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Comfort the Disturbed, Disturb the Comfortable

Answering the question, “What is literature?” is like trying to hold water in one’s hands. Every seemingly good idea slips away, or is undermined by contradicting thoughts. It is difficult to define such a broad and abstract topic such as literature in so few words, but if art is the soul of humanity, literature is its mind. Literature goes beyond the scope of everyday fiction and reaches new insights, resonating with readers and reflecting his or her life with original ideas. Literature has staying power, and speaks to readers over generations of re-evaluation. This multi-faceted, ever changing body of artwork of written words is the definition of literature.

Literature allows a reader to feel, experience, or even totally inhabit a character or place. One can adventure far away at sea, get lost in a jungle, fall in love, or any number of possibilities. While these imaginings and images are present in many stories and books of fiction, literature sets itself apart in that it has the ability of staying with readers over the generations. Instead of displaying these scenes in a flat and passive way, works of literature evoke strong emotions in different readers, taking them to a place they once knew, or know, and showing them a different perspective. David Foster Wallace, the late author and professor of literature at Pomona College, believed in the power of literature to create a new viewpoint for readers. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace expanded on this idea, saying “that good fiction's job is to comfort the disturbed and

disturb the comfortable. [A] big part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in [his or] her own skull, to give [his or] her imaginative access to other selves.” Wallace argues that literature has the power to take the reader to new emotional and spiritual levels, experiencing a wide range of feelings while he or she spends time reading. He mentions being marooned in one’s own skull, an experience that recalls Thomas Lux’s poem, “The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently,” in which Lux eloquently describes the emotion and the intimacy someone feels while reading silently, drawing on past life experiences, thoughts, and ideas, and interpreting them in a unique voice personal to the reader.

Caught in the dark cathedral
of your skull, your voice heard
by an internal ear informed by internal abstracts
and what you know by feeling,
having felt. (818)

Wallace and Lux describe perfectly the effect literature can have on a reader, evoking emotions either familiar or never felt, comforting and disturbing while enabling temporary solace in the “dark cathedral of the skull.” Literature transports adults back to childhood, and gives young readers a peek into the future. This appeal to pathos and personal sentiment draws readers in, then makes a lasting impact, enough to carry a book through changing times.

Not only does true literature bring foreign experiences into the lives of average people, it also creates a fun house mirror for readers to view themselves in. The characters in works of literature make us consider the ugly, awkward, and imperfect

flaws in ourselves, while reminding us that to be imperfect is to be human. All of the scars, quirks and imperfections of the characters of literature make them memorable and carry readers through everyday life by reminding them that, although they are fictional, they are not perfect either. Arthur Miller argues in his essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man," that literary tragedies are not reserved for kings and gods, but are applicable to the average man or woman, one that the reader can understand personally. Miller believes "that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were," which supports the idea that literature asks readers to examine themselves while reading, applying the ideas from the novel and comparing them to their everyday lives.

Breaking the barrier between the kings and humans, a deeper understanding of literature is formed. A connection is made between the common, flawed character and the reader, making it possible to connect deeply with the work of literature by standing in the character's shoes. Take, for example, J.D. Salinger's protagonist from his iconic *The Catcher in the Rye*, the teenage Holden Caulfield. Holden is a complex and dynamic character, hiding his insecurities and showing his angst and reluctance to change. True, Holden *is* flawed. However, what makes his story literature is the ability of readers to search within the pages and see themselves in his shoes. They recall their own teenage years, the complex feelings of being torn between the adolescence and the adult world. The portrayal of the world as is it, without compromising the painful, jagged edges, is another aspect of why literature is set apart from the run of the mill publications. This layer of depth strengthens the staying power of a book, and becomes another defining aspect of literature today.

One of the most important aspects of literature is its potential for reevaluation. The ebb and flow of thoughts is ever changing, and as readers ask themselves big questions, the opinions and ideas surrounding a work of literature are likely to change. While one reader may consider a book a literary masterpiece, another may simply read it as a story of fiction, without much thought or consequence. Differing and disagreeing interpretations add to the story, giving it more meaning than the author may have originally intended, or shedding new light on a previously grey area. These different opinions could be compared to those of several onlookers observing a painting in a museum. While some may love the painting, seeing beauty and reflection in the artist's brushstrokes, others may find it lacking in depth, realism, and beauty. As works of literature are carried down through generations, the changing world will affect the way readers interpret and reinterpret their meanings. Literature is multilayered, diverse, and complex. Each rereading reveals new ways of seeing the world, while the reader explores the inner workings of the novel, taking something new each time it is read.

This brief definition only scratches the surface of what literature is and has the power to do. Literature changes the way one views one's self, giving a reader a new and foreign home to inhabit. The images and feelings universally experienced by many readers can be found woven into the pages of literary classics, each person lending his or her own interpretation to the thread of connection between the author's work and the reader's reaction. Literature asks readers to search inside themselves and read between the lines, reevaluating and reinterpreting the story while nourishing the mind. As life goes on, literature stays. Its impact lasts and is passed down to the next generation. Literature

is a living, changing, growing collection of human experience, thought, and emotion, and it will always leave a lasting impact on those who choose to read it.

Works Cited

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