

AP Literature Summer Reading Assignment 2017

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”

– Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird

Part of the beauty of being human is being able to connect with others, across time, distance, gender, race, culture, language, and upbringing through the power of the written word. Literature not only broadens our horizons, it builds empathy. This allows us to avoid misunderstanding, disagree compassionately, and resolve conflict respectfully. Multiple studies have shown that people who have empathy are more effective in business, leadership, and personal relationships. Reading and studying literature is one of the most beneficial practices to develop empathy (see the attached article by Julianne Chiaet from *Scientific American*). In AP Literature and Composition next year, we will focus on analyzing and understanding works of literary merit to further your knowledge of literature, prepare for the AP Exam, explore humanity, and practice empathizing with people that experience life differently.

For your Summer Reading Assignment, select a text from the AP reading list* that you feel challenges your current worldview or is told from a perspective that is significantly different than your own. Use the following website to see summaries for all of the books on the AP reading list, which will help you choose the right text: goo.gl/hgw7cq. After you finish your reading, choose an assignment from the options below to complete and turn in at the beginning of the next school year.

1. Letter to a Main Character

- Write a detailed letter to a main character explaining to them how your experience with his or her story challenged your worldview and encouraged you to see things differently. Use text evidence from the attached article, as well as your piece, to express to the character how reading this piece has helped you develop empathy.

2. Body Biography

- Create a visual representation that demonstrates the similarities and differences between yourself and a main character from your selected piece. This should be a poster-sized image that shows your situation and traits on one side and the character's situation and traits on the other. Then, somewhere on your visual, write a paragraph using text evidence from the attached article and your selected piece to express how these similarities and differences challenged your worldview and helped you develop empathy.

3. Found Poem

- Using words from the attached article and your selected piece, create a found poem (poem made with words found in another piece of writing). Your poem should not only demonstrate the different perspective or challenging worldview that you experienced in your piece, it should express a theme about how this experience helped you develop empathy. Make sure to develop your poem, organizing your stanzas according to the meaning you are making.

4. Diary Entries

- Step into the world of your selected piece and write 3-5 journal entries from the perspective of a main character. As you do this, consider the similarities and differences between your world and the world of your character. Try to get in your character's mind and really show his or her perspective. Then, using text evidence from the attached article and your piece, write an introduction for your journal entries expressing how taking on the role of your character challenged your worldview and helped you develop empathy.

***NOTE: This is an AP class; some of the titles from The College Board may contain challenging content or something you or your parents feel is not suitable for you at this time. Remember, you have the choice to read what you want off of the entire list, so feel free to search for something appropriate for you.**

Novel Finding: Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy

How important is reading fiction in socializing school children? Researchers at The New School in New York City have found evidence that literary fiction improves a reader's capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling.

Emanuele Castano, a social psychologist, along with PhD candidate David Kidd conducted five studies in which they divided a varying number of participants (ranging from 86 to 356) and gave them different reading assignments: excerpts from genre (or popular) fiction, literary fiction, nonfiction or nothing. After they finished the excerpts the participants took a test that measured their ability to infer and understand other people's thoughts and emotions. The researchers found, to their surprise, a significant difference between the literary- and genre-fiction readers.

When study participants read non-fiction or nothing, their results were unimpressive. When they read excerpts of genre fiction, such as Danielle Steel's *The Sins of the Mother*, their test results were dually insignificant. However, when they read literary fiction, such as *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich, their test results improved markedly—and, by implication, so did their capacity for empathy. The study was published October 4 in *Science*.

The results are consistent with what literary criticism has to say about the two genres—and indeed, this may be the first empirical evidence linking literary and psychological theories of fiction. Popular fiction tends to portray situations that are otherworldly and follow a formula to take readers on a roller-coaster ride of emotions and exciting experiences. Although the settings and situations are grand, the characters are internally consistent and predictable, which tends to affirm the reader's expectations of others. It stands to reason that popular fiction does not expand the capacity to empathize.

Literary fiction, by contrast, focuses more on the psychology of characters and their relationships. "Often those characters' minds are depicted vaguely, without many details, and we're forced to fill in the gaps to understand their intentions and motivations," Kidd says. This genre prompts the reader to imagine the characters' introspective dialogues. This psychological awareness carries over into the real world, which is full of complicated individuals whose inner lives are usually difficult to fathom. Although literary fiction tends to be more realistic than popular fiction, the characters disrupt reader expectations, undermining prejudices and stereotypes. They support and teach us values about social behavior, such as the importance of understanding those who are different from ourselves.

The results suggest that reading fiction is a valuable socializing influence. The study data could inform debates over how much fiction should be included in educational curricula and whether reading programs should be implemented in prisons, where reading literary fiction might improve inmates' social functioning and empathy. Castano also hopes the finding will encourage autistic people to engage in more literary fiction, in the hope it could improve their ability to empathize without the side effects of medication.

Chiaet, Julianne. "Novel Finding: Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy". *Scientific American*. N. p., 2017. Web. 5 May 2017.