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LITERATURE AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION: SMITHEAN SYMPATHY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCE THROUGH READERSHIP

by

ELIZABETH M. K. A. SUND

Under the Direction of Christie Hartley

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I argue literary readership allows us to gain imagined experiences necessary to sympathize with people whose experiences are different from our own. I begin with a discussion of Adam Smith's conception of sympathy and moral education. Although sympathy is a process we take part in naturally as members of a society, we can only be skilled spectators if we practice taking the position of the impartial spectator and critically reflect on our judgments. As I will argue in this thesis, literature provides a way for us to practice spectatorship without the consequences that come along with making mistakes when judging real people. Literature also provides a way to build up a stock of experiences, which can be applied together with our personal life histories to create the most informed judgments possible.

INDEX WORDS: Adam Smith, Sympathy, Literature, Moral imagination, Moral education, Empathy

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To Jeff, I could have never accomplished this without your love and support.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Although we each have a limited number of actual experiences, our imaginations are able to supplement our personal histories, which together allow us to put ourselves in the shoes of another person whose life experiences differ from our own. In this paper, I argue that literary readership is an important part of creating the experiences necessary to sympathize with people whose experiences seem or are unfamiliar to us. Sympathy is important because it allows us to take another agent and her context into consideration when making moral judgments. For my purposes, I will adopt and develop Adam Smith's account of sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, because it provides a great groundwork for understanding why literature helps us to comprehend others' experiences despite differences in personal histories. According to Smith's conception of sympathy, it is important that we try to understand a person's situation from her standpoint rather than simply imagining what we would do in her situation. If we judge others based solely on what we would do in similar circumstances, we risk making a biased and prejudiced judgment rather than an impartial one. Importantly, reading literature can allow us to become one with a character and experience the world from her vantage point as she experiences it. Although we always experience the world through our own eyes, practicing the skill of sympathy using literature helps us to try to approximate how others experience the world by creating imagined experiences, which can then be used to understand the experiences of others more accurately even if we never truly see things from their point of view first hand.

I begin this paper with an exposition of Smith's conception of sympathy. Next, I describe the way literature nourishes the moral imagination and improves our ability to take the position of an impartial spectator. The impartial spectator is an imagined standpoint from which one can view a situation with interest, and yet remain separate from the action itself. It is a disinterested

perspective insofar as the impartial spectator is able to judge the propriety of an action or passion without having a stake in the outcome. From that imagined position we are able to make impartial ethical judgments about our own actions and those of others. Literature informs this process in at least two ways: 1) literature provides spectatorship practice which helps habituate the process, and 2) literature helps individuals build up a stock of imagined experiences that cannot be experienced physically in a single lifetime.

In the third section, I provide two main examples of this process at work. The first example describes the process through which I came to better understand my transgender sibling's experience by reading an autobiography of Jennifer Finny Boylan called *She's Not There*.[1] Second, I describe the way a reader sympathizes with and makes judgments about the character Winston Smith in George Orwell's novel *1984*.[2] Both cases help illustrate the way literature allows individuals both to practice being impartial spectators and to build up a stock of experiences to draw upon in future acts of spectatorship with other people.

In the fourth section, I address the potential objection that literature can sway us into believing things that are not true or praise worthy through persuasive language and story lines. For example, it is often the case that readers prefer the antagonist to the protagonist and seem to sympathize with actions that actually deserve disapproval. Furthermore, authors do not necessarily have benevolent intentions, and may even intend to influence readers to adopt beliefs that an impartial spectator would deem inappropriate. I will argue that the key to responding to this objection is properly understanding the viewpoint of the impartial spectator. The impartial spectator would not approve of inappropriate actions, so if the reader critically reflects on her judgments from the view of the impartial spectator, she will not sympathize with actions that

[1] Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (New York: Broadway, 2004)
[2] George Orwell, *1984* (Signet Classic, New York)

deserve disapproval. Reading in groups is a great way to facilitate this kind of critical readership and avoid the pitfalls of biased judgments. Correcting one's mistaken judgments of literature then adds further practice for correcting one's mistaken judgments when interacting with actual people.

II. SMITHEAN SYMPATHY

Sympathy as a process of the imagination and judgment

Smith's usage of the concept of *sympathy* is a technical term. It differs from how we use the term today and resembles in some respects the contemporary usage of "empathy." However, the term "empathy" did not exist when Smith wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.*[3] At times, Smith uses the word 'sympathy' to mean something close to the emotion of compassion. For example, Smith explains that a criminal who reflects on his actions with guilt and repentance "dares no longer look society in the face, but imagines himself as it were rejected, and thrown out from the affections of all mankind. He cannot hope for the consolation of sympathy in this his greatest and most dreadful distress" (*TMS* II.ii.2.3).[4] The criminal cannot expect sympathy or compassion from society because of his transgressions. But as Charles Griswold stresses, the word 'sympathy' can have two meanings within Smith's work, "In its narrow sense, sympathy is an emotion; in its broader, Smithean sense, it is also the means through which emotions are conveyed and understood."[5] So, sympathy does not always refer to compassion, but rather, at

[3] Stephen Darwall explains, "In fact, 'empathy' was only coined in 1909 by Edward Titchener to translate Theodor Lipps's '*Einfühlung'*, which he in turn had appropriated for psychology from German aesthetics in 1905, and which derives from a verb meaning 'to feel one's way into.'" *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 52.
[4] Griswold, FN 5, pp. 79.
[5] Charles Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 79.

times, the term encompasses a process through which we come to understand our own emotions and those of others. I'm interested in the latter sense of sympathy, and I will use the term to refer to the process of understanding emotions, unless otherwise noted. Sympathy is not just something we passively feel, rather it is an active process through which we come to understand the actions of another person.[6]

Smith provides the reader with a compelling example of sympathy as a process on the first page of *TMS*. We are called upon to imagine what it would be like to see someone punished on the rack, which would surely be a humiliating and painful experience for the sufferer. Smith refers to this person on the rack as "our brother," which emphasizes the relationship between spectator and agent. As we look at "our brother" on the rack, "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments" until we feel like we are one person with the man on the rack, at which point "His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels" (*TMS* I.i.1.2). When we come to experience on some level the same feelings as the man on the rack, especially when our bodies react physically to a situation even when we are not active participants, we are experiencing the process of Smithean sympathy. The sensation of terror we feel in our own body when someone is hurt in a horror film, or real tears of happiness when characters fall in love in a novel, can both be examples of this kind of Smithean sympathy.[7] This should not be confused

[6] Although Smith's conception of sympathy is related to David Hume's, there are some distinct differences. Hume's theory of sympathy was based on utility, while Smith's makes room for rational judgment and allows for the possibility of the subconscious. For these reasons, Smith's theory is more easily modernized. For more information on the differences between the two theories, see James R. Otteson's *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life* (30-39) and A.L. Macfie's *The Individual in Society* (48-57).

[7] Smithean sympathy does not have to conclude in a physical reaction like tears or pain in the spectator, but the existence of sympathy in these situations is clear-cut. These are some of the most extreme cases of sympathy, because the simple process of imagining the situation of the agent can cause physical reactions in the body of the spectator. There are many cases where sympathy only requires minimal emotional reaction from the spectator and

with selfish or self-centered reasons for feeling a certain emotion while watching the experience of another person. If I cry at a movie because the actor in the movie resembles a deceased friend, or the words in a novel are so beautiful in themselves that they evoke a strong emotion, I am not experiencing Smithean sympathy.

When we sympathize with another person, we use our imaginations to form a conception of what it would be like to be that other person and experience her circumstances. The key is that we do not simply imagine what it would be like to be ourselves in her shoes, but instead we try to imagine what it would be like to really *be* the other agent. Smith explains that our senses, "never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations" (*TMS* I.i.1.2). For this reason, our imaginations must rely on our own experiences and sensations to recreate an accurate portrayal of what it must be like to be the agent with her different set of experiences and circumstances. Through imagination, "we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them" (*TMS* I.i.1.2). To sympathize with someone is to imagine her situation accurately enough to feel the same kind of emotions she does in response to her circumstances, although as spectators we always feel the emotions to a lesser degree than the agent. To refer to the last example, when we sympathize with "our bother" on the rack, we don't just imagine what it would be like if we were in his position, but rather what it must really be like from his point of view for him.

Importantly, there is a sense in which Smithean sympathy differs from our modern idea of empathy. In particular, Smithean sympathy is different from empathy because it is not only the

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shows no evidence in the physical reaction of the spectator.

emotions we feel that are important, but also our judgment of the appropriateness of another's emotions in his circumstances from the point of view of an impartial spectator. For example, I might know that the man on the rack is claustrophobic, so this means he probably feels much more afraid than I would in those same circumstances. I imagine what it would be like to feel trapped as a claustrophobic, not just what it would feel like for me to be on the rack. Alternatively, if I watch a customer shout at a waiter because her food was overcooked, I would not approve of the customer's actions. Even if I imagine that the customer may have had a bad day, which explains her behavior to some extent and gives me some ability to sympathize with her, I would still disapprove of her overreaction. Even if I can imagine myself giving the same reaction in those same circumstances, I would still judge – as an impartial spectator – that the customer's actions are inappropriate. I will explain more about the way we use sympathy to make ethical judgments about appropriateness later in the paper.

As I noted above, the experiences we have when sympathizing with someone else are never as strong as the sentiments she is actually feeling. Although imagination can give us great insight into how she feels, we are unable to forget that the passion is not real for us the way it is for her (*TMS* I.i.4.7). But this does not hinder our willingness to sympathize according to Smith because, "Nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren" (*TMS* III.2.6). All people want to be understood by those around them, and we have an innate desire for mutual sympathy.[8] According

[8] "The imaginary change of situation, upon which their sympathy is founded, is but momentary. The thought of their own safety, the thought that they themselves are not really the sufferers, continually intrudes itself upon them; and though it does not hinder them from conceiving a passion somewhat analogous to what is felt by the sufferer, hinders them from conceiving anything that approaches to the same degree of violence. The person principally concerned is sensible of this, and at the same time passionately desires a more complete sympathy. He longs for that relief which nothing can afford him but the entire concord of the affections of the spectators with his own. *To see the emotions of their hearts, in every respect, beat time with his own, in the violent and disagreeable passions, constitutes his sole consolation.* But he can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him" (*TMS* I.i.4.6 emphasis added).

to Smith, the agent will recognize this fact and try to soften her emotions so that they are more in line with the imaginary sentiments we have in our minds as spectators.

As I argue below, sympathy is a reciprocal process that involves imagining on the spectator's part and can involve a "tempering" of the original passion by the person being observed. Ideal sympathy works like a set of scales, with the original passion on one side and the spectator's idea of the passion on the other. If the two sides of the scales are not balanced, the original person will try to lower or increase the intensity of her passion to make it match up better with the level of passion those around her think is appropriate to the situation. The actor will always find it disagreeable when the spectator cannot sympathize with her passions (*TMS* I.i.2.6). Skilled spectators will continue to gain more information and perspective on the actor's experience, so their idea of the passion will come ever closer to the level of her tempered passion. Ideally, this process continues until the scales are perfectly balanced. Although both parties feel this attraction to harmonious sympathy, according to Smith, the actor always feels a more intense desire to harmonize than the spectator, so in many cases the actor will strive to temper her passions in accordance with the spectators' passions more than the spectators are motivated to augment their judgments. When a harmonious conclusion cannot be reached between the spectator and agent, then the spectator necessarily disproves of the agent's passions.

Although we often sympathize with people we do not know personally within discrete situations, our sympathetic reactions can become more accurate as we get to know people better by forming relationships with them over a period of time. In a long-term friendship, both people must communicate with one another and be good listeners for the relationship to work. As James Otteson explains, "The better we know the person we are judging—that is, the better we know his passions, interests, and inclinations—the more readily will we be able to understand why he

acts the way he does, which, in turn, makes it easier to judge whether we would have the same sentiments as he if we were in his shoes."[9] The more intimately we know someone, the better we are able to interpret her actions accurately. Without accurate interpretation of other people's sentiments, we cannot judge their actions appropriately. For example, if I know my friend does not feel comfortable showing her feelings in public, I would be better able to accurately interpret her lack of aggression in a public confrontation. Other observers might think her feelings were not hurt or that she is a pushover, but I would have enough information to sympathize with her more accurately and judge her actions accordingly.

According to Smith, the motivation to take part in the process of sympathy is its inherent pleasure. Even when we are sympathizing with someone's emotion such as sadness or pain, "the pleasure which we find in the conversation of one whom in all the passions of his heart we can entirely sympathize with, seems to do more than compensate the painfulness of that sorrow with which the view of his situation affects us" (*TMS* I.i.2.6). Although it may be a happier feeling to sympathize with someone's joy, sympathizing with sadness nonetheless gives the spectator a sense of pleasure. It is pleasurable on some level for both people involved because the agent who experienced the misfortune first hand is relieved to share her experience with another human being, while the listener feels the pleasure of human connection as well. Even though we often cry more at the retelling of a misfortune and feel like the event is happening all over again by reliving it while telling the story, "the sweetness of his [the listener's] sympathy more than compensates the bitterness of that sorrow, which, in order to excite this sympathy, they had thus enlivened and renewed" (*TMS* I.i.2.3). Smith claims the pleasure of sympathy does not compensate for the actual instance of suffering, but it does compensate for the pain of retelling

[9] Otteson, 22.

the story to a sympathetic spectator. According to Smith, the pleasure of sympathy in this situation does not necessarily equate with feelings of happiness, but instead relates more to feelings of relief and comfort.

It is important to emphasize that according to my interpretation of Smith, to sympathize with someone and feel her same emotions to some degree does not necessarily mean we must approve of her emotions. It is possible to sympathize with someone and understand her motives for the passion, but still disapprove of it. For example, if somebody insults an agent's spouse and the agent punches the offender, we can simultaneously imagine having the same response in the agent's circumstances, while consistently asserting the agent overreacted and should calm down. Even if we would have thrown a punch upon hearing the same insult, it seems perfectly acceptable to disapprove of the agent's reaction because it was offensive.

Although Smith clearly states that to sympathize with someone is to approve,[10] there are interpretative issues regarding the possibility of sympathy with disapproval. According to Griswold's interpretation of Smith, "sympathy is not to be equated with approval; that would destroy the possibility of ethical evaluation and entail that disapproval amounts to no more than the inability of a spectator to empathize with an actor."[11] We are often able to understand the motives and emotions of an agent, and maybe even believe we would have the same emotions in those circumstances, but still find the emotions reprehensible. For example, we may be able to sympathize with someone who commits murder to avenge the death of a family member while still wholly disapproving of the passions and actions of the agent. It is at this stage of sympathy where we make ethical judgments about passions.

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[10] "To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them" (TMS I.i.3.1).
[11] Griswold, 85.

One of two possibilities is probably going on when we seem to sympathize and yet disapprove of an agent's actions. One possibility is that we may sympathize with the agent at first but upon further reflection come to disapprove of her actions. Essentially, this would mean that we have the ability to change our minds about how we judge an agent's actions after further reflection. If we can no longer enter into the position of the agent and feel what she feels, we therefore no longer sympathize with the agent. This possibility allows the spectator to change her mind about her approval or disapproval as she reflects on the agent's passions and the circumstances surrounding them. A potential problem with this interpretation is that it becomes unclear whether the spectator sympathized at time one but not at time two, or if the disapproval at time two actually negates the sympathy at time one. In other words, it is unclear whether the spectator was actually sympathizing at time one, or was mistaken in some way and therefore never actually sympathized at all. Although this particular point is beyond the scope of this paper, it raises interesting epistemic problems concerning our access to our own acts of spectatorship. I will return to this point during the discussion of George Orwell's *1984*.

The second possible explanation is that when we find ourselves disapproving of an action and seeming to sympathize with that action at the same time, then we are actually confusing the emotion empathy with the process of Smithean sympathy. It is not contradictory to empathize with an agent and simultaneously disapprove (and therefore not sympathize in the Smithean sense with the agent), because empathy is only the ability to enter into the agent's situation. This sort of explanation involves a two-part process of sympathy involving an empathy stage and a judgment stage. First the spectator enters into the position of the agent, and then she makes a judgment about the agent's actions. This allows for the spectator to fully enter into the agents passions without approving of the passions in the second stage of the process. For the purposes

of this paper, either of these two interpretations works equally well to describe the common situation of entering into the position of the agent, coming to realize we might do the same thing if we were the agent, and yet disapproving of the agent's actions.

Self-directed sympathy

A person can perform Smithean sympathy by reflecting on her own passions the same way another impartial spectator might reflect on her passions. According to Smith, when I step outside myself to view my own actions and passions, "I divide myself, as it were, into two persons," to create a spectator and an agent. The agent is "the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character or a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion" (*TMS* III.1.6). I also become my own spectator and judge of my own actions. This is what Griswold calls moral self-consciousness, because "we cannot see and judge ourselves except by looking at ourselves from the outside; that is what it means to take an evaluative perspective on ourselves or others."[12] This process is so ingrained into human society that individuals are able to take part in sympathy when they are alone, without even thinking about it. Although we cannot literally reflect on our actions in the same moment we perform them, once sympathy is ingrained the process will often seem simultaneous because we seem to be acting and judging in the exact same moment. When I take part in sympathy alone, I imagine what it might be like to be an unbiased outside observer watching me and judging my actions. Smith thinks we can only ethically evaluate our own actions through this process, by imagining the way another impartial spectator would view us.[13] When we reflect on our own actions, "[w]e

[12] Griswold, 108.

[13] Smith thinks, "The principle by which we naturally either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, seems to be altogether the same with that by which we exercise the like judgments concerning the conduct of other people…[W]e either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station, we either can or cannot entirely enter into

endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it" (*TMS* III.I.2).

For example, if a person is alone in her house and stubs her toe, she will probably make a sudden outburst because of the pain. After a moment goes by, she will not continue to cry over the pain because she will come to feel the same sense of embarrassment over the outburst that she might have felt in public. Even though there is nobody around her to judge her actions, she flattens her passions to make them more in line with what is appropriate. She plays both the role of the agent with the original passion and the role of spectator at the same time by reflecting from one position to the other. We must use the same process we use to judge the passions of others as we do to judge ourselves, because there is no other way to judge ourselves, according to Smith. As Griswold explains, we are able to take the position of both the actor and spectator because "[t]he internalized or idealized judge is still a spectator. The imagination preserves the privileged position of this spectator—the stand-in for 'the public.' […W]e become our own public."[14]

The Impartial Spectator

The impartial spectator is a creation of the imagination which represents the viewpoint of an outside, unbiased spectator even when no such real-life spectator exists to judge the situation. But the impartial spectator should not be confused with a simple representation of societal norms, because the impartial spectator is unbiased, whereas the views of society as a whole are often filled with implicit prejudices. The position of the impartial spectator is attainable, because

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and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influence it. We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them" (*TMS* III.1.2).

[14] Griswold, 108.

it "is ideal insofar as it represents an unactualized, imagined perspective, but that does not mean that an actual, real person cannot imaginatively put himself in the imaginary person's place."[15] However, some people are better than others at taking the position of the impartial spectator. This means that the impartial spectator's position is attainable by any person who has removed her biases, "though perhaps only with great difficulty and many years of practice."[16]

The removal of biases allows for the possibility of an agent reflecting on her own actions from the point of the impartial spectator and coming to the conclusion that her actions are appropriate, even if society as a whole disapproves of them. For example, a suffragette who fought for women's right to vote may have been certain an impartial spectator would approve of her actions, even though the majority of her community may have frowned upon her actions and been unable to sympathize with her. Despite society's actual disapproval of her actions, she would have been capable of dividing herself into two and creating her own, unbiased spectator using her imagination. Smith explains that the impartial spectator is "the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct. If in this view it pleases us, we are tolerably satisfied" (*TMS* III.i.5). This capacity to step outside ourselves gives us the ability to defy the opinion of the majority, whether they praise us inappropriately or blame us without reason, and come to know on our own what actions really should be met with approval or disapproval.[17]

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[15] Otteson, 62.
[16] Otteson, 62.
[17] Smith argues that we don't only want to be sympathized with, rather we want to be worthy of sympathy. He says, "Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love. He naturally dreads not only to be hated, but to be hateful; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of hatred. He desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise. He dreads, not only blame, but blame-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame" (*TMS* III.2.2). For these reasons, "The man who applauds us either for actions which we did not perform, or for motives which had no sort of influence upon our conduct, applauds not us, but another person. We can derive no sort of satisfaction from his praises" (*TMS* III.2.5). This is why the impartial spectator and the views of community members are distinct, because the praise of a community member is only meaningful if we also are

Of course, our imaginations have several limitations, especially when it comes to viewing our own character accurately. In the first edition of *TMS*, Smith adds the following caveat,

> Common looking-glasses, it is said, are extremely deceitful, and by the glare which they throw over the face, conceal from the partial eyes of the person many deformities which are obvious to everybody besides. But there is not in the world such a smoother of wrinkles as is every man's imagination, with regard to the blemishes of his own character. (*TMS* 112)[18]

Imagining the position of the impartial spectator in relation to one's own actions is not easy because it is difficult to imagine oneself clearly in general. According to Otteson, "It is true, of course, that when we compare the sentiments of the impartial spectator with those of the agent, we are in actuality still comparing our own sentiments to those of the agent," but this can be overcome because, "Smith thinks that it is possible for us to detach ourselves in our imagination from all the peculiarities about us that would make us interested or partial in some respect."[19] Our limitations do not make impartial sympathy impossible, meaning we can become better able to realistically portray our own actions to ourselves over time with practice.

Moral education and habituation

According to Alexander Broadie, as a creation of one's own imagination, the impartial spectator "has no more (nor less) information about what is to be judged than the agent, for the creature cannot be better informed than its creator."[20] This means that the impartial spectator

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aware that an impartial spectator would provide the same praise. Likewise, the censure of community members, although painful, is only really meaningful when the impartial spectator would feel the same disapproval.

[18] This quotation can be found in footnote *n* of the Liberty Fund edition relating to *TMS* III.1.5. It was included in the first edition of *TMS*, but was later replaced by a new section by Smith in later editions of his work.

[19] Otteson, 47.

[20] Alexandar Broadie, "Sympathy and the Impartial Spectator." Editor: Kund Haakonssen, *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith* (Kindle Edition) (Cambridge University Press, February 26, 2007) Kindle Locations

formed in the imagination of an individual is not perfect or infallible, but a good effort made to view one's situation for the point of view of an impartial spectator provides a different, less biased view of our own actions than if we never tried to leave our own position. Smith also often refers to the impartial spectator as "the demigod within the breast." Broadie argues that this use of the word "demigod" describes the difference between the impartial spectator created in our imaginations and a perfectly impartial, omniscient spectator, who would be a true god.[21] The demigod within the breast is "simply no ideal, but instead the best, for all its many faults, that we can manage" and our conception of the impartial spectator gets better all the time.[22] Smith explains "Every day some feature is improved; every day some blemish is corrected" (*TMS* VI.iii.25). Depending on how much time an agent spends perfecting her moral imagination, the impartial spectator will be either more or less highly developed within her mind.[23]

Smith makes many suggestions about ways to improve one's ability to step into the position of the impartial spectator. His theory of education emphasizes social interaction with one's community to become familiar with norms and responsibilities. Smith thinks education makes people better, meaning "an increased ability to sympathize with others, a more diverse sense of one's intellectual abilities, a well developed sense of self-esteem and self-respect, a strong ability to resist the temptation and easy alliances of superstition, an increased

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2231-33.

[21] Broadie, Kindle locations 2255-57.

[22] Broadie, Kindle locations 2254-55.

[23] Smith's full description of the progression of the demigod in a wise man is as follows, "There exists in the mind of every man, an idea of this kind, gradually formed from his observations upon the character and conduct both of himself and of other people. It is the slow, gradual, and progressive work of the great demigod within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of conduct. This idea is in every man more or less accurately drawn, its colouring is more or less just, its outlines are more or less exactly designed, according to the delicacy and acuteness of that sensibility, with which those observations were made, and according to the care and attention employed in making them. In the wise and virtuous man they have been made with the most acute and delicate sensibility, and the utmost care and attention have been employed in making them. He has studied this idea more than other people, he comprehends it more distinctly, he has formed a much more correct image of it, and is much more deeply enamoured of its exquisite and divine beauty. He endeavours as well as he can, to assimilate his own character to this archetype of perfection" (TMS VI.iii.25).

understanding of the moral rules and the potentials of perfect liberty, and a more developed rationality."[24] Along with improving a person's ability to sympathize with others, education improves individuals and the community.

This education, which is largely based on social interaction, teaches us what is right and wrong by means of experiencing the effects of certain actions again and again. There is no other way to learn what actions are amiable and which are not other than "by observing what actions actually and in fact excite them [approval or praise]" (*TMS* III.4.9). After seeing these actions and their effects over and over again, we habituate our reactions to them. Smith explains that "habitual reflection" is capable of "correcting the misrepresentations of self-love concerning what is fit and proper to be done in our particular situation" (*TMS* III.4.9). We learn to look at ourselves the same way we look at other people and see our own flaws and misdeeds. Reading history and literature is just one of many ways to practice this habituation within the realm of education. And for Smith, "learning is a lifelong process,"[25] so the influence of social interactions and literature on our education need not be confined to the schoolroom or formal institutions.

III. LITERATURE AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION

Although there are many ways to improve our ability to take the position of the impartial spectator, such as personal conversations with others or watching movies, I will focus on literary readership. The ability to enter into the position of the impartial spectator is acquired largely though habit until it becomes second nature (*TMS* III.3.25).[26] Reading novels, poetry, plays,

[24] Jack Weinstein, *Adam Smith's Pluralism: Rationality, Education, and the Moral Sentiments*. (Forthcoming from Yale University Press) pp. 327-28.
[25] Ibid., 329.
[26] Weinstien, *Pluralism*, pp. 329. When a person consistently practices taking the position of the impartial spectator it becomes in some sense part of who she is. "This habit has become perfectly familiar to him. He has been in the

biographies, etc., helps us learn little by little how to react to the actions of others disinterestedly and with the appropriate kind of emotions from the position of the impartial spectator. The impartial spectator is disinterested insofar as she is able to judge the propriety of an action or passion without having a stake in the outcome. The term 'disinterested' should not be confused with 'uninterested' in this sense, because the impartial spectator cares about the agent and is interested, without having a vested interest in the outcome. As Martha Nussbaum explains in *Poetic Justice*, the impartial spectator is disinterested in so far as he

> is not personally involved in the events he witnesses, although he cares about the participants as a concerned friend. He will not, therefore, have such emotions and thoughts as relate to his own personal safety and happiness; in that sense he is without bias and surveys the scene before him with a certain sort of detachment. He may of course use any information about what is going on that he derives from his own personal history—but this information must be filtered for bias in favor of his own goals and projects.[27]

Although she can care about the agents she is judging, she is separate from them and disinterested because she is not part of the action; this is the same way a reader is interested in a story and can even be moved to laughter or tears without being *part* of the story itself. Because she is disinterested and views the situation from an outside perspective, she can remain impartial. This is similar to the third person point of view from which many books are written because the narrator cares what is going on in the story on some level, but is not herself part of the action and

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constant practice, and, indeed, under the constant necessity, of modeling, or of endeavouring to model, not only his outward conduct and behaviour, but, as much as he can, even his inward sentiments and feelings, according to those of this awful and respectable judge. He does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel" (*TMS* III.3.25).

[27] Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), 73. This book will be referred to only as *Poetic Justice* from this point forward.

has no stake in the outcome.

In this section, I propose two ways literature helps us to improve our moral imagination. First, literature provides a type of practice for spectators through which we can become better spectators through habituation. Reading simulates the experience of an impartial spectator and allows us to make moral judgments about the characters without the consequences of real life situations. We can learn from the mistakes we make when judging characters in books so that we will be better able to make appropriate judgments about real life situations. Second, literature helps individuals build up a stock of imagined experiences they can draw from to understand people in future instances of spectatorship. Because reading allows us to step into the position of another person and helps us to feel what she feels, we can draw on that memory in the future. By reading a wide variety of books, we can create numerous literary experiences to nourish our moral imagination.

The habit of good spectatorship: Literature as practice

In this section, I argue that reading literature is one way in which we can improve our ability to be impartial spectators. This is because it simulates the distanced view of the impartial spectator by allowing us to delve into the experience of a character, while continually reflecting on the character's actions. When we read, we take the position of the impartial spectator because we care about what happens to the character, but we are not part of the action and the events of the story do not directly affect our lives. We are spectators of literature in the purest sense, which might be something we seldom achieve in our relationships with actual human beings. However, by practicing the process of impartial spectatorship through literature, we become better at imagining real situations from this neutral standpoint through habituation. In this

section, I will primarily address the form of spectatorship itself, which is the process of Smithean sympathy. In the next section I will discuss the way literature can inform the content of Smithean sympathy by helping us to build up a stock of imagined experiences to use in conjunction with our personal histories in future cases of spectatorship.

Importantly, Smith says very little specifically about literature in *TMS*, but he often mentions spectatorship at the theater and critical reflection about historical figures as a model of the spectatorship process.[28] For the purposes of this paper, I will discuss literary readership in a general sense, rather than the different aspects of plays, history, novels, biography, poetry, etc. I think analogous arguments can be made that all of these forms of story telling allow people to practice impartial spectatorship. I will be using literature as a blanket term to encompass many different forms of imagined spectatorship through readership, which encompasses many forms of spectatorship that do not contain human interaction or self-directed sympathy. I will also use the term 'novel' generically throughout the paper, but I think the scope of the arguments can reach beyond strict literary formats. I have chosen to focus on literature because the reader/character relationship is analogous in important respects to the impartial spectator/agent relationship as Smith understands it. We are outsiders looking in on the situation of characters in books, similar to the way an impartial spectator is an outsider looking in on the actions of real people. We cannot affect the outcome of the book the same way an impartial spectator cannot affect the actions of individuals, but a good reader/spectator both cares about the agent and judges her as carefully as possible.

[28] Smith usually brings up history and literature as examples of the way we view the passions of characters. In section VI.iii *Of Self-Command*, he brings up countless historical and mythical figures as examples of different levels of self command, including Alexander the Great, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Ulysses and Gengis Khan. I think it is especially clear from his mixture of myth and history that it is the examination of a character that is important about history, not the fact that historical characters were real while mythical characters were not. Both myth and history provide readers with a chance to practice being an impartial spectator.

One of the lessons we learn from reading literature is how to properly include emotions in our spectatorship. The impartial spectator is not void of emotion, first because the process of sympathy requires that the spectator enter into the emotions of the agent, and secondly because the spectator often has an emotional reaction to the spectatorship itself. According to Smith, a good spectator has the virtues of humanity, which are "[t]he sort, the gentle, the amiable virtues, the virtues of candid condescension and indulgent humanity" (*TMS* I.i.4.10). This would not be possible if the impartial spectator were void of emotion and feeling. Martha Nussbaum argues in the article "Steerforth's Arm: Love and the Moral Point of View," that the impartial spectator is not void of emotion, but rather it "is a viewpoint rich in feeling. Not only compassion and sympathy, but also fear, grief, anger, hope, and certain types of love are felt by this spectator, as a result of his active, concrete imagining of the circumstances and aims and feelings of others."[29] As readers of literature, we experience a series of emotions along with, and in response to, the actions of different characters. We feel pain along with the heroine when she experiences misfortune, and we may even feel anger toward the perpetrators even if the heroine of the story is not aware of the person behind her suffering. [30]

We can appropriately feel these emotions as an impartial spectator of literature. As

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[29] Martha Craven Nussbaum, "Steerforth's Arm: Love and the Moral Point of View." *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 338. This article will be referred to as *Steerforth's Arm* from this point forward in this paper.

[30] We don't simply feel the emotions of the agent when we act as impartial spectators, we also feel emotions in response to the agents emotions or even what we think the agent's emotions should be. For example, we often feel embarrassed for people even when they do not realize they have done anything inappropriate. Or, Smith describes the way we come to sympathize with the dead by "not only sympathiz[ing] with the resentment of his friends and relations, but with the imaginary resentment which in fancy we lend to the dead, who is no longer capable of feeling that or any other human sentiment. But as we put ourselves in his situation, as we enter, as it were, into his body, and in our imaginations, in some measure, animate anew the deformed and mangled carcass of the slain, when we bring home in this manner his case to our own bosoms, we feel upon this, as upon many other occasions, an emotion which the person principally concerned is incapable of feeling, and which yet we feel by an illusive sympathy with him" (*TMS* II.i.2.5). We feel emotions in a similar way when we sympathize with an infant who is crying out for its parents. The infant cannot reflect on its own emotions or discern between fear, hunger, and pain, but when we imagine its situation we sympathize with these emotions even though the baby is probably incapable of feeling them.

Nussbaum explains, as we read "we quite naturally assume the viewpoint of an affectionate and responsive social creature, who looks at all the scene before him with fond and sympathetic attention, caring for all the people, and caring, too, for the bonds of discourse that hold them all together."[31] But even when we feel emotions, we maintain a safe and impartial distance from the action itself, so we are able to practice feeling appropriately disinterested emotions as part of sympathy. Through habit, this will make us better able to temper our emotions in instances of spectatorship with real people so that our reactions become impartial and disinterested as well.

Literature also allows us to understand characters and their actions in a way that is often impossible in our interactions with other people. We can only tell each other so much, as a result we often have to make educated guesses to fill in gaps using information we have gathered elsewhere.[32] This concept is closely related to the ideas I discuss in next section in which I explain how literature allows us to build up a stock of experiences in our imaginations, but my point here is to say that literature provides practice sympathizing with an agent with more information than we usually receive when we interact with actual people. In literature we are provided with all of the relevant information necessary to sympathize with a character and to approve or disapprove of her actions. By "all the information," what I mean is the only relevant information in a story is what the author provides, so it is the reader's responsibility to extrapolate from the information that has been provided and to think about what is purposely left out of the story. For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader despises Mr.

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[31] *Steerforth's Arm*, 346.

[32] For more information on "gaps" between the agent's experience and the spectators understanding of the situation, see James Otteson's *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life*. He explains that there always "remains an ineluctable gap between his [the agent's] actual experience and our imagined experience. Smith thinks that this gap nevertheless does not preclude a sympathy of sentiments…We are able to overcome this gap as a matter of fact, so, for the most part, Smith is content to leave the matter at that. He does not inquire into the nature of phenomenological qualia, and he does not explain how two independent sets of private experience can generate a sympathy. In fact, Smith develops no significant theory of mind at all" (20-22).

Darcy just like Elizabeth Bennet does in the beginning because we only know that he is rude and proud. As the story progresses, Elizabeth learns that she was wrong about Mr. Darcy because she did not know his true character. When the two become engaged at the end of the book, Elizabeth's father is surprised because he still thinks Mr. Darcy is rude, but Elizabeth explains, "I love him. Indeed he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable. You do not know what he really is."[33] The reader sympathizes with Elizabeth because Mr. Darcy really does seem rude in the beginning of the story, so the reader approves of her dislike of Mr. Darcy in the beginning and of her love for him at the end. The reader comes to understand Mr. Darcy's character as the plot progresses, resulting in a better interpretation of his actions. Mr. Darcy only seems rude to people who do not understand his motivations. Austen deliberately sets the reader up to dislike Mr. Darcy in the beginning so that the reader is forced to discover her partial perception along with the character Elizabeth.[34]

Although many novels present situations that could easily take place in reality like *Pride and Prejudice*, stories do not have to present events that are actual possibilities for the reader to practice spectatorship in a meaningful way. In fact, it may be the case that the more outrageous a story gets, the more the reader is forced to think about the character's actions rather than the actions the reader would choose if she were in the place of the character. Examples of these sorts of stories are "The Nose" by Nikolai Gogol and "The Metamorphosis"[35] by Franz Kafka. The

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[33] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (USA: J.W. Edwards, Inc. 2007) 359.

[34] Another way literature helps improve our ability to be impartial spectators may be through acquainting us with different aspects of human lives that come up again and again in literature. For example, the reader of *Pride and Prejudice* learns the importance of not making rash judgments before getting all of the information surrounding the actions of others. This literary encounter is directly relatable to our experiences as impartial spectators because the theme of prejudiced judgments is one that is bound to come up in our interactions with other people as we attempt to judge their actions. By reading books about biased judgment and prejudice, we may become better able to recognize when we make rash judgments ourselves. A related theme in literature might be "things aren't always what they seem," which helps remind us to look deeper into situations when we act as impartial spectators. These recurring themes may be another key to becoming a good impartial spectator.

[35] Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (New York: Barnes & Nobel Classics 2004).

point of the "The Nose" is not what I, Elizabeth Sund, would do if my nose mysteriously disappeared from my face and began running around town, but rather what Platon Kovalyov would do in the situation. Similarly, I don't need to know what I would do if I woke up to find I was turned into a giant bug when reading "The Metamorphosis," rather I need to think about what Gregor Samsa does upon becoming an insect. The fact that neither of these situations will ever happen in reality does not affect the reader's ability to go through the process of sympathizing with and judge the actions characters in the stories. It may be more difficult to sympathize in the Smithean sense with Gregor Samsa than Elizabeth Bennet, but that does not make it impossible. As the last few lines of "The Nose" state, despite the strange nature of the stories, "when you think about it, there is something, really, in all this. No matter what anyone says, such things happen in the world; rarely, but they happen."[36] Although people don't turn into bugs and noses don't drive carriages or go to church, the themes of bureaucracy and angst that run through both short stories are common to every day life. Literature is often difficult to decipher, but so are the passions of people around us. The variations in types of literature and narration mimic the complexities of human interaction, because sometimes we receive ample information as spectators while other situations require more interpretation to understand. By reading a wide variety of literature we learn to see the world through the eyes of people who are very different from us and consequently learn to make judgments about their actions that are separate from judgments about what we would do in their situations.

Furthermore, another way literature is helpful for habituating the position of the impartial spectator is that reading a novel has fairly low stakes consequences in comparison with judging actual people in real situations. There are can be important consequences if we misjudge real

[36] Nikolai Gogol, *The Diary of a Madman and Other Short Stories* (New York: Penguin Group Inc. 2005), 51.

people, whereas literary characters are not real and will not be affected by the mistakes we make as we learn to be good impartial spectators. Real acts of spectatorship can have negative consequences when the spectator judges inappropriately. Ideally, the more a person practices judging characters in books, the more likely she will be to be a good judge of herself and others in her everyday life. When we read *Pride and Prejudice*, we learn the dangers of judging based on gossip and see the way it affects people around Elizabeth Bennet. By reading books with this common theme again and again, we come to learn through habituation the importance of accurate information. Smithean sympathy is not an exact science, but the more practice we have acting as impartial spectators through literary readership, the better we will be at going through the process of sympathy concerning real people and real situations.

Of course, practice through literature is only one aspect of the education necessary to become a good impartial spectator. In part because literature only provides one-sided practice because the characters in the book are incapable of actively taking part in the sympathetic process along with the reader. As was explained in the second section of this paper, acts of spectatorship that include actual people are two sided. The agent and the spectator both desire to come to a harmonious conclusion by flatting their passions. A character in a story cannot adjust her passions in accordance with the reactions of the reader. An individual can only practice two-sided spectatorships either when reflecting on her own passions or when taking part in the process of spectatorship with other people.

The creation of experience through literary readership

As I have argued, the more a person reads, the more familiar she becomes with human experiences because she will have a stock of situations and passions she can draw upon to judge new situations that may arise. This point is closely tied to the previous section, but in this section I want to emphasize the content of spectatorship, whereas in the last section I spoke about the form of spectatorship itself. We can then take the experiences we gain from literature and use them to fill in gaps in knowledge about other people. Smithean sympathy is aided by experience from outside sources like literature, because as Weinstein explains, "for Smith, the ability to sympathize rests on either pre-existing commonalities or the ability to create commonalties by learning the contexts and perspectives of others."[37] Because we can only have a limited number of experiences first hand, we need to learn more about what it might be like to be born in another country, live in a repressive regime, or be the opposite sex in other ways. As I describe below, reading *She's Not There* allowed me to artificially construct the experiences I needed to sympathize with my sibling even though I will never experience her situation. By constructing the experience of changing genders through literature, I am now able to better dismantle the false sense of separation between my experiences and those of my transgender sibling.

Example One: She's Not There

To say I was surprised when my brother told me he was transgender a few years ago is an understatement. He explained to me that although he was born a male, he felt trapped in the wrong sex body because he knew he was meant to be female. Despite my liberal political and social views, I could not understand why my brother felt this way. Even if he would have had the words to describe his feelings to me fully, I did not have the life experiences necessary to make

[37] Jack Russell Weinstein, "Sympathy, Difference, and Education: Social Unity in the Work of Adam Smith." (Economics and Philosophy 22 (2006): 79-111), 101.

real sense of them. I could only understand my brother the same way I had always understood him, as a fun-loving, laid-back, *guy*. As was described earlier in this paper, when we cannot make sense of someone's experiences enough to understand him, we inevitably disapprove of his sentiments. I could feel myself growing to resent my brother for keeping secrets from me, and for simply being someone with whom I could not sympathize. I wanted to understand why he felt the way he did, but on some level I was incapable of replicating his experiences. Although I made every attempt to understand my brother on my own, the stock of memories and experiences in my life up to that point did not provide me with the imagination I needed to envision myself in his place.

A professor who knew what was going on suggested I read *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders*, by Jennifer Finney Boylan.[38] It is the autobiography of an English professor who is born male but transitions to a woman later in life. Although the details were different, the overarching story of James Boylan and my memories of my brother were very comparable. As I read about James's transition to Jenny, I became capable of recognizing the remarkable similarities between this woman and my brother. I came to understand Jenny as a character because of the author's ability to put her feelings into words. Through coming to a better understanding of Jennifer Finney Boylan by reading her autobiography, I was able to begin to love and understand my sibling for who she really is. I am now able to look at my sibling and see the beautiful woman she has become, who is more like me than I ever thought possible. When I was struggling to understand her before reading the book, I was imposing too many of my own expectations onto her and was unable to sympathize with her fully. Now I am closer to understanding her to my full ability because I can enter into her position in a way that would not

[38] Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (New York: Broadway, 2004).

be possible if I had not read the book.

It wasn't until I read *TMS* that I began to reflect on the process through which I came to terms with my sibling's transition. It was I who had to change my judgment and adjust the level of my passions for sympathy to occur, not my sibling. Despite my originally mistaken judgment that her passions were inappropriate, through the expansion of my moral imagination I came to understand that I was wrong. After reading *She's Not There*, I was able to adjust my passions and better imagine my sibling's position so that we could reach some kind of harmonious balance, the goal of Smithean sympathy. For Smith, the sympathetic process seems to be, at least in part, an exercise in perfecting oneself as much as possible[39], which requires expanding one's moral imagination to include many experiences one cannot fit into a single physical life. The mental life of the moral imagination need not be bound only by those experiences we have with other individuals, but rather the moral imagination is nourished from a number of sources including literature.

Although sympathy can take countless forms, the situation I describe above is a powerful example because opinions on the morality of changing one's gender vary widely from person to person. Because there is such dispute over whether it is morally acceptable to be transgender, an objector might argue that I came to approve of something that deserves disapproval simply because I was swayed by a book. People are swayed by good arguments and powerful rhetoric

[39] The pursuit of perfection plays an important role in his moral philosophy and has its roots in the Stoics. For example, Smith describes the importance of prudence as follows, "We talk of the prudence of the great general, of the great statesman, of the great legislator. Prudence is, in all these cases, combined with many greater and more splendid virtues, with valor, with extensive and strong benevolence, with a sacred regard to the rules of justice, and all these supported by a proper degree of self-command. This superior prudence, when carried to the highest degree of perfection, necessarily supposes the art, the talent, and the habit or disposition of acting with the most perfect propriety in every possible circumstance and situation. It necessarily supposes the utmost perfection of all the intellectual and of all the moral virtues. It is the best head joined to the best heart. It is the most perfect wisdom combined with the most perfect virtue" (*TMS* VI.i.14). None of these perfections is possible without the ability to view oneself and others through the eyes of an impartial spectator.

into believing things they probably should not believe. My point in this paper is not to say anything about whether or not it is actually moral to be transgender, I only mean to point out that it is a controversial issue, and I was forced to choose whether to approve or disapprove of it because of my sibling's situation. I could not simply turn to society and refer to consensus because there is not solid agreement on the issue. I had to employ the process of Smithean sympathy on my own to decide for myself whether I could sympathize with my sibling.

Because opinions about homosexuality and gender issues vary widely, many people will disagree about whether or not I should approve of my sibling's passions. Despite the lack of social consensus on the issue, I feel confident that I have come to sympathize with my sibling correctly. This is because I have thought critically about my own biases, I have read books on the issue to construct relevant experiences I lack naturally, and I have discussed the issue with both my sibling and various other people. It is possible that I have been misled by Jennifer Finney Boylan's beautiful writing style and moving story, but I have taken every precaution to make the best assessment possible. There are no set rules about which passions we should approve or disapprove of, so we can only do our best. If I had refused to discuss the issue with others and neglected to read books on the topic to get more acquainted with the issue, I would have disapproved of my sibling wrongly. That disapproval would have been inappropriate because it was hasty and riddled with both transparent and hidden biases. I have done everything in my power to be the best impartial spectator I can, so I need to trust the decision I have made to approve of my sibling.

The imagined experience of being transgender that I have constructed is probably a combination of Jennifer Finney Boylan's book, movies I've seen about gender issues, and conversations I have had with my sibling. All of these aspects come together to build up an

experience that I have never really had, but that I can imagine more clearly every time I read more about the issue or have in depth conversations about what it might be like to be transgender. The creation of artificial experiences is like painting a picture of someplace you have never been. You only have second hand information, but as you gather more information and stories the picture becomes clearer and more accurate. The continuous creation and modification of artificial experiences brings us ever closer to being able to imaginatively construct an accurate portrayal of the experience of others. The more nuanced our conception of their experiences, the more we can sympathize with them and the more impartial our judgments will become. If we judge others based on an inaccurate picture that contains unexamined biases, then we will not be able to fully sympathize with them or judge their passions appropriately.

Example Two: 1984

The preceding example of literature I mentioned represents "real" people, at least in some sense, because the situations in *She's Not There* are so similar to the situations of actual people that it is easy to see how they relate to spectatorship. However, the relationship between novels and our moral imagination need not always be so straightforward. In this section, I will describe the way *1984* by George Orwell can provide experiences for real acts of spectatorship despite the fact that it is written about a situation that has not, and may never come to pass. Although the details of *1984* may bear little resemblance to contemporary life, the themes of physical and psychological torture can be applied to real acts of spectatorship.

Because *1984* is not about real events, the experiences we gain from reading it are more abstract and may take more work to apply to real situations. Many readers of Orwell's work will never experience physical or psychological torture, and probably have inaccurate thoughts about

what they would do if they found themselves the victims of the most severe forms of torture. We often like to think we would be the type of people who would never betray a secret, and would withstand torture without giving any information about loved ones to the perpetrators. But if we judge others according to these criteria, we risk judging them inappropriately and with bias because we hardly know what it would be like to be in their shoes. Reading an account of torture like the one found at the end of *1984* may be able to help correct this bias by at least forcing us to question our expectations of ourselves were we ever to became the victims of torture.

In *1984*, the reader watches as Winston Smith and Julia fall in love and attempt to resist the influence of Big Brother. But by the end of the book, both Winston and Julia have betrayed one another under the pressures of intense physiological and physical torture. The final aspect of Winston's torture is the threat of being eaten alive by starving rats, his greatest fear in the world. It is not enough for the reader to imagine being eaten alive by rats, which would be terrible for anyone, but rather the reader must imagine what she would do if she were confronted by her greatest fear. The torturer O'Brien explains, "The worst thing in the world varies from individual to individual. It may be burial alive, or death by fire, or by drowning, or by impalement, or fifty other deaths. There are cases where it is some quite trivial thing, not even fatal."[40] The reader must judge Winston knowing death by rats is his greatest fear in the world, understanding exactly what "greatest fear" means. She enters into Winston's position and imagines rats are her greatest fear, and judges Winston accordingly. When the cage of rats is put on Winston's head, he betrays his beloved Julia to save himself.

The reader may not judge Winston as harshly if she makes a true attempt to put herself in his place and comes to feel what Winston feels. In some sense, she becomes Winston for a

[40] George Orwell, 1984 (Signet Classic, New York) pp.238

moment "as it were" and feels his suffering, and his relief when he final gives in to the torture by betraying Julia. As it turns out, Julia betrays Winston under similar circumstances when confronted with her greatest fear. The reader may come to the realization that even she would betray a loved one if she was put under that level of pressure and was faced with the very thing that terrifies her most in the world.

However, despite the reader's sympathy with Winston's plight, I think it is likely that most readers of 1984 still disapprove of Winston's betrayal of Julia. We understand why he betrayed Julia, and maybe we even come to realize we would do the exact same thing in a similar situation, but we still think he was wrong. This is because when we take up the position of an impartial spectator, we can see that the betrayal of a loved one is wrong. Even though the reader might be willing to admit that she would betray her lover in the same state of utter torture, she can still judge Winston as blameworthy. Smith explains that one of the methods we use to judge actions is "the idea of that degree of proximity or distance from this complete perfection, which the actions of the greater part of men commonly arrive at. Whatever goes beyond this degree, how far soever it may be removed from absolute perfection, seems to deserve applause; and whatever falls short of it, to deserve blame" (*TMS* I.i.5.9). This means that rather than take complete perfection as the measure of actions, we judge people according to what we expect good people can achieve. Taking the position of the impartial spectator allows us to step back and reflect on Winston's entire situation. There are people who have withstood the most severe forms of torture without ever revealing important secrets or betraying loved ones. Although those people are not perfect, they create a "degree" from which we can judge the actions of others. Although as an individual, the reader may sympathize with Winston and realize she too would take the same action, she also knows that the betrayal is blameworthy nonetheless because

it is too far removed from the degree of perfection attainable by virtuous people.[41]

My point here is not to make any claims about what is expected of torture victims, but rather to describe a tricky situation where we both sympathize with an agent and disapprove of the action at the same time. While it is true that a story like 1984 may only bring the reader a fraction closer to understanding the horrors of torture, that fraction is still a step in the right direction. We need to judge our own actions and the actions of others everyday, but if we limit ourselves to only judging those with whom we can sympathize using our actual experiences, we will be unduly limited. With those limitations, I would not have been able to grapple with my own issues that arose when I confronted my misunderstandings about my sibling since I am not transgender. We would not be able to make moral claims about whether perpetrators of heinous crimes deserve punishment if we have not been the perpetrators or victims of horrible crimes ourselves. Our moral imagination is what fills these gaps in our experiences and allows us to do the best job we possibly can when we make judgments about the situations of others, even when we do not have any analogous experiences ourselves.

IV. Objections

When we judge the passions of characters in stories, we must reflect on our judgments to see if we are being swayed by bias. Readers are not "foolproof," because literature can misrepresent the world. As Nussbaum explains, novels can present falsehoods as fact, and they

[41] As I discussed in section two, there are some interpretive issues among Smith scholars regarding how it is possible to sympathize with an agent and still disapprove of the agent's actions. It is possible that we sympathize with the agent at time one but not at time two when we come to disapprove, or we may be confusing the emotion of compassion or empathy with the process of sympathy in these cases. Either way, the important point is that we reflect upon our acts of sympathy to decide whether we really should approve or disapprove of the agent's actions and we are capable of changing our minds as new information arises or we see the situation from a new and more impartial angle.

"can also misrepresent the importance of various types of suffering or harm, leading us to think them either graver or lighter than they really are."[42] Novels, just like real people, can sway us into sympathizing with someone who might deserve our disapproval. Literature distorts reality in such a way that it sometimes seems impossible to take an impartial view of the characters because one of the purposes of literature is to persuade us take a specific, *partial* view of a situation.

Therefore an important objection to my claim that the process of learning to judge others through literary readership is valuable is that a reliance on literature might dispose people to approve of too many things. As I said in the last paragraph, literature often attempts to convince us to sympathize with someone we normally would not. I touched on this potential objection when I discussed my personal experience of coming to sympathize with my transgender sibling. In the same way a conservative person might claim I have been swayed by literature to approve of my sibling, the objector might point to the fact that we often like the antagonist of a story better than the protagonist, even if the antagonist performs unethical actions. We come to understand the antagonist's point of view as we read the novel and recognize why she feels passions that traditionally gain disapproval. If the antagonist murders someone in the novel, although we may be able to sympathize with her, murder is not something that should gain our approval.

One of the keys to answering this objection lies in the difference between the common meaning of empathy and the process of Smithean sympathy. When we like the antagonist despite her negative actions, it is possible that we are empathizing with her but not sympathizing in the Smithean sense. Similarly to the case of Winston Smith, we are capable of liking a character,

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[42] *Poetic Justice*, 75.

and maybe even empathizing with him without approving of his actions. For example, many readers of Thomas Harris's novel *The Silence of the Lambs*[43] like the character Hannibal Lecter despite the fact that he is a cannibalistic serial killer. This certainly does not mean however that readers approve of his actions. Smithean sympathy is one of many ways we connect with characters and is not necessarily present every time we enjoy a story or find a character interesting. Rather, Smithean sympathy arises when we reflect on a character's actions, attempt to enter into her situation, and view the character from the position of a benevolent and impartial spectator. If we view Hannibal Lecter from this impartial position, we will surely disapprove of his cannibalism. This is not inconsistent with being entertained by villains in novels.

The question then becomes, how do we avoid approving of inappropriate actions in the Smithean sense? We are often swayed by literature the same way we are swayed by people in real acts of spectatorship. These cases are good examples of why we need to take the position of an *impartial* spectator, not just a spectator in the general sense. We may be swayed by the charisma of a morally reprehensible character, but an impartial spectator would not be won over. These are times when we need to check our own judgments and intuitions against the way an impartial spectator would judge the situation through critical reflection.

If we reflect on our reaction to a book and find ourselves sympathizing with the antagonist, the next step is to have a conversation with other readers. If we only read in isolation, we risk perpetuating our own biases and not recognizing our own partial judgments. As Weinstein explains, we must have conversations with others because,

> Moral judgment is a product of interaction, and is enabled by the ability to learn about others. For Smith, thinking for oneself is a group activity. It allows an

[43] Thomas Harris. *The Silence of the Lambs*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998.

> individual to be constituted at least in part by others, even if persons are, at root, fundamentally separate. […]This entails both being taught and figuring things out for oneself.[44]

Part of being a good spectator for Smith is continuing education and taking part in a community of other spectators. If we were only able to judge the passions of others in isolation, then the objector would be right to worry that we risk approving of actions that actually deserve disapproval. But by critically reflecting on our own judgments and discussing these judgments with others, we gain a clearer picture of the character's motives and personal history. The final judgment of a passion with either approval or disapproval will always be indeterminate, but it is our responsibility to make the most informed judgment possible. Conversation with others can help safeguard against hasty judgments, which are often based on hidden biases and misinformation.

Finally, literature provides insight into the complications that arise in actual acts of spectatorship with other people. Correcting our inappropriate judgments of literature through critical reflection and conversation with others provides important practice for seeing our incorrect judgments of real people. It may often be the case that characters and situations are more nuanced than they appear. Perhaps it is possible to sympathize with one action of an agent and not another. For example, maybe we can sympathize in the Smithean sense with Winston Smith's desire to get the cage of rats off his head, but we are unable to sympathize with his betrayal of Julia. Many characters that commit unethical acts still have good in them that deserve approval because people and their motivations are complex. The correction of our biased judgments through critical reflection will help readers become better impartial spectators through

[44] Weinstein, 91.

habituation because they will be come better able to see the nuances of agents and their circumstances.

V. CONCLUSION

Although Smithean sympathy is a process we take part in naturally as members of a society, we can only be good spectators if we practice taking the position of the impartial spectator and critically reflect on our judgments. As I have argued in this paper, literature provides a way for us to practice spectatorship without the consequences that come along with making mistakes when judging real people. We can safely reflect on our judgments and change our minds as conversations with others help us see new aspects of the situation that we did not notice at first. Literature also provides a way to build up a stock of experiences, which can be applied together with our personal life histories to create the most informed judgments possible. Although we may never reach the ideal of perfectly impartial spectatorship, through literature we are able to come ever closer to that goal.

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