

Why Literature is Useless:  
A Defense of Literature's Value

by  
Kerith Asma



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## Abstract

The value of literature has long been contested: from Plato to the present, critics have argued for the value of literature (or its lack thereof) through its purpose(s). In this thesis, I will examine what literature's function, as a defense of its value, might be. While literature has been used in a variety of ways—from moral benefit to political power—none of these functions is a universal characteristic of literature. Instead, I argue that literature is inherently useless.

By all critical constructions of value, which depend on use, the removal of use ought to render literature valueless as well as useless. However, in considering literature as a whole, I hope to separate use and value: I define value as worth or merit independent of any function or purpose. Thus literature's value need not hinge upon its use or uselessness. In this way, I argue that literature, in its freedom from any kind of utility, is actually rendered more valuable, because this freedom enables literature to be a critical and revelatory entity which is simultaneously autonomous from any concerns of usefulness or commitment.

In the first part of the thesis, I will briefly describe the background for this debate and my claim of uselessness, describing the connection between use and value and developing pertinent definitions. This section also examines what import the question of literature's value might have: there is strong stake in the claim that literature is valuable, as to validate literature is to validate the study of English, the act of reading, and an entire field of creative activity.

In the second part of the thesis, I hope to provide space for analysis of these critical perspectives in greater depth. Here I categorize uses of literature into five main groups, which I examine through various critics and example texts. By considering how literature is used under these five categories—as a means of fulfilling social needs, for obtaining and disseminating power, as a source of knowledge, as a moralizing force, and as the focus of aesthetic concern—I argue that none of these neither offers a sufficient understanding of literature as a whole nor an irrefutable defense of literature's value.

In the third part of the thesis, I will consider the uselessness of literature as its freedom, and the consequences of approaching literature in this way. Since literature is not tied to any intrinsic purpose, any considerations of genre or categorization, as lenses of use, must be ascribed, rather than inherent. Similarly, contextualization becomes at best imperfect: all contexts read in the text must instead be read in the reader. Rather than understanding the text as a kind sociological commentary, moralizing force, or source of aesthetic beauty, I argue that the text itself is autonomous: the focus must therefore shift from text to reader. I conclude by gesturing towards a new practice of reading in which the critical reader is paramount, with the aim of maximizing the descriptive moralizing that literature allows through its uselessness.



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## Introduction

“What’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?” asks Haroun in Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a novel originally written as a children’s story. This question, which is repeated throughout the novel, asks what stories are good for, what renders them valuable, as a question of their use. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* poses the question of the value of literature as a whole. What is the purpose of literature which is not explicitly didactic or factual? And what exactly do we mean by the term “literature?” Is there one use which can offer a suitable defense for literature? Haroun discovers that although there are many different ways in which stories are used, stories are ultimately valuable simply for the experience of them. As Haroun travels to Earth’s mysterious second moon of Kahani in order to save his father Rashid’s lost gift of gab, he encounters many different ways in which stories are used, from assisting conniving politicians to acting as a framework for his own life, each of which is problematic in its moral import and as an understanding of stories’ value. Haroun also discovers the difficulty in defining what is meant by stories, as their nature is often elusive and changeable. Although all stories in *Haroun* originate in the Ocean of the Streams of Story, Kahani’s residents are constantly telling stories, by which they mean both crafting fiction and speaking falsehood. Neither is the line between story and reader clear: as Haroun seeks to save not only Rashid’s storytelling but also the Sea of Stories itself, he weaves a new story as the protagonist fighting to save stories, becoming a storyteller himself. In his confrontation with Khattam Shud, the Cultmaster of Bezaban who attempts to destroy the Sea of Stories by poisoning it with anti-stories, Haroun ultimately realizes that answering the question “what’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?” is less important than simply experiencing stories, whether hearing, reading, or even living them out, framing his own existence through stories.

Haroun's question—"what's the use of stories that aren't even true?"—is not limited only to the world of fiction, but also permeates philosophical debate. In Haroun's world, the figure of Khattam Shud, as the destroyer of stories, is a clearly negative one: to Haroun, he stands for explanation and rationality, the supposed antithesis to stories. Yet rationality is not often viewed as a negative force, and in contrast to the fiction of stories, reasoning and explanation are valuable tools for understanding the world. Plato, describing his ideal society in the *Republic*, goes so far as to remove the poets altogether, because they are distanced not only from the ideal, but also from the actual: poets, concerned with representation, are far from the reasoned consideration of the ideal which Plato espouses. Although he makes an exception for Homer, Plato argues that poets are actually harmful, distracting the youths of society from rational thought.

Both of these constructions, though taking opposite views, emphasize literature as distinctly separate from rational thought; it is possible, however, to consider literature as linked to an increased capacity for critical thinking, and thereby the development of rationality. John Carey, in his book *What Good are the Arts?* (2004), concludes that literature is uniquely capable of critically examining the world by espousing multiple—even contradictory—viewpoints at the same time. Carey, examining the purpose(s) of the arts as a whole, notes the ways in which art often acts negatively within in society: for example, the arts are often viewed in terms of high versus low based on the notion of "canon," an exoneration of elite art that elevates art above people, and those who can appreciate high art above those who enjoy popular art, dissociating art from human concerns. Literature, Carey argues, is unique among the arts in its ability to reason: through its use of language, literature can criticize the world, albeit in diverse and even contradictory ways relative to the perspective(s) found in any given text.



The essential question which Rushdie, Plato, and Carey address is whether or not literature is value, and in what that value (or harm, in the case of Plato) consists. Defending literature's value determines not only the worth of individual texts, but also the importance of the study of English in education, the act of reading, and an entire field of creative activity: thus it is especially important to discover if, and in what ways, literature might be valuable. In examining the arguments of critics and theorists to discern what literature is good for, one discovers that arguments for the worth of literature tend to be couched in terms of use. Various answers have been developed over time: literature is good for communication, entertainment, moralizing, teaching, truth, power, a framework for culture, to name but a few of the claims, all of which emphasize literature as good for something. Literature's worth is thus constantly tied to its use or function.

This connection between use and value in determining literature's worth is the common (if not inevitable) approach. Various critics—from Plato and Aristotle to modern day studies of the arts—have argued for literature's value based on its having a unique and practical function. One common defense is that literature is improving in moral import, a trajectory especially evident in the Romantics such as William Wordsworth, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde. While their ideas depend on a sense of art as aesthetic, attached only to practical concerns within a grand humanizing scope, recent defenses of art—particularly in arguments for public funding—emphasize explicit economic, political, and social utility.

Whatever the case, defenses of literature depend on use—whether phrased as use, function, utility, purpose, benefit, or end, the intention is the same—although what that use is varies vastly across time periods, cultures, and even within the same critical schools. With such difference in what literature's use(s) might be, it becomes clear that none of these posited

functions is characteristic of all literature. Various time periods espouse different ideas, and even within the same time period, what literature's unique use-value is depends on its having a specific form or affecting only certain people. The intention of this thesis is to encapsulate this wide range of ideas and opinions, while acknowledging that I cannot possibly include every text which has made claim to discuss literature's usefulness or value, by using characteristic, representative examples. There will be countless other examples which typify either the uses of literature, or the ways in which use is inadequate to defending literature, but these must remain to the further exploration of the reader. My emphasis falls to the critics of the nineteenth century—namely Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, and William Wordsworth—whose arguments emphasize the individual nature of response to, and use of, literature in shaping individual experience. Their claims, which emphasize the effects of literature on the reader, inform my own claims: the reader imposes their own meaning on a given text, a meaning which is relative to that reader because the interpretive spaces in any given text allow for the construction of meaning by the reader. As a consequence of this freedom in interpretation and significance, literature is therefore expressive, rather than purposive: the reader's relationship with the text, rather than any characteristic use, determines literature's value.

Chapter 1 examines what is at stake in attempting to defend literature, an endeavor which has been undertaken by countless critics, theorists, and philosophers. In addition, this chapter will consider pertinent definitions of key terms, delineating for example how literature has been defined in contrast with the more expansive definition this thesis espouses. Chapter 2 considers the ways in which literature has been defended as useful, categorizing use into five main categories. Whether literature is argued to fulfill social needs, provide knowledge, create and ensure power, moralize, or as act as a source of aesthetic enjoyment, this chapter concludes that

none of these uses can possibly be characteristic of all literature, and therefore cannot provide an adequate defense of literature's value. Chapter 3 will argue that none of these posited uses is characteristic of all literature: rather, I would like to suggest that literature is inherently useless. This uselessness is uniquely enabled by literature's autonomy from the world. According to Oscar Wilde, uselessness is requisite for something to be considered art:

The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art.<sup>1</sup>

Art is good only for itself, neither good nor bad because it is not to be understood in terms of human benefit. Instead, art—including literature—is uniquely free from “the things that...concern us,” elevated outside of the realm of cause and effect. Art's claim is on a world entirely separate from any usefulness, purpose, or function—or at least from any purpose which has claim in our lives.

Does this then render literature worthless, without value? I will argue that in fact literature's uselessness renders it yet more valuable, because its freedom from utility allows it to be metamorphic, capable of any number of uses. Simultaneously, through literature's freedom from the limitation of utility, it is paradoxically capable of revealing the reader to him or herself. Turning again to Wilde, we find that

Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Ed. Linda Dowling (England: Penguin Books, 2001) 172.

mirror. She has flowers that no forest knows of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds...Hers are the 'forms more real than living man,' and hers the great archetypes of which things that have no existence are but unfinished copies. Nature has, in her eyes, no laws, no uniformity.<sup>2</sup>

Literature is free from any limitations—and as such serves not as a kind of clear picture of reality, but rather as a “veil” which can be drawn back. This veil reflects the individual reader’s reality, rather than any absolute understanding or truth.

In many ways my approach and conclusions, which emphasize the role of the reader in creating the meaning and significance of a given text, resemble reader-response theory, especially as it is presented in Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading*. However, although I approach the same issue—the role of the reader—I do so from a different direction than reader-response: where Iser, for example, considers the ways in which a text works on and with a reader, I am considering how literature is autonomous of any function. I would like to suggest that not only does the reader construct meaning within a given text, but that furthermore, the reader is responsible for any and all meaning in a text, as meaning is relative to the reader. In addition, my conclusion is slightly different than Iser’s. In Iser’s construction of reader-response, the text is only manifested through the reader, who experiences the text as an event in his or her own reality; the text’s effect can change based on the reader, but it is the act of reading, rather than the text, which is relative. I conclude that the source of significance seemingly derived from a text is not in the text, but rather in the reader: the reader determines which text will be manifested, thereby expressing, rather than forming, his or her own reality. Of course, the distinctions are subtle, but I would like to emphasize that the largest difference is in the

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<sup>2</sup> Wilde 178

construction of literature and function: namely, in this thesis, I hope to show that literature is separate from any kind of function.

So what is literature good for, if literature cannot be inherently functional? And what is the use of stories that aren't even true? *Haroun* again provides the answer; or in this case, the lack thereof. Haroun never explicitly answers this question, and while he encounters many ways in which stories could be used, it matters less to Haroun that stories be useful than that they continue to exist. Stories need not have a purpose, they simply are. When Haroun interrupts Khattam Shud's endless explanations, saying, "But why do you hate stories so much?...Stories are fun," the Cultmaster replies, "The world, however, is not for Fun...The world is for Controlling...And in every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, which I cannot rule at all."<sup>3</sup> Stories, constantly changing and metamorphosing, are free from any worldly concerns. Instead, stories exist, in Haroun's world, for the visceral experience derived from them. So what is the use of stories that aren't even true? Ultimately, the answer is that the question is beside the point: instead, the point is that stories must be told and read, regardless of any use, because literature's expressiveness allows the reader to shape his or her own experiences and meaning in and through stories.

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<sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, (New York: Penguin, 1991), 161.

## Chapter 1: Stakes and Claims—Use and Value as a Validation of Literature

When John Carey asks the question, “what good are the arts?” in his book of the same title, he draws attention to the seemingly eternal need for art to defend itself as good for something. One of the most common responses to the question “what good are the arts?” is the idea that the arts make people better. In *What Good are the Arts?*, Carey dedicates an entire chapter to examining, and ultimately refuting, this claim. He argues that not only do the arts rarely make people better in practice, such applications of betterment are often disguises for less noble aspirations of maintaining order, instilling dominant cultural values into subjected groups, and defending art as elite. In fact, when questioning the arts as an entity for improvement, “all that can be determined is that ‘work in the arts evokes, refines and develops thinking in the arts.’”<sup>4</sup> According to Carey, the arts do not improve people in any other spheres besides the arts. Furthermore, the idea that literature makes people better is at best vague and difficult to explain: “the assumption that the arts make people better is seldom accompanied by any serious consideration of what better people might be like.”<sup>5</sup> While the arts may sometimes allow us to step into someone else’s shoes, in doing so we isolate ourselves from the person at hand, possibly even trivializing their suffering as fictive or at least distant from immediate experience.<sup>6</sup>

Carey, while decrying art as a force which makes people better, defends literature as a unique subset of the arts in its abilities to criticize and moralize: “literature is not just the only art that can criticize itself, it is the only art...that can criticize anything, because it is the only art capable of reasoning.”<sup>7</sup> Literature is uniquely suited to this capability because its form is written language, the language of reasoning. Yet literature is also uniquely suited to moral concerns:

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<sup>4</sup> John Carey, *What Good are the Arts?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 101.

<sup>5</sup> Carey 103

<sup>6</sup> Carey 109

<sup>7</sup> Carey 177

“only literature can moralize” though “its moralizing is diverse and contradictory.”<sup>8</sup> Carey provides the example of the moralizing of Chaucer, which was deeply entwined in the Christianity of the Middle Ages: his messages about conquering death are not universal beyond his circumstances or the religion of the time.<sup>9</sup> Within the same period, or even within one text, literature disagrees, and the moralizing provided depends on how it is understood: whereas “Johnson teaches resignation,” in the eighteenth century, Swift encourages advocacy, their two moral lessons contradicting one another.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately what matters, according to Carey, is that literature does benefit its reader, albeit in variable ways. Yet this inconstancy in benefit—not only it what comprises it, but also in the consistency of its effect on the reader—makes it difficult to justify literature through an argument for improvement.

The idea that literature might be of value, not because it makes people better, but because the act of reading is enriching for experience, is a claim often contested in informal settings rather than in formal study. When explaining to a friend why one reads *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* “for fun,” one might say something like, “it spoke to me,” or, less colloquially, “it had a profound relationship to the way in which I understand and experience life.” As a formal defense of literature, this is rarely used; yet in everyday conversation and even in book reviews, the idea that literature might have a deepening effect on one’s own life is common, if not perpetually assumed. One critic, Lisa Ruddick, sees the need to incorporate this discussion into formal defense of literary study, especially as it relates to the university study of English. What Ruddick calls literature’s “capacity to deepen lives” is an undeniable experience for readers, and arguably

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<sup>8</sup> Carey 181

<sup>9</sup> Carey 182

<sup>10</sup> Carey 186-188

the most common reason that both students and teachers choose English as a discipline.<sup>11</sup> Yet this experience depends on the individual reader: literature as enrichment is determined by the reader's susceptibility and personal preference, relative to his or her own circumstances.

While these two possible defenses of literature—literature as moralizing and as enriching experience—function within the context of readers and critics of literature alike, both delineate an understanding of literature's value which depends on relativity. While as a reader of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, I accept its role in influencing my opinions, ideas, and quality of life without further explanation, these are specific, personal, literary rewards which are intangible, inconsistent, and impossible to measure from reader to reader. How can one universally defend literature when its value hinges on the relative response of the reader?

Although critics define literature by a wide array of different formal elements, almost all arguments for the worth of literature are posed in terms of use or function. In fact, the question “what is literature good for?” assumes in its response some kind of purpose that makes literature good, because the question itself asks what for: to what end ought literature to be employed? In fact, every discipline, whether science or history or psychology, for example, relies on this connection between function and worth. The value of any given field, approach, practice, object, subject, text is determined by its having some kind of use or function. A scientific discovery is only valuable if the knowledge obtained further advances science itself; a historical reconstruction is only valuable if it can portray with greater clarity something about the past with the end of improvement and understanding for the present; a psychological analysis is valuable only if it can provide a constructive method for remedy. The same is true of the study of

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<sup>11</sup> Ruddick, “The Unnamed Work of English,” *ADE Bulletin*, (2010: 29-35) 32.



literature: literature and literary analysis are valuable if they give better understanding, improve the reader, or offer some kind of function.

Even in its definition, the term “value” is yoked to utility. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines “value” as “the relative worth, usefulness, or importance of a thing or (occas.) a person; the estimation in which a thing is held according to its real or supposed desirability or utility.”<sup>12</sup> Usefulness is made parallel to worth; though they are not synonyms, their place within the sentence structure links them together as similar entities. In addition to this more general definition, the Oxford English Dictionary includes several definitions of “value” which are specific to various disciplines in which value refers to specific, inherent qualities of a given concept or entity. For example, value can signify “A numerical measure of a physical quantity; a number denoting magnitude on some conventional scale; (also) the numerical amount denoted by an algebraic term; the numerical output of a mathematical function” in mathematical concerns.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, value can serve as “The relative length or duration of a sound signified by a note; (also occasionally) the relative length of a silence indicated by a rest” when describing music.<sup>14</sup> All of these disparate and distinct definitions show how value is uniquely and specifically defined depending on what discipline engages it, and how the object is viewed within that discipline.

Thus value depends on who or what is doing the valuing: the approach or lens taken significantly changes how value will be understood, and what its import will be. “Value, it seems evident, is not intrinsic in objects, but attributed to them by whoever is doing the valuing:”

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<sup>12</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition

<sup>13</sup> “Value,” (*Oxford English Dictionary, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, September 2011), 15 March 2012.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

similarly, the value literature is determined by the approach used in examining a given text.<sup>15</sup> This connection between use and value in determining literature's worth is the common (if not inevitable) approach. Even when critics argue against literature's value, they frame their argument in terms of use. When Plato states that poets must not be accepted into his ideal society, he says so because they might be harmful for the state: the good—reason and self-reflection—is useful, and the bad—poetry, or imitation, which is essentially falsehood—causes in young men an increase in wickedness. For Plato, poetry's effect is to corrupt. Of course, for Oscar Wilde, immorality is the very essence of literature, the quality that makes it good. Already we see the divide not only between critics, but between critics on the nature of what is good: even when there is consensus on literature's function, its value becomes a space for disagreement.

Perhaps it would be helpful to define what literature, a vague and varying term, is. Literature is often contested as a subject of worth, dictated by the ways in which it is used. In modern considerations, literature has often indicated some sort of canon of texts which are approved for literary study. However, literature can also indicate any sort of written work, including pamphlets, brochures, and in twenty-first century studies, even social media. Historically, works of science and history were included in the literary canon; categories and definitions of what is allowed to be included shift over the course of time. Whether the term literature should encompass fiction or nonfiction, creative or factual, elite or popular, poetical or prosaic is not easily resolved, as the concept of "literature" has included all of these categories at some point in its past.

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<sup>15</sup> Carey xii

With such a vast range of possibilities at hand, it may prove helpful to turn to literature's etymological origins. "Literature" is a derivative of the classical Latin *litteratura* which means "use of letters, writing, system of letters, alphabet, instruction in reading and writing, writings, [and] scholarship."<sup>16</sup> The emphasis is not on specific texts, but rather on the acts of reading and writing, and the form of literature, which is written language. As the word developed in Europe, it also acquired synonymy with knowledge, learning, and erudition, especially as achieved through written texts. It was not until the eighteenth century that any distinction between fiction and nonfiction is recorded; prior to this point, literature encompasses literally anything written, especially texts of scientific and mathematical knowledge.<sup>17</sup> This range is far from considerations of literature today, in which texts from other disciplines, especially those in the sciences, are generally separate from considerations of literary study. Distinctions have arisen between different areas of learning where once literature encompassed the written form of all types of knowledge and learning. A similarly recent distinction (in the span of history) is between literature of quality and written texts which are considered "popular." The word literature can be used to signify quality: the *Oxford English Dictionary* includes a definition of literature as "written work value[d] for superior or lasting artistic merit."<sup>18</sup> This distinction of "literature" as only good texts excludes texts which do not adhere to the standard of form or merit requisite to be "good."

This definition of literature as that which has "lasting artistic merit" is problematic: how does one define artistic merit, who determines what fits in this category, and what is included or excluded because of political, social, religious, or psychological concerns? Carey discusses this

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<sup>16</sup> "Literature," (*Oxford English Dictionary 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, September 2011), 15 March 2012.

<sup>17</sup> "Literature," (*Oxford English Dictionary 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, September 2011), 15 March 2012.

<sup>18</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> edition

quandary in depth in *What Good Are the Arts?*, examining both what has been considered art over time as well as whether “high art” is in some way privileged because of its merit or quality. However, what is included in the term “art” is constantly changing, and definitions of “high art” are almost entirely determined by status and power: “though high-art advocates have no doubt about their own superiority, their arguments, when they offer any, do not bear scrutiny.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, “though generally reinforced with abstruse phraseology, their definitions are invariably reducible to the statement that works of art are things recognized as works of art by the right people, or that they are things that have the effects that works of art should rightly have.”<sup>20</sup> What these effects might be, however, is variable and contradictory at best. Any attempts to justify high art—as opposed to popular art and behaviors of art—through moral benefit, general consensus, and quality of form and content, fall short of adequately explaining how some art might be considered higher than others.<sup>21</sup>

Yet the idea of a canon composed of uniquely valuable works of art has been prevalent in the study of literature for about a century, in the study of what has been termed “the Great Books.” The Great Books determined a standard canon of classic literature which still permeates ideas of what constitutes literature today, particularly in university settings. In its early days, the Great Books program was a way to assert cultural values in an ever more diverse American population: with a corpus of “all deceased and primarily Caucasian males” as authors, the program, whether used in universities or for the public, represented a kind of “intellectual surrogate for...church” which could instill Western cultural values.<sup>22</sup> Yet although Great Books

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<sup>19</sup> Carey 64

<sup>20</sup> Carey 15

<sup>21</sup> Carey 63-4

<sup>22</sup> Alex Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 73-74, 88.

stood as a figure for all the good that Western culture had to offer, the actual books selected were chosen by a few men exclusively in university settings.<sup>23</sup> In their selection by a small and homogeneous group, the books chosen were not selected because of their import for a variety of people over time, but rather for their role in Western culture. The selectors emphasized the moral qualities of the books, which would supposedly assist the reader not only in developing reasoning skills, but would improve the reader's sense of justice and law: the founders of Great Books programs "[used] the Great Books to 'revive the great tradition of liberal human thought' [to] result in nothing less than 'a world republic of law and justice' ...a Utopia."<sup>24</sup>

This certainly complicates any notion of a literary canon: if what is the standard canon of classic literature depends less on qualities inherent in the works of literature than on cultural values reinforcement, then how does one determine what is literature of value? While the works in the literary canon are generally thought to be determined by some kind of linguistic or narrative form which is more aesthetically pleasing, the study of the Great Books programs shows that in fact the canon is incredibly arbitrary, determined by those holding some kind of power or authority. So how can one define what art is to include or exclude? Rather than defining art by a specific form or inherent quality, Carey turns to the person appreciating the art: "What could make it a work of art was nothing in its physical make-up but how it was regarded, how it was thought of."<sup>25</sup> Many art works which were originally considered simply a part of culture—Grecian urns, for example—have been termed art by later viewers—in this case, by the Romantics in particular. What is included in a canon of art depends almost entirely on circumstances of time and space. With the advent of modern and postmodern art, everyday

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<sup>23</sup> Beam 79-80

<sup>24</sup> Beam 94

<sup>25</sup> Carey 17

objects can become art—distinguished from their standard utility only by placement in an art gallery or museum. Works of modern art, such as Andy Warhol’s sculptures, illustrate how consideration as art, rather than any formal qualities, can determine what is art:

For the point about Warhol’s sculptures was that they were absolutely indistinguishable from ordinary supermarket Brillo boxes. They showed that a work of art need have no special quality discernible by the senses. Its status as a work of art does not depend on how it looks, or on any physical qualities whatsoever...Anything, Danto concluded, could be a work of art. His typewriter could become a work of art, though it could not become, say, a ham sandwich. What could make it a work of art was nothing in its physical make-up but how it was regarded, how it was thought of.<sup>26</sup>

What is art is not determined by form, but by context: in this case, if curators deem a work art, then it takes its place in physically distinct place, the museum. Carey ultimately concludes that “Anything can be a work of art. What makes it a work of art is that someone thinks of it as a work of art. ... My answer to the question ‘What is a work of art?’ is ‘A work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person.’”<sup>27</sup> In other words, art is relative, determined entirely by how it is viewed.

Terry Eagleton takes a similar approach in examining what literature specifically includes in *Literary Theory*. Rather than focusing on a set of formal qualities, he emphasizes the way in which literature is read as its determining feature:

It would not be easy to isolate, from all that has been variously called ‘literature’, some constant set of inherent features...There is no ‘essence’ of literature

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<sup>26</sup> Carey 17

<sup>27</sup> Carey 29

whatsoever. Any bit of writing may be read ‘non-pragmatically’, if that is what reading a text as literature means, just as any writing may be read ‘poetically’.<sup>28</sup>

Literature’s value is relative: any kind of objectivity is replaced instead by the notion that “‘literature’ means...any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly.”<sup>29</sup> Eagleton concludes with the idea that not only is the focus on the reader, in which case what is literature is variable and depends on how it is read and understood, but there may in fact be a multitude of ways in which something might be considered literature: “In this sense, one can think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing...than as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing” (emphases Eagleton’s).<sup>30</sup> As in Carey’s argument that anything can be art, Eagleton is saying that anything can be literature, provided that someone thinks that it is literature; this shifts emphasis from literature itself to those engaging with it.

The reader determines whether or not something is literature, although the something being read must be a written text. This allows literature to assume all of its possible manifestations. Unless literature includes anything which has held that title, we cannot possibly account for all disparities in opinion across cultures, geography, and chronology. In order to account for all possible manifestations of literature without exclusion, I will define literature as a written text which has been considered literature, as a special category, by anyone, anywhere, at any point in time. Literature need not be limited to something of a certain type or quality, but can encompass any written text. However, what ultimately differentiates literature from, say, exit signs or grocery lists is that it is read and considered as literature. A grocery list may become

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<sup>28</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

literature for someone, if for example, the grocery list were read in a poetical, rather than merely practical, manner. Similarly, works that are generally considered to be literature may simply be seen as words, or even just symbols: runic poetry cannot be read unless one has the right linguistic tools, and even then, poems which offer blessings or curses may not signify as anything but practical when viewed by a modern reader. The definition of literature relies on the reader's perspective. By not limiting the definition of literature, we allow room to account for all differences of literature in all cultures across time and space, preventing any exceptions.

Anything can be literature, just so long as it has a reader to value it as such.

What is useful or valuable in literature is determined by the person doing the evaluating. Use (and therefore value) differ greatly for different readers—whether they are evaluating a text in terms of its religious, political, economic, academic, sociological, anthropological, historical, or entertainment use determines how that person will value or devalue a text. How can we account for these differences, or in fact, can we at all? This quandary points to the present inadequacy in approaches to determining literary use and value. The tension between the desire to justify literature through use and the difficulty of accounting for discrepancies permeates defenses of literature, and ultimately leads to my conclusion that use is inadequate to defending literature.



## Chapter 2: What *is* Literature Good For?

Although defenses of literature—especially in the question “what is literature good for?”—almost exclusively rely on use as a precondition for literature’s value, critics rarely agree on what exactly that use might be. Literature can be, and has been, used in a large number of variant and disparate ways: how can we possibly account for all the variety, which ranges from literature’s function as anthropological study to literature as an object of beauty to the usefulness of literature as an economic commodity? Is it even possible to encompass every way that literature has been, is, or will be used in the brief space allotted in the following pages? I hope to account for this range of possibility, not by identifying every single way that literature has been or will be used over time, but by discussing the uses of literature within five main categories. Each of the five subsections examines one argument, or thesis, for literature’s usefulness as an implicit or explicit means of defending literature’s value. The first thesis examines the argument that literature serves as means of facilitating, replacing, or supplementing human relationships. The second thesis considers how literature, both through ideological persuasion and social status, can serve as a means of effecting change within society, whether politically, economically, or socially. The third thesis explores the role of literature in disseminating knowledge, ranging from historical fact to universal truth. The fourth thesis delves into arguments for literature as a source of pleasure; although this pleasure is often intended for another use, such as moral improvement. The fifth and final thesis briefly considers the idea that literature is good for ethical or moral improvement before turning to a consideration of specificity of form guaranteeing a general kind of moralizing. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that none of these categories—nor, therefore, the uses they encompass—provide a sufficient defense of literature’s value.

## **Thesis 1: Literature as Fulfilling Social Needs**

The idea that literature in some way connects people—whether a reader with an author, a reader with humanity as a whole, or a reader with other readers—is often used as an argument for literature’s value, as in the works of William Wordsworth and Megan Sweeney, to name but a few. If literature serves to connect and communicate—whether drawing together different readers of the same text, readers and their or another culture, readers and an author, or even humanity with itself in general—then literature is valuable in that it can supplement or substitute for human relationship. However, I want to argue that as a defense of literature, the idea that literature serves to fulfill social needs is inadequate. Parsing the personality of an author from a text, for example, is very difficult, and depends largely on interpretative conjecture; understanding humanity as whole through a given text is even more arduous, as texts do not provide explicit depictions of humanity in a universal sense. Ultimately, human relationship itself is more satisfying for fulfilling social needs, as actual interaction involves the response—i.e., communication—of the other, something which a text, as inanimate, simply cannot provide.

Megan Sweeney’s book, *Reading is My Window*, about practices of reading in women’s penitentiaries, provides a poignant example of how literature can fulfill social needs: prisons, as a space which is essentially void of normal social communication and relationship, offer an especially dramatic backdrop for examining the role of literature in stimulating relationships. The book opens with the following epigraphs, which highlight the ways in which literature serves to foster or fulfill social needs:

“Ordinary people don’t know how much books can mean to someone who’s cooped up.”—Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*

“Books are a lifeline to people in here. We live life vicariously through books.”—  
Caesar, State Correctional Institution at Muncy

In the absence of actual social relations literature can assume the role of human relationship. Literary works in this conception serve as a replacement for human bonds, literally speaking to their readers and offering advice and feedback. Literature can also serve to connect one person with another, as vicarious existence or cultural symbol. These quotes emphasize the importance of literature as it is used to fulfill social needs or desires, especially as a replacement for missing human interaction.

While prisons are not the only situations in which this use of literature is relevant, *Reading is My Window* offers an important example of how reading literature fosters social connections in a place typically dissociated and alienated from society. Sweeney describes her study of reading and reading groups in women’s prisons as follows:

Drawing on extensive individual interviews and group discussions that I conducted with ninety-four women imprisoned in North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, *Reading is My Window* explores how some women prisoners use the limited reading materials available to them in creative and important ways: to come to terms with their pasts, to negotiate their present experiences, and to reach toward different futures.<sup>31</sup>

Sweeney examines the reading and discussion of three categories of books: “narratives of victimization, African-American urban fiction, and self-help and inspirational texts.”<sup>32</sup> These categories were chosen due to their popularity with the women inmates as books which spoke to their personal experiences, offered connection with cultural symbols, authors, or even other

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<sup>31</sup> Megan Sweeney, *Reading is My Window*, (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Sweeney 2

readers, or provided practical advice. Through these books, interviewed inmates expressed a sense of not only reconnecting with society, but of situating their own place within society through their connections with one another and the books they read. In other words, literature can mediate not only how one frames one's existence, but how one fits within humanity as a whole.

The book's title expresses the importance of literature, as experienced through reading, for replacing or supplementing society: "The phrase 'reading is my window'—coined by a woman named Denise—underscores how reading can counter forces of isolation, abandonment, and dehumanization by serving as an opening to other people, ideas, and the world outside the prison."<sup>33</sup> According to this claim, literature is imbued with the voices of people, voices which can be accessed through the process of reading. Literature becomes a connector between its reader and cultures, people, and thoughts through its medium of language. Through this facilitated relationship, reading is used to counter the "social death [of imprisonment]...and to achieve critical insight, self-development, and even transformation."<sup>34</sup> Through connection, reflection is made possible. As a whole, the books read in Sweeney's study "enabled interaction and dialogue, and they fostered women's engagements with characters, with other readers, with the outside world, and with developing versions of themselves."<sup>35</sup> In addition to connecting readers with humanity as a whole, reading enables a kind of self-communication through which the reader can parse his or her own experiences of themselves.

Literature can also serve as communication between different readers of the same text. By experiencing a given text, then communicating about that experience with another person—

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<sup>33</sup> Sweeney 3

<sup>34</sup> Sweeney 4

<sup>35</sup> Sweeney 228

whose experiences will vary in some way—the text can be a conduit for conversation and thereby human relationships. This is especially important in the setting of prisons, “in an environment that thwarts possibilities for interpersonal connection with people inside and outside prison, books often serve as ‘a carrier of relationships.’”<sup>36</sup> By reading and then reflecting on that experience with another person, literature acts as “a kind of connective tissue” which enables a bond between readers.<sup>37</sup> Different readers can thus communicate through and about the same text, using the text to relate to one another.

This connective tissue exists not only between readers, but also between the author and the reader, a claim especially relevant in psychoanalytic analyses of literary texts. There is a long-standing argument that through reading a given work literature, one can come know the psyche of the author of that work. According to William Wordsworth, this connection is as much one between author and reader as it is with humanity, as distilled by the author:

[A Poet] is a man speaking to men... So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure.<sup>38</sup>

As William Wordsworth points out in this excerpt from his “Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*” (1801), literature is often a means of conveying speech between persons, albeit in a general, rather than personal, way. The Poet, according to Wordsworth, is the connector between men,

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<sup>36</sup> Sweeney 79

<sup>37</sup> Sweeney 228

<sup>38</sup> William Wordsworth, “Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*,” *William Wordsworth*, Ed. Stephen Gill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 603-404.

dictating, rather than creating new communication, which ultimately gives enjoyment or pleasure to the reader. The idea that through a text, one can gain an understanding, either of humanity as a whole or of the author, is a common one.

However, the attempt to parse a writer's psyche from a given text is an imperfect and incomplete act at best, because a text does not equal the explicit personality and voice of the author. According to Roland Barthes, "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity [which wrote it]." <sup>39</sup> The author is dead, inaccessible, lost to the text itself. Gaining a sense of an author is in fact a constructive act, rather than a revelation, because "as soon as a fact is narrated...the author enters into his own death, writing begins." <sup>40</sup> In order for there to even be a reader—who makes his or her own construction of the text, reading it from his or her own unique and individual perspective—the author must disappear from the equation. Thus the author is dead: "the birth of the reader must be at the death of the Author." <sup>41</sup>

Through the death of the author, the reader comes alive: the reader, who, through the text, can reflect on him- or herself, using literature for self-reflexive communication. Critical engagement with one's own self is especially vital in the case of women's prisons, in which reflection and critical analysis of one's own circumstances are eclipsed by a rote message of right and wrong pervading the justice system, a message which is often complicated by other factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender. Thus literature, particularly in but not limited to narratives of victimization and the inspirational stories found in self-help books, is

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<sup>39</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Barthes 148

especially useful in providing examples of how to develop a sense of self, and to critically examine one's own self: the "women [in prisons] use these narratives to facilitate self-reflection."<sup>42</sup> The genre of self-help in particular "involves an ongoing journey or narrative unfolding, a long-term process of claiming authorship of one's life and 'restoring' or rescripting one's past and future experiences."<sup>43</sup> by reading literature, the reader acts as creator both in reading the text and by shaping his or her own experience in relation to the text.

By reflecting on oneself in the acts of reading and also telling stories, one also gains an understanding of one's own position in history and culture: "bell hooks argues that 'story-telling becomes a process of historicization. It does not remove women from history but enables us to see ourselves as a part of history.'"<sup>44</sup> Literature is also a means of connecting its reader with a culture, whether one's own, as a means of understanding one's own social expectations and norms, or with another culture, providing an experience of an "other," non-familiar set of cultural norms. Furthermore, literature can be used both as a way of comprehending the culture presented in a given text, and more abstractly as a cultural reference within one's own culture.

It is important to note that Sweeney's study—as well as this section of the thesis—focuses not only on the reading of literature, but on communication through and about literature through facilitated discussions, similar to book clubs and reading groups. Literature itself acts as a catalyst for conversation about literature. The communication instigated between the women inmates in Sweeney's study is only rendered possible by their reading of literature, and thus literature becomes literal food for thought and discussion. Literature then can be a catalyst for communication between people, even it is itself non-human. But is this function universal? Does

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<sup>42</sup> Sweeney 127

<sup>43</sup> Sweeney 204

<sup>44</sup> Sweeney 126

every text one reads connect one with someone else? Is this true of all circumstances, times, and places? And does it even really connect you, or this an illusion of connection which is actually construction or an imaginative leap on the part of the reader?

Even if literature's use is to fulfill social needs, an obvious counterargument is that the best way of fulfilling social needs is by actual human relationships and communication: if the choice is between an actual person and a work of literature, the real person surely offers fuller social satisfaction because a person can respond and reciprocate, where a text is inanimate. Similarly, one text is different to every person, and the social benefit gained from a given text may depend immensely on one's own circumstances. Sweeney acknowledges the limitations on the social use of these texts, especially in such a specific example such as women's prisons: she always notes how one text may give one inmate a strong sense of cultural community, while for another that same text has no such effect. Instead, her point is that this is one way in which literature can be used for the social benefit of its reader. Again though, not every reader of these texts in the study gained any social benefit. Rather the point of Sweeney's study is freedom—both of access to books, and of the experience of relationship— and the possible power of literature to deepen the lives of its readers. Similarly, I argue that the value of literature is its freedom of meaning, which allows the reader to frame his or her own experiences through the text. But what does this deepening depend on? What determines how a text will affect a given reader? These questions resonate through the third part of this thesis, which examines how the reader determines the effects of a text, rather than the text determining the reader's fulfillment.



## **Thesis 2: Literature (for and) as Power**

One way in which literature has been used throughout history is as a means of ideological control and change, influencing society, not as a means of social connection, but as persuasion. To put it another way, arguably literature is uniquely useful for exerting control or effecting change on individual, societal, or structural behaviors, acting as ideological persuasion to influence society. Literature and literary practice often serve as means of acquiring, maintaining, or disseminating power, whether for instilling social virtues, effecting change in a political or moral system, asserting the authority of public figures, or as an economic resource. How literature is read and approached can influence how one thinks and relates to society. A given text can lend credence to or criticize worldviews, changing how people relate to the world based on their reading. The staggering influence of bestsellers, for example, highlights the important role that literature plays in determining who holds social, political, and economic power in our society. However, this influence is rarely consistent, because it relies on literature as subset of culture and society for the development and maintenance of power, emphasizing not any given text itself, but the aura and status ascribed to a text by those doing the controlling or effecting change. Furthermore, literature is not uniquely capable of ideological persuasion, because texts often present multiple, even contradictory perspectives simultaneously, perspectives which are often implicitly rather than explicitly stated.

At first consideration, literature does not seem like a likely candidate for reinforcing or creating political power, as its political messages, if any, are generally veiled or limited to the opinion of the individual author. Yet literature can both criticize and confirm various political systems, not only through more overt genres as satire, but also through the implicit or explicit perspectives evident in literary works. Not only individual texts, but literature as a whole can

serve to simultaneously reinforce and question a given political system. In her book, *Provoking Democracy: Why We Need the Arts*, Caroline Levine posits that art—including literature—influences the political system, serving as a higher authority which reinforces and questions key values. A specific type of art is uniquely suited to this duality of affirmation and doubting: avant-garde art, including avant-garde literature, is especially suited to speaking of and toward a better political system by defying and provoking change in that same system. Although by “deliberately defying popular tastes, [the arts] appear evidently anti-democratic,” they reinforce the importance and relevance of freedom of speech, a key property of democracy.<sup>45</sup> According to Levine, art plays a key role in shaping social opinions and responding to social change:

The growing power of mass culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prompted both an artistic and a political response: avant-garde artists began to distance themselves from popular pressures and mainstream tastes, while political thinkers increasingly articulated the fear that homogenizing mass culture posed a significant threat to independence of thought—the freedom to articulate critical and dissenting views.<sup>46</sup>

Art and politics are parallel in their response to social and cultural changes: both aim to influence societal structure through the art of persuasion and argumentation. By critiquing practiced democracy, works of avant-garde art enable a reiteration of the ideals of democracy: as a representation of all voices, the ideal form of democracy maintains minority as well as majority opinions. In this specific case,

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<sup>45</sup> Caroline Levine, *Provoking Democracy: Why We Need the Arts*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 11.

<sup>46</sup> Levine 15

[the] constant movement back and forth between majority and minority perspectives is exactly what makes [art] an effective instrument of democracy: the logic of the avant-garde...involves the perpetual and dynamic process of challenging the mainstream to incorporate difference and dissent.<sup>47</sup>

Art's challenge to majority perspectives is also, paradoxically, an affirmation. By critiquing the political system of democracy, avant-garde literature is able to narrate the world and simultaneously effect change within it. Democracy, as an entity of power, is only possible, according to Levine, because the avant-garde exists to reiterate the minority voice.

As a defense of literature, this schema is one which limits valuable art to a specific kind: according to Levine, only avant-garde art and literature are capable of acting as “friendly enemy,” and the only political system affected is democracy. The formal limits on type of literature do not allow for defenses of any non-avant-garde literature. Of course, Levine's argument is specifically interested in the relationship between art and democracy, and thus specificity need not be a downfall here. Rather, the largest question which her study raises—but does not answer—is how effective avant-garde art is at both critiquing and serving democracy. In general, avant-garde art is regarded only by the few, rather than the mass of society, and even when it is regarded, its impact does not necessarily make any visible change to the political system. This effect is ideal, rather than actually enacted in the present system of democracy as it stands.

One means of defending literature's value is to say that it has the ability to effect social and political change through ideological persuasion. This work is subtle, rather than necessarily propagandist: even propagandist literature functions on multiple levels, and any change it effects

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<sup>47</sup> Levine 23

its determined by its ability to represent the world through a given ideological lens. By representing a different world—one which is better or worse than the present—literature arguably promotes a desire for change, followed hypothetically by a change in behavior in its readers. Thus literature is a means of revolutionary power, the power to change present social structures and behaviors for the better.

Where Levine posits a view of art as challenging the political system, and thereby effecting change within it, Jacques Barzun describes how art is redemptory from the issues of political systems and social structures in his series of lectures, *The Use and Abuse of Art*: by changing the world, art is supposedly a means of redemption from any negative circumstances, whether personal, ethical, or general. Barzun examines the many different ways in which art can offer redemption from the problems of the world, concluding with social revolution:

The next and last promise of redemption differs totally from the preceding [religious, ethical, and moral]. It is that offered by revolutionary art, in the sense of art dedicated to bringing about political revolution. Calling a *style* or technique of art revolutionary by itself signifies only that it appears new and opposed to former styles. *Political*-revolutionary art is a logical and practical application of the discovery that art has the power to foment hatred of the world we live in.<sup>48</sup>

Barzun's point is that literature can instigate change, not only formally, as in the creation of new styles, but also in the way that its readers view the world: because literature can criticize and argue, it is uniquely able to stimulate ideological or perspectival change towards dissatisfaction.

This argumentative power is aimed at shifting how one views the world. Barzun explains:

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<sup>48</sup> Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art. The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*. Bollingen Series xxxv.22, (The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.: Princeton University Press, 1973) 82-83.

This power acts in two ways—by creating disgust through depicting what is and by creating hope through depicting a better life. Revolutionary salvation from the present may even be promoted by showing the actual as so abominable that any other state is to be preferred.<sup>49</sup>

Literature's power—and its value—is in its ability to create a vision of change by narrating the world in a specific way. Narration is therefore a means not merely of structuring events, but of doing so in such a way that one's perspective is altered towards an understanding of present experience as negative, even where previously reality was thought normal or even good.

One example of this intention of ideological persuasion in literature is William Morris' novel *News From Nowhere* (1890). The novel presents a utopian world envisioned in a dream by the protagonist, William Guest, a man from Morris' time period (the present day at that time). Within the dream, the protagonist becomes convinced that he must carry the message of the utopian world—which is to live life in harmony and aesthetic beauty—back to his own industrialized and alienated society. In Morris' world, art is tantamount: one of the denizens of the utopian world, who witnessed the change from industrial society, explains that “The art or work-pleasure sprung from a kind of instinct among people to do the best they could with the work in hand...a craving for beauty seemed to awaken in men's minds, and they began to ornament the wares they made.”<sup>50</sup> This aesthetic vision is clearly meant to promote desire for change in Morris' own contemporaries and culture by showing them both the problems of their industrial society and the possibility of aesthetic existence, which would result, according to Morris, in utopia. Simultaneously, Morris is responding to arguments against Socialism by narrating his contemporary world as not only extremely troubled, but one which can only be

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> William Morris, *News From Nowhere*, (Boston: Roberts brothers, 1890) 178.

redeemed through his specific type of aesthetic Socialism. Not only does Morris attempt to provoke ideological change in general, he proposes and reasons through a specific way in which this change can be redemptive.

However, we are not at present living in an aesthetically-based Socialist world, nor did the society of his time especially heed Morris's novel, which begs the question: how successful is literature's persuasive endeavor? Furthermore, this novel's role in promoting social revolution is paradoxical: while encouraging art and aesthetic pleasure through the medium of literature, Morris discourages the reading and writing of literature. In his utopian world, as in Plato's ideal republic, books are loathsome, even harmful, and children are discouraged from reading and writing.<sup>51</sup> One of the characters exclaims in protest to her grandfather's constant reading, "Books, books! When will you understand that it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much?"<sup>52</sup> Thus literature is discouraged, even though this message is dictated through the medium of literature. How can we trust this ideological work when it simultaneously undermines its own endeavor? Literature can both persuade and question: the clarity of its underlying ideological message, therefore, is often difficult—even impossible—to decipher.

The difficulty with the idea that literature instigates change by presenting a better, more admirable reality, is problematized by the simple fact that most literature does not present utopias, or even societies better than our own. In fact, many texts portray a rather worse world than our own: even the classical epics such as Homer's *Iliad* are rife with tragedy, anger, sorrow, strife, and the issues that arise from the constant and general decay of societal structures. In an incredibly simplistic view, a text like the *Iliad* promotes violence—not a characteristic usually

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<sup>51</sup> Morris 44-46

<sup>52</sup> Morris 201

cited for ideal society. And who would want to live in the world of Kafka's short stories, riddled as they are with chaos, pain, and alienation? In addition, literature offers complicated perspectives, in which society is good and bad; multiple ideologies may be manifest in any given work at the same time. How can literature persuade the reader towards multiple different, even contradictory views at the same time? Understanding literature as ideologically persuasive is hampered by literature's ability to express multiple perspectives.

It may not be that complete structural revolution is literature's function, but literature does play an important role in influencing how and what people think. Through this influence, literature is an agent of social power and authority: if you control literature, or can use it adeptly, you can change how people think and exist in society. Not only can you change thought within society, but through literature it is possible to control it. This was the presumption behind the use of English literature in the colonization of India, as described by Gauri Viswanathan in *Masks of Conquest*, in which British officials attempted to enforce their own cultural system through the teaching of reading and studying English literature.

Literature can be "an instrument of ideology:" literature's ability to ideologically persuade can be joined with a specifically framed study of literature to execute social control, especially in this example of the English colonization attempts in India.<sup>53</sup> Literature, often associated with moral improvement, served as a means of instilling key virtues in Britain's Indian subjects. Viswanathan describes the study of literature as social control as follows:

The history of education in British India shows that certain humanistic functions traditionally associated with literature—for example, the shaping of character or the development of the aesthetic sense or the disciplines of ethical thinking—were

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<sup>53</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 4.

considered essential to the processes of sociopolitical control by the guardians of the same tradition.<sup>54</sup>

By teaching English literature, and promoting a knowledge of English literature as key to social and political success, British administrators attempted to instill Western—specifically, British—ideas in the Indian populace, and thereby control and change social behavior, both on an individual scale and at the structural level. Furthermore, English literature replaced the role of institutional religion by creating a model of values and practices, as Viswanathan explains:

the inadequacy of the English model resulted in fresh pressure being applied to a seemingly innocuous and not yet fully formed discipline, English literature, to perform the functions of those social institutions (such as the church) that, in England, served as the chief disseminators of value, tradition, and authority.<sup>55</sup>

In a sense, and in some contexts, then, literature can serve as a guiding entity, along the same pattern as religious institution, for determining social behaviors, thereby acting as a source of power through influence. Furthermore, in 1844 Lord Hardinge, a British official overseeing the colonization efforts “passed a resolution assuring preference in the selection for public office to Indians who had distinguished themselves in the study of European literature. With this act he gave literary study a material and worldly motive.”<sup>56</sup> Thus by promoting literature and its study as part of successful life under British rule, colonization efforts used literature as a means of providing and acquiring power, specifically economic and social.

While ultimately these socialization efforts through literature were largely unsuccessful, the fact that they stressed English literature foreshadows a later push in the study and power of

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<sup>54</sup> Viswanathan 3

<sup>55</sup> Viswanathan 7

<sup>56</sup> Viswanathan 89



literature and literature studies: the Great Books programs, which grew out of a desire for a universal, humanist educative system in the mid-1900s, emphasized the importance of studying the “Great Books,” the classics of the Western World, as a means of gaining social prestige. This objectification and commodification of literature as the supposed embodiment of Western culture was aimed a kind of pacification through homogenization: ‘Under the influence of the Great Books...’[t]he Marxist launched fewer manifestoes. The arguer stepped down from his soap box. The truck drive grew less arrogant, the immigrant less humble.’<sup>57</sup> The Great Books, as a means of understanding and situating works of literature, were aimed at a reification of Western cultural values; historian Benjamin McArthur states that the Great Books programs reinforced “‘the immutable tenets laid forth by the great works of our Western tradition...[a] message that won a wide hearing in a nation hungry for guidance.’”<sup>58</sup> Literature, as an entity which is categorized through supposed “greatness,” serves to reiterate the ideological power of those doing the categorizing.

The Great Books were also an economic venture, by which the University of Chicago and the Encyclopedia Britannica hoped to capitalize on the status of the “classics.” Despite its failure as an economic venture, the story of the Great Books indicates the importance of culture—especially literary culture—as a means of obtaining economic power. The phenomenon of bestsellers today illustrates how literature actually can accrue economic wealth, status, and authority within current society. Literature—whether read or not—becomes a source of income and fame for the author through its publishing and subsequent purchasing by consumers.

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<sup>57</sup> Alex Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2008) 22.

<sup>58</sup> Beam 70

Through its reiterations in popular culture, a given book can become a cult phenomenon, accruing further status, importance, and wealth for the author.

What about the text itself? These examples, especially the economic and social value of literature focus on the reputation of a text, its status and authority, rather than the text itself; where these examples do focus on the ideological power of the text, reception thereto is limited, as in the case of avant-garde's influence on democracy, for example. Any intentions for power on the part of literature, whether to influence social or political opinion, change structural systems, or acquire economic authority and status, are unequal to actual power or influence. In other words, even if the purpose of literature—and thus its value—is to acquire, maintain, or disseminate power, then this purpose is fulfilled only in intention, rather than in actuality, because literature is not essentially ideological. As these cases have shown, literature's role in power is rarely effective, and when it is, as in the case of bestsellers, it relies on other factors and entities such as consumer taste or advertising in order to act as or narrate power.

### **Thesis 3: Literature as History**

A common argument for the value of literature, especially in educational settings, is that through literature you acquire some kind of knowledge of history. Whether this is historical fact, anthropological understanding, cultural knowledge, a moral lesson, a factual knowledge of reality, or an inherent truth about the universe, a given text supposedly reveals some information or truth. Educational systems rely on this truth: we study texts to gain knowledge, perhaps of a past culture, perhaps as a reflection on our present world, perhaps of universal or moral truth

applicable to all of humanity. This knowledge is complicated by the tension between fact and fiction: what is reality, and what do we learn about it from fictional stories? Also, how can we separate out the fictional elements of nonfiction, and is it even possible to do so? What one discovers is that knowledge gained from literature is at best incomplete, skewed by bias, and ultimately dependent on affirmation by other sources.

These questions are especially relevant in the case of the *The Icelandic Sagas*—do they represent historical and anthropological fact, or a fictionalized, mythological history of a people? The Sagas, which comprise a rather large and somewhat variable canon of medieval Icelandic literature, which despite depicting the events of the settlement of Iceland in 870 until the period of Christianization following the year 1000, were mostly composed during the thirteenth and fourteenth century. While the accounts include confirmed historical events, they also contain supernatural elements, as well as clearly fictional characters and plot lines. Their general subject is Iceland, although some sagas deal with the greater Norse world. This is the literature of the Vikings become settlers, although these traditional oral accounts and stories were recorded several centuries later. As such, their accounts reflect both the earlier Viking period as well as the viewpoint of the Christianized thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Furthermore, the sagas vacillate between seemingly pure historical account and heavily mythological elements, often encasing stories of magic and the supernatural within purported histories. Thus *The Sagas of the Icelanders* provide an apt example of the tension between fact and fiction: as stories which are often used to gain anthropological and historical knowledge, they are simultaneously considered fictional works, rife as they are with mythological and supernatural elements.

The fact that the sagas were written down so many centuries after the events described took place creates a gap between the perspective of the writers and the perspective of the

characters in the sagas. In other words, bias in the writing of the sagas creates a particular difficulty in sorting the various perspectives present in the texts: in addition to the difference in time period, the men writing down the sagas were Christian, rather than the pre-Christian religion of Iceland's early settlers. The medieval Christian writers generally deemphasize elements of Viking religion, or attempt to explain events according to their own perspective. Furthermore, no one is certain exactly how and through whom the stories originated: while it is generally agreed that they were oral tales passed down over the centuries, it is possible that they were actually inventions on the part of the sagas' writers. At the very least, the oral tales must have changed over time, and even if the sagas were recorded exactly, their form must invariably differ from the original tales.

Yet the sagas are written as detailed historical description of the early Icelandic settlers: Robert Kellogg suggests that they comprise "a prose fiction in medieval Iceland that was fluent, nuanced and seriously occupied with the legal, moral and political life of a whole society of ordinary people."<sup>59</sup> The depictions in the sagas of the specific events in the lives of these "ordinary people" are confirmed by other historical texts, including extensive legal documents which confirm the yearly meeting of the Althing, an event heavily described in the sagas, at which all the laws of the early Icelanders were recited out and legal cases decided.<sup>60</sup> In fact, many such events are consistent with other sources,

including the settlement of Iceland, the establishment of a national government, the testing of its laws and constitution, the discovery of Greenland and North America and the conversion to Christianity. Many of those great events can be confirmed by archaeology and the testimony of history writing in other languages.

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Kellogg, "Introduction," *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, (New York: Penguin, 2000) xxi.

<sup>60</sup> Kellogg xxiii

By and large they must have happened more or less as they are said to happen in the fictional worlds of the sagas.<sup>61</sup>

Archaeological evidence serves as a particularly impressive source of confirmation, as it offers a relatively concrete support, as opposed to the description of events in other contemporary texts: the most notable archaeological evidence is the find at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, whose distinctly Viking artifacts and building remains, dated to approximately 1000, confirm the discovery of America by either Leif Erikson or a similar figure, as described in "The Saga of the Greenlanders" and "Erik the Red's Saga."

These two sagas in particular stress the overlap of factual knowledge and mythical history: in "Erik the Red's Saga," for example, one of the women settling Newfoundland uses pagan sorcery to see the future of their journey, which is recounted in the midst of detailed descriptions of the flora and fauna of Newfoundland. These supernatural elements must either be reinterpreted as real events which the characters understood as supernatural or mythological, or the sagas must at least contain elements of fiction or exaggeration. Kellogg argues that by using meticulous detail and referencing not only well-known historical events, but also cultural changes, the writers of these sagas aspired to lend historical credence to essentially fictional tales:

Such an apparently painstaking effort at recording variant accounts, citing the evidence of a place-name and tracing the relationship between a distant historical past and the 'present-time' is a characteristic feature of saga style, an aspect of a narrative art which aspires to counterfeit reality.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Kellogg xxix

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

The point here is not that everything in the sagas is therefore fictional: rather, historical fact is used to frame and highlight the fictional elements in the sagas. By offering confirmable facts, the writer situates the saga within a tradition and a historical period, while simultaneously situating the Icelandic people within history as a whole: “[the Sagas of the Icelanders] constitute a story, a national myth, within which the more local and detailed stories of the individual *Islendinga sogur* [sagas] take shape.”<sup>63</sup> Factual detail and accuracy is less important than the national identity which the canon of sagas provides.

Where fact is inaccurate, the sagas possibly provide a depiction of contemporary society, delineating how the early Icelanders viewed the world around them, and what cultural practices they followed. In other words, the sagas portray an anthropological knowledge, through which the reader is meant to learn what composed early Icelandic culture, rather than the histories of specific individuals or events. Accounts of magic, runic curses and spells, prophecy, and the supernatural are then viewed, not as intrinsically fictional elements, but rather as depictions of early Icelandic cultural practices, in which characters represent types rather than historical figures. If historical details are not accurate, *per se*, then the truth that is meant to be gained from literature is nonetheless representative: by depicting typified characters and situations, the sagas can serve as kinds of moral tales, although whether the moral knowledge gained is pagan or Christian—or both—is largely debated. If they are moral tales at all, it is unclear what the intended message is, because the blurring of these two religions often creates contradictory values within a given saga.

Perhaps the truth we find in the Sagas is not factual, but universal: through them we gain an understanding of how the world works, philosophically speaking. Art has longed been argued

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

to reveal universal truth, whether this means truth about humanity, spiritual truth, or truth as in a way of thinking. Jacques Barzun highlights the relationship between art and truth:

Art has always been embroiled in the question of truth, but it has never been in such a muddle as today. When Aristotle affirmed that poetry was truer than history, he meant that Greek drama offered representative cases in clarified form. Art supplied a more general truth than history...For representative art does not copy, it imitates; that is, renders in such a way as to make the understanding of its subject deeper, clearer, or more lasting.<sup>64</sup>

Truth is thus a means of understanding, rather than any kind of concrete knowledge; truth acts as a perpetual development of knowledge. Similarly, William Wordsworth describes art as a means to universal truth of and about humanity. He describes art as a means to universal truth of and about humanity. He describes art as a means to universal truth of and about humanity. He argues that the universal truth provided by poetry, as a specific subset of literature, is a knowledge of universal and human feelings: “the reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings.”<sup>65</sup> In contrast to historical and factual truth, this truth of feelings is general, expressing a way of understanding the world: “Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion.”<sup>66</sup> Applied to the example of the *Sagas of the Icelanders*, the truth gained is one wrought by the emotional import of the stories, which provides an understanding of humanity as a whole. What exactly this might

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<sup>64</sup> Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art. The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*, Bollingen Series xxxv.22, (The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.: Princeton University Press, 1973) 99.

<sup>65</sup> Wordsworth 594

<sup>66</sup> Wordsworth 605

be, however, is subject to debate, complicated by the many layers of perspective both in the sagas and in the approach of any given reader.

The sagas are, of course, only one example of a literary text which is used as—and argued to be—a source of knowledge, although what that knowledge is varies. But they offer a case study of how literature is used—and argued to be intended—for gaining historical, cultural, anthropological, ideological, or universal knowledge. The tension between fact and fiction that dominates the sagas permeates every literary text, although some texts lend themselves more overtly toward one or the other. In any case, the knowledge gained from any given text depends largely upon what the reader expects to find there, and is limited by the fact that the text itself constantly evades classification by knowledge. That texts leave room for interpretation simultaneously prevents their being a source of pure knowledge or truth and allows texts to be interpreted and argued in many different ways.

#### **Thesis 4: Literature as Aesthetic Pleasure**

The idea that literature provides a unique truth about the world, as discussed in the section above, is strongly tied to aesthetic considerations of literature. As John Keats famously wrote in “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” “beauty is truth, truth beauty, -- that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (1819). The connection between the two has permeated critical thought about art and literature arguably since their beginnings; the beauty of a given work, which is associated with pleasure, is often thought to be an indication and even explication of the truth to be found in that given work. According to this Keats, art is valuable because it is simultaneously



beautiful and truthful: “the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from its being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth.”<sup>67</sup> Beauty figures as that which the work uniquely contains but also speaks to the reader, to the exclusion of any immediately practical concerns: Keats argues that “with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.”<sup>68</sup> Any other concerns are removed in light of Beauty, but only when the work is great: Keats distinguishes between classes of poets, and thereby classes of works, which produce the ideal effect of Beauty in varying degrees. Only great poets are capable of emphasizing beauty to the exclusion of all else, and yet simultaneously, “Poetry should great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.”<sup>69</sup> The text must be both great and subtle in order for it to engage the reader with its beauty and evoke some kind of truth.

However, what exactly this truth might be, or what beauty entails, varies from critic to critic, and furthermore, depends on individual preference. To argue that a work is valuable because it is aesthetically pleasing must either be relative to the individual, or one must classify aesthetic judgments and/or works. By saying that one aesthetic judgment is more sound than another, or one work more beautiful than another, aesthetics inadvertently lends itself to a kind of elitism, in which certain judgments—and therefore also those making the judgments—or works are better than others. Furthermore, different time periods and cultures have different standards for beauty: how can one select among them to determine a standard without excluding any perspectives based on one’s own dominant perspectives? Because it is impossible to account for all understandings of beauty within a single standard, and because it inadvertently defends it

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<sup>67</sup> John Keats, *Selected Letters*, ed. John Mee, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 41.

<sup>68</sup> Keats 43

<sup>69</sup> Keats 61

through elitism, beauty is inadequate as a defense of literature. The one exception to this is Walter Pater's understanding of aesthetic enjoyment as relative, dependent on the individual: I hope to suggest that Pater's approach, in which what literature provides depends entirely on the individual, gestures at a convincing defense of literature via aesthetics.

Viewing literature as good for aesthetic enjoyment—whether relative to the individual or not—depends on a freedom from practical use, unlike the three previous theses. Beauty, as something which is aimed at deepening the quality of one's experiences, must be free from any concerns of experience in a physical sense: Jacques Barzun states that “utility...lowers the gaze of men to ignoble things. Art is noble through being useless; that is, useless for keeping the body alive, which always involves struggle over matter.”<sup>70</sup> Uselessness, as a freedom from practical utility, is a direct correlation of aesthetic enjoyment. The function of aesthetic pleasure is reflexive: aesthetic enjoyment, as enriching experience, is not practical, not useful for any other purpose than experience itself. According to Barzun, as a critic representative of aesthetic thought in general, literature's value derives from its ability to give the reader (or the author) some kind of pleasure, which in turn is valuable for enriching experience.

An important question that this raises is how, and if, this enjoyment effects different readers: different readers have different aesthetic preferences, and while the *Iliad*, for example, might improve one person's experience, another may find it neutral or even dislike it. This question of taste requires some kind of standard for aesthetic beauty—universal qualities which will dictate whether or not a work will create aesthetic pleasure—or a standard for reading which will create pure aesthetic enjoyment. Because not every reader reacts in the same way or to the same degree to any given work, either one reader must not appreciate aesthetics to the same

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<sup>70</sup> Barzun 79

degree, or their aesthetic enjoyment must be relative. The issue with the latter is that it classifies people by their ability to appreciate the aesthetic pleasures of literature. Even within the Romantic period, when aesthetic concerns were of utmost importance, critics disagree widely on what exactly constitutes beauty and aesthetic enjoyment. The improvement and the pleasure to be gained from beauty are variable and must instead be largely dependent on the individual's response to any given work: because defending literature as having unique and universal aesthetic standards is limited by differences in individual approach, such a defense must instead argue that aesthetic judgments are relative.

This is why many aesthetic critics tie beauty and aesthetic enjoyment to moral influence as a means of defending literature as still exercising a practical function. While this influence is not usually didactic, aesthetic pleasure is moralizing in that it improves an individual's humanity or mental capabilities. In other words, aesthetic pleasure leads to a moral improvement which emphasizes the ability to think and feel with greater connection to humanity as a whole. Friedrich Schiller, for example, argues that the contemplation of beauty—which he argues is not physically sensuous—leads to an improved rational faculty, thereby developing one's moral senses as well: "Beauty is a subject which has direct connexion with all that is best in human happiness...and what is noblest in our moral nature."<sup>71</sup> Aesthetics, which is generally associated with sensuous enjoyment—art works speak to one's senses first in their immediate impressions, and later to one's mind through their subjects—is paradoxically necessary for its antithesis, rational thought: "there is no other way of making a sensuous man rational except by first making him aesthetic."<sup>72</sup> For Schiller, rational thought is the cornerstone of humanity, because it

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<sup>71</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a series of letters*, Trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1982) 3.

<sup>72</sup> Schiller 159

is free from any sensuous distractions. Beauty is uniquely capable of encouraging rational thought, because it is “the work of free contemplation, and with it do we indeed enter upon the world of ideas.”<sup>73</sup> Because beauty enables one to freely and rationally contemplate ideas, “the unfailling effect of Beauty is freedom from passion.”<sup>74</sup> Through the development of rational thought, beauty encourages a lifestyle which is morally improved, and beauty itself becomes a mode of living: “Thus beauty is indeed form, because we contemplate it, but it is at the same time life, because we feel it...it is at once a state of our being an activity we perform.”<sup>75</sup> Beauty is simultaneously in the aesthetic work—as form—but is also a means of accessing a type of thinking, and thereby living. Rather than ethical moralizing, beauty perpetuates a lifestyle which is rational and thereby moral in an intellectual sense.

Ultimately, Schiller’s trajectory actually represents a use of literature for moralizing, rather than literature for the sole purpose of aesthetics. Unless Beauty is useful for some other end, such as truth or moral improvement, critics have a great deal of trouble defending it as the reason literature is valuable. As this section has already indicated, what is aesthetically pleasing to a given person is dependent on their own tastes, influenced by their background, culture, and identities. Aesthetic pleasure is not universal, or is only universal in that every person finds something aesthetically pleasing, although that something might be different for everyone. This variance plays a key role in the arguments of Walter Pater, who proposes a more general improvement to be gained from art, one which is free of any moral concerns, but rather depends on individual experience.

Pater advocates an understanding of beauty which is determined by individual taste:

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<sup>73</sup> Schiller 185

<sup>74</sup> Schiller 157

<sup>75</sup> Schiller 187

Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics.<sup>76</sup>

Paradoxically, to understand beauty in the most concrete and definitive way, one must acknowledge one's individual understanding of each manifestation of beauty: to put it more simply, beauty defined depends on relative circumstances. Each individual understanding of beauty, and the pleasure derived from it, is a valid conception of beauty. This relative approach to aesthetics enables Pater to account for the differences in taste which arise in judging aesthetic objects, and thus makes his argument the most convincing defense for literature as aesthetic enjoyment. What is most unique about this approach, however, is not that beauty is relative, but that the emphasis is the individual as critic as a necessary means to understanding the aesthetic object itself: "To see the object as in itself it really is, has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step toward seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly."<sup>77</sup> Only through not only acknowledging, but discerning one's own individual impressions can one understand the aesthetic object unhindered by these impressions; by becoming aware of the unique lens that he or she brings to the text, the critic is thus capable of understanding both his or her own impressions and the object itself, apart from any individual lens.

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<sup>76</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1961) xxix.

<sup>77</sup> Pater xxix

Aesthetic pleasure for Pater, as for Barzun, must be individual and inutile for anything but itself, “For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.”<sup>78</sup> Experience, personal and variable as it is, is the only purpose of aesthetic enjoyment. As Roland Barthes states in *The Pleasure of the Text*, textual pleasure is separate from any function other than individual pleasure:

If I agree to judge a text according to pleasure, I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad. No awards, no ‘critique,’ for this always implies a tactical aim, a social usage, and frequently an extenuating image-reservoir...the text...can wring from me only this judgment, in no way adjectival: that’s it! And further still: that’s it for me!<sup>79</sup>

The removal of any objective standard of aesthetic pleasure simultaneously ensures that the emphasis is placed on how an individual approaches a given text. For Oscar Wilde, this individual and unpractical approach—“emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art”—allows the individual to perfect experience: “It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence.”<sup>80</sup> For Wilde, the fluidity of individual aesthetic tastes emphasizes beauty for itself, rather than any kind of moral concern, as “Art is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and ever-changing.”<sup>81</sup> Thus aesthetic pleasure, as a defense of literature, is only plausible if everything is relative, dependent on the individual’s impressions and approach to a given aesthetic object. Although beauty is

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<sup>78</sup> Pater 153

<sup>79</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Trans. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 13.

<sup>80</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Ed. Linda Dowling, (England: Penguin Books, 2001) 252.

<sup>81</sup> Wilde 265

separate from any moral concerns, it is nonetheless correlated with an improved quality of experience, albeit one entirely dependent on an individual's unique impressions. While in many ways this relativity is unsatisfying as a defense—there cannot be one aesthetic standard by which to judge literature or its critics—it raises the fewest objections because it is so individually dependent.

### **Thesis 5: Literature and the Good**

The previous sections examined how literature might be useful for social needs, power, knowledge, and aesthetic pleasure, only to discover that while literature has been used in these ways, it has many shortcomings in fulfilling these uses, and further, there are better means for fulfilling these needs and desires. Yet in answering the question “what is literature good for?”, we have not yet considered arguably the most common response in defenses of literature, the idea that literature is moralizing, that it in some way makes people better. Some of the most obvious ways in which literature is considered as morally beneficially are the same ways which are easiest to refute as universal or characteristic of all literature: uses of literature for religious improvement, for example, differ not only between religions, but even within them as well. Moral and ethical improvements from some kind of ideological persuasion on the part of the text are clearly not universal, either, as they depend on cultural context, and many texts—such as the works of Franz Kafka, Kurt Vonnegut, or Dennis Johnson, for example—work to refute any clear ethical and moral codes. Perhaps literature is educative, but here we stray back into the realm of knowledge, which has been discussed in its limitations to factualness and truth in an earlier section. Moral improvement, in any kind of specific sense, cannot possibly be literature's characteristic use, because there are so many differences in how literature affects any given

reader. The idea that literature serves as moralizing, in a prescriptive sense, therefore cannot offer an adequate defense of literature. In other words, literature cannot dictate a moral system—or even simply a system of betterment—which a reader will be impelled to follow. If moralizing is not literature’s use, nor are any of the previous theses in this chapter, then how does one go about defending literature?

One possible way to account for all the different defenses—and uses—of literature is to consider literature’s value as a corollary of its having a specific kind of form which enables its usefulness. While the previous theses considered literature as referential—acting for or as some function—this thesis considers literature as reflexive: there is some quality, which we can call the good, in literature’s literariness that has some kind of improving effect on the reader. In other words, the inherent form of literature effects some improvement on the reader. According to Charles Taylor in his book *The Sources of the Self*, for example, art is revelatory, expressing “conscience [which] is the voice of nature,” a form of morality.<sup>82</sup> He calls this phenomenon “expressivism,” indicating the process of “our access to nature through articulating what we find within us...its realization in each of us is also a form of expression.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, “expressivism,” means to manifest an inner knowledge through some mode, a function which is executed uniquely by art.<sup>84</sup> For art to be valuable, its mode of expression is intrinsic to its ability to reveal: “for works of art...being in the medium they are is integral to them...and so for this kind of expressive object, we think of its ‘creation’ as not only a making manifest but also a making, a bringing of something to be.”<sup>85</sup> Because nature is considered to be the source of

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<sup>82</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, (USA: Charles Taylor, 1989) 359.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor 374

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



expression, and because morality and ethics are “more directly concerned with how we feel about the world and our lives in general,” therefore “to be in tune with nature is to experience these [moral] desires...as significant...it is really a matter of having certain *sentiments* as well as aiming at or doing certain things.”<sup>86</sup> To be in tune with nature as expression is thus to be more concerned with how one feels about the experience of existence; expressionism is as much a means of articulating experience as it is to feel experience.

The idea of the necessary perfection of form in literature has long been a subject of literary inquiry, and one which has been argued to determine literary value: Aristotle’s *Poetics* deals solely with questions of the structure, content, and accuracy of literature, specifically of dramatic works and poetry as both a justification of literature and a presentation on how to best create it. In other words, the quality of a given work of literature is determined by its formal elements. For Aristotle, the most perfect form is that which most accurately imitates, because imitation is the most unified with nature, the reason why people enjoy art and literature:

the reason for this is that learning is a very great pleasure, not only for philosophers, but for other people as well, though their capacity for it may be limited. They enjoy seeing images because they learn as they look at them, and reason out what each thing is (for instance, that ‘this is a picture of so and so’).<sup>87</sup>

Thus according to Aristotle, the best literature is that which most accurately imitates, because it will instigate the greatest learning and therefore the highest pleasure in its readers.

Even in the circumstance that the work of art or literature is not an imitation, or the reader does not recognize the imitated, the work must still follow rules of forms that will give pleasure:

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<sup>86</sup> Taylor 372

<sup>87</sup> Aristotle, *Classic Literary Criticism*, Trans. Penelope Murray and T.S. Dorsch, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) 61.

“for if by any chance the thing depicted has not been seen before, it will not be the fact that it is an imitation of something that gives the pleasure, but the execution or the colouring or some other cause.”<sup>88</sup> Aristotle goes on to specify these causes: tragedy, for example, must represent “an action that is serious, complete, and of some magnitude; in language that is pleasurably embellished...presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the *catharsis* of such emotions.”<sup>89</sup> The presence of these elements, which Aristotle specifies even further, determines the quality of a given tragedy, and thereby its power to emotionally affect the audience.

Aristotle also provides guidelines for how the poet should produce a work of literature; form is not only important in the actual structure of the work but in its construction as well. Without the poet to mediate the imitation, literature would be impossible, and therefore any learning and pleasure to be obtained by the reader would be obsolete. The language chosen by the poet determines its import: “the too-obvious” leads to comic effect while proper use of metaphors, loan-words, and poetic diction leads to epic, and in any case, “moderation is necessary in all kinds of diction.”<sup>90</sup> Despite the importance of the poet’s role in composing and in selecting the appropriate language and structural features, the poet should essentially disappear from the work so that it speaks for itself: Homer is especially admirable to Aristotle because “he is the only poet who recognizes what part he himself ought to play in his poems. The poet should speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not in that way that he represents actions.”<sup>91</sup> Even though the poet is integral in creating the structures of the work, the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Aristotle 64

<sup>90</sup> Aristotle 88

<sup>91</sup> Aristotle 91

work must at least seem autonomous so that the presence of an author does not distract or detract from the message of the work.

The autonomy of a work can only be achieved by its unity and wholeness, which will set it apart as unique; the plot, for example, must be self-contained, “and its various incidents must be arranged so that if any one of them is differently placed or taken away the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted.”<sup>92</sup> All of these prescriptions on form are necessary because the wholeness and unity of a work, when perfected, will provide a universal picture of a possible situation.<sup>93</sup> Because poetry can be revelatory, it is therefore greater than history: poetry “tells of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of attention than history; for poetry speaks more of universals.”<sup>94</sup>

Like Aristotle, Taylor prescribes specific structures that are best suited to manifesting nature: art must be universal in that it is natural, and therefore free from all distortion of opinion. Taylor similarly proposes the universal nature of art in the sense that it provides a moralizing quality based on the internalized source of nature. In his argument we see that unity is required not only for perfection of form, and therefore art’s universalizing, but also for art’s autonomy: “autonomy must be reconciled with unity with nature” in order for it to serve a moral purpose.<sup>95</sup> This reconciliation of art and nature is the ultimate form of imitation: “perfected art becomes nature again; which is the final goal of the moral destiny of the human race.”<sup>96</sup> This is only possible because “the spirit of [art’s] forms” is to reveal.<sup>97</sup> Again, it is the role of the artist to mediate through pleasure and unity by using the appropriate forms; however, rather than

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<sup>92</sup> Aristotle 68

<sup>93</sup> Aristotle 68-69

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Taylor 382

<sup>96</sup> Taylor 385

<sup>97</sup> Taylor 378

imitating a likely situation, “the poet must articulate his own world of references, and make them believable...to make us aware of something through nature for which there are as yet no adequate words.”<sup>98</sup>

While for Taylor the poet transcribes his own world, Wordsworth’s ideal poet uses his imagination to convey the lives of other men: good poetry is, according to Wordsworth, a coloring or translation by the poet’s imagination of “incidents and situations from common life,” using “the language really spoken by men.”<sup>99</sup> This prescription is much less formal than that given by Aristotle, but it is nonetheless prescriptive, dictating that poetry is about man—a poet is “a man speaking to men”—with importance is given to the poet as translator.<sup>100</sup> The poet must also apply “selection; on this he will depend for removing what would otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion;” by discerning what elements to keep, poetry can be about “truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative...carried alive into the heart by passion.”<sup>101</sup>

Only a specific form of poetry will produce universal truth which will better mankind as it is carried into the hearts of men, namely Wordsworth’s idea of good poetry, which selects from “the real language of men...[so that] a class of poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently...and in the quality of its moral relations.”<sup>102</sup> Perfection of form for Wordsworth comes from poetry’s endeavor to depict ordinariness. Similar to Aristotle in the attempt to imitate probable situations, Wordsworth’s poet must make poetry which by using common language provides pleasure and thereby sympathy.<sup>103</sup> The poet too experiences this

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<sup>98</sup> Taylor 381

<sup>99</sup> William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth*, Ed. Stephen Gill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 596, 602

<sup>100</sup> Wordsworth 603

<sup>101</sup> Wordsworth 605

<sup>102</sup> Wordsworth 595

<sup>103</sup> Wordsworth 605

pleasure, but as a direct result of engaging common life; the lesson is “held forth to him” by Nature, which he takes, and using “the real language of men” with imagination to reveal universal truth, he is responsible for educating other men.<sup>104</sup>

According to the preceding arguments, literature is morally beneficial; however, in *The Critic As Artist*, Oscar Wilde posits a seemingly opposite position: “all art is immoral.”<sup>105</sup> He explains that art is immoral because it can have nothing to do with life or society, but is instead “emotion for the sake of emotion.”<sup>106</sup> Because it is made up of “beautiful sterile emotions,” art is autonomous from use; in its immorality, art is also autonomous from any kind of prescriptive moralizing.<sup>107</sup> For Wilde, art’s unique capacity to lead its readers and critics to perfection is not because it expresses some kind of universal truth, but rather because “it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-colored world.”<sup>108</sup> While literature may express nothing, the author must ensure this by using specified forms: good art must “bring us [a] new element of pleasure. It [must] suggest...fresh departure of thought, or passion, or beauty,” it will preferably use “metrical beauty” and will follow the Greeks in that “the most perfect art is that which most fully mirrors man in all his infinite variety.”<sup>109</sup> Yet the forms which lead to perfection cannot themselves be too perfect; rather,

[the] sculptor gladly surrenders imitative colour, and the painter the actual dimensions of form, because by such renunciations they are able to avoid too definite a presentation of the Real, which would be mere imitation, and too

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<sup>104</sup> Wordsworth 611

<sup>105</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialis*, Ed. Linda Dowling, (England: Penguin Books, 2001) 38.

<sup>106</sup> Wilde 38

<sup>107</sup> Wilde 39

<sup>108</sup> Wilde 27

<sup>109</sup> Wilde 5, 10, 18

definite a realisation of the Ideal, which would be too purely intellectual. It is through its very incompleteness that art becomes complete in beauty.<sup>110</sup>

Perfection and revelation for the reader can only come through incompleteness; in other words, the perfection of form required by Wilde is a kind of imperfection, which rebels against organization or ethically moral improvement.

This imperfection is aimed, however, at perfecting existence: according to Wilde, “the function of Literature [is] to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realise their perfection.”<sup>111</sup> Similar to Schiller’s concept of beauty as a rationally improving mode of life, the life gained through art for Wilde is “the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming;” and this life can only be derived from art which is made up of the appropriate forms, which must “suggest...fresh departure of thought, or passion, or beauty.”<sup>112</sup> For Wilde, the forms found in art are higher than those of reality, and therefore make art more revelatory and in some way more real than reality itself: “For life is terribly deficient in form,” says Wilde, and therefore “as civilisation progresses and we become more highly organised, [we] will grow less and less interested in actual life, and will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched.”<sup>113</sup> Art will supersede reality because art gives to us a “momentary perfection.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Wilde 29

<sup>111</sup> Wilde 22

<sup>112</sup> Wilde 18, 42

<sup>113</sup> Wilde 33

<sup>114</sup> Wilde 4

Just as for Wilde actual life is less perfect than art, so for Viktor Shklovsky, life only exists in its pure, ideal form when enriched by art. In fact, Shklovsky argues that without art, life becomes mundane and insignificant: “life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. ‘If the whole complex lives of so many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.’”<sup>115</sup> Art undoes the work of habitualization by defamiliarizing and making difficult the objects of aesthetic contemplation:

art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.<sup>116</sup>

In contrast to ordinary living, in which according to Shklovsky experiences are rendered unnoticeable, aesthetic experience is difficult but therein more sensory and prolonged. Art which renders sensation unfamiliar, for Shklovsky, is the counterpart to life, the necessary remedy for the ordinariness of living. The aesthetic objects themselves are essentially irrelevant, as it is the process of perceiving art, rather than its contents, which thus improves the person confronting the art work.

While each of these critics states that perfection of form is necessary for art’s autonomy and therefore its ability to reveal, each posits a very different idea of what constitutes such a form. With such a large range of possible ways in which form can be perfected, all of which

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<sup>115</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Trans. Lemon, Lee T., and Marion J. Reis, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 12.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

according to their respective critics are necessary for the revelatory power of literature, the question arises: what is the standard for perfection of form? Can there actually be one conception of form which will act as the standard? Furthermore, it is important to note that artistic form is variable across space and time, further complicating this question of the perfection of form as revelation: different cultures and eras espouse different ideals of the perfect form. J. Paul Hunter, in his essay “Sleeping Beauties: Are Historical Aesthetics Worth Recovering?” asks this very question:

the point [is]...that, whatever strategies and features literary forms may have in common over ages and cultures, at least some features are time- and culture-dependent, and peculiar to local, technologically dependent possibilities.

Aesthetics are particular, local, time- and technology-dependent, and Beauty is in the culturally trained eye of a beholder who exists in time and space for such a little while.<sup>117</sup>

Everything depends on circumstance: the perfection of form is variable, based not only on the specific time and place under which it is determined but also on the technologies made available by those circumstances, whether of medium or of structure. Is it possible, then, that there can be just one conception of form which will guarantee the revelatory power of art?

To answer, we must return briefly to the idea that literature and art, through the power to unveil reality, serve as a moralizing force. This moralization is not prescriptive, but it fosters a way of perceiving that allows for autonomy from individual perspectives of reality while simultaneously offering a higher perspective of reality. The same is true of the efforts to obtain perfection of form in art: the specified or prescribed form is less important than the striving

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<sup>117</sup> J. Paul Hunter, “Sleeping Beauties: Are Historical Aesthetics Worth Recovering?” (*Eighteenth-Century Studies*. 34.1 (2000): 1-20.) 18.



toward a perfection of form. In this way both the construction of art and the result obtained by it are aimed at developing a better way of seeing by which what is conveyed is continually becoming clearer.

Not only is constructing art part of its perfection of form, reconstructing art forms from the past can serve as a means of discernment and understanding. “Can we, should we, try to understand the assumptions of value and form in ages not our own?” asks Hunter in his essay on the importance of recovering literary forms as a means of understanding. He argues that acknowledging and reconstructing these past forms—such as the couplet, for example—is necessary to best discern not only the text at hand, but also the disparities between text and present-day opinions: “Without being able to argue that [these past forms] are recoverable, I want to defend the attempt as a necessary process for noticing and confronting difference, and for creating the double consciousness necessary to any reading of a text written by someone else.”<sup>118</sup> Thus a striving towards understanding multiple types of form is a means of comprehending not only perfection of form, but also the literary text itself.

Taylor summarizes a similar striving towards perfect form, regardless of any limitations, when he describes the revelation of reality as something brought about equally by the manifestation itself and the act of manifesting:

But to talk of ‘making manifest’ doesn’t imply that what is so revealed was already fully formulated beforehand. Sometimes that can be the case, as when I finally reveal my feelings that I had already put in words for myself long ago. But in the case of the novel or play, the expression will also involve a formulation of what I have to say...Fulfilling my nature means espousing the inner élan, the

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<sup>118</sup> Hunter 2

voice or impulse. And this makes what was hidden manifest for both myself and others. But this manifestation also helps to define what is to be realized. ... In realizing my nature, I have to define it in a stronger sense: I am realizing this formulation and thus giving my life a definite shape. A human life is seen as manifesting a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation.<sup>119</sup>

Thus art can reveal something which was not intended in its making; rather, the act of creating art can reveal the individual both to him or herself and to others. In a certain sense, this means that what is revealed or manifested by art renders any given work greater than the sum of its parts.

With this concept, we have come fully round, as “the Aristotelian concepts [of nature] have been interwoven with the modern notion of expression as an articulation which both manifests and defines.”<sup>120</sup> At any point of approach to a work of art, reality is being revealed, in a perpetual expansion of understanding, though this revelation may not be explicitly empirical or serve as an indicator of absolute Truth. Rather, reality as revealed by art is the result of a constant and continuing process of striving towards revelation. Thus while no specific form can guarantee literature’s usefulness, and while the many uses of literature cannot possibly be characteristic of all literature, literature itself still possesses some kind of truth through revelation. However, as part three of this thesis will suggest, this revelation is dependent less on the text at hand and more on the interplay between text and reader.

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<sup>119</sup> Taylor 374

<sup>120</sup> Taylor 375

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has considered the myriad ways in which critics defend literature through usefulness: by having some kind of function, literature must arguably also be valuable. However, as I hope this chapter has made clear, attempts to justify literature's value through use prove to be inadequate, or else they depend on a relative, rather than universal, approach, in which the reader's individual perspectives and impressions determine literature's value. While the first four theses demonstrated the ways in which literature is often approached as or for a specific function, the fifth thesis, literature and the good, emphasized the ways in which there is something in literature's essence which is good, or valuable, though not necessarily useful. However, this value is relative, dependent on the reader, rather than necessitated by any specific function inherent to literature. In the following chapter, I hope to suggest that despite the prevalent and almost unavoidable connection between use and value in defenses of literature, purpose is not necessary for value. Instead, literature is essentially useless: its value is not dependent on its having a characteristic use, but rather on the individual reader.

### Chapter 3: What Good is Being Useless?

The first two parts of this thesis have considered the ways in which literature is dictated by use. Literature, constantly subject to examination and appropriation by other disciplines, has been argued to have moral, economic, cultural, religious, and aesthetic uses, which supposedly ensure its value. This third chapter concludes, in contrast, that literature is actually free from any kind of utility. This freedom is unique to the arts—what else is free in this way, uncommitted and detached from any concerns of the world? Thus literature is valuable for the sheer fact that it has unique freedom from the world, distinct from any other fields, disciplines, or pursuits. Its separateness makes literature free in the most absolute sense of the word.

I have been suggesting that no one function universally describes literature: literature is instead essentially useless. However, uselessness neither signifies a lack of value nor a prohibition from the use of literature. Put more simply, uselessness describes literature, rather than proscribing literature from ever being used. To use the words of Oscar Wilde, “all art is quite useless,” free from any practical, emotional, or moral concerns.<sup>121</sup> Instead, art’s only purpose is its own existence. “Art, it is true, can never have any aim but her own perfection,” a perfection which is separate from any usefulness or relevance to ourselves; literature’s value, therefore, is removed from any use or utility in the sense of in some way fulfilling the needs or instigating the improvement of humanity.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, art’s uselessness prohibits it from expressing any kind of truth, context, or moral message, because “Art never expresses anything

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<sup>121</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Ed. Linda Dowling, (England: Penguin Books, 2001) 122.

<sup>122</sup> Wilde 8

but itself.”<sup>123</sup> Thus uselessness means freedom from being useful or necessary to us as humanity—it cannot be useful for us—so what is literature good for? It is good only for itself.

Although I am suggesting that literature is free from use, it *is* used in many different ways: how can we account for the fact that literature has been and is used, but is simultaneously and essentially useless? Literature, without having one purpose, must have a nature which enables it to assume or tend towards purpose. Literature must have, using Immanuel Kant’s phrase, “purposiveness without purpose”; this allows literature to be used in many ways, even having a disposition to assume many different uses, without actually having a characteristic use.

<sup>124</sup> These myriad purposes are uniquely enabled by freedom:

The concept of freedom is meant to actualize in the world of sense the purpose proposed by its laws, and consequently nature must be so thought that the conformity to law of its form at least harmonizes with the possibility of the purposes to be effected in it according to laws of freedom.<sup>125</sup>

The idea of freedom is not separate from function; rather, based on its laws, freedom has at least purpose in a hypothetical or possible sense. Uselessness, as a type of freedom, thus need not be divorced from purpose; in fact, I would like to suggest that freedom is what allows literature to be purposive in many different ways. In other words, literature’s freedom from a given use is what enables it to be used in so many different ways, without being characteristically restricted to one use or purpose.

For Kant, purposiveness, an inclination toward purpose without the restriction of characteristic or unique purpose, is not characteristic of the thing itself, but rather derivative of

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<sup>123</sup> Wilde 185

<sup>124</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Transl. J.H. Bernard, (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1951) 55.

<sup>125</sup> Kant 12

the representation of the thing. Furthermore, Kant argues that something can only have purposiveness when this representation is combined with aesthetic pleasure:

Now the purposiveness of a thing, so far as it is represented in perception, is no characteristic of the object itself (for such cannot be perceived) although it may be inferred from a cognition of things...Hence the object is only called purposive when its representation is immediately combined with the feeling of pleasure, and this very representation is an aesthetical representation of purposiveness.<sup>126</sup>

This pleasure is not sensuous, but rather moral, in a rational sense. For Kant, purposiveness is only possible when the representation of an object is aesthetically pleasing: thus literature, purposive without having a unique purpose, must also be an object which encourages “the feeling of pleasure.”<sup>127</sup> Literature is autonomous, detached from the world, and what pleases must be good only for itself, although this still involves the concept of a purpose:

Whatever by means of reason pleases through the mere concept is good. That which pleases only as a means we call good for something (the useful), but that which pleases for itself is good in itself. In both there is always involved the concept of a purpose, and consequently the relation of reason to the (at least possible) volition, and thus a satisfaction in the presence of an object or an action, i.e. some kind of interest.<sup>128</sup>

The good—i.e. the valuable—is whatever gratifies by concept, through the understanding of reason: when the idea of a thing is pleasing, again in a moral rather than sensuous sense, then the thing itself is good, whether for an end or simply for itself. In this passage, Kant also further

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<sup>126</sup> Kant 26

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Kant 41

elaborates the idea of purpose, which involves a satisfaction deriving from both reason and desire in the thing itself. Put in other words, whatever gratifies in itself as an object of desire is something which instigates interest. Purpose, which involves this satisfaction or interest, is always involved in the good, even in things which are good only for themselves.

While the good and the useful have this interest, the beautiful does not: the beautiful is separate even from concerns of interest. For the good, however, as in the question, “what is literature good for?” interest in purpose figures importantly, just as use plays a dominant role in defining value: in the space between reason and desire or volition, interest in purpose arises. Yet interest in an object’s having a purpose is not the same as that object having a purpose. Rather, this interest reflects the purposiveness of the object. Thus it is that literature, as an object of interest, can be both free and purposive: “There can be, then, purposiveness without purpose.”<sup>129</sup> Although the good must have an interest in purpose, it need not have one specific purpose.

Following Kant’s conception of purposiveness which need not have purpose, I would like to suggest that freedom from use equals possibility, rather than limitation, because literature’s uselessness is essentially purposive without have a specific purpose. Literature, in its uselessness and therefore its freedom, is able to manifest in different ways, with different uses, even though no use is characteristic of all literature. Its purposiveness without purpose allows literature this option to be used in different ways, because even though it has no universal use or purpose, its nature is such that it tends toward having purpose. Uselessness need not mean that literature is never used. Rather, it is literature’s uselessness—its freedom, but also its purposiveness—which enables it to be used. Another way of expressing this claim is to say that literature is autonomous, which allows it to be useless: in other words, literature is detached from the world.

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<sup>129</sup> Kant 55

J.M. Bernstein aligns autonomy with freedom from purpose: “Autonomy is but another term for art’s purposelessness. Adorno reads autonomy as double: both as art’s loss of a (direct) social purpose, and as art’s refusal of the kind of purposiveness that has come to dominate society.”<sup>130</sup>

Autonomy marks a freedom from practicality or a need to serve a function within society.

Literature stands on its own, separate from any concerns of usefulness, context, authorial intent, didactic function, etc.

Autonomy can be defined in many different ways, with variations as to the degree of detachment: Theodor Adorno, for example, argues that art is simultaneously detached from the world and committed to it. In fact, art can only reveal the nature of the world by being autonomously distanced from it:

Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world. In analogy to a current philosophical phrase we might speak of the ‘aesthetic distance’ from existence: only by virtue of this distance, and not by denying its existence, can the work of art become both a work of art and valid consciousness.<sup>131</sup>

This revelation of the world is a “negative knowledge,” because rather than explicating empirical existence, art shows reality as unhindered by personal, empirical perspective: “Art does not provide knowledge of reality by reflecting it photographically or ‘from a particular perspective’ but by revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality, and this is possible only by virtue of art’s own autonomous status.”<sup>132</sup> Simultaneously, this autonomous art must also be committed to the aims and purposes of existence, even as it distances itself from them.

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<sup>130</sup> J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992) 208.

<sup>131</sup> Theodor Adorno, et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, (New York: Verso, 2010) 175.

<sup>132</sup> Adorno 178



However, this commitment is not aimed at any specific practical function, but at overall revelation:

In aesthetic theory, ‘commitment’ should be distinguished from ‘tendency’. Committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions—like earlier propagandist plays against syphilis, duels, abortion laws or borstals—but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes.<sup>133</sup>

For Adorno, commitment—the seemingly opposite concept to autonomy—is required in order for art to be autonomous; many other critics argue for a more complete severance between art and the world, but in general, autonomy represents a form of the “art for art’s sake” argument. Under this view, art is concerned only with itself, and ought to be viewed in relation only to itself, rather than relating art to the world or to ourselves. Art is autonomous from any use of necessity.

The idea that art is autonomous—contained in and focused on itself—is one also espoused by Wilde, who states that

The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art.<sup>134</sup>

It seems easy to protest this idea that art, in its proper form, does not affect us in any way: arguably every work of art, including literature, in some way affects us, influences us, or speaks

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<sup>133</sup> Adorno 199

<sup>134</sup> Wilde 172

to our circumstances. It is impossible to think of an example of literature which has not affected us in some way. Nonetheless, this is what Wilde argues—that ideally literature will have no such effect. My point is that this is true, but simultaneously it is also true that literature *appears* to affect us. When reading a given text, the emotional, personal, and sympathetic effects are real, but they are not contained in the text, because the text is autonomous, useless, free from any kind of commitment. Thus these effects, the appeals to our sympathies, must be located outside of the text.



Because the text is free from commitment, Wilde argues that literature is unattached from influence or affect: “As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art.”<sup>135</sup> How then can we account for the fact that art does at least seem to influence and affect us? Furthermore, I have suggested that literature is useless: does this also mean that literature is valueless? How do we approach an understanding of literature which is useless? In short, provided that literature is useless, there are important consequences for the way literature is understood, defended, and read. Despite literature’s uselessness, I would like to suggest that it is still valuable: its freedom, and the consequences of that freedom such as purposiveness without purpose, ensure that literature is valuable. The effects and influences of literature become relative, dependent on the reader, rather than viewed as intrinsic in a given text. In addition, literature is valuable because its uselessness enables it to serve as moralizing, revealing the reader to him or herself. Rather than envisioning literature as prescriptively revelatory, I would like to suggest that literature is descriptively

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<sup>135</sup> Wilde 172

revelatory, parsing existence rather than dictating a way of life or understanding. Even though what literature reveals depends on its reader, its value is constant, paradoxically ensured by its uselessness.

Freedom is valuable not only in its uniqueness, but also in the possibilities that it creates. In its most ideal sense, freedom signifies a state in which there are no limitations or restrictions, in which all opportunities and choices are accessible. To say that literature is free is to remove any of the frameworks by which one normally defines and delimits literature: I would like to suggest that acts of framing, such as contextualization, are located not within the text, but rather in the reader. The reader imposes his or her own frames and meanings on the text; meaning is thus relative to the individual reader, while the text itself is free from any concrete meaning as dictated by framing. Literature is therefore expressive, but not purposive: literature has no one function, but rather its uselessness, as an intrinsic property, enables literature to manifest as many meanings as there are readers. As the discussion of Kant's concept of "purposiveness without purpose" shows, it is only through literature's freedom that it is able to assume every possible use, even though literature is not characteristically limited to one use.

Use can be understood as a kind of categorization, framing the text by understanding it as having a certain intention. Just as use is an application, and not an inherent quality in texts, any and all limits of framing, including of categorization and contextualization, a manifestation of intention, must also be understood as external to the text, rather than intrinsic to it. Take, for example, the example of *The Icelandic Sagas*, which are discussed greater depth in Chapter 2 of the thesis. Whether the *Sagas* are used for anthropological ends, as historical record, or as pure aesthetic fiction determines what genre they are considered: to the historian, the *Sagas* fall under the category of historical record or anthropological study, and for the reader aiming to enjoy the

poetry found within the texts, the *Sagas* are considered aesthetically. Genre, or how the texts are categorized and framed, is determined by how the text is used. Even the form of the text itself depends on the frame. Framing dictates how we read and how a given text will be interpreted, defying even authorial intentions of form: according to Shklovsky, “a work may be (1) intended as prosaic and accepted as poetic, or (2) intended as poetic and accepted as prosaic. This suggests that the artistry attributed to a given work results from the way we perceive it.”<sup>136</sup> Individual perception, rather than inherent formal qualities, determines how the reader will understand the text’s form.

Furthermore, how one perceives art is not only limited by framing, but Shklovsky argues that art itself is a frame by which a certain experience of the world is revealed:

art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*<sup>137</sup>

The essential elements of the text, which are framed by how a text is used and intended by its reader, are what enable art to reveal reality as sensual experience; rather than empirical knowledge, the text provides, within the context of framing, a sense of personal experience as

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<sup>136</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Trans. Lemon, Lee T., and Marion J. Reis, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 8.

<sup>137</sup> Shklovsky 12

rendered “unfamiliar.” Meaning is irrelevant—envisioning and reframing surpasses knowledge in artistic importance:

An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object—it creates a ‘vision’ of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.<sup>138</sup>

The ideological frame through which one reads a text is determined by how one uses the text: if use is not essential to a text, then framing is not intrinsic to the text either, but rather externally applied.

Put simply, function is inextricably tied to the frame. Similarly to Shklovsky, John Frow argues in his essay “The Literary Frame” that the frame, dependent on intention or use, determines how one perceives the text: “the frame situates the work within nonaesthetic space and thus transforms it into a function.”<sup>139</sup> However, where Frow is interested in the material frame applied to the text, I am interested in using his arguments to understand the ideological frames placed on the text by the reader. Because framing represents a use of literature, and literature is essentially useless, two types of framing, categorization and intention or contextualization, though most commonly used to delineate and study literature, must also be applied by the reader, rather than inherent in the text. When we read a given text, it exists within this frame of contexts, determining not only how we view that text, but also what the intended message is:

a text may be situated in the ‘normal’ space of an aesthetic function indicated by its frame (e.g., a play may be staged as an aesthetic object), or the frame may be

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<sup>138</sup> Shklovsky 18

<sup>139</sup> Jonathan Frow, “The Literary Frame,” (*Journal of Aesthetic Education* 16.2 (1982): 25-30) 28

ignored and the text ‘quoted’ to nonaesthetic ends (the text of the play may serve as a moral or sociological example, or the play may be staged as historical curiosity so that it becomes a citation in a larger written or unwritten text). The frame signifies only the norm (the text as an aesthetic object and the normative expectations governing the reception of this object).<sup>140</sup>

Intention is not an intrinsic quality of a text; rather, how the text is categorized is determined by a reader. The framework around a given text can change how the text is viewed, and to what end the text is used. Genre, as a kind of frame, is an application of intention, rather than a necessary condition of a given text. Nonetheless, all of these different frames of categorization and contextualization are difficult to acknowledge, because their very nature lends itself to becoming indistinct from the text itself: “the difficulty of coping with the concept of the frame is the near-invisibility of the frame.”<sup>141</sup> Not only is the frame essentially invisible, insofar as it goes unacknowledged, but it is also an empty space in that it is not actually a part of the text, but the space by which we delineate the text. Frow argues that the frame actually serves as an absence insofar as it is a purely relational moment, the point of crystallization of the normative conventions of reception; like the nonexistent meridian line dividing night from morning, it exists only as a sign of difference, and without a special act of attention it is blotted out by the quasi-substantiality of its content. To ‘see’ the frame is to account for the culturally determined *vraisemblance*<sup>142</sup> by which the conventions determining the reception of the work are naturalized, become

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<sup>140</sup> Frow 28

<sup>141</sup> Frow 29

<sup>142</sup> meaning “believability”

second nature; and the full social dimension of the literary sign can only be restored through a deliberate reconstruction of these conventions.<sup>143</sup>

By acknowledging the existence of frames, which are not part of the text itself, but merely an imposed boundary, one can gain a better understanding of the way in which both the text itself functions, and the ways in which the text is expected or anticipated to function. By acknowledging the frames, one can then gain a better understanding of one's own viewpoint.

What is important to note is that frames—whether the physical frame of the page or a culturally or ideological frame of intended use—are not inherent in texts but are applied by the reader. Because use is not characteristic of literature, categorization becomes an act imposition rather than a gleaning of inherent qualities. Not only are genre and categorizing by ideas or use not characteristic elements of literature, but with the removal of use, the distinction between “high” and popular literature becomes impossible. According to John Carey, what is “high art” is determined by those using the art: “though high-art advocates have no doubt about their own superiority, their arguments, when they offer any, do not bear scrutiny.”<sup>144</sup> Instead, Carey argues that “though generally reinforced with abstruse phraseology, their definitions are invariably reducible to the statement that works of art are things recognized as works of art by the right people, or that they are things that have the effects that works of art should rightly have,” although what these effects might be is variable and contradictory at best.<sup>145</sup> What is “high” art depends entirely on its use by “the right people.” Any attempts to justify high art—as opposed to popular art and behaviors of art—such as moral benefit, general consensus, and quality of form and content, fall short of adequately explaining how some art might be considered higher than

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<sup>143</sup> Frow 29

<sup>144</sup> John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 64.

<sup>145</sup> Carey 15

others.<sup>146</sup> Instead, distinction between high and popular art is arbitrary and imposed, rather than intrinsic in the nature of a given text. Thus all texts must be given equal weight and significance. Personal preference may select certain texts as more meaningful or enjoyable than others, but this is an individual experience, rather than a universal valuation.

Not only is how one reads a text within formal or societal constraints extrinsic to any given text, but also how one reads contexts is extrinsic to the text, located in the reader's approach, rather than in literature itself. Freedom from use is also a freedom from contextualization: the ability to contextualize is determined by considering literature under a given lens of use. For example, looking at the historical context of when a text was written adds another frame to the text by which to make sense of either the author or the content of the text. However, this context is not part of the text itself, but a frame of categorization by which one places boundaries on the text. While the text itself may gesture toward any number of contexts—historical, social, authorial, of the reader, artistic, formal, etc—none of these are actually contained within the text itself. Provided that contextualization was located within a text—for example, if authorial intent was evidently and clearly present within any given text—then literature would be uniquely able to connect the reader with the author through the text. However, literature is autonomous from authorial concerns: “The content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything, it is the opposite.”<sup>147</sup> According to Adorno, not only is the author's intent removed from the text, but the more an author tries to direct a text, the less the content will reflect his or her intellect. Instead, context must exist as extraneous to texts, applied by the reader, who interacts with the text. The reader, rather than the author or the text, is the source of all contexts typically located within the text.

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<sup>146</sup> Carey 63-4

<sup>147</sup> Theodor Adorno, et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, (New York: Verso, 2010) 215-216.



If framing, including contexts and intentions, are removed from a text, and if, as Wilde argues, literature does not exert any influence, then how can a text affect and influence a reader? I would like to suggest that the reader is indeed affected and influenced by any given text, yet not by any intrinsic qualities of a given text, but by his or her own interplay with that text. The supposed affects or influences are actually manifestations of the reader, and of what contexts he or she brings to a text. Textual meaning is relative, because each individual reader imposes his or her own meaning on the text. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that because textual meaning is relative to the reader, literature is therefore expressive, but not purposive.

Because a reader's relationship with a text must show how he or she is influenced by the text, and thus the contexts that he or she brings to a given text, literature, in and only because of its uselessness and freedom, reveals the reader to him or herself. Though contextualization may seemingly merge into the text—one reads contexts as a part of the text—the knowledge of literature's uselessness, and therefore freedom from contexts, relocates contexts in whomever applies them. By acknowledging the center of contexts as oneself, the reader can see the revelation of his or her own subconscious and conscious perspectives, which manifest as contextualization.

It is important to note that this seems like a return to the correlation of value because of characteristic use. However, I want to clarify that I am not privileging one use of literature—revelation—as uniquely defining literature's value. Rather, this revelation is a reflection of how the extension of literature's literariness—its uselessness—reveals one's interaction with a given text. Rather than a use, this revelatory element is a description of the way in which literature is free from contexts and categorization, which when applied to practices of reading, can reveal the reader's approach, however subconscious, to him or herself. Literature's ability to reveal is an

application of its usefulness, rather than a characteristic and universal use. It also important here to clarify that this revelation, as a kind of moralizing in the general sense, is not prescriptive: it does not tell you what to do or think. The revelation enabled by literature's uselessness, when interacting with a reader, allows for moralizing in which the reader's experiences are revealed through the interaction between the text itself and the contexts used to frame the text.

This revelation is contextual, rather than textual; the reader takes the empty spaces within a text and fills them with his or her own contexts, even the contexts of knowledge of history or of the author's personal history. Because texts are free (unattached) from any kind of contextualization, there is space in the reading of literature for inclusion of context, one which is facilitated by the blank spaces in the text. There is room for context in the text, although where we normally read these contexts as existing within the text, they actually exist within the reader. Although the reader can try to contextualize, this is an absolutely imperfect act—an act of construction, rather than reconstruction. The text itself is separate from any intents, and stands on its own. We as readers inevitably approach texts with our own contextualization and from our own personal contexts, but the text itself is autonomous. In order to separate out what is essential in the text from the applied context of the reader, one must examine one's own impressions of the text: "To see the object as in itself it really is, has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step toward seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly."<sup>148</sup> Individual perspective determines how one sees a text, a lens which dictates what the text is able to reveal.

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<sup>148</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1961) xxix

The meaning of any given text, therefore, is necessarily influenced and even formed by the reader. Wilde again is particularly pertinent, as he argues that not only does the reader imbue the text with meaning, but also the reader makes the text exciting and relevant:

For the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it...It is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvelous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives, and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear that we may receive.<sup>149</sup>

How one views the text draws upon one's own contexts, and in doing so speaks to the perspective of the age: in other words, new takes on any given text can not only reveal the reader to him or herself, but can reflect the reader as a part in a larger cultural and ideological whole. Of course, even the individual reader will not read a text in the same way twice; perhaps it seems obvious to say that each new reading will be influenced by different emotions, life events, and different layers of perspective which will have developed since the last reading. By noting this, however, it becomes clear that literature reveals the reader to him or herself not in one mathematical understanding, but in a constantly developing unveiling. And thus it is that Wilde's idea of beauty and art as revealing the entire world to us becomes a revelation of each reader's world, even as that world constantly changes: "Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods...When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world."<sup>150</sup> What constitutes the world to each individual depends on personal experience and mood. The meaning

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<sup>149</sup> Wilde 239

<sup>150</sup> Wilde 240

of beauty is relative, dependent not only the individual, but the emotions and disposition of that individual in that instance of reading.

Literature, by expressing through reading whatever contexts or moods a reader brings to a text, is revelatory. This revelation makes literature especially valuable, as Wilde suggests: “But what are the two supreme and highest arts? Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life.”<sup>151</sup> Literature is the perfect expression of life because it expresses what each reader brings from his or her own life to the text. Literature thus reveals something which is not actually in its content or intrinsic to it, but that is only manifested through the interplay between reader and literature; in this way the text “becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing.”<sup>152</sup> Revelation is only possible through literature’s autonomy from the reader.

So what good is it that literature is useless? In other words, what value does uselessness uniquely provide to literature? Literature, in its uselessness, is descriptively revelatory. Although this means that literature cannot show us any kind of absolute or empirical truth, it shows us instead the nature of our own realities and experiences. The value of literature is that each text, each story, speaks to our own individual stories, because by reading a text, we inadvertently bring them with us to that text. The idea that a space exists in the text for the essentially creative act of reading is valuable in and of itself: each reader essentially becomes a writer, crafting his or her own stories out of and in literature. Literature is thus valuable in that it opens a space for ourselves, allowing us to construct and better understand our own realities poised against the autonomous and detached text. At the same time that literature reveals the reader to him or herself, it provides a space for the reader’s freedom of expression as he or she interacts with the

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<sup>151</sup> Wilde 222

<sup>152</sup> Wilde 239

text. Literature is a continuously unfolding creative process, shaped by and for the reader. And so it is that

Art, even the art of fullest scope and widest vision, can never really show us the external world. All that it shows us is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance. And the soul itself, the soul of each one of us, is to each one of us a mystery...consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality. It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Wilde 91

### **Conclusion: Tempering Explanation with Experience**

This thesis began in response to the question posed in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, "what's the use of stories that aren't even true?" In my own pursuit of the experience of stories, this question posed an irresistible and unanswerable dilemma: the enjoyment of literature warrants no defense, yet the question of its value inexorably demands attention. What makes literature—which fosters imaginative experiences that seem beyond any explanation by utility—useful? When Haroun is asked this question of use, he finds himself encountering a myriad of answers which hinge upon literature's usefulness. Defending literature's value through its use is the most common impulse in attempting to justifying why one reads and studies literature: explaining the phenomena of writing, reading, and critically engaging literature feels more scientific—and thus more legitimate—than approaching literature simply from one's individual experience. Yet as Haroun discovers in his confrontation with Khattam Shud,<sup>154</sup> attempting to parse literature in terms of some intrinsic use ultimately leads to "terrifying explanations" which inhibit, rather than enrich, the power and value of stories.<sup>155</sup> I would like to conclude this thesis, which has emphasized explanations and answers, by returning to the value of stories as they are experienced through reading; specifically, I would like to consider how literature's uselessness enables a practice of reading which is both informed by explanation and laden with the value of literary experience.

The most common defenses of literature argue that literature must have some characteristic use or function which ensures its value. And yet, as the reader of *Haroun* discovers, no one use can account for every manifestation of literature, formally or

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<sup>154</sup> "Khattam Shud" means "'completely finished,' 'over and done with.'" Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, (New York: Penguin, 1991) 216.

<sup>155</sup> Rushdie 160

experientially. Instead, this thesis has attempted to consider literature within its own discourse—as good only in and of itself, its value residing not in any function, but in its intrinsic revelatory uselessness. Because categorization is applied by the reader, rather than intrinsic to a given text, the text contextually reveals the reader to him- or herself.

Although literature's uselessness accounts for the variety of meanings which exist seemingly ad infinitum in any given text, thus far this explanation of revelation feels incredibly abstract and theoretical. What does a critical practice based on understanding literature as useless actually look like? Acknowledging that the possibility of multiple meanings within the same text, even for the same reader, arises from the application of categorization and contextualization by the reader allows us to read meanings within the reader: "Meanings are not things inherent in objects. They are supplied by those who interpret them."<sup>156</sup> Even though meaning seems to reside within the text, the knowledge of literature's uselessness allows us to understand—and interpret—meaning as in the reader. Although the words themselves are there, how the reader interprets them depends on his or her own contexts: by critically reading with this knowledge, one gains a sense of these contexts, which often resonate only subconsciously. In other words, the text reveals to me what I have at stake in reading that text, because it is itself autonomous from any such concerns.

By understanding what one has at stake in reading a given text, one can understand not only one self, but how that self changes through experience, and how to frame my experiences through narrative form. A critical practice of reading can help one not only understand one's approach to a text, but also to parse and understand existence as a whole. According to Wilde, the soul is the only thing which we can know or understand at all: "Art, even the art of fullest

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<sup>156</sup> John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 20.

scope and widest vision, can never really show us the external world. All that it shows us is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance.”<sup>157</sup> And yet our knowledge of our own souls is limited, because though internal and personal, the soul is incredibly difficult to comprehend: “the soul itself, the soul of each one of us, is to each one of us a mystery... consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality.”<sup>158</sup> That our souls are a mystery is compounded, perhaps caused, by the nature of experience. The following quotes from Pater, though long, not only describe the way in which experience is fleeting and unstructured, but also verbally illustrate how experience is dreamlike and chaotic:

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world.<sup>159</sup>

Experience is not only individual, but isolated, limited to passing impressions. Communication, attempting to connect two personalities, is essentially impossible, as experience consists only in the individual. Furthermore, experience is composed of a constantly shifting landscape of images and sensations:

Analysis goes a step further still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a

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<sup>157</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Ed. Linda Dowling, (England: Penguin Books, 2001) 91.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1961) 151.



single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves.<sup>160</sup>

Experience, according to Pater, is limited to fleeting moments of impressions, isolated to the individual. Reality, constantly changing through the present, limited to the instantaneous, constantly alters the shape of experience and therein the nature of the self. Put simply, experience is unstructured, constantly in flux.

Critical reading can help to narrate the reader's self to him or herself, giving a sense of structure and order to essentially unordered experience. Literature thus inadvertently concretizes experience: as the reader shapes their own meaning in and through the text, they can acquire a narrative structure for their own experiences. In other words, critical reading not only elaborates the text as imbued with meaning by the reader, but also enables a narration of the self. Megan Sweeney describes a “narrative self,” in which by reading literature, the reader learns to construct a self out of the chaos of impression: “The idea of a narrative self—a self constructed *through* narratives and *as* a narrative that can unfold in multiple ways.”<sup>161</sup> This sense of self is

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<sup>160</sup> Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1961) 151.

<sup>161</sup> Megan Sweeney, *Reading is My Window*, (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 206.

uniquely enabled by the role of the reader in creating meaning in a given text. John Carey describes this development of selfhood through reading:

Literature's power to strengthen one's sense of selfhood and individuality, some instances of which we have noted, depends, to a large extent, on this capacity to cultivate and enfranchise the reader's private, individual imagining. The reader creates, and feels a creator's possessiveness.<sup>162</sup>

Personal ownership of a text through imagination empowers the reader: that literature is so open to interpretation allows the reader to become an active agent in the process of making meaning, thereby gaining a greater sense of the significance of his or her own experiences.

Obviously this is but an incomplete gesture towards a practice of reading, one which could itself form the basis for a whole new thesis, and one which will remain to be explored, but for this thesis, I would like to conclude with the (perhaps) radical idea that reading can not only reveal and narrate or structure one's life, but reading itself can act as a mode of living, through which we parse existence. Wilde describes the critical spirit as tantamount for an ever-improving life: "the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming*, that is what the critical spirit can give us."<sup>163</sup> By creating meaning in and through the text, the reader parses not only the text itself, but also their own existence: not only that, but critical examination leads to a means of becoming, a process of living. Life can be structured, informed, and rendered significant through the act of reading critically.

In the end, if nothing else, I hope that I have shown the importance of literature as understood through critical reading; however, rather than envisioning literature as the end-all,

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<sup>162</sup> John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 213.

<sup>163</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Ed. Linda Dowling, (England: Penguin Books, 2001), 256.

elevated above other concerns, literature is a part of life. The arts are intended for living, because, according to Wilde, “the arts are made for life, and not life for the arts.”<sup>164</sup> Reality as revealed by art is the result of a constant and continuing process of striving towards truth. Under this view, at all moments of literature’s existence—whether in its construction, its present structure, or its interpretation—because of its autonomy, and therefore its freedom from the impressions of reality and its higher standpoint, art “finds its logical, its architectural place, in the great structure of human life.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Wilde 6

<sup>165</sup> Walter Pater, *Appreciations*, (London: Macmillan and co., 1889) 36.

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