LOVE, FRIENDSHIP AND STORYTELLING

Talking with Young People about the Best-Loved Works of Their Generation

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NORBERTO GONZÁLEZ GAITANO

1. WHY DO WE TELL AND READ STORIES AND WATCH THEM BEING TOLD ON THE BIG SCREEN?

Some have said that man is a being who tells stories and that he does so not just to entertain himself but to *understand himself*. Telling stories—fiction or nonfiction—is the basis of human formation, of learning what it means to be human. In Jonathan Gottschall's words: "Story is the glue of social human life —defining groups and holding them together. We live in Neverland because we can't *not* live in Neverland. Neverland is our nature. We are the storytelling animal."[1]

As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre so compellingly contended in his famous book *After Virtue*, we tell stories because we live our lives in terms of *narratives*: "It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others."[2]

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[1] Jonathan Gottschall. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make us Human*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2012, p. 28.

[2] Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, IN 2007, p. 212

Certainly, we do not live *in* a made-up tale, but human existence allows us to see events in our lives as if they were narratives. Human life somehow has a narrative structure, since humans *do* things and things *happen* to them. After all, man makes certain choices freely—choices that are unforeseeable; in stories they *seem to be* the same for both the characters and the readers or viewers. It is not the case for the story's writer, who artfully designs a chain of events, actions, and reactions to fulfill the destiny of characters as he wishes and please readers, viewers, or listeners. Reading or watching stories develops a *narrative intelligence*[3] within us—a human capacity where emotion and reason are intertwined. It is a kind of "competence necessary for citizens to understand the totality of the world around them," in correlation with and complementary to logic and facts. However, this innate competence that weaves together poetic reason and practical reason must be helped to grow and mature, and it *must* be nurtured.If I may, I would compare it to one's taste. We all have taste, but we do not all cultivate it equally. There are those who eat poorly, devouring food low in nutrients, and end up destroying their palate; thus, they can no longer distinguish good food from junk food. There are others who are gluttons and destroy their health. Back to our stories: how could we not recall the spectacular scene in *Ratatouille* where the protagonist, Remy, scolds other rats for eating voraciously instead of enjoying the delicious dish he offers them when they storm the restaurant where he works? Some people live to eat and consider everything subordinate to the pleasure of eating, ruining themselves in

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[3] Martha Nussbaum. *Not for profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, Updated Edition, Princeton 2016, p. 107.

the process, too. Something similar happens in enjoying stories. In this case, however, it is not our physical health at stake, but rather that of our hearts and minds—the whole man.

This book is a sequel to *Educating Young People through the Classics: Love, Friendship and Storytelling*. In the prequel, we chose six classic literary works —which were later adapted for the big screen—that thoroughly explore two universal themes: friendship and love. Six speakers—who are well-known for their educational abilities and professional experience with mass media—offered a reflection on the six chosen works: Alessandro d'Avenia (Homer's *The Odyssey*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*); Natalia Sanmartín Fenollera (*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen); Armando Fumagalli (*Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy); Travis Curtright (Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*); Antonio Malo (Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*) and Andrea Monda (J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*). Their speeches were presented in a workshop for four hundred youth and were later published in the aforementioned book. Furthermore, summaries of their speeches were featured in a short film series, available as an online course on the *Familyandmedia Education* website.

The book also offered an account of the narrative-epistemological presuppositions upon which the study is based.[4] I would like to take the opportunity to expand on the book and delve deeper into the topics of literature and morals, literature and character formation, and literature and Christianity—the latter not having been explored at all in my previous work.

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[4] Norberto González Gaitano. *Educating Young People through the Classics. Love, Friendship and Storytelling*, EDUSC, Rome 2020.

2. Literature and Morals

Nowadays, most literary theorists, from respectable scholars to popular essayists, agree that art has the capability of shaping morals. Essayist Jonathan Gottschall says it plainly:

> Fiction is, on the whole, intensely moralistic. Yes, evil occurs, and antiheroes, from Milton's to Satan to Tony Soprano, captivate us. But fiction virtually always puts us in a position to judge wrongdoing, and we do so with gusto. Sometimes we find ourselves rooting perversely for dark heroes such as Satan or Soprano (…) but we aren't asked to approve of their cruelty and selfish behavior, and storytellers almost never allow them to live happily ever after.[5]

This does not mean that every work intends or should intend to be educational or convey a particular set of morals. We already have the literary genre of the fable to teach young people about morals. Any given work, however, is educational or just the opposite, moral or immoral, good or bad. And these three aspects—beauty, truth, and goodness…or their opposites—can all be found in any work, not by mere superimposition.

To avoid any possible misunderstanding—before moving on to my main point of reasoning, the unavoidable moral character of narration—I would first try to refute the widespread idea—an erroneous one in my opinion—that fables are just second class literature, or, for some, not even *really* literature.

We must keep in mind, as David Carr did, that allegory, fables, and parables, *regardless* of their goals to teach

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[5] Jonathan Gottschall. *The Storytelling Animal…*, p. 130.

children about morals, can still be seen as true literature.[6] By offering quite a few examples, he dismisses the haughtiness with which some scholars or literary critics look at purportedly "moral fables," bringing them to believe that fables are not really stories or narratives—not truly good literature.

We must be sure not to think of fables as only old-fashioned works, like the famous Aesop's fables. Carr offers plenty of modern examples—some even belonging to a culturally Christian mindset, like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. A few others belonging to a post-Christian culture where religious perspective is clearly absent are Orwell's *1984* or his universal fable *Animal Farm*; Huxley's *Brave New World*; and Kafka's works *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *The Burrow*. There are other post-Christian culture works, which we may we call fables or allegories, where there is a strong sense of faith but it is left unsaid, for example the profoundly dystopian and pessimistic *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and the powerful, hopeful, and inspiring *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. These are all literary masterpieces that are not strictly fictional narratives, like novels, rather they are imaginary stories which ostensibly *teach morals*, as Carr states:

> All of them have made a profound impression on modern educated sensibility and perspective, and—particularly in the light of unspeakable twentieth century horrors—most (if not all) of them

[6] David Carr. "From character to parable and allegory: varieties of moral imagination in fictional literature", in Edward Brooks; Emma Cohen de Lara; Alvaro Sánchez-Ostiz and José María Torralba. *Literature and Character Education in Universities. Theory, Method and Text Analysis*. Routledge, London 2022, pp. 103-116.

have a clear moral point. Precisely, many such works continue to be taken as dire warnings—in a not so brave world of new coercive totalitarian, bureaucratic and technological threats and menaces—of the fate that may lie in store for any and all serious lapses of rational critical or liberal-democratic vigilance, courage or humane sensibility.[7]

Writers and producers of movies and TV series, from Hollywood to China are well aware of this, too, as Armando Fumagalli has compellingly proven.[8] Screenwriters, directors, and producers know that they have the power to shape culture, public opinion, even people—and they use it, sometimes deceptively, to change people's values, customs, morals, and even political views.

The overall argument attesting to the fact that narratives have the power to shape morals goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics* and can be summarized in these terms: narratives, from drama—the object of study in *Poetics*—to novels, movies, and TV series are "words in action" in Antonio Vilarnovo's terms.[9] The same applies to historical or even journalistic narratives:

> What is the nature of narrative? It usually requires as a minimum a sequence of actions that have a goal or purpose, and these actions occur in a story world, which occupies a specified time and place. This is true no matter whether the story world claims to be real, as in a news report, or entirely fantastic, as in science fiction. Narrative also requires that causal connections be drawn between the events that it brings together in the sequential chain. The first

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 113.

[8] Armando Fumagalli. *Creatività al potere. Da Hollywood alla Pixar passando per l'Italia*, Lindau, Torino 2013.

[9] Antonio Vilarnovo, José Francisco Sánchez. *Discurso, tipos de texto y comunicación* (Speech, Text Types, and Communication). Eunsa, Pamplona 1992.

event is seen to bring about the second, and the second then bears on a third. Where 'characters' are involved, they are likely to be shown both to have played a part in initiating the events and *to have been changed by them.*[10]

For Aristotle, fables are imitations of a complete action of great magnitude,[11] meaning that a character goes through a deeply transformative experience, like going from being unhappy to happy or vice versa. A fictional character's life—made up of decisions, reactions to unexpected events, blessings, or misfortune—exhibits their personality—a series of virtues and vices that are shown in their words, actions, and temperament. Many contemporary authors have drawn from Aristotle's *Poetics* or have likened it to their own way of thinking, as they come to the same conclusion as Aristotle. Presenting an account of how that classic work was received by innumerable modern-day thinkers would be a formidable task, since it covers so many topics: literary theory, philosophy, film writing, etc. So, let's take a look at a few selected thinkers' theories.

Wayne C. Booth's theory of the implied author, which emphasizes the rhetoric of any narration, upholds that *telling* is also *showing*. As he affirms, the author's second self, the implied author, is the one who "chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read (…) he is the sum of his own choices."[12] Consequently, however impersonal the author may try to be, the readers still infer and "construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner – and of

[10] Richard Kilborn and John Izod. *An Introduction to Television Documentary. Confronting Reality.* Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 117.

[11] Poetics 50b 20-25.

[12] Wayne C. Booth. *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* The University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 74-75

course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values. Our reaction to his various commitments, secret or overt, will help to determine our response to the work."[13]

Paul Ricoeur stands out among the contemporary authors who have upheld the moral meaning of fictional narrative.[14] His narrative theory, besides his studies on the metaphor, has shed light on the ever-more recognized parallel between the narrative identity and our biographical identity as humans who live within a set lifetime. The theory of narrative identity suggests that individuals create their identity by integrating their life experiences into an internalized, evolving "story of the self" that provides the individual with a sense of unity and purpose in life. Furthermore, this theory finds that "this narrative is a story – it has characters, episodes, imagery, a setting, plots, and themes and often follows the traditional model of a story, having a beginning (initiating event), middle (an attempt and a consequence), and an end (*denouement*)."[15]

Commentators on the implications of Ricoeur's theory are innumerable, and some probably go beyond what the French philosopher meant: "(his) theory of reading explains – according to Mora-Fandos – how a new moral self-understanding may develop through the reading process, which ultimately results in the ability of the reader to change his actions in the real world."[16]

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 125.

[14] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. The Chicago University Chicago Press, 1983.

[15] Narrative identity. Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_identity

[16] José Manuel Mora-Fandos. *In dialogue with Antigone: Ricoeur's theory of reading as a tool for designing a core texts course*, in Brooks; *et alia. Literature and Character Education…*, p. 35.

In any case, paraphrasing Ricoeur, we might say that telling what someone *does* implies telling who he *is,* and telling who someone *is*, involves telling what he *does*… ultimately telling his "story." Therefore, the alleged "moral neutrality" of storytelling, whether fictional or factual, is like the Trojan horse—a "deceit."[17]

The media's potential—especially in the genre of fiction—to shape morals and social values has been demonstrated by Fumagalli, co-author of an annotated Italian translation of *Poetics*, in his seminal work *Quel che resta dei media* ("What remains of the media").[18] It is a work about all sorts of media content—journalism, advertising, propaganda, TV series, and movies—that reveals the impact media has on the social imagination. Interviewing Bettetini[19] in the last months of his life, the famous Italian semiologist asserted:

> Inasmuch as a story cannot be without a rhetoric dimension, it still has a dimension of truth, and there is an expectation of truth from those who consume it (…) The stories are convincing not only because they respond to prevailing cultural conventions, a kind of established rule for recurrence of texts of the same type, but also because (and when) they adjust to a certain *eikò* – a universally probable proposition, the 'verisimilar'. It is hard to accept, for example, a story in which a mother hates her son and at the same time is happy, not because it is against cultural conventions, but because it violates a core anthropological principle that we know is true.

[17] Norberto González Gaitano. *Hechos y valores en la narración periodística informativa*, in «Comunicación y Sociedad», 2 (2) (1989), pp. 31 - 60

[18] Armando Fumagalli; Gianfranco Bettetini. *Quel che resta dei media. Idee per un'etica della comunicazione.* Franco Angeli, Milano 1998.

[19] Paolo Braga, Armando Fumagalli. *Colloquy with Gianfranco Bettetini in Milan: reality and values at the heart of audiovisual semiotics and my reflections on the media*, in «Church, Communication and Culture», vol 2 (1) (2017), pp. 88-107.

Juan José García-Noblejas, throughout all his published works, has, in one way or another, applied Aristotle's *Poetics* and expanded on it by incorporating a Christian anthropology and blending together ethics, aesthetics, and poetics in his reading of *Poetics*.

His analytical method of examining fictional works considers the *personal condition* of the human being to be the link that connects deliberate human acts in real life with "the internal necessity that governs the characters within the stories and dramas." Fictional characters are not free, but they mirror our freedom in order to be believable. In fact, as readers, we are more likely to suspend our disbelief and fully engage the characters when the author gives them more "freedom"—that is when he better hides the threads he holds that control his characters' actions.

With García-Noblejas, we might say that a literary work is a "quasi-person." It can resonate with us "real humans." Referencing a successful TV series, we can say *This is us*.

García-Noblejas's analytical method not only facilitates a renewal of the Aristotelian *praxis* in search of perfection and happiness, it also "opens personal liberty, as well as its narrative representations, to a perspective in which the relationship with God makes rational sense."[20]

To complete my exposition of authors who draw upon or expand on Aristotle's *Poetics*, I offer an overview of Antonio Malo's book *Svelare il mistero. Filosofia e narrazione a confronto* ("Unveiling Mystery. Confronting Philosophy and Narration"). In my opinion, it is one of the best current

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[20] Juan José García-Noblejas. *Practical philosophy and television drama. Ethical and anthropological remarks on some European television series*, in «Church, Communication and Culture», 2 (1) (2017), p. 42

works that explores the link between philosophy and narration. Malo, himself both a philosopher and literary theorist, makes this connection through a long conversation with Plato, Aristotle, and modern philosophers like Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Ricoeur, and Girard, who have used literature as both a source and a parallel for their philosophical thought.

Malo converses with all these authors over the framework of some outstanding literary works: Dostoyevsky's *The Demons* and "The Grand Inquisitor" (from *The Brothers Karamazov*); Camus' *The Stranger*; Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe*; Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*; Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*; Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*; *Animal Farm* and *1984* by George Orwell; Susana Tamaro's *Follow Your Heart*; and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Malo also incorporates some movies in his intellectual journey: *The Other Son*, *Father and Son*, *Rear Window*, *Joker*, *Groundhog Day*, and *Babette's Feast.* I just have a different point of view with his interpretation of Tamaro's most acclaimed work, *Follow Your Heart,* but find myself in general agreement with the others that I have read, which are almost all of them.

Malo distinguishes two dimensions in the Aristotelian notion of verisimilitude: *material* verisimilitude and *formal* verisimilitude.[21] The first one refers to the construction of the fictitious world, and it includes all the elements that allow the reader or viewer to experience "willful suspension of disbelief"—as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge called that inner

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[21] Antonio Malo. *Svelare il mistero. Filosofia e narrazione a confronto* (Unveiling Mystery. Confronting Philosophy and Narration). EDUSC, Roma 2021.

disposition by which we "enter into" the fictional world. In this state, we accept "playing along" or implicitly agree with the *reading pact rules*, as theorists call this make-believe play. The stories will be successful if characters are well-formed, their actions align with their character, their intertwining relationships compel us, and, above all, events and actions occur in the proper order of events and actions, which Aristotle pointed out are the essential elements of a successful play.[22]

Formal verisimilitude, according to Malo, refers to "the relationship between the representation of the true, the good, and the beautiful – or their antonyms – and their communication to the viewer or reader (…) When [this verisimilitude] is adequate, it perfects the author and the audience as persons."[23] This concept allows the author and the reader to "communicate" through their sharing a common understanding of truth as opposed to deception, good to evil, and beauty to ugliness. Communication, as we know, etymologically comes from the Latin word *communio*, which is made up of the preposition *cum* (with) and the noun *munis* (gift or duty). Therefore, we might ask along with Malo: What is the gift that narrative has to offer and the duty it

[22] "Now, according to our definition, Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles." *Poetics,* 1450b

[23] Malo, *Svelare il mistero,* cit. p. 105

must fulfill, bringing together fictional worlds and readers' real lives? As Malo points out:

> The relationship between narrative, communication, and verisimilitude depends on the author's ability to find a universal truth in a human story and to represent or tell it in such a way that viewers can grasp, through verisimilitude mimesis, that same truth which, by virtue of being human, is open to every person and can affect each of the audience or readers.[24]

In other words, whether the author is aware of it or not, the overarching goal of the narrative is to reach a representation of human beings as they truly are.

3. Literature and Character Formation

Following this train of thought, it is obvious that literature helps to generally form the reader's character.

In fact, "following a pattern of moral education that stretches back to the ancient world, fictional narratives and philosophical texts have been employed by educators in order to fuel students' moral imagination, stimulate reflection, introduce exemplars, and develop virtue literacy."[25]

The Greeks were fully aware of theater's pedagogical-moral value, the first form of public storytelling. Therefore, they "used" it to teach citizens about the virtues of the *polis*. The ancients did not banish poets and storytellers from their republic, as Plato wished for his ideal republic as these artists pushed immorality, among other sins. The Romans did not banish the artists, either. On the contrary, for example, Cicero, in defending Archias, a Greek poet who had been accused of usurping Roman citizenship, stated:

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[24] *Ibidem*, p. 109.

[25] Brooks; *et alia. Literature and Character Education…*, p. 1.

How many images of the bravest men, carefully elaborated, have both the Greek and Latin writers bequeathed to us, not merely for us to look at and gaze upon, but also for our imitation! And I, always keeping them before my eyes as examples for my own public conduct, have endeavored to model my mind and views by continually thinking of those excellent men.[26]

We find a modern echo of this belief in John Henry Newman's powerful argument about how reading good works can heal mental sins. Newman was addressing Catholics in England in a time when most of English society was prejudiced against them. He implores them to broaden their minds:

Cultivation of mind (…) contributes much to remove from our path the temptation to many lesser forms of moral obliquity. Human nature, left to itself, is susceptible of innumerable feelings, more or less unbecoming, indecorous, petty, and miserable. It is, in no long time, clad and covered by a host of little vices and disgraceful infirmities, jealousies, slynesses, cowardices, frettings, resentments, obstinacies, crookedness in viewing things, vulgar conceit, impertinence, and selfishness. Mental cultivation, though it does not of itself touch the greater wounds of human nature, does a good deal for these lesser defects. In proportion as our intellectual horizon recedes, and we mount up in the knowledge of men and things, so do we make progress in those qualities and that character of mind which we denote by the word "gentleman;" and, if this applies in its measure to the case of all men, whatever their religious principles, much more is it true of a Catholic.[27]

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[26] Cicero. *Archias*. 14. The quotation has been taken from A. Sánchez-Ostiz. *Character education at any age? Cicero on the lifelong pursuit of intellectual and moral virtue*, in Brooks; *et alia. Literature and Character Education…*, p. 72.

[27] John Henry Newman. *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England*. The Birmingham Millenium oratory edition, Birmingham 2000, p. 361.

Later, following the bloody tragedy of the Second World War, there was a revival of teaching literary masterpieces in Ivy League Universities to improve moral citizenship. The famous Harvard University Report[28] made a mark in this educational trend to "help young persons fulfill the unique, particular functions in life which it is in them to fulfill, and fit them so far as it can for those common spheres which, as citizens and heirs of a joint culture, they will share with others." It was assumed that drawing from the best archetypes of human thinking, through literary, philosophical works, would offer a good basis for a education in general: "What we are looking for is wisdom, and it does not seem sensible to say that the insights and understandings offered us by the greatest creations of the human mind cannot help us in our search."[29]

Nowadays there is a revival of scholarly literature about the potential that stories have to form and develop moral character and virtues. There is one particular book that should be recognized for its sheer scope and depth: *Literature and Character Education in Universities. Theory, Method and Text Analysis*.[30] At the start of their book, the editors de-

[28] Harvard University Report. James Bryan Conant. *General Education in a Free Society,* Harvard University Press, 1945, p. 4

[29] Robert M.Hutchins. *The University of Utopia*. The University of Chicago Press, 1947, p. 16.

[30] Edward Brooks; Emma Cohen de Lara; Alvaro Sánchez-Ostiz and José María Torralba. *Literature and Character Education in Universities. Theory, Method and Text Analysis*. Routledge, London 2022. I would add here another two noticeable references: José María Torralba. *Una educación liberal. Elogio de los grandes libros* (A Liberal Education. Praise of Great Books), Ediciones Encuentro, Madrid 2022; and Rosario Athié. *La propuesta de Newman para una formación humanista* (Newman: A Proposal for Lifelong Education), in «Church, Communication and Culture», 3, 1 (2018), pp. 22-35.

cidedly affirm: "Over the last thirty years, a growing movement in moral education scholarship and practice has seen the application of virtue ethics and positive psychology in an educational focus on the development of students' character. This new wave of character education has spread from the United States to Europe and beyond."[31]

It is not by chance that many authors, from various academic fields, and with such different worldviews and backgrounds like Ratzinger, Nussbaum, Todorov, and Llovet agree that we have entered into an educational crisis. They all have a common adoration of the classics of human thought. What is clear, in my opinion, is that the tide in the understanding of education is changing: liberal education is on the rise and "*learnification*"[32] is on the decline. Pedagogist Gert Biesta calls "*learnification* of education" the dominant policies and practices in many countries that measure education in terms of "results." These policies and practices have driven universities to a managerial enterprise, where accountability is strictly understood as a functional matter, foregoing the *purpose* of education in favor of measurable educational "results." Biesta demonstrates in his book *Good Education in an Age of Measurement. Ethics, Politics, Democracy* that "in past decades, the idea of accountability has transformed from a professional and democratic notion to one that is fundamentally managerial."[33]

The aforementioned book, *Literature and Character Education in Universities. Theory, Method and Text Analysis,* is

[31] Brooks; *et alia*. *Literature and Character…*, p. 1.

[32] Gert J. J Biesta. *Good Education in an Age of Measurement. Ethics, Politics, Demo*cracy, Routledge, London 2010, p. 5.

[33] Biesta. *Good Education…*, p. 6.

the result of an outstanding project that set out to prove that literature has the power to form one's character. The book offers well-written essays and many good case studies on the results of university discussions in classrooms on some literary masterpieces like *Antigone*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Confucius's *Analects.*

The main point of the vision their authors share can be summarized as: Literature's potential to "teach" morals lies in our own intellectual virtue, as human beings, which Aristotle called *phronesis*, or "practical wisdom" as these authors translate it. *Phronesis* is "the capacity of knowing and enacting the right course of (moral) action through a process of identifying and deliberating between competing values, emotions and alternatives," in Kristján Kristjánsson's words.[34]

I find myself in absolute agreement with their thesis, which is tied to previous works of various moral philosophers. There is a train of thought that goes back to Alasdair MacIntyre's groundbreaking work, *After Virtue*, and continues with Kristján Kristjánsson, who applies Aristotelian ethics to character formation, and Karen E. Bohlin, David Carr, and Tom Harrison, who used fictional narratives to fuel students' moral imagination, stimulate reflection, introduce inspiring examples, and develop virtue literacy.It should be noted that, in my opinion, literature alone does not have the power to shape the reader's character, as these moral philosophers and theorists have suggested. In the end, it ultimately comes down to how the reader behaves and the choices he makes. A book has an inherent intel-

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[34] Kristján Kristjánsson. *An Introduction to the special issue on wisdom and moral education*, in «Journal of Moral Education», 49 (1), (2020), pp. 1–8.

lectual value, but it does not immediately transfer to the reader as practical wisdom. Prudence has two dimensions: intellectual and practical. Intellectual may render us wiser, but not necessarily better.

4. Downplaying the Character Power of Literature

The first hurdle we must overcome is to not mistake literature's capacity to transform its readers by overemphasizing the characteristic of performativity that stories have. A good many authors refer to a biblical story in order to prove how some stories have the ability to change the reader. King David listens to the prophet Nathan's story about a rich man who, looking to entertain a guest, steals his poor neighbor's only sheep. Upon hearing this, David explodes in anger, outraged by the man's wickedness. This story encourages David to bring justice to the abused poor. Nathan then points out David's very own sin of having stolen Urias's wife, who was an army officer he allowed to be killed in battle. Nathan tells David, "You are that man." Consequently, David painfully comes to understand his true character and repents. From that moment on, he changes his behavior and submissively accepts God's punishments.

José Manuel Mora-Fandos connects this story with another universal fictional story that is quite therapeutic in a way: Hamlet decides avenge his father, the former king, after his father's ghost informs him that he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who subsequently married his brother's widow in order to be crowned the new king. Hamlet seeks to place clear blame on his uncle. He feigns madness and stages a play in the royal palace that alludes to his own father's murder. Hamlet's intention is to see how Clau-

dius reacts to the performance. When Claudius sees the murder on stage, he abruptly leaves the room, and Hamlet infers that his uncle is guilty. Mora-Fandos, having compared these two tales, concludes: "Both texts show that inhabiting a fictional narrative can result in both cognitive and moral development."[35] Nathan and Hamlet/Shakespeare were surely aware that these stories would result in their desired outcome, otherwise they wouldn't have engineered these tales. Nevertheless, I do not think it is appropriate to compare two very different series of events based on a common effect of repentance. Nathan's performative story was real; the other one is a mimesis. On the other hand, as far as I know, a performative effect of literary texts is "proved" strictly with Biblical texts or, for some, with biographies of saints—as happened with St. Ignatius of Loyola when he was recovering at home from injuries he sustained in battle. Plenty of people throughout history have read biographies of saints and have been *inspired* but not necessarily *changed*. The inner transformative effect seems to depend on *something* or *someone* outside the text or story. In fact, St. Augustine read the Bible for the first time without having been moved at all. The sacred text seemed ridiculous to him. It was only later when he felt called to read a specific passage that he saw a whole new world, was able to see and understand this world, and ultimately changed his ways. We should explore one other point that will help to prevent any possible misunderstanding. If we ask the common reader about the purpose of stories, he would probably be confused: *What are stories for…?* He would likely be more comfortable explaining his motivations for reading his favorite literary

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[35] Mora-Fandos, *In dialogue with Antigone …*, pp. 34-46.

genre. The purpose of stories remains a mystery even for the educated. Somehow, we can safely say that stories are "for nothing." Playing with a biological analogy, Gottschall emphasizes this point:

> The brain is not designed for story, there are glitches in its design that make it vulnerable to story. Stories in all their variety and splendor, are just lucky accidents of the mind's jury-rigged construction. Story may educate us, deepen us and give us joy. Story may be one of the things that makes it most worthwhile to be human. But that doesn't mean story has a biological purpose.[36]

Taking the biological analogy to its proper point, I agree with C. S. Lewis that a common mistake, even for good readers, is appreciating stories *because* they teach truths about life. They may forget that literature is primarily for *being received* not just for *being used*—although it can be also used: "It is not merely *logos* (something said), but *poiema* (something made). The same is true of a novella of a narrative poem. They are complex and carefully made objects. Attention to the very objects they are is our first step." To value them chiefly for reflections, which they may suggest to us, or morals that we may draw from them is a fragrant instance of "using" instead of "receiving."[37]

Having cleared the way for preventing misunderstandings of my thinking about literature and character formation, I go forward emphasizing my caveat. Most authors who write about forming one's character through literature generally state that narratives, whether historical or fictional, *might* help. They *might* enhance our lives, *might* help us become better citizens, *might* render us better people by im-

[36] Gottschall. *The Storytelling Animal…*, p. 28.

[37] Clive Staples Lewis. *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge University Press 1992, p. 82

itating characters in the books, *might* cause us to act in a certain way. It is always a "might."

I would say that, in a way, the curious "might" is a positive side of Plato's temptation to cast out the artist from society. Plato banished poets from his ideal republic as they *might* ruin citizens with their stories. Ironically, Plato made his point using philosophy and storytelling: his works are an outstanding combination of both philosophy and narrative. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle, on the other hand, definitively confuted Plato's pessimistic view of the role artists play in society, applicable to any society of any era. Aristotelian *catharsis*, whatever it might mean, leaves no room for *a priori* condemnation of poetical works. It is beyond my ability and not my job to enter into this longstanding debate among scholars about the Aristotelian notion of *catharsis* and to decide whether this notion can correctly be applied to other narrative texts. It is sufficient to say that apart from tragedies (what Aristotle studied), comedies, dramas, fairy tales… novels and films can have a positive effect—or a negative effect—on its audience.

Those who speak of fictional narratives as an educational tool for the development of students' character, shouldn't worry too much about this facility without simultaneously cautioning others about its likely opposite effect. In fact, some have explored this reality. Rosa Fernández Urtasun, for example, in her piece "Literature and practical wisdom: An experience with *The Catcher in the Rye*,"[38] explores the limitations and challenges of a work that causes the read-

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[38] Rosalía Fernández Urtasun. *Literature and practical wisdom: An experience with The Catcher in the Rye,* in Brooks; *et alia. Literature and Character Education…,* pp. 137-152.

er to be overly empathetic toward the book's characters. As readers, we somehow experience others' actions as if we were characters, too. Thus, a well-written piece may lead the reader to develop empathy by teaching him how to make parallels between the book and how he encounters others in real life and teaching him to be prudent before judging another's actions. This capacity aside, thoughtless compassion towards the story's protagonist(s) may also mislead the reader and cause them to incorrectly interpret the narrative, ultimately obscuring the reader's moral judgment. The same thing happens every day in real life… Having too much empathy can misguide us.

Well-written literature succeeds at exploring the manifold layers of character: cultural norms, education, social constraints, familial relationships, psychological wounds, past failures, personal flaws, religious beliefs, fears, and so on. Looking at the complexity of human agency, mimetically represented in literature, we may begin to curb the judgement we might show toward others in day-to-day life. Nevertheless, the opposite could also be said: too much complexity, if designed in a certain way by the author and explored by a reader who lacks proper moral reasoning, it may mislead the reader to have an over-simplified, confused understanding that, in the end, nothing matters. Humans are so complex that we must not judge anyone's actions. We do not possess any concrete criteria to do so. Losing ourselves so deeply in a convoluted work, we lose our ability to correctly judge the characters' actions and see the proverbial forest for the trees.

In his deep and nuanced analysis of Iris Murdoch's moral thought as a philosopher and novelist, David Carr makes a relevant, sound assertion:

past human constituencies, secular no less than religious, have largely endorsed something like the Gospel principle of treating others as one would be treated in return, as well as general principles of honesty and truth-telling, treating others fairly and impartially, avoiding cruelty, exercising some control of unruly desires and passions and many other values that inform or underpin the character traits of human virtue. Moreover, all these are significant, albeit general, moral truths, principles, and/or values with which all human agents—young and old, but perhaps especially the young—need acquaintance as well as frequent reminder. To this end, it might also be that the necessary reminders are better made by bringing such moral truths into fairly sharp focus away from the dense detail of human motivational complexity.[39]

Carr acknowledges that, for agents possessing a principled moral compass—perhaps a compass influenced by Christian ethics—there is place for delving into the human psyche to better understand their motives and desires. As Carr mentions, literary masters, like Shakespeare and Austen, did so in the past. At the same time, he reminds us: "There might also be some danger—not least with many character-focused modern novels in an age of moral uncertainty—of missing the moral wood for the psychological trees."[40]

It is obvious, then, that stories "revolve about a handful of master themes, on the great predicaments of human condition"[41]—fear of death, life's challenges, love, power, etc. Stories explore a few major themes and have "similarities in skeleton and flesh," as storytelling has one key job, according to Gottschall: "It suggests that the human mind was shaped *for* story, so it could be shaped *by* story."[42]

[39] Carr, *From a character to parable* …, p. 110.

[40] *Ibidem*.

[41] Gottschall. *The Storytelling Animal…*, 55.

[42] *Ibidem*.

Nevertheless, what "shaping" really means is difficult to pinpoint. We all know from experience that there is a difference between comprehension and action. This difference, at times, is an abyss. Filling the gap with expediency is always tempting, but misleading.

To me, the explanation for that gap is the complex relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. The first has to do with universal truths, while the second has to do with truth in particular cases. Universal truths appeal to our intellectual mind. Literary works, inasmuch as they are "objects" that convey truths—and falsehoods for that matter—appeal to our capacity of seeing universal truth in particular cases. This is a wonderful way to learn, which is available to and possessed by anyone. It is a kind of learning that does not require an academic degree. Notwithstanding, it is not practical knowledge—the kind of knowledge we gain by deciding, acting, and correcting. The only decision we may make when reading a book or watching a show or movie is to continue giving it our time or to let it go—for whatever reason we decide to do so.

In conclusion, literature can enlarge our inner world and enlighten us, but it does so by appealing to our *moral imagination*, not by engaging our practical wisdom. Reading good literature does not make us better people. It can certainly inspire us, but it does not shape our character as actions do.

5. A STEP FURTHER: CHRISTIAN VIEWS AND LITERATURE

The Christian view of mankind embraces all the discoveries made thus far. It simply takes them to another level.

To begin with, "Not only the message of Christian revelation itself is a story, but it also generates, shapes and

is incarnated in new stories, and it inevitably engages and competes with other rival stories."[43]

Christian truths are not just theoretical, divine truths for believers. They are embodied in a story. God has not just spoken to men "from above." He has been involved in the history of mankind, as he personally entered our world through Jesus Christ. God became man, lived among us, and keeps living through those who identify themselves, as best they can, with Him. This is the bottom line of the Christian faith; this is what Christians are supposed to believe. The Christian faith's truth is a narration, which can inspire many stories with similar or alternative narratives.

Paraphrasing Chesterton, John Wauck affirms that Christianity is a "true myth." This means two things: First, it means that the story (*mythos*) is an accurate description of historical events, not just fables that convey bits of wisdom. Secondly, "Chesterton's *dictum* can also be looked at from the opposite direction, meaning facts of history constitute a *mythos* or story—neither a random collection of events nor a blind process, but rather the work of an intelligent, indeed omniscient, author who knows the beginning, middle and end of this story."[44] Unlike fictional protagonists, the actors are not just characters who are controlled by the skillful, determined hand of the writer. Rather, they are real people who move freely on set. In a word: Christianity has narrative character. And, somehow, the literary author, the playwright, is a "subcreator." In the works of his literary imagi-

[43] This refers to an unpublished draft of a paper prepared some years ago for the School of Church Communications at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross by John Wauck: *Narrative, Drama and Christianity*. Quotes from the text follow in quotation marks.

[44] *Ibidem.*

nation, he mirrors Providence. Whatever he believes regarding God's existence and place in history, Christians' faith may lead to looking at authors as makers of quite ingenious works that, willingly or unwillingly, convey truths—or falsehoods—regarding that "true myth."

For that reason, every literary work, especially one well fleshed out, explores in its own way, albeit implicitly, the experiences of guilt, pain, death, redemption, sin, and grace. Each work's perspective may agree, partially or totally, or even oppose the Christian view of mankind, but it will always be present.

Let us not forget that after God's Incarnation, man's vision deepens, and he begins to see cracks in the proverbial glass—societal disharmonies and weaknesses in his fellow man. With the Redemption, there is no room left for mere resignation; there is only room for joy or despair. The darkest literary works will be post-Christian. At the same time, comedy will reach previously unmatched heights; comedy, after all, has a distinctly Christian origin. Good humor is only possible if one is already saved; if not, only dark humor remains. Shakespeare, for example, moves between the ironic humor of his tragedies and the celebratory mood of his comedies, according to how pessimistic he feels on a soul-level. The same is true of the fantasy genre, which thrives in cultures that have embraced the Christian faith.

Mariano Fazio, in his defense of classics as conveyors of human essential truths, says: "The classics present us with truth, beauty and goodness (or love), which is tantamount to saying that they tell us about the essentials of life (...) At the very least, they lead us to glimpse the truth,

to feel the desire to exercise the virtues, to appreciate that beauty that fills our souls."[45]

The author references so many classic literary works—and some movies, too—to show the connection of the human worldview that the classics present with Christian values. The pursuit of happiness is not found in wealth, achievements, or pleasure; it is found in the love from within that results from the gift of a saving love, offered to us freely by God through Jesus Christ.

Certainly, most readers are not searching for God while reading and enjoying literary masterpieces—just like how most philosophers, scientists, or thinkers are not looking for God in their work. Nevertheless, borrowing from Edith Stein's thoughts, "The man who seeks the truth, whether he knows it or not, is seeking God." Paraphrasing the outstanding disciple of Husserl, who died in Auschwitz a victim of Nazi madness, one can add: he who sincerely seeks the good, happiness, or beauty, whether he knows it or not, is seeking God.

In spite of Mariano Fazio's optimism, it goes without saying that not every literary masterpiece draws the reader closer to God. Regardless, their authors might be unaware of their work's potential to do so, and the readers might be ignorant of it, too. Some works *do* lead readers away from God—even if their authors don't intend to cause such an effect.

I will conclude this short and modest reflection on the relationship between the Christian mindset and fictional stories with Wauck's sensible reminder about "the most elusive of the transcendentals"—beauty:

[45] Mariano Fazio. *Liberare l'amore attraverso i classici*, EDUSC, Rome 2022, p. 12.

A narrative is, after all, not merely something to be understood; it is something that has been made, created. In addition many narratives demand to be evaluated not primarily in terms of truth and goodness, but rather in terms of beauty. The very elusiveness of beauty is a reminder of that other peculiarity of Christian revelation: while is utterly reasonable, it is a mystery to be contemplated ever more, but never seen through.[46]

Having set up the theoretical framework of this book, I present a short introduction of the next chapters.

6. Love, Friendship, and Storytelling: Talking with Young People about the Best-Loved Works of Their Generation

On September 24th and 25th, 2021 at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, we picked up the thread of our conversation, temporarily suspended by the Covid pandemic, and proceeded with the focus group discussions on books, movies, and TV series that young people like most. The works were chosen based on a representative study[47] done two years prior with a sample of 3,700 subjects ages 18-29 from five European countries (France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Spain) and four countries from the Americas (Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States).

From the works of fiction most-watched and responses to our questionnaire, we chose to further discuss those that ranked highest: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

[46] Wauck, *Narrative…*, p. 5.

[47] To have a look at the results, refer to "Audiovisual consumption and reading habits of young people" on the Familyandmedia platform. A longer explanation can be found in David Iglesias Pérez. *TV series: the top of today's audiovisual pyramid among young people*, in Norberto González Gaitano. *Educating Young People through the Classics: Love, Friendship and Storytelling*, EDUSC, Roma 2020.

for the conversation on books; *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, directed by Andrew Adamson and *Titanic* by James Cameron, for the conversation on movies; *The Big Bang Theory* and *Thirteen Reasons Why*, for the conversation on TV series.[48]

To my knowledge, fictional works have been seldom used in traditional focus group methodology. Here are some examples of studies that have used this research method:

Gema Bellido (2015)[49] used focus groups in her doctoral thesis to measure the impact of various TV miniseries on its audience, which depict real events and characters in recent Spanish history. Her study found that realism and verisimilitude were the main causes of the miniseries' success.

Cecilia Galatolo[50] applied this methodology with teenagers in three Italian parishes. She has worked with *Braccialetti Rossi*, a popular Italian series later shown on TV throughout Europe. Her study shows how young people interpret the significance of the main issues explored in the series, specifically: being friends, being in love, appreciation for and attitude towards family life and attitudes towards rules set by adults.

[48] As a matter of fact, *Friends* was the second most watched series, but since it is the same genre and explores the same topic as *The Big Bang Theory*, we replaced it by *Thirteen Reasons Why*—ranked seventh—for the impact the series had on audiences and the public debates that followed.

[49] Gema Bellido Acevedo. *Ficción y no ficción en las miniseries españolas contemporáneas*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2015.

[50] Cecilia Galatolo. *Discutere su amore e amicizia con i ragazzi a partire di una serie giovanile*, en Norberto González Gaitano (ed). *Teen Usage of New and Old Media. Formation and Family*. Pontificia Università della Santa Croce. Roma 2018, pp. 108-158. Disponible en http://www.familyandmedia.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Ebook-Teenage-Usage-ULTIMA.pdf?_ga=2.183527846.1261571418.1653982559-202093422.1642668932)

María Fernanda Novoa Jaso[51] also used focus groups in a study on the "reception" of archetypes and stereotypes of professional roles in the audience of *The Newsroom*. Novoa identifies, in the characters of the series, the stereotypes and archetypes regarding roles, activities, and professional values that shape the journalistic professional culture. Furthermore, she studies how these stereotypes and archetypes influence the viewers' perception. The author created focus groups for journalists, and online surveys for the general public who are fans of the series.

The specifics of how we went about the discussions in our case study of the aforementioned works are explained at the start of the corresponding chapters written by Cecilia Galatolo and Gema Bellido, whose collaboration has been invaluable. Their chapters explain the criteria regarding the selection of the participants, sub-themes for each work discussed within the framework of the study's general topics (love and friendship), and the guide for the game-like/recreational activities designed for fostering participation.

One novelty of the methodology should be pointed out: anonymous questionnaires were given to participants at the end of each focus group session. While the discussion was intended to foster group reflection and an in-depth examination of various issues, the questionnaire was intended to collect more quantifiable data on the young people's opinions than what can be extrapolated from a conversation—a context in which there is also the risk that more extroverted people will overpower more reserved personalities. Such a

[51] María Fernanda Novoa Jaso. *La influencia de las Workplace TV Drama Series en las expectativas sociales y profesionales acerca de la labor del periodista televisivo. El caso de The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012-2014), Universidad de Navarra, 2021.

tool was meant to allow participants to think about the issues themselves, to do so without being influenced by others, and to get more "individualized" answers. Being anonymous, the questionnaire encouraged openness and sincerity. In fact, the test proved our theory that some opinions regarding sensitive topics might not be expressed during discussions due to subtle "group pressure."

Aside from the focus groups' findings during discussions, minutely detailed in the following chapters, I would like to add some general conclusions that prove what José María Torralba affirms regarding the "great book seminars" common in university teaching:[52] 1) The students become personally engaged. When reading and discussing these books, students cannot listen passively nor just learn abstract ideas in a detached way—they become involved. 2) They read primary sources—meaning that they delve into the original works, not just the commentaries their professors give on the works. Thus, students can better grasp their professors' commentaries within a broader framework. 3) "Great book seminars" help develop the students' ability to think for themselves.

In our case study, these three conclusions proved true. Just one more conclusion can be added: after hearing and discussing others' views, almost all participants said their lives were enriched by the focus group study.

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[52] José María Torralba. *Una educación liberal. Elogio de los grandes libros*. Ediciones Encuentro, Madrid 2022, pp. 65-82.

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