

***Towards a Poetics of Empathy:  
Literary Fiction as a Transformative Experience***

Cynthia F. Wong, University of Colorado Denver, United States

The European Conference on Education 2017  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Sales of George Orwell's classic novel, *1984*, peaked following the American election in November 2016, leading to a kind of crystallizing moment that author Chinua Achebe would have identified as literature's purpose to help readers "turn to art and find a way out" of dreary reality. Readers seek a way to frame and comment on current affairs. Driven by curiosity, a desire for knowledge of history, or to appease a fearful future, readers find that made-up stories can help them change, cultivate empathy, and promote understanding. This paper advocates for fiction's capacity to engage readers with examining their worlds and urge them to resist dehumanization. It offers a reading list of contemporary literary fiction that cultivates themes and effects of transformation. Fiction authors have the ability to imagine worlds and situations, to induct readers to care deeply about those made-up worlds and characters, and to guide them towards illumination, resolution, or poetic justice in their circumstances.

Keywords: Empathy, Literary Fiction.

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

Shortly after the U.S. election in November 2016, sales of George Orwell's classic dystopian novel *1984* peaked (Makishima, 2017), leading to a kind of crystallizing moment that author Chinua Achebe would have identified as literature's purpose: "People are expecting from literature serious comment on their lives [and want] a second handle on reality so that when it becomes necessary to do so, we can turn to art and find a way out" (1997, p. 253).

Readers seek a way to frame and comment on current events and the state of their nation. Driven by curiosity, a desire for knowledge of history, or to appease a fearful future, readers find that made-up stories can help them learn more about situations, cultivate empathy, and promote understanding. The nature of studying literature is inherently rewarding, as it allows readers to engage with and positively change their perspectives. Such engagement has the potential to affect attitudes and actions in everyday life and even have more permanent and positive long-term outcomes.

Readers drawn to Orwell's novel in the wake of a new political era in America, for example, sought in literature another means to regard the intrusive power of governments and the restrictions of individual and group freedom. The protagonist, Winston, seeks in forbidden written texts a way to understand his situation: "The best books, [Winston] perceived, are those that tell you what you already know" (Orwell, 1949, p. 200). But, he discovers that while he "understood how" his world was operating, "he did not understand why," since his government had effectively indoctrinated in its citizens mind control and turned paranoia and fear into the fabric of daily existence (p. 217). Winston desires explanation and context in a completely suppressed world, but he is no longer in a world that values books and their ideas. Orwell represents the tragedy of such forms of oppressive control.

In the year of Orwell's title, Canadian author Margaret Atwood began *The Handmaid's Tale*, about the elimination of a liberal democracy and succession of a theocratic dictatorship (1985). Atwood noted, "Anything can happen anywhere, given the circumstances," and she imagined what could happen when a ruthless ruling class monopolized power in order to subdue humans, particularly women's bodies that are literal and metaphorical vessels for advancing civilizations (Atwood, 2017). She also claimed that everything in her book has a historical reference and is a part of the "nightmare of history" (Atwood, 2017).

At the Woman's March in Denver, Colorado this year, some protestors carried a sign that read, "Make Atwood Fiction Again," expressing the fear that Atwood's horrific society in fiction was taking root in real life. Atwood's imagined Gilead society portrays a devastating world where fertile young women are imprisoned in the homes of a Commander and his wife, in order to be raped monthly until she bears his child. A handmaiden's transgression can result in her maiming or even execution by stoning or hanging. Suddenly, such events seemed plausible in 2017 America.

Since the serialization of Atwood's novel into an acclaimed show this year on the American Hulu channel, women from all over the world have recognized themselves or their sisters or mothers or daughters in this extreme portrayal of systematic and enforced domestic violence. The horrifying correspondence of reality to fiction and

fiction mirroring reality demonstrates one example of literature's atavistic power to captivate readers.

Novels like Orwell's and Atwood's—respectively written 35 years apart from different countries—offer a glimpse of fiction's capacity to urge readers to assess values governing their own worlds and urge them to not repeat the violence of past histories, to resist dehumanization, and to seek and engage with ways to humanize our world.

Fiction authors have the ability to imagine worlds and situations, to induct readers to care deeply about those made-up worlds and characters, and to guide them towards illumination, resolution, or poetic justice in their own actual circumstances. Although authors often seek first and foremost to present a fascinating story, those such as Orwell and Atwood also speak volumes about the fine line between fiction and fact, between imagination and reality.

### **Why Fiction is Good for You**

Jonathan Gottschall in his article, “Why Fiction is Good for You” (2012) declares: “Fiction enhances our ability to understand other people; it promotes a deep morality that cuts across religious and political creeds.” Psychologist Dan Johnson adds that as well as providing pleasure and instruction—or, “relaxation and entertainment”— “[r]eading narrative fiction allows one to learn about our social world and as a result fosters empathic growth and prosocial behavior” (qtd in Gottschall 2012).

David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano conducted scientific studies on reading literary fiction to explore how affect (emotions) and cognition (inference and meaning of the ideas and beliefs of other people) are enhanced: “Just as in real life, the worlds of literary fiction are replete with complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration” (p. 378). They highlight literary critic Roland Barthes' distinction of readerly texts that promote a passive experience in contrast to writerly texts that heighten engagement and understanding (Barthes, 1974). In essence, any engagement with reading contributes to aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional enhancement.

Julianne Chiaet (2013) remarks on the study by Kidd and Castano and observes that literary fiction, in contrast to genre fiction does not merely “take readers on a roller coaster ride of emotions and exciting experiences [with] . . . predictable characters.” Rather, reading literary fiction teaches readers how to focus “more on the psychology of characters and their relationships . . . [thereby prompting] readers to imagine the characters' introspective dialogues.” Consequently, literary fiction may disrupt a reader's expectations, offer the unexpected in unusual ways through a literary process of *defamiliarization* in which the familiar seems both strange and familiar, both imagined and real. This important literary element can bridge fiction's made-up worlds with a reader's actual world.

In teaching narrative—or, literary—fiction for more than two decades at an urban university in the United States, I can attest to the profound effects of literature upon my students, many of whom are first-generation college students. Studying literature through narrative techniques and discussing and debating the merits of social,

psychological, and philosophical issues that arise in the literature have given students intellectual, aesthetic, and linguistic power to transform their perception of themselves, their relationships, and their world: they learn to observe and interpret their own world more thoughtfully through close reading of literature. In writing assignments for their class, they become motivated to express their interpretations and experiences.

The transformation of self-awareness or heightened cognition is not always immediate nor even discernible nor conscious to readers. However, a sustained engagement with made-up stories invites readers to participate in significant acts of the imagination, particularly the imagination to envision lives other than one's own. Reader engagement with an author's believable world and imagined characters can enlarge human sympathies, evoke deeper compassion, and consequently, may cause effective empathetic responses and actions. In other words, the development of emotional capacity is one means towards positive personal and social changes.

How can teachers select literary works that might initiate such positive transformations in readers? I would like to share with you the following selected reading list and offer a brief annotation of their educational value for change and transformation. For this list, I focused on characterization and situation as the most expedient elements that engage readers of all levels. In a literature classroom, other elements such as expressions of time and space in the story can also be analyzed more deeply in order to explore social and philosophical issues.

Characterization is literature's most powerful tool for engaging readers. Literary critic M. H. Abrams (1971) notes that literature can provide a lamp or illumination into our humanity and it also can serve as a mirror or provide a reflection of who humans are and what they are capable of doing and feeling.

Readers identify and empathize with characters that are authentically portrayed; by the same token, readers may reject or feel alienated from characters that do not illuminate nor reflect their experiences or understanding. But a serious engagement is a worthwhile endeavor, one that we can teach our students, to urge them to read about many different complex characters. All confrontations with the new and unusual—or, of the familiar and comforting—can broaden perception and understanding. In other words, while *defamiliarization* may be uncomfortable, readers can explore these and other effects of fiction from the safe distance of literary study.

A story's situation and events are also critical for providing contexts for characters to inhabit and interact. The combination of strong or well-drawn characters fleshed in their historical and geographical contexts, along with an author's literary skill and acumen, can profoundly effect change for readers.

Nobel-prize winning Canadian author Alice Munro offers a fictionalization of her family's long history of immigration from Scotland to the U.S. and Canada in the mesmerizing book, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006). In contrast to the impoverishment of spirit and body that plagues generations of her family, Munro offers a rich exploration of what happened to people when they are not remembered in any official or family records. Who cares about those who were born, lived, and perished on the same earth that we now inhabit? The compulsion to locate the real

facts of her family leads the narrator to this reflection: “We can’t resist this rifling around in the past, sifting the untrustworthy evidence, linking stray names and questionable dates and anecdotes together, hanging on to threads, insisting on being joined to dead people and therefore to life” (Munro, 2006, p. 367).

From one of America’s best writers: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) evokes deepest compassion from readers embarking along with the wounded father and his very young son in a post-apocalyptic world. All around is ruin with little hope for their survival. McCarthy gives voice to the dying and fosters every bit of hope in the most hopeless of situations. The novel becomes almost inaudible at times, unreadable at others, but the smallest flicker of hope in humanity during the most dire of situations sustains a reader’s engagement and causes deep reflection.

From India, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) is family history and cultural history. The Booker-prize winning novel disorients time, in order to depict the terrible tragedy involving a 9-year old girl visiting her Indian father and his family that culminates in further tragedies: the exile of the father’s sister, along with her twin children, after a social caste transgression is discovered. Roy mingles an array of voices in order to weave and shape her polyphonic novel (Bahktin, 1984) that, like Atwood’s, focuses on the liabilities of being a woman in an oppressed system. Readers enter into a dialogue with the author and her characters.

Japanese-born British author Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) starts with narrator Kathy recounting what appears to be a very idyllic childhood at a boarding school called Hailsham. There are the usual childhood antics of finding the right group to belong in or gaining a teacher or guardian’s attention and respect. The novel moves onto a teen-age angst period at a place called the Cottages, and it is there that the dark reality of the students’ lives culminate: there will be one last place they inhabit—a hospital or a recovery center—for the remainder of their short lives; that is, until their organ donations are exhausted and they perish after serving the clone industrialists who created them. My own students want the students in the novel to rebel, to have anarchic fits, and reclaim their lives, until our discussion centers on the perverse socialization of which the novel allegorizes in the form of the students’ truncated and expended lives.

British author Ian McEwan writes a novel that is *about* fiction in *Atonement* (2001): a crime that is committed is resolved with the tools of fiction. Thirteen-year-old Briony causes her sister Cecilia’s pain by having her lover Robbie imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. As the second war looms, Briony begins to make reparations for her role in devastating the lives of the two lovers. In my 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fiction class, I close the course with this novel: on its own the story is powerful because it focuses on themes of love, tragedy, and the desire to seek compensation and change. Read thoughtfully through the literary tools of narrative time and space, and through psychological ideas about loss, pain, and forgiveness, the novel richly develops character, situation and event, and even offers a resolution.

I have taught or will teach the above list of books in my college classes to students who are not naturally drawn to literary fiction. My objective is to enliven their reading with attendant lectures about the cultural contexts of these books and invite them to assess the characters and situations in each story through a variety of literary

tools. I hope to guide them to question and debate the situation in the book and for them to move through a transformative experience with fiction.

Literary fiction can be transformative because it asks much of readers, who are subsequently rewarded for their efforts. Fiction asks readers:

1. To examine the world in the book and contrast and compare it with the reader's own world.
2. To judge the efficacy of choices, under the specific conditions found in the stories.
3. To be engaged, interactive, and responsible for the interpretations they make of stories. They write about their interpretations in order to shape their ideas.
4. To become a custodian or guardian of the knowledge gained from literature by sharing the ideas in the book with others.

### **Conclusion: “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”**

I want to close by commenting on the reading responses of my students in my 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fiction class. I dream that each book I assign causes an intense response and reflection for each reader, but I can only dream—still, as poet W. B. Yeats notes, “in dreams begin responsibilities.” I like to think that literature teachers have a responsibility to select some of the best literary fiction for their students, so that they may have a first or even a second handle on any reality they chance upon, so that—as Achebe noted—readers can turn to literature and find answers or a way out of their own or their society's dilemmas.

Last semester (Spring 2017), one of my students emailed me at 3:00am after finishing McEwan's novel, *Atonement*. She was mesmerized by the story's ending, a conclusion that she hated and then loved, and hated, and so forth. In other words, she was caught in an emotional pendulum by the author's compelling story and an ending that she had not expected. She told me that she could not stop thinking about the book and would likely think about it for a long time afterward. She had an empathetic experience after reading McEwan's fiction.

I don't expect all of my students to experience such wide emotional arcs, but I admit that I was pleased by the conflicted sense that my student had of the whole novel. The issues presented by McEwan tested a reader's sense of moral and poetic justice, and the final word on the situation in the novel was simultaneously unsettling and offered an effective closure. McEwan populated his novel with neutral characters, victimized characters, and even odious characters. He placed these characters in the turmoil of the Second World War, and he presented them on a world stage in his fiction.

McEwan's feat is quite grand, but perhaps it is the lasting effect of his fiction that remains most memorable for readers—such as my students—who will return to works such as these in order to explore their own humanity. A poetics of empathy for reading and understanding fiction mandates such exploration, and the rewards can be plentiful in any age of dread and uncertainty.

## References

- Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Oxford UP, 1971.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*. Ed. B. Lindfors. UP of Mississippi, 1997.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985. Anchor Books, 1998.
- . "What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump." *The New York Times*, 10 March 2017.
- Bahktin, Mikhail. *The Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z: Essays*. Hill & Wang, 1974.
- Chiaet, Julianne. "Novel Finding: Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy." *Scientific American*, 4 October 2013.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. "Why Fiction is Good for You." *Dallas News*, 25 May 2012.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. 2005. Vintage, 2006.
- Kidd, David Comer & Emanuele Castano. "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind." *Science*, 18 October 2013, Vol. 342, No. 6156, pp. 377-380.
- Makishima, Paul. "Orwell's 1984 Spikes." *Boston Globe*, 25 January 2017.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Vintage, 2006.
- McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. 2001. Anchor, 2003.
- Munro, Alice. *The View from Castle Rock*. McClelland & Stewart, 2006.
- Orwell, George. *1984*. Signet Books, 1949.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. Random, 1997.
- Yeats, W. B. *Responsibilities*. 1914.