

Reasserting Relevance: Literature in a COVID-Changed World

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Literature has long had to defend itself against attacks of being a less-than-essential part of a college's curriculum (the attempt to shutter the Classics department at Howard University a recent case in point). Ironically, COVID-19's deadly arrival and fracturing societal impact has seen literature play a resurgent instructional role both inside the classroom and out. As Michiko Kakutani noted in her May 2020 essay, *Coronavirus Notebook: Finding Solace, and Connection, in Classic Books*, "we [were] reminded that literature provides historical empathy and perspective, breaking through the isolation we feel hunkered down in our homes to connect us, across time zones and centuries, with others who once lived through not dissimilar events. It conjures our worst nightmares [...] but also highlights what we have in common with people in distant cultures and eras, prompting us to remember that others have not only grappled with traumatic events, but have also experienced some of the same things we are dealing with today."¹ Kakutani describes "the consolations of storytelling" in reading writers like Boccaccio, Edgar Allan Poe and Katherine Anne Porter who, in their chronicles of plague catastrophes, wrote of "the human capacity for recovery and renewal."²

Similar arguments reasserting literature's relevance in the face of COVID-caused suffering and conflict have been reviving across the academy. In *Medical School Needs a Dose of the Humanities*, Molly Worthen points out that "history, literature and philosophy aren't just good training grounds for an empathetic bedside manner. They shed light on the big questions of healing and suffering and [...] help doctors connect with patients as multidimensional beings."³ In his recent book on teaching, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: in Which Four Russians Give a Master Class in Reading, Writing, and Life*, George Saunders acknowledges our impulse to distance and disrespect—"These days," he says, "it's easy to feel that we've fallen out of connection with one another and with the earth and with reason and with love. I mean: we have"—but remains hopeful in the instructional moment, in the exchange between author and reader: "to read, to write, is to say we still believe in, at least, the *possibility* of connection."⁴ Literature gives us an "increased confidence in [the] ability to imagine the experiences of other people and accept these as valid." Literature, Saunders goes on to say:

"ask[s] the big questions: How are we supposed to be living down here? What were we put here to accomplish? What should we value? What is truth, anyway, and how might we recognize it? How can we feel any peace when some people have everything and others have nothing? How are we supposed to live with joy in a world that seems to want us to love other people but then roughly separates us from them in the end, no matter what?"⁵

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In *How to Destroy Truth*, David Brooks suggests that a cause for the current fractured state of our political and social discourse is “our failure to understand what education is.” He laments the “atrophying” of the willingness “to tell complex stories about ourselves.”⁶ This complexity Brooks defines as follows: “the ability to tell stories in which opposing characters can each possess pieces of the truth, stories in which all characters are embedded in time, at one point in their process of growth, stories rooted in the complexity of real life and not the dogma of ideological abstraction.”⁷ Instead of a broad-minded approach to “see in difference and multiplicity” as Maria Vargas Llosa defines it in his 2001 article *Why Literature?*⁸ “[n]ow as we watch state legislatures try to enforce what history gets taught and not taught, as we watch partisans introduce ideological curriculums, we see how debauched and brutalized our historical storytelling skills have become.”⁹ As the current demand by a Virginia politician that Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* be removed from a high school class’s syllabus demonstrates (rehashed from a decade-old case involving a parent’s outrage over her son being exposed to immoral behaviors expressed in the book), culture wars are sadly alive and well.

Considering the ongoing institutional challenges facing humanities education (partisan attempts at curricular censorship, shrinking core requirements and the closing of low-enrolled majors) and the impact COVID-19 is having on society’s view of the value of the arts in our personal and communal lives, this essay examines opportunities for literary studies going forward. It does so predominantly through discussion of work students and I did in a required general education Arts & Culture course this past semester at LCC International University in Lithuania. A North American educational-style university on the Baltic coast, LCC has an extremely diverse student body, including large cohorts from post-Soviet bloc and Middle Eastern countries like Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Georgia, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as students from Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. Expanding the scope of its gen ed program has been a crucial focus, as has assessing its impact on student learning.

¹ Michiko Kakutani: *Coronavirus Notebook: Finding Solace, and Connection, in Classic Books*. New York: 2020.

² Ibid., n. pag.

³ Molly Worthen: *Medical School Needs a Dose of the Humanities. The horrors of Covid-19 may give proponents of the liberal arts an unexpected opening*, New York: 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/opinion/sunday/covid-medical-school-humanities.html>

⁴ George Saunders: *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: in Which Four Russians Give a Master Class in Reading, Writing, and Life*. New York: 2021. p.4.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5-6.

⁶ David Brooks (2021): *How to Destroy Truth*. New York: 2021. n. pag. Web.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/01/opinion/patriotism-misinformation.html> ⁷ Ibid., n. pag.

⁸ Llosa, M. (2001). *Why Literature?: The premature obituary of the book*. *The New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/78238/mario-vargas-llosa-literature>.

⁹ Brooks, *How to Destroy Truth*. n. pag.

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The challenge of what Kakutani, Saunders, and Brooks describe is for humanities courses to help students participate in the creation and nurturing of complex and open dialogue. LCC's program goals speak to this, emphasizing (as many such goals statements do) the ability to "demonstrate multidisciplinary knowledge" and engagement with "multicultural perspectives" by "recognizing and articulating how artists, authors, and forms of art and literature from around the world represent the human condition."¹⁰

My course goals reflect just such a combination of exposure to various genres, a global mix of authors and artists, and the use of multiple methodologies to study these materials. Examining various forms of expression—paintings, poems, photographs, films, and plays—and comparing how different disciplines look at particular questions or themes, I asked students to consider how the arts and humanities help us understand ourselves and the people and environments around us; how we have tried to make intellectual, moral, and spiritual sense of the societies we inhabit through the "cultures" we create and promote. Beginning with Llosa's impassioned defense of literature's importance as "one of the common denominators of human experience"¹¹ in which he emphasizes its vital "integrative role" in teaching us "to see, in ethnic and cultural differences, the richness of [...] humanity's multifaceted creativity,"¹² we explored various "role of literature in society" questions. They included literature's ability to develop and shape one's emotional intelligence, global awareness, and ethical perspective and now how it has been helping build community among people separated by COVID-forced isolation and political difference. Writing about such questions involved us in examining the values and governing assumptions of our societies—past and present and across the globe—and in interrogating the answers given to some of the universal questions that have challenged humankind since its beginnings:

What is the origin of life? What do our answers to this question tell us about ourselves and our culture? What does religion offer us? What is Nature and what is humankind's relation to it? Why do we fight wars? What does war do to culture and humanity? How does culture influence the way we think about war? How does culture impact our conceptions of love? Why do cultures have different ideas about how to demonstrate love? What is the individual's role within a larger group or position toward a government? What is the position of women or racial and ethnic minorities in society? Where do ideals of beauty and attractiveness come from? What does freedom mean? What responsibilities do we have to our fellow human beings and to the planet?¹³

¹⁰ This SLO and "apply cultural and historical knowledge and various methodological approaches to interpret art forms and creative expressions through a variety of means" were essential objectives for the assignments I created.

¹¹ Llosa, M. (2001). "Why Literature?: The Premature Obituary of the Book," *The New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/78238/mario-vargas-llosa-literature>.

¹² Ibid., n. pag.

¹³ These questions, essentially defining the course syllabus, come from an Introduction to Humanities textbook I co-authored, entitled "*That is the Question: Answers from the Humanities*."

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Employing Mary Louise Pratt's classic "contact zone"¹⁴ formulation, students examined how themes like identity, community, and one's relationship to the environment and works by writers like Alice Walker, Camille Dungy, Franz Kafka, and Jean Anouilh translated and spoke across ethnic, cultural, and geographic distance. As a required first-year course, students' application of the humanities—their consideration of the materials at hand to the rest of their coursework and lives—also provided commentary on the intentions of core curriculum pedagogy and their outcomes, especially claims about the value of interdisciplinary exploration and intercultural understanding and literature's practical role in developing the soft skills (critical thinking, and oral and written communication) that employers demand. Using literature and the arts to ask questions about compassion, family, community, and ethical behavior was especially timely during the pandemic, particularly among students from post-Soviet countries where social and political unrest remain constant worries and medical support often hard to access or nonexistent. What the students' answers and perspectives suggest about literature's place in educational settings and society today was instructive in terms of literature's cross-cultural value and deeply illuminating in regard to how students understood their particular time and place.

Some of the typical resistance to such humanities/gen ed courses was encountered (usual "why do I need to take this if I'm a business major"-type laments) as well as difficulties in terms of classroom communication (many of the students were not used to discussion-based courses; exacerbated by the limits of the online format as well as ESL barriers). The relatively small number of humanities and social science requirements in the core and its lack of emphasis in the school's largest majors—business and psychology (whose curriculum is proscribed by the country's education ministry)—also make it difficult to assess how impactful this gen ed course has been in the ways students approach or engage their other courses. Anecdotally, though, most all of the students appreciated the opportunity to share their opinions and postings in a discussion-based format.¹⁵ Online "takeaway forums" where students posted a question or reaction to a week's materials became an especially rich place for dialogue.¹⁶ Sometimes I guided the conversation with a particular question, but mostly left the topics open for the students to propose and answer.

¹⁴ Pratt, M. L. (1991) "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, p.33-40. Modern Language Association. Here's one of the assignments from the course: Utilizing key ideas from Pratt's essay (like her description of specific "literate arts of the contact zone" on p. 37), describe a "contact zone" in which you've participated. In doing so, be sure to define the characteristics of the space you are describing (who are its participants, how things are communicated, what are the values being expressed, who has control of how those values are decided upon) and what the key issues are through which "contact" is shown to be important.

¹⁵ Here's a representative student evaluation response: "I liked the class structure the most—an open conversation in which anyone can offer their opinion."

¹⁶ As suggested by the following responses to a question asking what they "liked" about the course, the students saw the online forums as a freeing space, as well as a place to chronicle their "own" thoughts: "Takeaways. Sometimes you are too shy or afraid of speaking through zoom, or not prepared to show your face, and the opportunity to discuss interesting topics disappear. Weekly takeaway forums gave a chance to discuss or to write your own thoughts." "The open forums at the end of every week helped every member of the class be able to give their own insights."

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Measured by student engagement, success was found with ideas and applications coming out of pieces like Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* and Terese Marie Mailhot's *Silence Breaking Woman: Surviving Racism Through Storytelling* as well as with Franz Kafka (whom many of the students, especially the Russian and Ukrainians, had read extensively and immediately related to their experience with writers like Fyodor Dostoyevsky). Walker's piece was helpful in foregrounding key institutional and program-level goals of the course, especially "demonstrating multidisciplinary knowledge." Integrating a variety of genres and fields—from memoir, literary criticism, historical and art historical analyses, and anthropology—Walker gave the students an interdisciplinary method to follow; she looks through multiple lenses: literary and historical, of course, but also gender, race, ethnicity, and age. Her combination of the personal—telling the story of her mother's and grandmother's artistic efforts within their home despite extreme personal hardship—and the more broadly cultural (referencing, for example, the "anonymous" quilt hanging in the Smithsonian Museum) resonated especially with the students from post-Soviet countries. Many took the opportunity to present their own family and community (and country) histories through a combination of storytelling and artifacts: particularly heirlooms and religious icons that were (often secretly) preserved during Communist regimes outlawing religious expressions.¹⁷ Walker's demonstration that the seemingly ordinary (the tending of a garden or stitching a quilt from rags) held beauty and meaning provided the students a way back to their own families' (often hidden or silenced) pasts. Engaging with Walker also had the effect of breaking down borders between perceptions of high art versus low: crucial in helping students realize that literature and the arts are not rarefied, untouchable artifacts, but often come out of relatable experience.

One student, Tomiris, for instance, followed Walker's example and wrote about her Kazakh grandmother's artistic talent and creative purpose:

"Alice Walker talks about how much her mother's love of beauty and respect for strength helped her realize her legacy. This thought raised a lot of questions about my heritage and that of my grandmother, Kavirken, as she went through many hardships in life and still retained a love of art and a creative vision by making "korpeler." Kazakh korpeler are covered with a dense fabric and stripes of patterns on the outside and inside they are made of cotton or wool. They have been used for many centuries by the Kazakh people who roamed with portable yurts and laid these korpeler on the floor. The cultural heritage of my family including love to the motherland, art appreciation, and family love was passed down through the Kazakh korpeler that my grandmother sews."

¹⁷ One of the prompts for the first paper assignment was to relate a family story or artifact to one's broader cultural history: "Following Alice Walker's example of describing her mother's "creative" activities and what it taught her (her "heritage," she says at the end of the essay, was "a love of beauty and a respect for strength"), reflect on your family's culture and describe how crucial ideas, feelings, and values (your "heritage") have been passed down to you. This can be in the form of images and objects (a painting a parent drew, a quilt a grandparent stitched), practices (religious services and observances your family follows, cultural events you attend), and stories (memories family and community members pass down from one generation to the next)."

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Also focusing on the power of craft to connect and speak to us, another student, Evgeniia, emphasized the idea that textiles are “our DNA” (a comment expressed by one of the artists in a video, *Crafting in America: Quilting*, we screened in relation to our reading of Walker’s essay). As with Tomiris, these discussions, Evgeniia noted, got her thinking of her own country and culture. A third student, Revo, offered a particularly moving response to Walker’s essay and to the unseen or unheard voices silenced by discrimination and oppression:

“[It] made me wonder how many great artists, scientists, engineers, singers or much more have we prevented from contributing, expressing, and enhancing humankind. It makes me wonder how much better life we could have if they were to pursue their careers and talents. Sadly, we won’t ever find out, but we can make sure that for our future we let everyone contribute and enrich our lives. Yes, we made the same mistakes over and over, and even in 2021 we are facing such degrading prejudices but if we fight as one, if we come together and spread the language of kindness, we will win together, and create a much better life. And exactly those past events are the evidence that we can move forward hand in hand. If we managed to come to where we are, I can only imagine how much further we can go with love and respect.”

Mailhot’s descriptions of her ongoing struggles with a conflicted identity gave students a way to see the immediacy of storytelling, the relevance of myth-making (and the necessity of its preservation):

“The duplicity I carry in myself, in having these two stories laid out so incongruently alongside each other—it is how I believe Thunder works. Disruptive and natural—part of me is chaotic, and I cannot escape it. I felt as though the myth of myself had been born on this day, when I could have the things I strived desperately for, but would always carry with them the weight of my history—and that, in order to liberate myself and women like me, I must acknowledge that my history is my gift. It disrupts the good in my world, but with purpose.”¹⁸

Mailhot’s expression of the abuse and discrimination she faced evoked deep sympathy from many of the students as well as an understanding of the “power” Mailhot sees “in the reclamation of [her] story”¹⁹ from those who would stereotype or silence her. Romina’s comments are representative:

¹⁸ Mailhot, Terese Marie (2019). “Silence Breaking Woman: Surviving Racism Through Storytelling,” *Pacific Standard*, <https://psmag.com/magazine/silence-breaking-woman-terese-marie-mailhot-on-surviving-racism>. n. pag.

¹⁹ Ibid., n pag.

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“All these harsh experiences got her to play a reminder role to tell the world about discrimination against Native American women. I think there are two purposes to her story. First is speaking out about the discrimination against Native American women. The second one is to vent her deprived emotions. I think she is familiar with the consequences of piling up negative emotions. Her mother has been abused. Although she loves Maillot, she treated her aggressively in her worst days. Maillot herself has maltreated her sister due to the pressure she has been dealing with. She claims that this behavior has brought more pain instead of peace. She has written her story to discharge herself. I think this would help to ease the pain and stop the circle of aggression.”

Students also took to a prompt focusing on the importance of daily reflection, particularly of one’s time in isolated environments during the pandemic described in Simran Sethi’s *Why Mundane Moments Truly Matter*.²⁰ Emphasizing the ordinary, Sethi argues that “[a]lthough we, as a culture, typically favor the superlative, research shows that moonlight, and everything that is revealed in ordinary moments of our life, matters. Valuing the routine enriches our lives in ways we do not expect, because ‘how we spend our days,’ the author Annie Dillard reminds us, ‘is how we spend our lives.’” Students who had experience journaling were especially engaged. Though not about literature *per se*, the practice of noticing was instructive and helpful, with students looking more closely at what they were seeing and reading. Literature and reading seen as documentary practice, not just at the macro-level (where students/readers are told by a teacher that such-and-such a book represents an, epoch or crucial moment), but at the more personal.

Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* also resonated with students in regard to both gender and its questions concerning the rule of law and order. Considering Antigone’s moral absolutism versus what Creon claims to be the practical necessity of dictatorial rule provided the students an opportunity to compare and prioritize ethical perspectives. The setting of Anouilh’s adaptation—occupied France during WWII—was particularly evocative. And given the power and threat of dictatorial leaders in countries like Belarus, Moldova, Hungary, and, of course, Russia, the students from these countries (as well as those from Ukraine and Lithuania) gravitated to the conflict between the two main characters, to Antigone’s repeated attempts to honor her fallen brother despite Creon’s edict against it. For me, very much a reminder and evidence of the ongoing appeal and value of “classic” drama; its universality and adaptability.

²⁰ Sethi, S. (2020). “Why Mundane Moments Truly Matter,” *The New York Times*, <https://nyti.ms/3afOxVU>. With Simran Sethi’s article as a guide (especially the “document” and “reflect” suggestions at the end of the piece), gather data on your own “everyday” life: a week’s worth of reflections on what you did and noticed (the feelings you experienced and were struck by, the ideas and conversations you had, things you read or watched, etc.) and write an essay that describes these moments and offers your reflection on what they say about and mean to you.

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Early in *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, George Saunders described a key goal of humanities courses in emphasizing the critical practice of close reading and how literature broadens our ability to respond to others, and to life. More expansive vocabularies, more examples to which to compare our experience and reactions, more time and opportunity to engage what others have created or said all result from our attention to literature: “Criticism is not some inscrutable, mysterious process. It’s just a matter of (1) noticing ourselves responding to a work of art, moment by moment, and (2) getting better at articulating that response.”²¹ Foregrounding the personal but referencing the disciplines of art, history, and literature, Walker’s piece similarly helped demystify academic criticism for the students by demonstrating how she sought out commonalities across space, time, and culture. From our class, a comment from Romina stands out for me as an example of how directly students can access the ideas and emotions of others, to, again, “see the richness [...] of humanity’s multifaceted creativity:”

“Another lesson we can learn from Alice Walker’s essay is that “Art builds an inner life.” This fact enables people to deal with reality or difficulties. In the darkest days, art lights a flame. When there is no other way to bear the reality, people cling to art. Just like what African-American women did in Walker’s essay. As she says, “They forced their minds to desert their bodies, and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay.”

Ultimately, I think, the most instructive “role of literature” is in the promotion of the “practical criticism” Saunders and Walker describe, in helping students develop a sensitivity of response, as Saunders might call it, that approaches the “big questions” and engages the “isms” (methodologies) but does so with an applied, beyond-the-classroom intention. “After all [...] reading fiction changes our minds *in particular ways*, as we step out of our own (limited) consciousness and into another one (or two, or three).”²² The “role of literature today” remains about the value of encouraging students to use such materials—the arguments and questions they raise, and the concerns and feelings they engender—as bridges to the other places in their lives (the other career and academic disciplines they are studying and the worlds of work and spirit they inhabit) that are meaningful to them. The return of calls to censor literature that challenges us or expresses difficult experiences and truths, make this purposeful engagement more necessary than ever. As Viktoriia, said after reading Llosa: “The importance of Literature is in enlightenment and fulfillment that can dispel the darkness and fill the emptiness, restore hope and grow love, reveal the truth and bring freedom. Stories inspire our imagination and creativity. We start to perceive the world differently, perhaps, as less cruel and ugly.”

²¹ Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, p. 60.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 387.

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