


# The Value of Literature, Today and Tomorrow

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**Abstract:** While reports of the death of literature are greatly exaggerated, reports of the decline of Aestheticism, New Criticism, and the printed word are not. Literature as a critique of society is alive today, but to survive tomorrow in any form it will need to engage environmental, climate, and pandemic public health issues. Without such engagement, there will be no civilization, and, thus, no literature. Literature can survive now, but to thrive, essays in literary criticism may have to not only (i) continue to discuss canonical and (ii) minority writing but also (iii) partner with cultural studies and/or (iv) expand the definition of literature to include “the best stories”, (v) especially multimedia stories. Critics would also be well advised to (vi) balance abstraction and theory with close, detailed readings of literature. Editors might encourage new essays demonstrating that (vii) unity in literature is compatible with the celebration of diversity, that explore (viii) the relationship of literature and science in general, and (ix) the integration of unity in literature with the search for unified theory in science. Finally, editors might encourage new essays on less trendy topics such as (x) literature focused on feelings and/or (xi) how literature helps individual readers make radical changes in their lives.

**Keywords:** literature; social function; environment; climate; pandemic; minority; cultural studies; science; emotions; individual



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## 1. Introduction

In 1910, the power of literature was taken for granted: “the eleventh edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* stated that literature ‘had as much effect upon human destiny as the taming of fire.’”<sup>1</sup> Yet, only eighty years later, there were reports that literature was dying, suffocated by theory. As it happened, these were laments for the decline of one very limited version of literature that fulfilled only one of the two goals usually set for great literature: unifying beauty.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes there were nods toward the social function of literature, but the literature that was mourned was mainly that which inspired Art for Art’s Sake, Aestheticism, and New Criticism, representing only a few decades of the thousands of years of literature’s popularity.

One of the problems was that “literature”, the “best writing”, came to mean the literary works chosen for prizes and for anthologies assigned to students (Figure 1). Until the rise of minority literature, this canon was relatively stable, clearly distinguished from the low-quality reading of the masses. One of the traditional goals of ivy-league college courses was to teach the student how to choose high-brow over low-brow literature. Today, some critics might argue that the choice of works reflects class consciousness and ethnocentrism, a message that some will find between the lines of Chace’s description of elite English classes. In his review of *The Death of Literature*, he recalls how:

We began to see, as we had not before, how such books could shape and refine our thinking. We began to understand why generations of people coming before us had kept them in libraries and bookstores and in classes such as ours. There was, we got to know, a tradition, a historical culture, that had been assembled around these books. Shakespeare had indeed made a difference—to people before us, now to us, and forever to the language of English-speaking people. (C)



**Figure 1.** English major studying.

Beautiful and attractive as the unity of that tradition is, for some readers, the stress on “English-speaking people”, and “classes such as ours”, seems to prevent the attempts of minority writers to get into the canon. The result was a kind of civil war.<sup>3</sup> Literature easily survived, partly because of the weakness of the claims of the aesthetes about the decline of English departments and the quality of literature. Even during the time of Aestheticism and the New Criticism, fiction “on the whole, remained intensely moralistic: much of the emotion generated by a story—the fear, hope, and suspense—reflecting our concern over whether the characters, good and bad, will get what they deserve”.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that STEM subjects have drawn college students and funds away from language and literature departments in four-year colleges in the United States, but in two-year colleges, humanities degrees are still regarded as good preparation for the business world and graduates earn decent starting salaries. After all, literature is still an important way to improve reading and writing, two of the most basic skills needed for success in life. Publishers of books, magazines, and newspapers are surviving, after making adjustments to the new multimedia technology, and literature remains enjoyable and meaningful for millions of readers of all ages.

Moreover, even those who lament the decline of the reign of literature for its own sake have to admit that Kernan’s book, *The Death of Literature*, is an egregious distortion of the history of the more serious goals of literature. The social function of literature has been taken for granted for thousands of years. Presumably, a true conservative would want to protect a tradition dating from the fifth century BCE. Ethical interpretations of tragedies, such as the Book of Job and the story of Oedipus, grew in popularity in both the Hebrew and Greek traditions. Sophocles demonstrated the danger of hubris in a civic leader, but Plato was apparently the first Greek to explicitly stress that “there is a use in poetry as well as a delight”.<sup>5</sup> About five hundred years later, Horace reiterated versions of these phrases that have been repeated ever since: “Combine instruction with pleasure; poets wish to benefit or to please, or to speak what is both enjoyable and helpful to living . . . Who can blend usefulness and sweetness wins every vote, at once delighting and teaching the reader”. (Horace 2003). In 1582, Sir Philip Sidney was more concise, affirming that literature is “full of virtue-breeding delightfulness”. (Sidney 2014).

As these words suggest, framing beauty and usefulness as mutually exclusive opposites is misleading. One of the traditional criteria of beauty is unity. “Reading against” and deconstructing a literary text has had its uses but, ultimately, the success, even the survival, of our civilization and probably our species depends on our ability to transcend division and sustain a unified vision of the planet as a whole. If we focus in this way on unity, even “art for art’s sake” serves a social purpose. For example, in this essay, we will discuss how writing instruction teaches students to strive for unity of thought and form; how literary works embody both ideals and can inspire and support the search for unifying theories in science. Equally, if not more importantly, literature can activate the sympathetic imagination that helps us overcome the divisions between people that have blocked progress toward a unifying planetary vision.

The stress on literature as a form of instruction in ethics that brings people together grew in England, as it had in Greece, Israel, and Rome until it culminated in the “moral aesthetic” of the nineteenth century. Even the Romantic poet Shelley defined literature

as not just the “beautiful” but as “the beautiful and the good”. (Shelley [1821] 1977). Presumably by “good”, he meant Plato’s sense of “the highest or pre-eminent end to which human action can be directed; *esp.* the ultimate goal according to which values and priorities are established in an ethical system”.<sup>6</sup> One of the chief accomplishments of the nineteenth-century ethical aesthetic was George Eliot’s attempts in her novels to teach “humanism”, a secular version of “love your neighbor”. She was more successful than most of the other writers of her time because her prose was always “enjoyable” and at times “delightful”. Yet, at the same time, she showed how literature “restores the culture to itself: mirroring what it finds there but also embodying the higher purposes and buried ideals of that culture”, (Parini 2008, Kindle edition, p. 22) words that also fit works by Eliot’s contemporaries, the authors of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Black Beauty*.

Though literature, in general, is not threatened even as much as it seemed to be thirty years ago, if it is to thrive, rather than merely survive, it must adapt to changing conditions. Let us brainstorm ways to do so, considering even wild hypotheses, no matter how impractical or nontraditional they may seem now.

## 2. Redefining “Literature”: Some Possibilities

- (1) Continue considering articles written about canonical literature, but maybe state a preference for literature originally written in languages other than English, for comparative literature essays, or for related concerns in the philosophy of literature (see, for example, Pitari 2021).
- (2) In 2009, we learned that the average American reads printed words on paper for about twenty minutes per day (G 8). Literature can adjust to this change as it did when print replaced handwritten manuscripts. Now we can look for the best writing in more media and stories than we have considered before.
- (3) Consider including essays about electronic versions not only of canonical literature but about almost any story in multimedia form. If the journal is online, consider multimedia essays in criticism. Perhaps we might even merge with cultural studies by expanding the definition of literature to “the best stories”, with “stories” defined as broadly as Gottshall does in *The Storytelling Animal*? Moving toward the social digital humanities as well, perhaps we could even include studies of social media stories that convince or deprogram conspiracy believers?
- (4) Consider including more essays that demonstrate that some of “the best writing” or “best stories” are written by minorities, including Native Americans. We should respect the representation of emotion in such literature.
- (5) Consider including essays on neglected topics such as emotions in literature, reader-response criticism, and the use of literature to help individual readers to change, maybe even transform themselves, using bibliotherapy, poetry therapy, autobiographies and other life stories?
- (6) Consider essays that show how the drive for coherence, wholeness, and unity that results in “the best writing” is compatible with a celebration of diversity, both on campus and off.
- (7) Consider essays that demonstrate, because of the aforementioned drive, that literature can be good training and inspiration for the vision of networked unity that became the new scientific paradigm in physics a century ago and that is now driving research in neurobiology?
- (8) Finally, in view of the movement of funds from literature faculties to STEM departments on college campuses, consider encouraging essays on science and literature, especially on literature and the environment, climate change, and pandemics (see, for example, Meyer 2021).

### 3. Brainstorming the Details

#### 3.1. Canonical Literature?

Kernan's solution, if he has one, is apparently to turn back the clock. William Chace calls for teaching with "passion" the previous vision of literature as a coherent whole, but at this time, that seems elusive. On the other hand, although traditional evaluative literary criticism of the canonical literature of dead white male authors may have declined, it is not dead. Even if "serious literature" has now "only a coterie audience", as Kernan puts it, continue considering essays about canonical literature or related concerns in the philosophy of literature.

#### 3.2. Best Stories?

Because reading words on paper is declining, can "literature", defined as "the best writing", survive outside of educational and research institutions? It might not only survive, but thrive, if we replace the word "writing" with the word "stories". The key word, "best", would remain, and of course, we would set the bar high for quality, but linking "literature" closely to "story" expands the possibilities dramatically to almost all the forms of story that Gottshall discusses in *The Storytelling Animal* (Gottshall 2012). Again, integrating literature with cultural studies would include myths, sacred "fiction", the tales of conspiracy theorists and psychotics, and the forms of story in multimedia, social media, video games, etc. We may find that versions of some of these stories meet our standards of quality and compete for the title of best in their field. Uncomfortable as this may be for some, bringing "stories" in this broader sense into our curriculum might save it.

#### 3.3. Electric Stories and Literary Criticism

Personally, I cannot easily imagine writing literary criticism about "reality" TV, but I propose that we consider essays discussing all kinds of stories and/or hypermedia "essays" that demonstrate how to write, think, and feel electronically. Of course, how many of these radical essays would be accepted remains to be seen. For many reviewers, these changes may seem too much, but Gottshall advises, "Don't despair for story's future or turn curmudgeonly over the rise of video games or reality TV. The way we experience story will evolve, but as storytelling animals, we will no more give it up than start walking on all fours" (G 200).

In his 1992 review of Kernan's book *The Death of Literature*, Richard Lanham recommended the shift of literature from the printed book to the electronic screen (Lanham 1992). In 1993 he insisted that "we can neither preserve the educational system unchanged nor throw out the 'literate' ways of thinking. We have, in some way, to move the humanities from the old to the new operating system". (Lanham 1993, p. 264) (Figure 2a,b). Agreeing with him, I supervised two graduate students who made a powerful hypermedia version of Dante's Hell, and I championed this vision of the future of literature (Bump 1999). I went on to experiment using the huge virtual world, *Second Life*, in a literature class (Bump 2013, chp. 5, pp. 148–84; 2007). When social media first became popular, I welcomed it as a step up from the networked classroom that our graduate students created, my chosen space for literature discussions for the next fifteen years (Bump 1990b, 1996). However, as time went on, I was shocked to see the virtual hell that social media has become. A great service to society would be to analyze how social media conspiracy stories have totally captivated millions and challenged the mental health and direction of the United States.





Figure 2. (a) The Old. (b) The New.

In any case, for online journals, I propose the consideration of hypermedia essays, essays on stories in multimedia formats, and “virtually” any essay about the shift from the old to a new operating system of the humanities. In addition, I propose including illustrations and embedded video as needed in any essay.

### 3.4. Emotion and Literature Written by Minority Authors

In his critique of *The Death of Literature*, Peter Erickson argued that: “Contrary to Kernan’s position, literature is very much alive. But its life has shifted in large measure to emergent minority literatures . . . Kernan can neglect major new literary developments only by seeing them as noncanonical, inferior, incidental, . . . less prestigious writing”. (Erickson 1991). I propose including and evaluating more essays about minority writers as if they were canonical writers. To that end, I will add to this section a discussion of a supposedly minor work by a minority writer that is, I believe, not just in the “best writing” category, but in some ways as great as Shakespeare’s plays.

As we de-emphasize the word “writing” within the basic definition of literature, we highlight the one remaining word, “best”, as in “best words” or “best stories”. So, do we adopt Matthew Arnold’s famous definition of “culture”, as “the best that’s been thought and known”? (Arnold 1869). That would include the best writing in science, but is that inclusive enough?

Maybe “literature” should be redefined as “the best stories that have been thought, felt, and said”? Emotion is, to some extent, an accepted, if not a popular, topic in cultural studies.<sup>7</sup> However, too much emotion with too little rationality has been one of the criteria for the rejection of “minority” literature and ethical emotive literary criticism focusing on the feelings, moods, and emotional fields in readers as well as texts.<sup>8</sup> In the midst of the triumph of deconstruction theory in literature departments, Barbara Christian, a Professor of African-American Studies at Berkeley, protested that literary critics “have redefined literature so that the distinctions implied by that term, that is, the distinctions between everything written and those things written to evoke feeling as well as to express thought, have been blurred”. She was disappointed because “in literature I sensed the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional in which Western philosophy inevitably indulged”.<sup>9</sup>

That split can be traced, in the Greco-Roman tradition, at least as far back as Plato. Sometimes the primary reason the poet is banished from the “well-ordered State”, in Book Ten of *The Republic*, is that literature “awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason”.<sup>10</sup> It is significant that poetry is a “she”, as in, “Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled”. Plato reminds us that the oldest form of discrimination, older than race or class, is gender: “when any sorrow of our own happens to us, . . . we would fain be quiet and patient; this is the manly part, and the other . . . is now deemed to be the part of a woman”. Plato was particularly afraid of emotional contagion, such as women weeping in solidarity with others. (Ironically, in the 1700s, sympathy for others eventually becomes the most ethical emotion, the equivalent of selfless love). Plato is disappointed “when in misfortune [men] feel a natural hunger and desire to relieve our sorrow by weeping and lamentation”, but Plato is far more upset when “the better nature in each of us [men], not having been sufficiently trained by reason or habit, allows the sympathetic element to break loose because the sorrow is another’s”. Indeed, he seems to become hysterical [to use an etymologically female adjective] when they share other men’s sadness; when this happens, “from the evil of other men something of evil is communicated to themselves”. (The irony of Plato’s popularity with Christians devoted to loving their neighbor is palpable).

Plato’s pupil, Aristotle, rejects this hypermasculine, rationalist repression of emotion. In the *Poetics*, he explains the emotional value of literature for purging fear and grief. In the *Rhetoric*, he set out “to understand the emotions—that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited”.<sup>11</sup> Almost two thousand years later, Goleman followed a similar program in *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman 1995). Nevertheless, Plato was far more influential in this regard than Aristotle. Instead of Aristotle’s acceptance of the role of emotions and his concept of the Golden Mean between extremes, the “split” that Professor Christian identified widened and became a basic premise of science and technology, based on Descartes’ mutually exclusive dichotomies.

We can see Descartes’ influence in Davies’ recent lament for the death of modern science. Davies points to the loss “of the primacy of reason over feeling” as the cause of the decline of “contemporary notions of truth, scientific expertise, public administration, experimental evidence and progress”. (Davies 2018; cited by Chotiner 2019). Other commentators agree that we are now “awash with emotion”. (Blair 2018). However, the tragedy here is not the new respect for emotion, but the reluctance to admit that the old Cartesian rationality often fails, as it does in the mutually exclusive dichotomy in Davies’s sentence.

Fortunately, in the biological sciences, brain scans force researchers to replace the gross oversimplifications of mutually exclusive dichotomies with non-dualistic models that are more congruent with reality, such as Sapolsky’s account of the brain scans of the rational and emotional brain systems: we “no longer need to imagine them at war with each other. While they are somewhat separable, they’re rarely in opposition as tasks become more difficult . . . activity in the two structures becomes more synchronized”.<sup>12</sup> If Sapolsky is right, the “war” is over, and we can discard our military metaphors and declare peace before it is too late.

### 3.4.1. Ethical Emotive Literary Criticism

It is significant that Barbara Christian not only reminded us of Plato’s and Descartes’ “split between the rational and the emotional”, but she was also one of the first to champion Toni Morrison’s focus on feelings. We can dismiss Kernan’s obituary for literature by focusing on how alive literature is when conveying feeling as well as thoughts, a feature obvious in ethical emotive literary criticism. This critical approach may not illuminate the literature of relatively detached writers, critics, or theorists who seek a primarily cerebral response, but African American writers such as Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde make emotion the “foundation of knowledge and ideology”. (Crawford 2000, p. 8). Indeed, they assert that, as Lorde put it, “Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge”. (Hall 2004, p. 91).

Minority writers like these are particularly important because, like Christian, they challenge us to revise not only literary criticism and theory, but also higher education: we “are always on the brink of practicing a complacent version of multiculturalism, a version that may make room for different voices but does not allow those voices actually to shift the epistemological foundations of the university”. (Crawford 2000, p. 12). Certainly, the English and other language departments could be changed by embracing an ethical emotive literary criticism, especially one that connects research on feelings of “sympathy” to the sympathetic imagination: our ability to penetrate the barrier between us and another person and, by actually entering into the other, so to speak, securing a momentary but complete identification with her (Bate 1945; Bate [1946] 1961). This is essential for white readers; as Gayatri Spivak put it, “the holders of hegemonic discourse should . . . themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other”. (Spivak 1990, p. 121). Imagining what it is like to feel like “the other” is, of course, a prerequisite of ethical behavior.

### 3.4.2. Emotional Intelligence

Christian Keysers, currently the leading neurobiologist of literature, has demonstrated in the laboratory that the greatest power of literature is in the way it communicates an “intuitive feel for the inner lives of the people that surround us, including both their goals and emotions” (K 110). Hence, one of his basic research questions, “How [does] the brain make us feel so moved by a novel?” focuses on emotional, not intellectual response. In this regard, he followed in the footsteps of one of the early mirror neuron researchers, Rizzolatti, who stressed that this process works “by feeling, not by thinking”. (Rifkin 2009, p. 83).

About the time that Rizzolatti made that statement and Barbara Christian critiqued dualism in science and philosophy, Joseph Ledoux was researching the two sides of the brain. Ledoux is cited extensively in Goleman’s book, which expands Aristotle’s account of feelings to include (1) knowing one’s emotions, (2) managing emotions, (3) motivating oneself, (4) recognizing emotions in others, and (5) handling relationships. Goleman also showed how important emotional intelligence is for mental health, education, social competence, business success, intimate relationships, and physical health.

As Aristotle demonstrated, the first step is emotional literacy: knowing one’s feelings, recognizing them as they happen, and being able to communicate them to others. Recent examples include microaggressions. Sometimes the victims can only describe a vague feeling that they have been attacked or disrespected. Training in emotional literacy (Bump 2000) can help them name this feeling. Of course, even an accurate emotion name is merely an abstraction. It needs to be followed by an example or a context that explains more fully what was offensive.

Microaggressions show why the literature of emotion has become especially valuable now as we struggle to deal with the problems of race, gender, and class. To honor Professor Christian’s memory, I propose we welcome ethical emotive criticism. We can do this more easily now because of the growing academic research on emotions and the increasing recognition outside academe that emotional intelligence is essential to many fields, including teaching.

In the history of literature, a focus on the emotions in the text and in the reader is not new. Aristotle’s discussion of pity and fear in the viewer/reader of tragedy and Wordsworth’s defense of a poetry of feeling are two of the more famous examples. Wordsworth focused on the poet’s feelings, but added, “I have one request to make of my Reader, which is, that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings”. (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 1802). However, in the middle of the twentieth century, such discussion of the reader’s emotions was dismissed as the “Affective Fallacy”. In the 80s and 90s, a new reader-centered criticism emerged that began to focus on feelings. At first, attention was paid to subtle nuances of feeling in the reader’s response to style. Then, the importance of student emotions in college literature and composition classrooms was explored, and a few literary critics reminded us that knowledge is produced by readers’ identification with characters’ feelings (Berman 1994; Feagin 1996; Novitz 1987). This research was soon displaced by theories of deconstruction,

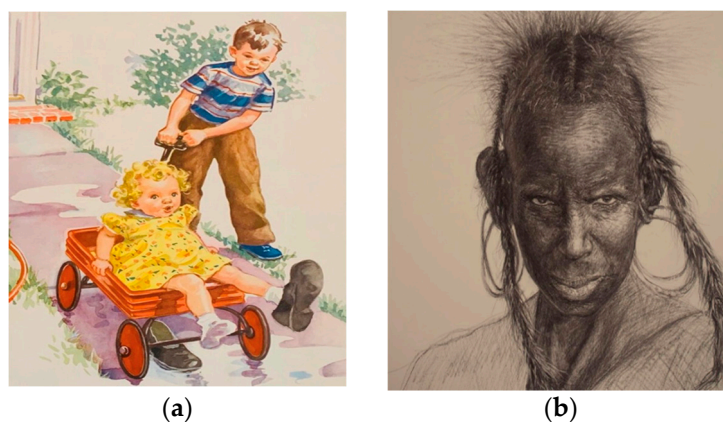
but a few feminists, reader-response critics, and composition theorists continued to stress that truth is emotional as well as intellectual.

Outside the academy, Daniel Goleman (1995), as we have seen, demonstrated the crucial role of emotional intelligence as we moved into the twenty-first century. Finally, in 2002, Michalinos Zembylas cited research on emotion “in virtually all of the disciplines, with philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, and anthropology taking the lead”. (Zembylas 2002). In 2003, “Getting Emotional” was the cover story in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Scott McLemee noted that: “The study of feelings, once the province of psychology, is now spreading to . . . literature, and other fields . . . producing a body of work that regularly crosses the line between the humanities and the social sciences”. (McLemee 2003). Early in the twenty-first century, the rising popularity of queer studies and of Raymond Williams’ focus on cultural “structures of feeling” support new research on emotions.<sup>13</sup>

Had your fill of academic citations? Perhaps it is time to climb down the ladder of abstraction and test some of our generalizations on a specific, unique story of the highest quality, the best that has been thought, felt, and said in its field. This is where literature really comes to life.

### 3.4.3. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

**Brief Synopsis:** This is the story of a little black girl called Pecola, whom everyone regards as ugly (Figure 3b). Her family is very dysfunctional, especially her father, Cholly, who sexually abuses and impregnates her. Pecola decides that if she had blue eyes like dolls and girls in the movies, everyone would love her. Instead, she remains the scapegoat of a community afflicted by internalized racism. Her baby dies and Pecola does eventually become truly insane, fantasizing about her blue eyes.



**Figure 3.** (a) Dick and Jane, (b) Black child.

The narrator of the story is a neighbor, a girl called Claudia, a little bit older and fortunate to have a fairly average family, although living on the edge of poverty. There is also an omniscient narrator for about half of the chapters, presumably more like the voice of the author.

This narrator inserts parts of the 1930s *Dick and Jane* stories about a seemingly perfect white family (see Figure 3a). *The Bluest Eye*, however, which was published in 1970, in as late as 2010–2019 was still on the list of the ten most-banned books in the United States (American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom 2020).

In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, everyone is invited to participate emotionally. An engaged reader, recalling related associations and emotional fields in their own life, may be given a vocabulary for them, and begin to extend their sympathetic imagination even to the Breedloves, one of the most dysfunctional families that one could imagine. Morrison said that writing “should try deliberately to make you . . . feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation . . . to expand on the sermon that is being delivered”. (Baillie 1985, p. 26). Morrison “wants to involve her



readers emotionally in her work. Her writing ‘demands participatory reading’; ‘The reader supplies the emotions. He or she can feel something visceral . . . Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience’” (Bouson 1999, p. 208, italics added).

Unfortunately, critics, whether oriented to literary criticism or cultural studies, rarely discuss emotional reader response. When I think of my own theory-based essay on this novel (Bump 2003), I recall Morrison’s critique of Geraldine, who steadfastly denied “the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions”.<sup>14</sup> Dawes observed that this funkiness “is understood to have been already lost by white people in a process that was either racial or cultural (perhaps this loss is what makes someone white)”. (Dawes 2004, p. 141).

Of course, this loss is not unique to English departments. For example, W. B. Stanford commented that, despite Aristotle’s focus on pity and fear, “many of the most able commentators on Greek tragedy in modern times have ignored its emotional elements almost entirely. You may search through their publications without finding more than cursory references to pity, fear, anger, grief, hate, scorn, or any of the other tragic emotions, and often there is no reference to them at all”. (Stanford 1983, p. 2).

There are exceptions, of course—some critics have remarked on the emotional impact of *The Bluest Eye* (Bouson 1999, p. 230)—and thus we can use this novel as a template for the practice of an ethical emotive criticism that connects feeling to thought, in this case to psychological models of racism, stigmatism, judging by appearance, and hierarchies of emotions. However, at this point in the life of criticism, our greatest need is to ask: what exactly are the characters and readers feeling? That question is answered so well that this novel could be a primer for emotional literacy.

In the novel, as in life, the first step is to recover our experiential knowledge of feelings. All of us were once the age of Claudia, the narrator and protoreader, when she listens to adult conversations: “the edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to [my sister] Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all the words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre” (BE 15). Eventually, their gaze shifts to their suffering neighbor, Pecola, and they discover truth in tragedy.

Rebecca Degler has shown that *The Bluest Eye* is modeled on classical Attic tragedies in which “an ugly or deformed person was chosen to take upon himself all the evils which afflicted the community”, who was then sexually abused and killed (Degler 2006). The viewer of such a tragedy apparently felt what Aristotle calls *eleos*, often translated as “pity”, but Stanford argues that it should be translated as “compassionate grief”.<sup>15</sup> Morrison did not want Pecola to be pitied, with her passivity inspiring the contempt that some readers still feel (Bouson 1999, p. 226; Otten 1989, p. 24). “Compassionate grief” is a more accurate description of the final response of many readers to this novel.

However, it is not a common emotion of the characters in the novel itself. Shame is far more pervasive. Guilt is based on the awareness that “I made a mistake”, but negative shame is the fear that “I am a mistake” (as distinguished from the positive shame of maintaining sexual boundaries between parent and child). Guilt can be purged: a person can correct and make up for a mistake. But shame is a deeper emotion: if a person is convinced that he or she is a mistake, they often believe that they should not have been born and that nothing can be done about it. This is the kind of shame that pervades Pecola’s family.

The dominant secondary emotion in the novel is anger, secondary in the sense that beneath it, driving it, is fear or shame. Lorde, who was apparently the first writer to offer a Black feminist theory of anger, famously argued in her essay, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (Lorde 1981), that activists must hold on to anger, no matter what. For Britney Cooper, it became “the essay that I always [kept] close at hand”, as she wrote *Eloquent Rage* (Cooper 1981), published at almost the same time as Chemaly’s *Rage Becomes Her* (Chemaly 1981). However, Morrison, no doubt aware that the dynamics of fear and

love suggest that rage will not be enough, shows how anger often misses the mark. Claudia recalled that:

I destroyed white baby dolls. But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so . . . If I pinched them, their eyes—unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll’s eyes—would fold in . . . a fascinating cry of pain. When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. (BE 22–23) (see Figure 4)

When Cholly, the father, was shamed when discovered with a girl by hunters, “never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men” (BE 150–51). Instead, when he grew up, Cholly turned his fury on “petty things and weak people” (BE 38), especially Pecola and other members of his own family. As these examples suggest, anger is not enough to fight racism, not only because it often misses the target, but also because it is a secondary emotion, driven by shame and/or fear, basic emotions that must be dealt with first.



**Figure 4.** White baby dolls.

Shame is sometimes identified as the basic emotion in this novel (if not in the reader). When Pecola tries to buy some candy, for instance, she looks up at the shopkeeper and sees the glazed separateness. When she gets outside:

Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb . . . she trips on the sidewalk crack. Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame. Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging. Her thoughts fall back to Mr. Yacobowski’s eyes, his phlegmy voice. The anger will not hold; the puppy is too easily surfeited. Its thirst too quickly quenched, it sleeps. The shame wells up again, its muddy rivulets seeping into her eyes. (BE 48–50)

Just as militancy is an alternative to madness, anger is better than this shame, but it is too easily left on the sidewalk.

The other candidate for the primary emotion is fear. According to Aristotle, viewers identify with the fear in Greek tragedy because it is the misfortune of “someone just like ourselves”.<sup>16</sup> For example, ultimately, most readers can relate to some kind of fear of abandonment, beginning perhaps with adolescent fears of rejection, maybe ending up with that fear of being abandoned by God, the “transcendental homelessness” that characterizes modern fiction, according to both Marxists and postmodernists (Lukacs [1920] 1971, p. 41; Miller 1963). From this perspective, family novels of the last two centuries revise Freud’s traditional “Family Romances” (1908) to focus on the reader as well as the protagonist as the “orphan” driven by fear of abandonment to seek a more functional family (Freud [1908] 1959).

Ultimately, feeling compassionate grief for Pecola, acknowledging her pain, may be taking the first step toward breaking out of the habits of racism and judging by appearances. However, to “suffer with” Pecola, or anyone else, one must have a capacity for, and willingness to extend, the “sympathetic imagination”. Defective sympathetic imaginations are not confined to recognized sociopaths. Mr. Jacobowski, for example, “does not see [Pecola] because for him there is nothing to see” (BE 48). Worse, “her teachers always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her” (BE 45). Unfortunately, as Adams and Cohen have identified, this is the way most teachers still respond to ugliness (Adams and Cohen 1974).

Thus, the primary ethical questions become, how can we help ourselves and the Jacobowskis around us to see people like Pecola? How can we then imagine what it is like to be Pecola, to “suffer with” her, that is, to feel “compassion” for the scapegoats in our community? People in her own community make such comments as “‘Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.’ ‘Can’t help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground’” (BE 189–90).

Unfortunately, this experience of racism and judging by appearances outside of the family is also strongly reinforced by fear of abandonment within it. As Bouson puts it, Pecola “is a victim not only of racial shaming but also of her ‘crippled and crippling family’”. If the ultimate ‘Enemy’ that shames and traumatizes African Americans is the racist white society, there are also more immediate and intimate enemies within the African-American community and family”. (Bouson 1999, p. 217; cf. Guerrero 1997, p. 29). Yet psychiatric research has shown that the average Black family is healthier than the average white family. In fact, it can be argued that the modern definition of a functional family is moving in the direction already taken by the Black family: toward a structure of relations transcending blood kin that can include gays and lesbians (Bump 2003, pp. 151–56). However, as Morrison pointed out, Pecola’s family was “unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator’s” (BE 21). The Breedloves had reached the end of the line. No one could have convinced them that they were not ugly. The only solution was to let the family die out. In this tragedy, there would be no *deus ex machina* to intervene to save even one of them.

Thus, like Ralph Ellison (1981, *Invisible Man*), Morrison makes visible the invisible, not just discrimination but also fear of ugliness. Morrison lowers the veil drawn over sights and events too terrible to admit into consciousness. The revelation is critical for any person who belongs to any marginalized category for, “historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic”. (Carrasco 2014).<sup>17</sup>

Fear of ugliness enables more readers to identify with this basic situation of racism. Teachers can follow Morrison’s lead in almost any literature classroom. For example, the physical and tribal stigmas of appearance are also leitmotifs in canonical British as well as American literature. In my Victorian novel course, for example, just as Pecola feels inferior to Maureen Peale, Maggie seems ugly beside Lucy in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, and Jane knows she is not beautiful compared to the blond Georgiana in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Jane is fully aware that because she is considered not pretty or handsome, her stepmother “could not love” her (Brontë [1848] 1971, p. 13).

To document what readers are feeling in response to passages such as this, I have been citing the publications of critics but other sources are available, such as student journals. For example, one of the servants states explicitly that if Jane “were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad” (J 21). One of my students wrote that Jane “felt a great deal of physical inadequacy that was easy for me to relate to”; another was prompted to write about why “no one asked me out in high school”. (Bump 1993, pp. 132, 134). Heathcliff, in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, activates similar feelings. Comparing himself to Edgar Linton, he says, “I wish I had light hair and fair skin”.<sup>18</sup> When Mr. Earnshaw introduces him into the household, he says, “you must e’en take it as a gift of God, though it’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil” (W 39). In addition to his tribal stigma, a physical stigma, his facial expression, prompts instinctive hatred. A servant says that Heathcliff “looks an out-and-outer! . . . the villain

scowls so plainly in his face, would it not be a kindness to the country to hang him at once, before he shows his nature in acts, as well as features?" (W 48–49).

*The Bluest Eye* conveys the fears, shames, and angers of a child who receives such messages as well as, or better than, *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, but does it succeed in Morrison's terms? Are readers "moved" as well as "touched"? Ruby Dee said, "To read the book . . . is to ache for remedy". (Dee 1971; McKay 1988; McKay and Earle 1997). For some readers, one anodyne, if not cure, is the narration itself. Poetic prose like Morrison's can make pain manageable. Her writing can be to us what her mother's songs were to Claudia: "If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad . . . Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (BE 25–26). Is this the kind of "play with language" that Christian identified as the equivalent of theorizing by "people of color"? (Christian 1987, p. 52). Where a theoretician might talk about bibliotherapy or discuss how language becomes a means of catharsis, Morrison demonstrates how literature heals. Claudia, the protoreader, is able to keep her sanity, partly because as an emotionally literate, adult, third-person narrator, she tells the story of their childhood by simultaneously identifying with and separating from the dilemmas they faced. Becoming the narrator of her own life, master of the therapeutic "play of language", Claudia escapes Pecola's fate.

Yet the novel also succeeds because the representation of Pecola enables us to feel compassionate grief, a far more profound response than the distancing feeling of contempt associated with the modern sense of "pity". Admittedly, it is often remarked that Pecola has no voice in the story. Most readers believe that the two voices at the end are hers, but the voices are trapped within her psyche, apparently and, thus, it is assumed that she does not speak to another person. But she does communicate to the reader, who is allowed to hear her stream of consciousness, and thus her own "play of language". Indeed, Pecola's final mono/dialogue is one of the most startling examples of the power of literature to engage and stretch the reader's sympathetic imagination. The reader of *The Bluest Eye* is made to experience the internal reality of someone who at this point would probably be labeled "schizophrenic". To enable the reader to feel the suffering of such a victim of racism and fear of ugliness, to feel all this from inside the mind of the scapegoat, is a significant ethical accomplishment, one that might well effect a change in the reader's sensitivity to others.

Moreover, we do not merely identify with Pecola: the narrative technique implicates us in what happened to her. The novel succeeds because we identify not only with Pecola but also with Claudia when she says, "All of our waste . . . we dumped on her and . . . she absorbed" (BE 205). Many of us know that at some time in our lives we too have made scapegoats of those who did not meet "our" standards of the "beautiful". Because Morrison makes the issue not only of racism but also our perception of ugliness in general, we know that the problem of the "ugly little girl asking for beauty" (BE 174) is also our problem. Every time we look in the mirror and see that we are not as beautiful as a movie star, not as beautiful as the television, magazine, and billboard ads tell us we should be, we feel the fear of rejection and abandonment, and know that we have experienced a little of the emotional pain of Pecola. Suffering with her, knowing that pain consciously, feeling it, acknowledging it openly and directly, most of us will be less likely to inflict it upon others, and more likely to take action against those who do.

As the presence of the *Dick and Jane* primer in the novel indicates, education, in particular, is being interrogated. By focusing on feelings, Christian, Morrison, hooks, Lorde, and many other authors challenge not just the way multiculturalism is taught today, but, ultimately, the fear of emotion throughout education, especially in the churches of reason, the research universities. By acknowledging the fears in this novel and in ourselves, ethical emotive criticism can help us overcome these institutional fears of feelings and, more importantly, carry the battle against racism to a wider audience.



#### 3.4.4. "Where Is the Love?"

One of the basic plots explored by ethical emotive criticism is love displacing fear and vice versa. Is there no love to answer all these fears in this novel? For me, that question is best answered by the song "Where is the love?" by the Black-eyed Peas.<sup>19</sup> There is love somewhere in the world, but the English word "love" is useless here. It usually means little more than lust or "romance". Trying to use this one word for selfless love all too often inspires mockery, as it did when Marianne Williamson challenged Trump in the first Democratic debate in 2020,<sup>20</sup> and as it did at the University of Southern California when, "inspired by the suicide of his student, Prof. Leo Buscaglia wanted to teach a non-credit course on love", but "began receiving odd looks from some colleagues: 'One professor, in discussing my plans over lunch in the Faculty Center, called love—and anyone who purported to teach it—irrelevant; Others asked mockingly and with a wild leer, 'If the class had a lab requirement and was I going to be the primary investigator'". (Buscaglia 1972, p. 11). I can identify with Professor Buscaglia: I heard a similar leer in the voice of an administrator, who then proceeded to take my course featuring selfless love and other emotions out of the registration process as students were signing up for it. In my mind, he was no different from my honors freshmen who, seeing a new, attractive person enter class, would exclaim, silently or aloud, "I am in love!" What they meant, of course, was, "I am in lust!" (The preposition "in" distinguishes "I am in love" from the active verb, "I love", as if the subject and the object were falling "into" a vat of double egoism). As Morrison put it in *The Bluest Eye*, "romantic love and physical beauty" are "probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (BE 122–26).

Equally profound and provocative is the statement, "Where there is no terminology there is no consciousness. A poverty-stricken vocabulary for any subject is an immediate admission that it is inferior or depreciated in that society. Sanskrit has ninety-six words for love; ancient Persian has eighty; Greek has three; English only one". (Johnson 1993, p. 6).<sup>21</sup> In other words, English, the first, the strongest world language of business, science, technology, and multimedia, may be the weakest in the world for the expression of our most important emotion. Demonstrating how this works in detail in the context of a realistic novel, ethical emotive criticism can make some of the supercilious, smug "English-speakers" more conscious of possible similarities between themselves and all those literary and biblical characters whose vanity set them up for a fall. This new self-knowledge may then encourage more respect for, and interest in, other cultures.

Betrayed by our own language, we can resort to a hyphenated word that evolved from translations of the Bible, "loving-kindness", or we can use a word from a foreign language, such as *agape*, but that word has too many tangential meanings. In English, "compassion" may be a better word, but its root meaning, "to suffer with", is too limiting, as is "compassionate grief". Hinduism and Buddhism<sup>22</sup> are the best sources of terms in this context, but we would have to leave the English language and culture far behind.

#### 3.4.5. The Greatest Value of Literature: The Sympathetic Imagination

The greatest value of literature, in my opinion, is the way it facilitates experiences of, and training in, "the sympathetic imagination", the best words in English for the basic connection between all living beings. In the West, about three hundred years ago, the traditions of loving-kindness, *caritas*, and *pathos* contributed to a related complex of ethical feelings identified first as pity, then sympathy, then the sympathetic imagination, and finally empathy. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, almost as popular as "love" was the word "sympathy": the state of being affected by the condition of another through a similar or "fellow" feeling. This emotion, combined with a mental action, became "the sympathetic imagination", a central concept in accounts of the power of literature. W.J. Bate, for example, famously argued that the sympathetic imagination in literature and morality are so psychologically dependent on each other that they augment each other's

growth and delicacy, and the decline in one necessarily precipitates a decline in the other (Bate 1945).

In the twentieth century, this emotion was called “empathy”, as in Jeremy Rifkin’s blockbuster, *The Empathic Civilization*. Twentieth-century philosophers tried to restore more rationality to the concept, arguing that it is an intellectual-emotional practice that can be learned, a philosophical tradition now associated with modern philosophers of “quasicognitive”, “enlightened” sympathy such as Fisher (1987). Some have argued that Derrida has problematized this concept by stressing the difficulty, or aporia, of the sympathetic imagination. However, Derrida makes important contributions to this tradition when he describes the sympathetic imagination as arational, paradoxical, even paralinguistic: a syncopated beat of “continuity and interruption”, an “extreme paradox” at the limit of “distance and contact”, a “sharing out without fusion”, a “being-with without confusion”. (Derrida 2000, pp. 199, 195). In any case, no matter how brief or incomplete the identification, the effort to connect via the imagination and the emotions remains an indispensable ethical exercise.

Morrison is a master of this relationship. Emotions electrify the interactions between the characters and Claudia, between the characters and the omniscient narrator, and between the characters and the reader. Claudia, the voice of the four chapters named for seasons and the beginning and end of the novel, is our prototype of the sympathetic imagination within the novel, moving from anger at Pecola, to “sympathy” and/or “compassionate grief”, and finally to guilt for what she herself has done to her. The omniscient narrator of the other chapters extends a god-like authorial sympathetic imagination to all the characters.

One of Morrison’s greatest achievements is that she can extend her sympathetic imagination to a character as dysfunctional as Cholly, as well as to one as functional as Claudia. If a reader were asked before reading the novel if she could imagine what it is like to embody toxic masculinity, feeling the emotions of a man who could rape his own daughter, the answer would most likely be “no”. Yet Morrison takes as much time to “realize” Cholly as fully as she does the other characters. Morrison can do this because she has what Keats called “negative capability”: the character of the writer “is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing . . . It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. . . . [s]he is continually . . . filling some other Body”.<sup>23</sup>

It is true that, at times, Morrison’s story seems as fractured as the characters. Yet the author’s sympathetic imagination is always present, creating a unitive awareness of a whole community that includes the reader. Morrison, like George Eliot, plunging into “the mysterious complexity of our life”, is inspired by “the growing insight and sympathy of a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human” (*The Mill on the Floss* VII.III). Morrison’s Cholly becomes a good example of the Roman playwright Terence’s motto, “*Humani nihil a me alienum puto*” (nothing human is alien to me). In this regard, Morrison rivals Shakespeare himself.

This thought helped me to answer a question that puzzled me for some time. When I moved from U. C. Berkeley to the University of Texas, I was surprised to discover that the original, primary focus of the university, according to the state constitution, was to become “a university of the first class . . . for the promotion of literature”, to which was added, as if it was an afterthought, “and the arts and sciences”. Why, in 1876, I wondered, did they make the first, hence apparently the primary, purpose of the University of Texas “the promotion of literature”?

I discovered that most of the framers of the constitution were members of The Grange, the Patrons of Husbandry, who crusaded for better education. These farmers gathered in bimonthly Grange hall meetings where they shared libraries, sang songs, and read essays. What did the word “literature” mean to them? “Book learning” and “instruction in reading and writing” were taken for granted, but it had also come to mean “a body of literary works”, especially “‘works of fiction considered collectively’” (*O.E.D.*).

Works of fiction in 1876 were associated with the traditional “moral aesthetic” of Western literature that can be traced at least as far back as the Greek tragedies (sixth century

BCE). By the eighteenth century, Scottish philosophers identified the representation of the sympathetic imagination in mimetic or “realistic” literature as the basis of all morality. If the unethical person’s problem is an inability to imagine what it is like to be the Other, literature becomes crucial. Passages in Shakespeare’s plays were obvious bibliotherapy to those lacking this ability, but in the nineteenth century, Browning’s dramatic monologues of the thought processes of murderers became at least as famous.

During Browning’s time, the emphasis on loving your neighbor became stronger and more explicit. At the time of the composition of the Texas constitution of 1876, the Victorian fictional hero was expected to grow by painful stages to overcome isolating self-consciousness and, eventually, feel sympathy with others. This is the path of several characters in, for example, George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, a novel no doubt familiar to some of the framers of the Texas constitution. It was praised at the time for its morality and its ability to activate sympathy. Eliot was commended for her belief that:

the greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. (Eliot 1992, p. 263)

The result is “a picture of human life such as a great artist can give”. Kernan might call this “humanism”, but John Henry Newman explained how and why it works: “The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us”. (Newman 1874, p. 93). Hence, as the framers of the Texas constitution could testify, a novel about a few individuals can elicit more of a genuine reaction than endless summaries of statistics about millions of beings.

#### 4. “Help People Live Their Lives”?

Wallace Stevens spoke for many when he said that the poet’s role is simply “to help people live their lives”. (Stevens 1951, p. 29). Many others have stressed specific benefits to the individual, from providing words for subtle feelings and moods to suggesting other ways of living. This may well be the original “benefit” of literature. About 1300 BCE, during the reign of the pharaoh Ramses II, the words “house of healing for the soul” were inscribed above the entrance of the first library (Lutz 1978).

The most famous example of healing by bibliotherapy in English history is that of John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), who was brought up from early childhood to be a logic-chopping machine. Eventually, in 1826, he found that he had become “anesthetized”, like Darwin seemed to be later (Fleming 1961). Mill eventually admitted that “what I had always before received with incredulity—that the habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings—was in fact the case”. He fell into a long, deep depression from which he might have never recovered without what we now call poetry therapy. With “nothing left to live for”, he found words for his condition in Coleridge’s “Dejection”:

A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,  
A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief,  
Which finds no natural outlet or relief  
In word, or sigh, or tear.

Finally, in the poetry of Wordsworth, he found the “culture of the feelings” that he needed, and he “gradually, but completely, emerged from [his] habitual depression, and was never again subject to it”. (Mill 2003).

In 1920, medical research began documenting how individual lives have been saved by literature, usually through affective bibliotherapy, poetry therapy, therapeutic storytelling, or writing therapy. Aristotle’s emotional literacy in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* led the way,

and the basic model remained that of his emotional theory of tragedy: empathizing or identifying with the central character, followed by catharsis, then insight.

Often when literature benefits the individual in this way, the individual contributes to the improvement of society. Indeed, many novelists who wanted to reform society believed that one could only teach compassion one reader at a time. Yet this model also inspired the model of group reading and responding that became popular in teacher education in the 1930s, 50s, and 60s. Discussions inspired by bibliotherapy were particularly effective for shy students: never forced to talk about themselves, they still benefitted from any “literacy activity, including reading (fiction, nonfiction, or poetry)”, song lyrics, “creative writing, or storytelling that “facilitated personal growth, healing, and greater self-awareness”. (Ouzts and Mastrion 1999). “Classroom story time was often followed by a ‘guided discussion’ that also helped the students practice empathy as they become aware of problems of other children”. (Berns 2004).

As a result of such practices, in the 1960s, the Ford Foundation sponsored several efforts to renew “education for the ‘whole’ person” (Brand 1980, pp. 9–40; both the rational and emotional brain systems). Around the same time, researchers focused on readers’ thoughts when reading, alone or in interpretive communities (See Bump 1989, 1990a). Unfortunately, they rarely discussed emotional responses, though they could be crucial, as when Thomas Merton’s reading of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins led to his conversion.

## 5. Unity

### 5.1. *The Paradox of Unity and Diversity?*

Literature not only teaches us how to anchor ideas in reality but also how to bring together in our minds those ideas that seem to be totally opposed. We do not just connect but also enjoy both opposites at once as we experience paradox, the simultaneity of, say, the One and the Many. If we do this often enough, we can begin to feel the presence of our planet as a whole, our own blue marble spinning through space, effortlessly generating the Many who are inconceivable without the One.

Inspired by a similar vision, the brain-scan researcher, Christian Keysers, focused on the novel in his research on the impact of reading on the brain, presumably because the novel is, as Richard Powers put it, the “supreme connection machine—the most complex artifact of networking that we’ve ever developed”. (Williams 1999). However, literature can convey holistic visions in all kinds of genres. Gerard Manley Hopkins did so in eleven lines of poetry, evoking the religious feelings generated by extraordinary diversity arising from and returning to divine unity:

#### Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;  
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.

This poem is a good illustration of what Goleman calls “the emotional mind’s special symbolic modes: metaphor and simile, [which] along with poetry, song, and fable, are all cast in the language of the heart. So too are dreams and myths, in which loose associations determine the flow of narrative, abiding by the logic of the emotional mind”. (Goleman 1995, p. 54). Abiding by that “logic”, these literary devices, along with paradoxes, challenge the mutually exclusive dualisms that block unitive consciousness.



Now, the new paradigm in science acknowledges this way of knowing. In physics, matter and energy were considered to be very separate and distinct entities, but in the twentieth century, we realized that they are so closely connected, they can be converted into each other. At first, there was just the mysterious equation,  $E = MC^2$ , but it soon became clear that a new scientific paradigm was emerging. Eventually, high school students like myself were memorizing the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and doing experiments proving that light consisted of particles and/or waves.

Literature, however, has demonstrated this mode of knowledge for millennia. Comparisons, analogies, similes, metaphors, symbols, and paradoxes demonstrate a different mathematics where, ultimately, any number can be one: sometimes  $2 = 1$ ,  $3 = 1$ , etc. In “Pied Beauty”, this keynote of “1 is 2 or more” begins, simplistically, with 1 item (landscape) which is at the same time 3: in one place, a sheep fold, in another, fallow land, and another, ploughed land. Then there is 1 fish and yet 2: at one time this and at one time that: as in one trout that swims at times swiftly, at times slowly. And, of course, seemingly simple similes are made, as in “skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow”. Here, the “as” in the simile is a gentle reminder, if we need it, that they are not literally the same thing.

But a primary power of the poem is metaphor, where the two are simply merged into one, leaving it up to the reader to discern that this is a metaphor, not to be taken literally, as in “rose-moles all in stipple upon trout”. We can see in our mind’s eye such a pattern but, of course, we know that roses do not grow on trout—and yet, here they seem to do so. Obviously, chestnuts and finches’ wings are not literally on fire, and yet they are full of that vital energy so often compared to fire by mystics, physicists, poets, and painters, especially Van Gogh. For Hopkins, all of nature is a “Heraclitean fire”.

Yet God is often “represented as if ‘s/he’ were a person like us, as in, He ‘fathers . . . praise him’”. Ultimately, the word “God” means the supreme mystery—“who knows how?”—that can never be reduced to an anthropomorphic comparison. When we move beyond such vain images, becoming flexible, open to multiple possibilities, the old simplistic splits in our unitive awareness, such as man vs. nature, or God vs. nature, are seen for what they are: gross oversimplifications.

This poem reveals many layers of meanings, like a literary symbol, although less obviously than, say, the rivers of Oneness in Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and Rudolpho Anaya’s *Bendiceme Me Ultima*. In this poem, the word-music activates our unifying consciousness, the paradoxical simultaneity of unity and diversity, as the two language families flow together, crossing back and forth, the Germanic and the Latinate, with their respective word music traditions, alliteration, and rhyme, both ringing out one divine harmony. God is the abstraction that points to the eternal, unchanging ground of being, the ultimate oneness, out of which springs all the constantly changing, infinitely varied, unique individuals, each of which houses within it the same God. To emphasize how much Hopkins treasured unique individuals, despite being a priest of the One, I will take the liberty of including the octet of a poem of his, written the same year and closely related to “Pied Beauty”:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

## 5.2. Unity Consciousness, the Total Context?

Despite our desire to be different, perhaps unique, the search for oneness, integration, and coherence guides the teaching of reading and writing and many famous literary works. Attempts to teach connections between literature and the unity and coherence of the network or ecosystem of the new paradigm in science often begin in college courses

that teach writing using literature as examples, and in courses on literature with students assigned to write about it.

The students are often assigned to write “compositions”, that is, to organize words into “literary form”, putting together or combining things “artistically as parts or elements of a whole” (*O.E.D.*). Students eventually notice that the highest grades appear on the most integrated student compositions, that is, those that are particularly well organized: those with a clear progression or plot, with the changes, twists, and turns clearly marked by transitions. Eventually, they learn that these connections build coherence, cohesion and that most elusive of features: the “flow” that makes the literary examples a pleasure to read. It is no accident that unity and harmony were the first subjects of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, or that “Hammer your thoughts into unity” was the motto of a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, William Butler Yeats.

Yeats was but one of many artists who made unitive consciousness their subject as well as their form. The list includes Heraclitus, Hildegard of Bingen, Eckhart, Goethe, Rumi, Pascal, Wordsworth, Thoreau, Whitman, Yeats, Gibran, Sun Bear and Wabun, Black Elk, Hesse, Chardin, Aurobindo, Besant, Angelou, Anaya, Tolle, and Merton. The study of relevant works in this list can help scientists and others develop a more advanced, more intuitive sense for, and appreciation of, planetary as well as local unity awareness.

Both were reinforced when Keyzers published his “shared circuitry” neuron research in 2011. He carried the new network paradigm over to brain-scan research, demonstrating that even among humans, the networked collective is the primary reality, not the individual. “Through shared circuits, the people around us, . . . permeate into many areas of our brain that were formerly the safe harbors of our identity: our motor system and our feelings, creating the fabric of an organic system that goes beyond the individual” (K 118). Brain scan researchers coined the term “shared circuits” for both mirror and feeling neurons because our brains “simply and spontaneously link the actions and emotions together, without requiring the intervention of conscious effort” (K 118).

When we replace in this way the old paradigm of a war of opposites and simplistic cause and effect with the new one, “the big picture”, in literature or science, we become more aware of the networked interdependencies of the surrounding context. In the new relational rationality of the biological sciences, for example, we learn to “ask not what a gene does. Ask what it does in a particular environment and when expressed in a particular network of other genes (i.e., gene/gene/gene/gene . . . /environment) . . . Instead of causes, biology is repeatedly about propensities, potentials, vulnerabilities, predispositions, proclivities, interactions, modulations, contingencies, if/then clauses, context dependencies, exacerbation or diminution of preexisting tendencies, circles and loops and spirals and Möbius strips”. (S 386).

What does this have to do with literature and language? As the twenty volumes and almost three hundred thousand entries of the *Oxford English Dictionary* demonstrate (along with the hundreds of thousands of works of literature and literary criticism), no one studied “dependency on the surrounding context” for longer or more fully than English and other language programs.

## 6. Both Science and Literature?

Given the shifting of college funds away from literature and the humanities to STEM departments and programs, interdisciplinary essays relating science and literature are particularly important, especially those that can demonstrate a both/and rather than an either/or relationship between science and literature.

### 6.1. Nondualism

Perhaps the best way to restore literature to its previous status on campus is to demonstrate how it can help us to make the changes we must make in our cultural DNA to survive. Mutually exclusive dichotomies have served us well to this day, most obviously in law, mathematics, philosophy, computer science, and electrical engineering, but when applied

to other aspects of our civilization, simplistic binaries may well doom us to extinction. The tragic flaw in our cultural DNA is the little abbreviation “vs”. as it is used in “reason vs. emotion”, “us vs. them”, “man vs. nature”, and other dichotomies. “Versus” now means basically “at war with”. It is not merely a military “metaphor”: it is literally true that the use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons of mass destruction in real wars of “Us vs. Them” could destroy civilization as we know it. If our species is not terminated in this way, we will most likely face extinction because of the “man vs. nature” dichotomy that is the source of our zoonotic pandemics and our climate crises.

What can literature do for us in this situation? Literature can help train and inspire scientists, their spokespersons, and the general public in a revolutionary change from either/or to both/and thinking and feeling. It is almost as if the theory of general relativity, quantum mechanics, and other features of the new scientific paradigm are belated acknowledgments of the fundamental shift from dualist to nondualist thinking and feeling that some literary and religious traditions have been demonstrating for millennia.

For centuries, many literary works have shown us how to avoid the trap of dualistic language and see everything between the opposite poles. We recognized the dependency of each pole on the other, and the possibility of the simultaneous presence of both in a larger whole that contains each opposite. As we make the shift from myopic to planetary vision, throughout nature we will perceive many more biological processes of collaboration and synthesis operating inside larger webs of life, which are inside still larger ones.

In science, we congratulate ourselves for shifting from the old paradigm to the new, from Descartes’ absolute certainty to contingent approximation, from the pretense of complete detachment and objectivity to Heisenberg’s confession of our humanity, from what has often become a myopic, reductionist focus on small parts to an initial vision of the whole network or ecosystem. Some scientists now see what the Buddha saw twenty-five hundred years ago: ultimately, no parts, only patterns in an inseparable web of relationships. We used to imagine knowledge as a building with a foundation of laws and principles. Building blocks supported the upper stories, where the chosen few could see the whole, but now we all can start with the changing web of relationships and move down to our specialty, always keeping in mind its connections to the dynamic network that is our home.

But is that network fully connected? Have we really escaped the prison house of dualist language and thought? Although, ultimately, they are all aspects of the same world, does not classical mechanics remain almost completely separated from quantum mechanics, Newtonian gravity from general relativity? These separations now seem inevitable, but will they always seem that way? Does not  $E = MC^2$  suggest a deep transformation from one opposite to another, suggesting that they were never totally separate, but always somehow connected? If light is both waves and particles, what other paradoxes wait to be discovered in the universe? We can study the power of paradox and metaphor more easily in many great literary works that can train us to lower the walls of dualistic language and thought.

A literary metaphor can be as powerful as a model in science. Command of metaphor can help scientists see the limits of the world-pictures and models of their predecessors, be more at ease with the ambiguity that the new paradigm allows, and stretch their imaginations in many ways. For example, Max Black demonstrated that metaphorical models are in fact indispensable tools for the generation of creative hypotheses and effective explanations in science. He has shown that the “use of a ‘subsidiary subject’ to foster insight into a ‘principal subject’ through metaphor “is a distinctive intellectual operation . . . demanding simultaneous awareness of both subjects but not reducible to any comparison between the two”.<sup>24</sup> In science, as in literature, it is obvious that metaphors help us make new connections and see things in a new way:

the extended meanings that result, the relations between initially disparate realms created, can neither be antecedently predicted nor subsequently paraphrased in prose . . . Metaphorical thought is a distinctive mode of achieving insight, not to be construed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought. The scientist can move rapidly from the as if of analogy to the as being of metaphor, making

increasingly ontological commitments to a theoretical model, which began as a sustained and systematic metaphor. (MB 236–37)

Literary metaphor and paradox can, in this way, support and inspire more comprehensive, unifying theoretical models in science.

#### 6.2. *Discovering the Neurobiology of the Sympathetic Imagination*

Extending this interdisciplinarity further, a new frontier for literature might be the laboratory of a neurobiology researcher. Science and story are already working together, suggesting the possibility of joint research projects of the future. Many readers are familiar with the famous 1990s MRI experiment on a macaque monkey. When a human happened by and ate some of his peanuts, the same part of the brain lit up as if the monkey himself ate the peanuts. This was identified as some kind of premotor simulation.

Researchers soon found that not only motion, but emotion lit up the brain of the observer. In the words of the researchers, the insula can mirror the “visceral emotions of other individuals”.<sup>25</sup> The premotor simulation and the emotional connection together contribute to “a comprehensive intuitive feel for the inner lives of the people that surround us, including both their goals and emotions” (K 110). Thus, Rizzolatti, the original researcher at the University of Parma, was validated in his assertion that “mirror neurons allow us to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but through direct simulation. By feeling, not by thinking”. (Rifkin 2009, p. 83). Needless to say, this was a tremendous breakthrough: they had discovered the neurobiology of empathy, the force that holds our civilization together.

Rifkin’s blockbuster *Empathic Civilization* (Rifkin 2009) summarized these and subsequent breakthroughs related to touch, smell, and pain, as well as the early experiments at Christian Keysers’s Social Mind Lab that demonstrated the need for the new terms “shared circuits” and “resonance circuitry” to describe the whole family of mirror neural systems in different regions of the brain (K 105–6).

Eventually, researchers took up the question of “the power of words”. As literature is often virtual calisthenics of empathy, they turned to Keysers’ research question, “How [does] the brain make us feel so moved by a novel?” Previous researchers had discovered that experiencing the emotions of others was weaker when they saw videos instead of actual faces. Hence, they assumed that reading about emotions would activate even weaker responses than seeing actual facial expressions of them. The Social Mind Lab researchers conceded that “compared to seeing what other people do and feel, which animals have done for millions of years, writing is a new invention, no more than ten thousand years old”. However, they still “wanted to know whether written stories could somehow plug into the same brain region as the sight of other people’s emotions. “We measured brain activity in the same people that had seen and felt disgust and pleasure in our previous experiment, but this time we gave them little written scenarios to read”. The first story was relatively abstract and designed to be “emotionally neutral”. The second revealed more detail and emotional literacy. One could say that it illustrated John Henry Newman’s thesis that “the concrete exerts a force and makes an impression on the mind which nothing abstract can rival, doing so not through the reason, but through the imagination”. (Newman 1874, p. 36).

The Social Mind lab “directly measured activity in the part of the insula that we had previously found to be active both while people viewed the disgusted facial expressions of others and while they experienced bad tastes themselves. To our amazement, the same region became strongly activated while people read such a disgusting scenario, much more [stimulated] than when they read an emotionally neutral story” (K 108). The Social Mind Lab researchers were amazed to discover that “written stories can plug into the same brain region as the sight of other people’s emotions”: the insula can, in a spontaneous, unconscious effort, combine “our actual feelings “with those of others . . . we read about and imagine” (K 108), almost as if they were standing there before us! In other words,



reading a story seemed to be as emotionally powerful as being in the actual situation with live people.

Many more experiments are needed, but is it too much of a stretch to suggest that if a story uses the very best words and the most effective media, and the story is about empathy and/or loving-kindness for all living beings, that we can move on to test more widely the hypothesis that literature can, in some sense, help to “save the world”?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cited in Gottshall (2012, p. 145)—page numbers hereafter cited parenthetically in the text preceded by “G”. On the other hand, criticizing is, of course, what critics do. In 1970, Louis Menand announced that the Humanities were running on an empty tank; in 1982, Frederick Crews pronounced the study of English literature “comatose”. Cited by Chace (2009)—hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as “C”.
- <sup>2</sup> Those who complained were defending canonical high-brow literature, but, ironically, focusing on “literature itself”, with no obvious social function, is also characteristic of the huge readership of low-brow, escapist and vicarious literature included in cultural studies. Popular culture specialists are no doubt aware of, for example, Janet Burroway, the author of *Writing Fiction*, who argues that vicarious emotional experience, not social purpose, is the primary benefit of fiction: “literature offers feelings for which we don’t have to pay. It allows us to love, condemn, condone, hope, dread, and hate without any of the risks those feelings ordinarily involve” (G 57).
- <sup>3</sup> In his 1990 essay, “Literature R.I.P.”, Alvin Kernan made sure all readers knew that students in courses on the “great books” at Stanford successfully demanded that “classics written by ‘dead white males’” be replaced with books “by women, blacks and Third World writers”. Consequently, according to him, “‘serious literature’” had “only a coterie audience” and “the point of all this will no longer be literature itself—art for art’s sake”. When Kernan’s book, *The Death of Literature*, appeared in the same year, we were invited to the funeral of Literature, followed inevitably by burials of literary critics and English departments. (Kernan 1990a, 1990b; Bauerlein 1997; McDonald 2007; Klinkenberg 2013; Flaherty 2015; Schalin 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Does not Gottshall’s observation (G 130) challenge Plato’s complaint in Book III of *The Republic*: “Poets and story-tellers are guilty of making the gravest misstatements when they tell us that wicked men are often happy, and the good miserable; and that injustice is profitable when undetected, but that justice is a man’s own loss and another’s gain”. (Plato 1998).
- <sup>5</sup> Plato, *The Republic* Bk. X; cf. poets are “required by us to express the image of the good in their works”. (Plato 1998); cf. (Pitari 2021).
- <sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* ([1989] 2007); hereafter represented parenthetically in the text as (O.E.D.).
- <sup>7</sup> Literature and/or Cultural Studies. See the references in this text to Raymond Williams, Gayatri Spivak, Jaques Derrida, and bell hooks. A few publications: (Craik 2020; Lünenborg and Maier 2018; Irish 2018; Davidson 2018; Wehrs and Blake 2017; Campe and Weber 2014; Cvetkovich 2010, 2012; Harding and Pribram 2009; Engel 2008; During 2007; Berlant 2004; Sedgwick 2003).
- <sup>8</sup> Because “emotion” has come to mean an agitation of mind or feeling, “emotive” may be the best name for this kind of literary criticism, especially because it is a term recently used to push the boundaries of ethnic scholarship (Pulido 2004). Jennifer Edbauer (2005) and Ilene Crawford (2000) use the word “affect”, but that word for some readers connotes psychological theory instead of feeling. The word “feeling”, on the other hand, is closely related to bodily sensations, especially the sense of touch. In psychology, the word sometimes explicitly excludes thought; thus, it too would be inappropriate for literary criticism that integrates thought and feeling. For more on these issues, see (Bump 2010; Pulido 2004; Edbauer 2005).
- <sup>9</sup> Christian (1987). See also her *Black Women Novelists* 1980; *Black Feminist Criticism*, 1985, plus almost 100 published articles and reviews, plus editions: *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* and the section of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* for the 1970s through to the 1990s.
- <sup>10</sup> All citations of Plato’s *The Republic* are from Jowett’s translation: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/55201/55201-h/55201-h.htm> (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- <sup>11</sup> Bk.1. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.1.i.html> (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- <sup>12</sup> Sapolsky (2017, p. 58)—page numbers hereafter cited parenthetically in the text preceded by “S”.
- <sup>13</sup> Hence, in 2004, James Dawes’ article in *American Literature* began, “An interest in the . . . emotions that shake us when reading has in recent years come increasingly to the fore in literary and cultural studies.” (Dawes 2004, p. 437).
- <sup>14</sup> Morrison ([1970] 1994, p. 83)—page numbers hereafter cited parenthetically in the text preceded by “BE”.
- <sup>15</sup> “Pity” is no longer a good translation because in modern English usage the word may mean “to be pitied for its littleness or meanness . . . miserably insignificant or trifling, despicable, contemptible . . . generally dismissed with a pitying shrug of the shoulders” (O.E.D.) (Stanford 1983, pp. 23–24).

- XIII. [gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm) (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Bluest\\_Eye](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bluest_Eye) (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- Bronte ([1848] 1972, p. 54)—hereafter cited in the text preceded by W.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpYeekQkAdc> (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JA6gYXEdwY> (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- <http://www.lorinroche.com/word/word/love.html> (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- For millennia, the active form of love in Hinduism has been known as the Brahnaviharas, a combination of four kinds of love for which there can be only inadequate English translations: (1) Metta: boundless loving-kindness radiated to all sentient beings; (2) Karuna: compassion, the wish that all sentient beings be free from suffering, leading to action to relieve that suffering; (3) Mudita: sympathetic joy in the wellbeing of others, without envy or jealousy, even when we are facing tragedy ourselves; (4) Upekka: the least known but perhaps the most needed virtue in the West—expressing love without regard to the results, resting in equanimity, seeing the big picture, a clear-minded tranquil state of mind not pulled this way and that by emotional reactions that have more to do with the ego than with true concern for others (a related, but very rare emotion in the West is “tough love”, love with detachment, accepting all results, no matter how tragic).
- <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm#LXXXVI> (accessed on 25 October 2021).
- Black (1962, p. 46)—page numbers hereafter cited in the text as (MB). The topic is discussed in more detail in (Bump 1985).
- Keysers (2012, p. 110)—hereafter cited parenthetically in the text preceded by the letter K.

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