The Therapeutic Nature of Literature

When going through hard times, literature can provide a sense of relief and comfort. For some, writing down one’s thoughts and feelings during a difficult time can serve as an escape from reality and take their mind off of the hardship they are going through. For others, reading about someone who has had a similar experience can be a cathartic experience and help alleviate their stress and anxiety. During the COVID-19 pandemic, heartwarming stories of communities coming together can serve as a source of hope. Literature can be a source of distraction, catharsis, and hope when we are faced with adversity.

In *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, Elisabeth Tova Bailey is bedridden with an unknown illness. Towards the beginning of the book, Bailey gives the reader some idea of what it is like to be bedridden.

When the body is rendered useless, the mind still runs like a bloodhound along well-worn trails of neurons, tracking the echoing questions: the confused family of *whys, whats, and whens* and their impossibly distant kin *how*. The search is exhaustive; the answers elusive. Sometimes my mind went blank and listless; at other times it was flooded with storms of thought, unspeakable sadness, and intolerable loss (Bailey 5).

Bailey’s description of her mental struggles is haunting. Not knowing what the future holds is a source of anxiety for many people, but luckily most people have the ability to actively change their future. Whether it is losing weight or getting a job, there are steps that people can take in order to achieve their goal. For Bailey on the other hand, there was nothing she could do. The doctors did not know what was wrong with her nor how to help her get better. This feeling of helplessness and hopelessness led Bailey’s thoughts to some very dark places. She said that when she was healthy, “the future had once beckoned with many intriguing paths,” but with her sickness “there was just one impossible route (Bailey 11). However, Bailey quickly became entranced by a snail that was gifted to her by a friend. For the rest of the book, Bailey focuses her writing almost exclusively on the snail: how it moves, eats, explores, and breathes. Through her observational writing, Bailey is able to distract herself from her own dire situation and instead her thoughts are fixated on a snail. Bailey’s observation of the snail “had entertained and taught [her],” and “[led her] through a dark time into a world beyond that of my own species” (Bailey 160).

In *The Two Kinds of Decay*, Sarah Manguso discusses her struggles with CIPD. She talks about her actual treatment as well as how she felt while she was in the hospital. Manguso occasionally talks directly to the reader in an attempt to put them in her shoes and try to feel what she felt. While getting a plasma infusion, she said,

“the cold infusions went in very close to my heart. I need to describe that feeling, make a reader stop reading for a moment and think, *Now I understand how cold it felt.* But I’m just going to say it felt like liquid, thirty degrees colder than my body, being infused slowly but directly into my heart, for four hours” (Manguso 39).

Manguso makes a conscious effort to relate to readers and make them imagine what it would have been like to go through what she went through. A common emotion that she felt throughout her treatment was fright. After a surgery she said “when I looked at the plastic patch [covering my wound], I knew that what I was feeling… was fright. I was scared out of my mind” (Manguso 76-77). Fright is a common emotion which allows readers to put themselves in her shoes and act as if they were experiencing this emotion with her. In *Aristotle’s Poetics*, Aristotle says that Tragedy is the highest form of art and reading a Tragedy is a cathartic experience. Manguso’s narrative can certainly be classified as a Tragedy, as it evokes “pity and fear” and allows for “the purgation of these emotions” in readers (Aristotle Part VI). *The Two Kinds of Decay* and other Tragedies like it allow readers to purge their negative emotions when going through hard times.
Literature can also be a source of hope when facing adversity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, bad news is everywhere. Whether it is on TV, newspapers, or social media, death and sickness are ubiquitous. In the situation that we’re in right now, Elisabeth Tova Bailey’s narrative is very relatable; we are isolated, clueless as to what the future holds, and filled with helplessness. During uncertain times like these, uplifting stories of human kindness can be a source of hope. A journalist from the Boston area named Jeff Howe wrote about some of his experiences during the pandemic. When the country first shut down, he, like many others, wanted to help those who are most vulnerable. He looked online for services that were helping and found that, as of April 3, the Cambridge Mutual Aid Network already had over 300 volunteers (Howe). The volunteer service includes everything from food delivery to child care, and even routing donations to the people who need them most. Howe said it was “like some dopey activity straight from Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Stories of communities coming together in the face of adversity are not uncommon throughout the country. People are more than willing to volunteer to help more vulnerable populations in any way they can. Howe believes that we will “emerge with stronger faith in our ability to act compassionately and assist each other in dire times.” Reading stories like this can help people get through these trying times and give them hope for the future.

Reading and/or writing literature can be beneficial when going through hard times. In Elisabeth Tova Bailey’s case, writing about her observations of a snail helped distract her from her dire situation. Writing gave her a source of happiness in a time of sadness and isolation. When reading the narrative of Sarah Manguso, readers can put themselves in her shoes and purge their negative emotions. Uplifting stories, like those told by Jeff Howe, can give people a sense of hope in times that inspire fear and uncertainty.
Works Cited


