

Is it fair to say that literature is another name for language which has no practical use?

Language is a system of communication composed of words arranged in conventional ways, including speech, writing, or motion. Literature is a form of expression with significant artistic merit, often, but not limited to, the written word, including prose, fiction, poetry, drama, oral traditions, etc. Literature uses language creatively, artistically, or perhaps impractically, to convey meaning, express thought, and foster relationships within the human species. One may argue that literature is often an impractical form of language, but in reality, it expands far beyond the narrow scope of that definition; it is a tool for transmitting culture, reshaping society, fostering human consciousness, or even reducing stress. While literature may be regarded as impractical on the individual level, that is, not useful to the survival of the individual, it is essential on the social level and for the continued advancement of human imagination.

Audre Lorde wrote of poetry, “it forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action”.<sup>1</sup> Literature is often considered impractical for its focus on imagination and fantasy, but it is precisely through imagination and fantasy that practical inventions can spawn. For instance, the rocket was invented by American scientist Robert H. Goddard who became fascinated with space flight after reading H.G. Wells’ classic novel *War of the Worlds*<sup>2</sup>. He would later recall that the concept of interplanetary travel in the novel “gripped my imagination tremendously”.<sup>3</sup> Parallels can be drawn to the defibrillator and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*<sup>4</sup>, and the submarine and Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*<sup>5</sup>. In these ways,

---

<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”

<sup>2</sup> Ester Goddard and Robert Goddard, *The Papers of Robert H. Goddard*

<sup>3</sup> Ester Goddard and Robert Goddard, *The Papers of Robert H. Goddard*

<sup>4</sup> Rohin Francis, “How Frankenstein Saved Millions of Lives”

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Wier, “The Design of Jules Verne’s Submarine Nautilus”

literature impacts our daily lives; it is where many technologies, political theories, and inventions that shape our daily lives are first imagined and shared with humanity. Literature offers a space where what is once considered fantasy can be reinterpreted, unbound by time and distance, into tangible forms. This happens because literature, as a creative reimagination of our values, beliefs, and ideologies, offers a space where thought is inherently creative. While language has grammatical rules, phonetics, and syntax governing its use in communication, literature pushes language to its edges. It explores the limitless possibilities, styles, and forms that language can inhabit, unbound by language's innate duty to offer communication through the most direct and efficient route. By rejecting the limits of language, literature broadens our understanding of what human thought can achieve, which is definitively practical.

Many animals use vocalisation or other sounds to communicate, which some scientists consider their own "language"<sup>6</sup>. Literature, however, is a trait unique to humans. For humans, literature is integral to the recording, preserving, and transmitting of culture. As Jaffar Shah writes, "language is the medium to culture and literature; while, literature is the source that reflects culture in its true spirit"<sup>7</sup>. Language serves as a foundational building block for culture and a necessary tool for transferring knowledge and wisdom. Literature is the manifestation of a culture's imagination, history, and values that provides insight into the diverse facets and multitudinous experiences of that culture's history and present. For example, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens captures the stark differences between the aristocracy and impoverished working class during and after the French Revolution, not just through its content but also through its mastery of language and form, which lends itself to the precise satire surrounding the

---

<sup>6</sup> W. Tecumseh Fitch, "Animal cognition and the evolution of human language"

<sup>7</sup> Jafar Shah, "Culture, Language and Literature the Inseparable Entities"

upper class. *A Tale of Two Cities*, even when it was first published, served as a tunnel through which historic events and the lives of a decades-old event were transferred to readers, and now it serves as both a tunnel into the French Revolution and one into Dickens' own era. Not only are the past and present told and shaped by literature, so is the future. In Oscar Wilde's words, "literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it but molds it to its purpose."<sup>8</sup> In warning against dystopias, hoping for utopias, or shaping the modern world into different versions, canons have repeatedly changed their respective worlds. Through literature, humans learn how to think creatively, imagine complexly, and start to conceive of a future beyond the foreseen. Maria Cristina Azcona articulates, "literature allows us to transmit the profound meanings of a determinate culture, its stereotypes, archetypes and collective in conscience, creating the possibility of social change through a critic that is able to act into the subliminal world of emotions"<sup>9</sup>. While literature is often a documentation of a culture's specific practices, it can also traverse them. The short story "La dernière classe" (The last class) by Alphonse Daudet is about a French boy in Alsace-Lorraine who regrets not learning the French language when it is announced that his education will change to German under Prussian orders. This story was also in the South Korean curriculum for its parallels to the Japanese occupation of Korea. Its famous quotes, "We must always retain [the French language] among ourselves, and never forget it, because when a people falls into servitude, so long as it clings to its language, it is as if it held the key to its prison"<sup>10</sup> is not only resonant to me in both the contexts of the Korea-Japan conflict and the Korean American diaspora, but also relevant to the point of literature and its role as a connective force within and among cultures and times. Within literary works, readers are able to develop close relationships with historical figures or fictional characters with whom we would

---

<sup>8</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying"

<sup>9</sup> Maria Cristina Azcona, "Importance of a Literature and a Culture of Peace"

<sup>10</sup> Alphonse Daubet, "The Last Class"

not be able to communicate only with language. David Skorton writes in *Scientific American*, "Even the most profound scientific knowledge won't solve world problems such as hunger, poverty and environmental damage if we fail to respect, understand and engage cultural differences."<sup>11</sup> Through literature, we begin the act of "engaging cultural differences." Through literature, the human experience is shared.

If the reading of literature gives us insight into how the world has been and continues to be shaped, we write literature to shape the world. In fact, literature often precedes language in cultural reform and revolution. Audre Lorde articulates that poetry and the feelings it spawns become "a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action... We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it."<sup>12</sup> Where language cannot fully encapsulate the human experience, literature helps to translate what is untranslatable. She adds that literature "lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before."<sup>13</sup> When language is co-opted or controlled to suppress marginalised communities, literature, such as "I Have a Dream" by Martin Luther King Jr. or *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, breaks through. Many literary works offer social commentary and critique and spark conversations and questions in readers to engage with contemporary problems. Literature is tangible protest and conscious defiance against oppression, a lens through which an improved future can be imagined.

Contrastingly, it reflects a lens on ourselves and forces us to examine our own privileges. This

---

<sup>11</sup> David Skorton, "Why Scientists Should Embrace the Liberal Arts"

<sup>12</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

<sup>13</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

very ability to reflect, dare to imagine a future separate from the present, and create change is ultimately practical.

Furthermore, literature is practical for individual health and wellbeing. A study found that reading novels enhances brain connectivity and improves brain function<sup>14</sup>. It improves memory and retention<sup>15</sup>, and people who engaged in reading were 2.5 times less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease compared to those who spent less time on brain-stimulating activities<sup>16</sup>. A study published in the *Journal of College Teaching & Learning* found that reading for 60 minutes significantly reduced anxiety, heart rate, and blood pressure<sup>17</sup>. Reading literature, fiction to a significantly higher degree than nonfiction, also increases empathy<sup>18</sup>. Researchers David omer Kidd and Emanuele Castano said of their findings, "Understanding others' mental states is a crucial skill that enables the complex social relationships that characterize human societies."<sup>19</sup> Apart from these benefits, many engage with literature for entertainment. Reading or writing gives us a space to expand our imagination or to relax, both critical parts of preserving one's emotional well-being. Reading releases steady rates of dopamine, a feel-good chemical associated with pleasure and satisfaction, as well as endorphins, which relieve pain and reduce stress<sup>20</sup>. In realistic terms, literature is constructive to human health and creativity, acting as an environment of entertainment and freedom.

---

<sup>14</sup> Berns et al., "Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain"

<sup>15</sup> Melinh Lai, "Reading for pleasure can strengthen memory in older adults"

<sup>16</sup> Wilson et al., "Life-span cognitive activity, neuropathologic burden, and cognitive aging"

<sup>17</sup> Rizzolo et al., "Stress Management Strategies For Students: The Immediate Effects Of Yoga, Humor, And Reading On Stress"

<sup>18</sup> Kidd and Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind"

<sup>19</sup> Kidd and Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind"

<sup>20</sup> Paul Wright, "Physical and mental health benefits of reading books"

Literature is often an impractical form of language, though I believe that does not decrease its value or that practicality should be the measurement of its importance. Literature offers something beyond our individual livelihoods: the survival and prosperity of the human species. As a critical vessel for thought and creativity and as a manifestation of human consciousness, literature may be one of the most practical fuels for our advancement.