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Fall 2015 Award Winner: The Power of Novels

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The Power of Novels

by Huizi Hu, for ESL 101

As the saying goes, “A book holds a golden house.” This old Chinese proverb indicates that learning the wisdom that is shown in writing can lead to success. Therefore, in my home country, China, teachers always use this sentence to encourage students to study hard in order to achieve high scores. However, an interesting fact in the majority of families in my hometown is that only textbooks are considered to be useful while novels are considered to be unorthodox and a distraction to one’s studies. In most parents’ minds, reading novels is a waste of time so that they forbid their children to do so. Fortunately, this is not what my parents thought. In my growing process, this unique form of writing—long fiction—played an essential role. Although I have read various types of novels, all of them have significantly influenced my view of the world; writing improved my moral consciousness and helped me learn to look beyond the appearance to perceive the essence.

When I was a little girl in primary school, I was obsessed with the world-famous masterpieces. My bookshelf was full of those worldwide well-known novels, from *Oliver Twist* to *Treasure Island*, from *Don Quixote* to *Robinson Crusoe*. Generally speaking, these kinds of novels are always complicated and contain profound implications. However, I usually spent only three or four days on average reading one book. As a young pupil who could not even recognize all the words, I was attracted by the stories themselves instead of what the stories stand for. At that time, these masterpieces were just like bedtime stories to me. After quickly finishing the whole story, I would close the book and probably would not have understood the authentic purpose of that writing. Even with that simple and childish reading method, I still cannot deny

the benefit those incredible words have brought to me. I thought those novels were the same as Disney stories. However, even without knowing it, I had already stepped into the world that these amazing fictions showed me. For example, *Heidi* was the most influential book to me during that period. I read this book in the fourth grade. While reading it, I kept picturing all the scenes in my head. I was deeply moved by the friendship between Heidi and Clara and tried to understand Heidi's deep desire for her life back on the mountain. This novel made me, a ten-year-old girl at that time, start to think about the definition of true happiness and satisfaction in life. What an inspiring thing! Even if I was a little girl who could never meet the writer, the writer was actually showing me her own philosophy between the lines of her story. The influence was also reflected in my diaries. Instead of simply recording things that happened everyday, I now always thought more about each phenomenon and added comments to it. Maybe at that time, my judgments were still somehow superficial because the most common question that appeared in my brain was just "Is it good or evil?" but the novels still played an illuminative role in my childhood and lay the foundation for my personal characteristics.

Ironically, as I grew older and became a student in middle school, those classic novels seemed to lose their attraction for me and I thought reading those books was tedious. Adolescence is the transition between childhood and adulthood. Both boys and girls arrive at puberty during that special time period. Like almost all of my classmates, I was in favor of popular romance novels. For a teenager who was so curious about affection, romance novels were like instructors who could be found in school courses. When reading these works of fiction such as *Twilight*, I wished that I could also encounter love like the characters do in the book and pictured the scenery just like I did when I read novels as a little girl. However, instead of always agreeing with the writer and following his or her thoughts all the time as I did when I was

younger, I started to have my own opinions. For instance, my friends and I sometimes discussed the story between classes and we thought the girl in the book should choose another man, not the one she married. The most interesting part is that I then thought about why the writer believed the hero suited the heroine better. This process felt like debating with the writer. Even if sometimes I still disagree with the writer in the end, I could look at the story from a more critical perspective. Also, I started to take a serious look at works of literature. How did the writer describe emotions? How could she can make the scenery so real? How did she explain the complex relationships between all the characters? Being intrigued by these questions, I learned to use elaborate words in my own writing to make it more vivid. To be honest, I used to think the period when I read so many romance novels was worthless. However, while I am writing this essay and taking an entirely new look at how novels influenced me, I have realized that even these popular novels, which are often underestimated, actually improved my critical thinking ability and my rhetorical ability.

By taking a more serious view of writing, I realized how powerful writing can be. Just as Tom Standage states in “Writing Is the Best Invention,” writing “allowed philosophers, poets and chroniclers to situate their ideas in relation to those of previous thinkers, to argue about them and elaborate upon them.” Being amazed by the power of writing, I chose the liberal arts track in my high school. During high school, I read one novel I must mention—*Lord of the Flies*. In the past, even if the novel I read had a sad plot, the basic tone and the ending were always full of joy. However, *Lord of the Flies* is totally different. I was frightened throughout the whole process of reading the novel, not only because of the intimidating plot but, even more, because of the deeper meaning behind it. William Golding used his sharp pen to show the huge distinction between human nature in positive cultural circumstances and our animal instinct in other cultural

conditions, between the common good and the brutal human struggle for power. The most important behavior that humans have is thinking, especially for those school boys who have already received education. However, when their lives are threatened and the hope of being rescued is fading, they start to use their fists instead of their brains to solve the problems. They were born and raised in a democratic society, but they kill each other unscrupulously in the end. It is obvious that when their humanity is corrupted by circumstance and stress, they become the beast of which they are afraid. I could almost feel tension, sorrow, and fear from the words. I even trembled every time I thought about the ending, in which a group of school boys were left on that island forever as “animals.” Those novels I read in primary school may also hide very acute meanings, but I could not understand them at that time. Therefore, *Lord of the Flies* was the first novel I read that poignantly reveals the dark side of human beings. This piece of writing opened a completely new door for me and led me to much deeper thinking about humans, helping me to realize that it is much more complicated than judging between good and evil in most cases. Once again, I will never meet the writer, but he became one of the most vital teachers in my life. Without him, I may never have had such thoughts about the seamy side of human beings and the whole structure and rules of society.

Novels have so much influence on me that they helped to construct almost every part of who I am. In my hometown, teachers barely taught anything except the knowledge in the textbooks. Therefore, what I learned from novels, the way of thinking and viewing the world, is invaluable. The thoughts they put in my mind made me who I am, and I owe all of the formation and development of my ideas to those admirable authors and their ever-lasting masterpieces. Standage says that “By capturing ideas in physical form, writing allows ideas to travel across space and time without distortion, and thus slip the bonds of human memory and oral

transmission, not to mention the whims of tyrants and the vicissitudes of history.” Indeed, these writings can be passed through centuries and centuries. Even if some of the writers may have passed away years ago, their precious wisdom can still be read and shared by innumerable generations. Readers like me can still talk to the writers, be motivated by them, and, most importantly, spark new opinions. It is writing that allows us to communicate and allows the ideas to collide regardless of time and space and any other obstacles. That’s why writing is magical for me, and for millions of readers just like me.

Work Cited

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