

0 What is Literature?



How does a book affect you?

1 Which of the following effects do you think the six images communicate? Say which image expresses...

- an appreciation of beauty
- surprise/shock
- fear and horror
- an encounter with unknown worlds
- an understanding of the question of ecology
- the importance of books in a modern, technological world
- isolation/loneliness
- relaxation
- escaping from everyday reality

Does any one of the images match your idea of reading a book? If not, what image would you choose for yourself?

2 Go to pages 8-15 and look at the table of contents.

- 1 What period does it cover?
- 2 Do you know any of the authors mentioned in the table of contents? Why?
- 3 Is there a balance between women and men writers?
- 4 What types of texts does it include?

3 If you were a book...

- 1 Would you be an existing book or an unknown book?
- 2 What would your main theme be?
- 3 What kind of story would you tell? Funny? Sad? Horror? Romantic?
- 4 What would your protagonist be like?
- 5 What words would you like people to use to describe you as a book?

Share your ideas with the rest of the class.

4 Why read literature? Answer the following questions.

- 1 Can you live in another time?
- 2 Can you live in another place?
- 3 Can you be a completely different person?
- 4 Can you really understand what another person feels?
- 5 Can you die and live again?
- 6 Can you make terrible mistakes and avoid the consequences?

If your answer to all or most of the questions is 'no', what you need is (good) books to read. Great literature is the low-tech, low-cost means to let you answer 'yes' to all these questions.

What is Literature?

Is a definition possible?

“The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She travelled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.”

(Roald Dahl, *Matilda*)

A The quest to discover a definition for ‘literature’ is a road that is much travelled, though the point of arrival, if ever reached, is seldom satisfactory. Most attempted definitions are broad and vague, and they inevitably change over time.

In fact, the only thing that is certain about defining literature is that the definition will change. What may be considered ordinary and not worthy of comment in one time period may be considered literary genius in another. Initial reviews of Emily

Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* in 1847 were less than spectacular, however, *Wuthering Heights* is now considered one of the greatest literary achievements of all time. The same can be said for Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851).

B Most attempts at definition look at how literature works with the reader, rather than how the author set about writing it. It is the reception, rather than the writing, which is the object of enquiry. Largely, what we call literature is often a subjective value judgment, and naturally, value judgments, like literary tastes, will change.

C There is also general agreement that literature is based on language, and uses language in artistic ways. Terry Eagleton, a famous literary critic, goes some way towards a definition of literature and its relationship to language: ‘Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech’. Just as architecture is the art form that arises out of the human ability to create buildings, literature is the art form that arises out of the human ability to create language.

“While thought exists, words are alive and literature becomes an escape, not from, but into living.”

(Cyril Connolly)

D The common definition of literature is that it covers the major genres of poetry, drama, and novel/fiction. The term also implies literary quality and distinction. This is a fairly basic view of literature because the meaning of the term has undergone changes, and will no doubt continue to do so.

“Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart.”

(Salman Rushdie)

E Does it really matter what literature is? Does everyone have to agree? Because there is no hard and fast definition of literature, perhaps it is more beneficial to seek an analysis instead. What purposes does literature serve? What distinguishes literature from non-literary works? What makes us treat something as literature? How do we know when something is literature? Would it be easier to ask what isn't literature?

F Literature is as literature does. In exploring ideas about what literature is, it is useful to look at some of the things that literature does. Literature is something that reflects society, makes us think about ourselves and our society, allows us to enjoy language and beauty, it can be didactic, and it reflects on the human condition. It both reflects ideology and changes ideology, just like it follows generic conventions as well as changing them. It has social and political effects. Literature is the creation of another world, a world that we can only see through reading literature.

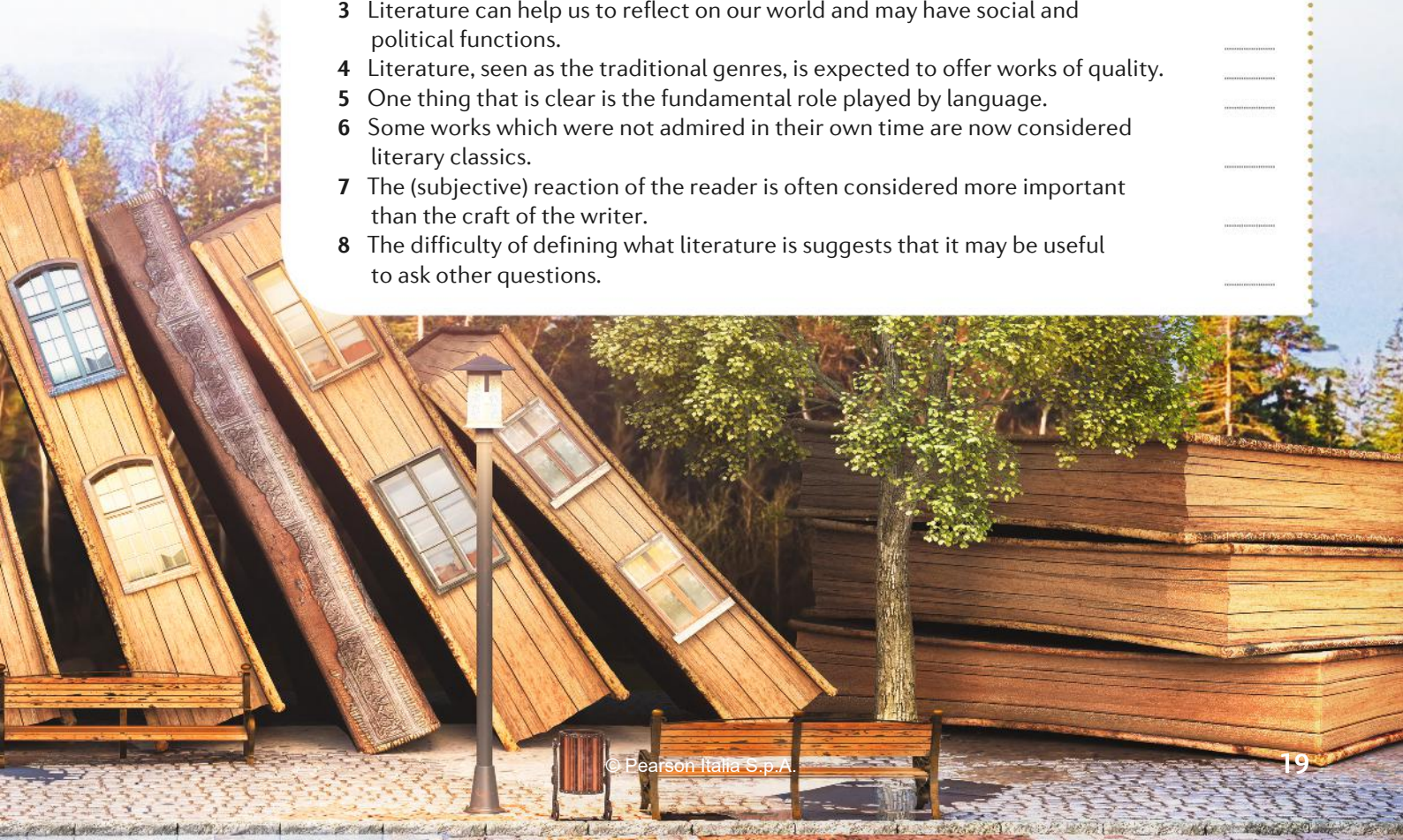
“Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.”

(C.S. Lewis)



Read the article above and say which paragraphs (A-F) contain the following ideas. You may use the same letters more than once.

- 1 Definitions of what literature is can change over time. _____
- 2 It is not necessary to establish a single, unanimously accepted definition of literature. _____
- 3 Literature can help us to reflect on our world and may have social and political functions. _____
- 4 Literature, seen as the traditional genres, is expected to offer works of quality. _____
- 5 One thing that is clear is the fundamental role played by language. _____
- 6 Some works which were not admired in their own time are now considered literary classics. _____
- 7 The (subjective) reaction of the reader is often considered more important than the craft of the writer. _____
- 8 The difficulty of defining what literature is suggests that it may be useful to ask other questions. _____



What is Literature for?

LITERATURE SAVES US TIME

In today's world where everything moves so fast, time seems to be our most precious resource. Can we justify time spent on what appears to be a passive activity like reading? The answer must be a convinced 'yes!'. Literature is the greatest time saver. It allows the reader to experience countless events and emotions, many more than we could fit in a lifetime. Literature is the great reality simulator. We can fall in and out of love, get

married and divorced, get rich and poor, commit sins and crime and get away with them.



CITIZENS OF THE WORLD

Literature is a machine travelling through time and space. We can travel through life from childhood to old age. We can live in ancient Rome, in 17th-century England, in yet-undiscovered future worlds and in worlds which will never exist. Literature gives us keys to places, real and unreal, that we would never have the chance to visit, meeting fascinating people, great and small, whom we would never meet.

At no or little cost, literature makes us citizens of the world.

NICER PEOPLE

The books we read and the plays we see give us opportunities to see things from someone else's point of view. They give us examples of kind and generous people as well as of wicked, heartless people.

We see the consequences of actions and this makes us empathetic and capable of considering the consequences of our own actions on others. Literature stands in contrast to the values of today, which reward money and power and can make us sympathetic to ideas and feelings that are important but often lost in a cynical world.

A CURE FOR LONELINESS

Great writers seem to know us better than we know ourselves. They find the words to express our feelings and experience of our inner lives. As the American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) said: 'In the works of great writers, we find our own neglected thoughts.'

While friends can disappoint us, books are always true friends – always there, never too busy for us, giving us honest accounts of what things are really like.

DEALING WITH FAILURE

One of our greatest fears in life is failure. The media deal with failure and delights in showing us how the great and good, the rock stars, footballers, actors, politicians, royalty etc., make a mess of their lives.

A lot of literature deals with failure, too, but great books don't judge people in such a cruel, one-dimensional way. Books can show us pity for the fallen hero and fear for ourselves as we see just how close we can all come to destroying our own lives.

LITERATURE AS A GUIDE TO ACTION

We live in an increasingly complex, rapidly-changing and problematic world.

Globalisation means that we are involved in and affected by events and situations that lie beyond our daily experience.

Modern instruments like television, the Internet and social media lead us to believe that every problem or question can have quick corrections and solutions. Literature, on the other hand, confirms the complexity of human conflict and problems in society and often offers us an illuminating perspective of how humanity has confronted difficult issues in other times and other places and in so doing can help us to intervene and act appropriately.

LITERATURE THERAPY

Literature can do all these things so perhaps we should treat it with more respect, not just as an entertainment or a distraction in our free time.

Literature is a type of therapy and we should learn to use it as doctors use medicine, to prescribe it according to the type of problem we need to tackle.

Literature deserves its prestige – it is a tool that can help us to live better, with more wisdom, goodness and sanity.

(adapted from www.theschooloflife.com)



■ After reading the text answer the following questions with your classmates. Share and discuss your opinions.

- 1 Why is literature described as a 'great reality simulator'?
- 2 How can a book make you a 'nicer person'?
- 3 How can literature be a guide to action?
- 4 Has a book ever changed you or your attitudes? Say which book and how.
- 5 Can you read (have you ever read) a book more than once? If so, why?
- 6 What is the difference between reading the book and seeing the film? Which do you prefer?
- 7 Do you always finish a book that you have started reading?
- 8 (How) could you convince a friend to read a good book (a book you enjoyed reading)?

A storyteller inside of us

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) was a British-Zimbabwean novelist. In 2007 she won the Nobel Prize in Literature. The text below is taken from her Nobel Lecture, 'On not winning the Nobel Prize' in which she reflects on the ancient roots and power of storytelling.

We have a treasure-house of literature, going back to the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans. It is all there, this wealth of literature, to be discovered again and again by whoever is lucky enough to come upon it. A treasure. Suppose it did not exist. How impoverished, how empty we would be.

We own a legacy of languages, poems, histories, and it is not one that will ever be

LITERARY NOTEBOOK

Canon

The word 'canon', from the Greek, originally meant 'measuring stick' or 'rule' and was used by early Christian theologians to differentiate the genuine, or canonical, books of the Bible from the false ones. For centuries the word 'literature' has coincided with the word 'canon', meaning the set of books considered by critics as genuinely 'literary' as opposed to the ones with little or no literary value.

In literature the word 'canon' refers to an 'official' list of works that scholars, critics, tradition, or some other authoritative body recognise as 'authentic'. If the list includes just the works written by a single author – let's say, William Shakespeare – we talk of the 'canon' of this author's works. The 'English canon' includes the works officially recognised as being part of 'English literature'.

exhausted. It is there, always. We have a bequest¹ of stories, tales from the old storytellers, some of whose names we know, but some not. The storytellers go back and back, to a clearing in the forest where a great fire burns, and the old shamans dance and sing, for our heritage of stories began in fire, magic, the spirit world. And that is where it is held, today.

Ask any modern storyteller and they will say there is always a moment when they are touched with fire, with what we like to call inspiration, and this goes back and back to the beginning of our race, to the great winds that shaped us and our world. The storyteller is deep inside every one of us. The story-maker is always with us. Let us suppose our world is ravaged by war, by the horrors that we all of us easily imagine. Let us suppose floods wash through our cities, the seas rise. But the storyteller will be there, for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative.

¹ bequest: lascito

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■ **Read Lessing's speech and answer the following questions:**

- 1 What three words in the text indicate a tradition of literature that has come down to us from the past?
- 2 How does Lessing describe inspiration?
- 3 How far does this inspiration date back, according to Lessing?
- 4 What is the role of the 'story-maker' in times of horrors and devastation?

■ **Reflect and discuss. Work in pairs. In your opinion:**

- 1 What are the qualities of a 'great' book?
- 2 Is literature for everybody or only for highly educated people?
- 3 Is it necessary to know details of an author's life and historical period when you read a work of literature?
- 4 Is reading an individual occupation or can it be a group/social activity?
- 5 Can literature survive in an age of online communication technology?
- 6 Is reading a task or can it be a pleasure?

■ **Desert-island books: Imagine you are marooned on a desert island. You may be there for a very long time! You can choose five books of any type that you would like to have with you on the island. Write your list and then compare it with your classmates' choices.**

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

Now put your ideas together to make a 'class canon' of about 20 books.

