

Education of Literary Classics and Cultivation of Empathy*

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Abstract—Previous researches have shown that reading literature fosters empathy. However, problems still exist in the educational function of reading literary classics and the classroom approaches. This paper is intended to discuss the values of literary classics education in the new era and strategies of cultivating empathy in the basic stage of English major. It is indicated that there is a close linkage between education of literary classics and cultivation of empathy. The education of literary classics can cultivate empathy, making people behave better, think better, and making the world become better. To effectively improve empathy in literary classics education, it's necessary to connect inside and outside of the classroom and combine reading with writing appropriately.

Keywords—*literary classics; empathy; humanistic education; strategies*

I. INTRODUCTION

Education objectives of the New Era must meet the requirements of the New Era. To develop quality education, importance should be attached to cultivation of empathy. Today, the rapid development of technology is fundamentally changing the way people live, work, study and interacts with each other. The Fourth Industrial Revolution will see the world reshaped by artificial intelligence, robotics and other technological breakthroughs. But the future of the world should ultimately be shaped by human beings. The earth is our common home. To survive and reproduce, human beings need to have empathy consciousness to establish an interdependent relationship with all life to maintain the harmony of the earth society. Actually, empathy is increasingly seen as one of the fundamental forces in addressing global challenges. Empathy is an innate ability, it is also a skill that can be learned. The relationship between literature reading and empathy development has already been scientifically proven (Kidd & Castano, 2013). New researches add to evidence that reading literature fosters empathy (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015; Junker & Jacquemin, 2017; Michael Fischer, 2017; Thexton, Prasad & Mills, 2019). Researchers have studied how to learn empathy through literature from many aspects. This is very necessary, which will further strengthen the empathy

education. However, little research has been done on the fit between literary classics reading and its educational function in the New Era, and the classroom approaches that can be adopted to improve students' empathy through literary classics. On this account, this paper focuses on education of literary classics and cultivation of empathy, discussing the values of reading literature classics and the strategies of cultivating empathy in the basic stage of English major, so as to effectively improve the humanistic quality of foreign language talents and lay a solid foundation for the realization of the long-term goals of education modernization.

II. CONNOTATION OF LITERARY CLASSICS

Literary classics are elite masterpieces, Harold Bloom (1994), the American literary critic, argues. They are elegant and noble with incomparable imagination and aesthetic dignity and competitiveness, the characters, narrative structures and language styles of which are unique, and the influence of which is extensive and profound. As Bloom says, "unless it demands rereading, the work does not qualify", a classic is a book that makes you re-read, and each re-reading is as revealing as the first time. It never runs out of what it wants to tell to its readers, and constitutes a valuable experience for its readers. Literary classics, with its powerful literary originality, becomes the true art of memory, the basis of cultural thinking, "the fundamental carrier to maintain national emotion, national identity, national consciousness and shared values and aesthetics" and "imperceptibly and silently expresses, transmits, shapes and promotes the living souls of various nations. This is also the indispensable and irreplaceable permanent value and permanent charm of literature." (Chen Zhongyi, 2015)

III. EMPATHY AND RELATED CONCEPTS

A. Empathy

Empathy is "the power of entering into another's personality and imaginatively experiencing his experiences" (Sidney Landau, 1989). According to Daniel Goleman in *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, "[Empathy is] awareness of others' feelings, needs and concerns." Thus, empathy is the ability to put yourself in others' shoes and understand their feelings, desires, thoughts and behaviors.

*Fund: This paper is sponsored by the Scientific Research Project of Shandong Institutions of Higher Learning in 2018(J18RA216)

But it's more than that. It not only recognizes another's feelings, but also values and respects the feelings of another.

It means treating others with kindness, dignity and understanding. This is a divine human quality, an indispensable quality in most of us.

The word "empathy" comes from the German word *Einfühlung*, which was created by German aesthetician Robert Vischer in 1872 for aesthetic field, mainly referring to the phenomenon that when people observe and understand an object, they project their own life and emotion into it, to be infected by it, to understand and appreciate its beauty, so as to achieve integration with the object. Later, the term was adopted by the German philosopher and historian William Dilthey to describe the psychological process by which a person enters the inner world of others and understands their feelings and thoughts. In 1909, Edward Bradford Titchener, a representative of American structural psychology, translated *Einfühlung* into English word empathy for the first time, and the psychological term empathy quickly became popular in the West. The use of empathy is an important part of the counseling technique developed by American psychologist Carl Rogers. Mr. Rogers believes that for a person to "grow", they need an environment that provides them with genuineness, acceptance, and empathy.

Actually, the concept of empathy can be traced back to Confucius, the ancient Chinese thinker and educator from 551 BC to 479 BC. In Confucian Analects, Tsze-kung asked, "Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?" The master said, "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." The word reciprocity here is similar to empathy. If a person can put himself in the shoes of others, then he is on the path of benevolence, which is the essence of empathy consciousness.

Against the background of economic globalization, empathy consciousness appears the trend of globalization. Economic globalization and social informatization have not only created unprecedented development opportunities, but also brought about new threats and challenges: large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions from human activities contribute to global warming, the earth's environment has been severely damaged. Meanwhile, inequality in income distribution and imbalance in development space have been growing, and xenophobia, political populism and terrorism are on the rise. The human environment is deteriorating along with the natural environment consequently. So, there is a growing awareness that the planet inhabited by mankind is the common home of mankind. A common home needs to be maintained and protected by all. Living in the common homeland, people should take care of each other and be responsible for each other.

B. Empathy vs. Sympathy

Sympathy is acknowledging the pain that another person is suffering. It is the perception, understanding, and response to the misfortunes or needs of another form of life, a sharing of others' feelings. Sympathy might be considered "feeling for" someone. Empathy, instead, is "feeling with" that person,

through the use of imagination. Empathy goes far beyond sympathy. Empathy understands the feelings of others, but does not necessarily share them.

One expresses empathy and shares sympathy. Sympathy is genuine and heartfelt, but, empathy is a deeper feeling. It creates a deeper and more meaningful connection, becoming a broader bridge between individuals or leaders and their followers. Both empathy and sympathy are based on compassion. It is a complex emotion of understanding and accepting others that is derived from knowledge and wisdom. Both empathy and sympathy mean caring for another person, but with empathy, caring is enhanced or expanded by being able to feel the other person's emotions.

Empathy and sympathy are not mutually exclusive, nor are they always felt at the same time. For example, a person who has lost a loved one will receive a lot of sympathy, but only those who have experienced similar bereavements can truly empathize. Sympathy and empathy are considered vital to human consciousness. People who lack this ability are often classified as narcissists, sociopaths, or, in extreme cases, psychopaths. However, these terms apply only if one consistently lacks sympathy or empathy.

C. Empathy vs. Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind (abbreviated as ToM) is the ability to understand the state of mind of oneself and others and thus predict relevant behaviors based on that. It attributes the beliefs, intentions, desires, emotional knowledge, etc. of mental state to oneself and others, and understands that others have beliefs, desires, intentions and viewpoints which are different from one's own. ToM represents a fundamental mental activity.

Theory of Mind is considered a theory because the mind is not directly visible. One never knows what others are thinking, one can only make assumptions based on his own beliefs, emotions and perceptions. ToM is inborn, it starts to appear around the age of four, and improves over time. ToM is essential to our everyday social interactions, and is also used in analyzing, judging and inferring the behavior of others.

Empathy is similar to Theory of Mind, but slightly different from it. Empathy is built on ToM, that is, empathy understands that because of differences, other people see things differently from us, and maybe differently from reality, they have different beliefs, intentions, desires, and emotions, etc. More clearly, empathy refers to the ability to infer another person's emotional state, or to feel what another person has to feel, whereas Theory of Mind is the ability to understand and attribute a particular mental state to an action, without having to feel it or align oneself with that state of mind.

IV. VALUES OF LITERARY CLASSICS EDUCATION AND STRATEGIES OF CULTIVATING EMPATHY

Literary classics education is closely related to the development of empathy. Literature builds a culture of empathy, making people realize that others' destinies are

linked to their own. Reading literature is extraordinarily important to cultivate love and empathy: reading literature, especially literary classics of superb quality, will strengthen the core values such as civility, justice, integrity and friendship, etc. making people more capable of thinking, better at critical thinking, more tolerant of the views of others, more concerned about others, and thus inspire the hope for a better world.

A. Values of Literary Classics Education in the New Era

1) Reading literary classics makes people behave better:

In the New Era, "Strengthening moral education and talent cultivation", the fundamental task of China's higher education, is to pursue the all-round development of people. This idea is embodied in humanistic education, while reading literary classics can better reflect the characteristics of humanistic education. Can reading literary classics make people better? The answer is in the affirmative. Kidd & Castano (2013) conclude through experiments that reading literary fiction improves Theory of Mind, "we propose that by prompting readers to take an active writer role to form representations of characters' subjective states, literary fiction recruits ToM." Literary novels tend to focus on the inner world of characters, readers must get inside the characters, and psychological effects result thereby. Reading *Jane Eyre* will inevitably have feelings for Jane, experience her pain and suffering in her bumpy life, and understand her pursuit for freedom and dignity. In the novel, readers can understand the characters' actions from their interior point of view by entering into their situations and minds. The emotional and moral dilemmas in the book will push the reader into the characters' mind and experience the emotional and moral complexity, thus increasing his or her ability to empathize in real life. Frequently reading novels, especially literary classics, will undoubtedly help people better perceive others' feelings, understand their opinions, care for their concerns and shape the way people see the world.

Reading literary classics can resonate strongly with readers and motivate people to perform better in the real world. Literature brings readers into another world and provides readers with the key to open the inner world of others, so people can see through the eyes of others and experience what can't be experienced in real life. When reading *The Old Man and The Sea*, readers will be shocked by the immortal voice of "a man can be destroyed, but not defeated!" Seeing the thrilling epic battle between the old fisherman Santiago and the large marlin, readers know how the old man feels inside. On the boundless sea, Santiago has been abandoned by all, he is left in isolation, but just as Hemingway wants to prove, it is not until a man is isolated that he can prove himself honorable and worthy. Three days and nights he battles the fish is a trial of his mental and physical courage that becomes the ultimate test of his worth as a man. His courage, his endurance, his perseverance, and his fighting spirit are all with his readers and will always inspire people: humans should be indomitable against terrible odds. All art is metaphor. Metaphor has a special ability to evoke deep emotional responses and elevate the human spirit. While reading, readers become Jane Eyre or

Santiago, and understand them from the inside, which helps people become better and much stronger in reality.

2) Reading literary classics makes people think better:

There is no doubt that reading literary classics can improve people's thinking. In 2013, three researchers at the University of Toronto led by psychologist Maja Djikic, wrote in *Creativity Research Journal* that reading fictional literature could lead to better procedures of processing information generally, including those of creativity. Reading more literary fiction allows people to engage in complex thinking, improving their critical thinking skills. There's a strong link between empathy and critical thinking skills. Reading a novel, one will think together with its characters, even experience it together, no matter how repulsive he or she finds the character. This double release – thinking through events regardless of their urgency and durability, and thinking differently – can have the effect of opening the mind. Reading literary fiction helps people accept ambiguous ideas and avoid hasty judgments. It is acknowledged that people are usually uncomfortable with ambiguity. That's very common, but it's a big problem. Suppressing this restless impulse can lead to hasty judgment, rigid thinking and poor decision-making. Nevertheless, reading literature may provide a way for people to be more likely to open their hearts and show greater creativity.

People who read frequently will become better at reading, and will become more perceptive about others and their opinions. There's nothing like reading the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities* to elevate people's thinking: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way — " From these opening sentences, Dickens's humanitarian thought can be profoundly understood. Charles Dickens lived in a time when the United Kingdom was gradually getting rid of domestic and foreign troubles and becoming a modern power. Dickens saw its glory and knew its darkness as well. The rapid changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution made him proud, and also made him realize that the world was not perfect. In his works, including *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist*, Dickens not only attacked the ugliness of society and human nature to arouse people's moral consciousness, but also guided people to think about how to reform the drawbacks and transform the imperfect world so that all people could live with dignity in a warm space. Reading is thinking, and reading literary classics is indeed thinking deeply.

3) Reading literary classics makes the world become better:

The real beauty and wonder of literary fiction is that it allows people to empathize. The capacity to empathize is a revered trait in most societies across the world. Empathy is considered a motivating factor for unselfish, prosocial behavior, whereas a lack of empathy is related to antisocial behavior. In an increasingly complex global economy and in

work environments that require cooperation, it is a skill which can make young people more productive. And more importantly, it is what turns today's students into future leaders. In the 21st century in which few other forces could compel people to put themselves in others' shoes, literature, with unparalleled aesthetic and cognitive values, offers an almost limitless range of life situations and experiences to inspire the endless imagination that is alive there and then. The individual thoughts and feelings expressed in great literature can surely represent the common thoughts and feelings of a nation, even human nature. Wonderful literature will force people to face the world and themselves with great complexity. Literary classics can lead human spirit to cross the line between the visible and the invisible, bringing people all over the world closer and closer.

Better world needs better literature. Literary classics is, and will be, a great achievement of human beings. Literature shows how different people relate to each other and how those relationships have impact on thoughts and feelings of other characters, so that people are provided with a cross section of the interwoven human relationships. This cross section tells the inner thoughts and feelings of others, shows their interactions, drawing people into their experiences and making people care about them almost as deeply as they care about themselves and their beloved ones. "Deep understanding is, I believe, the most precious gift one can give to another." as Carl Rogers puts it. In today's world, all people are interdependent and share a common destiny. For young people to become global citizens of a community of Shared future, seeds of empathy must be planted now, to increase understanding and trust, and to bridge differences. Only in this way can the world people share be a better place.

B. Effective Strategies to Improve Empathy in Literary Classics Education

1) Connecting inside and outside of the classroom to expand life tension:

Implementing literary classics education for freshmen from the beginning of the university can arouse a kind of serenity, a kind of awe in their souls, making their life more meaningful and full. Take English Reading course for English majors as an example. Generally, each volume of the textbooks contains literary classics. Teachers should consciously expand reading from inside to outside of the classroom, assigning great books recommended by Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee of Colleges and Universities for students to read. Sow in spring and harvest in autumn. By reading works of strong appeal and penetrating the classics step by step, students will get more aesthetic power; their inner self will be improved gradually.

First of all, teachers should have a good reading literacy. Only by accumulating the thickness of classical knowledge, improving the scope of reading, and enriching the wisdom of reading classics, can teachers actively carry out classroom design and guide reading practice effectively. Secondly, the purpose of reading classics should be clarified. Why read? Because "literature is a form of the good." (Harold Bloom, 2001), it is the path to wisdom. Just as Henry James said, reading classics will give rise to a noble moral sense in the

heart, a love of justice, truth and light, a magnanimity in dealing with people and doing things, and a sense of pride to make unremitting efforts for a better future of mankind. Reading the wisdom of great writers will make one more decent. It enlarges life, and diminishes no one. Certainly, the form of reading also plays a decisive role. Essentially, students should not read classics only to complete the reading task. "It matters, if individuals are to retain any capacity to form their own judgments and opinions, that they continue to read for themselves." Here, Bloom also introduces a formula of how to read: find what comes near to you that can be put to the use of weighing and considering, and that addresses you as though you share the one nature, free of time's tyranny. More clearly stated, students should be allowed to choose reading independently and choose works which are close to their hearts from the recommended reading bibliography.

Reading books close to the heart will give students an unexpected pleasure and even surprise. They will be amazed that there is so much understanding between the author and the reader: what he (she) has said is so close to their mind, just as what they are thinking. Time is far, but the distance is near. Reading human emotions in human language needs reading them with human nature, with whole body and mind, how can students' vitality not be expanded!

2) Combining reading and writing to enhance the power of mind:

The education of literary classics will perfect students' mind. In *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman tells people that the knowledge acquired from the cultivation of literature expands and enlarges the mind, enriches and ennobles all people: "it enables him to act his part in each of them with better grace and more elevated carriage; and, if happily planned and conducted, is a main ingredient in that complete and generous education which fits a man 'to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously, all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war'." He stresses that the function of university is intellectual culture, that is, to educate the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it.

To begin with, it is very necessary that education of literary classics follow the principle of "creative reading and creative writing" and enlarge the mind through the combination of reading and writing. The significance of creative reading and creative writing lies in the fact that the page of whatever book people read becomes luminous with manifold allusion when the mind is braced by labor and invention. Reading and writing are mutually beneficial. Reading is an active process, an active mental process. When an active mind accepts the truth, and then writes creatively through reflecting, questioning, and self-discovering, valuable thoughts, even wisdom, are formed accordingly. Creative reading furnishes the mind, while creative writing transforms the mind. Only through transforming can thoughts become deeper and reach a higher level. The human mind depends on the depth to which life is transformed into truth, "Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing." (Emerson, 1937)

In addition, writing styles should be diversified to facilitate the development of thinking. Students can be encouraged to write Book Reflection, Book Review, Book Report, etc. to cultivate their independent thinking and complete personality. Book Reflection is creative thinking of a book, which needs reflecting one's own life and deeper issues of society and humanity. A Book Report is a brief statement of the book, that is, a summary of the main subject and plot, with comment on it, and explanation of the reasons for recommending this book. While Book Review is highly personal, which is the description, critical analysis and evaluation of quality, significance and importance of the book. Students' writing can be shared on the online teaching platform, in this way, a learning community can be formed simultaneously. This is a kind of creative process to express personal understanding and internalize external viewpoints in words, which can make students' thinking more precise, logical and profound. As is known to all, teaching students to acquire knowledge is an integral part of universities, but to be more effective, universities should encourage creativity, kindling the young mind with the flame of knowledge. And empathy is the foundation of good creativity.

V. CONCLUSION

All in all, the education of literary classics has been endowed with brand-new significance in the New Era. There is a strong linkage between education of literary classics and cultivation of empathy. Empathy is the root of humanity and the foundation that helps young people become good, caring people while education of literary classics is an important force to improve empathy. As a complement to the best part of liberal education, the education of literary classics elevates people to a new moral consciousness based on the community of shared future for mankind. In today's people-oriented world, people are the priority in education. To cultivate human resources that are creative enough to coexist peacefully and harmoniously with others and with nature, humanistic values are the foundation. Only by respecting life and human dignity can education shape a future that benefits all. To achieve human progress and well-being, more humanity, more understanding, and more empathy are needed. The more the individuals can be reminded of what can be shared, the better the world will be. It is hoped that, with further theoretical work, there will be more in-depth discussions to support educational activities. Sow the seeds of empathy today and harvest the beautiful future tomorrow.

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