"How important is it to be able to relate to literary characters, their values and their world?"

In an age where TikTok, Instagram, reality television, personality cults and self-help success stories dominate our media diet, relatability has become a valuable currency. Likes, views, reposts, retweets… digital virality is intimately connected with relatability. Of course, content that shares experiences vastly different from our own circulates too, but so often our algorithmic navigation of digital content encourages self-centred feedback loops, that act constrictingly rather than expansively, reaffirming one's image of oneself and the world.

Literature also profits from relatability. At its best, literary "relatability" inspires recognition and identification, prompting a reader to see something of themself or their world in the text. Relatability heightens literature's ability to provide an emotional experience for the reader, to prompt self-reflection and to teach us something about ourselves. However, as Rebecca Mead points out in a 2014 New Yorker article, too often relatability expects "that the work itself be somehow accommodating to, or reflective of, the experience of the reader or viewer". Valuing relatability above all in our assessment of literature's power, demands that literature be like a "selfie: a flattering confirmation of solipsism" (Mead). Thus, it is highly important to be able to relate to literary characters, values and worlds, so long as this process is not purely self-reflective or self-affirming. Literature is most powerful when it not only offers a mirror to the reader, but also allows them to put themself in another person's shoes. In our increasingly digital world, where narcissistic media diets proliferate, literature that shares a diverse range of experiences and takes us outside of ourselves is precious and ought to be preserved.

In literature across time and genre, both realist and non-realist, relatability heightens emotional impact. Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), argues that, following social changes

during the 18th century, the novel was created to introduce a newly individual sensory experience in writing. Novels' innovations include ordinary names for characters with ordinary values and worlds, rather than idealised epic heroes and kings. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is one such novel. Psychological realism and a bildungsroman structure familiarise the reader with the development of Jane's mind. Our investment in Jane's story is heightened by sympathy for Jane's situation and by the relatability of her emotions, such as fear, love and grief. However, while many readers might find Jane relatable, others may find Rochester or St John more relatable. Relatability is malleable and audience-dependent. Jane is manipulated by Rochester in an abuse of class and gendered power and idealised by St John as the perfect wife to serve his own image. For Brontë's contemporary female readers, the relatability of Jane's experience of gender allowed for identification with a female protagonist created by a female author. Relatability is part of what makes *Jane Eyre* an important stage in the development of a female literary world. However, it is equally important that Brontë's male readership did *not* "relate" to Jane's experience of gender, because this unrelatability might prompt them to reflect on gender inequality. Simultaneously relatable and unrelatable, *Jane Eyre* is able to communicate important messages about harmful social patterns.

Relatability contributes to poetry's enduring popularity. Where novels create overtly fictional characters and use these to focalise relatable emotional experiences, lyric poetry plays with first-person poetic personae to offer self-reflective and confessional forms of expression. Wordsworth in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (1800), writes that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings […] emotion recollected in tranquillity". Many follow his prompt to write and read poetry as authentic emotional expression. Helen Vendler, literary critic, says: "in

a state of perplexity, sadness, gloom, elation, you look for a poem to match what you are feeling". Relatability is important to poetry's enduring popularity, in large part due to the cultural practices that prompt circulation. Poetry is, often, a performance art: poems read at events for loftier emotional articulation. Auden's poem read at the funeral service in Newell's *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) exemplifies our use of poems as scripts to express otherwise inexpressible loves and griefs. Poems, too, are gift-objects: given to others as more eloquent expression of our own feelings. Thus, while we frequently encounter lyric poetry that is striking and affecting independent from metrics of relatability, in the circulation and performance of poetry, value is often directly linked to relatability.

While novels like *Jane Eyre* and lyric poetry like Auden's generate relatability from realism, relatability is important in non-realist genres too. Horror and dystopian fiction create unrecognisable and deformed worlds. However, the power of these genres comes from the fact that they maintain a degree of relatability. They offer twisted versions of our own societies, accelerations of our current flaws, thereby reflecting our deepest fears. Nazism, Stalinism and the Spanish Civil War inspire Orwell's dystopian, futuristic novel *1984* (1949). Real fears such as war, information control and truth manipulation generate relatability within an ostensibly unrelatable novel. Orwell himself says: "I write because there is some lie that I want to expose" (Why I Write, 1946). *Animal Farm* (1945) exposes the innate flaws of totalitarianism through its animal world. Orwell's seemingly unrelatable worlds make his novels powerful, as they prompt conscious pursuit of hidden meaning. Such active readership often involves self-scrutiny in our search for answers, thereby encouraging readers to explore a deeper understanding of their own character, values and world.

Kushner's, *Angels in America* (1991), is an example of epic theatre that, unlike dramatic realism, distances its audience in order to prompt self-scrutiny and inspire social change (Brecht). When Harper journeys to Antarctica with Mr Lies, we might deem this to be utterly unrelatable fantasy or hyper-theatricality. However, this distance created between character and audience makes space for us to reflect on the causes of pain and monotony in Harper's life that motivate her desire for escape. Her husband is gay but afraid to accept this and so continues their loveless marriage. Thus, through seemingly unrelatable drama, Kushner prompts his audience to recognise the far-reaching impacts of homophobia. Just as Harper's apparently unrelatable pain becomes more relatable as we get to know her character more, the play teaches us that crises we might choose to dismiss as "not about us" (like AIDS and homophobia) require collective and active attention.

Assessing the importance of relatability in literature, especially literature that voices an oppressed perspective, should prompt us to interrogate the politics of relatability. What assumptions underlie our understanding of something as "relatable"? When we imagine an audience "relating" to art, are other audiences ignored, for whom the experience presented may be less relatable? When we call something relatable, we may often mean simply that it voices the hegemonic perspective. Are we less likely to term something relatable if it voices a minoritised or oppressed experience?

Langston Hughes in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" exhorts Black artists to stay true to themselves, in defiance of a racist society which values artistic standards set by white people. Hughes warns against "this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization." Hughes advocates for the

power literature possesses when it aligns with the author's authentic experience of the world. Furthermore, Hughes alerts us to the difficulty of talking about relatable art in a racist society. The idea that art is powerful because relatable, often assumes that the intended audience is ready and/or willing to recognise themselves in the art. Hughes articulates this complexity when describing "the coloured artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces [...] because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features." Hughes reminds us that when talking about people "relating" to art, we often overlook systemic oppression that might have created shame and fear of their own reflection and thus prevent them from recognising themselves in the work.

Reni Eddo-Lodge, journalist and author of *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017) details the difficulty of explaining the depths and complexity of racial prejudice to people who have not experienced it first-hand. She reminds her reader that "not everyone experiences the world in the way that [white people] do." She struggles especially with white people "who think we enter this conversation as equals. We don't.". Eddo Lodge is not specifically talking about literature, but she is talking about communicating perspectives to others, which is what literature does.

Relatability is not the only source of power for literature. When we say something is relatable/unrelatable, we too often mean that it does/doesn't align with the dominant, hegemonic viewpoint. Putting pressure on minoritised groups to express their experiences in a way relatable to the majority, particularly in the context of racial experience, obscures the fact that difference is violently experienced. Chasing relatability above all, or shying away from topics that are

"unrelatable" or "incomprehensible", prevents us from listening to the voices of those who experience things we do not.

In novels, poetry and drama, across both realist and non-realist genres, relatability often makes literature powerful. While no single experience is "universal" to everyone, much of literature's power comes from conveying emotions in a way that is relatable to a diverse readership. Literature that conveys relatable emotions is powerful because it allows for therapeutic and self-illuminating identification. However, demanding relatability in literature - especially when "relatable" is used only to describe art that reflects the hegemonic perspective - is problematic. Literature that incorporates perspectives and experiences that are ostensibly unrelatable, is often even more valuable than literature that is directly and purely relatable. Literary non-relatability invites readers on a journey and encourages us to listen and learn from others which in turn prompts self-improvement. In an increasingly solipsistic digital world, literature that is unrelatable is as important as literature that is relatable.

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