

Why Black Literature Matters



“The Thankful Poor”, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1894

Last month in *The Atlantic*, Egyptian writer and activist Alaa Al Aswany wrote an excellent essay on [How Literature Inspires Empathy](#). He gives an example from a sentence in Dostoyevsky’s *The House of the Dead* (“He, also, had a mother”) to show how a single word makes the reader see a criminal and prisoner in a whole new light. As Al Aswany explains, “the role of literature is in this ‘also’. It means we’re going to understand, we’re going to forgive, we’re not going to judge. We should understand that people are not bad, but they can do bad things under particular circumstances.” Later, after mentioning how *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* help us sympathize with and not judge those titular unfaithful wives, he writes “Literature gives us a broad spectrum of human possibilities. It teaches us how to feel other people suffering. When you read a good novel, you forget about the nationality of the character. You forget about his or her religion. You forget about his skin color or her skin color.

You only understand the human. You understand that this is a human being, the same way we are. And so reading great novels absolutely can remake us as much better human beings.” There is a case to be made that Dostoyevsky is not an author who always aspires much empathy in his readers (especially when compared to his counterpart Tolstoy). Likewise, it is impossible to claim that reading literature always improves the reader, which is just not the case.

My main interests of study and research have always been history, philosophy, and literature. I have two degrees in history, which helps me learn about and understand the world. Philosophy helps me think about the world, sometimes too abstractly, as it is and ought to be. But literature is a way of feeling, understanding, and connecting with humanity in all its various guises on a personal and emotional level. It is a continuation of the oldest human activity of storytelling. I would argue that not only is literature at least as important as the other arts and sciences, including history and philosophy, but, at its best, it is one of the central things that symbolizes our shared humanity and, in the process of both absorbing old and creating new literature, shapes us as human creatures.

One reason for this is that, despite some self-appointed guardians of what constitutes high culture (or snobbish protectors of an exclusive and immutable “canon”), literature is and always has been primarily a form of popular entertainment appealing to people from all walks of life. We think of Shakespeare, rightly, as an almost godlike literary creator central to Western literature; in reality, a large part of his plays just barely survived in written form only through the foresight of two contemporaries who produced the Folios. If not for this, Shakespeare might today be known only to scholars as an Elizabethan playwright whose enormous popularity was due mostly to the lower and middle classes enjoying his over-abundance of wittily crude sexual jokes and

double entendres.

According to my own rough formulation, all literature can probably be grouped into two categories based on the motives of both author and reader: escapism, and edification. Most genre literature falls under escapism—fantasy, science fiction, mystery, thriller, historical fiction, romance, western, travel, etc. The somewhat smaller range of books that intend to represent broad universal truths, dig into a particular philosophical discourse, or teach some important life lesson to the readers about the world fall under the category of edification—these are usually the “classics” that are reread by every generation of reader. It is important to note that there is overlap between the two categories; that is, every type of escapist “genre” literature has its own exemplars of great literature due to the skill and depth of the writing. Tolkien is considered the greatest of the fantasy writers, and his work transcends that genre and becomes something valuable and worthy for all readers (I don’t know if the Harry Potter series can be seen the same way since I have never read it; readers can let me know in the comments section). Similarly in science fiction, Asimov is one of the writers who pushed the boundaries of his genre into something greater and more universal. Most of Jane Austen’s novels are basically simple romance (just like all Shakespeare’s comedies), but that does not mean they are not also edifying literature in some capacity. I do not intend to attempt any wider comparisons on this theme of two types of literature, but I would be interested to read about other examples that come to mind (once again, you can let me know in the comments section).

Coming broadly around from this digression to my main point, literature can do many things, and one of the most important of these, to my mind, is to inspire empathy—something which has never been overly abundant in the world but which there can never be too much of. Because of the unique merits of

literature, it has a power to reach people on a raw or emotional level that is rare in other media. In the most extreme end of the spectrum, it can cause readers to be so affected as to kill themselves in droves, as with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. It can convey the feeling of shared humanity, such as Prince Andrei felt while mortally wounded on the field of Borodino in *War and Peace*. It can make us understand the lives of people who are totally different from us, and who we would otherwise never know anything about. This is especially true of the books by people who in the past were never represented in literature due to political and social circumstances— slavery, colonialism, poverty, and other exploitations. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is considered the first important modern novel by an African writer, which shows the African rather than the European perspective of a Joseph Conrad or a Graham Greene. A similar example is the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, and *A Grain of Wheat*, which describe the hardships of colonial Kenyan life and the Mau Mau rebellion in a much different way than the more idealized European vision of a Karen Blixen.

A writer does not have to be one of the excluded minorities or oppressed in order to write about them. Alan Paton was a white liberal South African who worked for penal reform in his country and founded the South African Liberal Party (which was outlawed by the Apartheid regime). His book *Cry, the Beloved Country* tells the story of a poor Zulu priest who makes a Dantean journey to Johannesburg to look for his missing sister and son. It is one of the most emotionally charged books I have read, and a book that cannot fail to create a strong sense of empathy in the reader for the injustices of racism in South Africa (and, by extension, the whole world).

"Black Lives Matter" is a new civil rights movement for Black people in America after the seemingly endless cases of police

murder and injustice that have recently proven the existence and depth of entrenched systemic racism in the America of the First Black President. The reactionaries and enablers of injustice that have decried this movement say that it foments violence (it does not) or disregard for White people's lives (it does not). Despite the unique promise of its founding, America is a country whose relatively short history has had more than its share of horrific and unforgettable injustice. After decades or even centuries of hard-fought activism slowly bending the arc of history towards justice, much of the past has indeed been forgotten or misrepresented. In school textbooks, I fear that much of the true history is at least partially white-washed, if not completely elided. The two grossest examples are the 400-year genocide of the Native Americans, and the 300-year terror regime of Black slavery. Both of these things allowed the United States to grow into the wealthy and powerful country it is today, and the latter's influence on the society and politics of 21st century America is still quite strong and cannot be forgotten, diminished, or excused. For every romantic apology for the South (such as the novel and film *Gone With the Wind*) or for every apologist who claims that slavery was "not so bad" for the slaves, there must be someone who refutes them immediately with the truth. If someone claims that things are fine for Black people now because of the Civil Rights Act and Affirmative Action, they need to understand that such relatively feeble legislation has barely put a dent in the centuries of heart-breaking brutality and relentless economic exploitation.

Luckily, there is a strong recent tradition in America of Black literature which tells stories that could never have been told even 100 years ago. For anyone doubting that White privilege is real or that Black Lives have not mattered as much as White Lives in America, I would recommend some of these books more than any history book. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Ralph

Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. I was thinking mostly of fiction—novels, specifically—as the focus of this piece, but there are numerous examples of literary non-fiction—especially autobiographies—that are worth reading and have lessons to teach: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. More than the superficiality of film and the flatness of art and photography, the depth of characterization, psychology, tragedy, and emotion contained in such literature can do more to create awareness of the joy and tragedy of human lives and inspire deep and long-lasting empathy for other people.

In Al Aswany's article, he comments that "I don't think literature is the right tool to change the situation right now. If you would like to change the situation now, go out into the street. Literature, to me, is about a more important change: It changes our vision, our understanding, the way we see. And people who are changed by literature, in turn, will be more capable to change the situation." There is often a strong connection between writers and political activism, which has been especially clear in the case of writers coming from traditionally suppressed minority backgrounds; James Baldwin was a lifelong fighter for social and racial justice, and Alice Walker famously declared that "Activism is my rent for living on the planet."

In a time when Liberal Arts and humanistic studies are coming under criticism for not being apparently linked to "real-world" skills, and budgets for education are being cut across the board, we need to ask ourselves if there are things important in society beyond profit-making. Is nation-building and money-making the most important thing in society, more than the lives of people it exploits? Are some people in society just a means for others and not an end in themselves? How can we enrich our culture and society to be not only good

citizens but empathetic fellow humans? Reading literature is no panacea, but is certainly something that can do no harm. Only in such a world where we understand and feel compassion for people outside our own circle can a statement such as Black Lives Matter be both a true assertion and a reality. Where kids and teenagers are not murdered by the police for no reason other than that they were Black, where refugees and immigrants would be universally welcomed rather than treated like lower life forms. Only in a more empathetic world of shared humanity is this possible.