

**THE IMMEDIACY OF WRITING:  
WHY LITERATURE MATTERS MORE  
TO STUDENTS WHO ARE CREATIVE WRITERS**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The compelling question of our existence, How shall I live? can be pursued through philosophy, art and education when tied to Aristotle's maxim, 'people who know most live best'. The ancient debate between Plato and Aristotle, however, sets philosophy against art due to the nature of understanding and whether the immediacy of emotions elicited by art can aid learning. Today we appreciate emotions have a cognitive role to play, especially in gaining practical wisdom. In knowing how we feel, we know what we think.

Both philosophy and art seek truth; one through logic, the other through aesthetic intelligence which relies on intuition, senses and feelings in order to penetrate deeper, ineffable mysteries of life as well as illuminate the malaises of modern society and entrenched habits of mind. Art takes us out of ourselves and reveals limits of morality, all of which have enormous implications for education. In guiding students towards what is worthwhile, teachers strive to find moral methods of initiation and facilitate the education of feeling. The creative writing classroom provides manifold opportunities for development of the whole person.

In reading literature, we practice moral discernment that suggests compassion for people as qualitatively unique beings, which reduces the distance between ourselves and the 'other'. Good literature is difficult; we must face reality but are offered ways to transcend suffering and death by becoming part of a larger realm of life, resulting in the desire to change our lives, see more and be touched more by life.

Creative writing is even more immediate; our words reveal who we are and the views we hold. The learning curve is great as we take responsibility for our shortcomings and return to esteemed authors for models of moral vision. The literary canon mentors writers with high examples of creativity, imagination and technique. Experts divide on teaching writing; some believe in genius, others in skills and knowledge, but much can be encouraged in beginners if they naturally persevere and work hard. Serious engagement with literary reading and writing offers the possibility of achieving a balance between ideals and reality, heart and mind.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, Mary Ruth Barber,  
and the memory of my father, Norman Barber.

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## INTRODUCTION

Imagine a small child, locked away in an attic room like David Copperfield, shivering and wiping his eyes. He glances around at the neglected fireplace, the cast off furniture and stares at the wall. As a distraction, he pulls a book off a shelf; the black ink is in high contrast upon the ivory page. The words are strung together to awe and excite, and meaning begins to pick up momentum. A picture sharpens in his thoughts and he is no longer alone; a voice tells him that somewhere, perhaps far away, there is a candleflame burning, and soon he feels the warmth from that fire.

The child will eventually close the book but in his heart continue to cross the great Sahara or sail the frothy seas. If the words have done their job and his imagination has taken ownership, he may be compelled to finish the tale. He will often return to literature, finding more places to go, more battles to fight and new ways of understanding his life. When again he is filled with the emotion of the moment, there may even come a jumping off point when he goes beyond the printed page and writes his own story.

George Steiner (8) informs us that the best response to a work of art is another work of art. I believe that to be true. There is often something so immediate and personal about being inspired by art that it is all we can do but get to the canvas, the piano or our writing desk. I also believe that in order to critique art or even teach art well, we must be practitioners of the form. There is something “parasitic” or secondary about the critic who has not served the long apprenticeship art demands. In contrast, there is something profoundly moral in the meditation upon a work of art by someone

who has. The difference lies in the fact that the artist naturally and spontaneously invests her own being in the process of that interpretation. For that reason I have tried to keep close to what authors of literature have to say on my topic.

In this thesis I will examine the mutually inciting relationship between creative writing and the reading of literature. I will aim to show how one beckons to the other and increases the desire to learn and share more. Literature offers many paths to knowledge and understanding and it accomplishes this by striking a critical balance between the cognitive and the affective. In other words, literature demands we access deep feeling in order to access deep thinking.

I will present a case for the importance of teaching literature, not only as a reflective tool but as a possible antidote to the ills of our society, especially the negative aspects of politics, science and modern economic demands. With the author as moral guide, the reader is encouraged to rise above stereotypes and prejudice, and avoid the habit of relying on fixed rules for making judgments. It is also hoped that with practice, the reader will begin to perceive other human beings as unique and complex individuals and see their situations within contexts. After reading enough quality literature, “norms” of morality will hopefully come into focus which will further aid discernment and deepen ethical understanding.

Great literature challenges us to see one another as less strange, less threatening, less “other”. But it also asks us to look closely at ideas we hold dear and question whether new ways of thinking would not improve our circumstances. In this manner literature can be unsettling; it penetrates our very inner being. Literary persuasion can be so effective that we begin to see ways in which we would like to change our lives.

Creative writing offers an even more intense experience. We discover who we are as we write. As we read about ourselves on the page we may find that we need to know more, bring more of the world into ourselves. And this is precisely when we return to literature; first, as a moral guide, secondly, as a means of mastering skills, and third, as a way of escaping from our limited existence. Put quite simply, the more we write, the more significant great literature becomes for us.

Before stating the main points related to literature and creative writing, however, it is essential to establish how we have come to view the arts. Because I will argue that literature and creative writing are valuable paths to knowledge and ethical understanding, I would like to cite a few of the thinkers throughout history who have opposed this view and those who have effectively countered their position. I will touch upon the ancient debate between Plato and Aristotle, as well as discuss the Romantic notion of genius and the dichotomy within the arts themselves which centers on art for art's sake vs. a necessity of purpose in the arts. We will see again and again how the disagreement which pits the rational against the emotional influences the public's perception of the arts and I will attempt to diffuse the debate by suggesting examples of how cognitive elements within emotions can lead to knowledge.

From the time of Homer onward, literature and philosophy have been at odds over these points, and due to Plato's hostility in particular, the arts are in need of defense. And yet I believe the arts can be as valuable as philosophy in revealing moral truth, especially through aesthetic intelligence which is developed and accessed through intuition, senses and feelings. Although these ideas cannot be argued fully with reason, nonetheless they

are grounded in truth. I will explore Kant's concept of aesthetics and how our sense of beauty may be the moral center of philosophy in any case.

Whether literature is enough in itself, whether it works best as an agent for social change or whether it is just entertainment, art is still able to delight us through contact with the author's creativity and imagination. I will discuss why there are still difficulties with art because it does not want to be analyzed and why interpretation of art is fraught with hazard.

Ultimately, however, it is hoped that with their strong emotional as well as cognitive components, literature and creative writing will clearly be seen as offering valid answers to the same questions philosophy and education pose. If philosophy dwells in the abstract realm of ideals, and literature in the nitty-gritty of real life, education is the common ground where philosophy and literature may effect a compromise. For it is true that the aims of education embody the best of Plato and Aristotle, models of perfection as well as practical wisdom. Between the opposing sides lie urgent questions of what to teach and how to go about it, keeping in mind what's best for the student. The creative writing classroom appears to be one place where it is possible to achieve a harmony between the two views.

Finally, in the appendices following the conclusion to this thesis, I will include two works of creative writing; one in response to a current social issue, the other as acknowledgment of our debt to significant works of literature.

## **CHAPTER ONE: PHILOSOPHY VS. LITERATURE**

As human beings mature into greater awareness, a question arises that is the central inquiry of philosophy: How shall I live? This has been translated and elaborated in numerous directions, through many disciplines, so that it is often restated as: What is the meaning of life? Who am I? What is truth? With a thousand worlds for the asking, how best to spend the time given to me?

If early wisdom is any guide, we might lend an ear to Aristotle, who simply says, the person who knows most is likely to live best. For Aristotle, the highest state of human perfection is in the contemplation of truth. Whether a truth can be determined through sustained analytical thinking, or, if it must be held up against the authentic, spontaneous response of deeply felt emotions, this is the point of much friction between philosophy and the arts. The source of this disagreement may be traced to the ancient debate between Plato and Aristotle. That Plato felt hostile towards the emotions aroused by literature and the arts, and denounced them as a means of learning, has been the cause of much distress for its practitioners, supporters and teachers.

I would like to take the time here to examine how this disagreement came about, especially how it has played a role in promoting a negative attitude towards the arts that has persisted up to today. Nussbaum (14) tells us that before Plato, Greek tragedians recognized the ethical significance of learning through emotional experience. In other words, the ancient Greeks did not divide the poetic from the philosophical. What brought

about such a change? In the next section I will attempt to clarify the issues surrounding this argument in order to set forth certain concepts that I will revisit in later chapters.

### ***The Paradox of Plato***

Both Plato (428-347 B.C.) and the poets agreed their aim was to investigate human life and how to live it, but where they and later Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) parted company was over the nature of understanding and ethical truth. For modern readers to comprehend Plato's stance, we must slant our thinking towards the culture in Greece at that time.

The pre-Socratics were basically oral thinkers, strongly rooted in the traditions of the past. Of Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Parmenides, the three whose work has survived, what we notice first is a strange way of speaking, not merely due to certain verbal and metrical habits but in their expression or mental attitude. (Havelock x). This is because they were embedded in myth, these thinker-poets, and their means of expression was through recitation. By this period various tribes of people had invented their own religions and mythologies that were related to the Greeks but with slight differences. Further abroad, there were even more different systems of explaining the world in terms of spiritual values and dogma. In the first millennium B.C. these systems began to converge on Greece, situated as it was at the crossroads of Africa, Persia, the Middle East, Europe and the surrounding city-states of the Mediterranean. Wherever cultures with strong ideas rub up against each other, there follows a competition for the hearts and minds of the people. Because the nature of religion and deity-based mythologies is such that no one group could accept another's beliefs, Helladic Greece became a crucible for religious and mythological strife. (Hughes/Abbs 162).



The struggle to find a peaceful equilibrium was equally strong and the early philosophers became the heroes of the conflict. It created them, opened up depths of spiritual imagination as they attempted to impose order and make sense of it all. Religious passion was transformed in the philosopher to an awareness of the sacredness and seriousness of life. Obscure symbolic mysteries in the mythologies became for the philosophers a perception of universal, human truths. A tectonic shift was underway. What followed was the apogee of ancient Greece, the great fifth century B.C., which saw the waning of the religious era and the waxing of the philosophical. (163).

Yet during Plato's lifetime, in the early days of Greek rationalism, religious symbolism and ritual still exerted great influence. (Havelock ix). Perhaps more importantly, Plato viewed this era in Greek civilization as one of quasi-morality. As part of their training, the young were taught that although virtue was important, it was often difficult and unrewarding. In the Republic, Plato has written a guide book where he attempts to isolate the principle of morality in the abstract, to be defined and defended for its own sake, and to set forth what he believed would be the happiest human condition. Never before had pure morality been envisioned as a goal for society and its individuals. The Republic, ultimately then, came to be written as an indictment of Greek tradition and its educational system, as well as an attempt to create order from the cultural chaos of the time. (12).

Today we find it strange that the title of Plato's work is not wholly indicative of the contents. In fact, Book III and X are occupied with an examination of the arts, not politics. In these Books and in many of his other works, Plato focuses blame for Greece's state of gray morality upon the poets. (3). In a remarkable statement in the

Republic (398A) he says that if a dramatic poet tried to visit the ideal state he would be escorted to the border. In other works such as the Laws he takes a stronger line, recommending stringent censorship of the poets. (Murdoch Existentialists and Mystics [unless otherwise noted] 386).

This attitude has puzzled thinkers for centuries. Was not Plato himself a poet in his youth? Did he not frequent dramatic performances? And what about the Republic – is it not arranged artistically in the form of dialogues with a beauty of range, universality, depth of human emotion, economy and commanding power? If we are to understand his meaning we must take a harder look at his conception of philosophy.

Plato describes existence as a life-long pilgrimage from appearance to reality. Awareness moves from blanket acceptance of sense experience to a more complex and morally enlightened understanding. This is laid out in Plato's Theory of Forms, derived from Socrates's search for moral definitions and the beliefs of Heraclitus. The Theory of Forms wrestles with the questions that most concerned Plato: Why do so many different things share similar qualities? How do we know things in a world that is in continual flux? And, what is virtue and how can we learn it and know it? The Forms are put forth as changeless, eternal, non-sensible objects that can provide some answers. As guarantors of the unity and objectivity of morals and therefore the reliability of knowledge, the Forms remain steady and true. (Murdoch 387). In the Republic (596A) Plato tells us that there are Forms for groups of things, such as mathematical Forms and logical Forms, even "sensa" Forms such as Beauty. The Form of the Good appears as an awakening and creative force. (Murdoch 387).

Interestingly, Plato tells us that we are innately aware of the Forms because before we were born we possessed all knowledge. This is an argument in favor of the immortality of the soul. Life then is composed of stages of *anamnesis*, the recovery of forgotten knowledge, which can be accessed through training or guidance. (388).

Plato elucidates this concept through his myth of the sun, the fire and the cave (Republic 514). The pilgrimage through life begins with prisoners in a cave. In the lowest levels of existence the prisoners are only able to see shadows on a wall cast by the fire. Later they move into a new level of reality and are able to see the fire, which makes the shadows. After they escape the cave they realize that the outside world is illuminated by the sun, and ultimately, in the highest level, they can apprehend the sun itself. The sun stands for the Form of the Good by which humans are able to see the truth. (Murdoch 389).

How does this relate to art? Plato describes the distance of art from the Forms through the example of a painting of a bed. The Form of a bed is eternal; it is a pure essence, an ideal. When a carpenter builds a bed, it is one step removed from the ideal Form. But an artist who copies this bed from her point of view is therefore at a third remove from reality. She doesn't understand the Form of the bed, nor has she made a functioning physical piece of furniture. And moreover, since she avoids confronting the disparity between the appearance of the bed and the Form, her art willfully accepts appearance without questioning it.

Thus Plato accuses the poets of being undignified or immoral. (390). Their work is at best frivolous and at worst dangerous, to science and morality. For this reason, Plato

recommends the major Greek poets from Homer to Euripides be excluded from the Greek educational system. (Havelock 3-4).

For modern thinkers there has been great reluctance to take what Plato says at face value. One of the main arguments, Havelock (6) states, is that “the experience of poetry today has an aesthetic dimension that was lacking in Plato’s day”. That is, we now accept that the experience of poetry can offer a particular kind of aesthetic understanding, one that appeals to us through the senses, feelings and intuition. But Plato reacts to the elements of poetry as though they are a type of psychic poison. He charges the poet with contriving to distort meaning through the use of language (Republic 601A) or embellishing meaning by exploiting the resources of meter, rhythm and harmony. To us, this seems to be violating the heart of the poetic experience. Plato goes on to say,

In the same way the poet can use words and phrases as a medium to paint a picture of any craftsman, though he knows nothing except how to represent him, and the meter and rhythm and music will persuade people who are as ignorant as he is, and who judge merely from his words, that he really has something to say about shoemaking or generalship or whatever it may be. So great is the natural magic of poetry. Strip it of its poetic coloring, reduce it to plain prose, and I think you know how little it amounts to. (601A)

All Plato’s efforts run contrary to our idea of “poetry for poetry’s sake”, especially as a means of communicating experience. And it is important at this stage to recall that the Republic was partly written as a manual for educational reform. His objections are in the context of the standards he was setting in terms of education. For him then, poetry is a threat to education due to a moral danger as well as an intellectual one. It clouds values, good character and prevents perception of the truth. (Havelock 6).

Today in education we defend poetry as morally uplifting, inspiring us to higher levels of consciousness, deeper compassion and making us more aesthetically adept at reaching out to new and ineffable ways of describing those realities which escape prosaic articulation. But this is a modern prejudice and many thinkers have attempted to rescue Plato in order to make him more palatable to modern tastes. Havelock (7) counteracts such attempts by saying if “the programme of the Republic is utopian and that the exclusion of poetry applies only to an ideal condition not realizable in the recognisable future or in earthly societies...(then) why should the Muse of all people be selected for exclusion from Utopia? ...this depends ... on the assumption that the Republic (so-called) is about politics. Is that not the label on the bottle? Yes, it is, but...in this instance (it) reports a strong flavour of educational but not of political theory. The reforms which are proposed are considered to be urgent in the present and are not utopian. Poetry is not charged with a political offense but an intellectual one and accordingly the constitution which has to be protected against her influence is twice defined as the polity within the soul.”

Another deflection of Plato’s assault is to refocus his target a little left of poetry on to that of drama. In his desire for a life of virtuous moderation, we may say that Plato was a puritan, and like most puritans, Plato disliked theatre. Public performance is at home with vulgarity, buffoonery, histrionic emotion and even scandal. Aristocratic taste is sometimes offended by gaudy showmanship, rude sounds and behavior, displayed especially by the mob mentality of the crowd. (Murdoch 397). The fear that words might provoke deeds led Plato to urge his followers to be content with the more sedate writer who would reproduce the speech of the decent man. (Republic 398B). Of course

Plato has a point in some respects about the cheapening and cruel effects of an atmosphere where everything can be mocked and rendered ludicrous. (Murdoch 398).

But I would reiterate here that Plato is hugely concerned with the emotional impact on the audience. In particular, he points a finger at the poet's use of *mimesis*, or imitation, which caused the audience, as well as the actors and the poet himself, to identify emotionally with the characters in the play. It is this pathology of fluctuating emotions, he says, with which we feel but never think and the submission to the hypnotic effect of the poet's skills that is the root of the problem. The damage is caused by being under the spell of an artist's imperfect view of things and the audience's identification with that view. (Havelock 26).

Now we begin to see that Plato's argument is concerned with people identifying with flawed role models, not just the noble heroes. In so being affected, people might be encouraged to adopt lower behavior, much like our modern worries about viewers mimicking TV, film or video game violence. It is the irrational emotional power of art, along with its power to tell lies or subversive truths, that puts us significantly at risk, according to Plato. (Murdoch 13). There is nothing left for it but censorship. If we take the stories of gods, heroes and human beings seriously, full as they are of murder, incest, treachery, uncontrolled passions, weakness and cowardice, I feel we could agree with Plato that after a time the repetition of this hazardous material may lead to copycat behavior by those with undeveloped minds.

If it were only this, we might be able to understand Plato's objection. But he leaves off criticizing the content of the stories to examine the manner in which they are told. He begins to reveal a fundamental hostility to the poetic experience per se, and

especially to the imaginative act which makes up such a large portion of that experience. (Havelock 10-11).

Why does Plato view poetry as such a menace to the moral fabric of his society? We must recall that up to this time, the poets were the only means of transmitting knowledge in a pre-literate society. Poetry circulated a massive repository of useful information, in effect a veritable encyclopedia of ethics, politics, history, culture and even skills, such as the proper way to load and unload ships. An indoctrination rather than an entertainment, poetry was the core of the able citizen's educational equipment. Once this is grasped, we can begin to understand that the Republic is an attack on the existing, traditional system.

In the tenth book of the Republic Plato takes issue with the idea that the poets ought to know about the techniques and subjects of which they speak. Homer, Plato contends, attempts to discuss warfare, military leadership, politics and education, when in fact, Homer had very little practical experience in most of these areas. Yet Homer is so convincing in relating these subjects that he is admired for his expert knowledge. Plato goes to great lengths here to illustrate the enormous gulf between the truth as understood by reason and the illusions produced by poetry. (28).

All of this strikes us as foreign to our modern way of thinking. We assume the poet is an artist who creates works of art. But for Plato the concept of aesthetics never enters the discussion. He persists in criticizing the poets for not teaching well. (29). I tend to agree with the literary critic, Harold Bloom (6), who sees this as Plato's deep and personal resentment towards the poets. Bloom claims that as Plato became more aware of the hold poetry had over society's imagination, he began to recognize the "agon", or

competition with philosophy. It matters little if it is geographical, religious, or philosophical; the struggle for ideological dominance is inevitable as education systems are put into place. (Eisenberg 36). The lesson in Homer is the glory of battle, the strengths and weaknesses in each of us, and so Homer teaches the poetics of conflict. And all of Plato is an incessant conflict with Homer. Worse, all of Plato's efforts were in vain, Bloom (6) says, because it was the voice of Homer, not Plato, that was the continued schoolbook of the ancient Greeks.

We might concede that this kind of attack is fair if Homer is actually intending to provide a manual on the manufacture of beds, etc. If that is so, it is a poor manual. It is indeed not based on practical experience or understanding. In contrast to art, Plato's Theory of Forms is epistemological and wishes to define the kinds of knowledge that would be described as universal, precise and final. (Havelock 30).

Perhaps the most surprising revelation is that if poetry's primary purpose was to provide a social encyclopedia, one that Plato defined through the standards of his Academy as functioning badly, it was because the goal of his curriculum was expressed by the word *episteme*, which is often translated into English as "science". A graduate of the Academy possessed rigorous training in mathematics and logic, which Plato deemed most necessary to a society he believed ought to be organized along scientific lines. (31).

However, I would still like to question why Plato chose such an easy scapegoat for all of society's woes. What role exactly did Plato see poetry as playing? The answer to this last part of the puzzle may lie in Plato's difficulty in discussing poetry as separate from the conditions under which it is performed. This leads us to believe the actual performance of poetry was much more crucial to Greek culture than we might realize.



These were not selected readings held in public or private venues nor kept to festival days in the theatre. These performances were in fact a fundamental part of adult recreation. People did not go to the bookshop or library to pick up a copy of The Iliad and read it at home. The relationship between the audience and the poet was always that of listeners at an oral performance. (Havelock 37-38).

The Greeks had been using the alphabet since the 8th century B.C. but as with any new technology it was slow to spread. Its appearance did not necessarily imply full literacy. Reading must be introduced at the primary level, not the secondary, and records show that as late as the 5th century B.C., Athenians were taught to read as adolescents. The skill was therefore overlaid upon previous oral learning. We can assume then that along with a dominant oral learning style, there also persisted an oral state of mind, and for Plato, this was the main enemy, for the manner of thinking determines the connection of the group. (40-41). The terms of thinking become standardized so that the group recognizes a clear identity and shares a singular consciousness with a similar set of values. And to maintain a standardized identity a group must take action to preserve a certain body of knowledge. In the form of language, for example, information will be passed on to others about methods of building a house or cooking food. Paradigms will be drilled into successive generations. (42).

In a pre-literate society, this living knowledge is retained through storytelling. But how can such detailed instruction be transmitted from person to person over multiple generations without losing its precision? The answer was, as Havelock (42) puts it, to use a particular “verbal technology” based on rhythmic wording that was constructed cleverly enough in metrical patterns so as to imprint sound, shape and meaning on the

listener's psyche. All memorization in this tradition required continual repetitive recitation. The body of knowledge was repeated at the banquet, family rituals, and in the public theatre and marketplace. Parents, elders, students and professionals participated in a community conspiracy to keep its precious knowledge alive. (43-44).

How is such a body of memory to be acquired, not just by the professionals but by the average members of the group? We have alluded to it earlier as an appeal to psychic resources, sometimes latent but available in the consciousness of each person. It is actually accomplished by a collusion between poet and listener. The Homeric poet knew he controlled the culture in which he lived and this was a fact accepted by the community and himself without reflection or analysis. He was highly aware of the skills he used to imprint ideas on memory but the actual methods he employed were personal unto himself. It is this personal power that alarms Plato. Both what the poet was saying and how it was being said was being accepted without question because the Homeric audience submitted gratefully to the pleasurable, hypnotic effect of the poet's art.

Let us spend a moment showing how this was done, in particular by Homer, and by literature in general. Partly it is accomplished by the marriage of words to dance rhythms. (145-146). If we look closely at this technique, we compare the easiest way to memorize, and that is through sheer repetition,

Hector is dead; Hector is dead.

This, however, has little force. But compare it to the increased energy of the following,

Hector is dead; dead indeed is Hector.

where the words and meaning are the same but now we have a more unusual word order.

If the mind chooses to take a further creative step, keeping the same essential image but taking a different angle on it or utilizing unexpected words or syntax, it can be restated in a more appealing way,

Hector is dead; fallen is Hector

Yea Achilles slew him

Hector is defeated, Hector is dead.

Such is the virtuosity found in The Iliad. The mind's eye is bifocal; it sees meaning but it makes room for differences within the meaning. In addition to this is the parallel system of repetition that concentrates on sound alone, outside of meaning. In the example of,

Hector is dead; Hector is dead.

the units of repetition are two-fold, the dactylic hexameter in the Greek is proportioned between lines of constant time length. The result feels like slow regular undulations, which in turn are composed of an internal pattern of ripples of wavelengths. In other words, the rhythmic memory constantly repeats itself. (Havelock 147-148).

The voice falls naturally into these rhythms, and as if that were not enough, other parallel rhythms reinforce it. A reciter uses a lyre and his strumming sets up an acoustic rhythm in addition to the vocal cords, which add to the pattern of bodily reflexes. Thus the listeners' ears are doubly affected by two sets of sounds in concordant rhythm, voice

and instrument. The latter, however, is merely repetitive, otherwise it would detract from the main attention. Lastly, there is the body itself. The fingers, legs and feet are controlled in a pattern of actions akin to dancing, which aid in “acting out” the recital. And this lulling, throbbing motion invites the audience to enter the poet’s trance and shadow the motions of the reciter, perhaps only half known to the listener herself, and soon the listener is accompanying the beat with a rocking motion or a foot tap of her own that keeps with the body’s overall rhythm. (148-150).

This is how the poet moves the audience and now we will go inside the listener herself to learn how a person is affected. The recital of the social and cultural encyclopedia was an adult recreation but it could also be said that it was a great pleasure. The audience was quite willing to spend time under the poet’s spell so as to let go of their cares and relax. Poets were often praised for releasing their listeners from anxiety and grief. (152-153).

The pleasure of letting go while at the same time coding the information into the memory awakened another psychic phenomenon, that of fully identifying with the actor or character in the performance. A listener as well as a reciter had to access her own previously experienced grief or anger in order to connect to that of Achilles’s. In effect, the actor or listener *became* Achilles. If this was achieved, a person could recall the story of Achilles for the rest of her life, quoting the story, line for line. The cost of this mental effort, of course, was a complete loss of objectivity. And here we are again at Plato’s complaint about the arts.

I would emphasize the importance of his choice of the word *mimesis* to describe the poetic experience which becomes more significant when we understand that it does

not only apply to the poet representing Forms at a third remove. The actor upon the stage is imitating a character who represents a hero or god, and the members of the audience themselves are following the words, sounds and body rhythms so closely that they are possibly mimicking the movements of the reciter which in turn helps them enter the trance more fully. The vivid experience of the work enables them to remember the story they are hearing. For Plato, this kind of learning, this emotional reliving of experience through the memory over and over again instead of learning through rational analysis, is for him the worst aspect of it. For in the oral tradition, there is such an immediate impact upon the listener that the emotions rush forth and there can be no clear-headed understanding of the information that is being delivered, no critical distance nor objectivity that would allow for determination of the truth. (Bailin, in conversation.). And again, for Plato, this is the chief obstacle to the ideal method of learning as deemed by the Academy, that of scientific rationalism. (Havelock 45, 47).

In the end, Plato was to have his way. As literacy spread in Europe, the oral tradition is all but lost to us. From classical Greece on to our day, rational thinking and science appear to be winning over more and more hearts and minds. In our modern society, the arts continue to suffer from Plato's decree that they cannot be a form of knowledge. The great paradox of Plato is that his masterpiece of thought is great art, yet it is something he never theoretically realized. (Murdoch 13).

I will continue to bring up Plato in later chapters when his ideas relate to issues I will discuss. But before we leave philosophy I would like to present another view of the arts from within the discipline. Ancient Greece did produce a great defender of literature, someone for whom emotion played a large role in discovering truth. Fortunately for

history, one of Plato's students took up art's cause and argued in favor of its ability to provide a way of learning.

### ***Aristotle's Apologia***

The qualities of mind found in Plato contrasted to those of Aristotle make for a list of opposites: Plato as idealist vs. Aristotle the realist, conservative vs. liberal, elitism vs. inclusiveness, a rational mode of thinking vs. an emotional mode that validates cognition. Aristotle must have been Plato's most recalcitrant pupil. Their ancient debate in terms of this thesis is stated thus: Can literature tell us how to live? Plato insists we cannot learn from art. Aristotle counters with the certainty that tragedy does tell the truth. In this section I would like to survey several of the intellectual faults Plato finds with art and allow Aristotle to counter them, as interpreted by other thinkers.

In the Poetics, Aristotle never explicitly challenges Plato's assertion that all art is an elaborate trick. But he does take on the idea that art is useless. Art has value because it offers a kind of therapy. Psychologically, it arouses and purges dangerous emotions. (Sontag 4). I believe literature can be said to do just that; it is a disciplined technique for arousing certain emotional responses. Its power is in the close and dangerous play with subconscious forces. Murdoch (10) would agree that one of the main reasons we enjoy art is because it disturbs us in mysterious ways.

The Greek tragic poets recognized three main ideas: the ethical significance of contingency, the dilemma of conflicting duties and the importance of passion, which are not often the subjects of the great philosophers. (Nussbaum 14). All of the tragic poets composed in a similar vein and communicate a sense that events beyond one's control are

of real importance, not only for feelings of well-being and happiness but also in order to live a good life, including correct moral action. In other words, what happens to people due to Fate can have an enormous effect on the ethical quality of one's existence. (17). Aristotle confirmed the view that the honorable man can still be thwarted by unforeseen circumstances. (40).

For these reasons, Nussbaum (17) states, the responses of pity and fear that are elicited by tragedy are worthwhile because they highlight ethical truths, while other emotions are deemed appropriate in relation to their proper beliefs. Tragedy in particular relies on universal morals for its structure and literary shape, as Aristotle tells us in his manual for playwrighting, the Poetics. Here he relates that aesthetic structure functions to produce a whole that has a beginning, middle and end (Poetics 31), and within that whole there is catharsis, or a climax, that evolves out of what might happen, what is probable, even inevitable, based on our knowledge of life and beliefs. (Nussbaum 17). Stories often deploy the technique of reversals of fortune or shocking discoveries that befall good but vulnerable people. As we have said, tragedy moves the spectator to identify with a hero who is frustrated unto madness or grieves over the corpse of his beloved. (17). The form itself leads the audience up to this release through a transfer of pity for a character to fear for oneself. In defending the art of the tragedy, Aristotle defends the *necessity* of arousing pity and fear, for the purpose of providing an outlet for such emotions (Poetics 12).

Plato, however, quotes Socrates as not accepting this view of things. His main point is that Fate means nothing because the good man cannot be harmed. When one is virtuous in oneself nothing else has ethical significance. The correct view, therefore, is

that the virtuous person is self-sufficient. (Nussbaum 17). And yet I feel here again we witness Plato's idealism where one case fits all, and the single paradigm being philosophy as the only means to arriving at ethical truth and understanding.

Aristotle, on the other hand, uses a much more inclusive dialectical method in pursuing truth. His inquiry is both empirical and practical; that is, it takes evidence from the experience of living and aims to find a means for human beings to live together. This position involves examining all ideas and belief systems, especially contrasting them to one another, as well as against the beliefs and feelings of the individual holders of the ideas and their active sense of life. What is sought after is not a truth that corresponds to some supra-human reality but what is most natural to human lives. Participants are asked to determine what they can least live well without and to find coherence and a good fit through judgment, feeling, perception and values. The consideration of literature already assumes a few 'givens', such as the ethical importance of uncontrolled events, the epistemological value of emotion and the variety and non-commensurability of important experiences in life. Works of literature are not neutral tools for the examination of these concepts. There is a specific grasp of what matters built directly into a work. (25-26).

I feel along with Nussbaum (27) that if moral philosophy is to be investigated, especially as a pursuit of truth in all forms, comprised of all ethical alternatives as well as the comparison of each within our active sense of life, then literature must be included.

Aristotle reminds us to be respectful of difference while at the same time to search for consistent patterns in answer to the question, How to live? Ultimately the question endeavors to reveal what is most fundamental to life. (28).



Some may argue that this path of inquiry is unsound, that every ethical tradition is non-comparable to every other, and that there is no single starting point. But Aristotle's response to this is simply, this is what thinkers do, and what is urgently needed to be done. We need to know how to live and we attempt to contrast and evaluate traditions, as rationally as possible, through all the muddle of that endeavor. And that is what our relation to literature is – muddled, complex and mysterious. We listen, or from Aristotle's time onward, read, for life, like David Copperfield, searching for the answers to pressing questions, new ways of being, while holding up images against our previously acquired knowledge of the way things are. (29).

Thus defended as belonging in Aristotle's inclusive approach to philosophy, Nussbaum (36) says, "novels show us the worth and richness of plural qualitative thinking and engender in their readers a richly qualitative kind of seeing". Authors labor towards presenting this qualitative rightness, and lead us towards refined understanding. In this way, "perceptions" or ethical ability, as Nussbaum (37) defines it, become developed in the reader; finer discernment enables one to view moralities beyond general rules or ideals. True perception is the ability to see through to the salient features of a person's particular situation, and, according to Aristotle, this is the essence of practical wisdom. It is also of great ethical value. I must point out the contrast here to general rules that are set to one standard. In underlining perceptions, Aristotle reveals the ethical crudeness of moralities based exclusively on following general rules. He demands of ethics a much finer and wider view, taking into consideration details that have not been seen before and therefore could not have been included in a previous system of rules.

Rules have their place, Aristotle believes, but perception of the particular must dominate both the general and the universal when it is important to look closer. (38).

In another example, I believe it is essential to recognize in literature a double vision towards characters and their conditions. On the one hand, when the reader identifies with a character, she imagines herself in the character's place and so learns vicariously that if she were in a similar situation, she would naturally react in the same manner. In this approach the reader becomes more aware of herself and goes beyond set rules or ideals to weigh the specifics of her own circumstances. On the other hand, I think each reader's experience is so individual that the identical features of the literary work could never correspond exactly to the reader's reality and so the awareness is one of lessened impact. Today, one thinks of how we leave the theatre or cinema and how quickly "reality" returns. The speed with which we are returned to our normal lives slowly diminishes the effect of the experience. In this case, the familiar environment acts as a corrective to the loss of objectivity that takes place when we let go of what we know to be true during the experience.

It is a fact, however, that the emotional response at climactic moments is strong, especially in theatre and film. Plato believes that once activated the emotions become irrational. If we focus mainly on literature, the response is also strong but we are able to gain critical distance as soon as we set our book down. We may pause, re-read and re-enter the emotional fray at will; the experience may be intense but our emotions rarely become irrational. Aristotle challenges Plato's claim of irrationality and states that practical reasoning without emotion is insufficient for practical wisdom. For Aristotle, a contradiction exists, in that emotions are at the same time not only more unreliable than

the intellect, but often they are *more* reliable. This is especially true in the case of hindsight, when we've had time to reflect upon an emotional response in literature and reality alike. (Nussbaum 40).

Aristotle rejects the idea that the emotions are blind animal reactions, akin to bodily feelings such as hunger. But a feeling like anger is closely linked to a set of beliefs, such as a sense of what is fair when we have been wronged. Just the same, when a belief changes, either by a new development or an altered significance, the emotion is likely to be revised or withdrawn. (41). Because of this cognitive dimension, Aristotle sees emotions as intelligent parts of our ethical system. It may be true that emotions can be unreliable, but so can beliefs. Frequently emotions are more dependable because they reveal what is most firmly rooted in our judgment of what is important to us, views that often get lost during complex intellectual meditation. (42).

Aristotle also takes issue with Plato's requirement of learning along the lines of *episteme* or scientific understanding. Aristotle emphatically denies that practical reason is scientific. In fact, true rational practical choice cannot be forced into becoming more scientific without becoming defective. (55). Again, he tells us that discernment of the right choice relies upon perception, the ethical ability that allows us to respond to specific features of a situation. He cites three ideas that undermine a scientific conception of rationality; the first two I have mentioned earlier -- that valuable things are non-commensurable and the necessity of judging on a case by case basis -- and now he adds a third, which is a defense of the emotions and imagination as being vital to rational choice.

Plato's stance on this last idea connected to the imagination is one of rejecting the sensuous flights of intellect as part of a general rejection of the influence of the body.

Other philosophers have described imagination as too egoistic and self-indulgent. (76).

And yet I would ask if it is not specifically the imagination that allows us to put ourselves into others' situations and experience more objectively what it is to leave our self?

Aristotle's "phantasia" corresponds most closely to our modern conception of imagination in that it works with memory to picture absent or previously experienced items, or form new combinations -- some not yet experienced -- from things that have entered our sense experience. (Nussbaum 77). He believes imagination works in tandem with ethical conceptions of the good, shown by the way we conduct a test run in our minds to determine what is to be avoided and what pursued. The person of practical wisdom will not ignore the imagination's conclusions when assessing a situation for its goodness or virtue in future acts. (77-78). People possessing a practical wisdom are ready to meet new situations with enough imagination and perceptiveness that will allow them to improvise what is required to act morally. (71). To improvise, specifically, is to read what the concrete situation requires. When we are aware of the particularities of individuals and situation, practical wisdom will allow us to use self-directed judgment because we are not rule bound. A virtuous person, according to Aristotle, learns to value the distinctive qualities of each human being and situation. Ideal living is defined as "creativity animated by passion". (99).

I agree it is often the passionate response, not intellectual thought, that will guide one's action to the appropriate response. Thought will frequently consult feeling to learn the true nature of the circumstances at hand. Without taking this step, the understanding of the situation would be handicapped. Aristotle states that it is lacking in virtue to make

a choice that is not verified by the emotions. In other words, as Nussbaum (79) puts it, when feeling is missing, part of the correct perception is missing.

A person can be proud of his intellectual powers to the extent that they become a detriment to true ethical perception and may undermine a full human response. (81). In the extreme, this person has no awareness of other people or events unfolding around him. Sometimes understanding requires responding as a whole person. For example, when a friend has died, the person who only registers it as a fact fails to react with the appropriate feelings of grief or sympathy for the family, which indicates a lack of virtue as well as perception. It could also be said that this person doesn't fully realize what has happened because he doesn't feel it. The emotional part of cognition is absent. In this case the emotions prompt the appropriate intellectual sizing up of the situation. The emotions, therefore, are in and of themselves modes of seeing and recognizing. (79).

Aristotle extends this even further when he delivers a warning. Not only do intellectual responses need to be completed with imaginative and emotional ones, they must be monitored to determine if the intellect is being *prevented* from seeing. The pure intellect is not only overreaching but it is a "dangerous master". (82). In no uncertain terms should people of practical wisdom rely too much on a technical or strict intellectual response that might hinder emotional or imaginative responses. In fact, Aristotle promotes an education that encourages "fancy" and feeling through contact with literature, using it as an opportunity to learn appropriate understanding. (82).

In this section I have attempted to show some of the arguments by which Aristotle famously restores the emotions to their proper place in morality, bringing them back from Plato's unjust banishment. Aristotle believes the truly good person will act well and have

appropriate feelings in response to the choices she makes. As I've said, emotions are composed of belief and feeling, shaped by thought and are capable of discrimination. (78). Often it is the passionate response rather than the cool, detached intellect that will lead to correct perception. Thought will rely on feeling to verify an authentic take on the nature of the situation. (79).

Now I shall leave Aristotle and take under consideration more recent theories connected to the emotions.

### ***The Primacy of Emotions***

Because our views of art have evolved greatly over the last twenty-five hundred years and emotion continues to be the main sticking point since the time of the ancient debate between Plato and Aristotle, let us now try and comprehend a few relevant aspects of modern scholarship on the subject.

For the sake of a definitive theory, surely we might be moved to concede to some of Plato's views or compromise here and there on Aristotle if we were able to set knowledge on a clear and firm foundation that is based on truth and rules. Sadly, however, certainty is not to be had. The middle course seems most prudent but navigating between the arbitrary and the absolute demands a redefinition of the nature, aim and methods of epistemology. (Elgin ix). In this section of the chapter I would like to examine the cognitive role of the emotions in relation to literature and determine whether or not they can lead to knowledge.

The fact that philosophy continues to view reason and passion as opposing stereotypes has stayed with us up to today. Beliefs are seen as cool, calm, rational

convictions, while emotions are visceral, unpredictable and possibly violent. We have said emotions and beliefs can exchange properties at will given the right circumstances. Affection for a friend can be stable and enduring over a lifetime. The supposed collapse of reason due to emotion in this case is far from incapacitating. (146). In literature we often notice the duality of intellect and emotion at work. Huckleberry Finn's anxiety over his aunt's plan to civilize him is one example. At once cognitive and affective, Huck's response makes epistemology's alienation of affections unjustifiable.

Elgin (146) states that recent cognitivist theories of emotion have attempted to fight the stereotype by saying that emotions are based on beliefs, or an attitude towards a thing. For instance, someone may have a fear of snakes because she believes they are dangerous. But what if that person lives in an area where there are no poisonous snakes? Even if the person understood there was no risk of encountering a snake, it would hardly make a difference. The fear remains, irrational as it is. It seems then that only emotions that are based on beliefs would be cognitive and all the others, those without objects that may act on the person, are powerless or inert. But the truth is that emotions are much more complex and enter into a variety of cognitive roles whether or not they depend on a belief. Not all emotions lead to knowledge, just as not all beliefs do. And because of that, emotions have just as much right to be considered epistemically as beliefs have. (147).

First it is important to clarify that a feeling is not necessarily the same thing as an emotion. Emotions require conceptual frameworks. A feeling of nausea does not indicate fearfulness if it is not accompanied by a threatening object. It could be a bout of indigestion. But nausea in response to a threat constitutes a feeling of fear. (147)

What if one attempted to remove the cognitive elements in order to identify the emotions that remain? It would not be possible due to the individuation of the emotions. Feelings that appear specifically tied to an emotion often belong to a family of emotions. For example, consider pride and admiration. They may feel similar but the difference is in the direction of feeling; pride being the result of a sense of excellence reflecting back on oneself, while admiration focuses on good qualities in another. The degree of distinction between remorse and regret is that with the former, one feels a sense of responsibility for what has occurred. Or, when one is nervous with anticipation before an event, it may be due to hope or dread. In this case, emotions that feel alike do not always function alike. Although a swoon of love or thrill of excitement may share a uniform feeling, emotions are much more sophisticated. Love for a child is not just a single warm and fuzzy feeling but one that involves all the hopes and fears for that child's well-being, happiness, development, experiences, etc. These have little and all to do with moments of disappointment, annoyance, frustration, and so on. Since there is no specific feeling to be defined here, it is easier to see it as a "frame of mind" or pattern of attention that coordinates feelings, attitudes, actions and circumstances. (148).

Interestingly, it is not only the stable and complex emotions that create frames of mind. Consider the picnic that turns stormy and the delight at seeing shelter available in a nearby cave. Imagine how quickly one's point of view changes when large animal footprints are found within. The emotional landscape quickly rearranges ...the mind seizes upon strategy, determining how immediate the danger is and making its escape plan. The focus has been pared down to fight or flight.



The reverse is true as well. According to Elgin (149) “feelings are not necessarily involved in emotions”. For example, trust is shown in the reliance put on someone, regardless of thinking whether or not that person will fail or betray that trust. It seems more a matter of belief in the person. Also, a firefighter may not feel especially brave going into a burning building to rescue someone, but because the firefighter is not impeded by fear we describe him as having courage. The feelings of trust and courage both exist but Elgin (149) points out that “the relation between having an emotion and feeling it is more complicated and less direct than it first appears”.

As I have mentioned earlier, an emotion can rearrange a whole system of thought. It seizes upon a new focus, highlighting certain features of the new landscape while suppressing others, and makes judgments of what is now relevant to the new circumstance. What we are noticing at this moment is directly related to our most vital interest. Emotions make a new feature salient. Jealousy, for example, will cast a hideous green light over everything. What had been a contented loving relationship is now thrown into suspicion. Suddenly we see things we hadn’t noticed before, an unusual handkerchief, or the loved one’s attention to another. We feel as though we have been oblivious – there is a pattern here. New facts fit perfectly into the picture. The emotion has heightened our awareness and redirected our attention. Without contradicting reasons to doubt these patterns, cognitive aspects of emotion are initially credible.

However, the emotion that dominates does not always lock the pattern into a fixed system of thought. Elgin (150) believes we also exercise a “reflective equilibrium”, a standard of rational acceptability, where if we deem the components to be reasonable in light of one another and past events, we lend the new insight tenability. Emotion

provides the first possibility for truth, but it does not automatically justify itself. There is no circularity. (150).

In literature and elsewhere, emotions can be manipulated. I would not say this negates their ability to advance understanding. It is true they are not wholly reliable sources of beliefs, but they do lead to consideration of phenomena that otherwise might be overlooked. The arts often utilize this method intentionally to foster reorientations. Through the skilful and complex rendering of a murderer in Dead Man Walking, we are brought to the impossible position of understanding and sympathizing with a tragic life and its contingency of low self-esteem, poverty and ignorance. Seen in this light, we understand there is much more to someone than we initially believed, heinous as his life has been. By allowing ourselves to slip into another way of being, we discover a new way of seeing, and grow from the experience.

If we return for a moment to jealousy, we can look at how this emotion sensitizes someone to signs of infidelity. Jealousy can sometimes be misinterpreted because irrational feelings cause a person to dismiss plausible explanations. Actions that might be deemed suspicious need not always indicate betrayal. That handkerchief, for instance. Think of Othello's irrational response due to his premature rejection of innocent alternatives. Because he fixes upon a certain frame of mind, he is led to believe the evidence leads directly to Desdemona's guilt. (Elgin 151).

Unjust emotions need not undermine understanding. One merely needs to be alert to the possibility that one's responses are off the mark and then adjust their skew. Even hypochondriacs fall ill occasionally, so their complaints ought not to be discounted every time. Better to invent a method for identifying symptoms that indicates the onset of an

illness. The tenability of justified emotions is not guaranteed but it is more credible than with unjustified emotions. When emotions function cognitively, they follow patterns or frames of mind, just as when beliefs are epistemologically analogous, they do the same.

In the case of unjustified emotions, I must emphasize that in order to distinguish them from justified emotions, there must be an interplay between reason and the emotions, where one is simultaneously verified by the other and back again. Yet if it is impossible for an emotion to find a cognitive handhold in relation to the situation, it follows that without justification based on reason, the emotion will be untenable.

In art as in life, emotions can awaken dormant systems of categories, reminding us of systems we are out of the habit of using. Becoming aware of compassion, for instance, out of feeling for a friend's misfortune, would remind us to be considerate in our speech and behavior. Being in a compassionate frame of mind would suppress one's normally cheerful or chiding humor. Emotions can be reclassified as well. Offhand remarks when taken badly would be revised to a category of ridicule or discomfort. Often changes in emphasis move us to reconsider our assessments of details and become more aware. Our emotions can spur us on to investigate a situation more deeply and persevere. (Elgin 155).

Unfortunately, we can ignore emotions even if our world is structured by them. Repression gives rise to an orientation of its own, along with its partners self-deception and denial. But this is not the same as saying unacknowledged emotions advance understanding as well as known ones. A person who is unable to admit to feelings of victimization lacks the ability to name the hostility she feels when her boyfriend teases her. When more attuned to our emotions, we can better verbalize our concerns. It is the

unknown commitments that we hold inside ourselves that provoke the most mysterious emotions. Freud may have been right in saying that humanity's greatest intellectual leaps have been motivated by emotions too terrifying to admit. (160-161).

It is still more beneficial to remain emotionally honest to ourselves. Self-awareness gives epistemic access to the cognitive commitments emotions engender. I would like to summarize our entire argument up to this point by saying that, *in knowing how we feel, we know what we think*. (160).

In this chapter I have introduced some of the ideas that will be applied later in discussions of emotion in literature and education. I will return to these concepts in greater detail, especially when discussing reading and writing. For now it has been in coming to know the views of Plato and Aristotle through the lens of philosophy that has prepared us to progress next to the arts, and how they are particularly suited to answer the question we are asking, How shall one live?

## CHAPTER 2: WHAT ART CAN DO

As a result of the ancient debate and the tenacity of Plato's slight, the arts are in need of defense. Literature has often been disparaged because much of it is trivial or lacks strong writing. Postmodernism has infected many contemporary novels, the outcome being that even the reading public who are drawn to quality literature feels alienated or "doesn't get it."

If we put aside the works that are experimental, shallow or seizing upon the latest trends, what remains is a body of work that still endeavors to express something vital and significant, in the tradition, as it were, of the "great books." I would like to explore what that is, and contrast it to what we have in philosophy, and show how literature is able to go further towards offering ways to live.

### ***What Philosophy and Literature Have in Common, and How They Differ***

Now we can pull up a chair (well, perhaps the Form of a chair) and visit with a number of modern thinkers who have compared philosophy and art, and philosophy to literature in particular. Iris Murdoch, both a novelist and a philosopher, is especially eloquent on the fine points of difference between the two. She states that philosophy and literature are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing pursuits. Both function as cognitive activities and offer explanations. Philosophy and literature, like the other arts, concern themselves with exploration, classification, discrimination and clear vision. However, art does not look like analysis because the result of the imagination's work is sensuous,

organic, reified, mysterious and ambiguous. “Art is cognition in another mode”, she tells us. (11).

Knowledge is said to be the way we make sense of things; it is more than just facts, it is acquired through a dynamic process. Both philosophy and art must investigate things down to the essence. (Richmond, class lectures). Just *how* philosophy and literature do this is the distinction between the two. Philosophy’s goal is to clarify and explain, by stating and then attempting to solve complex and highly technical problems. The writing is subordinate to the goal. We can forgive bad art and it can still be categorized as art, but philosophy is less forgiving. Literature is read by the general public while philosophy is not. Artists are their own best critics; they do not produce for a field of experts. (Murdoch 4). In the arts, when understanding comes, it has been through the ability to distinguish and relate within this particular form of communication. (Richmond, cl). Art can be fun; it works on myriad levels and often entertains. Murdoch (4) says that “literature does a lot of things while philosophy does one thing”.

Because literature is an art, language is used in an artful manner and there is no set style of writing. Murdoch (4-5) ventures that “there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style. A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and decoration....he speaks with a certain cold clear recognizable voice...But there is a kind of self-expression which remains in literature, together with all the playfulness and mystification of art. The literary writer deliberately leaves a space for his reader to play in. The philosopher must not leave any space”.

It is the sensuous feel to works of art that makes us aware of its effect of being an organic whole. Murdoch (5) makes another distinction by saying “most philosophy, as compared with literature, seems rambling and formless, even when the philosopher is explaining something of great formal complexity...Philosophy is a matter of getting hold of a problem and...being prepared to go on repeating oneself as one tries different formulations and solutions. This patient relentless ability to stay with a problem is a mark of the philosopher; whereas a certain desire for novelty usually marks the artist”.

While agreeing with much of what Murdoch says here, I would also add that philosophic works can be artful, too. There may not be the pronounced wheels of rhythmic rising and falling action or aggrandizing metaphors and subtle themes that are carefully placed within the planned structure of literature, but in philosophy there are exciting summaries of large ideas that feel like deep breaths, repetitive sign posts or shifts that serve as punctuation to demark sections within the whole.

Another significant difference between philosophy and literature is scope. It has been remarked that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato; that is, the problems focused upon since the dawn of time are those that occupy philosophers today. The problems are vast and lack resolution but they are limited in actual number. (6). The beginning philosopher must engage in a definite and continuous dialogue with the past, which seems rather confining to the artist's view. A writer may be immersed in her time and the history of literature but she has no concrete issues to expand upon in the way the philosopher does. In fact, the opposite is true: she must invent problems. (10).

What is striking is that in the main we are all storytellers. Murdoch (6) says “it is indeed something in which we all indulge spontaneously...Literary modes are very

natural to us, very close to ordinary life and to the way we live as reflective beings... (On the other hand) philosophy is very counter-natural...philosophy disturbs the mass of semi-aesthetic conceptual habit on which we normally rely. Hume said that even the philosopher, when he leaves his study, falls back upon these habitual assumptions.”

Upon meeting a friend, we “tell our day”, impose some order on events, lead up to a climax or point; we emphasize, improvise and exaggerate to elicit a response from our listener. It is often an offense against the truth, as Plato might say, but the storyteller’s intention is perhaps to pass along a little cheer or give meaning to the world.

And yet when we feel strongly about a point, we argue or persuade according to the rules of logic. Even young children are able to engage philosophically and defend their ideas. (Bailin, conversation). Perhaps I might clarify then, that depending on the aim of the conversation, it is possible to utilize elements of narrative and philosophy in daily life, but the more advanced literary techniques such as dramatization of experience, foreshadowing, adoption of distinct voices, invention, role playing and imagining come to us more easily than advanced philosophical techniques.

Both literature and philosophy are truth-seeking but literature’s conception of truth is very different from what philosophy hopes to get at. Philosophical language is direct and abstract, while literature can be intentionally vague, artful and indirect, even as it appears to be using plain speech. And yet I would concur with Murdoch (12) in stating it is the directness of philosophy that strikes us as unnatural. We don’t notice the subtleties of a story because we are used to the conventions employed. “Mistakes” in philosophy are hard to pinpoint; they may be due to conceptual errors, false starting points or a break in the chain of logic. Testing for truth in philosophy is difficult because



the subject is so difficult. The measure of truth in literature may be difficult because the subject is easy – we are all in some ways literary artists in our lives and feel we understand much of art because it is so close to the “ordinary” world. The truth in philosophy is in the proof of the proposition. Much of the pleasure derived from literature comes from a recognition of what’s true; that is, in discovering what we already knew but had never consciously thought. Again, this is what Plato called *anamnesis* – recovered memory of previous knowledge.

In a final comparison between literature and philosophy, Murdoch (21) contends that,

For better or worse art goes deeper than philosophy. Ideas in art must suffer a sea change. Think how much original thought there is in Shakespeare and how divinely inconspicuous it is... When we ask what a novel is *about* we are asking for something deep. What is Proust about, and why not just read Bergson? There is always something moral which goes down further than the ideas. The structures of good literary works are to do with erotic mysteries and deep dark struggles between good and evil.

It is not my intention to suggest that we must choose between art and philosophy, but it has been argued that art is capable of achieving the same valuable goals as philosophy, such as finding ways to live and learn. I am suggesting that literature by virtue of its form may achieve this in deeper and wider ways than philosophy. However, to do justice to the field of philosophy, we may add to Murdoch’s comments that perhaps literature is just more accessible to the average person; that we are more accustomed to learning from stories and require less specialized training to grasp the ideas encoded there. That said, there are many crucial philosophical ideas that are naturally explored in literature and after a certain point in these types of novels, it is often impossible to

distinguish which is the literature and which is the philosophy, they are so complimentary. Examples of this are the great works of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, which I will discuss later. Perhaps ultimately it is simply the layman's preference to have complex philosophical concepts presented in literary form so as to make them more comprehensible. And as we shall see in the next section, therein lies the unique capability of artistic works.

### ***What is Unique to Art***

We are ready now to have a look at some definitions of art. It is often called a human attempt at imitating or revising nature. It can also be the conscious creation or manipulation of sounds, colors, forms, words, movements or other qualities in a way that evokes a sense of beauty. At other times it can be a description or judgment, indicating a high standard or quality; for example, the art of putting on a good party. Lastly, it is sometimes defined as having aesthetic value.

Art is often defined simply as "expression". Lyas (103) qualifies that by emphasizing it is the *degree* of expression. Within that, there are two kinds of expression, ordinary and artistic. The latter must have two qualities to render it art. First, "sufficiency", wherein the work has a greater intensity and range than the ordinary, and second, a "necessity". It is not just the sound of birds singing that makes music, but a complex kind of making of sounds. And in this, the artist's personality comes through. (98-102).

Art is expression then, but we must also understand how it is expressed. And we might add that art is powerful because of the expressive significance of representation.

(56).

All of these ideas come under the umbrella term *aesthetics*. A somewhat slippery word, it refers to a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature and perception of what is beautiful, and includes taste or the appreciation of beauty. Here we are most concerned with *aestheticism*, the idea that beauty may be the basic principle from which all other principles, especially moral principles, are derived.

Abbs (3) states that the aesthetic is a mode of intelligence. Just as a deductive method of conceptual thinking is developed through logic, mathematics, dialectical and analytical philosophy, the aesthetic uses not concepts but “percepts” of sensory experience. The arts become symbolic forms for what they wish to communicate. There is a continuum here, a sliding scale between sensation and feeling, of sensory experience and sensibility. When we touch an object, we have a perceptual experience, while to be touched is to be moved emotionally. We can say then that the aesthetic includes both the perceptual and the affective. Growing in aesthetic intelligence therefore deals with the development of sensation and feeling into what adds up to be a whole greater than its parts, a “sensibility”. (4).

The point we are leading up to is that aesthetic intelligence, when defined in this way, is particular to the arts. It is true, that although there can be feelings of beauty in response to a scientific discovery or a mathematical proof, what I want to focus on, here and in this thesis, is a method of responding that is inherent in human life and one that can only be accessed through senses and feelings. It is not so much the actual sensation

that is valued but the apprehension that derives from it. (6). Therefore, returning to Abbs's (7) definition, the artist can be said to be a "perceptual philosopher", one who seeks through the symbolic ordering of her sensations a means to gain understanding of the *human experience*.

It was Kant who put aesthetics at the center of philosophy. (Scruton 26). In the Critique of Judgment, Kant places the aesthetic experience in a similar category as the religious experience by suggesting it is the former and not the latter that is the archetype of revelation. Specifically, what he is saying is that the aesthetic experience is able to reveal the sense of the world. How does this happen? Simply, in the presence of beauty an individual senses the purposiveness and intelligibility in the things around him. This beauty may be highly subjective to the individual or it may be his recognition of what is beautiful based on what has been culturally transmitted to him.

Either way, when we apprehend the sublime, we feel as though we can see beyond the world to something overwhelming, ineffable and yet strangely grounded. Scruton (26) states that formerly it was the traditional concern of theology to provide a greater meaning of the world, but even before Kant, this faculty which has beauty as its goal, was the same thing as aesthetic contemplation. Scruton further states that human beings have always had "intimations of the transcendental", either personal or cultural, as a quality of being human. None of this can be argued fully with reason. Language has its limits here. As we try to grope our way between thought and emotion we become intuitive rather than rational or analytical. This is because we are able to grasp the idea of the transcendental without being able to verbalize it. Ultimately we know nothing of the transcendental. But we *feel* it and it is in this feeling of beauty that we sense truth. (26).

To take this idea further, we could say that when we become aware of the beauty in a literary work, its content begins to feel true. And simultaneously, as we start to become conscious of the literary “world” presented to us, certain truths about that world begin to emerge. We might even believe that these truths make perfect sense, *within that world*. This is remarkably so in the case of inspired religious texts, where apprehension of these works’ beauty, and therefore feelings of truth, inexplicably begins to intimate at meaning.

This may seem to be a *non sequitur* where beautiful but different works of art both present the “truth” despite the contradictory nature of their content. Murdoch (8) explains that unlike philosophy and science, literature asks us “to submit oneself to criteria outside oneself; (the author) tries to say something that is *impersonally* true”. I feel the answer lies somehow closer to Aristotle’s concept, that just as we learn to value individuals within their qualitatively distinct situations, we must also consider works of literature within the contexts of their unique “worlds” and therefore examine the truth found therein. Therefore, there may be no absolute truths to be found in any one work of literature in relation to the “real” world; too much depends upon the circumstances presented in the story and also on the life, experiences and views of the reader, or, even more specifically, what that reader believes to be true, both subjectively as well as culturally, religiously, etc. Even scientific truths have been proven false since the time they were included in classical works. In a later chapter I will discuss the “norms” of morality that emerge from a survey of the literary canon, which taken collectively may point at “general truths”.

Returning now to Kant's third Critique, we see the significance of the shift from religion to philosophy, specifically Christianity to the Enlightenment, which was to bring ethics and aesthetics to the forefront. Echoing the Copernican revolution in science, Kant believes the mind gives structure to the world and not the other way round. What occurs, he says, is that we struggle to organize the bombardment of random stimuli into perceived objects, which is done by our imagination. The creation of conceptual categories is done through understanding. (Lyas 25). What we have when the mind plays back and forth between imagination and understanding is aesthetic delight or rapture. (31). This takes place in a state of disinterestedness, when there is no personal motivation for assigning value. (28). It is often called an aesthetic attitude, or a possession of a psychic distance, that allows the mind to roam with controlled imagination. The freedom that ensues releases us from the numbness of our daily lives. (31).

This is why we are so attracted to art and why it is so powerful to us. (19). We stand in awe before representation and tend to cherish those works by gifted artists who are able to capture a part of life and truth. (38).

Through its unique blend of form and content, then, art can remind us of our humanity in new and fresh ways and confirm our connectedness to others. It says a great deal about the permanence of values and conceptions of human nature that startles us when we realize we can still understand Homer and Aeschylus. Literature is the main vehicle, as it was in Homer's time, for this wide-ranging understanding. We would not want to be cut off from this vast encyclopedia of the past, in terms of its art, history or moral viewpoints. (Murdoch 25).

It might be added here that good art is good for us. For certain thinkers, Schiller, Hegel, Kierkegaard and especially Nietzsche, the aesthetic replaced the religious as an object of philosophical interest. Their work arose from an effort to perceive the world through aesthetic value. According to Scruton (27) these philosophers believed the aesthetic experience would “raise nobility, glory, and tragic beauty to the place that had been occupied by moral goodness and by faith”.

It is hoped then that through exposure to high quality art, human sensibilities, powers of understanding and therefore empathy for others would always be increased. If we can stretch our imaginations we will be able to enter other worlds, and thereby enlarge our vision. But the powerful counter-example of this cannot be overlooked, and that is that exposure to art does not guarantee in any way that a person will develop empathy for others. A chilling example of this are the accounts of Nazis playing classical music in the concentration camps. (Bailin, conversation).

Later I will discuss how biographies may or may not lend insights to the author as person or understanding of the work. For now I will say that because human beings all have shortcomings and life is often very complex, it behooves us to remain focused on the creation of the artist rather on the person, if only for the reason that the artist is able to exert more mental and emotional control over a work rather than a life, and great artists have always had their detractors.

Therefore, I will conclude this section by saying there will always be exceptions, but in the main, the reason that art is good for us is that for the majority of people it encourages a higher vision and enables us to view other lives with a disinterestedness that may lead to compassion and greater identification. That art attempts to facilitate these

things we have attempted to show here. In the next section we will see how art is often compelled to take on certain roles.

### ***What Art Must Do***

How do we make sense of where we are right now? We are living in a time of globalization, dizzying computer technology, political unrest, multiculturalism and social restructuring. People struggle to find individual identity and take control of their lives. Modernity is largely experimental – there is no historical model – we have new rules for marriage, child raising and community living. Which direction should we go? How do we live? The individual’s creed seems to be: go after what you want. (Richmond, class lectures.).

In this section I cannot present an exhaustive list but feel it is important to examine certain features of our times that appear to be leading society in dubious directions and suggest how art might counteract that trend. I would like to focus for now on three particular areas, as defined by Taylor (2, 5, 8), that center on individualism, instrumental reason and politics. The implications for society are no more than a loss of meaning due to fading moral horizons and a growing acceptance of the “cost-effective” mindset we believe we must adopt if we are to have continued economic prosperity. What this adds up to, bluntly, is a prison.

Let us look more closely at each of these three “malaises of modernity” as outlined by Taylor (10). Individualism is valued by our Western society; it is seen as an achievement. It means the right to choose for oneself, to break free of possibly suffocating moral structures. But people in earlier times, and even today in non-Western



cultures, belonged to a larger order, a continuum or “chain of being”, consisting of clear hierarchies, each with its own rituals, and clear “norms” for that society. Today there is also a loss of the heroic dimension of life – there is no higher meaning and nothing worth dying for. Thinkers such as de Tocqueville, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have described these changes from earlier times as being driven by the pursuit of small and vulgar gratifications in our democratic age, or even a lack of passion. (4). There is a loss of purpose due to a narrowing of focus: people focus on themselves.

The media uses words like “a permissive society”, “the me generation” and “narcissism”, but it goes deeper than this. Naming “authenticity” as the moral force behind this movement, Taylor (16) pinpoints what is singular to our times. It is that people feel *obligated* to subordinate relationships and the raising of children in order to become successful in their careers – or they feel their lives will be insignificant. One of the principles in authenticity is that it will not adjudicate other lifestyles out of tolerance or mutual respect. But this reluctance to judge leads to moral subjectivism – a belief that moral positions are not grounded in reason but are particular to each individual’s situation. This is in opposition to Aristotle’s stance that says there can be standards in reason and that human beings will naturally discover what is right or wrong. Nonetheless, Allan Bloom says individualism leads towards a facile relativism and no one is willing to talk about let alone challenge another’s moral values for fear of showing disrespect or lowering someone’s self-esteem. Each person must be true to his or her own self. Yet at the same time it involves a dangerous unawareness or even deliberate shutting out of the greater issues that go beyond the self, such as the political or historical. (Taylor 14).

Another important concern, one that we can hear rumble louder every day, is the primacy of instrumental reason. Taylor (5) defines this as, “the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, is its measure of success.”

Elimination of the traditional social order has paved the way for the dominance of instrumental reason. If there are no longer sacred relationships, that is, solid bonds between people, between company and customer, the ruling body and citizen, the yardstick that now applies is instrumental reason. (5).

This comes to our attention by way of the media when we hear that the demands of economic expansion necessitate tax breaks for the rich, or that unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities is to be expected while social programs are axed; all of this is justified to stimulate financial growth. Success in business makes us insensitive to the environment as well. At worst, cost benefit analysis reduces human lives to dollar figures. (6). It is a great seduction; we all desire to get ahead. But powerful systems push us in the wrong direction. Despite personal awareness, a vice president might be coerced by company rules or the threat of losing a job to make choices he or she knows to be against humanity. This is what has been called the “iron cage”. (98). But Taylor emphasizes that we are not helpless and can reject a fatalistic outlook, which I will describe shortly.

The combination of individualism and instrumental reason conspires towards a third fear, political demise. De Tocqueville, as early as the nineteenth century, believed he saw in America a society where people become the type of individuals who are “closed up inside their own hearts”; and few will choose to engage strongly with their

government. The danger of this attitude is that it may tolerate a quasi-despotism. The government will appear to the public as benevolent and paternalistic while the opportunity for corruption looms larger as people relinquish control.

Taylor (61) resists an entirely grim outlook, however. For one thing, he names precisely what art *must* do, and that is, offer society an alternative to this troubling trend. The supreme irony of the age of individualism is that in some ways people have never been more conforming. The belief that we must have what others have, that we must keep up with the Joneses and adopt similar attitudes is indicative of this leveling. How this plays out at its worst is if six television stations inform us that a war halfway around the world is necessary, at the office the next day our co-workers are acquiescing to it. Within this consensus it is difficult to hold onto our good sense. There is a pressure not to be different, or the next social step is finding oneself labeled “suspicious” or “unpatriotic”, or suffering ostracism. In a world where citizens spend less and less time actually conversing about significant issues, people are unskilled at sorting out reasons for differing opinions. The television isolates us; computers involve solitary activity. Long commutes, more hours spent at our jobs – all sap time that in the past would have been spent in leisure or social relaxation. Long gone are the days when poets would recite or a book would be read aloud by the fire. And so is the discussion that followed.

We ought to want to notice and act upon the change by realizing that modern life is creating obstacles to thinking for oneself. There is no time for registering the force and meaning of our emotional response, for reflection and deliberation, and it has been tacitly agreed that we don't have time for it. And here we are. Vulnerable to ambitious

individuals, ideologies and systems that feel the need to exploit our complacency. What shall we do?

Taylor (61) states the solution will evolve from the same sources as the ideal of authenticity. Since each of us has an original way of being human in the world, a counter to the malaises entails finding out who we are. But we cannot simply be told who we are or chase after other people's ideas of self or use society or media models. All values are not equal to all people.

What is most basic to human life, Taylor (32) says, is its "fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression... No one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter... "significant others". The genesis of the human mind in this sense is not "monological," not something each accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical." He goes on to say that we define ourselves sometimes by struggling against others' identities as well as the identities significant others assign to us. Even after we outgrow, say, our parents' view of who we are, this dialogue of identity continues for as long as we live. Taylor (35) believes that "when we come to understand what it is to define ourselves, to determine in what our originality consists, we see that we have to take as background some sense of what is significant." What is unique to us as individuals takes on "importance against a background of intelligibility...a horizon. It follows that one of the things we can't do, if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which things take on significance for us." What this means is that because of the dialogical

nature of human life when joined to certain demands of the ideal of authenticity, the more self-absorbed and “narcissistic” side of contemporary culture doesn’t fit. In fact, Taylor (35) insists they are self-defeating. By denying that certain qualities in a life are more meaningful than others, or more specifically that each person has “pre-existing horizons of significance”, we deprive ourselves of what is most important to our identity.

Unless some choices in life are more significant than others, Taylor (39) says, “the very idea of self-choice falls into triviality and incoherence. Self-choice as an ideal makes sense only because some issues are more significant than others.” It comes down to self-choice “as a *moral ideal*. To concentrate on self-fulfillment *in opposition* to the demands of society or nature, which shut out history and the bonds of solidarity...flies in the face of authenticity...Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the backdrop of things that matter.” (40).

Self-knowledge, therefore, can only be found by oneself, through oneself. I believe we learn who we are by expressing through language what is original in ourselves. Revelation will come through expression. The obvious link here is with self-discovery and artistic exploration. Taylor (62) states that creation is the leap towards self-definition. Since the 1800’s, the artist has been venerated as the paradigm of the questing individual, the mystic visionary who would lead the way to meaning and enlightenment.

For artists as well as non-artists, we describe the works brought forth in the same artistic terms. The self is discovered as it contributes to creation; every work reveals something new and surprising. A person has the potential of becoming something else by means of what he or she has within. There is also another reason for the link between art

and self-revelation and that is morality. What avenues we may choose to explore and what means we use to get at the truth could be quite different, even in conflict with, the idea of proper conduct others expect. As we have said, the enemy of authenticity is often social conformity. The artist, indeed, must rage against externally imposed rules. And yet inner truth must reckon at some point with society's idea of justice. (63).

We come to recognize that the demands of authenticity are entwined with those of the aesthetic. What is beautiful and true for one may not be for another because art is partly subjective. Yet if a person is able to arouse human feeling in another, a feeling separate from moral or trivial pleasure will arise. Then there will be a chance to overcome differences and connect on the level of the universal.

To go back to Kant for a moment as the one who believed beauty involves a feeling of satisfaction in the individual, we now understand that this satisfaction is distinct from personal desire or from a feeling of moral excellence. It is a disinterested satisfaction then, and, as Taylor (64) says, "beauty gives its own intrinsic fulfillment. Its goal is internal...All this contributes to the close links between authenticity and art."

In a later section I will return to the idea that art and authenticity are naturally at odds with morality. But next I would like to talk briefly about how art must be an antidote for the ills of modernity, especially those that science has brought upon us. While none of us would care to return to life the way it was before medicine or electricity, it is modernity's more pernicious side effects I wish to speak of. All the conveniences that have been billed as time-savers, safety devices or essential tools appear at times to be actually eroding the human aspect of our lives. Think of our gadgets, the cell phone, for instance. People believed they were needed for emergencies, but how

disruptive they are when they go off during class time, in theatre performances or sadly, notice the father sitting on the park bench on the weekend, catching up on calls while his children play on the swings.

Science encourages a particular way of thinking, an exacting mode of inquiry, that within the confines of science poses no problem. My argument centers on the way science appears to be dominating larger spheres of our lives, even moving into traditional areas of emotional human response. An example of this is how some parents are led to believe that they ought to schedule “quality time” with their children, usually between nine and eleven a.m., when the children are most apt to be fresh and content. When weighed against common sense, this strikes us as comical and begs the question of whether or not this pediatrician or that child psychologist ever spent a week changing his own baby’s diaper or walking the floor at night. When it is not so comical and even harmful is when parents begin to think that “science knows best” or when parents believe they are incapable of caring for their own child. Taylor finds fault with a society that accepts that science should have the final word, or that we should always look to scientific evidence because its “truths” can be proved. Within the precise nature of science, a fact is either right or wrong; it is either 1.0000 or it is 1.0001.

Murdoch (235) says that “the Romantics felt instinctively that science was an enemy of art. A technological society, quite automatically and without any malign intent, upsets the artist by taking over control and transforming the idea of craft, and by endlessly reproducing objects which are not objects but sometimes resembles them. Technology steals the artist’s public by inventing sub-artistic forms of entertainment and by offering a great counter-interest and rival way of grasping the world.” One instance of

this is that it is now possible to view on the Internet a film that has been released the same day. Literature is undermined by the violation of intellectual property rights, sometimes to the point of gross incidences of plagiarism which frequently occur in countries which have access to a book but are not bound by copyright laws.

Taken together, the spread of scientific thinking and our greater usage and dependency on technology, may affect the artist not only in terms of her audience but also in her soul. Murdoch (235) says that when this happens, what the artist must do then is to act. Occasionally in history the artist has become a revolutionary and served as an instrument of change. Writers have responded with revulsion against materialistic, totalitarian or technically controlled societies.

Science shares things in common with philosophy; namely, they both try to understand and categorize the world through a style that does not admit personal bias, ideas are subject to outside criteria, and therefore, things are impersonally true. (8). Literature must affect the reader emotionally while science and philosophy positively work to eliminate any emotional appeal to its field of experts.

As I have said, science is an exacting mode of inquiry. Scruton (27) feels that people who think exclusively along scientific lines have “lost contact with the human world” to such an extent that thinkers such as Snow have been quoted as saying there are now “two cultures” and that one of them could be a culture of science. Leavis rebutted this idea, stating that to possess a culture is not just to possess a body of knowledge or skills. It is a possession of a “sensibility”, an attitude or a way of seeing. Culture is not academic but belongs to its participants. And this involvement has the power to transform not only thoughts and beliefs but also perceptions and emotions, as well as



offering redemption. Therefore, how could science be a culture, with its absence of emotion? In fact, its exacting methods of investigation and rigid results may be a foe of culture.

I feel the threat today is that the habit of scientific thinking may infect the human habit of emotional response, and distort the picture of the world upon which our moral life is based. Aristotle, as I have said, warns us not to allow the intellect to dominate; it is a dangerous master. Intellectual responses must be completed by emotional ones, as well as the reverse. The intellect must not be prevented from seeing so that we may be able to live through practical wisdom. My concern here is that the dominance of scientific modes of thinking may lead away from the development of feeling and the acceptance and affirmation of human ways.

The sacred products of a culture are to be found in its works of art. With art we find neither scientific nor theoretical knowledge, nor practical information. We find life and only life; life grounded in its meaning, affirmed and made whole. Again, to adopt such a view is to raise high the belief espoused by Kant, that value is intrinsic, contained by life itself. Since Homer we have attempted to preserve the emotional memory of our civilization so as to spare ourselves backsliding into the oblivion of nothingness. The aesthetic experience is our insurance of moral health and the meaning of human life. (Scruton 28).

In leaving our discussion about what art must do, I shall concur with Taylor (78) in saying it is to be expected that a free society will always be the nexus of a conflict between higher and lower forms of freedom. Neither can win. Better forms can gain ground, however, through social and political action and greater awareness in the

population – all which may be facilitated through art. Murdoch (18) tells us “a good society contains many different artists doing many different things”. We must take care not to go along with governments as long as they continue to provide the lifestyle we prefer. It can be a direct road to the loss of freedom. Art may be more important for humanity than philosophy, as Murdoch (362) says, but we must strive for a balance between cognitive and emotional speculation in both. I would add that it is from art and ethics that we must attempt to define modern concepts that are worthy, ones that are able to function as checks and balances to the worrisome sway of the “malaises”.

### ***What Art Does Well***

In Shakespeare we bear witness to the great story of art. If asked what it is about King Lear that is so riveting, often one strains to name the definitive feature. Of course it is the *play*, the acting, the characters, the plot, language, costumes, etc., but it is more the larger effect that moves us. (Lyas 50). The individual qualities can be described but what is often ineffable is the organic total. How is this accomplished? I will build on this question more as we go, but for now I will attempt to discuss ways art astonishes us.

Art at its most revered is that of expression, often self-expression. That Romantic poet par excellence, Keats, exemplifies through his “Ode to a Nightingale”, the sensitive, thinking artist, pouring his feelings of rapture or sorrow into his art, yielding to, as Wordsworth put it, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.

One view of the importance of art is in the pleasure it gives. It is an activity we enjoy in our recreation time and are delighted to find we have learned from the experience. But Kant for one believed art ought to do more. Because aesthetic pleasure

can be joyful and transcendent, it can be a starting point for understanding its hold on us. However, if we wish to defend art's place as central to humanity, we must look further.

In this section and the next, I will focus on the debate *within* art itself. There exists an odd dichotomy – on the one hand, we have Shakespeare, who purports no agenda – no political bias, no religious dogma, no philosophy. On the other side, we have literature that works towards a purpose, one that often seeks to bring to the forefront an awareness of social issues, injustice, oppression or philosophical ideas. Authors like Kafka, Dickens, and Sartre belong in this camp.

First I will look at “art for art's sake”. In its essence, what this means is that we are able to value the experience of art for itself, say, in how we enjoy a poem for the sake of its being a poem and revel in the aesthetic experience of dwelling within it. Form is of paramount interest here. On this level we appreciate the poem's very use of language, its cadences and musicality. (Richmond, in conversation). In some cases we may be delighted by the way a poem looks on the page or how it surprises or plays with our expectations of what a poem can do just for the virtuosity of its language and sound.

If we move slightly away from the emphasis on form in “art for art's sake” but stop short before we get to “art for a purpose”, we have another level which relies on content as well as form and takes “life” as its main subject. Its aim is to plumb deeply into the heart of human experience without trying to shape it into a particular way of viewing it; for example, by bringing our attention to a particular social issue, political idea or current trend. The accent here is on the universal; it makes its appeal to audiences through the commonality of emotions, character, and the major milestones and situations of life. Meaning is derived from what it is to be human. No special education is required

for understanding; the subjects are equally accessible. The result is that we come away from a work of art with the certainty that given very little alteration in circumstances, this could have just as easily have happened to us. In literature that takes life as its topic, little has changed in the fundamental nature of existence since Homer and the tragedians who worked to arouse fear and pity. We are still profoundly moved by identifying with human beings. For this reason I would say that “art for art’s sake”, or in this case, “portraying life for life’s sake”, has its own intrinsic value, as real life does, because it is shared by all. And in Shakespeare, how rich that portrayal can be.

Sontag (26) claims that a work of art, if it is “pure” art, cannot advertise anything at all. Art by virtue of being art is neutral. Sublime examples of this are Shakespeare and Homer. As hard as scholars try to show a proclivity towards this ideology or that, there is no view to be found on what these authors thought of human nature, morality or society. In the extreme case of Genet, because the artist’s intentions are known, the writer may appear to be persuading the reader to accept cruelty, betrayal, debased behavior and murder. But because his stories are artistically rendered these qualities have transfigured the author’s actual life experience into a work of aesthetic value. It is this processing of experience through the author’s imagination that creates something more than a repugnant record of a deviant’s life.

Tolstoy, in his essay, “What is Art?” rejects the idea that we ought to be satisfied only by the beauty in art. If the apprehension of beauty inevitably leads to pleasure, he says, then pleasure must be the goal of art. We know from other philosophical writings that Tolstoy was convinced that there needs to be at least a social dimension to art, such that the artist and audience will to come to understand one another’s feelings and

attitudes in a negotiation of the experience. (Lyas 61). But this view falsely assumes the artist has said feelings to begin with, and undervalues the work of art as object, as well as assuming the audience will arrive at the same feelings as the artist.

I feel that this view of transmitting meaning from creator to audience implies a right and wrong way of experiencing art. In addition, it ultimately professes that the artist has an intention in putting the work out there. It is often true that the artist will shape or point at clues to guide the audience to certain ideas in the work but there are still limitless interpretations available. In other words, there is nothing concrete about quality art. It is critical to distinguish between the act of entering the emotions, thoughts and attitudes of a work and another to believe it is possible or desirable to adopt the artist's own sense.

The extent to which we inhabit a story depends on our emotional and cognitive investment in it. In the end, however, our impressions of it will remain subjective due to who we are. Lyas (66) states that it may grip us, exercise an absolute claim on us, but the "purpose" of art is not to provide a historical or common truth. Art stands on its own. It is everything and anything. It also has the freedom to mean nothing. If Hamlet tells us anything, it tells us about Hamlet the individual, his specific circumstances, not about life in general. A work's objective is to single out a particular idea and make it explicit. If it has truth in it, we cannot judge; it can only be generally true and for that matter we can say the experience of works of art transcends judgment. Think of Shakespeare, Homer, Tolstoy. It is the transcendence in their art that we feel; and our inadequate labels of "good" and "bad" seem petty.

Murdoch (17) says that the artist has no obligation to write with a purpose in mind. The primary duty is to art, and how to tell the truth in his or her own form. The only goal should be to create the best possible work of art and to struggle hard towards achieving this. It is often the case that as soon as an overriding ideology commandeers the work, then the art is debilitated. Murdoch (18) goes on to say that “a propaganda play which is indifferent to art is likely to be a misleading statement even if it is inspired by good principles. If serious art is the goal then some sort of justice is the primary aim. A social theme presented as art is likely to be more clarified even if it is less immediately persuasive.” In Marxism, art was a vehicle for social revolution, but because the impulse that inspired it was not art, it is relegated to a branch of propaganda. (16). A propaganda play, no matter how good its intentions, will go awry if it is not forged through the crucible of aesthetics. Much art comes to serve society as a result of being art first, and then a mouthpiece -- it does this by revealing things previously unnoticed or presenting old ideas in a fresh way. Through revelation, imagination is able to do much by way of explanation.

In regards to novelists who weave their stories through philosophical ideas, Murdoch says the effect is often artificial. Writers are certainly influenced by the views of their era but as soon as philosophy is introduced into literary writing it resembles a pet idea of the author. One can see on the page in Sartre and de Beauvoir where the “existential voice” is turned on because the natural voice, the art, noticeably stiffens. Again, contrast the original thought in Shakespeare and how perfectly it blends into the whole. (21).

If a “novel of ideas” is lacking in art, perhaps it is because it belongs to another form. And yet, if it is good art, then the ideas appear to be smoothed into oneness with the work and fall into a rhythm of narration and reflection, narration and reflection, such as in War and Peace. In “What is Art?”, Tolstoy explains ideas in such a way that they embody the highest perceptions of his era. For him the measure of good art is akin to religious rapture and he effectively expounds religion through art to his generation.

One of the best examples of “purpose” subordinated to the aesthetic is found in Dickens. His social reflections are *aesthetically* valuable, Murdoch (21) states, since they are grounded in character; that is, with substructures that are not abstract. The guiding principle remains founded upon art. Although Dickens had specific social targets and did indeed instigate change, he was still a most imaginative writer first while being a social critic second. It was likely that the corruption in society most strongly spurred his imagination and creativity. The reason his novels are so effective is because he is able to portray living, breathing characters in their frightful, David Copperfield-like situations. (17). Dickens allows his characters to speak directly to us and we as thinking, feeling readers identify strongly with them. Through this literary experience, I feel we become socially aware on our own, without being preached at or threatened. Awakening to new ideas in this subtle manner is probably the main thrust of the power of art.

No where is the dichotomy between art for art’s sake and art as purposeful more visible than in the difference between drama and theatre in education. If drama is centered on student experience, and theatre with communication with the audience, it seems to be a parallel question of emphasis. If drama serves the purpose of exploring social problems or cultural understanding, then the focus is on those issues. Role-playing

in drama may surely be imaginative or original but it is not clear how the student develops an artistic sensibility. The aesthetic is missing. (Bailin, class lectures). If the guiding purpose, such as how to defend against bullies, dictates the experience, then students are focused on dealing with bullies. Drama has a valuable place in the curriculum, but it does not always increase our knowledge, appreciation and understanding of art. It does provide the psychological tools students need to manage schoolyard thugs, but it cannot be said to be a work of art because it is tied to its overarching purpose. (Bailin, cl).

Again, I believe this is another attempt at thwarting the arts and making it into something other than it is at its heart. It is much more difficult to deal with the ineffable head on. It cannot be pinned down, so many would like to make it more tangible. But what art does best, when it is good, is get into the contents of the conscious and the unconscious mind. A true work of art needs to be considered as something rendered and also as a means of getting a handle on the ineffable. When presented with the highest art, one always struggles to find words to describe it. Sontag (36) says there is a sense of contradiction between expression and the inexpressible. When words fail, it is not a failure of art. We are often overwhelmed by the strength of its deep silences.

### ***What Art is Sometimes Compelled to Do***

As I have touched upon earlier, often it happens that conditions in the world conspire to make a writer suffer and the response must be to get it down on paper. Murdoch (29) speaks of great writers possessing a “calm merciful vision” because they accept difference in people and understand why they are so. Tolerance is based on exercising the imagination, putting oneself into centers of reality that are far from



oneself. I agree with Murdoch when she says that in Shakespeare and Homer we are bathed in an intelligent concern, a generosity of spirit and tolerance that warms us each time we read. They seem to be saying to us that they so loved the world and cared to such a degree about the people and their impossibly absurd and bloody struggles within it that they were willing to give of themselves to an equal degree to convey their vision. There is no need in great writers to remake the world in their image; often the artist is drawn to what is “other” than himself.

Murdoch (30) feels that this type of merciful objectivity is similar to virtue. In some political systems, this very quality in art is seen as the threat; specifically in totalitarian states where art is attacked. Under some ideologies there are those who are deemed unworthy of compassion; the ideology is at odds with the “other”. Tyrants have always feared artists for the power unleashed when the artists reveal what the tyrants would rather leave in shadow. Ideas that would have otherwise remained mystifying, artists bring forward in such a way so as their existence can no longer be denied.

When the writer feels a human response to conditions, whether they are brought on by government policies, scientific advancement or a philosophy, he naturally takes action. Oppressors try to silence the artist, by character slander, degradation, harassment and other means, or may even try to buy him. Financial success can effectively remove the artist from the struggle. Even conflicting forces within art itself can detract from the traditional role of the artist in society. That the artist needs to be a sensitive and independent critic has been said; it is a profession that must remain on the fringe of society in order to gain the perspective it requires for greater insight. When life takes unsettling directions, the artist may feel compelled to revolt. (235).

At times this may mean not only advocating change, but arguing for the return to the status quo or traditional values. Often the artist may believe that society needs the stabilization of remaining close to a particular way of life. An example of this might be established cultures that feel under pressure to adopt Western ways of living. (Bailin, conversation).

Within art one motive for change has always been the artist's vision of what is important for him and his generation. It is more the case for visual artists than writers, but both at times find their traditions old-fashioned or simplistic. The canon in literature today is frequently discredited for its sexist, racist or other biased "norms". Even Shakespeare has not escaped; serious doubts about his choice of words at the ending of Taming of the Shrew have been voiced. (Lyas 210). However, he is far from the worst. The result has been for many artists today to mistrust any claim to authority by the "masters". Because the classics in literature have been labelled by centuries of experts as the "best", they are seen as needing to be torn down and exposed for embracing a flawed value system. In other words, some artists feel the moral universe of these works no longer applies to modern life. Murdoch (236) adds to this by saying "traditional art is seen as far too grand, and is *then* seen as a half-truth".

Contemporary writers may feel a responsibility to "re-write" the world as they comprehend it. One method artists use to challenge the existing authority is to intentionally shock and disturb. When it affects the way we experience a work of art, which is usually the case because it is an objective of the artist, we enter into another arena of discussion, that of morality.

One of the most famous examples of art clashing with morality is found in the cinematic masterpiece by Leni Riefenstahl, The Triumph of the Will. It is beautifully filmed but with no comment upon the Nazi regime depicted there. Today many people would not be able to accept its “glamourization of evil” with disinterest. (188).

I feel this raises a vital question in the arts. Does the value of a work depend upon our view of the truth or morality expressed in it? Especially in fiction it is difficult to avoid the confusion between art and morality. Language reveals the author’s views, and almost all uses of language imply value. Just as it happens when we speak, writing is a way of communicating that is morally active, and in describing the behavior of human beings, moral judgments are put forth. It can be argued that characters may “take over” the story and dictate their own actions, which is then shaped to suit a theme, but at some point the writer has imposed her own beliefs on the work. Also, a writer indicates overtly or covertly the moral correctness of a character’s actions if only by her choices of words, which in turn suggests to the reader how to view the character, and this becomes the stimulant to moral imagination.

It could be debated that a bad writer follows personal obsession without regard for “norms” of morality, general truths or the larger picture of life, and in so doing, ignores working through the aesthetic process. But is Leni Riefenstahl a bad film maker? There is a fine line here between the work of art, its deliberate ambiguity that allows for the reader/viewer to form her own opinions without the artist’s direct influence, and the work of art that presents a specific moral indicator. In the latter case, a heavier hand in interpreting characters or situations tells us a situation must be seen in a certain way, and therefore the work becomes a didactic exercise with a message to deliver. Often these

works are deemed “poor” art. This may be the place where the critic provides a balancing role, by drawing attention to the “norms” of morality, general truths and the larger picture. A necessary dialogue is thus opened up by the critic. And yet, the critic too must be game for moral scrutiny, and so on.

One hopes that the good writer will measure her work against reality and make a literary judgment of her creation. This may or may not be possible, but I believe it is still critical to remember that when writers and readers try and understand fiction that involves human beings, moral engagement is required. Ideally, at some point in the experience, the astute reader who has developed the ability to think for herself, will be able to determine moral value while appreciating the work from myriad angles.

Lyas (188) says that each of us brings a certain understanding of morality to a work that will color the way we understand. But how important is our sense of morality to the judgment of art? Moral judgment, after all, is definitely not aesthetic judgment. (189). As part of the experience, we need to examine very closely what we believe, how it affects our relationship to a work of art and our response to it. (222). What may be upsetting is not the behavior of characters and their societies in literature but the views held by the author. Morality is as much a part of the work as other qualities. The moral universe of a novel may be acceptable or it may not. If we choose to accept it then it follows that considerations of truth will have a part in our judgment of the work. (210-11).

As I have said, good art is good for us and yet problems arise when we attempt to define what is morally good. Sontag (22) claims the problem lies in our culture in the West, where we have a passion to protect traditional values that we see as in constant

danger of being corrupted by art. This returns us to the historical confusion regarding the relation between art and philosophy, the aesthetic and the ethical. What I believe Sontag is talking about here is a sliding continuum in the population. For some people, what is presented in art as morally challenging may be perceived as a threat to the values they hold to the extent that they are unable to see any aesthetic worth in it. On the opposite end of the continuum, there are those who embrace the aesthetic experience so fully that they disregard the important step of examining the morality presented in the work against their own values. Sontag emphasizes that there are not two separate responses; we do not always have to choose between moral humane behavior and the pleasurable stimulation of the consciousness. (23). I would qualify this by saying there are generally not two mutually exclusive responses. That is to say, we can choose to read or view a work from within the purely aesthetic experience, or we can be at moral attention as we read, treating all actions as suspect, but at a certain point our overall response to a work ought to be the sum total of the effect the work has on our mental and emotional faculties. It is only in wilful ignorance that we could continue to remain enthralled by the aesthetic impressions of the Leni Riefenstahl film after we have had time to examine our feelings and thoughts. Again, moral responses will vary greatly between individuals, but I prefer here to remain within the “norms”.

It is impossible anyway to have a purely aesthetic response to a work. And yet we do not respond morally to art in the same way we would to an event in real life. Sontag (23) cites the difference by comparing a murder in reality that goes unpunished to a murder in a novel that goes unpunished. The former provokes outrage while we go along with the latter because there are no repercussions; we suspend judgment to discover

what point the novelist will make. Another instance is not letting a personal opposition to adultery prevent us from being able to appreciate the beauty of the novel and film, The English Patient.

Just as a preoccupation with the author as “personality” detracts from a purely aesthetic response to a work, so does too great a preoccupation with the work’s human content. Characters are not real people with whom you need become friendly. One of the remarkable things about literature is that you are privy to extremely different lives, minus the odor.

Aesthetic pleasure therefore is a state of mind that at first seems indistinguishable from our real responses. And yet because we are free from any consequences the difference is that our response to art is one of disinterestedness. (24).

I admit, of course, that it is possible with some people for the arts to lead to “bad” morals and be twisted towards degraded living. As Plato indicated, some individuals may imitate negative behavior suggested to them by art. But I can make an analogy here with sports and the release of violent energy in a controlled manner. Few athletes are violent off the playing field and most spectators return to their normal lives after they leave the stadium. It may be said there has been a safe release of dangerous emotions. Violent incidences are reported at times, but they represent a minority, just as those due to a response to works of art. A stronger argument could be made for the negative effects of constant exposure to violence, which has been shown to desensitize some people to real pain and suffering. In this case it is hoped that individuals who are inclined in this manner will be able to benefit from the corrective responses of their society. Again, the majority of people connect violent acts with the suffering of victims, yet in recent years

we have seen shootings in schools that have been directly related to the perpetrators viewing violent films.

Murdoch (14) says that a viewer can always use art for his own purposes. For instance, the pornographer can go to the National Gallery to search for images. More of concern, Steiner (144) says, is the question of whether the identification with fiction, the tidal wave of emotion aroused there, can dull us to the less intense, unfocused suffering in our environment. “Does the cry in the play muffle the cry in the street?” Coleridge believed it did. And this leads to the question of whether the artist is responsible for the distortion, abuse or misuse of his creation. Steiner (145) says no, the answer lies in the ethics of a work’s reception, which of course brings us back to the morality of the beholder.

Sontag (24-25) defines morality as “a habitual or chronic type of behavior (including feelings and acts). Morality is a code of acts, and of judgments and sentiments by which we reinforce our habits of acting in a certain way, which prescribe a standard for behaving or trying to behave toward other human beings *generally* ... as if we were inspired by love. Needless to say, love is something we feel in truth for just a few individual human beings, among those who are known to us in reality and in our imagination...Morality is a *form* of acting and not a particular repertoire of choices. If morality is so understood ... it becomes clear that no generic antagonism exists between the form of consciousness, aimed at action, which is morality, and the nourishment of consciousness, which is aesthetic experience.”

Art functions, therefore, in a moral role because it requires us to exercise certain skills that are basic to the aesthetic experience such as emotional and thoughtful

awareness, reflection and disinterestedness as well as skills intrinsic to responding morally to life. If we continue to nourish our ability to make moral distinctions and prompt ourselves to act, then we remove the predisposition or pattern of blindly and spontaneously following the majority. (25).

It trivializes art to say that artists are unable to offer serious statements on serious topics. It is too simple a view to look at art and morality in terms of pros and cons, likes and dislikes. It is crucial to remember that we may not always be “comfortable” with great art. (Lyas 208). If we are able to “inhabit” a work, we have a better chance of being amenable to it. If not, we shall be repelled. Ultimately it is hoped that we can permit ourselves to be open enough to take on the moral challenge of looking deeper and see a difficult work as creating an opportunity for further contemplation. Our moral response and a hard assessment of that response must play a part in the overall judgment of the work of art. (211).

In bringing this section to a close, I will briefly summarize our exploration of the dichotomy within the arts. As we’ve said, art may fall into the ‘art for art’s sake’ category or the ‘art for a purpose’ category. I would now, of course, pronounce that art can do both, with Murdoch’s reservation, however, that in order for a work to be considered art at all, it must be cast in the heat of aesthetics.

### ***The Difficulty with Art***

It is hoped that at this point it has become clear why Plato and others have not seen art as a means of learning and also how that has been refuted by Aristotle and other



thinkers. In this chapter it has been my intention to go beyond the similarities in the ways philosophy and art reveal the truth by suggesting what art can do in its own right.

But there are still difficulties with art that cannot easily be explained away and a brief discussion will add to points I will make later on.

Because the ancient debate has defined our view of art, and insists art is mimesis or representation, Sontag (4) says we are permanently placed in the position of defending art. The defense itself divides in half; we either defend form or we defend content. Even today when most artists and critics prefer to speak of art as subjective expression it is still assumed that art is mostly content. But Sontag (5) warns us that it is risky to reduce the importance of the organic whole because in focusing solely on content we no longer see the work as it is and reach out for interpretation. At its worst, this means isolating elements x, y and z in order to identify x's meaning.

This can be traced back to antiquity when the literature of the people, their religions and myths were "improved" by the new institution that wanted to replace the old. This meant that the consummation of lust between Zeus and Leto was really about the marriage of power and wisdom. Interpretation here, as with re-writes of erotic texts by later Christian writers, was motivated by what was perceived as a need to elevate a lower form of morality or viewpoint found in the work. When a text is judged too valuable to be completely discarded, it must be made more palatable for its readers. Even today, the justification for doing this cannot be admitted; the writing is merely being "clarified" and "updated".

In the last century we have witnessed complex deformations, even as they are being celebrated for their connection to influential figures. Marx and Freud labored over

elaborate systems of interpretations. These innovative thinkers went so far as to state that events only *appear* to be intelligible when actually to fathom the real idea they must be interpreted correctly. And in doing this events are restated in different words, with different emphases, to effect an equivalent but ultimately dissimilar meaning. (7).

But what I have attempted to illuminate here so far is that art does not want to be analysed or interpreted in this manner. Works of art cannot be broken down into their base parts and, therefore, a scientific approach to aesthetics is impossible. It is as it is, a whole work, to be experienced on its own. There are limits to language, and when words or phrases are substituted, meaning changes. It is a different work of art then, one that must also pass the test of its own aesthetics.

Often today the intent of interpreting texts is suffocating. Sontag (7) calls it “the revenge of the intellect upon art”. It is a peevish dissatisfaction, an attempt to grab hold of more and replace it with something better.

What needs to be distinguished here are the intentions of the interpreter. If a text is bent towards supporting a theory, as in the case of Freud and Marx, then the original text is corrupted. Salient points that fit the theory are plucked out for show, while the organic whole is disregarded. Or, often a text will be altered so as to give credibility to the replacement text, as with religious works. The invitation to the new text is being offered in familiar tones to ease acceptance. In these cases, there is a lack of honesty. But as we have said about the necessity of opening a dialogue about morally difficult works, the critic who interprets a work of art fulfills a valuable role. The honest critic has no personal agenda to follow and ideally can question elements that appear in a work. Even better, the critic who is a practising artist is more adept at viewing a work from

the inside and the outside, which may place him in a position to deliver the most profound and objective response.

We would do better, Sontag says (12) if we stayed close to form. If content provokes interpretation, then form can return it to its natural state of “transparency”, and the experience of the thing itself. (13). Steiner (5) reports there are thousands of books on Hamlet. Why not just read the play? Interpretation often ignores the sensory aspect of a work, which cannot be discarded. Our goal in experiencing art must be to recover our senses and we can do this by reducing content in order to see the thing before us. By striving to see, hear and feel more, we will derive a greater sense of fulfillment from the experience and it will strike us as more real. (Sontag 14).

In bringing this chapter to a close we can say there are many aspects of what art does that are unique. These elements are such that they may stimulate people to understand themselves, their lives and how to live them well. In the next chapter I will bring literature and knowledge into a larger area of consideration, that of education.

## **CHAPTER 3: EDUCATION**

If, in the first two chapters I have been implying that much of philosophy is concerned with high ideals while literature deals more with the rough and tumble of real life, then education is the middle ground where we negotiate what is best for humanity. In this chapter I plan to focus on a few key issues in education that are directly related to the emotional development of students and the pedagogical worth of literature and creative writing.

Education shares with philosophy similar goals, practical goals, that were defined long ago, on how to improve oneself and live a better life. More than this, one aim of education is to reduce the distance between the self and “the other”. We undergo more than a dozen years of education in the hopes that we will find ourselves in the good company of people with whom we can live together afterwards in that familiar collective called civilization. It is an attempt to create a space that is conducive to the dissemination of knowledge, to bring about an awareness of more options in life and find what is best for each person.

The origin of education was likely motivated by the desire to impart information useful to others that would benefit their existence. Late Paleolithic cave paintings were a way of communicating the hunt, the brute force and the joy of cooperation that could reduce the menace and advance the interests of the group. In the paintings Steiner (138) reads the emotions of courage, determination, beauty, exhilaration, respect for the animal and thanksgiving, as well as an acknowledgement of the continuation of life. It is an

intelligibility or at least a dialogue of the common struggle, he says, with qualified observation and a willed form.

In this description we hear much more than communication of simply useful information. In fact, much of it satisfies the definition of the aesthetic and justifies its inclusion in what constitutes art. In Lascaux someone cared enough about his or her experience of life to want to share a cognitive and emotional response with others. It is all there in a few images: the physical animal, the landscape, technical skill, energy and motion, a place, time, forms of expression and a total impression that tells its story to us.

Education seventeen thousand years later was to become more expansive, more detailed and therefore in need of being broken down, so that now we concentrate on the science of things, the history, geography, art and literature as separate disciplines. We've lost the larger picture, the cohesion of the parts but gained more information in each subject than any one person can master in a lifetime.

The challenge in modern education, as we shall now see, is two-pronged; we must constantly ask how to teach most effectively and also what is worth learning.

### ***Satisfying Plato...***

According to Peters (3) education, "implies that something worthwhile is being or has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner". He goes on to state that education is like reform; to say someone is educated infers that she has become someone better by achieving a positive change. Success in education might be reflected by knowing something relevant, precise, concentrated, or shown through qualities such as courage, sensitivity and compassion. (4).

The problem for education is to ascertain what is worthwhile. Many thinkers have tried to separate learning “tasks” from learning “achievements”, wherein a task is described as an activity and an achievement is the successful completion of the task. Put another way, it is process vs. product. (Bailin, conversation). Education covers both tasks and achievements, and encourages both “trying” and “succeeding”. (Peters 4). If we can determine the aims of education it often helps clarify what is truly worthwhile. (10). And to pinpoint an aim is to define a more exact specification of the activity.

One thing that can be agreed upon, however, is that a person’s outlook is changed by education. There is a sense of being on the inside of a form of thought and awareness. If we believe, as did Socrates, that knowledge is virtue, then it follows that a broad aim of education would be to educate the intellect or character. It is significant that the etymology of the word education means “leading out”, ideally from a lesser to a greater state of awareness and being. (11).

Every culture passes on knowledge to its newest participants, teaching norms of behavior, attitudes and beliefs. But not every method is teaching. For example, there are different means of approach. Teaching in the traditional Western public school manner involves a teacher passing on knowledge with the awareness of how the student is understanding and judging the material. When something is taught, a pupil does not necessarily believe it to be true; he has the right to demand reasons for its being true. It may well be the case that the teacher gives *her* reasons for its being true which in turn must be open to the student’s skepticism and evaluation. (14).

One point I am trying to make explicit here is that education is more than just teaching. It is a complex activity that has the overall goal of leading a student not only

towards acquiring skills, knowledge and right behavior but also towards acquiring them in a way that promotes understanding – while at the same time encouraging the student to judge the rationale behind them. (15). Directly following the introduction of some new activity or information there must come a discussion and explanation of reasons for learning it. And this requires the active and willing cooperation of the learner. (15).

As Plato demonstrates in the Republic, the teacher may direct the student towards understanding through means of questioning, or may choose a more “child-centered” learning approach and leave the rationale for a time when the student is ready to discuss it.

The difference between teaching with and without opportunities for the student to question the material is the difference between initiation and indoctrination. The latter reveals a lack of respect for the pupil and hints at propaganda, conditioning or blind obedience. To avoid such methods education must include two minimum requirements, “wittingness and voluntariness” -- that is, the awareness of what is being taught and how, along with the willing cooperation to being taught in this way -- both of which work towards eliminating the indoctrination teaching method. (17). The presence of these two qualities indicates a liberal education where the student’s learning experience is treated with ethical concern and the *manner* of transmission of worthwhile activities is weighed with as much consideration as the knowledge itself.

The next question I must ask is, how does one lead the student out?

Peters (13) says once the student’s witting and voluntary cooperation is secured, then notions of interest and hands-on learning can be launched. If students are brought to care about knowledge through educational methods, interest and self-motivated learning will

follow. It serves our purpose here to stress that the teaching process is not entirely one of leading out. At a certain point education becomes self-learning. A teacher can present tasks in such a way that hook student interest but beyond the initial attraction it is only the individual who can achieve real learning. (14).

The aim of a school then is to initiate students into worthwhile activities by offering a worthwhile array of subjects. Although students can choose subjects based on their interests and goals, there must be some value beyond usefulness. At the beginning of a new course of study students will not have grasped the reasons for putting time and effort into it. Passion warms up slowly as the subject is revealed. Because human nature leans towards efficiency and best returns, reminiscent of Taylor's malaises, people ask, What's in it for me? Difficult subjects offer little immediate pleasure so we must look further to understand how we make choices. (72).

Pleasures such as lying in the sun or listening to pop music can be enjoyed for what they are. Instant happiness is not to be found in long struggles and frustration; in fact, difficult subjects can be painful at times. Yet there is a pleasure to be had from completing a difficult task well. Unless both have a *feeling* side to them, it would make no sense why someone might choose the "painful" activity. If we possess the discipline to defer immediate pleasure for long term return of pleasure, then often the pleasure due to a sense of accomplishment in the difficult task is all the greater. It might be said that pleasures involve sensations and emotional states that are directly connected to the activity pursued. (77).

Plato determined that a level of civilization is based on the number of citizens who are occupied with activities beyond the "necessary appetites". (78). In advanced



civilizations highly developed practices arise that have intricate rules but serve little useful purpose. Elaborately prepared meals, table etiquette and witty dining conversation are examples of what goes beyond the necessity of eating. This level of civilization is tied to a “doctrine of function”, when people are differentiated by their use of reason. Advancement in life can be measured by how high standards have been raised. (79).

But imposing standards of value does not justify greater striving. Rather it implies that a person is more committed to asking, How shall I live? The system by which she judges activities is based on general and interpersonal principles. A person is able to determine whether there are reasons intrinsic to the tasks themselves that are worthwhile and if these reasons fit into a coherent pattern in her life. (81).

Now perhaps I am able to make a larger connection to earlier discussions. It says much in this context to know that the ancient Greeks took the idea of intrinsic value and applied it to a life in the arts. The Greeks were able to envision their lives in the whole, made known to them through creativity and aesthetic appreciation. Both of these qualities require disinterestedness. In fact, to the Greeks, being an artist was the epitome of the good life. We have mentioned Aristotle’s concept of “practical wisdom”, and shall now add that a person possessing this wisdom is an artist who guides his own desire for improvement. Even if his chosen form of art is only that of self-advancement, he will adhere to the highest standards of his art in order to shape the end he desires. (Peters 81).

Before we move fully into education and the arts, let’s take a general look at curriculum. There are other sides to activities other than the pleasures they bring. If we ask, as Peters (82) does, “Why do this rather than that?” it must be considered in terms of time and commitment. How we spend our time must be weighed by factors of depth of

interest, challenge, opportunity for growth and reflection, heightened awareness and good fit to our personality. This latter quality, also called mutual compatibility, is where happiness and balance lie. We may be able to find a harmony between our dominant interests, such as teaching and artistic creation, or they may conflict, such as being a teacher and being a stay at home parent. The coherence theory of goodness must be applied to these choices. A person must decide which activity will lead to the greater good because in the latter example, they are mutually incompatible.

Curriculum activities such as literature, science and history are “serious” activities, thinks Peters (85), because they offer insights to other areas of life and add to our quality of living. They also possess broad cognitive content that makes them more worthwhile than hobbies and pastimes. The aphorism, “education is for life” can be interpreted as either the desire to continue learning when the exams have finished, or that life can no longer be removed from the ways of seeing into which someone has been initiated. In the latter case, one may automatically consider the moral, historical and political dimensions in new activities. And spontaneously ask if the activity is socially responsible or for the greater good. What someone thinks about art or science will evermore be determined by a conceptual framework that crisscrosses between disciplines. (87).

One last consideration in evaluating curriculum choices is to inquire if the activity is isolated from or contributes toward living. How relevant is it? If the subject is so removed from a natural human curiosity and its connection to the world, then why pursue it? When faced with mortality a person must ask herself, what is worth doing? Each person by virtue of being human has an abiding concern for truth. To ask questions about

life is already a sign of being committed to finding some answers. In other words, to be alive is to possess a passionate need to know. And from the past we hear Plato confirm this through Socrates, who tells us the unexamined life is not worth living. (90).

Before we descend from lofty ideas to examining the reality of living with our feet in the dust, I might just add that Plato also believed in the special relationship between the teacher and the pupil. In the next section I will look at education and the arts and how the teacher plays a vital role.

### ***...while honoring Aristotle***

In the classroom, worthwhile concepts must be introduced and elaborated; building on concepts is the way we make sense of things. It is a dynamic process wherein we become adept at using our knowledge and eventually develop confidence in interpreting new knowledge. (Richmond, class lectures).

Today we talk about teaching towards skills for jobs, but in the wave of recent demands for technological workers, we must realize that computer skills are only one part of the world's needs. The traditional view since the ancient Greeks has been focused on the necessity of educating the "whole person". Today more than ever we need to stimulate and develop student minds, especially the ability to think and figure things out independently. (Richmond cl).

How does art prepare us for life? Art does not want to be hitched to a purpose or to be constrained by a repetitive job. It lies, to some extent, outside of morality and does not want to be analyzed. In this section we shall see how teachers can lead students out onto a higher moral ground while confronting relevant issues in student lives. Literature

and creative writing are particularly well suited to this; while at the same time they adhere to Aristotle's inclusive method of learning.

As I've said, education is the middle ground where we soar towards higher ideals but land in the reality of the classroom. That teachers are emotionally committed to students is part of the job description, that they work towards shaping an emotional environment that will facilitate learning – one that is safe, caring, encouraging, tolerant, fair, with appropriate humor, and understanding – is also a given. The teacher senses the emotional make-up of individual students, knows who learns best visually, auditorily, or with a “hands on” approach, and whose personality thrives on challenge, competition, sharing quietly or just needing more time.

Murdoch (The Sovereignty of the Good 33) speaks of the artist's “just and loving gaze”, a stance most teachers take, which says to the student, *I see you*. It is a form of attention. We all grow by looking, by putting ourselves in the background and allowing the image of another to come into focus. For teachers this requires “unselfing”, so as to recognize the independent existence of an individual outside of themselves (SG82). Along with empathy, I feel these two qualities are hugely important for students in developing a sense of others.

If education is the common ground, then teachers are also role models of proper public behavior for students. In her job, a teacher must strike a balance between a professional demeanor and a genuine respect for her students. This is especially valid for moral issues. It is a difficult equilibrium to maintain because a teacher cannot allow herself to become responsible for fixing the possibly messy lives of her students to the extent that she crosses legal boundaries. The system is set up so it ought to flow through

counsellors, administrators, social workers or even the police. Emotionally a teacher may suffer as a human being because she is aware of a student's problems but she cannot go as far as to remove a child from a home. She can only report what she knows to the proper authorities and continue to offer what emotional support she can. This right behavior sends a message to sensitive students that they are also not directly responsible for people whose lives are painful. They see that it is acceptable to seek help and enlist a support system to assist someone in need. It is a shifting continuum of complex moral responsibility that must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. There are no rules for offering succor to another person. Murdoch (Existentialists and Mystics 30) states that human beings inevitably are exposed to moral dilemmas and they learn by watching. Once they have absorbed a few examples, they will understand that the main approach is based on being compassionate to others.

Today a greater moral concern deals with different forms of propaganda pulling students towards two destructive camps – either the ideology of the charismatic figure, the political or religious institution – or the more frightening backlash to all this – being encouraged to reject society and rely on the blind, egomaniac self. Education must urge students to steer a middle course, where they can become aware of their choices. Granted, it is the more difficult path because it asks the students to think for themselves, stay the path that leads between determinism and freedom. But it only requires keeping close to life; that is, being firmly embedded in life and reality. Life cannot be compartmentalized. Nor is morality something that can be turned on and off. It goes on continuously. (36).

We ask students to take on “difficult” subjects in secondary schools, difficult usually defined as science and math. But what could be more arduous than the study of life? We cannot neglect the importance of a guided exploration of ethical conundrums. As Leavis has said, we have one culture, not a choice between the sciences and the literary-humanities. Murdoch tells us the most essential tool for an exploration of life is literature. It is how we begin to understand human situations. (33).

More importantly, I believe literature appears to solve many troubles at once. If teachers are unable and, in fact, prevented from getting directly involved in sticky predicaments, and shrink from the moral vulnerability of even extending opinions or advice, literature offers a possible alternative. For fiction presents an opportunity to air highly personal and ethical issues. There is a big difference in reading a story with a person in it *similar* to Johnny, but not, in fact, *being* Johnny. Johnny and the class find themselves at a safe distance from the “vulgar heat” of an uncomfortable problem and can freely discuss the most private and upsetting parallel situations. It is a cooler approach to the emotional chaos surrounding direct involvement and, more importantly, no one is in danger of being judged.

This moral solution can be explored much further in a creative writing class. Students may desire to write about very personal, even undisclosed events. The teacher can focus on distressing conflicts in a professional manner by talking about the stories in the third person, which allows for the same vital critical distance. For example, it is no longer, “when you did this,” but, “when the protagonist ran away from home,” or, “how the narrator felt when she saw her mother shooting heroin”. Referring to occurrences in

these terms allows the student to receive moral feedback on circumstances that may be too disquieting to discuss rationally with authorities or even their friends.

As a class, the teacher and students sort through the emotions intellectually, everyone being enough at a remove to see events for what they are. Conflicts in the story are open to discussion and various opinions emerge which are debated ethically. The benefit to the student author cannot be underrated. It is often more valuable than psychological therapy because there is no stigma of seeking or needing professional help, nor any shame associated with the subject in a creative writing class. If the teacher has set up the class in such a way that every student is required to respect the writing of others, then no one will respond negatively towards the author. Students are praised for having the courage to share and there is no judgment. The first rule of a creative writing class is that no one asks, did this really happen to you? Unless the author chooses to divulge that the story is autobiographical, it should not be a consideration in critiquing student writing. If the student does decide to reveal the truth, it is usually a case of admiration for the author that dominates the class's reaction. Students are awed by new insights they have towards the writer and he or she no longer seems like a stranger. Greater understanding and tolerance have been forged through the telling of a story.

Conversely, the teacher in some cases may be able to encourage the student to seek help or support him in making a change. The story may be taken as a cry for help and the relief at being understood can even mean the difference between life and suicide.

In an ideal world, students come to school hungry for knowledge, eager to improve their minds. In reality, they ask, why should I study Shakespeare? Only 25% will go on to higher education, fewer still will go into the arts or even attend cultural

events. An underlying problem for education today is that there are too many distractions, too many easy entertainments. Young people are able to access a wealth of pop culture outside of class but where will they get “high” culture if not in school?

If we take, for example, teaching Shakespeare, the concern in modern education is that there has been a shift from the bard’s mass appeal to the elite, or that his plays have moved from the Dionysian camp into Apollo’s. (Aspin/Abbs 254). Instead of an audience comprised of the groundlings up to the royal boxes, today there is a growing belief in the inaccessibility of Shakespeare, the language being too difficult, too archaic, or a fear of pupils not understanding. Shakespeare has come to be associated with high culture, snobbery and an aesthetic initiation that many people believe they do not possess. But now more than ever we must introduce students to Shakespeare because it is in his work that students can tap deep springs of feeling and human drama. They will find to their delight that their encounter is intense and exciting. (Gibson/Abbs 60).

When students are asked to take “feelings” as a subject of study, they are initiated into the refinement and control of emotions, and again, with Aristotle, we can say that Shakespeare’s plays allow for their safe exercise and release. We think of how our view of the suffering of others is altered once we have felt the “storm upon our heads”, sympathetically entering into the experience of the “other”, and avoiding what Gloucester describes as the indifferent and comfortable man, “who will not see because he does not feel” (King Lear, IV, 1/Knights/Abbs 62). Shakespeare invites us to try on fictional personalities in particular situations and learn through our moral imagination.

Another argument in education today is the idea of letting students bring what is most “relevant” to their lives into the classroom; if that happens to be “Sponge Bob” or



“Survivor”, then so be it. But I would strongly argue for supplying the challenges needed to develop more complex thinkers, if only to begin to discern the intentions of propaganda and sort out thorny moral questions. This effort may not be viewed as worthwhile to the students at this point in their lives, being perhaps due to a lack of maturity or sophistication, but if it can be seen as an investment in their intellectual future, it is likely to pay off later. For there often comes a time a few years ahead when the older student will *want* to know how Uncle Tom’s Cabin sparked the war that ended slavery or why Hamlet may be the best piece of literature ever written. It is a seed that must be planted while there is still a chance for the student to be guided and familiarized with difficult material. One day she will be more willing to return to it, because it is not cold to her, not entirely unknown, but she has an idea of how to proceed. She has been here before. “The readiness is all.” It is one more step that can be taken to improve life and her understanding of it when she chooses.

In summary, I can make a few general comments on education as they relate to the ideas we’ve been tracking so far. Nussbaum (103) says that that “education is seen as a way of modifying life and making it more humane”. Aristotle qualifies this by reminding us that education aims at producing citizens who are perceivers and believes that each student has the potential for practical wisdom. At the core of Aristotelian education will be the humanities, especially art and literature.

What this comes down to is the *education of feelings*. The arts are a means of developing more complex, more replete emotions, which in turn enliven the cognitive domain. (Richmond, in conversation). We define ourselves to the extent that our

awareness of other people has something of the emotional warmth and empathy that are inseparable from our own immediate feelings of self. (Knights 67-68).

Literature continually reinforces the immediacy of feelings and in the next chapter we shall see how they become active and activating forms of awareness and knowledge.

## CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

James Joyce, from "The Dead".

Next to reality, I believe literature may be the most emotionally and cognitively rich experience we can have. Some may even go as far as to say literature has more impact because the author can chase away all the static and fog of real life so as to trace a few key aspects right down to the root.

Previously I've examined what art can do and in this chapter I will now narrow that scope to literature as it relates to our topic. That literature is capable of presenting diverse paths to knowledge and understanding will be discussed, through both its formal features and implications for education. I shall ask if author biographies add to our comprehension of literary works or if they detract from an imaginative and creative reading of the text. And I shall speak about how literature invites the reader to step into a better world, by asking, "How do you feel? Change your thinking, and maybe even your life".

## ***What Literature Can Do***

Certainly there is much happening in the above excerpt from “The Dead”, both above and below the visible level. It is Joyce as technician, wordsmith and profound emotional being that makes him a consummate writer and also conceals from us the inner mechanics. In the next chapter I will focus more on skills and knowledge but here I want to stay closer to the unique effects of literature.

Coleridge says that deep thinking is attainable only by someone who possesses deep feeling. In literature I believe we have a natural balance between the emotional and the cognitive. Most people would agree that literature is accessed through feeling but the cognitive processes that are stirred by feeling are what have led to originality and creativity. One fine example of this is Plato’s reaction to what he perceived as the corruption in ancient Greek society, which resulted in his writing the Republic. It is impossible to say which came first, the thought or the emotion, but we may assume that his deep concern for the welfare and future of his countrymen spurred him on to exceptional writing.

One of the main ways that literature is unique, as Aristotle said, is that literature ushers us into a larger life; without it we have not lived enough to escape the confines of our parochial existence. (Nussbaum 47). What this means is not only that we may discover how people in China live, or what the lifestyle of a Roman emperor was, but also how it *felt* to be a young man in his first battle or what emotions arise when holding a newborn baby. Of course, in these examples the cognitive cannot be separated from the emotional without losing some of the effect. The novel is particularly adept at capturing complex and contradictory features of life while allowing the emotional texture to play a

cognitive role in grasping truths about human lives. Proust tells us that truths about human psychology cannot be told through intellectual statements alone. Powerful emotions have an invaluable cognitive function in our understanding.

A second unique quality of literature is that it slows things down. One by one we can take kernels of ideas and hold them up to scrutiny, contemplate their significance and truth. For example, in real encounters we don't always remember the exact words that were spoken, even the exact order of events, but we do recall what we were feeling at the moment. It is a process of registering visually the expression on someone's face, in their eyes, the intensity of facial muscles, bearing of the mouth, skin tone as well as gestures, body language, quality of voice, effort of finding words, or a hesitancy that is added up to confirm our intuition. All of this information is coming at us in the heat of the moment and the words uttered may not even be heard fully. Stimuli build in degrees of emotion and we categorize accordingly in areas of our consciousness and subconsciousness. He was angry. He was furious. He was angry but more annoyed than anything. He laughed to cover his anger. His shoulders suddenly stiffened and his face went cold. In each of these we mark nuances that go on infinitely but we grasp the ideas through the emotions.

In literature, the reader is emotionally engaged with the character while being freed from the distortions of reality and the urgency of being required to think, feel and respond simultaneously. We can read first about the tension of the facial muscles and then hear what words are said. The vital details are isolated and we learn what the author wants to emphasize. We can get close enough and still retain our comfort level. Whether the character is a Russian aristocrat, a country publican or a Japanese geisha, we can be

privity to their innermost secrets and desires. Proust says it is only in literature that we can fully identify with the other.

In real life as we have said there are too many obstacles to the objective examination of our lives. We may be willfully blind or obtuse. Jealousy or selfish interests create a “vulgar heat” as Nussbaum (162) calls it that prevents us from seeing our full situation. Because in fiction we read about other people, we have a cooler perception and can put ourselves in other people’s shoes. We feel love without feeling possessive, insecure or prejudiced. We hold no reservations because there are no consequences. Granted, we must have some experience of the emotion to take it further, but it is not an exaggeration to claim that we can understand, say, the conflict in filial love better in James than we do in our own lives.

A third quality in literature that is unique to the form centers on imagination. The author and the reader tacitly agree to leave the world temporarily behind and begin a magical voyage together. If the author is able to exercise skill in shaping a picture, the reader willfully suspends his disbelief and goes for the ride.

Coleridge (202) accepts part of this as the process behind creation. There is much debate also going back to Plato, on whether the writer is divinely gifted with a “genius” that allows for special powers to pass through him, or whether it is a result of hard work and a long apprenticeship. Coleridge, on the genius side with Plato, believes that the poet has a primary imagination — a fundamental, non-voluntary, largely unconscious synthesizer of experience that receives information from the senses. This reiterates Kant’s take on things; that we do not adapt to the world, we order the world according to human ways of seeing it. More importantly, Coleridge states the poet also has a

secondary imagination, which consciously creates imaginary worlds. In other words, it is a consciously controlled creativity. (Egan 23).

Coleridge (202) was able to blend a number of the concepts of his day and identify imagination as “the living power”. He describes it as the prime agent of all human perception (Rothenberg Hausman [from now on known as RH] 62). In writing “Kubla Khan”, for example, he proposes that some aspects of the writing process were outside of his own consciousness. He experienced it as a flow of words and images such that he was unaware of the act of composing. In other words, the poem seemed to spring forth as a whole, with no effort by the poet.

Coleridge was fascinated by the mystery of inspiration, and along with Wordsworth, thought poets had “a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present”. By relating the primary and secondary imagination to a divine imagination, with the poet merely acting as a conduit for the flow of inspiration, Coleridge echoes parts of Plato’s writings. But in fact, in Coleridge’s case, scholarship has records to prove the contrary. It is likely that during the writing of “Kubla Khan”, the opium Coleridge took for a toothache had broken down certain walls of resistance to creating and relaxed his normal awareness of the process. He was able to access a series of images that came directly from a travel book he had read recently and had taken hold in his subconscious memory. Interestingly, if we compare lines of text in the travel book with lines in the poem, there is uncanny similarity in language, images and even structure. (Weisberg 215-16). Coleridge had internalized the experience of reading the travel book and the opium made him unaware of having remembered the descriptive phrases of the images. He proceeded to put them into his own words as

though they were new to him and his poem was a response to the travel book. His ideas felt “fresh” because he was experiencing the scene fully for the first time and imposing his own order on it. Entering this fantastic world and being deeply immersed in the imagining, he was able to remake it by communicating what he “saw” through skills of exquisite language he had honed over the years and his singular emotional makeup.

The other side of the creativity debate is summed up nicely by Thomas Edison whose maxim has stayed with us: Genius is ninety-nine percent perspiration and one percent inspiration. Poe (Philosophy of Composition /RH 58) refers to writing poems with mathematical precision. In writing “The Raven”, Poe emphasizes that his approach was purely rational and conscious. As if flaunting the idea of “inspiration” as a source of creativity, Poe takes a shot at writers who “shudder at letting the public take a peek behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought...” Poe insists that “The Raven” was not created by chance, nor by intuition. He followed a rigid, step-by-step method until it was completed. (59).

We imagine Poe working off a grid, as he traces down the column for the type of impression or effect he desires and then chooses the corresponding type of work it will be, its length, tone, and intensity, and arrives at an optimal one hundred and eight lines. Part of the process of writing a poem is to determine these elements, and with experience, the poet discovers the rhythm of the piece and how best to use repetition, pattern and language to give it its power. It is worthy of note that in “The Raven”, Poe was writing about the death of his young wife. Perhaps the meticulous structure of the work allowed him a way to work through his grief and prevent the poem *and* the poet from sinking into



chaotic emotion. As Bailin reminds us, for emotion to be intelligible, it must be in some form of expression. (“Theatre, Drama Educ...” 425).

Obviously then, imagination in literature must be a blend of inspiration and hard work. Aristotle blends these ideas, treating creation as “making”. Things come from nature, from art, or are spontaneous. Some part of the result will pre-exist of necessity. “Matter” is present in the process of making and becomes something in the end. We can extrapolate that this is what an artist does in using craft or skill, while developing an idea or form. (Metaphysics/RH 33-35).

Fast-forward twenty-five hundred years and it sounds a great deal like the other side of the modern polemics which seems most valid, that skills and knowledge go a long way to stimulating creativity. In the next chapter I will talk more about the modern view of creativity and the heart of that debate, imagination.

These are a few of the major characteristics unique to literature. In the next section I shall take a look at literature in the classroom and why students can learn especially well there.

### ***Implications for Teaching Literature***

Why should students study literature? What makes it worthwhile? Why not just investigate life? One reason, as I’ve said, is that we have not lived enough. Also, that real life is too murky, too tangled up with other things. Nussbaum (46) tells us “good fiction makes the reader a participant and a friend”; a novel becomes a reflective tool in our lives. It makes an emotional appeal to lure us in, then chooses its particularity for study, and shows all its variety and indeterminacy before making a point. It encourages

us to think and feel about subjects that might otherwise be too far from our experience. Morally, politically and socially this cannot be underestimated. Novels delineate some aspect of life that will reveal what the author has to say on the subject. As Nussbaum (46) observes, “all living is interpreting; all action requires seeing the world *as* something”. Too much of life would otherwise pass us by, and without its heightening affect on our awareness, we are not seeing and feeling with enough precision and keenness. Simply put, without literature we are not as alive as we could be. The effect is both horizontal and vertical; we live through literature more widely and more deeply.

Exactly how literature does this ought to be briefly outlined here through one or two examples. In art as in life there are no introductory courses. With poetry especially, we must begin with highly developed and complex poems to get the feel of it. But even difficult poetry ought to be accessible to the layman. Poetry is intended to be grasped by the senses and experienced as a complex mental event; one that through its sensual impression recreates the same mental response in the reader. If the senses are at attention then levels of reflection open up. Poetry aims to induce in the reader a habit of mind, where the reader voluntarily succumbs to rhythms, sounds, subtle uses of language and allows associations to form based on memory, emotion and intuition. Through guidance and practice a student develops a sense of language and confidence builds. What is required is a sustained contemplation and, as Whalley (Abbs 234) describes it, “letting the poem lead”. In this way, the inclination to extract meaning is diminished and instead the poem’s harmonic system becomes audible, as well as a resonance within and without. Being able to discern these qualities, in fact, constitutes the experience of the poem.

Whalley (234) says we enter the universe of poetry by exercising “grace, patience and curious confirmation of passive attention and alert response.” The business of teaching poetry is to encourage a way of being, both inventive and daring, that includes everything the human world can gather up of itself.

Let’s look at the first stanza of a poem, “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” by Emily Dickinson.

A narrow Fellow in the Grass

Occasionally rides

You may have met him – did you not

His notice sudden is—

One main strength of this poem is in joining the familiar with the strange; in other words, a “fellow” has an affectionate ring, compared to the reality of a snake, which is so “other”. The frightening surprise encounter gives real force to the words and the snake is made sharply visible through words. The last two lines remind us of what we have seen earlier in Homer, the use of an odd word order, a technique that snaps us to attention. Here, it is a question that does not wait for an answer but runs into the abrupt statement, which echoes the reality of coming upon a snake suddenly. The result is we *feel* the poem; we see more and understand more about life. (Knights/Abbs 64-65).

It is often asked if it is beneficial for students to look at author biographies in addition to the literary works themselves. Many feel that the life stories of these remarkable people are a legitimate means of learning in themselves. Students may

recognize a struggle worth fighting for and see something of their own situations in the author's life. Perhaps it is merely a work ethic being presented, or an unfair promotion of those who did succeed where hundreds more did not, but there are still many other valuable lessons that may emerge.

Coleridge, for example, one of the most creative Romantic poets, was also able to write lucidly from within his artistic point of view about literature and philosophy. As we've said, he saw himself and poets in general as being divinely inspired. But from this alone, students might get the idea that a person is either a "born genius" or nothing. Perhaps more relevant to Coleridge's ability to create were the circumstances of his life. His father was a vicar who encouraged his young son to read at age four and Coleridge recalled being seized powerfully by the images in The Arabian Nights and Robinson Crusoe. Sadly, his father died when Samuel was seven, and the boy was sent to live with his uncle in London where he was pronounced a "prodigy" by his uncle and his circle of friends. In the capital, Coleridge was able to attend a good grammar school, followed by university at Cambridge. As often is the pattern, early tragedy and the bestowal of the label of "giftedness" do much for the self-concept, formation and motivation of artists.

There is, overall, a curious repetition in the early life of many writers. From infancy, many were already on the fringe of society in some way that allowed them to be part of the mainstream and yet gain some distance for observation. This may have been due to wealth, status and connections (such as T.S. Eliot), or the other unfortunate extreme, poverty (Dostoyevsky), illness (Camus, the Bronte sisters), the early death of a parent (Tolstoy, Sartre) or just being recognized for a remarkable precociousness and singled out for advancement (Coleridge, George Eliot). In many writers' lives, there was

some event or special circumstances that heightened the awareness of the writer as a child.

One chief factor could have been the tension between home and society which may have aroused the writer's search for identity. This was first shaped by the family and their values, by significant outsiders and school in youth, and later by university, peers, and mentors. Slowly, the writer began to engage with a larger society and assume a political, religious or ethnic identity. The importance of finding like-minded contemporaries aided their drive to master concepts in their chosen field. After a time, years for some, decades for others, the writer came into his own and reached the next stage: publication and public attention. In the last phase, the writer also showed a burgeoning historical sense – his relationship with writers of other eras and how his work would be judged in time. By this point, a sense of self as one with society had taken place and he was able to speak for a larger number of people with a view toward the universal. This brings us back to Murdoch and her concept of the necessity of “unselfing”, when maturity and vision can lead authors to moral awareness and more significant creation.

Dostoyevsky is one author who due to the events of his life opted to take on serious, controversial moral problems early on and limn the dark side of existence. We have Dostoyevsky to thank for the modern psychological novel, the murder mystery if you prefer, but he is also famous for the depths of his psychological insights to pathological states of mind and the realm of humiliation, self-destruction, tyrannical oppression and rage. He was greatly influenced by the ideas of his time and there are

frequently intellectual characters in his novels who “feel ideas” in the depths of their souls. He is also renowned for his experimentation with literary form.

Without a doubt, Dostoyevsky’s early life shaped him as a writer. Raised in a desperately poor, devout Christian family, Dostoyevsky often reiterated that he was not a part of the gentry as were Tolstoy and Turgenev, and did not engage in the skepticism of the aristocratic class. The overwhelming event in his life was his four-year imprisonment in Siberia and a mock execution that reappears again and again in his fiction.

Dostoyevsky’s concern for the poor and disadvantaged led him to associate with an intellectual group who discussed utopian socialism and supported revolution. Dostoyevsky may have been arrested for writing propaganda and being loosely connected to a terrorist group. After eight months in prison, he was taken to a square in St. Petersburg and stood in front of a firing squad. At the last second there was a reprieve and he was sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. His autobiographical novel, The House of the Dead, was the first of the Russian gulag literature, which has been continued most notably in our times by Solzhenitsyn.

After his sentence, Dostoyevsky rejected the determinist, materialist thinking of the intelligentsia and embraced even more fervently his beliefs in religion, freedom, integrity and individual responsibility. Gone were the romantic stories that had gained him some celebrity before prison. He virtually sanctified the Russian people as bearers of the truth, being the ones who through their suffering would save humanity. Now he was the author who would write Crime and Punishment, The Idiot, and The Brothers Karamazov. (Dostoyevsky/Britannica CD ROM).

Many great thinkers cite Dostoyevsky as their mentor. Freud named him as one of the forerunners of psychology. Dostoyevsky's treatment of evil and love of freedom made his works prescient to the world wars and totalitarianism of the twentieth century. His ideas wielded immeasurable influence on Nietzsche, Gide, Camus and Sartre.

How an author comes to see life and write about it cannot be separated from his experiences. Biography can aid understanding but Nabokov (1) exhorts us to approach a work of literature with an open mind. Knowing too much about an author or previous criticism of a work can color our response unfavorably. For it is more of a two-way street; how the author's view of life is presented to us and how we interpret it will depend partly on the author, partly on ourselves. The author quickly drops hints about how she sees the world and soon the voice of authorial consciousness stakes its claim. The reader responds to this picture and ideally the author and reader begin to bond. (Nussbaum 6). In order to have a personal aesthetic response, the work must be experienced directly and for itself.

In the next section we shall see how an author's view of life is not neutral and what matters most to her is built into the novel.

### ***Author as Moral Being***

I have spoken about the relationship between art and morality, that experiencing a work aesthetically may be at odds with how we feel about the work morally, as in the example of the Leni Riefenstahl Nazi film. I have also suggested that art will not make us more moral but it does have the capability of nourishing our moral faculties and

increasing our discernment. Now I'd like to move this aspect of art into a deeper realm, to that of artistic creation and moral achievement.

In many novels the author endeavors to show us characters in order to bring us around to view other people as qualitatively unique beings. As readers, we get to know their individual traits and circumstances so that sympathetic, tender emotions arise, which in turn elicit feelings of impartial love for these characters as if they were genuine human beings. We could say they have our moral attention, and we perceive with intellect and feeling their particular lives. Our moral imagination reaches out to understanding. By identifying with them and allowing ourselves to participate vicariously in their emotional responses to events in the story, we become enlightened by more thoughts and more emotional experiences. Nussbaum (162) states that if we can carry this over into reality, we might be willing to see more and also be more willing to be touched by life.

For this transfer to occur, there must be a moral agency in the novelist. Since, as I have said, she is drawing from her own view of life, her values and therefore her own personal truths, writing is in the main a moral act and the writer must be responsible for her ideas. Morality, in the best literature, is presented with clear vision; it is precision rather than vagueness. Nussbaum (164) says the ideal moral stance aims for "norms of rightness" and ethical objectivity. At the same time it is internal and human. Each author will present an individual vision of life and how to live it but after we have read enough quality works, we begin to get a sense of what the norms are. There is a collective of norms presented in literature, and this is what we must learn from, as a guide to good living. The subject in each work is the raw, unvarnished splice of life that when taken as a body of work is the history of human social experience. No one view is fully "correct";



we latch onto parts that speak to us but reject others. In total, we begin to see that each life has its own story and that if one thing is changed we are veering off into another story. And that is true in reality, for every human life. Each is unique, with its own moral universe. We are reminded once again that no one rule fits all.

One of the vital roles of the novel is to lead us outside morality to test our ability to adapt. In the novel we are accomplices to lawlessness and irrationality at times; the point is to show us the limits of morality. (51). Thoughts and actions are connected not to rules but to contexts. We need to know not just simply what happens at a given moment but what people think and feel. Twain gives us Huck Finn in deep conflict. According to the law he should report a runaway slave but his affection for the man and his understanding of circumstances overrides what without discernment might be judged as the correct thing to do. (Elgin 194).

On another interesting level, works of literature echo between one another, acting as moral advisors. That is to say, literature can learn morally from itself. Because all serious literature is a critical act, what we learn from life and the benefit of historical hindsight is sometimes “corrected” by a newer work. Steiner (12) says “aesthetic creation is intelligent in the highest degree.” How could it not critique itself? He gives examples, such as Virgil directing our interpretation of Homer; then Dante on Virgil, again Milton on Dante. As we read Joyce’s Ulysses we read Homer’s Odyssey along with him. It is a comparative act, and in this way the past lives on in the present. Just the same is James’s revision of George Eliot’s Middlemarch in his own Portrait of a Lady. Tolstoy wrote Anna Karenina in order to improve on Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. (14). Successively, each writer sends forth his new creation into the light of his own ambition.

What is left out or altered in the more recent work is perceived as a deficiency in the older version.

Literature over the ages, because it can learn from itself, might be considered a morally self-evaluating system. To be successful at updating a work, an author must ingest the whole of previous works on the subject and make her own advanced judgments. This is what it means to be writing with the ghost of James Joyce looking over your shoulder. It is one of the most difficult hurdles new writers face. In the next section we will look at other challenges made by literature, challenges made to us as human beings.

### ***The Challenge of Literature***

If we travel back to Lascaux and the Cro-Magnon cave paintings, Steiner (137) reminds us that there is language, and art, because there is the “other”. Awareness of the other runs deep in our consciousness and we desire to announce our presence in order to guard our own experience from oblivion. We communicate in words, yearn to fulfill the dialogical nature of our existence that Taylor speaks of. A poem issues out from ourselves towards another person. The wonder of mimesis at Lascaux erases the inhuman “otherness” of existence and brute force. It is perhaps the earliest attempt to reduce the instability and estrangement of reality. At terrifying moments we are strangers to ourselves, lost in confusion within ourselves. We must leave ourselves and connect; try to take comfort in what is similar, not different. And yet what is worse, we can remain strangers to those who would know us best.

Shakespeare tells us that nothing could demonstrate to Othello the devotion of Desdemona; that Lear had to settle for filial loyalty, unable to be assured his daughter's quiet love was sincere. We can never know for certain what other people are thinking; and Shakespeare shows us the penalty we pay for our mutual inscrutability. (Elgin 190). Without the arts we would remain unknown to ourselves and strange to one another. (Steiner 140).

Today an author cannot write in the same manner as the nineteenth century authors. It comes down to the relationship to characters. There has been a moral change, Murdoch (27) informs us, and modern writers are more ironical and less confident. No longer can a writer impose her direct judgment or authority over the work in the omniscient voice of the past. This coincides with Taylor's view of authenticity and not wanting to judge other lifestyles. Murdoch confirms this by blaming the disappearance or weakening of traditional religion in the West, perhaps the greatest change over the last one hundred years. The major nineteenth century novelists like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky took their belief for granted. Another reason for a shift in the moral voice is the loss of a social hierarchy, which undermines a person's sense of belonging and makes judgment more diffident. (27).

Quality art, however, constantly recreates itself through returning to plain speech, unpretentious truths and ordinary life. Art tells the truth by including the absurd and the simple. The best art is its own internal critic, recognizing and celebrating the absurd complexity and the incompleteness of its form. And here we find the great paradox – the best tragedy is anti-tragic. King Lear wants to embody the hyperbolic, histrionic drama

of his position. Shakespeare forces him to enact the true tragic, the absurd and incompleteness of being a flawed human being. (Murdoch 240).

There is no easy way out with good literature. In life as in fiction, there is the affront of death, its “intractable constancy”, as Steiner (140) calls it. The fact of death is resistant to reason. It is in literature that we rehearse for our meetings with death. And through the metaphor of the resurrection, the literary means of overcoming death, we find something beyond it. In the lucid intensity of meeting death, the aesthetic form pushes back and generates a response which says, there is still life, a vitality, a perseverance that counters the fact of it all by pointing out that one life may have ended, but somewhere, somehow, life goes on. (141).

I believe it is in this moment that literature declares itself to be significant or not. The best works distinguish serious thoughts and feelings from the trivial or opportunistic. They demand of us a serious encounter with reality in a serious manner.

Let me summarize what the challenge of literature is then. When faced with our unqualified aloneness we feel compelled to reach out to the “other”. There is irony here; while recognizing the strangeness of others, literature invites us to withhold judgment until we have discerned the separate and qualitative uniqueness of the other. After we have opened ourselves up, we have a chance to see ourselves in them. As we take something from the otherness in characters, we also give to real people. It is one way of transcending death, by becoming part of the larger realm of life. Murdoch repeats that literature commands us to conquer self-absorption, and one way to do this is through beauty, which in a disinterested state of mind, allows us to perceive beyond ourselves.

“Then the ‘otherness’ which enters into us makes us ‘other’”. (Steiner 188). The challenge is to let go ourselves in order to become something better.

Art, and especially literature, are the most practically important things for our survival and salvation, Murdoch (241) claims. Words that are refined and exact represent the most vibrant texture and “stuff” of our moral being. They are the most universally used and understood way we express ourselves into existence. Words alone make distinctions, and with words, great literature stands up and declares that some things are worth believing in. The level of a civilization is ultimately measured by its ability to use words, and through words reveal the truth. Literature enlarges our ability to exist through words, and in the battle for higher civilization, with its freedom and justice, our best weapons against alienating scientific jargon, mainstreaming journalism and tyrannical mystification are truth and clarity. (242).

In the next section I will look at what is possible when the reader chooses to rise up to the challenges of literature.

### ***The Open Door***

Elgin (180) describes a work of fiction as a “thought experiment”, a vehicle for exploring what things might be. In it, a question may be asked; for example, how a person who sincerely resolves to reform can continue to behave badly. Tolstoy allows Pierre to play out this scenario – Pierre vows to become productive, to change his indolent ways. But he never gets around to it. His character reveals how inertia can paralyze commitment to change, and Tolstoy comments on the relationship of resolution and action. Bellow, in Seize the Day, takes a similar note on character and state of mind.

Literature of significance says to us, “Change your life”. An intelligent voice appeals to our way of thinking and feeling and proposes a challenge. The author seems to be asking, What do you feel now? And now? How does this affect the possibilities in *your* life? Steiner (142) remarks on the indiscretion of serious art; it invades our last privacies and exposes our unknown motives and beliefs. The early Greeks associated the Muses with the wonder of persuasion. An encounter with the aesthetic is akin to waking, enrichment, complication, darkening and an unsettling of sensibility. (143). The immediacy of what happens to us when we read comes unbidden. How this penetration occurs is not wholly known. We’ve offered possibilities earlier when we spoke of how language, rhythm, patterns, appeals to memory and intuitive processes combine to work on our psyche. Freud places more weight on the subconscious; Jung on recognition of archetypal figures and situations. Steiner (180) describes it as a psychological wobble in our time-sense produced by the familiarity of the “coordinates” in a work of art. That literature draws upon and balances both cognitive and emotional elements is proffered as the reason for this immediacy. When we are emotionally engaged, our minds are more attentive and our opportunity for learning is heightened. Emotions code the information we are receiving and it enters more deeply into our awareness.

When we are moved by what we read, we respond, either in thinking, discussions with others, or sometimes in writing our own stories. Our interpretation is in itself a moral act. We find that our response to what is on the page is immediate, no matter how long ago the author laid down her words. With time and experience in reading, we form an intensity of sight, what we might call a literary intelligence.

That literature is immediate cannot be refuted, but there is still one further step. In the next chapter we shall see how creative writing moves the reader from a passive state to a more active one, involving thinking and feeling and the shaping of life.

## **CHAPTER 5: CREATIVE WRITING**

Creative writing is more immediate than literature because through the act of writing we must divulge who we are. Bloom (63) says characters in literature learn by overhearing themselves speak, and this could be said of real people as well, and what we reveal to ourselves when we listen to our conversations with others. In the act of writing, I feel this is taken to the extreme; the proof is on the page. There before us in black and white is the view we have of others, our moral values and an outlook on life; all of which we must take responsibility for in one way or another. It is often difficult, but one method is by facing ourselves head on. Is this how we want to be seen? If we are honest, we do not turn away from evidence of moral blind spots and shortcomings. In recognizing these, we have a wonderful opportunity. We can improve ourselves. The active learning that occurs through writing cannot be underestimated. The growth curve is too steep.

When a student first attempts to write, the struggle, both inner and outer, as person and writer, is so great that he must go to literature for guidance. Becoming aware of a narrow view might be ameliorated by having a look at how Austen, for example, handles the topic. It is a comparative method of learning where the beginning writer verifies his attitude about a situation through an admired writer. In fact, this will go on for as long as the student continues to write. Even advanced writers realize they are under continuous mentorship with the great writers, as we have mentioned. An author needs to understand Homer, Tolstoy and Joyce before he can say something generous and



significant. With fledgling writers, a moral attitude will be absorbed along with the search for writing techniques. Raiding the short stories and novels of the masters for concepts, characters, plots and themes, is just the first stage; soon the student senses that the elements are impossible to separate from attitudes. Furthermore, the moral stance almost always comes first.

In this chapter I would like to explore earlier ideas in a more practical vein. If we are to understand how creative writing imparts wisdom through its immediacy, then we must understand its relationship to literature and also how we go about learning to write. Finally, we will stand back and take a look at the big picture and hopefully see how our main ideas have come together in this thesis.

### ***The Canon as Writer's Manual***

Now it is time to turn our eye upon the art of writing, an art which emerges directly from literary ideas and makes them manifest. The first guidebook was Aristotle's Poetics. His intention was to instruct us in what to strive for, what to avoid, and what the goal of drama is. Aristotle understood that people love accurate imitation; the more exact and natural, the greater the pleasure. He specifies what elements of a play are necessary for a successful performance and insists that the more believable the plot, the greater the delight. As the audience watches, they learn meaning. Delight comes from "figuring it out". (Poetics 8). As we have said, a great deal of enjoyment arises through the vicarious emotions of fear and pity, which often come about through the hero's reversal of fortune or a surprising discovery. The strongest cause of these emotions is seen in deeds perpetrated within the family, the most universal experience. Contingency factors largely in the progression towards a climax, adding to the audience's

sense of reality. (27). When there is unity of plot, there exists an organic connection between form and content.

I would venture that the ingredients for a good tale have not changed much since Aristotle, although today we elevate character over plot as the driving force behind the story. The stories themselves haven't changed much either. It is a distinction of works in the literary canon that an author can recreate a situation in our minds so precisely that we are able to experience it afresh. We realize our feelings within the context of the story so completely that our response is at once personal and universal, happening to us as readers as well as to the character on the page. It is between these two experiences, memory and fiction, that the technique of using metaphor comes fully into play, bridging the distance between the concrete image and the elusive sensation that belongs to a larger, ineffable meaning. In writing, handling metaphors is one skill that must take hold early on.

It bears repeating that in fiction a revelation cannot be shown by direct, conscious methods. Wallace Stevens also says a poet must not look right at something as a journalist would and describe the hard details. Realism in this literal sense is "ominous and destructive" and has a limiting effect on the imagination. For the poet, the zeitgeist of his times can be heard in the rhythm of the lines, choice of words and the pauses between the words. "The Noble Rider" as Stevens calls the poet, must do nothing less than help people discover how to live their lives. It is only through indirect methods such as metaphor and association that the poet's imagination has the power to illuminate the minds of others. (Sherman 28).

What happens when we try to write? For one thing, we must find the courage to share something about ourselves while at the same time deliver an invitation through

words for the “other” to join us. In the best literature we are immediately impressed by what Murdoch calls a calm and merciful voice. Steiner (147) relates it to the concept of “courtesy”, taken from courtly love, meaning we find a mode of communication to our reader through tact, finesse of psychology, consideration of mind, perception, offering a warm welcome to the visitor. As we read, so must we write, through words. Lexical courtesy is the first step in philology, which makes us “dwellers in the great dictionaries”. We must open ourselves to vocabulary – theological, political, and regional in Dante; legal, military, botanical and of the craftsmen in Shakespeare; alchemy in Goethe; argot in Joyce. A distinct musicality registers life and time in Coleridge’s words. Gradually the finesse of reception increases. (157).

The second step is syntax, grammar and rhetoric. Syntax chooses an effect. The Bible uses an anaphoric arrangement, phrases cumulate or diminish; the grammar is set in motion. “The poetry of grammar is the grammar of poetry”. Stevens intends for the grammar to keep us off balance, in fact, where the rules of grammar are broken, meaning is set free. Rhetoric is the craft of charging with significant result the lexical and grammatical units of utterance. (160-161).

Semantics is the third part, which encompasses the previous steps. It denotes the passing of “means into meaning”. Suddenly, as in Shakespeare, Steiner (162) notes, “the entire notational code interacts with the totality of the historical and surrounding world, and networks with every conceivable value and usage.”

I would like to look more closely now at the best we have. If we try to tear away the mysterious veils of writing, what exactly makes Shakespeare so extraordinary? How did he bring the concept of what it is to be human into a more deeply understood

existence? For one thing, there is his command of language, the dazzling metaphors, newly invented expressions, and his usage of language. For Shakespeare, the meaning of a word is always another word, and words can be like persons. Each of Shakespeare's characters speaks in his or her own voice. Bloom (64) states, "his uncanny ability to present consistent and different actual-seeming voices of imaginary beings stems in part from the most abundant sense of reality ever to invade literature."

Another example is in the stories themselves. Much has been said about Shakespeare's free borrowing from historical texts (i.e., Pliny) and existing medieval plays, but the fact remains that what he took, he took much further. It is his ability to absorb and redeploy that is striking. What seems like a paradox of imitation resulted in a profound originality. (Bantock/Abbs 148).

Another reason for the unusual superiority of Shakespeare is in "his power of representation of human personalities and their mutabilities." (Bloom, 63). As we have said, with Hamlet, Shakespeare for the first time in literature has a character overhear himself as he speaks and he is able to learn from himself. Hegel remarked that Hamlet and the great villains, Iago and Edmund, are artists of the self, or free artists of themselves, able to go on creating more and more dimensions of themselves. (64). The difficulty of interpreting Hamlet, the most fecund of characters, is partly due to limitations within ourselves. Shakespeare is able to supply more contexts for explaining us than we are capable of supplying for his characters.

When we write we must tunnel into our consciousness to locate the proper word, phrase or inference that connects memory and sense with the universal. The equilibrium between precision of image and multiple meanings is the secret of making those

important associations. If we note when this is successful in literature, we recognize that it is the words that resonate within ourselves, which are intimate and feel like déjà vu or identification. (Steiner 184). We return to the books that reach the deepest parts of ourselves. There is no way to defend a personal canon; it just eventually becomes who we are.

As our writing progresses a literary image of ourselves sharpens. The more we write, the more clearly patterns emerge. We are drawn to those defining moments in literature that correspond most closely to our own lives, ones that we are able to write about most strongly. These become the themes or subjects that exert the greatest hold over our imaginations. F. Scott Fitzgerald admitted he was writing the same story over and over; trying each time to get it down just right, go a little deeper so it might be possible to understand it better. Hughes (Winter Pollen 106) claims that even Shakespeare wrote out of a single idea that doggedly tracked down a certain sexual dilemma that was rooted in his concept of good and evil, power and weakness. In his case, it was hardly limiting; the singleness of that idea was all-inclusive and affected nearly all of his best works. It was the way his imagination unraveled the mystery of himself to himself.

Depending on how well we've ingested our reading, we may be able to ascribe certain attitudes we hold to those found in literature. In fact, it may no longer be possible to remember which came first, our real life experience or that which occurred in something we read. According to the level of our familiarity with novels, we may conceive of love in the manner of Jack and Jill, Romeo and Juliet, or Natasha. Our

jealousies may imitate Othello's; Lear becomes a model when our children repay us with silence or retribution. (Steiner 194).

In our writing it is natural that we are drawn to the themes, styles and sensibilities of those authors we admire. Often critics compare beginning writers to those with whom they share a certain voice or way of looking at the world. Ideally, each writer would like to strike out for herself and develop a distinctive mode of expression. But there is something to the critic's observation that there are resemblances, or examples of "lineages" that can be traced back further and further in time. One example is where a popular film, a novella, a classical poem and a philosophic treatise have all explored the same fascination with the idea of "stations of hell". The narrator, Dante, in Inferno is led by the poet Virgil through well-detailed levels of Christian hell where tortures await the guilty. Updating the idea to colonial times and setting his story, Heart of Darkness, deep in the Congo, Conrad has his pilgrim/seaman, Marlow journey upriver through ever-worsening conditions/stations until he finally meets the devil Colonel Kurtz himself. Film director Francis Ford Coppola relocates the story to Southeast Asia and uses the Vietnam War as backdrop for Apocalypse Now. However, it may be surprising to learn that Dante's brilliant poem was not itself the original story. He was also responding to the ideas of Plato, who is believed to have borrowed them, ironically, from myth. (Santayana 78-79).

In the next section I would like to go into greater detail about our concepts of who the writer is, a gifted seer or diligent tradesman? I will try to define what is at the heart of creativity and answer whether or not we can actually learn to write fiction.

## ***But Can It Be Taught?***

My intuitive feeling is that only a small minority of writers can benefit [from creative writing programs], and these are the ones who you can convert from not being published to being published. There is only a very narrow range of writing skills you can actually teach. Writing fiction is largely the act of self-teaching, because the act of self-teaching is the act of imagination... For the most part, creative writing [programs] encourage blandness and conformity... Will Self, novelist

The above quote aptly lays out one side of the ongoing disagreement in the arts of whether or not creative writing can be taught. In one camp, we have numerous writers who believe that the essence of creativity – originality, generation of novelty, exceptional thinking processes and imagination – cannot be taught. On the other side, many prominent educators and psychologists insist that, yes, much of creativity -- in particular, the rules, skills and knowledge that lead to originality, novelty, etc. -- can, in fact, be passed along to students.

In this section I shall explore many of the issues surrounding creativity, and whether in the case of teaching creative writing, it can be stimulated and developed.

The crux of the creativity argument returns us to ancient Greece where our view of the artist was formed. Plato believed the poet's creativity emanated from an external source; the gods chose to speak through an exceptional human being and thereby became poetic interpreters of the gods. And for good measure, Plato adds that when the poet is in the act of creation, it is an inspired state comparable to being out of one's senses. (from Ion / RH 32). As we've said earlier, Coleridge took up this way of thinking, and regarded poets as special individuals who were more affected than others by their imagination. The designation we use today, "genius", echoes their beliefs.

Genius is a word that comes to us from the early 1700's. Just as Christians embraced the possibility of miracles, today the idea of "genius" fills a similar need of society. Genius worship is based on the hope that someone will come along to save us from the ills of modern life. We want to believe that there are truly remarkable individuals capable of accomplishing great things. (Garber 67, 72). And indeed, history has provided us with a parade of seemingly supernaturally brilliant human beings.

As I have mentioned, there exists in education an attempt to reduce the myth of "genius", if only to put significant achievement within reach for students who work hard. In the case of the writers Coleridge, Blake and Dostoyevsky, Weisberg tears down the edifice of "genius" and reveals how revisions in their texts led up to the final product. He cites existing drafts of these authors' works as proof that these texts were not written down fully, as the writers claimed, in the first draft. (215-21, 231-33).

I think here I am compelled to add my own interpretation, which will bring the opposing views together in this case. Weisberg is saying, literally, that the work did not find its final form in the first writing. Yet writers often say that a work sprang forth from their heads, as though in one piece. I believe what the writers mean in this situation is that after a long meditation on the idea and all its sides (*how* to write it, how to show the idea, choose the best form, determine which characters would best reveal the conflict, etc.), it suddenly comes together in a burst of insight. This is the "Eureka!" moment in the writing process. It's the moment the writer has been waiting for, when the Big Idea has been wrestled to the mat. The rest, then, is easy. The writer knows how to finish the piece because of knowledge and skills, and the "chunking" that DeGroot speaks of, due to years of experience. (Weisberg 114). Often, but not always, for there are many



working methods for writers, the revisions are mainly a smoothing out of language or a heightening of drama for greater effect. Mrs. Tolstoy may have copied out by hand sixteen drafts of Anna Karenina, but Leo had the premise of his novel in place before he started laying down a map of the story. When the overarching idea that pulls all the other elements into line has been discovered, the writer can relax and triumphantly and confidently proceed in writing the manuscript. It's the key moment when the sum becomes suddenly greater than its parts which is accompanied by a great "whoosh" of recognition.

In this instance, we may be able to offer an olive branch to the two camps by proposing that there is no such thing as "genius" but there are many moments where huge leaps of insight take place, making the creator believe that an astonishing event has occurred. An appreciative public may be as much in awe of the author because they have not witnessed the immense mental labor that went into the meditation and the years of acquisition of skills and knowledge. But after ruminating on this, we must admit that many other talented individuals have had long apprenticeships and were still unable to vault into the next level of their art. Is it further proof of genius, then, or just an accumulation of phenomena? For this we shall have to look deeper at circumstances affecting the individual.

Before the product, there was a process in a person. But how did that person arrive at such a set of skills and knowledge? How was this person suited to endure the demands of developing her art? Who is best able to develop as an artist?

Earlier in this thesis we have touched on personality traits and the early environment in Coleridge's life. Unexpectedly, in studies on personality, Roe found that

there is no relation between IQ and creativity. (RH 167). Traits that appear in the “nature” side of a creative personality are: willingness to work hard, perseverance, internal sense of satisfaction, attraction to a particular form, inclination to try a wide range of options, unusual ways of seeing things – to list a few. But the other side of personality has to do with “nurture”, or the early environment, which is vital to the young artist’s sensibilities and self-concept. How much value can we put on the home environment? If family life is just adequate, that is, the child feels safe and cared for, receives an education, is encouraged to find work that is commensurate with abilities -- are the chances higher, lower or equal for achievement -- compared to a home where the child feels cherished and admired for precocious behavior, where books are a part of daily life, where imaginative play is encouraged and modeled by adults, where respected outsiders name certain talents, and teachers and mentors take time to coax talent they see and suggest higher goals than the student has even thought of? The life of many writers offers this type of blueprint. (H. Gardner 308).

Today we know that exceptional creative intelligence is strongly connected to nurture, not nature, in other ways as well. Creativity has been closely associated with the writer’s parents’ ambition, but not precisely due to their parents being writers themselves. Less than one percent of literary prizewinners had parents who were in the same profession; however, forty-seven percent were in a related field. Rothenberg, who has researched creativity in literature for over 30 years, concedes that a “genius” possesses a certain level of inborn intelligence, but between the two, nurture is the more powerful influence. Interestingly, a pattern of being read to or being told stories as a child was a consistent factor in literary accomplishment. (MacLeod A:1)

Luck comes into play as another factor. The times the artist lives in can have a great effect on whether society is open to new ideas, has a tolerance for a range of individuals and politics are favorable. There is also a question of space in the domain the artist wants to enter, or new niches to be filled.

Of additional note is Csikzentmihalyi's research related to the traits of coldness and aloofness in artists. I believe this is a survival ploy, put in place to protect the confidence during the early stages of development. It is important that the young artist not be affected by the premature judgment of critics and continue to find her own style of expression. Personal values during this period must be such that there is no expectation of reward, money or fame. In Canada, there are only three or four writers who can afford to live off their writing alone. Consequently, the young artist must value aesthetics more than remuneration and be intrinsically motivated to withstand the long apprenticeship. (Csikzentmihalyi 192, 196).

There is one other factor that seems to be profound in the cases of some notable writers. The energy behind motivation in some authors is often due to personal tragedy. One of Proust's great themes is the importance of suffering for psychological knowledge. The intellect is clearly stimulated but it is not isolated from the personality. It is the imagination, however, which recalls painful, sometimes violent emotions. As we read, we are sometimes brought into contact with painful memories by way of a surge of recognition. Nussbaum (254) says that suffering is of cognitive importance; it opens the door to our deepest hidden soul. Literature carries us past the obstacles to clear feeling and thinking, beyond our defenses against seeing the truth, our justifications and habits that dull our sensibilities. Stolid rationalization can be knocked out by the power of

pain, and love can finally be acknowledged. It is more than coincidence that many of our greatest writers have suffered traumatic events previous to their becoming serious writers. The list is long: Dante – exile; Tolstoy – orphaned; Dostoyevsky – imprisoned; Joyce – self-imposed exile; Woolf – abuse and incest. J. Gardner (62) believes that if it can be kept in partial control, a psychological wound will spur the writer on towards accomplishment.

It is impossible, however, to isolate any of these factors and seize upon it as the reason for creativity. Each person is too complex, and more akin to a system undergoing evolution. The artist is a unique combination of her traits, experiences, skills and knowledge. (Gruber, Davis/Csikzentmihalyi 202). Also, there are certain situations where individuals seemed poised to make major breakthroughs but social effects prevented their advancement to higher level, especially in the cases of minorities and women, as described by Nochlin. (42).

And even in circumstances where all the right ingredients appeared to be in place for individuals to achieve stature in a field, with no social walls in front of them, they were unable to progress beyond a basic level of mastery. What could possibly be holding them back?

Maybe we are not debating creativity at all. If we agree that creativity is the use of skills and knowledge in a rational process that emerges from a tradition generating a product of significant achievement, where in this definition can we pinpoint the moment of great leaps of insight or inspiration? More significant to the debate is the concession that, so far, no one view of creativity has been able to sufficiently explain the “spark”, or “the something more”. (Bailin 109). Perhaps the true disagreement centers on

imagination. Often the words “creativity” and “imagination” are used interchangeably and Egan (36) specifies imagination as the source of novelty, originality and generativity.

Attempts have been made to link imagination to “seeing”, particularly in making images in the mind, but it also includes putting ourselves in projected situations and vicariously experiencing the “what if”, which is exactly what is required of creative writers while trying out new plot movements, character responses, settings, etc. But it is not only making images in the mind, it is enveloping ourselves deeply in an imaginary situation, so we can “feel” what it would be like for it to really be happening. If we are able to let go of reality, to no longer “be” in our physical surroundings — no longer see the daylight, hear the robins chirping outside, or feel the cool spring air on our faces -- and by entering fully into our reading, say, about the night market in Singapore, we begin to form a picture of the tight streets of Asia, then what it is to move through the thick hot air of the equator, sweat trickling down the spine; squinting over brightly-lit tables while the perimeter remains in shadow; drifting through a fog of incense as we pass by temple gates -- our imagination runs off the page and we continue elbowing between the vendors’ stalls, caught between chattering shoppers, now lemon, cilantro and mint sizzle over there in a wok, a boy spreading fish on a spitting grill, now tripping over uneven sidewalks, while moving in and out of music from ubiquitous radios... The emotion is pulling us along, stronger and stronger, depending on how we feel about Singapore, either from the memory of being there, experiences in other markets, images on TV, film, photographs, books, even from friends who have told us stories about it. The dreamy view of exotic lands may hold sway, or the resentment of generations who have lived

under colonial occupation. Nonetheless, we can't help but fall into imagining if the language gets its hooks into us.

Egan (32) returns us to our previous remarks about the relationship between the cognitive and the affective and asks whether emotion is a necessary element in imagining or whether emotion is what makes imagining more effective. Far from pulling imagination into the irrational, then, emotion is tied to reason in the act of making appraisals and evaluations. This has been said to be the definition of "intuition". It occurs below the level of conscious awareness (Bailin 127) and is responsible for what is commonly called "gut feelings", something most writers rely on in spades to test the authenticity of what's been written on the page.

Imagination is vital to significant writing but it cannot be considered separately from the skills that help execute it. In literature, exceptional imagination may awaken in the reader startling insights to human lives, which may be accomplished by a distinctive handling of language. Through new combinations of words, unusual juxtapositioning, rhyme, pattern, metaphors, etc., the reader is allowed to see and feel a situation in a fresh way. (Bailin 115).

These examples serve to underscore the skill of the writer as well as her imagination. The artistic vision, or imagination, is most clearly developed through the writer's mastery of verbal communication, while at the same time, the imagination transcends these skills, which is the moment in creativity when the writer is able to go beyond the given. (Bailin 109). Part of originality, Richmond (10) states, may be the artist's ability to navigate the rules, falling back on trial and error and even luck, but also the ability to think for herself, and know when to leave the rules behind.

The ability to write a piece that has a particular effect on the reader is defined as a higher order skill. (Bailin 114). Being part of the emotional and reasoned assessments an author makes during the process of writing, higher order skills become second nature with experience and occur below the level of the writer's consciousness, as we have seen with Coleridge. For him, imagination is a thing that is "unsubdued by habit, unshackled by custom, and as that which enables us to transcend those obstacles to seeing the world as it is..."(Coleridge BL 210).

Knowing these details about imagination now, the question begs to be asked, "But can we teach it?" For a practical approach we go to Barrow (84), and his argument that imagination can be fostered in students and that, in fact, it is inherently part of a satisfactory education. For him, imagination is the way we *do* something; it is unusual and effective action. It is not inspiration, but execution.

Barrow further maintains that the imagination must be developed indirectly, and it can only grow as a result of efforts by teachers to impart understanding. It must be taught within contexts, in a way that exposes students to the unfamiliar with an aim to widen their experience, both actual and vicarious. The material ought to be taught in an imaginative way to stimulate the student and by a teacher who personally models imagination. (91-92).

Richmond (10) believes much in art can be taught; in fact, all human beings can become artists through education. One of the rewards of teaching is witnessing student development; a quality emerges that announces individual talent, and both student and teacher are surprised, delighted and inspired.

Now that I have come to the end of our survey regarding the components of creativity and imagination, we might ask, what will they look like in a creative writing class? Are rules and research results smothering to a beginning writer? Are students better left alone, to self-teach, in order to avoid blandness and conformity? In the next section I will examine what actual writers and teachers of writing have to say.

### ***Catching on to Writing***

Let's hear from a well-known teacher of writing, John Gardner, who was also a novelist. "Writing is immensely difficult, more than the beginning writer may realize, but in the end can be mastered by anyone willing to do the work.... Trust that what works for other human activities will work for writing. In learning to ride a bicycle, one must learn to steer, keep balance, work the pedals, stop, keep going – all separate processes, requiring separate focuses of concentration."

But in his experience, as someone who worked resolutely, earned a PhD, attended writing workshops after workshop, Gardner found that nothing did the trick. He had to face the truth – he was on his own. And, here it is again: "Writing can only be taught to a certain extent, then it is caught on to." (J. Gardner 17).

So, what is it then? Ninety-nine percent perspiration, as Edison said, but without that one percent inspiration, not much is able to enter the realm of significance? Is Gardner saying that with diligence, the skills will come, but not necessarily the "something more"?

There is a plethora of self-help books out there to guide the novice scribbler to success, many of which are disparaged by respected writers, but some of these books are



in fact authored by literary giants, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack Hodgins, E.M. Forster, Milan Kundera and John Updike. And what are the secrets of these books? “Write everyday”, “write what you know”, “show don’t tell”. After a while they all sound the same except for personal experiences and the quaint eccentricities. And it follows that in many creative writing classes the instructor dutifully divides the teaching of writing into elements of fiction and hopes that with enough practice, the students will begin to “catch on”.

What Gardner is ultimately getting at is the hot molten core of teaching creative writing, which we have mentioned with Csikzentmihalyi, and is most succinctly stated by the eminent Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (46). Simply put, it is “the will to try”. After exhausting the methods of increasing his skills and knowledge, Gardner deduced it was up to him to go beyond. This depended upon his will. Most beginning writers give up, life interrupts and the haul is too long. But the motivation behind those who are still resolved to try is found in Maslow (RH 86) and Roger’s theory that the “mainspring of creativity in the individual is the need to self-actualize”. (RH 298). Fully committed beginners have an unshakeable need to write. As Tennessee Williams says, “it may kill them”. Just as strong is a need to see themselves as writers. This terrible will to forge ahead may facilitate the breakthrough.

So, the question has come down to this: can this obsessive trait be instilled in students? Perhaps we would not want all students to have it, for it pushes life to the wall to make way for an all-consuming ambition. It may well be a quality that is discovered as the writer realizes how important writing is to her, as in the case where it becomes meshed with self-identity that we have seen with personal tragedy.

Let us now scrutinize the detailed chain of events in the creative writing classroom that might lead up to this point and make some suggestions on how to teach creative writing.

By using our very own imaginations for a moment, although very realistically, let's assume that we can replicate all the aspects of creativity in the classroom. The "early environment" would involve the teacher in the equivalent role of "parent", who will nurture and praise the student's first efforts at writing. It is crucial to make each student feel her writing has value and potential. The teacher as "expert" will help the student discover where her strengths lie. The atmosphere of a class must be established early – relaxed, friendly, supportive and, if possible, fun. The message is that this is a different kind of a class. It will be intellectually challenging but will have a strong affective component. Students learn to respect one another's early attempts at writing and give constructive feedback. When the teacher as expert "names" certain successes in a student's writing, the class is witness to the success, which in turn boosts the confidence of the student. (Mamchur, class lectures). This may be the biggest motivating factor for the individual.

The immediacy here, in the classroom, cannot be discounted in the formation of a writer. When a student's work is read aloud, her peers have a spontaneous natural response to the material presented in the story. The class becomes the student writer's critics and usually feedback is evenly divided between responding to the aesthetic experience of the story as well as assigning moral value. In this manner, the student learns quickly what is strong and what needs more work. At the same time, in the early

phases of class, the teacher must avoid premature judgment. There are just too many elements to juggle at once.

It seems unknown at first how students begin to create but it is necessary to make the environment non-threatening. As often happens, students choose events from their personal history that they deem momentous. There is a risk of feeling exposed. “There are many starting points for works of art.... (they) sometimes do have their inception in certain strongly felt emotions or significant experiences and the creation of the work can be a way to explore and to understand these feelings and expressions by giving them form.” (Bailin [www.ed.uiuc.edu](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu)).

I would also point out that in this early stage, it is important to separate different skills. It helps the student to focus on one element in the writing, say character, and by lifting up and turning it around, the student sees what it does and how it fits into the whole. It might also be appreciated as a puzzle piece that blends imaginatively into the overarching idea. As Richmond reminds us, concepts build on concepts and soon we become more confident with using our knowledge.

The instructor must accompany the teaching of writing with the teaching of reading – that is, the skill of being able to “read like a writer”. It soon becomes obvious that this is an entirely different approach to reading. Segments of class must be devoted to reading great works in the tradition. Here elements are also unpacked and repacked for examination. The student begins to have exposure to the domain and ideally, her own practice in writing will reflect influences of the reading.

The palimpsest is the best method for early writers to learn how to start “chunking”. If a student chooses a short story that she likes and feels she could imitate,

then it should be encouraged that she take the framework, maybe a plot outline or character development, and plug in her own special details. This tinkering with the story's mechanics can provide huge leaps of progress in a short time. The student is starting to think like a writer.

After a while, the teacher's role evolves to that of mentor. She is an authority in the field and also a role model to the students. Pupils will see the teacher as someone who has worked very hard through her own apprenticeship, as someone who is still motivated, and as a person who has had some public experience in writing, such as literary publications or screenplay and theatre productions, etc. The teacher can offer practical advice to the student on how best to use her talents. (Mamchur, class lectures).

Perhaps also in this relationship between student and teacher, the student will absorb a kind of "writer's attitude". It tends toward a "passionate curiosity", as Einstein explained his own outlook, about people and life, both on and off the page and in the grand drama in which we find ourselves. We have already mentioned certain creative personality traits, and in the teacher and other class members, the student may recognize kindred souls. On the other hand, teachers must bear in mind that research has shown that teachers do not always like the most creative students. (Parnes 341).

This is all slowly taking place as the student develops a mastery of language skills and familiarity with quality literature. If basic writing techniques have been absorbed, then the student has also begun to see what great imagination some writers are capable of. Eventually the student wants an answer from the teacher: where do original ideas come from? The teacher will direct her back to the process: first, original ideas come from the literary tradition; second, from making analogies with parts of other stories; and third,

from “small inspirations”, strings of associations that come together for the writer. (Weisberg 252-55). Originality may issue from ordinary thinking habits, but if we are relentless in our pursuit of ideas and hunting down solutions, there is a much higher chance of finding something uncommon.

In the creative writing class we find a wide range of students, all at different points in their development as writers. How to teach the class as a whole? The teacher must be subtly attuned to each student. There are stages of creativity and it may be problematic getting the class to the point where each person is able to give worthwhile feedback to other students. The class may in fact slide towards the “consensus” theory of what is “good” writing. (Hattiangadi 42-43). This is the warning Will Self delivers about writing programs leading to blandness and conformity. It is up to the teacher to redirect the discussions and point out attempts at inventiveness.

There may even arise the problem of culture and differing values of what constitutes quality writing. In some societies, creativity lies not in original stories, but in the retelling of classical myths, such as the Ramayana. The author’s contribution is not in plot or character, but in her style of telling the story. In some societies, the artistic goals are to preserve the classical patterns. (Weiner 150).

As frequently happens toward the end of a class, some students begin to feel a “lack of fit”. Either they have progressed beyond the rest of the class or they are ready to leave off the exercises the teacher has assigned to improve particular skills or insights. In these cases, students may feel motivated to strike out on their own. (H. Gardner 320).

Often the desire to go further is motivated by a certain personal philosophy rooted in a strong sense of self. To go further towards capturing a writer’s philosophy, we might

link it to Rorty's (2) definition of an intellectual, someone who has "the hope to be one's own person rather than merely the creation of one's education or one's environment". To discover what is authentically true for an individual is not necessarily to reject the past. "It may instead be a matter of reinterpreting that past so as to make it more suitable for one's own purposes." This is exactly what writers do; they keep reinterpreting their experiences in hopes of mining innovative ideas or drawing out more profound stories. The point, as Harold Bloom tells us, is to become aware of a great number of alternate purposes, perhaps by going to theatres, museums, churches, gurus, and above all, reading a great many books. (2).

If a writer can experiment with multiple versions of themselves and embrace varied experiences as part of her transformation, she can become more adept at imagining different lives and increasing her compassion and acceptance of "otherness". Gordimer says authors invent characters from parts of themselves – Conrad *was* Lord Jim, Conrad *was* Marlow. Toni Morrison said, "the ability of the writers to imagine what is not the self is the test of their power." (Gordimer 14).

As we have seen with J. Gardner's comments, it is the inner conditions of the writer's soul that are crucial. At best, the creative writing classroom may be a place that facilitates these conditions in the individual, and it may be a place of nourishment. Classes should offer a feeling of safety and psychological freedom and all writing should be accepted unconditionally. The teacher must present herself as a valid mentor and not judge the student's early work. Understanding and empathy here are key. (Rogers RH 303-04).

In summarizing our section on the practical aspects of teaching creative writing, I shall return to the quote by Will Self and determine if we have argued convincingly against it.

We have seen that more than a “narrow range” of skills can be taught, and that although there is some truth to the fact that “writing fiction is largely self-taught”, it is still important that writers have a community. The stages leading to creativity cannot occur entirely alone. Writers need mentors and safe places to air their early work. That “self-teaching is an act of imagination” is definitely true – we can study and read and write, but in the end, the hard work must be done so that imagination begins to flow more freely and becomes a habit. But we still take cues from other writers on what imagination can do. On our own, we can practice “feeling our way” through stories, imagining ourselves as a character in the drama, and in so doing, we deepen our awareness and emotional response.

Do “creative writing programs encourage blandness and conformity”? Maybe some do. But the student gets out of it what she puts into it. If the class has been encouraged to seek new ways of seeing, shown what is original, learned to eliminate clichés, and so on, then they have already avoided the charge. Students may be asked to learn the rules of creative writing – the techniques of writing openings, denouements, realistic characters, etc., but as Weisberg says, the more we know and the more choices we have, the more innovative we may be. (262-63).

It is my opinion that creativity and imagination *can* be fostered to a certain extent. I also believe that their development must begin in infancy and be stimulated throughout life. If creativity can be harnessed to skills and knowledge, then there is a chance that the

products of that creativity can be judged as significant. However, it is unfair for teachers to always be on the lookout only for what is original in a class. What is new for the individual should not be judged against what is original in the field. Instead, why not direct the student to ideas that are fresh to the student's experience, and thereby extend her boundaries? Along those lines, works may arise and evolve in such a direction that more chances for novelty will occur. But, as we have said, so much depends on personality, environment and just plain luck.

If a writer is profoundly motivated and possesses an unswerving will, the personal satisfaction she gains from creating may sustain her through the years of development, which might be enough for her to attain remarkable heights.

I feel very strongly that on any level, in any case, the student who attempts to learn from what she has written on the page will become more aware of her view of life and other human beings. The more she writes, the more in literature she will discover to increase her knowledge, and again come back full circle to her own writing with more advanced ideas. That literature will be an everlasting font where a student can take refreshment has been established and it is hoped that the life-long reader will remain a life-long writer. It is with amazement that a student re-reads pieces written in the past and can remark there an unequivocal evolution as both author and as thinking, feeling being. From this it is hoped that she will realize a passion for more of the same.

### ***The Whole Story***

What we have been exploring here is a way of valuing creative writing. The corollary for education as well as for life is enormous. Most honest authors believe that



the effort of really seeing, and really representing life accurately in writing, is no idle business. That life is continually edging towards chaos and hopeless complexity presents such a struggle to the author that only those who are of utmost seriousness are called to the profession. Creative writing is not for everyone; it is much too strenuous and time-consuming with little hope of financial remuneration. But for those who work out of an obsession for writing, James urges to be “someone on whom nothing is lost”. By identifying with characters, imagining new worlds and trying to express our own experiences, we become more responsive to life’s adventure, and more willing to see and be touched by the world. (Nussbaum 161).

Murdoch (241) tells us that when we write we ought to write as well as we can. The great artist appeals to us by speaking through a plain, sympathetic human language that is easily grasped. Its effect is to make us want to be more worthy. (242). Today the writer must make his own choices and use language as he pleases. He must not be bullied into believing he cannot tell a simple tale of life, but must bend his art to self-consciously stiffened texts which use artificial modes of expression. That language ought to relate to a world of things and people seems to be the common-sensical approach, and certainly true for our greatest writers, from Shakespeare down to the present. Our most sacred works have also had the widest and most enduring readership. (24-25).

It is a truism that the more we write the more important literature becomes for us. With practice we see ourselves on paper, then perceive parts of ourselves in literary characters, and ideally this same skill will carry over into the real world where we will connect more frequently with people. Through writing and reading we set in motion a

worthwhile process in ourselves, and that is to will ourselves more fully into life, while, paradoxically it seems, simultaneously transcending the limitations of our time and place.

The result is such a profound feeling of satisfaction that we naturally seek more knowledge, more understanding and further emotional development. Literature promises greater delights with age; in having read Hamlet at twenty, we find that it is a completely different work at forty.

The same is true for creative writing; we learn about ourselves at every stage. We may be surprised to feel an odd sympathy for our tender, younger selves, and even forgiveness and acceptance. If we are capable of reading ourselves with the artist's disinterested eye, we may even be able to move on from painful memories that linger in our conscience.

The awe we experience when faced with this metamorphosis in ourselves is all the more inspiring when we discern the same pattern in the careers of great writers, and then the epiphany comes to us that this metamorphosis has occurred for every person who has ever lived. It is from this that we are moved to identify with all individuals and cannot help but return to life with renewed feelings of love and compassion.

## CONCLUSION

We've come a long way from Plato and his offense to the immediacy of art. I hope it is now evident that literature offers both an immediate emotional experience for the reader which can be relied upon to heighten awareness and test the veracity of the ideas presented, as well as the more cognitive response which through critical distance and reflection can deepen understanding. Combined in such a way, this balanced response completes the dual vision necessary for a fuller engagement with life. Again, when we know how we feel, we know what we think.

I would state now with some confidence that although we need concrete analysis to investigate the nature of being, we cannot turn away from facing the ineffable because we are not comfortable with ambiguity. The arts are willing to take us by the hand and enter the misty woods, and we must be simply willing to trust our aesthetic intelligence enough to believe there is a greater truth to be gained through intuition, senses and feelings. The journey requires much effort but the rewards enable us to delve deeper into the mysteries and muddles that are part of the reality of being human. It matters little if we learn from art itself or art that makes a point, as long as its moral vision has been cast in the heat of aesthetics.

Each generation must make its own art. (Richmond, conversation). In defining its own values the new generation may be required to crash through the halls of the reigning canon. New voices in literature will themselves have to undergo the test of truth and be held accountable to past and future judgments. New works will either hold or

they will not. Fortunately, literature can question its own moral views and learn from itself.

It is hoped that students can be introduced to literature and creative writing in such a way that they are initiated into a richer way of seeing so as to allow a glimpse of greater fulfillment. If teachers can present a vision of what a life would be if it were sated with reading literature, perhaps students would understand that it would be a life of intrinsic value. If students can see themselves as creative writers and understand that it is worth delaying immediate gratification for grander returns, then perhaps they can begin to see their lives as a whole, and see art as a way to pursue their own fascinating path towards growth and knowledge. Students may gravitate towards creative writing because they need it; art may be the only field that will accept them as they are, or offer the only therapy that will pull them back from self-destruction. In the arts, all are welcome. With skills and knowledge, students may even come to have something vital to say to others. But one thing is certain; we can all benefit from the education of feeling. The more familiar we become with Shakespeare and Tolstoy, the more humane we feel, the more certain of belonging to the great collective of life, maybe even coming to find meaning in what it is to be human. Perhaps there is some truth to what some modern thinkers are beginning to articulate; that just as in ancient Greece there was a shift from religion to philosophy, today we are detecting another shift towards the arts.

In the act of creating stories we must choose who we are, name our values, and therefore learn to understand and feel more. We leave ourselves to find ourselves in others. We spend a relatively long time extracting our feelings and thoughts for a fictional moment. But in slowing down time and keeping the buzzing world at bay for a

few hours, we earn a precious gift. Because it is an exacting labor, because it challenges us so completely on so many levels, what is returned to us is the prize of great wisdom. In the end, if the author has been able to accept that challenge and create fine art, one effect upon the world may be the apprehension of more beauty.

## APPENDICES

In addition to the academic segment of this thesis, I am adding two pieces of my own creative writing. I feel it is important to stand by Steiner's statement that "the best response to a work of art is another work of art". In Chapter Two I have discussed the dichotomy within the arts, namely "art for art's sake", and "art with a purpose", and pointed out that both may be quality art as long as they are conceived through aesthetics.

My first piece, "Will and Angeline", attempts to heighten awareness of a current social problem. Here my aim is to subordinate purpose and keep the story grounded in character. In avoiding abstract substructures it is hoped the reader will not be distracted from the aesthetic experience.

"MacThelloletra", the second piece, fits more into the category of "entertainment", and ideally, could be enjoyed for itself. This said, it is acknowledged that I am responding to significant works of literature and in this case a large debt is owed to Mr. Shakespeare.

## APPENDIX A

### *Will and Angeline*

By Susan Barber

It was always hard getting here, she thought as she stood before the oaken door. Reaching for the brass knocker, she wavered on tiptoe, but it was too much of a stretch for her short arms and legs and she ended up pounding with the heel of her hand. Her fistfalls sounded weak. She checked her hair and waited. Even though it was cool, her thin long-sleeve blouse was slicked to her back from the punishing walk uphill from the bus stop. It didn't matter, she thought. It was past 10:30. Too dark to see. Then the flood lamp snapped on and she was caught in the harsh light.

The man stared at her empty hands and then at her face. He turned and called over his shoulder. She could hear the TV switch off and his wife appeared. The women studied each other's expressions and the door opened wider. Stepping in, she nearly lost her balance on the thick carpet and remembered to take off her rubber sandals and set them at the end of the row of shoes. Silently she followed the wife upstairs.

Her heart thudded as the woman pushed on the door to the first bedroom. Tonight the wife adjusted the dimmer so she could see him better. He slept as only a child could sleep – arms flung wide open and all the lines smoothed out of his face. She bit her lip – he was longer in limb and more mature around the eyes. The sound began in her mouth: William. Will, she nearly said. There at her feet, a castle had been erected in solid

colored blocks. In the corner a fish tank gurgled contentedly. School clothes were laid out on a chair for the morning. She stared hard at his face. Too soon the light diminished and faint yellow stars were left glowing across his ceiling. The woman was waiting for her in the second bedroom. From outside, a streetlight shone over the white bedding, and more light reflected off the vanity mirror. The little girl lay on her side, her long blond hair streaked across her cheek. Moving further into the room, she put a hand out on the dresser to balance herself and bent down on one knee before the child. She felt the girl's breath on her face. Nearer still, she could make out the soft eyelashes. The sweet mouth. Angeline, Angeline. She became aware that the other woman had started worrying the bracelet on her wrist. This woman had been inclined to trust her, and allowed her to come. She could have a look but no more. Not now. But it was like ripping open the tight bindings around her head, her chest; tearing off a shroud. Looking back into the living world. And at the same time she was aware that she'd never met a woman who had such faith in others. This woman was trusting her, and so she slowly creaked up to standing, steadying herself again on the dresser. Loops of hair on an elastic hair band caught on her finger and she shook at it. Then, deliberately, she put it in her pocket unnoticed. The wife gestured towards the stairs with finality.

They hadn't exchanged a word. She turned back to the wife as she stepped off the threshold. A moment passed and then they both nodded. She heard the door close and lock behind her, and at the foot of the driveway she stopped and searched for the second floor windows. Will and Angeline, she said aloud and exhaled. She stood quietly, as if still standing before them. She remained motionless for a long while. A car drove by and she began to hear other sounds around her – the wind in the fir trees, a car door,



further away a dog, maybe a coyote. Lights were on in all the houses of the cul-de-sac, other families with their own. A siren stole her from her reverie and she remembered the time. It was close to eleven. She moved heavily from the drive and began to walk back. The bus came quickly and there were several other passengers on board.

Soon she was leaving behind the thick darkness, moving into a more concentrated light, back into the noise, warmer for the proximity of man and his machines. In Surrey she changed to the train. A few people were dozing and she let her eyes close. The irregular jolting of the cars made for a rough cradle. It was as if they were all being rocked by careless hands. Too weary to protest, too weak to prevent it, they would just have to wait it out, to get to the next place. They would anyway. When she next opened her eyes, she had arrived at her destination and she had to jump off quickly.

George was still at the front desk and he asked her if she was okay. She shrugged and he called good night after her. It was minimum security here compared to the last place but George still had to know where you were and what you were doing. Her sandals made sticky sounds on the linoleum floor. At her room, she glanced down to the nearest door. No strip of light below -- Frankie had probably gone to sleep. Too late to be talking to him anyway. In the dark she hung up her blouse and splashed water on her face. Then she fell into bed and lay without dreaming.

“If he only knew,” snorted Doreen, nodding to the manager’s office behind the kitchen. She had come into work and found Doreen smoking out back. “He offered to walk me through the park last night. That’s a good one, eh?”

They had met at the mid-town house six months ago, although she had known Doreen from before. After 18 months, Doreen had been able to move out. Now Doreen was training her in this job as part of their program; “her mentor” as Doreen liked to call herself. She smiled whenever Doreen repeated this but didn’t answer. Doreen was younger than her, still in her twenties. It was just Doreen’s joke and it didn’t bother her.

The restaurant was busy at lunch and there were too many tables for the narrow space. Staff and customers were forever angling around each other. It was her job to tidy up the place – clear off the trays, mop the floor and keep the bathrooms decent. She came in at eleven and didn’t get a break till three o’clock but she was glad for it. People left their used things and she moved in to pick up the mess. Sometimes they talked to her.

At noon the door swung open slowly, too slowly. Customers looked round to see why the cold wind blew in upon them. An old man removed his hat and shuffled to the nearest table. The manager had installed a space heater in the back but it was useless. The door might as well have stood open in the lunch hour.

A young woman waved at her. “Excuse me?”

She had not seen her in a while but noted a change. The young woman’s hair was clean and pulled back neatly; she wasn’t wearing her stark black clothing today. In fact, the natural color in her face created a pleasant three-dimensional effect. She was no longer playing at being the Halloween goblin or back alley girl. Her mood seemed to be altered as well.

“Something’s on the chair? I’m expecting a friend in a minute.” Her voice was bright without being demanding. She was engrossed in something but it was no longer scary.

“I can do that,” she answered and squirted cleanser on the seat while the woman scribbled in a book.

“Thanks,” she said lightly.

The lunch crowd came and went and she sometimes was asked to pass a napkin or an extra cup. The manager called her to clean up a spill at the soda counter and she pulled away the chairs and knelt while she sopped it up. Occasionally someone would leave and then come bursting back through the door, asking her if she’d found a jacket or a shopping bag and she’d go behind the register and retrieve it for them. For a second they’d flashed her a look of genuine gratitude and wish her good day. When she took the job she’d had no idea people lost so many things.

The old man approaching her was such a person. She turned at the sound of his scratchy voice, a note of panic rising in it. His stooped body formed a question mark, with his right hand fingers pinching his left.

“Have you found...” he stammered. “I don’t know if you can help me. It’s just that my wife passed away, you see. A year ago. I think it’s in the garbage. My ring.” He got the words out with great effort and licked his lips.

Customers would leave the most personal of their belongings on the trays – keys, wallets, watches, even cell phones. She wondered how he could get along on his own. His hands were trembling and his clothes hung on him.

“That one?” She indicated at the bin nearest the door.

His eyes were wet and he blinked as he rasped, “Yes.”

“I’m not sure if I can find it,” she warned him, “but if you leave your phone number, we’ll call you.” She heard herself sounding capable. At the same time, she didn’t want to give him any false hopes. Some things just stayed lost. It would be better when he knew it would be found for certain. She believed she knew how deeply happy he would be.

On her break, she dragged the garbage bag out back and carefully sifted through the cups, plates and paper waste. There were lipstick marks on the cups and others that were flattened to a disk. Some came to eat because they were hungry; others, to talk over a coffee. There were even those who came just to escape their houses. Ultimately they had all come to make an appearance, to take the temperature of the day and measure themselves against the rest of humanity.

Halfway through the bag she found a small leather book; an address book, she thought at first, but inside the cover was a photograph. The young woman who’d asked for a clean chair looked back at her with black-ringed eyes and purple hair, one fist holding a bottle of whisky – the other fist under the chin of another drunken woman. Other pages had items stapled in – ticket stubs, party pictures, beer labels, which announced the title of a new entry. Expletives filled entire pages and then there were other photos with a head cut out, and in one, the defaced snapshot of a heavily bearded biker.

“Oh, god!” Doreen pinched her nose and mouth. “He says you’re a saint.” She jerked her thumb back at the office. “You know, he’s the type that thinks garbage can kill you!” She laughed and took her cigarette back through the restaurant.

She went back to flipping through the pages and came to a photo taken by someone standing on a bed. The young woman lay naked below, eyes vacant. There was something chunky spilled on the next few sheets, unintelligible writing, and then, flattened across the page, fixed there with heavy tape, a hospital bracelet. Emergency room, it looked to her. She let the book drop and saw that the shadow had crept up from the high wall. It was nearly quitting time. She hadn’t found the ring yet. But she couldn’t let the book go and skipped to the last few entries where she saw another face, the face of the girl today in the restaurant. Shining auburn hair, with a healthy looking man. The caption read, “Steve and I at camp”. Another photo and another. This was the newest chapter in her diary. Today the young man with the friendly eyes had kissed her when he arrived at the restaurant. They smiled out of the pictures together, arms clasped around each other. This girl was moving on.

At dusk she and Doreen walked over to the park and instinctively sat on the bench nearest the train vent where it was warmer. She’d made it through another week and they marked the time hopefully. Doreen said, “Hey, you made two people happy today, that’s something.”

She’d left the wedding ring and diary with the manager who promised to call their owners. He wasn’t ready to acknowledge her to his customers yet, but she didn’t mind.

There was a chance that they might remember her the next time they came in. The idea was pleasing to her.

“So, maybe you want a cigarette?” Doreen asked.

She shook her head.

“You could have a drink in 3 months. If you want.” Doreen looked at her out the side of her eyes.

The wind was still biting into them and they both studied the people hurrying through the park. As if on cue, they both realized the only people sitting in the cold were those with no place to go. Doreen finished her cigarette and stood up. In a serious tone she asked, “You’re still going tonight? Did you remember to call?”

“George told me Frankie’s already there.”

“Well, then. Off you go. Enjoy yourself.”

After they separated, she took the train to Burnaby, up past the big house. There were fewer people on a Friday evening but the ones who had just finished work slumped in their seats. The cold and fatigue made people less wary. She scanned the people facing her. Find three men, she thought, no, three types. Directly across was a man with polished features, a clean face, wearing a blue silk business suit, his trench coat open at the neck revealing a bright red tie. No, not him. A second man, in khakis, white dress shirt unbuttoned, black leather jacket. Reading. No. The third in creased jeans, tanned in his hooded sweatshirt. Still too far. But every so often she would let her eyes linger on the man in the blue’s smooth face, gauge the resilience of his shoulders, the steadiness of his hands. He would be the one, she thought. And she looked. Then at last, for a second,

he felt her, and for just a second, he focused his eyes on her, and in that instant read her life, and in the next, moved along to other faces. It was all right, she thought. Just a test. She didn't care. Near the door a sweaty, stocky man in overalls was watching, his chin out, eyes sweeping the swell of her chest, her legs and ankles. Their eyes met and he shifted his hips with the train and regripped the pole before looking back at her. At the next stop she slid off the bench and walked by him out onto the platform. His was always the type, always there, noticing.

“Hello? I'm here,” she called as the door easily gave way to her touch. She entered the narrow, stacked house. The old woman didn't hear her but Frankie came immediately, saying, “Hey, you're here.” He gave her a wet kiss on the mouth and began waltzing her into the kitchen.

“Wait, wait,” she protested. “I have to wash up.” But she remembered to grab the phone and call.

Frankie said, “Can you see? Tell 'em.” He gestured at the stove.

She nodded and to the phone said, “Yeah, George.”

“Okay,” George said. “Have fun -- but not too much fun.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Hey!” Frankie yelled.

“Frankie says to tell you that he's cooking.”

“Christ,” George said. “Are you going to eat it?”

She smiled. "Okay," she said and hung up.

In the bathroom she scrubbed her arms up and down again and wiped her face. She carefully rolled her sleeves back down and ran her fingers through her hair. She remembered the man on the train, moving his hips, legs around the steel pole in his hands.

When she opened the bathroom door, Frankie was standing in the bedroom with nothing on but an apron. She smiled and he twirled her around and around until they collapsed on the bed. She made a balloon around him with the apron while he removed her clothes. Not too long and the bed was creaking with their urgent movements. Then they lay gasping beside each other.

They had both gotten out at the same time but she didn't know him from before in Vancouver. He'd been doing cars and then gotten mixed up with some other guys, and then there were a few jobs with guns. He'd had a decent life before that, been married, but his wife overdosed when he was in jail. He'd said he'd been down for a long time then. Eventually he'd been assessed as 'low risk' and so he'd gotten to the house where he'd met her. It was then that he committed to making the changes. So far they were not bad for each other.

She had come from the city and that had been all she'd known. There hadn't been too much good there until what was good she had lost. She had learned how to stay with strong men and how to get off the streets. She had managed to forge a life beyond that, and for a while it had been a man, a woman and two children. But the man had left her, and the only thing she knew, she went back to. She had quickly lost even that life and



then the children. It had been years since then and it was as if now she was starting all over again – first job, first place to live, first boyfriend and their first real nights alone.

They both became aware of the silence in the room, save the blood pumping in their ears, but neither of them spoke right away.

At dinner they sat on either side of his grandmother and watched the TV. The old lady had brightened when they gave her the plate and they took turns feeding her. Frankie told her proudly how she was his only family. Her watery eyes slowly drifted back to the actors and they sat together. Frankie reached his arm over the old lady's head and rested his warm hand at the base of her neck for a while. She knew Frankie had called up a friend and soon there was a knock on the door. As usual, Maurice had brought a girl with him who was carrying a couple of paper bags. They moved the big radio downstairs into the cramped basement and put it on the washer, the paper bags on the dryer. Frankie went back upstairs to get glasses and ice.

The men had known each other from Agassiz. It just happened that way sometimes. By mutual agreement, ex-cons decided the other was worth staying in contact with. It wasn't business now– they no longer did anything because they had no desire to go back. What they shared was a similar kind of stance to the world. A view of things. They weren't ruined but they were more than just survivors. It was more akin to the humility that soldiers feel after a tour of duty – take what is sweet in life but don't ever expect too much. Worse was coming in the grand scheme. She didn't mind Maurice. She often danced with him at these get togethers. The three of them -- she, Frankie and Maurice -- could get to that place that was still worth it, get inside their bodies and stay there, finding the rhythm and feeling smooth. They issued through

sound, moving in and around each other, faces real, arms, knees, bodies floating, until they had achieved something.

Maurice's girl was always different. This one was calm and not edgy like the last. She watched her dancing with Frankie. Maurice called her Linney and she was taller than Frankie and so skinny that her hips swiveled when she moved. She decided Linney hadn't been inside, although she was drinking enough. Definitely a user – she had been looking around the house. Linney liked to dance though. At one moment, Linney was turning around and thrusting out her backside at Frankie, who was moving into her. A serious concentration came over Frankie's face. She looked at Maurice's eyes and he looked away from Linney to her and seized handfuls of her hips. She hugged him towards her around the ass and his eyebrows expressed surprise before straightening up and looking back at his Linney.

“Oh, hot, way too hot,” Maurice said, stretching out the neck of his t-shirt. She smiled at him and they danced until Frankie went to change the CD. Then she asked if he wanted a drink. Maurice clapped his hands together.

She made three drinks, then hesitantly made a fourth. Linney and Frankie took their glasses and Maurice moved in beside Linney. They chatted and listened to the CD, quieter in the background now. Linney walked to the laundry basin and splashed cold water on her face. The men wiped the sweat off their foreheads and they all drank. Maurice pulled Linney to his side when she came back.

“We have good news!” Maurice shouted. “Shall we tell them?” he asked Linney, hugging her so her waist was bent into him. Linney took a drink and held up her glass.

Maurice smiled at them conspiratorially. “We’re having a baby.”

“Whoa,” Frankie blurted. He recovered quickly and added, “Here’s to you, man. Yeah, it would be a good thing to have a kid.”

She could see Frankie was already pretty drunk. It was his habit to let go for a few hours and then down half a liter of coffee before it ended. “I always saw myself as being a father some day.”

Maurice loosened his arm around Linney. “What about you two?”

Frankie turned to her but she looked over at the radio. She shrugged and said, “What for?” She wrinkled her nose and nobody said anything. She said, “C’mon, Frankie. Put another CD in.”

She drained the rest of her glass and some spilled onto her blouse. Reaching into her pocket for a tissue, the hair band came out. She’d forgotten about it and now the golden strands sprayed out of the knotted hair and shimmered over her fingers. She saw a face sleeping and felt her breath, and right there, in the middle of their party, her legs gave out and she sagged against the washing machine. She started to shake.

It was past eleven and she was in the upstairs bathroom. Things had come to an end down below and the door had closed. Somewhere a window slid shut. The air had cooled down a lot, or so it felt on her face. There was a soft knocking, getting louder.

“Baby, sweetheart – you okay?”

A pause. It was quiet in the house.

“C’mon,” he said urgently. “Let’s go to bed. We’ve got time for one more. Sweetie?” Insistent. “Baby.”

She heard the doorknob and felt him staring at her.

“What the... Aww, Jesus.”

She didn’t move but he yanked her up by the arm. The puke slid off her face and he let her drop back onto the cold floor. She squinted at him and moved her lips.

“You fuck, you stupid fuck!” He kicked the bottle into the wall. “We gotta get back! You can’t go back like that! Aww shit, man.” His hands went to his head and he clawed his fingers through his hair. He paced the small room. “You stupid bitch, you *stupid* bitch. Goddamnit all!” He went to the tub and kicked it.

A frail voice called from downstairs, “Who is it? Who’s up there?”

She couldn’t raise herself. Her arms and legs were too heavy. Something was wrong with her jaw.

“You fuck up everything! Everything you do. Christ. I don’t believe it.” He leaned over and grabbed a hank of her hair and yelled, “You stupid, stupid bitch. Jesus!” He was losing control, unleashing all the pent up stress, the alcohol opening him to a flow of rage. He stood above her, shouting, while she was barely aware.

“You are *such* an asshole,” he bellowed into her face.

“Who’s up there? Who’s doing that?”

“Ass – hole. Ass – hole.” He stomped on the bottle and it crushed under his feet.

A high pitched sobbing came from downstairs that sounded like a child left

unwakened in a terrible nightmare. The phone was ringing and he turned, heaving into the door behind him. He pounded down the stairs.

The old lady shrieked in terror and he roared, "Shut up!" Then a door slammed and it was silent save the sound of weeping.

All she wanted to do was close her eyes.

In the morning he just lay in bed. He could hear her voice in the kitchen, talking with his grandma's caregiver. The chugging of the washing machine vibrated through the floor and he recalled sensing earlier that she had cleaned up the bathroom, but he had not been ready to think then. It was freezing in the room and he dragged the blanket over himself. He knew it was no good.

He rolled over to look at the house next door. It was so close he could probably reach through the window and touch it. He let out a sigh. If it was bad for him, it was hopeless for her. What would it take – a good year? Holding onto the job? Just putting one foot in front of the other?

The smell of coffee and toast was becoming more insistent. They would eat and then take the train back. At first they wouldn't meet each other's eyes, wouldn't talk. Then they'd get back to the house. The dread of going in there would be what would bring them together. They both knew that the only way to go back was together, and then they could take what their punishment was to be this time.

~ \* ~

## APPENDIX B

### *MacThelloletra*

By Susan Barber  
(with a large nod to Billy Bard)

A ONE ACT PLAY

[Dramatis Personae:

Hamlet  
Lady Macbeth  
Iago  
Cleopatra

Scene: Darkened stage haunted by dead characters]

(Dark stage)

Four characters die - Hear a shriek, groans and a gasp.

(One small spotlight on a man lying on the floor).

Hamlet. (Prone, dying). And the rest ... is silence.

(Dim lighting, see 4 bodies, two men with swords, one woman collapsed on the floor, another woman on throne.)

Hamlet. (Sits up, thinking, rubbing chin.) Or is it? (Pause. Full lights on).

Audiences have been obsessed with Hamlet for centuries. (Stands up.) *I have*

shuffled off this mortal coil. It is passing strange that I am the most impressive character to have ever breathed upon the stage.

Iago. (Comes back to life) Ha! Prince Hamlet! (Jumps to his feet). Another of the Bard's great creations! Here we are, the ghosts that linger on, long after the curtain has closed.

Hamlet. Gone but some of us are not forgotten.

Iago. (Aside.) Methinks this fool believes he is on safe ground. He knows not that I put money in my purse. And yet how unjust of fate to pass me over once again – not only in life but in death. I nurse this well. Ah yes, thus do I ever make my fool my purse.

(To Hamlet). Ah, the great Dane! (aside as he bows to Hamlet.) Ruff, ruff. Are not the villains great as well? (To Hamlet). I am your own forever, your *honest* Iago.

Hamlet. (Looking at hands). Such a piece of work is man.

Iago. (Aside). This prince will be a piece of work in *my* hands.

Lady Macbeth. (Arising, walking around Iago). (Aside.) Here is a man not without ambition but also with the illness that attends it. If this be the ever-living play, then play on. Make thick my blood, stop up the access and passage of remorse. (To Iago.) Come to my woman's breasts, and take my milk for gall!

Iago. (Startled). My lady...?

Lady Macbeth. Your Lady Macbeth. (offers her hand.)

Hamlet. (Taking notice.) How is it with you lady?

Cleopatra. (Thinks Hamlet is speaking to her.) I would be well but the state of Egypt is in peril.

Iago. (Aside) The Queen of Egypt! Ha! What does that wench want here?

Cleopatra. How darest these subjects speak!

Iago. No insult intended, O Great Queen. (To Lady Macbeth). I shall drink your gall but there are many events in the womb of time which will be delivered. (Indicates Hamlet.)

Lady Macbeth. But thy nature is already too full of the milk of human kindness. (Indicates Cleopatra.) Art thou a man? Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here!

Iago. Unsex you?!

Cleopatra. (Regally, with condescension to Lady M). But you are unsexed, my strumpet. Look at your hair, your face – round to faultliness. And a brow as low as I would wish it. (Aside) They shall tire of her soon -- only Egypt can conquer these two. (Getting up from throne, looking upon Hamlet.) But there are royal attentions to be had. If he is sad, I will be dancing; if he is in mirth, I am sudden sick. (To Hamlet.) Prince Hamlet, Denmark no longer exerts a pull on you?

Hamlet. Are you honest?

Cleopatra. I have no power over you.

Hamlet. Are you fair?

Cleopatra. Let it not be said that I keep you here.

Hamlet. If you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

Cleopatra. (Aside). He can do better yet but this is suitable. (To Hamlet.) You must enter fully into Egypt now.

Iago. The old black ewe will soon be tugging the white ram! Thieves, thieves!

Lady Macbeth. We fail? But screw your courage to the sticking place, man, and we'll not fail!

Iago. (Looking at his crotch). (With resentment). You'll not fail to stick. (Walking away from her, aside) But how I hate this Queen, Prince and Lady! It is time to reinvent Iago.

Hamlet. (To Cleopatra). Lady, shall I lie in your lap? That's a fair thought to lie between a maid's legs.

Lady Macbeth. (Coming to Iago). You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night and pall there in the dunkest smoke of hell. That my keen knife not see the wound it makes. Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, to cry Hold, hold!

Iago. (Pulling away from Lady M, tugging Hamlet aside urgently.) The queen works to upset your throne. Come out of your lusty fog and see it in the sun.

Hamlet. I am too much in the sun.



Iago. Prince, if it were not for your quiet and your good, nor for my manhood (looks at Lady Macbeth), honesty and wisdom to let you know my thoughts. I am a ghost come back to warn you!

Hamlet. (Alarmed). Angels and ministers of grace defend us! Speak, I am bound to hear.

Iago. Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, is the immediate jewel of their souls. Who steals my purse steals trash, but she (indicates Cleopatra) that filches from me my good name, makes me poor indeed.

Cleopatra. (Pleading) Hamlet! But come! We shall float upon the Nile and pass the hours. I shall order my servants to prepare the barge.

*Exit.*

Iago. She sets upon much mischief, my Lord.

Hamlet (Aside). But what means this? Something's rotten in the state of Denmark. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right! (Walks, wringing hands, thinking.)

Iago. *Now's* the time to catch him unawares. (To Lady M.) How now, Lady Macbeth? (Polishes sword).

Lady Macbeth. What, in our house?

Iago. Fetch me your handkerchief. I shall set this straight. We could let Cleopatra do it.

Hamlet. To be or not to be; that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—

Lady Macbeth. (Hand goes up to mouth in realization). Who shall bear the guilt of our great quell? He resembles my father... (Holds Iago's sword still) You must leave this.

Iago. I should be wise; for honesty's a fool, and loses that it works for.

Lady Macbeth. Help me hence. Ho!

Iago. He who helps himself helps best. (Works on sword.)

Lady Macbeth. Oh! What's to be done! Again and again. (walks away, over near Hamlet, who broods. Starts washing her hands.)

Hamlet. (Curious, watches). But there is some method to her madness. It buys time to follow suit.

Lady Macbeth. Out spot, out! Yet here's a spot.

Iago. (Looking at them.)

Hamlet. Words, words.

Lady Macbeth. Here's the smell of blood still. All the perfume of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

Hamlet. O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.  
(Hisses at Iago) Denmark's a prison!

Iago. (Perplexed, exasperated).

Lady Macbeth. Damned spot, out!

*Enter Cleopatra.* She stops and also watches Hamlet and Lady M in amazement.

Hamlet. There's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so. O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

Cleopatra. (Gestures towards Hamlet.) Burn the great sphere thou movest in: darkling stand the varying shore of the world! Help friends, let's draw him hither.

Lady Macbeth. (Grabs Hamlet.) To bed, to bed! There's a knocking at the gate. Give me your hand! What's done cannot be undone.

Cleopatra approaches Hamlet. To bed? To bed! The greatest of the world art turned the greatest liar?!

Hamlet. How wouldst I lie if I cannot lie?

Cleopatra. Bid farewell and go! When you sued staying, then was the time for words; no going then. Eternity was in our lips and eyes.

Iago. (To Hamlet.) Beware! Beware!

Hamlet. (To Iago.) Aye, truly. The power of beauty will sooner transform the beauty from what it is to a bawd.

Cleopatra. (Seductive). I would I had thy inches. (Gently) Thou should know there were a heart in Egypt.

Iago. (To Hamlet). O, beware, my lord, of jealousy. It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on!

Hamlet. Jealousy! Jealous is as jealous does!

Cleopatra. Ha! Expose him! Show him for what he is! (Seizes him and turns him. With his back to the audience, Iago hangs a snake from his pants, and Cleopatra turns him back to face the audience. Iago snatches away the snake and throws it at her.)

Hamlet. What wouldst thou do for her? There is much offense! (Draws sword).

Lady Macbeth. (Climbs up on a block is about to jump. Shrieks. Other three look at her.)

Cleopatra. (Sarcastically). Please don't. You're already dead.

Lady Macbeth. See you not? None of you?! We are all too much ourselves! We cannot stop.

Cleopatra. 'Tis true. I feel immortal longings in me.

Lady Macbeth. Your face is a book where men may read strange matters.

Iago. Tomorrow,

Cleopatra. And tomorrow,

Hamlet. And tomorrow.  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;

Lady Macbeth. And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death.

Iago. Out, out, brief candle!

Cleopatra. Life's but a walking shadow,

Hamlet and Cleopatra. A poor player

Hamlet. That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more;

Cleopatra. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot,

Iago. Full of sound and fury,

Hamlet. Signifying nothing.

Lady Macbeth. Nothing? But don't you see? We keep dying and dying.  
They (indicates audience) are forever watching us, entering the madness. (Rakes  
at her hair.)

Cleopatra. It cannot be denied. Be it known that we, the greatest of the great, are  
misunderstood. When we fall, it is to relieve others' suffering in our name. And  
therefore, we are to be pitied.

Lady Macbeth. (Realizing) And loved.

Cleopatra. (Commands all of the characters) Be noble to thyself!!

Hamlet. (Turning back to Iago). The readiness is all! (They fight with swords, back and  
forth).

Iago. From this day forward I never will speak a word. A-ha! Look to the Queen!

(Iago feints and at the same time they both stab each other with swords. Both fall,  
Hamlet staggers to Iago and stabs him.

*Iago dies.*

Lady Macbeth shrieks and jumps.

*Lady Macbeth dies.*

(Hamlet is on his knees, wounded.)

Hamlet. I die, Egypt.

Cleopatra. (Rushing towards him). No, let me speak!

Hamlet. I am dead, Egypt. Wretched Queen, adieu. Tell my story.

Cleopatra. What?! An Egyptian puppet? (Flings him away, gets up in a huff). Forced to  
drink their vapor? (Looking around, sees the snake on the floor.) I'll fool their  
preparations! (Takes the snake to her throne, applies it to her chest.)

*Cleopatra dies.*

Hamlet. And the rest... *is*.

*Hamlet dies.*

THE END

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