

STUDYING AND LEARNING THE TRADITIONS THROUGH ENGLISH LITERATURE

Dr. Soniya Verma¹, Dr. Anupam Sharma²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor- Department of Humanities- Raj Kumar Goel Institute of Technology

Abstract

What is literature? What is the significance of literature? Why we read literature? Is there any connection between the human emotions and English Literature? This paper is based on the connection of human emotions with literature. Literature is the foundation of life. It places an emphasis on many topics from human tragedies to tales of the ever-popular search for love. While it is physically written in words, these words come alive in the imagination of the mind, and its ability to comprehend the complexity or simplicity of the text.

I. Introduction to Literature

Literature is the foundation of humanity's cultures, beliefs, and traditions. It serves as a reflection of reality, a product of art, and a window to an ideology. Everything that happens within a society can be written, recorded in, and learned from a piece of literature. Whether it be poetry or prose, literature provides insight, knowledge or wisdom, and emotion towards the person who partakes it entirely. Literature is found in the beginning of all things, this is what we are truly certain about. It continues to live throughout the ages. It connects human beings and mirrors reality in an artistic way, in a profound value. As long as our world lives, so does literature flourish.

II. Connections between Human Lives and Literature

Literature enables people to see through the lenses of others, and sometimes even inanimate objects; therefore, it becomes a looking glass into the world as others view it. It is a journey that is inscribed in pages, and powered by the imagination of the reader. Ultimately, literature has provided a gateway to teach the reader about life experiences from even the saddest stories to the most joyful ones that will touch their hearts. Literature unlocks the culture of the time period, and in a way can give wisdom to the modern society about life. Literature allows us to interpret our own life and emotions and find ways to relate to the story so we in turn can reflect. It is also a form of entertainment and allows people to use their imagination to visualize the story within their own mind.

In **A Defense of Poetry**, P.B. Shelley wrote,

“A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination.”

Literature teaches us how to live. Literature makes readers visit places, experience events, meet people, listen to them, feel their joys and sufferings. It takes years to acquire so much wisdom that a single book of literary merit instills in a reader. Literature mirrors the society and its mannerisms. Because of Charles Dickens you can experience the **Hard Times** of the Victorian England without going through a detailed historical study. The fact-based education system, the fractured human relationships, the smokey polluted towns, the ill-effects of Industrial Revolution, the misery of labourers, the mercenary instincts of men and the flawed legal system of the

land....this single book will give you an entire picture of the Victorian English Society. Wordsworth's poetry makes you feel his aesthetic pleasure on the sight of *Daffodils* and the tranquility of the song sung by a *Solitary Reaper*. Similarly, Eliot makes you pity the spiritual barrenness of the world that has turned into *Wasteland*. Wilfred Owen forces you to think about the *Insensibility* of the state and people who glorify wars. Literature is a storehouse of all knowledge and wisdom. History, Political Studies, Philosophy, Science and all other forms of learning are part of literature. It has the potential to bring revolutions (the way Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* did)

The great Leo Tolstoy wrote a book titled *What is Art* in which he has explained the importance of all art to human society. Here is a critical excerpt:

As, thanks to man's capacity to express thoughts by words, every man may know all that has been done for him in the realms of thought by all humanity before his day, and can in the present, thanks to this capacity to understand the thoughts of others, become a sharer in their activity and can himself hand on to his contemporaries and descendants the thoughts he has assimilated from others, as well as those which have arisen within himself; so, thanks to man's capacity to be infected with the feelings of others by means of art, all that is being lived through by his contemporaries is accessible to him, as well as the feelings experienced by men thousands of years ago, and he has also the possibility of transmitting his own feelings to others.

If people lacked this capacity to receive the thoughts conceived by the men who preceded them and to pass on to others their own thoughts, men would be like wild beasts...

Studying human condition is not enough. One has to feel that condition in order to gain wisdom. Literature provides for a richer life. No other form of learning brings the enrichment that reading brings. Literature is the torch-bearer that has helped civilizations to overcome the darkness of savagery. In the absence of the great Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Vedas India would not have been called Golden Bird (Sone ki chidiya). The Greek history is great because of its great literature.

So, in the words of Tolstoy, without literature *men would be like wild beasts* because every book changes you, even if slightly.

III. Literature Needs the Heart Not Brain

Literature is not something to put your mind into, literature is something only a heart can understand. One simply does not study literature, he changes in one way or another. Literature broadens the horizon. Literature, for us, is like a ray of hope in this dark world. It is an escape from the negativity of life. Literature has given us a new perspective and has drastically changed us as a person. It just made us a better person, more humble, sensitive, and considerate towards others, patient and a good listener as well. When you read war literature, whether it is Walt Whitman, Alfred Tennyson or Sassoon, their words take you to another dimension. You can feel almost everything they have written. Virginia Woolf, feminism in her works reflects the quality of her thoughts, which this generation lacks. Shakespeare wrote plays so beautifully; every emotion/situation is a masterpiece. Anton Chekhov's short stories with harsh reality realised. Literature is a blessing to people who take keen interest in English literature. It is our strength and an escape as well.

IV. Curator and Shaper of life

Literature is important in everyday life because it connects individuals with larger truths and ideas in a society. Literature creates a way for people to record their thoughts and experiences in a way that is accessible to others, through fictionalized accounts of the experience. Literary tradition is both oral and written. Civilizations that existed without a written language still managed to pass down their stories through oral telling. Many Native American cultures practice an oral literary tradition. The primary use of literature in ancient settings was to pass down customs, beliefs and traditions to the younger generations. In more recent centuries, literature has taken on a more comprehensive role of mirroring society in order for humans to study themselves and understand the underlying truths common to all people. For students, studying literature is a critical component in education, as it teaches students to see them reflected in art. This allows people to learn about life and truth. Literature also helps people to see life from the perspective of another. Identity-based literature teaches the reader what life is like for others, helping them to be more understanding and respectful of those around them.

Literature unravels us into distant places, ancient times, other peoples and their different ways of speaking and writing. Literature begs us to analyse, to compare and, most importantly, to question; to always be asking questions. If you do not ask questions when the firemen start making fires then you cannot complain when there are no more books. This is the attitude that everyone should be taking into their own personal reality.

V. Significance for Students: A Medium of Learning

Studying Literature does not confine the students to the traditions of England but includes the possibility of introducing them to traditions which inform English Literature, such as the study of Ancient Greek drama, and to literature in other contexts, such as American literature. It also provides the students with an alternative to the pervasiveness of “television culture” with its immediacy and, often, its shallowness.

An enjoyment and appreciation of Literature will give students the ability to develop this into an interest in books and reading as they move away from their studies and into their adult lives. They will have the confidence to approach and tackle new forms of books and writing, since they were exposed to a range of literature during their school days.

When studying Literature, students can learn not only language aspects such as vocabulary items but also that language can be used for specific and aesthetic purposes. Familiarity with the concepts of beat, metre and rhythm can improve their own writing as students are able to appreciate and apply these ideas. Finally, the study of Literature can provide students with a fresh and creative angle with which to approach their studies in particular and their lives in general. Literature can help to add a refreshing and further dimension to a person’s life.

Students learn ethics from literature. For example, *To Kill A Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee teaches students that one must always do the right thing even if it costs your family dearly. Atticus Finch, a Southern Lawyer, who

represents a poor black man accused of raping a poor white woman suffers ridicule and harassment, but with dignity he carries on honorably. He is not only a great role model for his children, Jem and Scout, but for the reader as well. The Help by Kathryn Stockett is a more contemporary novel that discusses discrimination in our society and the main character overcome the problems with honor and dignity. Teaching students how our society has changed because of the noble, honorable actions of its citizens is an important lesson. I love to share with my students that Charles Dickens changed the laws on child labor with his book, Oliver Twist. Writing is powerful tool and so is literature.

Giving students a sense of history is another important role of teaching literature. Books like Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier can teach students how the Civil War affected real people. History classes can seem like a dusty text-book full of unfamiliar places and dates to a middle school student. Novels can help students understand that the events were real and they had both positive and negative effects on the people who lived through them. All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque is another book to teach about World War I or The Red Badge of Courage by Stephan Crane is another depiction of the Civil War. Poems like Wilfred Owen's poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est" creates a vivid image of a soldier's death from mustard gas during World War I. Students might be horrified, but war is never pretty and it can help them understand the sacrifice soldiers have made throughout our history.

Literature can give students insight into other cultures and other human suffering. For example if you want students to understand some of the current struggles in Afganistan, Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns and The Kite Runner can help students understand its political, culture and historical and social problems. The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver can help student understand how the geography, politics and culture affects lives in the Congo. Literature can open new worlds and people to students that textbook excerpts cannot.

Teaching literature can give students not only a connection to that past, but show students that we are not all that different. Which teenager students has not fallen desperately in love, which teenage student has not disregarded their parents' wants and advice to behave dangerously, which teenager doesn't have a friend who is always joking and one who is always fighting? They all need to read William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. How can we call students culturally literate without a little Shakespeare in their lives? Since the new Common Core requires that ninth and tenth grade students understand the literary device "allusion", teaching a broad-base of different literary genres and examples seems important. Without a being culturally literate that literary device is rather useless. Students would have no base of literary knowledge.

VI. Conclusion

Literature weaves a rich tapestry in our lives. It sparks our imagination by showing us people and places both familiar to us and unfamiliar. It teaches us that all of human kind is connected in our hopes, our joys, our sorrows, our needs and our troubles. It teaches us where we have been and where we might be going. It teaches us what it means to be human and values that we should uphold. Literature allows us to feel, and to have empathy for others and maybe even for ourselves. Literature gives us the lessons to hold us together during difficult trials in our lives and tools to handle those problems. An education should be more than a list of reading skills; an education should teach us how to behave as human being in a complex society.

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