

THE VALUE OF LITERATURE

Mark Twain once shrewdly observed that a person who chooses not to read has no advantage over a person who is unable to read. In industrialized societies today, however, the question is not who reads, because nearly everyone can and does, but what is read. Why should anyone spend precious time with literature when there is so much informational reading material available on our smart phones? Why should a literary artist's imagination compete for attention that could be spent on the firm realities that constitute everyday life? In fact, national best-seller lists much less often include collections of stories, poems, or plays than they do cookbooks and, not surprisingly, diet books. Although such fare may be filling, it doesn't stay with you. Most people have other appetites too.

Certainly one of the most important values of literature is that it nourishes our emotional lives. An effective literary work may seem to speak directly to us, especially if we are ripe for it. The inner life that good writers reveal in their characters often gives us glimpses of some portion of ourselves. We can be moved to laugh, cry, tremble, dream, ponder, shriek, or rage with a character by simply turning a page instead of turning our lives upside down. Although the experience itself is imagined, the emotion is real. That's why the final chapters of a good adventure novel can make a reader's heart race as much as a 100-yard dash or why the repressed love of Hester

Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is painful to a sympathetic reader. Human emotions speak a universal language regardless of when or where a work was written.

In addition to appealing to our emotions, literature broadens our perspectives on the world. Most of the people we meet tend to be like ourselves, and what we can see of the world even over the course of a lifetime is astonishingly limited. Literature allows us to move beyond the inevitable boundaries of our own lives and culture because it introduces us to people different from ourselves, places remote from our neighborhoods, and times other than our own. Reading makes us more aware of life's possibilities as well as its subtleties and ambiguities. Put simply, people who read literature experience more life and have a keener sense of a common human identity than those who do not. It is true, of course, that many people go through life without reading imaginative literature, but they are missing out on an essential human experience. They may find themselves troubled by the same kinds of questions that reveal Daisy Buchanan's restless, vague discontentment in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925): "What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon?" cried Daisy, "and the day after that, and the next thirty years?"

Sometimes students mistakenly associate literature more with school than with life. Accustomed to reading it in order to write a paper or pass an examination, students may perceive such reading

as a chore instead of a pleasurable opportunity, something considerably less important than studying for the “practical” courses that prepare them in obvious ways for a career. The study of literature, however, is also practical because it engages readers in the kinds of problem solving important in a variety of fields, from philosophy to science and technology. The interpretation of literary texts demands an engagement with ambiguity, morality, and emotional volatility, all of which are unavoidable aspects of life.

Because it pushes the boundaries of language, literature embraces the complexity of human experience. People who make the most significant contributions to their professions — whether in business, engineering, teaching, or some other area — tend to become excited about the existence of multiple possibilities. Instead of retreating to the way things have always been done, they bring freshness and creativity to their work. F. Scott Fitzgerald once astutely described the “test of a first-rate intelligence” as “the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” People with such intelligence know how to read situations, shape questions, interpret details, and evaluate competing points of view. Equipped with a healthy respect for facts, they also understand the value of pursuing hunches and exercising their imaginations. They are interested as much in “problem finding” as “problem solving.” Reading literature encourages a suppleness of mind that is helpful in any discipline or work.

Once the requirements for your degree are completed, what ultimately matters are not the courses listed on your transcript but the sensibilities and habits of mind that you bring to your work, friends, family, and every other dimension of your life. A healthy economy changes and grows with the times; people do too, but only if they are prepared for more than simply filling a job description, or solving a problem that someone else has identified. The range and variety of life that literature affords can help you to interpret your own experiences and the world in which you live.

To discover the insights that literature reveals requires careful reading and sensitivity. One of the purposes of a college introduction to literature class is to cultivate the analytic skills necessary for reading well. Class discussions often help establish an understanding of a work that might not be available if you were reading in solitude. You can also develop interpretive skills by writing about what you read. Writing is an effective means of clarifying and deepening your responses and ideas because it requires you to account for the author's use of language as well as your own. This book is based on two premises: that reading literature is pleasurable and that reading and understanding a work sensitively by thinking, talking, or writing about it increases the pleasure of the experience of it.

Understanding literature's basic elements — such as point of view, symbol, theme, tone, irony, and so on — is a prerequisite to an informed appreciation of it. This kind of understanding allows you

to perceive more in a literary work in much the same way that a spectator at a tennis match sees more if he or she understands the rules and conventions of the game. But rules and conventions are just the beginning. It might take many years of watching tennis to understand the unique gifts of Rafael Nadal or Serena Williams even if you see them dominate (or even lose) an individual match. The more literature you read, the richer the experience becomes as you understand how every poem, play, or story is a unique contribution to the ever-growing literary landscape even though all of them are basically rearrangements of the same twenty six letters of the alphabet. The analytic skills that open up literature also have their uses when you listen to music, or watch a television program or film and, more important, when you attempt to sort out the significance of the people, places, and events that constitute your own life. Literature enhances and sharpens your perceptions. What could be more lastingly practical as well as satisfying?