

McKever-Walsh

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Significance of Literature and Literary Study in the 21st Century

The 21st Century is an age of exploration, discovery and innovation. Exploration and innovation broadens the human mind and opens up new possibilities and opportunities, leading to ground breaking discoveries and a deeper understanding of the human condition. In a similar fashion, literature provides a myriad of views into the human condition and enables a deeper understanding of the past, present, self and society. Literature and literary study are particularly significant in the 21st Century. Literary study enhances understanding of historical events and ideals as well as current media. Literature also promotes awareness of the motivations, mental processes and emotions of the self and others in society. The insights gained from literature have many applications both on a personal and professional level.

Literature is the lens through which history is understood. Studying the literature of a time period gives modern historians a glimpse into the values, ideals and mindset of society during eras of shifting intellectual ideas such as the Renaissance, Romantic and Victorian periods. An English student at Gustavus Adolphus College, Sybylla Hendrix expresses the way literature is used to interpret history in the following statement, “Literature provides insight that cold hard facts do not” (Hendrix). Literature gives modern readers an indication of the emotional climate of society at the time the work was produced as well as the author’s personal views of

the major issues at the time. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for example demonstrates the changing opinions towards science, superior knowledge and power during the Gothic period. In the case of some civilisations, literature is one of the only means through which knowledge about that time is gained, "It was simply the ideals of the Greeks and Hebrews and Romans, preserved in their literature, which made them what they were, and which determined their value to future generations" (Long). The works of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates and Pliny provide a legacy to the intelligence, genius and desire for knowledge exhibited by the ancient Greeks and Romans. The 21st Century owes much of its scientific and philosophic understanding to these civilisations as well as many others. Without the preservation and study of the literature of the past much of this understanding of both the physical and abstract would be lost.

Intertextuality allows the ideas and emotions of the past to connect with those of the present. Themes, characters, symbols and plots from literature are constantly being recycled and modified. In his bestselling book *How to Read English Like A Professor*, Thomas Foster states, "True originality is impossible" (Foster 98). Foster goes on to explain that, "the work actually acquires depth and resonance from the echoes and chimes it sets up with prior texts, weight from the accumulated use of certain basic patterns and tendencies. Moreover, works are actually more comforting because we recognize elements in them from our prior reading" (Foster 99). Symbols used in literature aid in the understanding of modern media such as advertising and films. The knowledge that the use of blood in Shakespeare's iconic *Macbeth* to symbolise guilt will prompt the connection in a modern crime show enthusiast that the protagonist feels guilt about unsolved cases when he begins having violent dreams or visions. The theme of attaining divine or superior knowledge is a prominent theme seen in the gothic classic *Frankenstein* as well as the biblical tale of *Adam and Eve*. Despite being developed hundreds of years apart, the characters Macbeth

and Victor Frankenstein are easily compared in regards to their drive for power, which ultimately results in both characters sacrificing their love interests, Lady Macbeth and Elizabeth respectively. Victor Frankenstein has also been seen as the “Modern Prometheus” from the creator figure of the ancient Greek myth, as well as the Mariner from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Understanding the elements of literature and archetypes written centuries in the past will produce a deep understanding of any literature written since that time, regardless of the media type.

In addition to understanding past events and present media, literary study also provides a mirror with which to view the self and a lens through which to view others. Ron Rossenbaum writes that in classic poet William Wordsworth’s view, “the poet thinks and feels with the passions of men” (Rossenbaum 388). The literary expression of these passions by the poet are the vehicle through which the reader is able to experience the sublime, a term first applied by Greek intellectual Longinus who, “claimed that there were moments in literary texts when something grand, magnificent, terrifying, or awe-inspiring took place and sent a shiver through the reader, an ecstasy or *ekstasis*” (Rossenbaum 384). Literature prompts the reader to access their deepest emotions in response to the text and connect with the themes or characters contained in it. Glenn Schaeffer, founder of the International Institute of Modern Letters comments, “You look for your own story in literature; it’s one of the best mechanisms you have to convince yourself you’re not alone” (Elkins). Literary study serves to support an individual’s opinions, beliefs, emotion or ideas but it also serves to challenge them. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* challenges the reader’s beliefs on responsibility when King Duncan is murdered by Macbeth at the urging and goading of his wife. Literature encourages an individual to learn about themselves, their motivations and thought processes. Similarly, literature provides insight into

the perspectives of others, whether through the lens of gender, culture and/or class. This helps understand others as individuals or societies, developing invaluable skills in the professions of law, psychology, sociology and leadership.

Literature and Literary study are significant in the 21st century for the benefit it provides to understanding in in other areas of education, modern media, the self and others. English student Ryan McGinty gives a powerful description of the multitude of qualities and benefits of literature, “Literature is an art full of passion and heart; it transcends the ages... Literature has prompted political and social change in societies and continues to do so to this day. It can be a battle cry for the proletariat to rise up and make a difference, and it can also provide personal counsel” (McGinty). Literature and literary study is an important aspect in an age of rapidly expanding knowledge and ideas for the enrichment it provides on an educational, personal and professional level.

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