

Second Essay: Assessing an Argument

Option I: Literature & Empathy *due Thursday, June 19 in lecture*

Background

Reading literature is often said to make us more empathetic, that is, better at recognizing and responding to others' feelings, emotions, and thoughts.¹ This is typically assumed to be mean that reading literature makes us better people, but this assumption has been questioned, as in the following remark:

“Though empathy has become something like the celebrity trait of emotional intelligence, it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the sensitivity and gentleness popularly attributed to it. Some of the most empathetic people you will ever meet are businesspeople and lawyers. They can grasp another person's feelings in an instant, act on them, and clinch a deal or win a trial. The result may well leave the person on the other side feeling anguished or defeated... And to enter a wholly different realm, empathy characterizes certain sadists. Discerning the most refined degrees of discomfort and pain in another person is the fulcrum of the sadist's pleasure. The empathetic gift can lead to generosity, charity, and self-sacrifice. It can also enable someone to manipulate another person with great subtlety and finesse.”²

Despite such doubts, some authors still defend the worth of the empathetic benefits of literature, though in a subtler manner. Thus Neil Gaiman observes:

¹This connection has even been scientifically verified; see Pam Belluck, “For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov”, *nytimes.com*, 3 October 2013.

²Lee Siegel, “Should Literature Be Useful?”, *newyorker.com*, 6 November 2013

“Fiction builds empathy. When you watch TV or see a film, you are looking at things happening to other people. Prose fiction is something you build up from 26 letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and you, and you alone, using your imagination, create a world and people it and look out through other eyes. You get to feel things, visit places and worlds you would never otherwise know. You learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well. You’re being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you’re going to be slightly changed. Empathy is a tool for building people into groups, for allowing us to function as more than self-obsessed individuals.”³

And in a similar vein, David Foster Wallace remarks:

“I guess a big part of serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves. Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of “generalization” of suffering. Does this make sense? We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy’s impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character’s pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might just be that simple.”⁴

Assignment

Construct a plausible valid argument from the premiss that ‘reading literature makes us more empathetic’ to the conclusion that ‘reading literature makes us better people’, and write an essay presenting and assessing the soundness of your argument, using Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” as evidence for and/or against your claims. Your essay should: explain why the stated conclusion does not necessarily follow from

³Neil Gaiman, “Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming,” *theguardian.com*, 15 October 2013

⁴Larry McCaffery, “A Conversation with David Foster Wallace,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer 1993, Vol. 13.2

the stated premiss alone; present a clearly and precisely worded step-wise argument from the premiss to the conclusion; reference specific examples or points from “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” in assessing the argument’s soundness; and ultimately, explain specifically why the empathy one gains from reading “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” makes (or does not make) one a better person. Your argument should be informed by the quotes from the preceding “Background” section, but it need not purport to represent them. **Word limit: 1200 words.**

Formatting

Prepare your essay for blind grading: the only piece of identifying information should be **your student number**; please do *not* include your name. As for all other formatting guidelines: do whatever you want.

Turning it in

Your paper is to be printed out, stapled, and handed in to me, in person, at lecture on the due date. Late papers will be docked 10% if handed in within the first 24 hours after the lecture at which they are due, and 5% for each subsequent 24 hour period after that (unless accompanied by valid documentation). Late papers should be submitted, in PDF format, to willie.costello@mail.utoronto.ca. To repeat, **on-time assignments cannot be submitted by email**, and any assignment submitted on or before the due date by email will automatically be docked 10%.

On citations, secondary sources, and plagiarism

This assignment is asking *you* to write an *original* assessment of an argument. As such, you are not expected to do any research or use any ‘secondary sources’ (for example, books, journal articles, websites, or any other written work on the topic). Examples from “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” need not be cited, but any direct quotes from the story should appear in quotation marks.

However, if you *do* consult secondary sources – and remember, this includes websurfing on the topic and reading other students’

work – you *must*: (i) include a bibliography at the end of your paper listing all your sources; (ii) give a footnote reference *every time* you quote, paraphrase, or say something influenced by what you have read; and (iii) make sure that the bulk of your paper consists in your own original, independent thinking. **Any failure to follow rules (i), (ii), and (iii) counts as plagiarism** and will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. The much better option is just not to look at any secondary sources at all.

In addition, no collaboration on this assignment is permitted. Any submission of work not entirely your own or of work already submitted in another course is a form of cheating, and will be dealt with accordingly.