invincible self-satisfaction and self-delusion, perhaps excusable in one so very young and pretty and, as it happens, upscale. The story's key event is an act of bad manners: Emma insults a family friend, Miss Bates, and wounds her feelings. True, Miss Bates is the kind of boring old maid whose endless chatter about trivialities makes you cringe when you see her coming, but she is a harmless and kindly person. True, too, Emma's rudeness doesn't approach what you can now hear on TV or on the streets every hour of the day; it is only a sarcastic crack about Miss Bates's talkiness.

But the man Emma loves calls her on the carpet for her behavior: she's at the top of the social heap in her little town, he says, and if she treats Miss Bates with contempt, others will follow suit, causing injury to a poor and dependent but good-hearted person. Manners are not trivial, a matter of which fork to use; they are a department of morals, part of the code—that web of culture, again—by which we succeed in living in harmony with one another.


Manners are another key part of the humanizing project, through which we convert eating into dining, sex into romance and courtship, and our everyday interactions into occasions for cooperation rather than conflict.

Today, of course, many would object that all this is fake and stilted, and that we should just be natural and sincere and not trouble ourselves with the courtesies and conventionalities. So let me end with an early novel of Dickens's, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which has something to say about just this question. You want to know what people are like when they are natural and dispense with the courtesies? Fine, Dickens says; let's go out to the American frontier (which he actually visited in 1842). The natural landscape, far from being like the Garden of Eden, is a disease-carrying swamp; the inhabitants, who call themselves Nature's Noblemen, are coarse, deceitful, and violent. All of them carry guns and knives—and, among other proclivities, they have no problem with enslaving other people.

If you want something better, says this great novelist of the modern city, let's go back to London, an alternative realm to nature, a man-made place where you hear horses neighing and stamping not in fields but in underground stables, where you see oranges not on trees but in crates carried through the streets at unseasonable times of the year, where flowers bloom in pots on high-up windowsills, where the smoke from the chimneys creates its own, quite unnatural atmosphere. But this is an environment that is wonderful for people. It's like a hothouse, in whose controlled climate people can develop their selfhood to the full. For it is precisely in this artificial, man-made realm—a social realm in which people make up stories and tell them to one another; make up selves and present them to one another; make up the ceremonies that consecrate their doings—that mankind remakes itself into something that fulfills all the potentialities of our nature that nature alone can't make bloom.

One final point. The era that confidently viewed literature in the way that I have described has of course been over for some years now. A newly emergent critical orthodoxy has taken a wrecking bar to literature. Critics no longer see the literary enterprise as reliably trying to show us the truth of our condition and the possibilities it offers but instead trying to hoodwink us into tolerating political and social oppression that we would instantly reject, could we but free our minds from the myths and mystifications with which authors, mere apologists of the established and the powerful, have beguiled us. The critic's job now is not to dive down to the heart of

the truth the author had grasped and explain to a new generation of readers how it applies to lived experience; he is to unmask the author's imposture, to reveal how the author, unconscious himself of his actual motives and blind to the reality he purports to illuminate, really is a kind of lackey, devoid of the critic's keen ability to see that the social relations, conventions, and beliefs that the author celebrates as humanizing and civilizing man in reality do exactly the opposite, constraining and diminishing him. To these critics, the truth of literature has become its falsehood; the author, however great, is merely the gullible propagandist of one or another tyranny.

For all that, the literate public has kept on reading literature, whose great works will still be there to instruct and inspire mankind long after the works of that angry, arrogant, and obtuse generation of critics have turned to dust. 



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