

May 08

5. "...we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology." (Noam Chomsky). To what extent would you agree?  
Madeleine Weisman, Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School

Question Number 5

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IB Theory of Knowledge

Lambrakopoulos

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Noam Chomsky claims, "...we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology." While no one way of knowing could ever teach all there is to know about a given subject, Chomsky's claim is a fair analysis of the usefulness of novels over scientific psychology. While psychology is not without merit, novels remain vibrant and relevant to an ordinary person in a way that scientific psychology does not.

As ways of knowing, novels and psychology are equally legitimate. Just as much as psychology, writing a novel is a deliberate process that takes care, planning, time and study. In many cases, novel writing can take as much research as formulating a scientific theory – take for example *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracey Chevalier. Both of these novels, while fictional creations, rely on meticulous research to present the atmosphere and create the world that makes them so powerful and popular.

Novels and psychology are not even totally antithetical to each other – theories and phenomena found in psychology are often demonstrated in novels. The novel's explanation is no less legitimate, and in many ways more potent for the reader. The novel allows the reader to see inside the protagonist's head, and while a psychology textbook accomplishes this literally, with cross sections and diagrams of the brain, often the concrete examples found in a novel are more illuminating.

Alfred Adler argued that all human accomplishment is spurred on by feelings of inferiority and innate desire to triumph over other humans, especially our siblings. This should sound familiar, as sibling competition and feelings of inferiority are frequent themes in novels. For example, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* Jo March is

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characterized as unladylike, boyish, and improper. Jo worries that these are defects these that she shall never overcome, but her "playing brother" to her sisters and acting as the man of the house while her father is away at war gives her a feeling of real responsibility for her family (6). Her desire to support them stimulates her literary ambitions and ultimately she compensates for her "boyish" behavior by becoming the main breadwinner of the household through her writing. The question is; whose explanation is more helpful? Adler manages to connect his theory to all human psychology, but Alcott's personal prose is more concrete, relevant and emotionally evocative.

There are those who would argue that while both Adler and Alcott demonstrate the same idea, Adler's is the more legitimate interpretation because of the "objectivity" in his scientific approach. Aside from the fact that even in scientific psychology objectivity is impossible, perhaps objectivity is not even the ideal. Jo's situation was one very near to Alcott's heart. The profits from *Little Women* went to aid her impoverished family, and Alcott once remarked "I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body" (Alcott qtd.(L)ouisa). Adler started his career as a disciple of Sigmund Freud and spent most of his life trying to come out of Freud's shadow. He even changed his theories multiple times to distance them from Freud's and thus garner more attention (Boeree). Therefore both Adler and Alcott were examples of the subjects they wrote and studied and without their experiences it is extremely doubtful they would have ever developed their work. However, not constrained by scientific expectations novelists often seem more willing to draw on personal experience as a source of inspiration which is often a reason novels seem more relevant – the real person, thinking and acting in real life is rarely objective in their actions and emotions.

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After all, few people have experience in the psychologist's realm of the brain, but all of us have lived life and witnessed at least parts of what the novelists are speaking about. And we respond better to what we understand and have experienced ourselves – Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* could never be considered lovable or likeable in real life. Even within the novel she is too "turbulent, willful" and coarse to be "really liked" (25, 101). However Scarlett frequently appears on lists of "most beloved" characters of all time (Jones). She is loved because her actions are so completely understandable to everyone. Everything she does make sense in the scope of her feelings and her humanity, from her selfish self-preservationist actions to her naïve teenage dreams (Mitchell).

Novels also provide a common base or way to describe something that is often too hard to do in scientific terms. The Rosenthal theory, or the Pygmalion theory, explains the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Myra and David Sadker demonstrated how it applied to general expectations as a whole, and not just to predicted outcomes. For example, teachers who are told to expect certain students to perform certain ways are more likely to see that behavior, even if the information given to them is false. What is interesting to note is that Rosenthal developed his theory in the 1950's, the Sadker's in the 60's (Schugersky). However, the theory takes its name from a classical myth, and as early as 1902 J.M. Barrie wrote,

She thought she could get well again if children believed in fairies. . .  
"If you believe," he shouted to them, "clap your hands; don't let Tink die."  
Many clapped.  
Some didn't... but already Tink was saved. (97-198)

Barrie fit the Rosenthal and the Sadkers's theories neatly into a book for children, when a little fairy can only be saved from poison by affirmation of belief in her. Out of

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all these theories and examples, it is probably Tinker Bell, the fairy of *Peter Pan*, who is the most well known, and is the most associated with the phenomenon. The story of Tinker Belle is part of a public consciousness and public understanding in a way that almost no psychology is.

However, it is the fantasy element of novels, including fairies like Tinker Belle, which often makes people dismiss novels as unimportant, when compared to psychology. I've already addressed the fact that despite being a fictional creation, novels can still convey the same ideas as psychology, but in some cases the "fantasy" or "incredible" elements of novels can actually improve and highlight the messages, as it is removed from ordinary constraints. For example, *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead* by Orson Scott Card take place in worlds and galaxies that we could never possibly reach. However, by reading the novels, readers can still learn about humanity. In these novels, Card teaches an important lesson about human guilt. A basic psychology textbook explains that guilt probably developed to makes us behave more compassionately to each other (Johnston). This shows us what it is – Card shows us its power by creating a society that spends thousands of years reviling itself for an act of what Card terms "xenocide." In his world, the guilt is strong enough to permeate an entire culture. Some might say that such a fantasy world is too far removed from our own to legitimately such a comparison, but the power of guilt is strong in many cultures. The idea that we bear guilt for the genocide of the Jews in the 1940's is particularly powerful. Many countries, including Germany, Austria, France, Israel, Switzerland, Poland and Belgium have enforceable laws against those who would deny it happened, and "remember the Holocaust" is still a rallying cry in many political forums (Shermer).

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However, while novels are infinitely more useful than psychology in understanding humanity, they do have their drawbacks. Novels are very much products of their time, and are the work of only person. A novel, once written and published, cannot be changed despite agreement that such a change would improve it. Novels also can become dated as certain methods of storytelling or even situations become less relevant. Psychology is often a collaborative science, and is open to review and revision – one only has to look at the way perceptions and treatments of serious mental illness have changed to realize how beneficial such revision can be.

Yet despite the risk of becoming dated or irrelevant, novels retain a power to capture imagination and attention far beyond psychology. With *In Cold Blood* Truman Capote revolutionized the idea of narrating the truth in his chilling novel of a seemingly random and incredibly brutal murder. I can attest to the power of Capote's narrative – I was too terrified to even finish *In Cold Blood*. On the other hand, a website's suggestion that a typical serial killer might have holes in their conscience, like "Swiss cheese" merely bored me, and the complex discussion of the sociopathic killer versus the psychopathic killer confused me. It was *In Cold Blood* that kept me awake at night, and it achieved this through the power of narrative.

Ultimately even Adler admits that each human is unique, and to apply a generalized form of psychology to humanity is impossible. Novelists take what they know about humanity, great or little, and apply it into a real world, in the way that is best perceived and understood. Narrative storytelling is one of the most powerful methods of communication, because it allows the reader to witness ideas and situations in an environment that could possibly, maybe, someday, happen to them.

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