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English 115: Good Literature

Prof. Ryan Wepler

This essay was written in response to the last prompt of the course. Students were encouraged to be more creative and use their own voices to write an essay tackling the question: what makes “good” literature?

Remembering the Treehouse: The Magic Between the Lines

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14 Dec. 2016

Remembering the Treehouse: The Magic Between the Lines

My childhood can be summarized in a couple of short words: simple, happy, and Magic Treehouses. By this, I mean the very successful children's book series *The Magic Treehouse* which involves two siblings who have adventures in different time periods and must help people in the past in order to return to the present. Every night before bed, I would pick one of these books up and ingest it. My second grade self even had the audacity to read up to one and a half books every night, something unprecedented in an elementary school playground. These nightly reading sessions were not forced upon me by anyone; not even the cool Scholastic Book Fair that dealt my drug convinced me that I needed to read every night. I read every night to catch up with my new friends, Jack and Annie. While other children were fast asleep, I was on these adventures with them, helping people on the Titanic or swinging on vines in the Amazon. Now, like any other addict, I could have stopped at any time, but the thing that kept me hooked were the characters: Jack's intelligence and planning paired with Annie's spontaneity and courage made these adventures that much more enthralling and addicting. Jack and Annie were the chemicals that kept me hooked, and these stories were as psychedelic as any seven-year-old child can get.

As I grew older, this series still sat at the back of my mind. As a fifth grader, I would still stare at the newly released Magic Treehouse Book. The title *Magic Treehouse #40: Eve of the Emperor Penguin* still gave me a rush and the symptoms of withdrawal began to come over me. I

had all of the power in the world to go over and buy the book, especially because I was at the top of this elementary school food chain. However, this was the exact fact that kept me from even stepping foot near the elaborate treehouse booth. I only saw little children running around, books in hand, boogers in their noses, and slobber on their cheeks. They were ruining the thing I loved, but I did nothing about it. Despite loving both Jack and Annie, I had already grown up and had moved on to Judy Blume's *Fudge* series, and it was time for me to let go of my old friends and start the journey of understanding the life of Peter and his annoying younger brother Fudge.

This pattern repeated itself time and time again as I grew up. Every year I would grow attached to a specific book, and every year I would have to let it all go in order to pursue something more complex. I did not do this to move up a reading level, or pursue a new list of words to add to my vocabulary book; these were not my concerns. As I read these books over and over again, I would more and more often see myself in the characters. I could fully relate to Jack, an intelligent planner who always solved the problems at hand using his intellect. And as I read more and more, it seemed that the series was no longer about Jack and Annie but rather Oscar and Annie. And still as I read more, at every turn, I saw myself so tangibly that I could greet myself and say hello. My thoughts were not intertwined with the book, but they became the book. Every word became my name, and these book had nothing else to show me about myself. They could no longer supply my high, so I closed their covers, never to be opened again, and I moved on to the next book that could enchant me.

However, I feel that now I have reached a plateau of complexity in which every book refuses to stay closed, and the echoes of their stories constantly play in my mind. I see Scout Finch in Dicken's *Great Expectations*, and I see Hamlet on the big screen as Charlie from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Jack and Annie never return. My two lost friends do not

spontaneously come and say hello to me, and I can only remember them when I forcibly conjure them up in my memories. I have been thinking that maybe the reason they don't return to me is because I read differently now; I read with a more critical lens, dissecting symbol and motif to connect with the "human" aspects of what I read. However, I know that this isn't true. This is a fact that is very hard for me to admit, but I in fact participate in a tradition of literary evil.

Despite the maturity the process of shaving once every 5 days grants me, I purposely allow my seven-year-old self run amuck in these books and begin the forbidden process: I dare to see myself.

This very act of is condemned by the great writer and lecturer Vladimir Nabokov who says "the worst thing a reader can do, [is] identif[y] himself with a character in the book" (4). I would love to read without committing such a literary travesty, but it is something that I cannot control. I read as my seven-year-old self would, ignorantly. I am ignorant of the characters and the places, and I allow myself to be engulfed by this new adventure. On these separate literary journeys, I find many people across my path: evil doers, innocents, jesters, sages, mages, and the occasional run of the mill girl-next-door. But more often than not, I end up running into myself. Why should I be condemned for recognizing this and how would I ever forgive myself if I didn't stop by to say hello?

This is where I truly explore the magic that keeps certain books open, their stories leaping off the pages even after an initial reading. Nabokov explores the role of the author and above all says a "great writer is always a great enchanter" (5). Many would say that the thing that enchants readers is this connection to the human, but this is not the case. I connected to the "human" as a seven-year-old boy seeing himself fully in a character. A complex human being was able to recognize the human in a fictional character, a person that could take him on far away adventures

every night, a reliable person to lean on, a companion and friend. This was not only a connection to the human, but it was an almost complete transfusion of the self. And yet this connection was not enough to keep Jack and Annie and the land of the Magic Treehouse in my mind. The job of the author is more complex than merely capturing the human. The author must defy expectations, creating something more complex than the human, the ineffable essence of humanity.

The author enchants the reader not by creating the human but creating the ever elusive human. When I read these magical books that linger and stay in my mind long after I read them, the journey to finding myself changes. The same seven-year-old me runs down a road as my eyes read words from left to right. All of a sudden, within the crowd of heroes, villains, and lovers, I encounter an image of myself. As I run to say hello, it vanishes. I continue the journey on this road, and again I see an image that appears to be me, but it is only a morphed tree trunk with what seem like arms. As I read these great works, this pattern continues. I see myself, and I attempt to say hello only to be disappointed.

This is the magic that keeps these books open, the fact that I know I am somewhere within them, but I have yet to say hello. In Oscar Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he asserts that "it is the spectator and not life that art really mirrors" (4). However, this is not true in the case of great literature. Great works of literature do not reflect the self, but they reflect a more complex self. They reflect only spectral images of the self, intangible ghosts that resemble the self but are clearly anything but. As you look into these works, you see parts of yourself as you stare into the work ever more deeply, but you never fully see yourself. There is a dimple missing, or too many freckles on one cheek, and the search to find yourself continues.

This search provides the ultimate high and will never stop me from getting my fix. Great works of will provide enough substance to explore myself forever. I sometimes find aspects of

myself within these works, but I will never be able to find myself completely in any of these works. These works stay open because I never recognize myself fully, and until that happens, they still have plenty to show me about who I am, and what I am to be. And as I grow older, these open books are the ones that still call my name. These are the ones that challenge me to reread them, to continue the unfinished chase of myself, to find myself and simply say hello. These are books that are just as alive as I am, the ones that organically grow and change and become completely different every time I return.

And as I think about this, I am transported back to those Scholastic Book Fairs. I question whether or not I was forced to let those past books go. As I grew older, I needed more and more substance to figure out who I was. As I read about the same people in the same situations, I would find myself on that literary road more often than I wanted. Then I would move on to something else, and this pattern was ever repeating. Literature in fact does not capture “humanity” nor does it capture the self. I do not read to see myself; I use a mirror to do that. I also do not read to find “humanity”; I look need only look at the people around me to find that. Maybe we read to find something bigger than ourselves, to engage in this constant pursuit of identity that we know is futile, the thing that pleases our older selves as much as our seven-year-old selves, the search for the magic in something as tangible as a book, as tangible as a treehouse.

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