

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Essay Competition

Essay title:

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

Is literature practical in today's society? Is literature, a form of communication dating back to 2600BC and still consistently used today over 4,500 years later, practical? Definitely. Literature's practicality is increasingly obvious due to its role in illustrating the past while also spearheading cultural change throughout modern society. Moreover, literature is one of society's most effective methods of communication, proven by its consistent use throughout history. In this essay I will outline the profound impact literature has on society pragmatically.

Firstly, it's imperative to define the term literature. As per the Cambridge Dictionary, literature is defined as "written artistic works". It is therefore fair to say that novels, short stories, poems and plays all fit into this category. So, could you consider them to be practical? Again following the Cambridge Dictionary, practical is defined as "relating to experience, real situations, or actions rather than ideas or imagination". Clearly, literature fits this definition as literature is full of human experiences that are relating to real experiences people have undergone. For example, the experience of the *Invisible Man* in Ralph Ellison's novel very much details real scenarios and experiences of black

people in 20th century America, albeit slightly softened within the confines of a fictional character for practical purposes. Thus, literature must count as practical as it chronicles actions not mere ideas or imaginative and ideological concepts.

Arguably the most obvious practical use of literature is its unique ability to convey important messages to large audiences effectively as a mechanism for cultural change. For example, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* has sold over 40 million copies (according to the Washington Post) and has been one of the most read books across the world since its publication in 1960. But what has made it so successful? Its commentary on racial injustice is highly powerful and thus highly influential in getting messages across that would otherwise be too difficult. Of course, this is further reinforced by the book's large presence in classrooms, again reiterating its role as an educational tool which makes it easier for teachers to articulate complex issues such as racial discrimination in 1930s America. Furthermore, history has proven that it is no secret that books are effective communicators of truth, otherwise people such as the Nazis in 1933 wouldn't have been so committed to burning over 25,000 of them. Even today in places such as Florida, led by Governor Ron DeSantis, in the United States of America there has been a steep increase in book banning, which acknowledges that it is not just information - which is accessible easily online - that they are trying to ban but specifically literature. Why would they spend so much time destroying and banning books if they were not dangerously truthful?

They are just such effective communicators that their censorship in times of crisis has been and always will be inevitable.

Classical texts are also useful for illustrating the lives of the past. Novels provide unique viewpoints into otherwise forgotten parts of history, illuminating the lives of people with more depth and understanding than any other relic. E.M Forster's 1924 novel *Passage to India* is a multi-layered novel which discusses the delicate and harmful relationship between British colonists and the local Indian community. This novel's role in society is so significant as it finally provided an invaluable insight into the real lives of the Indian people, which helps us understand history to a greater level while also being accessible to a broader range of audiences. Contemporaneous events such as the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 would convey a sense of esteemed pride and support for the empire, whereas Forster's book is much more nuanced and realistic to the real, non propaganda washed perspectives of the era. This view that literature provides nuance and understanding which would otherwise be explicable is further reinforced in John V Fleming's 1973 *Historians and the Evidence of Literature*. Not only is literature useful historical evidence to accompany archaeological finds, literary evidence forms arguably some of the earliest pieces of historical evidence. Think of Egyptian hieroglyphics or Sumarian cuneiform, how much more to do we know about human history from those texts compared to mere rocks and old pots of the same time. To take this point

even further, historical evidence sometimes only really consists of literary evidence - for example, we have never found Jesus' body yet we have the *Bible* where his thoughts live on forever. Therefore, without literary sources, we would have substantially fewer expansive evidence bases to compile our knowledge of history which would mean we would have a very one dimensional view of eras that were in fact incredibly complex.

Literature has also always been key to education. Upon a child's infancy, they are taught to read not only as a form of literacy but also as a chance to widen their scope of knowledge about the world around them. Reading various forms of literature is the most effective way to teach people basic literacy skills, something that academic texts just can't do. These literacy skills are crucial to setting children up for successful lives - as 60% of people in prisons have problems with basic literacy skills, and 63% of men and 75% of women who have "very low literacy skills" never receive a pay increase in their whole lives (statistics from Succeed with Dyslexia). This demonstrates that in order to have a society that is better equipped for the world around them literature from a young age is a necessity. Not only is literature imperative for literacy skills but, according to the National Literacy Trust, reading "has astonishing benefits for children: comfort and reassurance, confidence and security, relaxation, happiness and fun". This reinforces literature's practicality due to the profound impact it has on the health and education of children which simply cannot be

ignored. Mental health, particularly of young people following the tumultuous coronavirus lockdown years, is on the forefront of people's minds and what better way to improve it than reading books. Literature also helps children, both younger and old, learn more about the world around them - why else are books such as *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell read continuously in schools all around the anglophone world? Because literature is the most effective instrument used to increase children's world awareness and emotional literacy. Therefore, considering all of these points, this proves that literature is crucial in building the next generation of intelligent, educated and empathetic individuals.

Ultimately, literature's practicality is proved time and time again by its ability to withstand the test of time. Both classic and historical texts are persistent within bestseller's lists because consistently and repeatedly they are useful and thought provoking dialogues on everything from human nature to science. This ability to push human thought and understanding is indicative of literature's practicality, it goes beyond theories and influences people everyday. again proving that people keep returning to the same books over and over again due to their unique articulation of significant points. People in their masses flocked to buy Charles Dickens' 1843 novel *A Christmas Carol* and it sold out within 5 days, and now reading figures remain high with 19% of adults reading everyday (YouGov

UK). Throughout humanity's long history, very few non-essential items have proven to be such an eternal tool as literature.

In conclusion, does literature really “go beyond theory or ideas”? Its ability to convey messages and ideas with depth beyond conversation highlights the significance its role is within society to understand ourselves. It articulates both philosophical and educational ideas, defying its critics who view books as entertainment only time and time again. Without literature, we would raise generations of ignorant children unexposed to the stories of those before them. We would even be unaware of various key parts of history where literature is the only thing preserved left for us to read. In the words of Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “there are years that ask questions and years that answer”. With the help of literature, we know the questions that humanity must answer.

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