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**THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN PROMOTING  
CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND SOCIAL AWARENESS**



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**Abstract**

*This study examines the multifaceted role of English literature in fostering cultural understanding and social awareness through cognitive, pedagogical, and socio-political lenses. Drawing upon interdisciplinary scholarship spanning literary theory, cognitive psychology, and educational research, the paper argues that literature functions not merely as aesthetic expression but as a dynamic system capable of transforming readers' social cognition and ethical engagement. The theoretical framework integrates Martha Nussbaum's concept of narrative imagination and political compassion, Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar's mental simulation model, and Suzanne Keen's critical interventions on the limits of narrative empathy. Empirical evidence from Theory of Mind (ToM) studies, including Kidd and Castano's landmark experiments and subsequent replications, demonstrates that literary fiction, through its stylistic complexity and psychological depth, enhances perspective-taking abilities and emotional intelligence. The pedagogical implications are explored through James Banks' model of multicultural curriculum integration, revealing both the potential and structural challenges of using diverse literature to develop intercultural competence. Historical case studies Charles Dickens' Victorian social critiques and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* illustrate literature's capacity to catalyze legislative reform, while contemporary works by Mohsin Hamid and Richard Powers address pressing global crises of migration and environmental degradation. The synthesis of quantitative metrics, including meta-analytic effect sizes and semantic change analysis, alongside qualitative rhetorical analysis, reveals that literature's influence is both empirically measurable and culturally profound. This review concludes that English literature remains an indispensable tool for cultivating the empathetic imagination, critical consciousness, and global citizenship necessary for navigating an increasingly interconnected and polarized world.*

**Keywords:** *narrative empathy, Theory of Mind, multicultural literature, social cognition, literary fiction, cultural understanding, intercultural competence, political compassion, reader response, global citizenship*

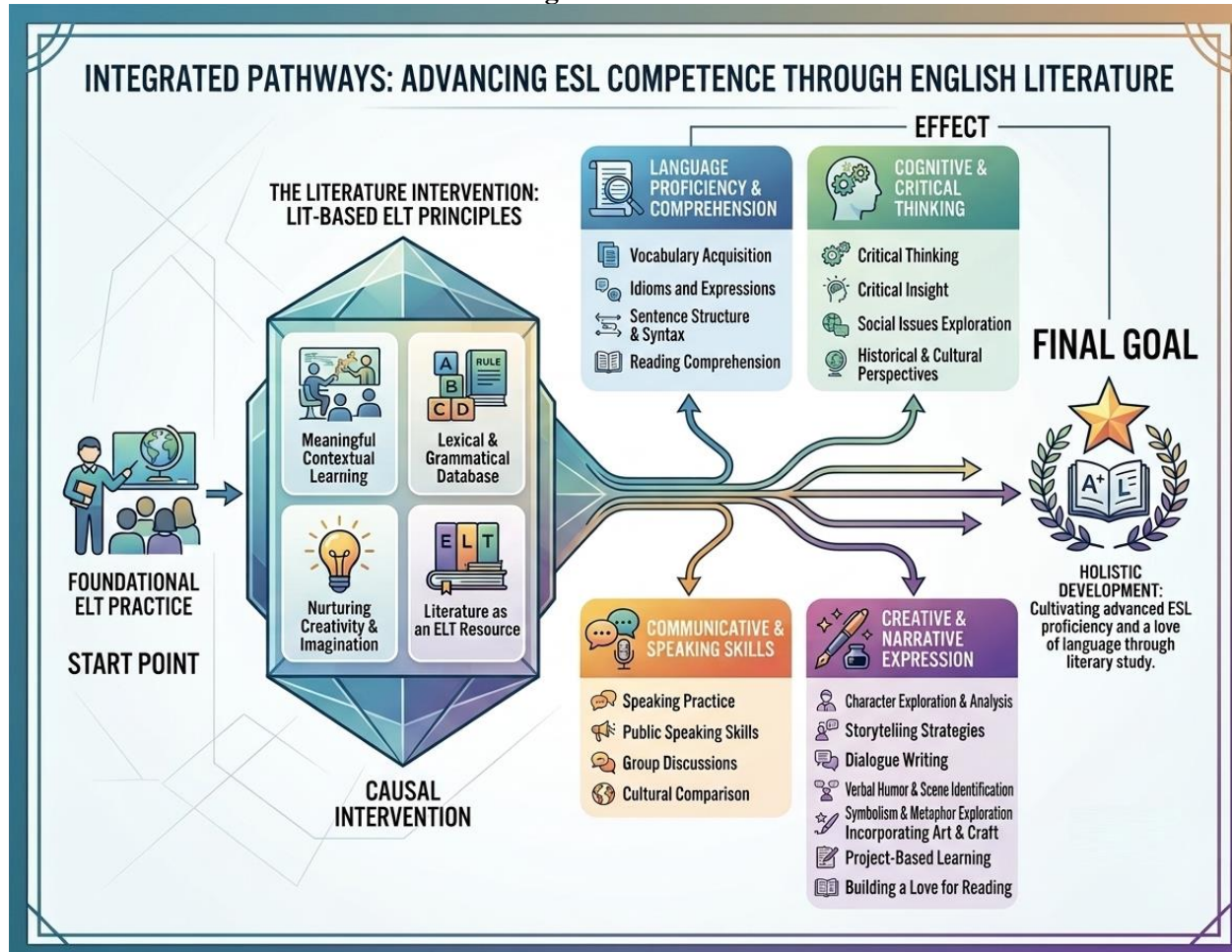
## **1. Introduction**

English literature functions as both a socio-cultural mirror and an active agent of cognitive and political transformation. Rather than serving as a passive repository of aesthetic values, literary texts operate as dynamic systems that allow readers to transcend geographic, temporal, and ideological boundaries (Kholodniak et al., 2023). The dual constructs of cultural understanding the capacity to decipher, value, and empathize with diverse cultural realities and social awareness the conscious recognition of the institutional, economic, and political forces shaping human existence are not merely passive outcomes of reading. Instead, they are actively constructed through the reader's engagement with the narrative (Zapf et al., 2016).

The historical trajectory of literature within language education highlights its evolving cultural and cognitive utility. During the nineteenth-century era of the Grammar Translation Method, literary texts served as the primary source of linguistic and cultural input. However, the subsequent rise of structuralism and the Audiolingual Method in the mid-twentieth century relegated literature to the periphery, a marginalization that persisted into the early phases of Communicative Language Teaching due to a perceived lack of empirical research validating its practical benefits (Orujlu et al 2025).

This neglect ended in the mid-1980s, when linguists and practitioners applied initiated a significant revival of literary texts in the classroom. This renaissance was driven by the recognition that literature provides an authentic linguistic resource that fosters emotional intelligence, vocabulary acquisition, and critical thinking (Eide et al., 2025). By engaging with complex narratives, readers develop the capacity to control and manage cognitive anxiety such as the testing anxiety described in modern emotional intelligence frameworks while simultaneously cultivating the social consciousness required to challenge established power structures (Martinović et al., 2025).

**Figure 1: Integrated Causal Model of Literature-Based Interventions for Holistic ESL Competence and Cognitive Growth.**



## 2. Theoretical Foundations of Narrative Empathy and Social Cognition

To understand how literature fosters social and cultural awareness, one must examine the cognitive and philosophical frameworks that explain the interaction between reader and text. The modern scholarly consensus conceptualizes reading not as a passive reception of data, but as an active simulation of subjective states and social relations (Schwerin et al 2025).

### Martha Nussbaum's Narrative Imagination and Political Compassion

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that the humanities are essential for cultivating the capacities required for democratic citizenship. At the core of her theory is the concept of the "narrative imagination," defined as the ability to be an intelligent reader of another person's story, striving to comprehend the emotions, wishes, and desires of someone placed in circumstances different from one's own (Legroux et al 2025). This capacity is essential to the

development of "political compassion" a cognitive and practical state of reasoning that links emotional engagement to the pursuit of social justice and the defense of human rights.

Nussbaum illustrates this mechanism through works from distinct historical eras:

- **Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (409 B.C.):** Written during a crisis in Athenian democracy, this play depicts the abandonment of a citizen crippled by an ulcerous, disfiguring foot wound on the deserted island of Lemnos. While the military leadership views Philoctetes merely as a disruptive nuisance, the chorus of common soldiers expresses deep compassion, vividly imagining his isolation and struggle for survival. By prompting the audience to adopt the perspective of an impoverished outcast, the drama encourages a political decision against using a human being as a mere tool, demonstrating the moral value of public sympathy (Legroux et al., 2025).

- **Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952):** Ellison's novel critiques the systemic refusals of a racially biased society to acknowledge the humanity of Black individuals. The protagonist is repeatedly cast in roles constructed by the white imagination whether as an animalistic boy scrambling for coins on an electrified mat, a token student driving a wealthy patron, or a radical activist rendering his authentic self entirely transparent. By exposing these failures of vision, the text invites the reader to see beyond the culturally constructed "inner eyes" of the dominant majority, illustrating how literature can shape a more inclusive democratic vision (Amri et al., 2025).

#### **Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar's Mental Simulation Model**

This philosophical perspective aligns with cognitive psychology, where Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar model narrative fiction as a mental "flight simulator". Just as a flight simulator allows pilots to practice navigating dangerous conditions in a controlled environment, reading a novel provides a safe space to navigate complex social interactions and interpersonal conflicts (Oatley et al., 2018). While reading, individuals run a cognitive simulation of other minds and social networks on their own neural architecture, experiencing authentic emotional responses to fictional dynamics.

This simulation hones the reader's real-world social cognitive processes, such as perspective-taking and emotion recognition. Frequent engagement with narrative fiction is positively associated with social reasoning and larger social networks, challenging the stereotype of the socially isolated bookworm (Oatley et al 2020).

#### **Suzanne Keen's Critical Interventions in Narrative Empathy**

While Nussbaum, Mar, and Oatley emphasize the prosocial benefits of reading, Suzanne Keen offers a critical counterpoint. Keen challenges the assumption that narrative empathy automatically translates into real-world altruism. She notes that while real human empathy often leads to prosocial helping behavior, this causal chain is more fragile when the empathetic experience is triggered by fiction (Keen et al., 2006).

Keen identifies several factors that can limit narrative empathy:

- **The Perception of Fictiveness:** Ironically, the awareness that a narrative is fictional can release readers from the guarded responses prompted by the real-world demands of others, allowing them to experience empathy more freely (Sklar et al., 2013).

- **Familiarity and Similarity Biases:** Human beings are predisposed to empathize more readily with characters who share their own identity or background, which can cause empathy to falter when encountering narratives of profound cultural difference (Gallagher et al., 2012).

- **Personal Distress vs. Sympathy:** An overly intense empathetic response can generate personal distress a self-oriented, negative reactions that prompts the reader to disengage or turn away from the narrative, neutralizing its potential to inspire social action (Keen et al., 2007).

#### **3. Empirical Measures of Social Cognition: Literary Fiction and Theory of Mind (ToM)**

The claim that literature enhances social awareness has been evaluated through quantitative psychological testing, particularly surrounding Theory of Mind (ToM) the cognitive capacity to attribute mental states to oneself and others (Kidd et al., 2013).

##### **The Landmark Study by Kidd and Castano**

In 2013, David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano published a series of experiments demonstrating that reading literary fiction directly improves ToM in adults. Using established measures such as the "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" Test (RMET) and the Yoni Task which evaluates the ability to infer mental states from facial expressions, eye-gaze, and verbal cues they compared literary fiction against popular fiction and non-fiction (Corcoran et al., 2019).

Kidd and Castano argued that the primary factor driving this improvement is the stylistic structure of the text. Popular fiction tends to rely on predictable characters and established social scripts, requiring minimal cognitive effort to understand. In contrast, literary fiction employs stylistic devices that defamiliarize the reader, presenting psychologically complex characters whose inconsistent behavior forces active, effortful mentalizing (Vice et al., 2021).

## Replications and Methodological Debates

The direct replication of Kidd and Castano's Experiment 5 conducted by Iris van Kuijk, Peter Verkoeijen, Katinka Dijkstra, and Rolf Zwaan yielded results largely consistent with the original findings. However, their broader meta-analysis revealed that the short-term, transient effect of reading brief literary passages on ToM is relatively small and shows significant heterogeneity across studies. Researchers have also noted that the RMET exhibits poor internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ), suggesting that more robust, long-term interventions are required to produce measurable, lasting changes in social cognition (Derksen et al., 2022).

**Table 1: Key Empirical Studies on Cognitive Responses to Fiction**

| Study / Theorist                               | Primary Construct Measured                            | Methodological Approach                                                                               | Core Findings and Quantitative Metrics                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Kidd &amp; Castano (2013)</b>               | Cognitive and Affective Theory of Mind (ToM)          | Multi-experiment design comparing literary fiction, popular fiction, and non-fiction.                 | Reading literary fiction produced statistically significant improvements in ToM tasks (e.g., RMET and Yoni Task) compared to other genres.                                   |
| <b>Van Kuijk et al. (2018)</b>                 | Replication of Literary Fiction Effect on ToM         | Direct replication of Experiment 5 alongside a small-scale meta-analysis.                             | Replicated the original direction of findings, but concluded the overall meta-analytic effect of brief reading exposure is small and highly heterogeneous.                   |
| <b>Mar, Oatley, &amp; Peterson (2009)</b>      | Empathic Accuracy and Exposure to Narrative Fiction   | Survey-based correlation controlling for personality traits (Openness), gender, and reading interest. | Confirmed that exposure to narrative fiction predicts higher performance on empathy tasks, whereas exposure to expository non-fiction correlates negatively.                 |
| <b>Dan Johnson (2012)</b>                      | Prosocial Behavior & Emotional Transportation         | Transportation scale assessment paired with an active behavioral helper task (dropped-pen paradigm).  | Revealed that deep narrative transportation predicts real-world helping behavior, mediated by a heightened perceptual sensitivity to fearful facial expressions.             |
| <b>Adolescent Literacy Intervention (2023)</b> | Reading Comprehension, Critical Thinking, and Writing | Mixed-methods evaluation of sustained engagement with young adult literature on controversial topics. | Demonstrated significant post-test improvements in the literature group: reading comprehension (78% vs 69%), critical thinking (26 vs 19), and writing quality (4.4 vs 3.8). |

## 4. Multicultural Literature in the Classroom: Fostering Global Competence

As educational institutions work to prepare students for an increasingly interconnected world, multicultural literature has become a key tool for developing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and global literacy (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016).

### Intercultural Communicative Competence and Systemic Access

By presenting authentic narratives of diverse cultural groups, multicultural literature encourages critical thinking, open-mindedness, and empathy. This exposure helps students recognize cultural biases and understand complex human experiences (Fantini et al., 2012).

However, pedagogical implementation faces structural challenges:



- **Monocultural Bias in Book Collections:** Many school libraries remain dominated by Eurocentric narratives, which can limit students' exposure to diverse viewpoints.
- **Educator Confidence and Read-Aloud Practices:** Studies in Western Australia indicate that teachers' anxiety regarding their own cultural competency can limit the effectiveness of multicultural read-alouds and discussions.
- **Socio-Cultural Representation:** Programs designed to provide diverse literature to low-income communities during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of representation, with students expressing a strong sense of affirmation and belonging when reading about characters who reflected their own identities (Adam et al., 2020).

This pedagogical work aligns with broader efforts to cultivate global citizenship. Global literacy involves addressing globalization, racism, diversity, and social justice. In regions such as Southern Africa, history and literary education are increasingly integrated to promote Global Citizenship Education (GCED), helping students examine historical events such as the Herero-Nama genocide in Tanzania to foster a sense of belonging to a global community (Shabalala et al., 2025).

**Figure 2: Four-Dimensional Conceptual Framework for Implementing English Literature in L2/ESL Higher Education.**



### **James Banks' Model of Multicultural Integration**

To help educators move beyond superficial engagement with diverse cultures, James Banks developed a four-level model for integrating multicultural content into the curriculum. This model categorizes integration into a developmental progression, helping teachers shift from a simple awareness of cultural differences to fostering active, transformative citizenship (Banks et al., 1993).

**Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Banks' Multicultural Curriculum Levels**

| Integration Level                         | Conceptual Focus                                                         | Structural Reorganization                                                                  | Classroom Literature Practice                                                                       | Target Civic Outcome                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Level 1: Contributions Approach</b>    | Focuses on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements.             | None; the core structure of the mainstream curriculum remains unchanged.                   | Celebrating Black History Month or displaying images of prominent figures like Rosa Parks.          | Encourages basic cultural recognition, but can risk essentializing or exoticizing diverse groups.   |
| <b>Level 2: Additive Approach</b>         | Adds multicultural concepts, themes, and perspectives.                   | Diverse texts are appended to the curriculum without altering its basic structure.         | Incorporating a novel by an author of color into a standard English syllabus.                       | Expands cultural content, but views diverse perspectives as peripheral to the mainstream narrative. |
| <b>Level 3: Transformational Approach</b> | Restructures the curriculum to view concepts from multiple perspectives. | The curriculum is changed to integrate diverse viewpoints alongside mainstream narratives. | Curating units where historical and social concepts are evaluated through multiple cultural lenses. | Develops critical empathy, encouraging students to question how knowledge is constructed.           |
| <b>Level 4: Social Action Approach</b>    | Combines transformation with active decision-making.                     | Incorporates activities that require students to identify and address social issues.       | Using literature on contemporary injustices as a guide for students to pursue local advocacy.       | Empowers "transformative citizens" to take active roles in promoting social justice and equality.   |

### **5. Rhetorical and Narrative Strategies for Building Empathy**

Evoking empathy through literature relies heavily on the specific narrative and rhetorical strategies employed by the author. Rhetorical narratology examines how these techniques are structured to shape the reader's emotional and ethical response (Leake et al., 2016).

#### **Formal Techniques of Narrative Engagement**

In his cognitive analysis of narrative impact, David Herman outlines how authors manipulate formal textual dimensions to invite perspective-taking:

- **Point of View and Focalization:** The choice between first-person and third-person narration, alongside the alignment of the narrative voice with a specific character's perspective, influences the reader's capacity for emotional projection.
- **Character Discourse:** The presentation of a character's speech and thoughts ranging from direct interior monologue to indirect discourse provides readers with access to their inner lives, encouraging mentalizing.
- **Character Emotion Presentation:** Explicit linguistic markers of emotional states help readers simulate and share the character's feelings.
- **Characterization Techniques:** Giving characters desirable qualities or virtues helps build an emotional connection, making them more relatable to the reader (El-Nasr et al., 2007).

#### **The Dual Role of Narrative Perspectives: Morrison's Strategic Distancing**

The manipulation of these formal techniques can also be used to intentionally disrupt or direct reader empathy. In her novels *Beloved* (1987) and *Home* (2012), Toni Morrison uses complex narrative structures, multiple focalizers, and traumatic events to challenge her readers' ethical perspectives. Rather than inviting a simple, sentimental connection,

Morrison's complex structures require readers to actively interpret character motivation, preventing easy identification and highlighting the limits of human empathy (Travis et al., 2010).

This strategic distancing can be essential when dealing with sensitive themes. Techniques such as metanarrative interjections and emotional distancing help keep intense emotions manageable, preventing readers from experiencing aversive personal distress and shutting down. This approach is central to "restorative narratives," which depict characters recovering from trauma or overcoming adversity, guiding readers toward a constructive emotional resolution (Li et al., 2025).

## 6. Historical Paradigms of Literary-Driven Social and Legislative Reform

The societal impact of literature is clearly illustrated by historical instances where narrative works have shaped public opinion and driven significant policy reforms (Thiruppathi et al., 2025).

### Charles Dickens and the Victorian Social Critique

In nineteenth-century England, Charles Dickens used serialized fiction to critique the social, economic, and moral abuses of the Victorian era. Drawing on his own childhood experiences of poverty and factory labor, Dickens sought to generate a shift in public awareness and challenge prevailing social institutions (Padra et al., 2024).

His novels targeted specific systemic issues:

- ***Oliver Twist and the New Poor Law:*** Dickens' critique of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 exposed the harsh conditions of the Victorian workhouse system, which relied on hunger and physical punishment to deter the poor from seeking assistance. By humanizing the suffering of an orphaned child, Dickens challenged the popular view that poverty was a moral failure, encouraging his middle-class readers to recognize the poor as fellow citizens (Richardson et al 2012).
- ***Hard Times and Industrialization:*** Set in the industrial town of Coketown, this novel critiqued the dehumanizing effects of utilitarian education and factory labor, showing how a sole focus on rational calculation and self-interest undermines social cohesion (Afzal et al., 2025).
- ***Bleak House and legal Bureaucracy:*** Through the fictional, endless lawsuit of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, Dickens satirized the Court of Chancery, showing how its complex bureaucracy prioritized legal procedures over the lives of those it was meant to protect.

While Dickens did not advocate for specific pieces of legislation, his immense popularity helped shape public opinion. His vivid social commentaries contributed to a climate of reform, indirectly supporting the abolition of imprisonment for debt, the purification of the magistrates' courts, and the restriction of child labor (Robbins et al., 2013).

### Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and the 1906 Consumer Protection Acts

A more direct connection between literature and legislative action occurred in the United States with the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* in 1906. Sinclair intended the novel to expose the exploitation of immigrant workers in Chicago's meatpacking industry. However, the public was most deeply affected by his graphic descriptions of the unsanitary conditions under which meat was processed (Sachs et al., 2009).

The resulting public outrage prompted President Theodore Roosevelt to launch independent investigations into the meatpacking stockyards. Once Sinclair's descriptions were verified, Roosevelt worked with Congress to pass the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. These acts prohibited the sale of adulterated or misbranded food and drugs in interstate commerce and laid the regulatory foundation for the eventual establishment of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) (Ahmed et al., 2009).

**Table 3: Chronological Evolution of United States Consumer and Pharmaceutical Safety Regulations**

| Date / Legislative Milestone | Primary Regulatory Focus                                                    | Triggering Event or Public Literary Catalyst                                | Ultimate Institutional and Policy Outcome                                         |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1902: Biologics Control Act  | Regulation of vaccines, serums, and antitoxins sold in interstate commerce. | The death of twenty children from contaminated diphtheria vaccines in 1901. | Mandated federal licensing of vaccine manufacturers to restore public confidence. |



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|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1906: Pure Food and Drug Act / Meat Inspection Act</b> | Banning of misbranded or adulterated food and drugs; mandatory livestock inspection. | Publication of Upton Sinclair's <i>The Jungle</i> in February 1906.                  | Established federal authority over food safety and laid the groundwork for the FDA.                                          |
| <b>1911: U.S. v. Johnson Court Ruling</b>                 | Legal evaluation of the limits of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act.                   | Discovery of a legal loophole regarding false therapeutic claims.                    | The Supreme Court ruled that the 1906 Act only prohibited false statements about ingredients, not therapeutic effectiveness. |
| <b>1912: Sherley Amendment</b>                            | Strengthening of labeling restrictions against false therapeutic advertisements.     | Continued distribution of dangerous remedies like Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup.     | Prohibited the intentional labeling of medicines with false or fraudulent curative claims.                                   |
| <b>1914: Harrison Narcotic Act</b>                        | Regulation and tax tracking of the distribution of opiates and cocaine.              | Rising addiction rates linked to unlabeled narcotic substances in consumer remedies. | Required doctor prescriptions for high-narcotic products and increased record-keeping.                                       |
| <b>1938: Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act</b>         | Mandatory pre-market safety testing and extended regulation to cosmetics.            | The Elixir of Sulfanilamide disaster of 1937, which killed 107 people.               | Significantly strengthened the FDA's regulatory authority and introduced drug safety requirements.                           |

## Long-Term Semantic Evolution of Social Stereotypes

Beyond specific legislative acts, the long-term impact of literature on public consciousness can be observed through computational analyses of written language. A study utilizing word embeddings from 850 billion words in English-language books (from 1800 to 1999) examined historical stability and change in social group representations. The results showed that while underlying semantic structures can be persistent, over 50% of the top-associated traits for various social groups changed across successive decades, reflecting a gradual shift in societal attitudes (Charlesworth et al., 2022).

This semantic shift aligns with historical survey findings, such as the Princeton Quartet studies initiated in 1933. These surveys revealed a gradual "fading" of explicit negative stereotypes of racial and ethnic outgroups; for example, the endorsement of certain negative stereotypes of Black Americans fell from over 75% in 1933 to under 11% by the early 2000s. This computational and survey data suggests that literature plays a quiet but continuous role in altering the broader linguistic and cultural frameworks of society (Ma et al., 2025).

## 7. Contemporary Global Crises in Fiction: Refugee and Environmental Narratives

In the twenty-first century, contemporary writers continue to use the unique capabilities of the novel to address pressing global challenges, shifting from traditional social realism to more speculative or ecocritical modes of narrative (De Bruyn et al., 2020).

### Refugee Humanization in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West* addresses the global refugee crisis by blending realistic detail with elements of magical realism. The novel follows Saeed and Nadia, a young couple who must flee their unnamed home city as it descends into civil war. Hamid introduces a speculative element: a system of magical doors that instantly transport individuals across the globe, allowing them to bypass dangerous journeys in trucks or boats (Gazazyan et al., 2023). This narrative choice serves several purposes:

- **Decentering the Journey:** By removing the physical process of travel, the novel focuses on the psychological and social reality of displacement.
- **Highlighting Ontological Shock:** The characters experience the sudden, disorienting transition of being transplanted into entirely new environments, such as a tent city in Mykonos or a squatted luxury home in London.

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- **The Tension of the Digital Age:** Hamid depicts the contradictory nature of the protagonists' digital lives, where their smartphones offer instant connection to a global world while they face physical containment, barbed wire, and rising xenophobia in "Dark London". (Pérez Zapata et al., 2021)

Through these strategies, *Exit West* seeks to humanize the refugees often treated in public discourse as an abstract threat or a problem to be solved by presenting them as complex, modern subjects. Frame this narrative against global reality: in mid-2020, UNHCR data indicated there were 26.3 million refugees worldwide, with 86% hosted in developing nations. Hamid's novel uses a speculative lens to explore these global dynamics, inviting readers to consider migration not as a crisis, but as a shared human experience (Rizwan et al., 2026).

## **Eco-Cosmopolitanism in Richard Powers' *The Overstory***

Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory* addresses the ecological crisis by interweaving the lives of nine different protagonists whose family histories are connected to trees. The novel uses an ecocritical lens to challenge the anthropocentric view that separates humans from the natural world (Reynolds et al., 2026).

Powers employs specific narrative strategies to encourage environmental awareness:

- **The Agency of Trees:** Trees are depicted not as passive resources, but as active, communicative organisms that share resources and warn each other of danger through underground fungal networks.
- **Contrasting Time Scales:** The novel contrasts short-term human decision-making with the ancient, slow lifespans of trees, highlighting the limitations of industrial practices that prioritize immediate profit over long-term sustainability.
- **The Concept of "Dwelling":** Utilizing Greg Garrard's ecocritical framework, the novel depicts contrasting human-nature relationships the damaging "Georgic" interaction that dominates the landscape, versus the nurturing "Ecological Indian" approach that seeks preservation (Khan et al., 2025).

## **Conclusion**

This review has systematically demonstrated that English literature occupies a uniquely powerful position at the intersection of cognitive development, cultural education, and social transformation. The convergence of philosophical argumentation, empirical psychological research, and historical case studies establishes literature as an active agent in shaping human consciousness and social structures, rather than a passive cultural artifact. The cognitive framework provided by Nussbaum's narrative imagination and Oatley and Mar's mental simulation model reveals that reading literary fiction engages readers in sophisticated processes of perspective-taking and emotional simulation that directly enhance real-world social cognition. However, Keen's critical interventions remind us that narrative empathy is neither automatic nor universally transformative, requiring careful pedagogical scaffolding and attention to the specific stylistic and structural features of texts. The empirical evidence, while demonstrating statistically significant effects of literary fiction on Theory of Mind, also highlights important methodological considerations. The small-to-moderate effect sizes and heterogeneity across studies, particularly in replication attempts, suggest that the cognitive benefits of reading are contingent upon sustained engagement with complex literary texts rather than brief, isolated exposures. This finding carries significant implications for educational policy, supporting arguments for the continued integration of literature curricula rather than their marginalization in favor of purely utilitarian or skills-based approaches. The pedagogical frameworks examined in this paper, particularly Banks' developmental model of multicultural integration, provide educators with practical pathways for moving beyond superficial cultural appreciation toward transformative citizenship education. The documented challenges of monocultural bias in educational materials and educator anxiety regarding cultural competency underscore the need for systematic institutional support and professional development. Yet the demonstrated success of literature-based interventions in improving reading comprehension, critical thinking, and writing quality among diverse student populations offers compelling evidence for literature's continued relevance in contemporary education.

The historical case studies of Dickens and Sinclair serve as powerful testament to literature's capacity to shape public consciousness and catalyze legislative reform. While the direct causal pathway from narrative to policy change is complex and mediated by numerous social and political factors, these examples illustrate how literary works can reframe public discourse, humanize marginalized populations, and create the cultural conditions necessary for social progress. The computational analysis of semantic change across two centuries of published texts provides quantitative

support for literature's long-term influence on social attitudes, revealing a gradual but measurable evolution in the linguistic representation of social groups.

Contemporary works by Hamid and Powers demonstrate that contemporary literature continues to engage with pressing global crises, employing innovative narrative strategies to address refugee displacement and environmental degradation. These texts extend the tradition of socially engaged literature while adapting to the complexities of an interconnected, rapidly changing world. The use of speculative elements and ecocritical perspectives allows these authors to challenge readers' assumptions and invite new ways of conceptualizing shared human and environmental challenges. In conclusion, English literature serves as an essential bridge between individual cognitive development and collective social consciousness. Its capacity to cultivate empathy, critical thinking, and cultural understanding positions it as an indispensable resource for addressing the challenges of an increasingly polarized and interdependent world. The evidence reviewed in this paper supports the continued investment in literature education, not as a luxury or anachronism, but as a fundamental component of preparing citizens for democratic participation and global citizenship. As societies confront complex issues of migration, environmental sustainability, and social justice, the humanizing power of narrative remains more relevant than ever. The task for educators, policymakers, and researchers is to ensure that the transformative potential of literature is accessible to all learners, regardless of background or circumstance, and to continue investigating the mechanisms through which narrative engagement shapes human cognition, emotion, and action.

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