

# THE RELEVANCE OF READING LITERATURE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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**Abstract:** English literature as a subject is studied in India with a view to enhance and empower the students. It is always believed that a language is very much a part of a history and literature, a reflection of the culture. The challenge for Literature educators today is to constantly think of ways to connect the subject to real-life issues for their students. Literature teaches us humanity- to be sensitive and empathetic towards others and it even help us to make connections between the literary text and the real life situations. This will help students see how the key concepts and ideas they learn in the literature classroom is quite evident in other cultures and contexts. Reading literature gives one a better understanding of human nature and the complexity of the human condition. It makes one less judgemental and more sympathetic. To me, above all that, Literature education is to prepare students for the types of skills needed for them to live and work in the 21st century and to acquire the requisite skills that will empower them to live a better life. Educators everywhere are facing this challenge and the solution can only be devised through partnerships with businesses and policymakers. This study serves as a basis for this paper, which explores the possible links between 21st century skills and the subject Literature. It further investigates the other cognitive benefits of learning literature that will help the students to be a better human being in its true sense.

**Keywords:** Literature, Community, Insight, Curriculum, empathetic

## 1. Introduction

During our school we are first introduced to literature. Being able to empathise with a group of characters written on a page is categorical and from a student's perspective a necessary skill.

Additionally, the ability to sense themes and messages opens us up to another way of thinking. Literature becomes a vessel. The innumerable books which have been published around the world are guides for the reader and generate a bridge for them to learn something new. An important aspect of literature lies in how it can help expand the horizons of its readers. It gives its readers an inside look into how cultures from other parts of the world differ from their own, and how customs from other countries help shape how their citizens view the world. By opening their minds to what different cultures have to offer, readers of literature become more accepting of the unique differences of people from around the world. It can also give them unique insights into their own past or present cultures, and can help them make a stronger connection to others in their own cultures. History is not only a gateway to the past, it's also suggestive of our present and the future. Within every time period lies different people and within them, different stages in our ever-growing culture. Each individual before

was a product of their own time. As a species we evolve every day and without that timestamp that literature gives us, we would know nothing about the past. Literature provides a window into the past, allowing readers to see how their ancestors and others dealt with day-to-day life. Readers can see where their own people came from, and how the country they live in became what it is today. Literature can also let its readers look back at the mistakes made by their predecessors, and hopefully avoid those same mistakes. Literature allows a person to step back in time and learn about life on Earth from the ones who walked before us. We can gather a better understanding of culture and have a greater appreciation of them. We learn through the ways history is recorded, in the forms of manuscripts and through speech itself.

Modern literature gives readers a view into present-day politics, and sometimes gives us an important view into the lives of the people around us. Fictional literature can also give its readers special insight into the minds of writers to see how they envision the future might turn out, including both the good and the bad. Literature also helps readers to understand the human condition, and what makes them who they are, whether talking about love, war or other important themes throughout life. What better way to learn about desire than through the pages of a book? While reading, readers are transported into their own world with their own thoughts, where they can develop their own ideas on basic human emotions, free from embarrassment and without the interference of others. Literature also makes readers question their own writing abilities. By taking a look inside the mind of the writer who wrote a particular book, readers can get a better understanding of why a writer imagined and wrote about a particular subject. It could be a look into the politics and drama of the time, or it could be a look into the imagination of the author who's relating his thoughts on a subject matter that's important to him. Ultimately, literature is a look into the mind of the reader, and it can help inform us about how we feel about the world around us.

Literature helps build crucial, critical thinking skills. Readers can learn more about symbolism within the pages of a book, and it helps them develop the ability to find the hidden meanings within everyday life. Furthermore, they can make connections between the characters and the themes of a book, and how that could apply to real life. The 21st century is upon us. The role of educational institutions to prepare students for the types of skills needed for them to live and work in the 21st century has never been more crucial and there is a strong sense of urgency to equip our students for “jobs and technologies that don’t yet exist...in order to solve problems that we don’t even know are problems yet” (Crutcher, 101). Educators everywhere are facing this challenge and the solution appears to be to work in partnerships with businesses and policymakers. In an effort to keep up with changes in a global economy, to meet the new skills demands and narrow the achievement gaps of students, academic curriculum around the globe put more stress on Learning and Innovation Skills, Information, Media and Technology Skills and Life and Career Skills besides the normal

curriculum. Learning literature will definitely help to acquire these skills as it provides the basic platform to develop them.

The impact of literature in modern society is undeniable. Literature acts as a form of expression for each individual author. Some books mirror society and allow us to better understand the world we live in. Authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald are prime examples of this as his novel 'The Great Gatsby' was a reflection of his experiences and opinions of America during the 1920s. We are easily connected to the psyche of authors through their stories. However, literature also reiterates the need to understand modern day issues like human conflict. In an era of modern communication media, such as television and movies, people are misled into thinking that every question or problem has its quick corrections or solutions. According to Lewis "Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become" (p 103). However, literature confirms the real complexity of human conflict. Literature is a reflection of humanity and a way for us to understand each other. By listening to the voice of another person we can begin to figure out how that individual thinks. I believe that literature is important because of its purpose, and in a society which is becoming increasingly detached from human interaction with the advent of social media, it serve as an effective link for human conversation.

Literature reminds us of stories, epics, sacred scriptures, and classical works of the old and modern times. It is defined as the body of written works of a language, period or culture, produced by scholars and researchers, specialized in a given field. Why is literature important? Let us see. As stated in the quote by C.S. Lewis, literature not only describes reality but also adds to it. Literary works are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in society. They are a depiction of the different facets of common man's life. Classical literary works serve as a food for thought and encourage imagination and creativity. Exposing oneself to good literary works, is equivalent to providing one with the finest of educational opportunities. On the other hand, the lack of exposure to good literature is equal to depriving oneself from the opportunity to grow. Prose, poetry, drama, essays, fiction, literary works based on philosophy, art, history, religion, and culture as also scientific and legal writings are grouped under literature. Creative nonfiction of the olden times and literary journalism also fall under literature. Certain extremely technical writings such as those on logistics and mathematics are also considered as a part of literature.

Some of the great literary works like the Bible and Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, among others, provide society with the guiding principles of life. Works by poets like Homer, Plato, Sappho, Horace and Virgil, Shakespeare's sonnets and notable poetry by W.B. Yeats, John Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and William Blake, among others, are timeless. They have always amused their readers and shall continue to. The Lord of the Rings, The Godfather, A Tale of

Two Cities, and James Bond Series are some of the best-selling books of all time that have entertained several generations. While some literary and poetry works carry life's lessons, many others make us think. Some works are known for the sheer entertainment they provide, while others intrigue. Many works in literature establish a strong connect with their audience through the stories they narrate or the message they carry. Readers tend to associate themselves with the emotions portrayed in these works and become emotionally involved in them. Literature thus has a deep impact on the readers' minds and in turn, their lives.

The Adventures of Pinocchio, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and Winnie-the-Pooh, as also the relatively recent Harry Potter Series are some of the greatest works in children's literature. Due to a whole new world they create through words, or due to their characters that the readers can relate to, these books attract children. Amused by the stories they tell, kids associate themselves with these books' characters and idealize some of them. Moral stories are an aid for parents and teachers to let the kids learn important lessons in life. Aesop, Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, and Mark Twain, among many others are some of the most widely popular children's authors. They have enriched the childhoods of so many. Their works have amused millions of children the world over.

It is through reading great literary and poetic works, that one understands life. They help a person take a closer look at the different facets of living. In many ways, literature, in its different forms, can change one's perspective towards living. Biographies of great people, real-life stories of courage, sacrifice and other good values never fail to inspire readers. Such works give the masses an insight into the lives of eminent people, and also serve as a repertoire of ideals. Literature serves as an enormous information base. Research works by famous inventors and literary works by notable scientists often narrate stories of their ground breaking discoveries and inferences. Ongoing developments in the fields of science and technology are documented so that the world can know about them. Several ancient scriptures relating stories of human evolution and narratives of human life in those times, have been of tremendous help to mankind. Thus, literature has always served as an authentic source of information.

True, languages are the building blocks of literature. But the study of literature cannot be restricted to only studying languages. In fact, literature cannot be confined to an educational curriculum. A degree in language and literature is perhaps not able to provide one with everything that literature can offer. Its scope is so deep and wide that even a lifetime may not be enough to really 'study' literature. Literature is important for the breadth of knowledge it gives, the moral values it carries, and the enjoyment it provides. An exposure to good literary works is essential at every phase of life as it enriches us in more ways than one. Literature is definitely much more than its literary meaning, which defines it as 'an acquaintance to letters'. In fact, it lays the foundation of a fulfilling life.

Some literary works require the reader to think through various interpretive possibilities. Students who argue for or against a particular interpretation learn how to weigh and marshal evidence, how to understand the types of evidence one can employ and their strengths and limitations. In arguing for and against an interpretation, they delve further and further into the relevant parts of the work. This process develops the students' aesthetic sensibilities and eristic capacities. It also cultivates an awareness of the need to be ever open to new perspectives and arguments. Ideally, the interpreter looks for counter-evidence to the very interpretation he has developed, integrating the evidence proleptically, clearly demarcating the limits of his interpretation, or developing a complex meta-interpretation that emerges from a series of possible interpretations. Attention to contrasting moments is a privileged dimension of interpretation. This results in an honest relationship to the work and has the side benefit of helping us guard against dogmatism.

By teaching students, the content and form of literary works, by confronting them with great and different traditions, but also by teaching them the mode of thinking associated with this process, they are better able to analyse problems in the world as well. Because we must receive complex artworks with greater care and effort than much of what otherwise occupies our consciousness, the reception of art sharpens our cognitive capacities. We learn a sensibility or sensitivity to subtle differences. At the same time the study of literature teaches us to look at the whole and not just at parts, to synthesize the parts into a whole. It allows us to recognize that meaning may unfold slowly and that the whole may be disclosed to us only as we recollect diverse parts and begin to discern patterns. It teaches us to weigh the significance of an event or occurrence or an encounter and to imagine alternatives. It enhances our awareness of structure, form, language, nuance. It teaches us how to synthesize evidence, articulate a complex view, and draw appropriate conclusions. It teaches us to respond to life with emotion and sympathy as well as analysis and judgment, and it teaches us the importance of reason and evidence in an emotionally charged arena. To understand ever new facets of a work contributes to flexibility of mind and an awareness of the need for breadth and balance.

When we study literature, our horizons are broadened, because we can learn about and come to understand people who are different from us. Conversely, we might discover characters or poems that we really identify with—it can be really exciting and validating to discover that your exact thoughts and feelings have also been experienced by someone else. Because of these effects, literature encourages us to be sensitive to the whole spectrum of human experience and to consider this when making decisions in our day-to-day lives. Academically, studying literature also helps us to refine our own writing skills and expand our vocabularies which is one of the prime requisite skills for getting employment. Reading and writing, the basic principles involved in the study of English, serve as the gateway to a deeper level of thought. After mastering these elementary skills, comprehension, analysis, and interpretation are learned and used to better educate one's self. Studying literature and

observing personal reactions to the literature can make one more aware of his or her own values. English skills are helpful in every area of life. Reading, writing, comprehension, analysis, and interpretation increase efficiency in multiple ways including communication, documentation in other areas of study, and reflection of personal values. I believe there is no area of study that English and communication skills do not influence and it can be only fine-tuned through study of literature.

## II. Conclusion

Reading literature helps people to sympathize with others and see how complex humans truly are. It aids in broadening a person's intellectual horizons and it stimulates a more active imagination. Literature explores different human beliefs, ideas and societies. This allows people to learn about where they came from and how past events work to shape the different cultures. Literature offers our students the chance to think not only about the characters they meet in the pages of the books, but also about their own lives. At a time when our own lives are bumping up against those of people across the globe we want better for our schools, far better for our students. We want students considering situations from another point of view, experiencing things they have never before experienced; we want them developing empathy. We want them reading literature. Reading literature, as quaint as it might seem, is a needed skill in this 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

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