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TE 849, What Literature Can Do

As someone who has always loved books, I have always believed that literature serves to help develop our imagination. It allows us to travel to new places, step inside the world of another character, and to take on new adventures we could only dream of. When I became a teacher, literature took on a new purpose. Literature then became a vehicle for knowledge. I placed certain books in front of my students to teach them beginning sounds and words, to teach them how to read and to help them understand the simple plots of stories. Over the past several weeks, these views of what literature can do have remained constant. Yet, my beliefs of what literature can do and its purpose in our curriculum has also changed. In some ways, these beliefs have been strengthened by the books we've read, the discussions I've had with classmates, and through other materials used to convey literature's purpose.

One of the beliefs I now have about what literature can do is that it helps bring people closer together. Though this was something I think I've always known or picked up on, it was made clearer to me through this course, especially through our discussions. Literature helps to fuel these discussions. It allows us to create bonds with one another and to learn about the experiences of others. After reading *Tea With Milk*, I found out how three of my classmates made this story relatable to their lives. Despite the apparent distance in online courses, I felt closer to Carlie, as she explained that she had traveled to another country and that like May, she could relate to feeling out of place at first before truly grasping their customs and ways of daily life. This was something I also experienced traveling overseas. I also was given new perspectives as literature opened doors to discussion. I learned how my classmates reacted to reading certain stories and how they

sympathized with characters like May and Rose Blanche. I took notice of different aspects of the certain texts, like the actions of characters or the artwork of the illustrator.

Another way literature can bring us closer together is by helping us develop empathy toward one another. I was challenged in this course to take a closer examination of the types of books I'm filling my classroom library with and consider if I was promoting positive representations of different races, abilities and sexual preferences. In fact, this was something my discussion group mates also cited as a key element when selecting quality literature or their own classrooms. In her article, "Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum," Rudine Sims Bishop reminds us that multicultural literature serves a place in our classrooms as it allows students of color to see positive portrayals of their respective races. It also helps promote a sense of empathy and understanding for students of different racial or cultural backgrounds. As Debbie Reese pointed out in "Native Americans in Children's Literature," many students are uneducated about various cultural groups, especially Native Americans, because a stereotyped image is all they receive. She suggests that when teachers are knowledgeable about the criteria that will correctly and positively portray Native Americans (or other cultural groups), our students will begin to see these cultures in a new and more accurate way.

When examining the articles of Eve Tal ("A Discussion of Criteria for Evaluating Children's Literature with Disabilities") and Caroline T. Clark and Mollie V. Blackburn ("Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People- What's Possible?"), this belief about what literature can do was reinforced. As I read through *Mockingbird*, I was able to spend time inside Caitlin's mind. I had the opportunity to experience what life would be like to have Asperger's Syndrome and to try to cope with the pain of losing a loved one. As

I read through texts like *Two Boys Kissing* and *Parrotfish*, I was able to view the world again through a new set of lenses. I had a glimpse into what life may be like for someone who is gay. Prior to reading these texts, my exposure to LGBT-themed literature was minimal at best. Though it was initially difficult for me to relate to these texts, I learned about some of the social pressures and conflicts that might occur for LGBT students. Now, I feel like I have developed a sense of empathy and understanding. By reading texts with such positive representations of people different from me because of their ethnicity, ability, and sexual preference, I now feel more armed to reject negative stereotypes. Literature has shifted perspectives for me, providing me with a sense of relatability toward people who I may have felt distance from before.

Along with this lesson, I also believe literature can also cause us to reflect on ourselves. In several texts we read this semester, I saw characters venturing on a path to self-discovery. For some, like Joseph in *Bowman's Store*, this journey takes many years as we uncover the painful history of our family. For others, like Grady in *Parrotfish*, this journey has a positive outcome when we are finally able to feel at home in our own skin. And for others, like Damon in *My Man Blue*, we look to others as positive examples for models in our own lives. Though it was a very different experience, I also was given a look into the life of Jacqueline Woodson in *Brown Girl Dreaming*, as she grew up in the New York and the South. During her youth, she became more aware of the Civil Rights movements and I was able to read how she came to terms with this history as well as her own journey to becoming a writer.

When reading stories about self-discovery, readers may experience what Donald G. Smith points out in his article "Speaking My Mind." He states that literature can take on

“the mirror angle” by showing us our true selves. In literature, we may find a character’s journey to self-discover so inspiring because it allows us to reflect on our own journey. In another way, we may find characters dealing with similar conflicts and challenges we face; as a result, literature can provide a sense of comfort and the knowledge that we are not alone in these struggles. I noticed this piece of literature’s purpose as I read through *Two Boys Kissing*. With the echoing voices of gay men who understood both the triumphs and hardships of the main characters, I felt like this text also called to students in our classrooms today who need to be guided and reminded that they are not alone in their feelings.

When considering the many things that literature can do, it is also important to think about the impact it has on our curriculum. When I consider my own classroom, I hope in so many ways that what I am doing everyday is helping my students prepare for the real world. By providing my students with literature that teaches them about different people groups, my objective is not only that they will become more knowledgeable through this literature, but also that they will carry this knowledge over into their interactions with others. I hope they will approach real world interactions with understanding and empathy rather than ignorance and judgment. I was shocked after reading “How Schools Play ‘Smear the Queer’” as Lisa W. Loutzenheiser reported the shocking number of suicides prevalent among LGBT teens. Sadly, it makes me wonder if a different outcome may have occurred if the students who were bullied for their sexual preference had been provided more literature that allowed them to see a character dealing with similar struggles. It also makes me wonder what may have happened if there had been more literature to educate those who acted with cruelty instead of compassion.

Not only does literature help to bring people together, but it also helps increase our knowledge. As stated earlier, this view of literature's purpose was something that became obvious when I became a teacher but has been reaffirmed through this course. In addition and as a result of this course, I have found new ways to increase my student's knowledge by introducing them to new types of literature.

One of the ways literature can increase our knowledge is by transporting us to a new place. When we read books about places we've never been to, we are allowed the opportunity to experience this new environment. I felt this way while reading *The Quest for the Tree Kangaroo: An Expedition to the Cloud Forest of Papua New Guinea* during our week-long study on non-fiction texts. Papua New Guinea is a place I've never been to, yet I felt as if I had stepped inside the Cloud Forest and was hiking in search of the tree kangaroo alongside the crew of naturalists. I'm very certain I will never have the experience to actually travel and search for the tree kangaroo, but through this text, I felt as if I were there. Although I had the opportunity to travel to Japan during a study abroad program, some of my group mates did not have this experience so reading *Tea with Milk* gave them a similar endeavor. Through Allen Say's descriptive language and artwork, my group mates noted in our discussion that they felt like they were visiting Japan and feeling out of place as May did when eating traditional Japanese dishes and wearing a kimono.

Along with being transported to new places, literature also allows readers to travel to different time periods and experience events throughout history. I was first exposed to this sensation when reading *Rose Blanche*. Rose grows up in Germany during the time of the Nazi reign. Through Rose's story, I was given a glimpse into what it may have been like to grow up during World War II and to be confused by the actions of the soldiers coming

into my neighborhood. When reading this text, my group mate Laura really challenged herself to put herself in Rose's shoes. Through our discussion, she motivated me to do the same and I considered how difficult it must have been to live through these traumatic events, especially for someone as curious and innocent as Rose. While Rose's story was fictional, I had the experience to walk in the shoes of actual children living through Nazi Germany in *Hitler Youth*, another text I read during our non-fiction week. When these two texts hailed from different genres, their similar subject matter allowed me to see how Rose's story aligned with some of the real-life accounts of children during this time period.

Literature also allowed me the chance to step inside history and bring me closer to a better understanding of the accuracy of particular events. During our non-fiction week, I was especially interested in check out *The Family Romanov*, which chronicles the final years of the Russian Czar's rule. Though my knowledge of Russian history is limited, I thought I knew some details of Czar Nicholas and his family through the movie *Anastasia*. However, I found that this movie portrayed historical events far from the truth, and literature allowed me the chance to clear up these misconceptions. I also had the chance again to step back in time and experience the fall of the Czar close up. Other pieces of literature that provided awareness for me were the articles surrounding the debate of the Vermont Eugenics Survey. As I pointed out in my paper during weeks 5 and 6, I was a little embarrassed by my own ignorance toward this time in our country's history. From reading the articles and debate of Beth Kannel's *Darkness Under the Water* and its accurate retelling of events surrounding the survey, I became more informed on what actually happened and how this affects Native Americans in our society today. In this way, literature not only provided

knowledge and understanding, but also awareness to dark events that seemed to have been hidden.

In a very different way, literature also reminds us how the world is constantly changing. When viewing literature across many time periods, as we did with fictional picture books, it was interesting to note how story plots, artwork, and character actions changed throughout history. When reading through these texts, it was also fascinating to note how certain texts reflected the historical events, social norms, gender roles, and the pace of daily life in the period in which they were written. In literature we can see glimpses of history left behind by the author.

I found that by reading “Research Says: Non-fiction Reading Promotes Student Success” by Bryan Goodwin and Kirsten Miller, I began to grasp another purpose for literature in our curriculum. As the author of this article point out, non-fiction texts help students develop their background knowledge. Students who read this type of literature are exposed to more ideas and concepts that are a part of our world, and in turn will find more literature or more life experiences relatable. I definitely saw this in my own exposure to non-fiction, but through the examples I noted of fictional texts, like *Rose Blanche*, I would also argue that fiction could help develop the background knowledge of readers too. When considering our curriculum today, teachers can’t ignore that our Common Core Standards require more use and mastery of texts that teach concepts. When we select quality literature that seeks to accomplish this, we are not only helping our students move closer to success in these standards but we are also providing them with knowledge and understanding about our world.

As I noted in my opening lines of this paper, my first belief about what literature can do stems from my love of reading at a young age. Literature can heighten our imagination. While it not only can transport us to places we've only heard of, it can also take us to places we've only dreamed of. When reading the various versions of *Coraline*, I was able to step inside the amazing and terrifying world of the Other Mother alongside our title character. I fought battles against Other Mother as Coraline did and eagerly anticipated the next piece of her puzzle. Thinking back to our initial discussion board postings on a favorite piece of literature as both adult and children, I recall many classmates noting their favorite work from either life stage was so loved because it gave them a feeling of escape into a new realm. This was also true when reading through fairy tales. This genre of literature allowed me to venture into the world of make-belief, where princesses befriend talking animals, where witches and other villains must be triumphed over, and where happily ever after ends the story. Although these stories share so many common elements, they serve a place in our curriculum as they teach children how to dream and let their imaginations run wild. They remind us that within the covers of literature, anything is possible.

When considering our imagination, literature allows us to explore the beauty of language, calling us to visualize the words and ideas in our minds. *Brown Girl Dreaming* and *My Man Blue* use poetic devices and descriptive language to tell stories. Through imagery and metaphors, they create strong visual effects for readers and teach us new ways to creatively say what we are thinking or experiencing. In this way too, literature can simply be enjoyed for pleasure.

Recently, author Johnathan Rand came to my school to discuss the importance of literature during March is Reading Month. Among the many wonderful stories he told, he

reminded our students that their own stories matter. Over the past few weeks in this course, I've been able to see reflections of this statement in the work we've been doing. Literature serves as a tool for reminding students that there is a place for their own stories to be retold. For some like Joseph Bruchac or Jacqueline Woodson, these may be the true stories of their lives and how they journeyed to finding out whom they were meant to be. For others, like David Gaiman or Roberto Innocenti, these may be the fictional stories we make up that express one's creativity. In some ways, this statement stretched my thinking, especially when called to consider my own criteria for selecting quality literature. Many times throughout this course, I was able to reflect critically upon the literature choices for my classroom, considering which texts would serve as vehicles to realizing that their own stories matter.

In closing, after so many weeks of wrestling with the idea of relatability, it is hard not to consider this as a final purpose of what literature can do. This theme stretched across many weeks of learning and was considered in a variety of texts. At the start, I was first pushed to consider what relatability actually meant. While I had first believed it to be closely linked to background knowledge, my view began to shift when working with classmates in our discussion board. I began to think of relatability as the meaning that a reader makes from a text, as I saw how my group mates and I responded differently to the same story. When working with some texts and topics, I found this purpose in literature complicated for me as I struggled to initially find certain stories relatable. I did not have prior knowledge of the Vermont Eugenics Survey or my experience with LGBTQ students has been minimal. However, by reading through texts on these and other topics and being pushed to reflect upon them, I now have a wider scope of what I consider relatable. When

we want our students to have a better understanding and sense of empathy toward people who are in many ways different from them, we can expose them to these types of characters in literature and increase their relatability to these people groups. If we want to increase our student's knowledge of real world experiences, literature can build their understanding and thus make their encounters with these experiences more relatable. Finally, if we want our students to allow their imagination to be taken to new heights, we let them find texts that are relatable to their lives and let them discover the pleasure in reading literature.