

International Baccalaureate
Theory of Knowledge

Do we learn more about human nature and
personality from novels than we do from
scientific psychology?

Theory of Knowledge
Word Count: 1,289
2/25/08

When we read an engrossing novel, get caught up in a newspaper article, or even write our own account of some human affair, we inadvertently add to our knowledge of the human experience. Somehow we can relate strongly to written words; we can remember them, feel them on a personal level, and share them with those around us. Through written expression we can experience the lives of others with the benefit of having our own unique perspective. We can broaden our range of understanding, challenge our own convictions, and even acquire new ideas and goals. Elizabeth Hardwick once said that reading is “moral illumination.” Her sentiment, as well as her own literary contributions, perfectly describes the role of novels as learning tools.

In order to assess the relative merit of novels and scientific psychology as means of learning about humans, however, it is first necessary to examine the meaning of the word “learn” as it relates to human behavior and personality.

Learning is usually thought of as an additive process. Most perceived knowledge is based on previously accumulated knowledge, gained through multiple ways of knowing. While many different kinds of information can be internalized and carried around by the human brain, there are many instances that suggest that we most effectively “learn” when we use multiple ways of knowing to perceive a piece of information. We have a stronger mental connection with things that we can perceive emotionally as well as see, as opposed to something we may only be able to reason with. Our feelings toward a loved one, for example, may be clearer to us than a historical fact or a physical description. There is also evidence to show that each of us learns in a unique

way, that what holds true for one may not necessarily hold true for another. It is evident in school, for example, that many students have their own way of studying. Even so, individual tendencies toward certain ways of knowing do not refute the claim that one can learn more effectively when more than one process is involved in taking in information. When we hear, see, and write about a specific topic, we have a higher likelihood of remembering facts and why they are important.

The terms “human life and personality” are multifaceted. The way we think directly affects the way we act, both independently and with others. We may act predictably or surprise all involved. The complex, changing network of cause and effect that continuously defines our lives is hard to make absolute sense of. In novels, we are given a chance to see worlds apart from our own, free of our own circumstances. We are exposed to characters with different situations and minds, with different constraints or sensibilities. We are often invited to know these characters intimately and judge them according to standards different than our own. The sheer act of reading a novel is an exercise in temporarily putting one's own life and set of limitations at a distance and engaging in another. This is not to say that we completely forget ourselves for the sake of a good read, but rather that novels offer a new slate upon which we can broaden our range of learning.

We are able to know the world of a novel on many valuable levels. Descriptions present in literary works allow us to perceive what we are reading somewhat visually, illustrating in our mind's eye what is presented to us through language. We can usually remember such images vividly, almost as though they are or once were a part of our own physical reality. Our relationships with characters change and sometimes grow over the

course of a novel. We react to their impressions, thoughts, and emotions with those of our own. It is common to feel an emotional attachment to characters with whom we feel a likeness or special connection. Their actions and motives are presented to us along with their reasoning behind them and we can use our own reasoning to, in turn, assess the reasoning characters place behind their actions and judge them accordingly. By doing so, we allow ourselves to indirectly abridge our own convictions. Sense perception, emotion, and reason are all ways of knowing employed in reading that are enabled by language—the key factor in the sharing and learning of concepts. Because we inevitably engage our minds so fully in what we read, we are able to internalize the human elements present in literature.

Psychology - the study of the brain and its many functions – is an ever-useful science, without which many developments in the way we view the mind would not have been possible. Psychology, as a science, attempts to study the human brain in a scientific way, zeroing in on a specific trend or phenomenon in order to broaden what is known about how and why humans think and act the way they do. Like many other kinds of carefully considered, meticulous scientific observations, however, new findings in psychology are mostly inaccessible to all but a few. The general population does not receive the most updated news in psychology, is not necessarily able to interpret the language the science itself has taken on, and does not possess the needed background knowledge of past research necessary in order for new compilations of research to be meaningful. Again, language is a key factor. The comparison of novels to science is not

necessarily one of content, but one of communication. Novels can relay humans to humans in a critical way that science, it seems, cannot always manage.

To be sure, psychology itself offers inspiration and creative outlet. Oliver Sacks, a well-known neurologist and author, is appreciated for his intimate, story-like accounts of unique cases in neuroscience and psychology. He illustrates many mysterious and nearly magical irregularities in the human brain that cannot directly be explained by current science, preferring to focus on the emotional and interpersonal implications that the disorders put forth. His books often closely resemble thought-provoking works of fiction, allowing one to understand the life of a patient with a unique disorder otherwise impossible to wrap one's mind around. It is possible for literature and science to collaborate in a remarkable way!

Novels themselves are the creations of human beings. Human beings, as we know, all have their own ideas, perspectives, opinions, backgrounds, associations, prejudice, inspirations, and motives that can come to life in writing. In reading a novel, then, we witness the creative work of one who may share or may have shared our own experiences on earth. This adds a new dimension to the knowledge that is gained by reading.

The importance of reading in understanding ourselves and the world around us makes the preservation of good reading habits all the more crucial. Over the past few decades, time spent reading by the average individual has decreased steadily. Many often see reading as unimportant and unnecessary, given the wide range of information

available at the push of a button, day or night. While it is true that we are increasingly surrounded by masses of new information, we should not automatically value or respect this information over literature and other art forms. Books continue to offer beauty, insight, and relevance with the passage of time, very much unlike many modern-day preoccupations.

If the purpose of understanding and learning about human nature is to affect the way normal people think about themselves and those around them, then scientific psychology alone is not as useful as literature. It is reasonable to assert that novels are more conducive to the understanding of the finer points of human experience. Literature, -or the depth of language literature encompasses- is accessible, inclusive, and perhaps the most widespread tool for discovery we have.

Word Count: 1,289