

Why Study Literature?

1. To benefit from the insight of others. The body of world literature contains most available knowledge about humanity--our beliefs, our self-perception, our philosophies, our assumptions and our interactions with the world at large. Some of life's most important lessons are subtly expressed in our literature. We learn these lessons only if we pause to think about what we read. Why would anyone bury important ideas? Because some ideas cannot be expressed adequately in simple language and because the lessons we have to work for are the ones that stick with us.

2. To open our minds to ambiguities of meaning. While people will "say what they mean and mean what they say" in an ideal world, language in our world is, in reality, maddeningly and delightfully ambiguous. If you go through life expecting people to play by your rules, you'll only be miserable, angry and disappointed. You won't change them. Ambiguity, *double entendres* (double meanings) and nuance give our language depth and endless possibility. Learn it. Appreciate it. Use it.

3. To explore other cultures and beliefs. History, anthropology and religious studies provide a method of learning about the cultures and beliefs of others from the outside looking in. Literature, on the other hand, allows you to experience the cultures and beliefs of others first-hand, from the inside looking out. The only other way to have such a personal understanding of others' beliefs are to adopt them yourself--which most of us aren't willing to do. If you understand where other people are coming from, you are better equipped to communicate meaningfully with them--and they with you.

4. To appreciate why people are the way they are. Each person we meet represents a unique concoction of knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. In our own culture we find an infinite variety of attitudes and personalities, hatreds and bigotries, and assumptions. With each exposure to those who differ from us, we expand our minds. We may still reject their beliefs and assumptions, but we're one step closer to understanding them.

5. To expand our grasp of the machinations of history. History and literature are inextricably intertwined. History is not just names and dates and politics and wars and power. History is about people who were products of their time with their own intricately-woven value systems. Study of literature enhances our appreciation of history's complexity, which in turn expands our appreciation of present political complexities

and better equips us to predict and prepare for the future.

6. To exercise our brains. Our brains need exercise just like our bodies do. Don't balk at picking up the barbell and doing a few mental curls. Great literature has hidden meanings that won't slap us in the face like children's books will; we'll have to dig and analyze like an adult to find the gold.

7. To teach us to see individual bias. In a sense, each of us is an unreliable or naive narrator, but most of us mindlessly accept the stories of certain friends or family without qualification. We should remember that they are centers of their own universes, though, just like we are. They are first-person narrators--not omniscient--just like we are. The only thing that suffers when we appreciate individual bias is our own gullibility.

8. To encourage us to question "accepted" knowledge. As children, most of us were taught to believe what we're told and those basic hypotheses provide our schemas, or building blocks of knowledge. As we grow, we learn to question some ideas while rejecting the offensively alien ideas outright, often without real examination. However, human progress often results from the rejection of assumed "facts." The difficulty lies in spotting our own unexamined assumptions. The more ideas we expose yourself to, the more of our own assumptions we can root out to question and either discard or ground our lives in.

9. To help us see ourselves as others do. Literature is a tool of self-examination. You will see your own personality or habits or assumptions in literature. The experience may even be painful. While our ego defense systems help us avoid self-scrutiny and ignore others' observations or reactions to us, literature serves as a mirror, revealing us to ourselves in all our naked, undefended glory.

10. To appreciate the contributions literature has made to history. The pen is mightier than the sword, yes? When a country undergoes regime change, the new regime imprisons, exiles, or executes the intelligentsia--scholars and philosophers--who are seen as the keepers of the culture, creators of ideology, and instigators of revolt. See Russian, Chinese, and German history for examples. In American history, see the copious examples of pro- and anti-slavery literature as well as Thomas Paine's and Thomas Jefferson's contributions to the American Revolution.

11. To see the tragedy. Stalin said, "A million deaths are a

statistic, but one death is a tragedy." History gives you the statistics. Literature shows you the human tragedy.

12. To further our mastery of language. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words build and destroy nations. Study of literature hones our language skills and teaches us new and valuable techniques for communication. A master of language can seduce your emotions and inspire you to follow him into death—or he can crush your will with a word. Language is the single most important tool of leadership and great leaders embrace its study.

13. To recognize language devices and appreciate their emotional power. Like good music, poetry uses wordplay, rhythm, and sounds to lull the reader into an emotional fog, and therein deliver its message. Great leaders learn to harness these techniques of communication and persuasion. Listen closely to effective advertisements and politicians and lawyers. Listen to the pleasing rhythm and wordplay of their mantras, and watch the sheep blithely flock to them.

14. To explore ethical complexities. Only children find ethical rules cut and dried. Literature forces readers to challenge their simplistic ethical conceptions and sometimes their outright condemnation of others' actions. For example, we believe lying is wrong. But what do we mean? Do we never lie? Have you ever met a person rude enough to follow this rule implicitly? Be advised, though: ethical exploration is a mature endeavor; it is not for the thin-skinned.

15. To see the admirable in everyday life. We are surrounded by unsung nobility and sacrifice. Once we learn to see it in the actions of common folk, our lives will be forever richer, as will our faith in humanity itself.

16. To learn better ways to behave. An untold amount of our opinions and words and reactions are absorbed during childhood and from our culture. Literature teaches us better courses of action and more effective responses to situations...if we let it.

17. To know we aren't alone. Others have been where we are, have felt as we feel, have believed as we believe. Paradoxically, we are unique just like everyone else. But we aren't alone. Others were here and they survived...and may have even learned from it—and so may we.

18. To refine our judgment. This involves several aspects of reading: exposure to new ideas and new ways of looking at old assumptions, expanded vocabulary and understanding, and improved ability to write. Altogether, these benefits refine our

ability to think, and thus guide us toward informed, mature judgment.

19. To learn to support our points of view and trust our own interpretations. We provide evidence for our interpretation of a story or poem when we explicate it. When we build a solid case in support of our opinion, we build self-confidence in our own interpretations of language itself.

20. To develop empathy for those who are unlike us. Literature can train and exercise our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours. As children, our circles of concern stop with ourselves. As we grow, we expand those circles to our families and friends, and *perhaps* to our neighborhoods, towns, cities, states or countries. Our study of literature continues to expand that realm of concern beyond the things we physically experience.

21. To expand our vocabularies. New words are tools for grasping *new ideas*. Each new idea is a building block upon which we may acquire more knowledge. Knowledge is power.

22. To improve our writing skills. We didn't perfect our writing skills in grade school or high school. Many people have failed to grasp the basics by 18. We learn to speak by listening and imitating; we learn to write by reading and imitating.

23. To learn to use our language well. In order to do this, we must immerse ourselves in it. Since most college graduates tend to use words a fifth-grader can understand when speaking, simply speaking the language is insufficient for continued improvement. Literature, however, presents an infinite variety of ideas, words and expressions.

24. To improve our reading comprehension. Most people stop improving their reading comprehension in sixth grade, if not before. Improvement in this area pays obvious dividends throughout our professional careers. We improve by reading and analyzing what we read.

25. To be entertained. When we immerse ourselves in someone else's world, we can find this world and its characters fascinating. Although this is listed last, it really pervades all the previous 24 reasons. Reading literature brings joy, elicits various emotions, and – if it's great literature that speaks to us – will stay with us our whole lives.