

Why Study Literature?

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The Theory of Knowledge course revolves around the question, "How do you know?" In addition to considering the sources and nature of knowledge, it looks at the contribution each subject area makes to knowledge, and it seeks to compare and contrast knowledge claims across subject areas.

As the IB Subject Guide states, the Language A1 programme is primarily a course in literature. We might begin by asking, What is the point of studying literature? To bring the issue into focus, imagine that a reduction in your school's financial budget requires that one subject area be cut from the academic programme. You have five minutes to present the case for Literature against the competing claims of Mathematics, Physics, History, Economics, Art etc. What will you say? With cooperative colleagues, you can, if you wish, act this scenario out for the IB students in your school.

To ask after the value of studying literature takes us to the heart of what has sometimes been called "the battle of the disciplines" between the scientists on the one hand and the literary intellectuals on the other. This battle can be traced as far back as Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* in which the young nihilist, Bazarov, says that "a decent chemist is twenty times more use than any poet". Given its steady intellectual progress and obvious practical value, it is perhaps not surprising that science has over the last century and a half become the dominant cognitive paradigm relative to which other disciplines have felt the need to justify themselves.

Well, literature can, of course, justify itself. To begin with, the study of literature gives us an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the problematic nature of language; and since language is what distinguishes human beings from animals, understanding language is the key to understanding human beings. Furthermore, since education is, to a large extent, education through language, and since every academic discipline has a form of writing associated with it, sensitivity to language is likely to make us more subtle and discriminating learners across the range of the academic curriculum. At a sophisticated level, we may become aware of the various literary devices used by scholars in every academic discipline to mould our thought, shape our attitudes, and persuade us of the truth. To take a simple example, there is a tradition in writing scientific articles of using the passive rather than the active voice. For example, rather than saying "We observed" a scientific article is likely to say, "It was observed that". The effect of this stylistic device is to give the article a spurious air of authority - as if nature itself was speaking to the reader. This by no means impugns the quality of the science that is being presented, but it does create a false conception of the nature of science because it covers over the

fact that it is an essentially human and therefore fallible enterprise. Once we come to think of academic disciplines as, among other things, forms of writing, the way is open for a literary analysis of not only scientific texts, but texts in almost any subject area.

A second justification for the study of literature is that it acts as a defence against the totalizing pretensions of science, which, at its crudest, tends to equate non-science with nonsense. While the scientific spirit is essentially analytic and abstract - it breaks the phenomena into parts and seeks to explain them in terms of general principles - literature draws attention to the unanalysable fugitive aspects of the world, and it reminds us of the fact that not everything can be reduced to measurable quantities. Indeed, a purely scientific description of the world would be like *Hamlet* without the prince, for it would leave out what is arguably the most important player - namely, subjective human experience. What is required is an eclectic approach that does justice both to the world of physical objects and that of subjective experience. Einstein once said that science does not give the taste of the soup. Taking a hint from this, we might seek to reconcile science and literature by saying that while science seeks to explain things from the outside, the goal of literature is to understand them from the inside. Science may be able to tell us what happens to our hormones and heart beat when we fall in love; but it is to literature that we instinctively turn to make sense of the *experience* of love.

Given the alleged humanising influence of literature, one might further argue that it is more important for the average person to be familiar with literary rather than scientific texts. This, at least, is the view of Iris Murdoch who argues that since we are men and moral agents before we are scientists, it will always be more valuable "to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist." There is, moreover, good reason to believe that we learn more about the human condition and gain deeper insights into human nature from reading literature than we will ever get from studying psychology. Think, for example, of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goncharov's *Oblomov*, Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne*, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno*, Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illyich*... The list is endless.

Despite the claims of realist novelists, such as Flaubert, Zola and Sartre, great literature does not passively describe the world; but nor does it seek to escape from it. We should think rather in terms of a *dialogue* between literature and the world. Shakespeare's Hamlet observes that the end of drama is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature"; but when, in the same act, he confronts his mother, he says to her: "You will not go till I set you up a glass/ Where you may see the inmost part of you." What great literature does is make explicit aspects of reality that we had never previously noticed so that we come to recognize them for the first time. We must all have had the experience of coming across a passage in a novel that for the first time gives voice to our own previously mute feelings. "Yes, that's just what I've always felt", we murmur with a quiet shock of recognition. And the way is then open for reflecting on these feelings, and, where necessary, subjecting them to rational scrutiny and modifying them. Through this

process of making the implicit explicit, literature nourishes our sense of interiority; and by giving us a standard against which we can take the measure of ourselves, it encourages us to grow in emotional maturity.

Great literature also furnishes us with a stock of situations, characters and ideas which function as categories and points of reference in terms of which we make sense of the broader social world and the people we encounter within it. To describe someone as an “Oblomov” or a “Stolz” brings to mind a rich network of associations which illuminate their behaviour and set our thinking in motion in a way that could not be done by a mere string of adjectives.

One of the lasting benefits of a literary education, then, is that it gives us a common and psychologically insightful vocabulary for making sense of the human situation; and it is to our detriment if either the commonality or subtlety of this vocabulary is lost. This is precisely the danger in the modern era when we can no longer rely on our interlocutors having any set of common references beyond the flattened categories of the latest Hollywood blockbuster or domestic soap opera. Given the experience of recent months, one could be forgiven for thinking that the simplistic “good guy/ bad guy” characterization, wooden dialogue, and special effects of Hollywood increasingly determine the way in which the people in the White House make sense of the world. *Operation Enduring Freedom* meets *Mission Impossible*. Among others, it has been suggested by intellectuals as diverse as Joseph Brodsky, Robert Kaplan and Martha Nussbaum that our politicians would benefit greatly from reading more good literature.

A final benefit that results from studying literature derives from the fact that it is a remarkably effective way of imaginatively projecting ourselves into situations that lie beyond the frontiers of our own lives. A great novel or play can convey with a power and vitality that goes beyond any purely factual description what it is like to be a woman in a conformist society struggling to break out of an oppressive marriage, or a prisoner coping with the numbing harshness of life in a Soviet labour camp, or a young black man trying to maintain his integrity in the face of a racist apartheid regime, or a victim of the Pinochet regime coming to terms with the disappearance of her children.

While there are doubtless a range of common human problems concerned with such things as love, self-realization and death, these problems can be articulated and responded to in as many different ways as there are cultural milieu, historical epochs, and idiosyncratic individuals. By exposing us to something of this variety, literature makes us aware of the range of actual and possible lives that can be led, and so gives us a broader conception of what it is to be human. We come to see that there may be other equally valid perspectives on the world each with its own vocabulary and scale of values; and this in turn makes us more willing to question our own outlook and rise above the particularities of our upbringing and cultural milieu. Our picture of the world is not the only one, and it does not necessarily reflect the way that the world is in itself. At its best, then, the study of world literature encourages us to become more cosmopolitan in outlook, sympathetic in response, and self-reliant in judgment.