

# How Literature Saves Lives

**Shahd Alshammari**

I learned to read when I was six years old, and the first sentence my mother helped me construct was “I can read!” I felt empowered. Ten years later, I woke up one day, with one blind eye. I couldn’t see for a week, and at school, I was called “Blind Girl.” That’s when I realized how people label each other, categorize each other, and reject anything that looks different. By the time I was eighteen, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), which is a neurological illness that can affect any part of the body. You may wake up blind one day, paralyzed the next; but not all people with MS are in wheelchairs. My doctor, however, did tell my parents that I would end up in a wheelchair, and that it was pointless to pursue higher education. But because I felt like there was a ticking bomb, the shadow of loss looming behind me, I took everything two steps at a time. I ran as fast as I could, and realized that I wanted to teach literature. Sometimes, as cliché as this might sound, we give up on our dreams. Or, we put them on hold. But when dreams are threatened, when you feel that loss is inevitable, you have a choice: you either give up, or fight harder than ever before. There were days where I struggled to write my essays, and as you all know, literature majors need their hands to write. We write and write. I needed to learn how to find different ways of holding the pen, managing my exams, and still attempting to keep my chin up. It was no easy task.

But I am not saying that I am a hero, or even my own hero. The real hero is Literature. I had a passion for it, and I realized that putting my heart and soul into it kept me alive, kept me going. After a long struggle with myself and body, I finally got my PhD. Now what, I thought? I want to transfer my appreciation for literature to my students. For me, literature is fictional, yes, and that’s great because it serves a great purpose: it opens the mind to possibilities and realities we don’t always relate to. But sometimes we do relate, and that’s the aim of this talk today. The Humanities do not always receive as much attention as the sciences do. I have had many people dismiss literature because it’s mostly made-up and unreal. But it is this unreal world that can actually provide us with a lens to examine ourselves and environments. We need stories of others, those who are seemingly different, but more alike than we think. We all have pretty much the same things happen to us. Almost the same plot, the same storyline. You are born, you get your heart broken, you learn a few life lessons here and there, you evolve or choose not to evolve, and then you die. What is the difference between a hero and a villain? It is precisely how we react to these circumstances and things that happen to us. We make life choices all the time, but we need the right tools to decide what to do with our lives.

My PhD supervisor introduced me to the field of Disability Studies. In literature, we have many different literary characters: there are those that are of a different race, different gender, different abilities and disabilities. Disability Studies is not only about people with physical or mental disabilities; it is about how people who are othered and different are oppressed by society. Disability Studies opens room for difference, and challenges any category that oppresses and separates people. I remember being fascinated with a literary character in a novel, Captain Ahab, a character that is physically disabled, but always insists “I would strike the sun if it insulted me.” Captain Ahab is perhaps a lesser known character, and mostly literature enthusiasts would remember him. I was able to relate to characters like

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him, characters that were different. Think of Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*. Captain Hook has a story of his own, he is an amputee and as an audience we tend to overlook this disability and see him only in one dimension: the villain. Think of the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*: Quasimodo, which in French means half formed; he suffered from a physical disability that placed him outside of society. But try to look past the disability. He is physically disabled, yes, but there are those of us that feel like we belong on the outside of society, even though we might be “normal.” Despite his difference in appearance, he finds love. Which brings us to yet another character,

the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*. We tend to think of the Beast as simply looking scary, but “looking scary” or looking like a monster is a vague idea. You can have scars, you can have a physical deformity, you can be marked as different or scary, and be shunned for it. He lives in a castle on his own, not interacting with others. No one reaches out. These literary characters are all different. Literature houses these characters, it gives them a home. In the same way, it gives us the opportunity to think about our assumptions of what is normal, what makes us think we are better than others, and what we really value. So when I assign literary texts to my students, I urge them to think about people who might not be similar to them, about other realities. Literature helped me understand that people have different ways of understanding their bodies, selves, and realities.

And that is how I began to think of MS, my physical disability, as a random disability. I coined this term, I made it up, to describe what it meant to live with this Monster. I imagined that MS was a green-eyed Monster, one that I had to make friends with. I had to make peace with it. By random disability, I mean that one day you can wake up having lost one of your senses, while another day you can appear to be perfectly normal. I realized that even normal is nothing but an illusion, and that it was okay not to be okay. I thought of how society constructs this image of normalcy, pushes us to be perfect, ideal. And I wanted to open up room for dialogue. When I have to use a cane in class, because there are some bad days, and some good days, I decided that there is no shame in telling my students that their literature professor is human and imperfect. We tend to think of academics as perfect, and

this connection between student and teacher is not always established. But when I opened up about my disability, many students did the same. They were able to voice their physical issues, their social issues, their fears, and what they felt they couldn't tell anyone. Society was the problem, not disability. The real issue was a disabled society, one that rejects anything and anyone different. I learned self and social acceptance only because I felt different, and I immersed myself in literature, in a place that was inclusive.

Leo Tolstoy says that the function of literature is to transfer feeling from one person's heart to another. As a literature professor, I wanted to transfer feeling and thought to my students. I didn't want to tell them how to think, or what to think, because ultimately there's no right or wrong way of thinking. I just wanted them to think about issues that concern them and the condition of being human, of survival. Readers of literature develop empathy, we develop a world-view, and realize that we are not as lonely or as isolated from the world as we think.

There is a common humanity that we disregard. Literature is universal, and it is this universality that I attempt to show through my teaching. As a literature teacher, I am deeply committed to finding the humanitarian value in reading literature. When I assign texts, my intention is to find commonalities between the characters' fictional lives and reality. I also want my students to challenge cultural assumptions and stereotypes, to think about HOW and what they think, to question what they take at face value. I want literature to influence, to inspire, in the same way that it has

offered me a home: it offered me a home in the psychological sense, it made me see the world with a different lens – that it wasn't just Shahd who was struggling, suffering, or trying to make sense of her body and her identity. Literature breaks these barriers and liberates you from feeling isolated and alone. You are able to at least begin to understand this condition of being human.

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The instructor's function is to help students realize that the most important thing is what literature means to them and does for them specifically. My students are able to enjoy the work, yet they are also able to develop critical insight into their own lives and their status

in society: they think about issues of race, class, and gender. My job is not simply to teach works of fiction, drama, or poetry. I believe it involves looking beyond the words, beyond what you see, and finding our shared suffering with fictional characters. Literature also really opens your mind to multiple ways of thinking about yourself and the world around you. What does it mean to be you today, in this moment in time, in this body, with this specific cultural background? What does it mean to empathize with those that are different? Are we really different, at the end of the day? If I read Shakespeare today, I can still find commonalities. Romeo and Juliet fought against society so that they could get married. Today, traditional

marriage is still alive and well. Lovers can still relate to that classic tale. In class, I try to foster an open-dialogue, where works of literature come to life, and we can find ourselves cutting across borders and boundaries. There are no real borders and boundaries, they are all culturally constructed. We set them up to distance ourselves from anything that isn't us. There is always us and them. But the point of the Humanities and literature is to break away from this line of thought. I know that literature saved me from my worst demons, and it made me realize that I was not ever really alone. I try to get my students to see that humanity is all about diversity and being different, and that, I believe, is empowerment.

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