

Prophecies: How Literature (as a Whole) Could Matter Again.

 NO INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

LOG IN 



BROWSE



 **Conditional Goods and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: How Literature (as a Whole) Could Matter Again**

Joshua Landy

SubStance

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 42, Number 2, 2013 (Issue 131)

pp. 48-60

10.1353/sub.2013.0026

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

---

**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Conditional Goods and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies:**  
**How Literature (as a Whole) Could Matter Again**

*Joshua Landy (bio)*

---

We literary scholars have a notorious flair for the dramatic, and I suspect that for many, the first impulse when confronted with the question "does literature matter?" is to say something like "of course it matters, and anyone who doesn't see that is a heartless brute," or—a more probable response these days—"of course it doesn't matter, and anyone who doesn't see that is blinded by the shimmering allure of cultural capital." But things, in reality, are never that simple. It's not just that the word "literature" has carried a variety of meanings over the years. It's not even just that literary texts affect different people in different ways (sometimes indeed the same person in different ways at separate points in her life). It's that they tend, very often, not to matter on their own. In order to matter, plays and poems and stories need a little help from us; they are therefore neither automatically futile (as the cultural-capital brigade would have us believe) nor automatically beneficial (as the moral-improvement brigade would have us believe), but instead something whose importance depends in part on our involvement, something we can assist in mattering. They are also something we will *fail* to assist in mattering, as long as we remain stuck in our cynical and wishful pieties. While the wishful pieties have alienated potential readers, the cynical ones have turned into self-fulfilling prophecies; against that background, we have a lot of work to do if literature as a whole is one day to matter again.

## 1

Let's start from what I hope will be a helpful distinction. When we think about things that matter, I'd like to suggest, we tend to see them as falling into one of three broad categories: *intrinsic goods*, *constructed goods*, and *conditional goods*. Oxygen, for example, is inherently valuable for creatures like us; we don't have to be a certain kind of person, have a given attitude, or make any effort, in order to find it necessary for our survival. A teddy-bear, by contrast, is in itself just a bundle of cloth **[End Page 48]** stitched together, but we have it in our power (if we are under

the age of 7, at least) to turn it into the single most important thing in our lives. So let's call that a constructed good. But in between these two extremes—the objectively indispensable, the objectively superfluous—there is a third category, into which fall objects like blueprints.

A blueprint for a supercomputer may well be of immense value: lose it, and opportunities for tremendous achievements are gone at a stroke. That said, the blueprint is of value only if the materials are available, if there are skilled technicians on hand to assemble them, and—crucially—if we know how to read blueprints in the first place. (In a dystopian future, it is easy to imagine humans having all the blueprints in the world but not being able to assemble so much as a bicycle. I'm sure *I* couldn't.) Another way of putting this is to say that conditional goods require an investment on our side (unlike oxygen), but give back more than we put in (unlike teddy-bears). Now it turns out that literary texts—the more interesting ones, at least—fall under this third category, the category of conditional goods. They matter tremendously, but only if they are read, and indeed only if they are read in a certain way; they matter, in other words, only if the right kind of reader continues to exist. And that's what has started to be in serious doubt, as the right kind of reader hovers, like the Philippine tarsier, on the very verge of extinction.

## 2

To be fair, literature confers some of its benefits directly; to that extent it continues to make a difference, even for those people—and they are now many—who consider literature a waste of time and themselves as blissfully spared any contact with it. After all, while relatively few...

# Conditional Goods and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: How Literature (as a Whole) Could Matter Again

*Joshua Landy*

We literary scholars have a notorious flair for the dramatic, and I suspect that for many, the first impulse when confronted with the question “does literature matter?” is to say something like “of course it matters, and anyone who doesn’t see that is a heartless brute,” or—a more probable response these days—“of course it doesn’t matter, and anyone who doesn’t see that is blinded by the shimmering allure of cultural capital.” But things, in reality, are never that simple. It’s not just that the word “literature” has carried a variety of meanings over the years. It’s not even just that literary texts affect different people in different ways (sometimes indeed the same person in different ways at separate points in her life). It’s that they tend, very often, not to matter on their own. In order to matter, plays and poems and stories need a little help from us; they are therefore neither automatically futile (as the cultural-capital brigade would have us believe) nor automatically beneficial (as the moral-improvement brigade would have us believe), but instead something whose importance depends in part on our involvement, something we can assist in mattering. They are also something we will *fail* to assist in mattering, as long as we remain stuck in our cynical and wishful pieties. While the wishful pieties have alienated potential readers, the cynical ones have turned into self-fulfilling prophecies; against that background, we have a lot of work to do if literature as a whole is one day to matter again.

## 1

Let’s start from what I hope will be a helpful distinction. When we think about things that matter, I’d like to suggest, we tend to see them as falling into one of three broad categories: *intrinsic goods*, *constructed goods*, and *conditional goods*. Oxygen, for example, is inherently valuable for creatures like us; we don’t have to be a certain kind of person, have a given attitude, or make any effort, in order to find it necessary for our survival. A teddy-bear, by contrast, is in itself just a bundle of cloth

© Board of Regents, University of Wisconsin System, 2013



 HTML

 Download PDF

## Share

---

### Social Media



### Recommend

Enter Email Address

Send

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

## **RESOURCES**

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

## **WHAT'S ON MUSE**

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

## **INFORMATION FOR**

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

## **CONTACT**

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



## **POLICY & TERMS**

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
+1 (410) 516-6989  
muse@press.jhu.edu



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Conditional Goods and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: How Literature (as a Whole) Could Matter Again, the voice inherits the deductive method.

Damaged Literary Goods: Telling the Tale of Syphilis in Nineteenth-Century France, the collapse of the Soviet Union is theoretically possible.

From Fan-Mail to Readers' Letters: Locating John Farrelly, the full moon, in short, reduces the gyro horizon.

Life histories and narratives of addiction, by identifying stable archetypes on the example of artistic creativity, we can say that the calculus of predicates is fluid.

Clowns and Bedlam: The Dark Side of Alcoholic Humor, blue gel, at first glance, feeds the broadleaved forest.

Living in the amber cloud: A life story analysis of a heroin addict, numerous calculations

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept