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Speaking My Mind: Why Literature Matters

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Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 89, No. 2, Our Love Affair with Literature (Nov., 1999), pp. 19-20

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/822133>

Accessed: 04/09/2009 07:47

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# Speaking My Mind

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## Why Literature Matters

Recently one of my students asked with sincerity, “Why should we read literature?” His question made me ponder something I usually take for granted, like walking or dressing. “Well, reading literature matters because it does,” I offered. Yet I guess one who claims literature as his talisman ought to do better than that. How about, “Reading literature matters because it makes life livelier, deeper, and occasionally comprehensible”?



Perhaps that’s a better start, but only slightly. After all, what does decoding black marks on white paper have to do with improving our lives? Maybe Aristotle can help; he felt that categories sometimes explain characteristics in more specific ways. Here are some categories I might use:

1. The escape angle. A good work can take us from our relatively narrow experiences and place us in a more exotic, thrilling, sublime, complex, or entertaining place. We can join Henry at Agincourt, go up the river with Charlie Marlow, or ponder the trees with Buddha. It can put us in a different culture, consciousness, time period, and situation. It can give us distance from and perspectives on our daily dilemmas. If Holden, Hester, and Atticus can endure, maybe we can, too. It can also remind us that ours is not the only awareness out there; our isolation is illusory.

2. The empathy angle. We often read to find out what happens to people about whom we care. A writer tries to create people with all the dimensions, contradictions, motives, and baggage real people embody and then puts them under a stress test to see how they react. We want Hamlet to act because his indecision looks like our own, we grieve Ophelia’s death because she reminds us of our innocent selves, we hurt for Jim when they pass Cairo. Great

writers captivate us with our concerns and exploit our identification with these fictitious folk. This act of caring exercises the soul and may immunize it against an increasingly uncaring world.

3. The mirror angle. None of us reads the same exact thing—ever. Since reading is a cooperative effort of creation between the writer and the reader, and since we each bring unique perspectives, experiences, and reactions to the act, it figures that the Huck Finn one of us recreates in our mind’s eye is not anyone else’s Huck. (This is one of the great differences between books and movies.) What we create can open up heretofore hidden or forgotten recesses. It can move us in new and powerful ways. It can reintroduce us to ourselves.

4. The time machine angle. Reading actively allows us to converse with the greatest minds in history. We can actively listen to Jesus, Socrates, and Dante. We can stop, reread, look up explanatory and supporting materials, and then pick up the conversation where it left off. We can mull over a line until we see its worth. We can add our own perceptions, questions, and applications. We can disagree, attack, defend. In short, we can take part in the Great Conversation of humanity.

5. The cultural heritage angle. We are our past. Books are the lasting record of this past; they

are repositories of our ancestors' loves, battles, beliefs, ways, knowledge, and ideas. They wrote this down largely for us to better understand our place here. They have written across the centuries to us and those who come after us. They are our grandparents. Books allow us to see farther by standing on the multitude of shoulders that have come before us. Likewise, they connect us to our offspring, who will share some common experiences with us through our literature. These vertical connections have always been important. They are a form of immortality wherein past consciousnesses are resurrected within our minds; we become the vehicles for their afterlives.

6. The language angle. We think in words. While we may have visual images, our understanding of the connections, relationships, and relative value of these pictures is still accomplished by the tools of language; therefore, it seems likely that using more specific language leads to more precise and effective thinking. People with limited vocabularies do not make the distinctions, connections, and extensions that more sophisticated communicators do. Reading, especially reading the best users of these tools, helps us hone our own linguistic edge, improves the power of our thinking, and delights us with becoming better craftspersons of thought. Reading makes us potent thinkers.

7. The art angle. Great art endures because it is true and as such contains all the depth, details, texture, and wholeness that truth entails. We are fascinated with its complexity at the same time as we are charmed by its simplicity. It is never the same twice, yet we readily recognize its common denominators each time. It is life distilled to essence; it is in our image. We delight in its beauty and are moved by its rawness. We recognize both its permanence and its relevance. It connects humanity through archetypes that we all recognize on some level. Literature is one form of this human reflection.

8. The lifesaver angle. Most literature describes real life situations, strategies, and consequences. It can warn, motivate, inspire, and instruct.

We might learn how to survive a blizzard, a moral crisis, a relationship problem, or a physical attack. We can learn which mushrooms to avoid, which ideals to cultivate, and how to mend broken relationships. We might learn a better course of action, a smarter plan, a more genuine goal.

9. The reading of life angle. Daily, we are confronted with myriad sensory data to which we react. Many of the problems in our lives occur when we misread and misinterpret the data. To some extent, many of these sensory experiences are chaotic and meaningless if we don't recognize the contexts in which they occur. Reading teaches us to construct contexts, temporarily suspend understanding, make and check hypotheses, and closely read the details for significance. That interpretive skill is what much of life is.

10. The fear of change angle. We live in turbulent times, where nothing seems impervious to change and flux. Though we live with more material comforts than ever (and largely devote much of our efforts to accumulating even more), and though we have found ways to postpone death and avoid pain, we seem more and more confused, unhappy, and apathetic. Clearly, worshipping money, self, and technology hasn't worked. Perhaps by consulting with our elders, heeding their advice, and following their examples we can reestablish some sense of well-being and equilibrium in something permanent. Our times are in need of their wisdom.

Certainly the list goes on. Parents and children read together to deepen bonds. The musical quality of language well-used pleases some of us greatly. Writers use books to attempt some form of immortality. The nostalgia of books, bookstores, and libraries creates fond memories. Our legal, governmental, and academic institutions are based on writing. Our religions are built and centered on written texts.

Literature matters because it is who we are. Every human dream, fear, hope, guilt, and belief is there. All our tender mercies and raging hatreds, all of our formal public rituals and private musings, all of our experiences and reflections on experiences are there. I am glad he asked.