<u>How important is it to be able to relate to literary characters, their values, and their world?</u>

The ability to relate to literature is a major factor regarding an individual's engagement and contentment towards it. This essay will evaluate the significance of being able to relate to literature. It will ultimately be concluded that relating to literary characters and their experiences is important for achieving greater empathy and self-awareness; however, literature also has the capacity to broaden individual viewpoints by introducing a foreign outlook on life.

The term "relatability" has been associated with a mutual understanding of literature, with the adjective "relatable" becoming more commonly used in recent years. The standard definition of relatability is "the quality of being easy to understand or feel sympathy for" (Cambridge University Press, 2018). This can typically be seen through a shared experience or similar feelings. To apply this to literature, it would refer to being able to create bonds and draw parallels between the world of literature and its consumer. In recent years, there has been an increase in the use of the word relatable when discussing literature. Greg Garrard commented that "relatable" may be "the top candidate for the neologism most hated by English profs" (Garrard, 2016, p.122). His reasoning for this was that it limited a text to a superficial overview and rejected a critical analysis and deep understanding of literature in favour of likeability.

Being able to relate to literature is a key factor influencing an individual's joy of reading. A study that included student participants centred around the link between positive reading engagement and the relevance of the text to the participant. It was found that when the texts contained similar experiences to the participant, they were more likely to find the texts relevant. This could be seen by one participant who described *Fish Cheeks* (Tan, 2003, p.125) as exploring "intricate and hidden feelings" (Tan and Mante-Estacio, 2021, p.353),

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showcasing that being able to associate the emotions of the book with their own enriched their experience. Another participant found *Eleven* (Cisneros, 2013) disinteresting as he could not relate to the emotions expressed by the characters. The results indicate that when a text can be applied to the life of the reader, it increases the overall enjoyment of the text. It should be noted that often the emotions expressed by the characters were directly mentioned, which could highlight that feelings play a vital part in relating to literature. The overall findings question whether a text that focuses on an experience beyond a reader's own perspective can be enjoyed in a similar way.

Literature that diverges from the personal experiences of the viewer is also vital, as it allows for a more comprehensive outlook on the lives of others. For example, *Last Stop on Market Street* (Peña, 2015) discusses the fictional life of a young boy and his grandmother as they travel through their city on a bus. At first, the boy believes his community to be lacking compared to others, but as his grandmother introduces him to people from all walks of life, he recognises the value of connections over materialism. This book takes both the young boy and the reader on a journey, introducing them to new perspectives and offering a lesson on the beauty of diversity.

Furthermore, this can be applied to poetry, which can be interpreted in numerous ways depending on different perceptions, making it a "complex process" (Hungerland, 1955) to understand. *The Road Not Taken* (Frost, 1915) lends itself to this with the use of words such as "sigh," "diverged," and "difference" which can be deciphered as relief or regret. This allows the poem to be interpreted as either positive or negative, which would thus change the message of the poem. With each person having distinct experiences, this allows the poem to be comprehended differently depending on the reader, allowing them to relate the poem back to their individual experiences. The interpretation of literature demonstrates that each reader

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can find their own significance of the piece and relate it back to their lives in diverse manners.

Relating to literature is needed to empathise with the characters and world surrounding them, which is why one must surrender their sense of self to embrace an unfamiliar point of view. Elsewhere, another study was conducted at Ohio State University that focused on the phenomenon of "experience-taking." Participants read about a character who was revealed to be of a different race or sexual orientation than themselves. The group that showed more favourable attitudes and therefore were less likely to stereotype were the ones where the information was revealed later compared to from the beginning (Ohio State University, 2012). Experience-taking demonstrates that to truly connect and therefore relate to a character, one must be able to remove their own self-identity. By finding commonalities with the characters before a dissimilar trait was revealed, the participants were able to humanise the character and therefore find common ground. This could emphasise how relating to literature can counteract prejudices. Revisiting *Last Stop on Market Street* (Peña, 2015), this study shows that to connect with literature beyond individual experiences, the personal identity of the individual must be forgone, allowing them to take on a new self. This can be seen through the reader letting go of themselves and seeing the world through the young boy's eyes and therefore undergoing the experience alongside him.

Additionally, it was also discovered that literature can shape and influence the lives of those in the real world, displaying that works can serve as a mirror for self-reflection. It was found that readers who identify with a fictional character are likely to subconsciously take on their behaviour (Daily, 2012). This may reveal that while a person can project themselves onto a piece of literature, it too can influence a person's mind and therefore their actions. This could highlight how literature can inspire people to improve their lives. Likewise, one fifth of

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people in an alternate study reported hearing voices of characters. This included 19% who stated feeling influenced by the style and tone of their usual thoughts (Lea, 2017). This may indicate that beyond relatability, literature has the potential to impact the thoughts and actions of those who engage with it, which is critical for self-growth.

Literature and fiction are built from the existing experiences of the authors, which is one of the reasons why it often feels similar. "Literature is the art of discovering something extraordinary about ordinary people and saying with ordinary words something extraordinary" (Pasternak n.d., as cited in Zaklina, 2014). Pasternak illustrates that literature is often based on and centres around the encounters and events of real life. Readers can relate to literature because it is a manifestation of the life and occurrences of the real world. This can cause a greater appreciation of regular life, as occurrences in literature can be related back to the reader. For instance, a Stanford article discussed the experience of a woman who recognised that, during her time as chair of her department, her actions were akin to Dolores Umbridge, a character from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling, 2015). Upon this realisation, the woman swiftly caught and amended her actions (Vermeule, 2022). Drawing up comparisons with oneself and a fictional character further proves how realistic portrayals of human behaviour are common in literature. This event supports the idea that relating to characters can act as a ground for reflection and self-improvement. This can be applicable on an individual but also a societal basis.

Undoubtedly, literature carries with it the power to provoke thoughts and questions that can contradict societal norms and extend outside the world of standard relatability. Various times throughout history, literature has been used to inspire change (Altun, 2023). Take the case of *Candide* (Voltaire and Cuffe, 2014, original work published 1759), which critiqued the religion, politics, and social institutions of the time. This encouraged people to question the

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philosophies that ignored real-world injustice. Voltaire was a key figure of the Enlightenment movement, where evidence was promoted over superstition and religion, which paved the way for rationality in society. This exhibits the importance of literature in societal movements and its ability to shine a light on the issues that society shuns. Furthermore, this can also be viewed through literature such as *Not Without Laughter* (Hughes, 2020)*,* which narrates the story of a young boy who lives a life of segregation, and *I Have a Dream* (King, 2014, original 1963) speech, which appealed to end inequality. These are renowned for emphasising the importance of change in society. While they do share a relatable experience with many who suffer injustice, it can also be said that these function as wider symbols of societal issues. This demonstrates the importance of literature in promoting equality and justice.

In conclusion, relatability is a vital factor in the overall understanding and enjoyment of literature, especially in modern times. Equally so, the ability to recognise the perspectives of other people, which can sometimes challenge and expand on one's own viewpoints, allowing for self-growth. Ultimately, being able to relate to literature on some level is crucial to taking away the messages that literature provides, which can often inspire change, whether it be personal or a collective development in society.

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