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Literary Theory

Initial Theory Statement

Rediscovering Reading

I have loved books and reading for as long as I can remember. As a child, my parents frequently found me underneath my covers with a book and a flashlight when I should have been asleep. I read every thing I could get my hands on, including books that were beyond me. My favorites were always adventures or mysteries; I loved a good story.

However, in the sixth grade, my English Literature teacher, Mrs. Koch, opened my eyes to the actual power that literature can have over a person. We were reading *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor as a class. Towards the end of the novel, one of the characters dies. When we got to that passage of the book, Mrs. Koch stopped reading. She literally could not get the words out. She had read the book multiple times; she knew how it ended. Regardless, she was at the mercy of the text; she couldn't speak. After that, my tastes shifted from fun adventures towards books with a little more weight. I read things that connected with my life and the problems around me. I found my own place in the worlds of my books. I realized that I was not immune to the power of the written word.

As I got older, though, homework and required texts began to rob me of sleep much more than joy reading ever had. I started reading things with the simple goal of finishing them. I was reading to prepare for classes and to pass tests, rather than for any higher purpose. Classes and curriculums that were designed to foster a love and appreciation of literature were distracting me from the beauty and power of the written word. Reading began to seem like work.

This remained true until I received a recommendation of *East of Eden*, with the promise that it wasn't the stereotypical Steinbeck. Initially, the vocabulary was a stumbling block and slowed down my reading. I saw this as the author's flaw, but as I spent more time on his words, I rediscovered reading simply for the sake of reading. I became lost in his enchanting description. I was examining the author's message and moods, not focusing on plot points and simply "finishing" the reading. Finally, I was reading for myself.

With Steinbeck's novel and several works by W. Somerset Maugham, I realized that for me, good literature was that which could create a clear picture in a reader's mind. The picture could be of a landscape, like the Salinas Valley, or a person, like Larry Darrell from *The Razor's Edge*, or even a moment in time. This picture would be tinted by the plot and cropped by the themes, but ultimately, it would be permanently and personally etched into the reader's reality.

From every author I read, I want a description that brings me into the world of the story. I want to see it clearly with my mind's eye. I want it to affect me and shape my views. I would rather meander through lengthy passages of captivating description than fly through succinct and obvious plots. Reading can be a beautiful type of escape. While you read, you have a chance to set down the issues that surround you. Then, after closing the book, you are not the same person that you were and the problems you face are different as well. E. M. Forster explained it perfectly when he said that "[Great literature] transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote it." Literature can make us uncomfortable; it affects each of us in a unique way that is irreversible.

In my college Literary Studies course, I realized that books do not only connect with the reader, but are connected to every other written work as well. There is a web of themes

and perennial concerns that permeate all of our literature, from Greek dramas to epic poetry to contemporary works. There is a wealth of knowledge at our fingertips. We simply need to learn to use the written word to access, connect, and learn from these ideas. We need to look for the archetypes, motifs, and morals. We need to notice the trends and the parallels drawn in great writing. We need to draw from the established literary canon and the works that have the potential to be canonized.

Utilizing literary tools and theory in this way helps the reader to glean the most information from all of the texts that they encounter. However, approaching literature in a strictly academic manner should be done with caution. Writing is both powerful art and technical science. As a teacher, I will need to encourage students to embrace both sides of the written word so that they can effectively enjoy existing works and create new ones.