

Effects of Reading Literature

One's life is more formed, I sometimes think, by books than by human beings...

Graham Greene

I'll never forget the first novel I read from start to finish in a day. I can't be sure how old I was, perhaps 14 or 15, about the time I was in high school. The book was Alexander Dumas's *Camille*. As I recall the situation, the 1937 movie with Greta Garbo as Camille had been reissued and for reasons that completely baffle me now, I decided that I wanted to see it. I am fairly certain my mother suggested I should read the book first and that she had purchased a copy for me.

And so, after breakfast early one weekend morning, I went back to bed to begin reading the novel. Going back to bed after breakfast was not something I ever did. That day was *the* exception and other than when I have been ill, I've never done it again. Reading *Camille* during the day in bed seemed like such a lark, thoroughly in tune with the spirit of the story. Everything seemed to fall into place then on what was no doubt a sunny Saturday in Los Angeles sometime during the early fifties.

I returned to bed after lunch and continued reading until I had finished by mid-afternoon, in plenty of time to see the film that evening. It was showing at a nearby art house and I know that I went alone. Now, some fifty years later, tales of ill-fated romances and their screen adaptations continue to exert a powerful hold on me. Indeed, the widespread popularity of this literary genre in general indicates that I am far from alone in this regard.

Yet we hear from every quarter that no one reads anymore, that television and now the Web have all but killed off the pleasures of the page. We bemoan the closing of one bookstore after another. However, I am growing increasingly dubious of all these obituaries for reading. In truth, informal book clubs and reading groups are flourishing throughout the country.

As a case in point consider my hometown. Portland, Oregon is said to be rather bookish, with perhaps more bookstores per capita than any other comparable sized city in the country. People seem to like to read. Or at least to have books around for those long and endless rainy days and nights. In a recent edition of the Sunday Oregonian there was a list of Book Groups scheduled to meet during the month. Sometimes they met weekly but more often than not once a month.

I counted twenty-four different groups and those were just the ones whose meetings were open to the public. I was astonished. The Great Books Group. The Popular Fiction Book Group. The Modern Women's Group, Contemporary Fiction, Science Fiction and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Book Groups. The Romance Readers Classic Books, First Wednesday, Mystery Lovers, Memoir and Biography Groups. On and on the list went. I was simply bowled over by the number of groups, the range of topics and the fact that they were meeting regularly. Who would have imagined that so many people were doing so much reading?

Late in August 2001, Chicago launched a reading program in which every adult and adolescent in the city was asked to read the same book. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the book that was chosen and from all accounts the program was an enormous success, as organized discussions were carried out by private clubs, employee groups, reading clubs, as well as informal gatherings at

Starbucks. The idea for a community-wide reading project apparently started in Seattle and has since spread to other cities, including San Francisco, Los Angeles and most recently New York, a city with millions of readers, where a committee is currently engaged in a vigorous debate about which book to select.

Recently I have begun to wonder how readers are influenced by programs like this and by their reading experiences, in general? How has their life or personality been affected by the reading they have been doing? To find out, I began by looking for empirical studies that have examined the effects of reading literature, as well as the writing of critics who, I was sure have given a good deal of thought to the matter. I was amazed at what I discovered. In a word, I could not find any systematic research on this topic. Thinking I had not been searching in the right places, I sent the following e-mail to a listserv in psychology dedicated to literature and the arts:

>Dear Group Members:

>I have joined the Div 10 Listserv because of my interest in literature and
>psychology. Specifically, I am interested in how reading literature, both fiction
>and non-fiction influences behavior and personality. I have had little success in
>locating previous empirical research or analysis...of this question. Thus, I seek
>you help in obtaining information about studies that have investigated this
>issue. Once collected I will post a summary of citations to the Listserv.
>Richard Katzev, Ph.D.

I received only one reply that read in part as follows:

>Dear Dr. Katzev:

>In my 1977 Book, "Psychology and Literature" (Chicago: Nelson-Hall), I
>reviewed some of the literature on the influence of literature reading on

>development and cognition, but I'm afraid the material is discursive/anecdotal
>rather than empirical. The problem is designing a controlled study, holding as
>much as possible constant, to see what effect literature had. However, the
>discursive literature is pretty interesting, all things considered.
>Martin Lindauer

Moreover, it appears the question has also been virtually ignored by literary critics who, to my astonishment, seem to have examined almost everything else about literature except its influence on readers. Robert Wilson¹ put it well: "Although most persons would agree that reading may be generally efficacious in directing an individual's development, few attempts have been made to define its influence more precisely."

Perhaps the question is simply too complex or too psychological for the critics. They may simply assume that reading literature influences individuals, that, indeed, it has enormous impact on their thought and personality, and that it is hopelessly naive to even question this belief, let alone to inquire about the nature and extent of literature's influence.

To be sure, many authors have given *personal* accounts of books that have shaped the life and writing. In *How to Read and Why*, Harold Bloom² claims that ultimately "...we read to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests". Anna Quindlen sounds a similar note in *How Reading Changed My Life*.³ "All of reading is really only finding ways to name ourselves, and, perhaps, to name the others around us so that they will no longer seem like strangers."

¹ Robert N. Wilson, Literary Experience and Personality. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1956, 14, 47-57.

² Harold Bloom. *How to Read and Why*. New York: Scribner, 2000.

³ Anna Quindlen. *How Reading Changed My Life*. New York: Ballantine Published Group, 1998.

We sometimes hear of books that have exerted a major influence on someone's life or the lives of a large group of individuals. Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* is perhaps the foremost example of the powerful impact of the reading experience. *Werther* led so many young individuals into acts of imitative suicide that it was banned in several countries soon after it was published.

Occasionally the *Oregonian* runs a column, *One Book That Changed Your Life*, in the Sunday book section, where individuals describe the way in which they have been influenced by a notable book or reading experience. One person described how the zest for life of Lee Mellon, the hero of Richard' *Brautigan's A Confederate General From Big Sur*, led him into a career of bookseller. Another wrote of a book that finally helped him overcome a lifetime of alcohol addiction.

The San Francisco bookstore, A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books, has a page on its website (www.bookstore.com/bookschallenge.html) that invites readers to "name the book that changed your life." One contributor responded: "The Harry Potter books changed my life. I used to hate reading. Now I am the best reader in the class. Those books changed my imagination. I wasn't too much of a dreamer. Now, I love to imagine things. I just hope that they change someone else's life like they did mine."

The Autodidactic Press also has a similar invited "Books that Changed Lives" page on its website (www.autodidactic.com/changedlives.htm). In citing *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, one individual wrote: "I first read the book as a sixth grader. The book was so searing that I vowed to become like that unusual man. Today I am a Muslim as a direct result of Malcolm's autobiography."

However, rather than personal testimonials of this sort, I was looking for more general tests of the hypotheses that Bloom and Quindlen had proposed, tests that measured the varied effects of literary experiences on readers. Do other individuals derive their sense of personal identity from the literature they read and, if so, how widespread is this effect? How durable is such an effect and how does it compare to the many other ways we learn about ourselves?

My search uncovered several investigations of the use of literature as a therapeutic tool. This approach, known as "bibliotherapy," is the "use of print and nonprint material, whether imaginative or informational...to effect changes in emotionally disturbed behavior."⁴ While bibliotherapy was employed initially with individuals who were institutionalized in prison or mental hospitals, it has recently been extended to other community settings including schools and libraries. All such programs try to use the experience of reading literature to change a person's behavior, attitudes or values in some way.

Is bibliotherapy an effective way to change behavior? The behaviorally oriented approaches, where individuals are asked to read self-help materials in treating problems such as alcoholism, obesity, and social anxiety, appears to be the most successful. In contrast, reading fiction, poetry or creative non-fiction appears to have only a modest degree of influence that is most clearly reflected in attitude rather than behavioral change. However, the research in this area is not extensive and what has been done is methodologically far from elegant.

The most direct attempt to answer the question I was grappling with is a program ambitiously known as Changing Lives Through Literature. It is designed as a sentencing alternative for high-risk offenders who have a large

⁴ Richard J. Riordan & Linda S. Wilson. Bibliotherapy: Does It Work? *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 1989, 67, 506-508.

number of prior convictions.⁵ In addition, the program is restricted to offenders who express a willingness to participate in lieu of a jail sentence.

Changing Lives Through Literature is based on the belief that criminal offenders can derive considerable benefit from the experience of reading and discussing major works of literature. Robert Waxler, one of its founders, suggests that "...offenders often commit criminal acts because they operate from a value system that gives priority to emotions and primal instinct, rather than to reason and critical thinking. We need to challenge that single-minded value system by using novels and short stories that unfold the complexity and diversity of character and human consciousness."⁶

The program tries to achieve this goal with intensive reading and group discussions of contemporary literature, including works such as Bank's *The Affliction*, Dickey's *Deliverance*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, London's *Sea Wolf*, Mailer's *An American Dream* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The discussion sessions take place every other week for two hours.

In a study of the first four groups of offenders, the recidivism rate of 32 men who completed the course was compared with a matched group of 40 probationers who were not exposed to any aspect of the program.⁷ An analysis of follow up criminal records indicated that only 6 of the 32 men in the reading group (18.8%) were convicted on new charges after completing the program. In the comparison

⁵ The average number of prior convictions for the first two groups of male participants was 18.4 per person.

⁶ Robert Waxler. Why Literature?: The Power of Stories. Online document: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/OCE/SuccessStories/Part2.htm>.

⁷ G. Roger Jarjoura & Susan T. Krumholz. Combining Bibliotherapy and Positive Role Modeling as an Alternative to Incarceration. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 1998, 28, 127-139.

group, 18 of the 40 men (45%), three times more than the reading group, were convicted on new charges during this period.

While these differences are important, it is not entirely clear they can be attributed to the *specific* works that were read or to the reading experience itself, independent of its content. The differences could also be due to the group discussions or the contact the offenders had with each other, as well as the group leader.⁸ Moreover, the attempt to match the groups was not successful, as those in the reading group had more prior convictions and were rated as more motivated to "make changes in their lives" than members of the comparison group. Without further tests, that ideally should include a control group of offenders who read non-literary materials, these factors cannot be ruled out as possible explanations for the initial findings.

In spite of this uncertainty, the Changing Lives Through Literature program impressed me. It sought to measure objectively the effects of literary experiences. It did so in a formidable setting with a group of individuals who are not often responsive to recidivism reduction techniques. Perhaps the offenders did gain some insight about their own behavior from the readings and discussions after all. As one of the participants reported: "I started to see myself in him [the ship captain in *Sea Wolf*] and I didn't like what I saw."

Unfortunately this was the only empirical study that I could find on the effects of reading literature *per se*. It appears that academic interest in this question is restricted to anecdotal reports of individual scholars or the analysis of the literary influences on particular writers. Charles Darwin described a paradigm

⁸ The groups were led by a rotating group of individuals, including a college professor, probation officer, and a judge.

case of this kind in recalling how Thomas Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* influenced his own work.

I happened to read for amusement Malthus on *Population*, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observations of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of a new species. Here, then I had at last got a theory by which to work....⁹

In commenting on this example, Edwin Castagna noted:

This was one of the most significant reading experiences in the history of science. A bright light had been kindled in the brain of an obscure young scientist. The tinder was a book in another field. Where can one find a clearer or more convincing illustration of the powerful impact of reading on intellectual progress?¹⁰

It appears that the effort to determine the effects of reading on the life and work of individuals will have to be content with examples of this sort. Some have claimed that even trying to answer this question in a more systematic manner is folly, that it is impossible to disentangle the various effects of reading experiences. Others have suggested it is unlikely that literature of any form can change a person's life, but that every now and

⁹ Cited in Edwin Castagna. *Caught in the Act: The Decisive Reading of Some Notable Men and Women and Its Influence on Their Actions and Attitudes*. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1982

¹⁰ *ibid.*

then a book comes along that simply reinforces the way the person already thinks and acts.

The truth probably lies somewhere in between these extremes. Lorrie Moore put it this way: "Everything one reads is nourishment of some sort--good food or junk food--and one assumes it all goes in and has its way with your brain cells." When put this way, I think most persons could hardly take issue with such a claim, that even though it is difficult to say much more, they are surely influenced in one way or another by the literature they read, no doubt by some books more than others. Unfortunately, the apparent complexity of this process has discouraged researchers from investigating it more deeply. Yet, it is clearly one of sufficient importance to call forth an active program of empirical study, one where an effort will be made to identify the effects of the literary experience in terms that are a good deal more specific than "way with your brain cells."