

HOW HEMINGWAY'S CATS WILL SAVE LITERARY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT. In the so-called western world, scholars have lamented the decline of the Humanities and the state of literary studies for what seems like generations. The rapid rise of communications devices only seems to fuel our fears. More than ever, scholarship is concerned with a collective apathy about our reading habits. This essay challenges the notion that we are losing interest in the literary by looking at the wide cultural production created around canonical literary texts. Drawing on a mix of scholarly theory (Simone de Beauvoir, Toril Moi) and cultural critique by anonymous internet users, this essay proposes that we embrace a materialist reading praxis. It demonstrates this approach by looking at the work of Ernest Hemingway through the lens of his famed six-toed cats.

KEY WORDS: humanities decline; Hemingway; De Beauvoir, Moi, internet

Introduction. A Feline Literati

Scholarship foretelling the immanent death of literary studies is by now so abundant and commonplace that I'm persuaded even Nostradamus predicted the discipline's demise. "I find that letters", he prophesies, "shall suffer a very great and incomparable loss" (1891: 47). Had the Renaissance philosopher made the same blunt declaration during the twentieth century, he would not have found himself alone. Ranging from brusque to benevolent, assessments of the function and future of literary studies have abounded for almost a century (Delbanco 1999). We are told that there are no students, no jobs and no funding (Berman 2007; McGowan 2007). That English departments are the "laughingstock" of universities; that the MLA convention is the most somber laughing matter to happen annually (Delbanco 1999). "We've already had the death of the author", writes Stanley Fish (2011). "Can the death of the whole shebang be far behind?"

There are plenty of defenses, too. Some argue that English, and the humanities at large, shouldn't have to—or oughtn't *deign to*—participate in higher education's scramble for vocational legitimacy (Le Guin 2008; Lawrence 2003). Others make quite the opposite claim, insisting that the skills

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acquired in a literature major are, in fact, distinctly useful to those employed in a spectrum of professions (Baker 2003; Biedler 2003; Gallup 2007; Slevin 2007). Many scholars employ statistical data to show that the numbers of students enrolled in literature and language majors have actually remained constant over the years (Springer 2010). Still others propose new curricula and pedagogies that mean to account for shifting interests and technologies in literature departments, contending that literary studies isn't defunct—just a little out-of-date (Culler 2003; Moffat 2003; Waters 2007).

At the root of every one of these denouncements and defenses, however, lies a familiar existential predicament. Ever caught between the fear of either being irrelevant or being popular, the literary scholar fights, mostly with himself, to achieve a legitimacy he ultimately disdains. But literature is not caught in a process of cyclical self-loathing, and that is precisely what we love about it. In his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne describes authorship thus: “The truth seems to be... that when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him better than most of his schoolmates or lifemates” (Hawthorne 1850: 3). However Hawthorne meant to calculate “the few who [would] understand” *The Scarlet Letter*, the author's words nevertheless isolate something important: those elements of literature that stop our hands from flinging it aside and instead encourage us to take it up. Readers articulate the virtues of literature in varied and often conflicting ways. Yet whether we praise its aesthetic achievements or explicate its unique cultural and historical contexts, what we are really talking about when we deconstruct literature is our collective interest in it.

If you bristled at the triteness and simplicity of my greeting-card summary of literary studies, take a moment to reflect again on the aforementioned body of scholarship so concerned with “the crisis of the humanities”. After all, isn't “interest” the very index by which we measure this crisis? And isn't waning interest the thing that keeps scholars awake at night: student's purported lack of interest in reading and cultural critique; institutional lack of interest in funding humanities research; and a disappearing interest on the part of the so-called public in the maintenance of a literary standard. As trite as it may seem, interest is precisely what we're talking about when we talk about literature. And interest, like matter, never dies. The next question, of course, is where to find said interest, if not in our classrooms, on the faces of institutional administrators, or buzzing about amidst the crowds on the streets.

I argue that the answer to this plaguing question lies somewhere between the fifth and sixth toes of Ernest Hemingway's famed polydactyl cats.

But before turning to the feline and her relationship to the literary, let's start by examining where the interest once *was*. After all, we can only claim that interest in literature has waned if we believe that it was once high. Literary studies persists in wringing its hands over the fact that the values of institutions, students and the public no longer align with those of the humanities, which aims to examine and emanate "the best of the best" of human culture. Fearing a cultural studies takeover from the interior (Bérubé 1997), a neoliberal downsizing from the exterior (Szeman 2003) and the permanent loss of students to the doldrums (Juster 1961), literary studies has, of late, made "recourse to the aesthetic" instead of "mapp[ing] out... an argument within the logic of contemporary culture" (Szeman 2003: 112). There is no need, however, to "make recourse" to Kant in order to defend literary studies; the "logic of contemporary culture" manifests itself everywhere—from Amazon's bestseller list to online gaming forums to the ongoing adventures of the Hemingway cats—and it suggests that interest in the literary is indeed alive and well.

In the following section of this essay, I draw on a variety of sources in order to flesh out an understanding of interest in literature that is conceived through the logic of contemporary culture. While the academic discussions surrounding literature's aesthetic and use values undoubtedly inform this section (Guillory 1993; Eagleton 1983), I purposely do not enter into those discussions here. There is something deeply troubling about the tendency to return over and over to the work of theorists like Bourdieu, Kant and Marx in an effort to convince people of why and what they should be reading. First, it reifies institutional definitions of "real" or "good" literature (which is, incidentally, how we have come to the conclusion that people "don't read anymore"). Moreover, just as it allows us to ignore the variety of texts that we regularly read, it simultaneously pretends that we don't talk about what we are reading—that we don't engage in criticism—simply because we haven't articulated it in so-called theoretical terms.

In the third and final section, I employ a reading practice articulated by Toril Moi with the purpose of showing that interest in the literary continues to thrive. Derived from the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Stanley Cavell, Moi describes a philosophical approach to reading that requires "let[ting] the work teach [the reader] how to read it" (Moi 2011: 125). Using Moi's approach, I locate evidence of literary interest in the living fiction of Hemingway's cats, who were once an anchor of the author's literary production, some sixty years ago, and who continue to inspire a corpus of literature into the present day.

Redefining the Adventure of Literature

Ernest Hemingway killed himself in 1961. Three and a half years later, in France, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre joined four other writers to participate in a public debate at the Mutualité Theater in order to discuss the question “Que peut la littérature?” (“What can literature do?” or “What is the power of literature?”) (Moi 2009: 190). Toril Moi rightly locates tremendous historical significance in the meeting, which barely preceded a literary shift from “committed literature” to “the new novel”. Yet aside from the fact that Moi is one of few people to work with Beauvoir’s untranslated, unanthologized lecture from the event, what surprises me most about the meeting is not actually the content discussed—it’s the audience. What Moi refers to as “an enormous success” I would call a miracle. Moi reports that the event drew a crowd of about six thousand people. Six thousand individuals convening to hear six writers (two of whom were, admittedly, celebrities) explore, define, and disagree about what literature can do. This was not a J. K. Rowling book signing or a “Rich Dad, Poor Dad” keynote at an entrepreneurial convention; this was a literary discussion, and six thousand people attended (Kiyosaki 2017). Is there a group of six contemporary literary critics or philosophers who could draw such a crowd today? Could an individual fiction superstar like Rowling or Stephanie Meyer pull it off? It seems impossible, even for a popular icon. Given that impossibility, claims about the decline in public interest appear justified.

At least they *would* appear justified, if it weren’t for the fact that book sales—and, more generally, reading—is on the rise. I mention Rowling, Meyer and Kiyosaki not because I wish to make a jab at pop culture by juxtaposing it with the supposedly “elevated” literary tastes some associate with Sartre and Beauvoir, but instead because the juxtaposition highlights a number of points relevant to the discussion of literary (un)interest, or what we might call, in the spirit of the industrialization of higher education, “diminishing literary returns”. To begin, these writers were the first examples that came to mind when I tried to come up with a list of authors or literary events on par with the 1964 debate. After all, in terms of genres that have the corner on today’s (U.S.) literary market, it’s no secret that teen fiction and self-help books consistently populate the bestseller lists, typically abdicating their position only to romance novels and crime fiction. A look at Amazon’s top twenty bestsellers confirms this trend. While Amazon does not (yet) provide demographic data on those who purchase its merchandise, the consistent presence of teen fiction on bestseller lists suggests that teens—in other words, our students—are either buying or reading books, or both. And this certainly calls into question, if not undermines, the first hypothesis about the state of literature: that our students aren’t interested in it. They may or may not be rushing home to read the texts we assign in class, but

they do read, and when they read, they read more than text messages and social media posts.

If the fact of teen romance dominating bestseller lists attests to our students' interest in literature, then it is ironic that the ubiquity of teen romance is also invoked to prove the decline of public interest in literature and the deterioration of a public sense of taste. Let's get this straight: if no one likes literature, we have a problem; yet if everyone likes literature, well, that's a problem, too. Imre Szeman writes: "With images of the classical moment of the bourgeois public sphere dancing in their heads, the present can't help but seem like a wasteland to critics who measure the twenty-first century by a whitewashed version of the nineteenth" (Szeman 2003: 104). And, I would add, literary studies can't help but seem like a wasteland to scholars who merge their analyses of public taste with their longing for a return to the "glory days" of the 1960s hiring boom in U.S. literature departments.

For Ursula Le Guin (2008), public disinterest and scholarly despair are born of the same dysfunctional marriage: that union capitalism and art, or the publishing industry and literature. In fact, as Le Guin contends, literature serves at least two human functions; the first of those has to do with literature's role in the general public, and the second speaks to the interest we want to see students expressing. "The social quality of literature is still visible", Le Guin argues, "in the popularity of bestsellers. Publishers get away with making boring, baloney-mill novels into bestsellers via mere P.R. because people need bestsellers." In other words, we *need* the Harry Potters. We need the dueling financial dads and we need Bella. We need Stephanie Plum and Suzanne Collins and Dr. Phil's unstudied psychological advice. But this need "is not a literary need. It is a social need. We want books everybody is reading (and nobody finishes) so we can talk about them." While it would indeed be interesting to see how many people actually finish the bestsellers they buy—probably many more than Le Guin realizes or wants to believe—her point nevertheless rings true. Public taste is merely the marker of a larger process of socialization, one which also encompasses, incidentally, our scholarly frustrations and elitism regarding the adulteration of a literary standard.

The second function, according to Le Guin, has to do with our students and with what they take away from literature. Though certainly not separate from the first function, this second purpose still differs from the larger process of literature-as-socialization. The second function is typically more individual, and involves not simply our *reaction* to an author's work, but rather our collaboration with that author's work. Le Guin suggests that the effect of this collaboration is easily recognized in the lives of our students. It's not that they learn to appreciate "the right" aesthetic. Rather, the collabora-

tion marks them with a particular affect. She writes: “I like knowing that a hard-bitten Wyoming cowboy carried a copy of *Ivanhoe* in his saddlebag for thirty years, and that the mill girls of New England had Browning Societies. There are readers like that still. Our schools are no longer serving them (or anybody else) well, on the whole; yet some kids come out of even the worst schools clutching a book to their heart.” Clearly, anyone overtly connected to the literary, be he teacher or author, has a narcissistic investment in declaring that “there are readers like that still”, readers who walk around thumbing books like they’re security blankets. The fact is, however, that those readers *do* still exist.

The other fact is this: it doesn’t actually matter if the reader is clutching a copy of *Breaking Dawn* or *Waiting for Godot*. What matters is the clutching. And our job as teachers and literary scholars is to help students figure out what triggers that instinct, regardless of whether or not they intend to make literary studies a vocation. Statistics suggest that students already value the bestsellers. But relying on statistics means we can only assume that they are interested in literature for its role in socialization (*i.e.* the first function identified by Le Guin). The question, then, is how to help students cultivate an interest in literature for its second function—for the dialogue they might have with the work and its author. Drawing a line between the bestseller and the canon is certainly not the way to achieve this goal.

By now, I hope that it’s clear that when I speak of literature’s “first” and “second” functions, I don’t mean to imply a hierarchy or trajectory. I do not think that our relationship with the literary starts as an interest in the bestseller, as defined by Le Guin, and subsequently evolves into an interest in the esoteric. We don’t mature into a deeper or more sophisticated appreciation of literature when we move from Stephanie Meyer to Samuel Beckett. Moreover, a person who is passionate about Beckett is no less interested in the social than one who adores the *Twilight* saga. This is all to say that even though Le Guin rightly distinguishes between the bestseller interest and the book-clutching interest, we must be careful not to assume that such interests are mutually exclusive—that if we are intelligent enough, we will grow out of one and into the other, or that, worst of all, an un-ironic interest in the social function of the bestseller is somehow indicative of stunted appreciation of artistic form.

If interest in literary studies is waning, it is not because literature has also lost its cultural currency, but instead because the discourse of literary studies has severed the ties between the bestseller and the canon. Here I am not making another defense of cultural studies; we have already made that turn, as it were. Nor is this an iteration of the postcolonial or feminist studies deconstruction of the high literary canon, though such critiques certainly inform this essay. When I say that the canon has been severed from

the bestseller, I mean that the discourse of literary studies makes it impossible for us to be fans of both, to appreciate both, in a genuine and un-ironic way. Rather than making the study of literature a space where our love for the work of Beckett and Meyer might be explored and examined together, the discourse of literary studies has instead forged a gap between the bestseller and the canon. This gap is a rift in two senses of the word: it is both an uncrossable distance that suggests a failure or lack, as well as an unending dissonance, whose constant friction has come to characterize how literary studies interacts with the world. We find tangible evidence of this rift in the way literary scholars talk about their interest in bestsellers, in the spread of that language to non-academic sectors, and in the caricatures of teachers and/or fans of the literary canon. The language of literary studies teaches us that we are only ever allowed to love the bestseller *or* the canon, but never both at once.

Consider the following two scenarios. If, because of our upbringing or education, we come to value canonical literature first, there is no path to the bestseller outside of legitimation, irony, weirdness or guilt. Academics (and literary scholars in particular) who like, for instance, the *Twilight* series, inevitably explain their pleasure in one of the following ways: 1) they find evidence of a so-called legitimate academic theory in the subtext of the books and/or claim that the texts are excellent “teaching tools”; 2) they say they are laughing at the series (not with it); 3) they take genuine pleasure in the books, for which they identify themselves as “weird” in contrast with their irony-loving colleagues (meanwhile book sales suggest that academics are hardly unique in their appreciation); or, finally, they apologize for liking the texts, referring to them as “guilty pleasures”.

If, on the other hand, we come to value bestsellers first, Literary Studies invariably presents us with a choice. We must learn to deconstruct, laugh at, exoticize or apologize for our bestseller pleasure, or we won't develop what is often called “the necessary critical distance” from our objects of study. Investing in literary studies demands a certain divestment. At best, literary studies encourages us to believe in the possibility of maturation, that one day we will evolve from the kind of reader who loves Meyer into one who is more critical—maturation invariably evidenced through a preference for canonical works). According to this view, we evolve by moving from one security blanket (the bestseller) to another (the canon), or by learning to read the first security blanket for “what it really is.”

So deeply instantiated is the language of this divide that we find it reproduced in conversations outside of the education system. For instance, in a post to the independent website *Book Riot*, freelance writer Wallace Yovetich (2012a) offers a ten-item list of clues for “How to Spot a Reader”. The following are among those traits included:

They know more than you do... about everything.
 They often use words that you secretly have to look up later.
 They give you a sympathetic smile when you mention that the last book you read was two summers ago... and it had a half naked man (or woman) on the front.

I hardly need to point out that the pretense of making such lists is both “smug” and “self-congratulating”, especially since someone using the moniker “JimHeine” has already made the point so effectively in the comment section at the end of the post. What’s important here is that the figures of the list—the “they” and the “you” mentioned in each point—are as proverbial as the “reader” Yovitch celebrates. So proverbial, in fact, that the tenth characteristic cheekily claims that “*they* do things that *you* wouldn’t do, such as reading lists about how to spot a *reader*”, thereby blending all three subjects into one. Apparently only a reader would read Yovitch’s list, so “they” and “you” and “reader” are actually interchangeable. In other words, an alternative title for this list could very well be “Dear You”, in the tradition of Austen’s “dear reader”. After all, if there exists another work that interpellates “the reader” of literature more explicitly than *Pride and Prejudice*, it certainly isn’t the kind of book that would have naked people on the cover, and we definitely wouldn’t read it during the summer.

At the heart of the image of a mature canon connoisseur lies a narrative of progressive growth so ubiquitous in the lives of our students (e.g. “You’ll understand when you’re older”) that it’s no surprise that the division between bestseller and canon is likely to rankle them. In order to grow into readers who can appreciate “well-crafted, serious works of literary art”, students must first check their “pleasure reads” at the door (O’Neal 2012). After a period of study, they are permitted to return to the pleasure reads, but only if they have learned to regard them from a distance, much in the way adults reminisce about the innocence, simplicity and intensity of youth. To wit: Wallace Yovitch has also written a blog post about her love for the *Twilight* saga, appropriately titled “I liked Twilight. Deal with It” (2012). She begins by saying

People often assume that because I’m an avid reader, whose favorite authors include the likes of David McCullough, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Sarah Vowel, I wouldn’t like certain genres. For instance, people always assume that I’m with them on being a Twilight hater... as in elbow-me-in-the-ribs and laugh at those poor, unenlightened folks who do like the Twilight books. But guess what ladies and lassies... I LOVED the Twilight saga, and I’m not even the least bit shy about saying it.

In some ways, her defense of the saga is admirable because after all, and as she herself points out, it’s not often that “avid readers” openly proclaim their love for bestsellers.

Yet a closer look at her defense reveals that she is merely reifying the distance between the *Twilight* genre and the canon, and she invokes her literal and readerly growth as a tangible metaphor of that division. For instance, she contends that sometimes she likes books like *Twilight* because they *don't* teach her anything (subtext: they present a welcome break from the challenges of the canon). Moreover, there are moments when she needs books that are “nothing like reality” and that have neither “beautiful language” nor “complex characters” (subtext: regardless of the severity of their plots, such books are lighthearted because they aren't real). Ironically, she also loves the series because it enables her to spend “hours upon hours reliving” the emotions of her first crush (subtext: mature readers are like mature lovers, who know that *Twilight*, like the love between Bella and Edward, can only ever be a short flight of fancy—a memory best appreciated from a distance).

There is a Catch-22 here. The canon-reader, Austen's reader, is thought to be a mature, experienced, trained individual, which suggests that the canon is best read by adults. At the same time, one can only learn to find value in the bestseller (assumed to be inherently valueless) after a process of maturation, which suggests that the bestseller is, paradoxically, *best read by adults*. No wonder our students don't seem to be interested in claiming a part in literary studies; it's a culture founded on their discursive exclusion.

Ask any group of adults to compile a list of canonical texts that they think young people are prepared to read, and the conflicting results will quickly disprove the notion that some texts require maturity and others do not. This is not to say that we are ready to read something as soon as we are physically able, but rather that preparation and maturity does not necessarily correlate with age and growth. For many, the logic of the separation between canon and bestseller remains a frustrating mystery, and our struggles to understand that logic take place both in and out of the literature classroom. For example: the following images are screenshots taken from a thread called “Literature Sucks” on *Feartheboot.com*, a website dedicated to role-playing games. Limited space prevents me from reproducing the entire four-page thread in this essay, but I have selected five contributions that highlight the tenor of such conversations, a mood which is characterized more by inquiry and dissatisfaction than by either apathy or antagonism.

The thread was opened by a user named “tweaker”, who lays out the stakes in the very first line of the very first post (2012: 1):

Literature Sucks

Post Reply Page 1 of 4 [33 posts] Go to page 1, 2, 3, 4 Next Previous topic | Next topic

Author	Message
<p>tweaker I am the story stick Joined: Fri Oct 31, 2008 8:21 pm Posts: 1304</p>	<p>Literature Sucks</p> <p>Who is this body of invisible critics who has selected what is good literature? I mean, has anyone here actually tried to read Jane Austin? It's self important crap. Can Robert Lewis Stephenson be any more pompous in his writing?</p> <p>What so-called literature do you hate and why? What classics should have been buried along with the writer?</p> <p>If there are classics you like, please start another thread about those glorious books. This thread is about poking that invisible body of critics and telling them where they can put their literature choices.</p>

Tue Jul 21, 2009 11:39 pm [PROFILE](#)

Tweaker makes it clear that “Literature Sucks” is not the place to laud one’s favorite books. Then again, it’s also not the place to tear them down, either. The intended target? “That invisible body of critics” and “their literature choices”. From the start, criticism is directed toward the formless power that decides on the works we are all supposed to accept as “good”. It comes as little surprise, therefore, when SandPunk pipes up a few comments later and foregrounds the issue in nine words (2012: 1):

SandPunk
ZCE's Grandmother's Quantum Cat

Joined: Thu Aug 14, 2008 11:20 pm
Posts: 5902
Location: A semi tropical, not quite hellish place.

Re: Literature Sucks

I love the idea of "Literature". It's f***ing hilarious.

Mrs Ninja wrote:

Sandpunk has narrativium-enhanced bones, and a flair for the dramatic which carried the game on a surf of energy.

Wed Jul 22, 2009 12:45 am [PROFILE](#)

This is not a sarcastic comment on writing, reading, storytelling or the printed text. This is an attack on “Literature”: that is, what literature becomes when it’s so overdetermined that it must be capitalized and couched in scare quotes. Later, a contributor by the name of Burning points the discussion toward the language of literary studies—the language used by that “invisible body of critics” to form a corpus of so-called good literature. For Burning, the problem lies not so much with the notion of a work being “good” but with the recommendation that it is “important” (2012: 2):

<p>Burning LF's frikin' laser attendant</p>  <p>Joined: Mon Aug 25, 2008 3:33 pm Posts: 2491</p> <p>Wed Jul 22, 2009 8:22 pm</p>	<p>Re: Literature Sucks</p> <p>Since you stated it's against the rules to say you actually like classic literature here, I won't tell you that I, a straight male, actually read Jane Austen for pleasure. 😊</p> <p>My beef is more with "modern literature." Any time someone recommends to me a recently published book as being "important" rather than "enjoyable" it is a clear warning sign that it indeed will not be enjoyable. "Importance" in modern literature seems to have two important components. First, the book should be difficult to comprehend. Second, it should end badly for the main characters.</p> <p>"Space is blue, and birds fly through it." - Werner Heisenberg</p>
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Burning's juxtaposition of "enjoyable" and "important" captures perfectly the language of the bestseller/canon divide, and is reminiscent of the language of comparison used in some of the sources mentioned above (e.g. pleasure read/well-crafted, serious work of literary art; Stephanie Meyer/Sarah Vowell). Much like telling children to eat vegetables because it's *good* for them or because vegetables are *important* for their health, calling literature "important" is just a coded way of saying that one probably won't enjoy reading it. Moreover, much like telling children to eat their "important" vegetables (in spite of the displeasure such vegetables cause) because we believe that gradual acclimation to displeasure is part of "growing up", so too does calling literature "important" set into motion the expectation of a readerly evolution which culminates in maturity perhaps bordering on masochism.

Unsatisfied with Burning's claims about modern literature, tweaker quickly jumps back into the conversation to reiterate the original query (2012: 2):

<p>tweaker I am the story stick</p> <p>Joined: Fri Oct 31, 2008 8:21 pm Posts: 1304</p> <p>Wed Jul 22, 2009 8:28 pm</p>	<p>Re: Literature Sucks</p> <p>Burning wrote:</p> <p>My beef is more with "modern literature." Any time someone recommends to me a recently published book as being "important" rather than "enjoyable" it is a clear warning sign that it indeed will not be enjoyable. "Importance" in modern literature seems to have two important components. First, the book should be difficult to comprehend. Second, it should end badly for the main characters.</p> <p>Some of the books kids are made to read are from the 40's and 50's. At some point, someone had to say those books were important. Have you read Hemingway? The books aren't that old. But someone had to say they were important.</p> <p>It's no different then someone wanting to say that Kurt Vonnegut is important. What I don't get is how this is decided. What under paid English professor determines this importance crap?</p>
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Again, the discussion is not actually about burying the classics—although several contributors make it clear when they don't like certain texts and authors—instead, it's about questioning the idea of there being classics in the first place, and about asking who "determines this important crap". Toril

Moi has suggested that “the point of literature... is to overcome separation”, so why has literary studies fostered such a tremendous rift (2009:193)? If studying literature is supposed to confer a degree of social distinction, then clearly something has gone awry, because, like it or not, the figure of the “underpaid English professor” has become the straw man for the discipline’s truly profound error in judgment. In our effort to nail down the characteristics of the “best of the best” of literature, we have lost track of literature altogether, and with it our ability to talk about literature with our students.

For Simone de Beauvoir, real literature—not “good” or “important” but real literature—is synonymous with action. Literature is an “activity” that “unveils” the world, one that allows people “to change universes” and thereby overcome separation (Moi 2009: 191-192). Indeed, this “is the miracle of literature, which distinguishes it from information: that an other truth becomes mine without ceasing to be other. I renounce my own ‘I’ in favor of the speaker; and yet I remain myself.” Moreover, literature “is the only kind of communication capable of giving me that which cannot be communicated, capable of giving me the taste of another life” (Beauvoir, cited in Moi 2009: 193). If Beauvoir is right, and if literature is the only way for us to divide ourselves, to be in two places at once, to “experience fiction as deeply as reality, while full well knowing that it is fiction”, then she is right to describe this act as a miracle (Moi 2011: 134). After all, how often do we have the security of knowing that the information we consume is fiction—that we can and will return to our separate selves when the experience is complete? In an age when our access to information makes it virtually impossible not to confuse totality with our individual realities (and vice versa), rare is the moment when “I [get to] renounce my own ‘I’ in favor of the speaker and yet... remain myself.”

Perhaps Beauvoir’s description of literature offers a clue for how literary studies might bridge the gap it has created between the bestseller and the canon. Certainly there is something structurally similar between Beauvoir’s literature and Wallace Yovitch’s seemingly contradictory reasons for liking *Twilight*. Recall that Yovitch appreciates the saga both because it’s absolutely nothing like reality *and* because it allows her to spend hours reliving the emotions of her own past. In essence, Yovitch articulates the feeling of being in both places at once: of simultaneously revisiting a past experience that is undeniably hers at the same time that she enters the universe of “an other”, regardless of whether that other is Meyer, Bella or Robert Pattinson.

In the context of *Twilight*, however, Beauvoir’s notion of literature meets its limits and requires tweaking. Calling literature an action rather than an object allows her to extend the borders of the literary beyond traditional texts to things like autobiographies and essays. All of these items can be lite-

rature provided they “have the necessary [human] voice” (Moi 2009: 194). Now, at the risk of being too literal, there is a problem with restricting the voice of literature to that of humans when, as we know, *Twilight* is also about vampires and werewolves. The point may seem silly, but it’s actually quite relevant. If literature is an action where “I renounce my own ‘I’ in favor of the [human] speaker”, then we are limited to trading universes with one other person. Based on what Moi translates of Beauvoir’s text, this other person is almost always the author. Even if we broaden the category of “speaker” to include individual characters—human, vampire or otherwise—there is still the problem of singularity: one self and one other. And let’s just say that the self/other binary is not a promising (re)turn for literary studies.

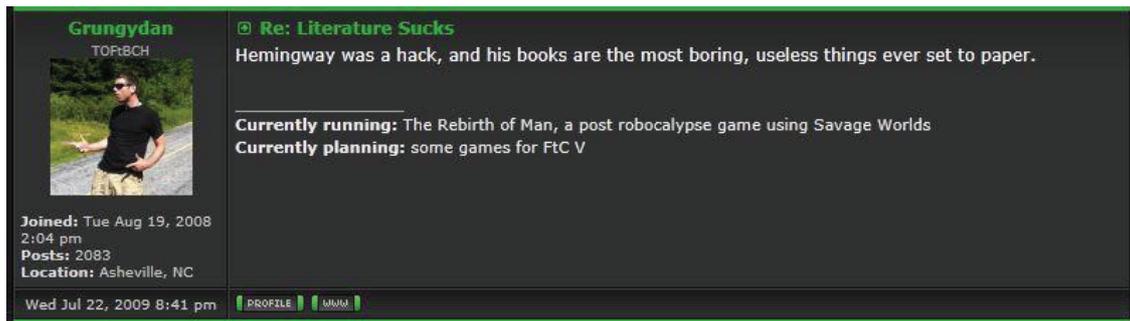
On the other hand, if literature is not an action but the condition of possibility, then suddenly I am not restricted to trading universes with Meyer OR Bella OR Edward. Instead, I am given the opportunity to renounce my ‘I’ and experience countless other lives, including not just the book’s author and characters, but also the actors (through film), other fans (through fan fiction), artists, and, dare I say, academics who write about *Twilight*. Along with the possibility of trading universes with innumerable lives comes the responsibility of considering multiple perspectives. According to Moi, responding to the voice of literature in the form of criticism is a way for us to signal our willingness to embark on the “adventure of reading”. As a result, “the best criticism is at once an account of an adventure and an invitation to new adventures” (Moi 2011: 137). That literature gives us the opportunity to consider multiple points of view is hardly a revelation. Yet as I look at the above examples of how literary studies has come to know itself only through exclusion, I can’t help but think we’ve lost sight of literature as a condition of possibility.

Allow me to put this another way. My niece, who is five, loves when people read to her. Given the chance, she will invariably bring a stack of well-loved books to whomever is available, she will sit or lay next to that person, and she will endlessly furnish books to him/her, even if it requires reading the same one more than once. Sometimes she talks over that person. Sometimes she recites the words of the text along with him/her. Regardless of her familiarity with the text, it’s clear that what she’s seeking from this activity is only partially related to the stories contained in the books. There are other stories for her to experience: how familiar sounds and words are given new life when they are spoken by various people; the comfort of sitting near someone else; the physical experience of feeling someone speak instead of just hearing that speech; the ability to ask questions, sometimes about the text but, more often than not, about a variety of other topics. Through the act of reading, she has the chance to try on any number of experiences that aren’t hers without ever losing sight of herself. With time, my niece will de-

velop her ability to read, and along with that, her own taste in stories. But that growth, that evolution, the development of that taste is only one small part of what literature makes available to her.

If we want to teach students how to engage in “the best criticism”, then we need to demonstrate the various ways in which literature allows them to approach the world, whether or not the text itself is something that they find formally pleasing and, more importantly, whether or not *we* find it formally pleasing. This is not to say that we should encourage students not to have preferences, to see all texts as the same—quite the contrary. Offering an opinion on a text can feel like a tremendous risk. “There is self-exposure in aesthetic judgment”, Moi writes. “It makes us vulnerable. The critic reveals how she sees the work, and the world, and what matters to her, existentially, intellectually, politically, morally. She reveals, too, the quality of her attention, the depth of her imagination, her capacity for philosophy” (Moi 2011: 137). In the end, how can students be expected to take this risk if we don’t?

The notion that we ought to study “important” literature will only ever generate responses like the following (feartheboot: 2):



Until only very recently, I would have shared Grungydan’s opinion about “Papa”. Then I had an experience that made me want to return to his work, one that gave me an easily understandable metaphor for how literature is actually the condition of possibility. By way of example, here is my own adventure in reading: how to read Hemingway through his cats.

Conclusion: Feline Adventures

In 2012, I found myself taking an unplanned stroll through the Hemingway House in Key West, Florida. My companion and I had not arrived in the southernmost city of the continental U.S. with the intention of visiting Hemingway’s former abode. I had heard of the famed cats living on the museum grounds from another very good friend (and cat owner), and so we opted to take advantage of the opportunity presented by proximity. I didn’t really know what to expect, and in fact, as far as museums go, this one is pretty modest. The house seems like one big room—perhaps an

effect of sharing the same space with a crowd. Photographs, books and other textual paraphernalia from Hemingway's life adorn the walls and displays. The Spanish antique furniture is charming yet sparse. All in all, one hardly gets the sense that Hemingway and his second wife, Pauline, spent eight years living there. Even the renowned carriage house, wherein (we're told) the author penned seventy percent of his life's work, is strangely devoid of spirit, despite the animal carcasses hanging on its walls and the proverbial typewriter resting forever on a desk in the middle of the room. In the end, any museum in the world could probably reproduce the Hemingway House (assuming that it had all of the letters and photographs), and the effect would be the same.

That is, of course, if it weren't for the cats. These famed felines are an affront to the core of the museum aesthetic. In the Hemingway House, they do everything that people are not permitted to do. For instance, I was required to leave my bottled water outside on the veranda before walking through the front door; but when I peered over the rope meant to keep visitors out of the kitchen, I detected the odor of cat urine, which someone had tried to disperse by setting up several floor fans. Upon walking into one of the living rooms, I spotted a cat lounging peacefully on a loveseat next to a laminated sign that read "Please help us preserve our treasures. NO SITTING ON FURNITURE." (Which is the treasure, the cat or the loveseat?) Upstairs in the bedroom, an elderly cat was perched atop Hemingway's pillow, busily kneading away at its white cover. Over in the room above the carriage house, a massive iron gate prevented humans from taking more than three or four steps into the author's writing space, but no one chastised the cat who was sleeping on top of his writing desk, right next to his typewriter. Soon enough, I realized that the museum did not exist to preserve the past but instead constituted a work-in-progress.

Amongst the artwork that the Hemingways hung on their own walls lie homages to the cats: artistic renditions of Snowball, the "father" of the Hemingway cat bloodline, and celebratory kitty kitsch (which may indeed be a genre of U.S. decorations). Outside, the story gets even more involved. Visitors who manage to tear themselves away from the actual creatures will find curious feline traces nestled away in various spots on the grounds. Cat houses sit throughout the property, and someone has even built a cat-sized replica of the actual Hemingway House. Elsewhere, the infamous six-toed cat paw has been forever immortalized in imprints captured in a cement garden path. Years ago, the workers created a cat cemetery, where one finds tombstones commemorating the lives of cats like Tigger, Errol Flynn and Frank Sinatra. The bookstore sells Hemingway novels alongside the work of a range of other authors, mostly cat lovers, as well as kitten and Key West paraphernalia. In short, the Hemingway House is alive with stories—in-

deed, it forms part of Hemingway's corpus—and it's the living cats themselves who catalyze that literature. They are, quite literally, literature's condition of possibility.

“To be willing to learn from the work [of literature]”, Moi avers, “requires a critic capable of a certain degree of humility” (2011: 132). It's difficult to demand that a reader be humble around Hemingway, who, if we judge by his fiction, appeared to be nothing of the sort. Like GrungyDan, I too thought Hemingway was “a hack” and that his books were “boring” (not to mention misogynist). I didn't identify with his characters or like the way they interacted with the world, and I found his nickname—“Papa”—offensive. I've never taught Hemingway's work and up until the visit to the house on Whitehead St, I wouldn't have known how speak on behalf of that work to a group of students. But, in the words of Darin Hohman, there is “something going on at the Hemingway House”: an exchange between author and reader that is marked by humility. “The copious quantities of kitties, with their extra toes” serve as a catalyst for looking past the “gamey, war-seeking, booze-quaffing” aspects of Hemingway's texts (Heller 2012: n.p.). Moreover, the cats continually inspire other works that become a part of the larger Hemingway corpus. In other words, the cat sleeping next to the typewriter disrupts our image of the safari-booze Hemingway just as it inspires stories that we can take home with us and tell to our friends and neighbors.

Beauvoir maintains that “there is no literature if there is no voice, that is to say language that bears the mark of somebody” (Beauvoir, cited in Moi 2009: 194). In this case, the cats help us to find that voice, and their six-toed footprints serve as a living fiction that allows us to connect—or reconnect, as it were—with Hemingway's work. Tales of the Hemingway cats are more than puns, alliteration and vacation anecdotes; they literally seek to incarnate the author's physical presence. It's no accident that the survival of the “Hemingway cat” has become synonymous with the survival of the man himself. Tour guides, for instance, frequently assure visitors that the museum seeks to preserve the “bloodline” of Hemingway's first cat in Key West: Snowball. Here is a guide speaking about the museum for an interest piece on cats:

Well there are forty-six cats here today, *descended from Ernest*. He had 50-60 cats that lived here. His first had extra toes, a polydactyl cat...*That's where the bloodline started here in the 1930's*. Ernest would only ever say that one cat leads to another. That's all he would ever say about that. (Hohman 2008, emphasis mine)

That the guide isn't actually stating that the polydactyl cats are genetic descendants of Ernest himself is, ultimately, of little import; they may as well have chromosomal links to the author. Take the first statement of the above

citation. The sound quality of the video, combined with the linguistic challenge of articulating the double/s/ of the possessive form of "Ernest", makes it impossible to hear if the guide is saying "Ernest" or "Ernest's". But he didn't say that they were "descended from Ernest's *cats*", which leads me to believe he intended to say "Ernest". Regardless, such a claim has nothing to do with genetics. Nor is it the praise of an extreme Hemingway fan. Instead, it suggests that the cats, much like the literature and the house itself, form part of the larger cultural phenomenon that is "Ernest". Snowball's continued bloodline has given voice—in the sense Beauvoir describes—to Hemingway's work, just as we claim of his literary production.

In fact, both the narrator and the visitors interviewed for the aforementioned video pick up on the relationship between the presence of the cats and that of the author himself. At one moment, in a voice-over, the narrator proclaims: "The cats' appeal remains as strong as Hemingway's spirit." Then the camera cuts to footage of an interview with a visitor, who says, "Cats have this mysticism about them, they're all different. Some of them you'll find loyal, some of them are very independent. To me it's very mystical." As she speaks this final phrase, we see an illustration of Hemingway's study, and in the foreground of the scene sits a desk topped by a typewriter and several lounging cats. An image of Hemingway sitting in front of the typewriter, "in action", slowly fades into view, echoing and corroborating the visitor's comments about feline mysticism. Visually speaking, the cats function as a portal through which the writer's spirit can remain present, as well as a lens which tempers Hemingway's macho image with delicacy and approachability.

Not only do the cats maintain a link with the writer, but they also engender other fictions. From 2003 to 2007, a scandal turned a few Hemingway cats into celebrities. Debbie Schultz, a neighbor and former official at a Key West animal shelter, had once been on such good terms with the museum staff that she had a key to the grounds. After an alleged conversation with someone at the museum, Schultz started taking Hemingway cats to be spayed and neutered because they were leaving the grounds and increasing the city's population of stray cats. The museum perceived Schultz's actions as a threat that "had left [it] with almost no cats to promulgate the bloodline", and they asked her not to return. Later, Schultz reported the museum to the USDA, which prompted a series of investigations. According to Sharon Parker (2006: n.p.), the USDA actually rented a room near the museum so that it could videotape the movements of the cats—as though it were performing criminal surveillance. The agency was especially interested in "the wanderings of Ivan, an orange tomcat born in 2004, the year Hurricane Ivan killed dozens of people." Note the language used to describe Ivan's suspicious behavior:

According to Schultz, Ivan the cat wreaks another type of havoc on the cat population that lived outside the museum wall.

She says Ivan often stops by a feeding station she keeps for neighborhood cats. Schultz says she took Ivan to the animal shelter six times. Higgins [a museum employee] says the museum had to “bail him out” [sic] each time.

“I saw Ivan many times loose”, she says. “Ivan is a very unneutered, very macho male cat, and in each case, he had one of the street cats pinned down”, she says. “We have an ordinance that says a nuisance cat can be removed.”

What emerges from this article is a cavalier personality: a “very unneutered, very macho” creature whose adventures have rendered him suspect. In other words, Ivan could quite easily be a literary character—or Hemingway himself. We would be remiss, however, to read the cat scandal as a mere literary reference. Ivan, along with his polydactyl roommates (siblings?) on Whitehead Street, offer us the opportunity to approach Hemingway’s now legendary literary machismo from a humorous perspective. They humble us, as they do him.

For instance, by connecting with “Hemingway’s deep devotion to the family pets”, self-proclaimed “cat aficionado” and owner, Carlene Brennan, has found a way past the author’s off-putting character traits:

The more I researched this complex writer’s life and his close association with animals, the more I came to understand Hemingway the man, the lover, the husband, the father, the hunter, the fisherman, the writer, as well as the devoted master of many cats and dogs. I discovered a kinder, gentler, man [sic] known only to a family and close friends, quite different from the macho character he himself helped to create--a man part fact, part fiction. (Brennan 2006: xiii)

Brennan’s text, appropriately titled *Hemingway’s Cats*, provides us with a path to the writer that lies outside of the dogma of the canon. In so many ways, the passage above illustrates precisely what literature can do, its “miracle”. The figure of the cat enabled Brennan to have a new kind of conversation with Hemingway, one she’d not had before, and her newfound interest constitutes what Ursula le Guin calls “a collaboration... with the writer’s mind”: a mental-emotional state that Beauvoir refers to as “illumination”.

“To read”, Moi contends, “is to have experiences one would otherwise not have” (2011: 133). Such experiences are not limited to the world(s) created by authors. In other words, reading *The Sun Also Rises* (for example) does not simply allow one to experience a bit of Jake Barnes’ life, or expatriate life in 1920s Europe, or Hemingway’s adventures overseas. Reading also offers us the chance to experience how other people responded to the novel, the period, and the author. Likewise, reading affords us the opportunity to partake in literature *inspired* by *The Sun Also Rises*, even if or when such literature seems to have nothing to do with the actual novel. The act of

reading includes writing, for “aesthetic judgment”, Moi insists, “is an appeal to [an] other”. If we are to teach our students how to read (where reading is “adventure”, “collaboration”, and “illumination”), then we must instruct them in how to make such appeals: to one another, to the Jake Barneses, to the Hemingways and to us. The frightening part of appealing to others is that “the appeal may go unanswered.” When we appeal to others, “we may discover, painfully, that we are alone in our perceptions of what matters in the world” (Moi 2011: 137). Yet literature is the condition of possibility, not the guarantor of happiness, and disappointment is merely one of the many experiences it makes available to us.

Finally—and this was the case for me—reading offers us the experience of revising our own opinions, even those we form about literature itself. Prior to my Key West trip, I had written off Hemingway. I didn't like his work or his image, I didn't want to study or teach him. Like all of the other museum visitors, however, Hemingway's cats captivated me. Moreover, my fellow museum-goers captivated me. I watched with amazement as people took pictures (of cats, but also of objects significant to the author's life), listened as the guide described Hemingway's “Key West years”, and perused everything in the bookstore, not just the cat merchandise. I realized that I was a witness to expressions of interest, and this interest amazed and intrigued me. I left the museum wondering how I could tap into that interest in my own classroom, how I might channel the widespread intrigue about six-toed cats into an investment in reading Hemingway's written work. In subsequent research for this essay, I found myself obliged to return to the writer whose work had bothered me so much. The research showed me a Hemingway who grappled with gender roles, an author I had either not known (*Garden of Eden*) or refused to see (*The Sun Also Rises*). This research taught me, just as it had Carlene Brennen, that Hemingway's “macho character” was as much our fiction as it was his.

Nathan Heller writes of Hemingway's earlier work that it connects with our animal habits of consciousness. And the struggle it brings forward is the struggle to make sense of—to find a line of narrative through—this disordered experience. Hemingway's insight was to understand that this struggle was not just a literary one. It's a fundamental part of how people themselves perceive and try to make sense of the world (Heller 2012: n.p.).

Heller is right that Hemingway's work “connects with our animal habits of consciousness.” Or, rather, the inverse is true: our “animal habits of consciousness” enable us to connect with literary form. At what point will we stop teaching our students that the “struggle... to find a line of narrative through” disorder is only a literary struggle, and that only a certain kind of literature deserves our accolades for narrating disorder successfully? We

don't teach the story of Ivan the cat so that we can lead students to the "real" story of Hemingway (the author) or to Jake Barnes (the man). We teach these stories alongside one another, as part and parcel of a larger literature, one which Ivan makes possible.

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