

Hymns of the Mountains, Dreams of the Stars

How the pound sign became revolutionized into the powerful symbol it is today is perhaps one of the most intriguing and fascinating turning points in history. From a mere telephone key beside zero to the now popular *hashtag*, this metamorphosis has given birth to a tagging device, so powerful that it has imparted a sense of dynamicity to the different ideas shared on the cyberspace. The hashtag, with its speed and flexibility, has truly transformed the whole social networking scene. It stands as a symbol with a promise of mobility, giving an empowered voice to each of today's *netizens* (internet citizens). Give it a couple of seconds and it will take you to a world of varied opinions and interpretations, may it be about pressing social issues, the latest gadgets, or even the freshest celebrity scoops. And maybe, for this reason, the hashtag continues to attract more and more users each day. This is, by far, getting the public pulse at its best.

We are fans of speed, and so, these days, it might be hard to negotiate a significant place in our lives for literature, minus all the romance and idealism. Truth be told: technology continues to move the world. Numbers, codes and formulas have managed to take over the helm of development, across fields such as banking, construction and business. This then pretty much clarifies how the word *information* in the "Information Age" really means. At a time wherein everything is geared towards practicality, demanding precision and technicalities, the magic of words, something that rests on being loose and ambiguous, might find it hard to assert its significance in the buzzing metro. While everyone else duels with the 24-hour restrictions of a day, ensuring that every second is allotted to something productive (whatever that means), reading seems to reject the idea of immediacy. The slouch, the lying-down position, the

complacency that there would still be enough time for everything else- these things lead to how reading becomes a luxurious expenditure of time in this era of the instant.

As I look back, there is a mix of regret and shame in admitting that I used to subscribe to this very mechanical lifestyle. Although I grew up primarily surrounded by books, I wasn't really into reading for the longest time. Not that I hated it. Probably, I was just among those who didn't have the time, or perhaps didn't see the need, to dive into pages of blocks of information. The basic mindset that time was that everything is now just a Google search away, and if we are really in need of stories, the TV is there to offer a visual narration that is far easier to absorb. But it came to a point wherein it felt like I was missing out a lot. There was a big loss in such passivity. It came to me as if I've been drifting away from my own way of thinking, slowly becoming less of myself and more of a walking Sparknotes. It was very limiting, I must say.

It was in the latter part of my senior year in high school when I've decided undertake the uncertain journey with words- to commit myself to the act of reading, starting with the then famous Hunger Games trilogy. As I grappled with more stories and began to connect with a new-found love, poetry, I was filled with distinct and flavorful experiences alien to my skin. It became clear to me that these were certainly the things I was missing out. I've since believed that literature has this immense power that, if harnessed, is capable of renewing our world altogether.

As I entered the very diverse world of college, I realized the importance of widening one's point of view, a value that has been much reiterated in my classes. I will always remember how my Lit 13 professor would frequently remind us to "suspend our disbelief" as we discussed stories under magic realism. By letting us explore different places and timeframes, literature offers the chance of seeing the world from different perspectives. I strongly believe that the only way for us to be able to truly understand the value of things and appreciate diversity is by going

outside the confines of our selves, especially at this particular period in our history wherein we are confronted with issues that are rather divisive. We are in great need of open-mindedness. The reading experience imparts to us that specific value of setting aside our biases and preconceptions in dealing with our realities, therefore highlighting a rule of thumb: the world is much larger than what lies in our familiarity.

Literature stands as a repository of values necessary to become effective members of society. It is not only through the insights and endless realizations we gain from the texts we come across. The very act of reading, I believe, necessitates a great deal of discipline. By demanding our full concentration, reading never fails to inculcate in us the value of perseverance, that is, dedicating our whole selves to whatever it is that we want to accomplish. Reading also expands the way we think and perceive. It molds us into outside-the-box thinkers who can offer creative and innovative solutions to the different problems that beset the nation.

More importantly, literature imparts an invaluable culture of depth. It becomes our tool as we strive to uncover the hidden meanings that lie beyond surface, as well as in our attempt to establish our connections to the greater mysteries of this world. It becomes our companion as we deal with the complexities of life: faith, love, and friendships, among other things. By allowing us to delve into a wide range of sensibilities and ideas, reading a work, both a filling and a breaking experience, ultimately leaves an enduring impact in our lives.

There must be something in writing, the production of literature, that it has withstood the test of time, from the clay tablets to the book and now, in its modern form, the electronic book. A motivating force must have compelled the first writer to lock down an idea on surface. That could have been the very day he realized, perhaps while looking at the vastness of the seas or the skies, the need to preserve and capture the many valuable things in this world, to share and to

partake with his environment, to make sense of his existence, and to aspire to reach higher peaks. As someone who has loved the craft way before the idea of a dream job came to mind, I cannot think of a force that is more powerful than the desire to be a part of something greater.

Literature forms people who are engaged with society, people who assume active roles. It is the kind of stimulus that moves a singular existence to paths that could ignite changes. By showing to us the power of imagination and by making us whole, literature inspires a contribution to the greater world outside the self, creating visionaries- dreamers who could craft their own destinies and engulf others with their flames as they move towards these destinies.

This I know: whenever history speaks of heroes and leaders, it can't help but speak of readers and writers as well. We have Jose Rizal who, as a 12-year-old kid, enjoyed reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*. We have Andres Bonifacio who, in order to compensate for his lack of formal schooling, spent sleepless nights reading books like Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. The ideologies they championed, due to which we regard them as the fathers of our nation, certainly did not just come out of the vacuum. These are ideas conceived perhaps centuries before their time- thoughts so electrifying that they, at one point, had to be contained and written down. I do believe that meeting these works contributed to the formation of their heroic consciousness.

I would like to believe that literature still has a significant place in this era of the hashtag. It speaks the same language of coming out. As it condenses the beauty of this world, as it gathers all the big ideas produced by generations of thinkers, literature brings our worldview to another level- ready to discuss, ready to take part. This is the power of the written word.

Literature serves as an avenue to come into terms with ourselves as a nation. It forms the backbone of our national identity, chronicling our successes and our failures. It makes us deeply-rooted to our past, in-touch with our present and linked to the uncertain terrains of the future. As

we try to address the problems posed by globalization, literature is there to fasten our fragmentations. After all, reading disregards our differences; it rests on our oneness, as people who wish to understand ourselves and the world better. We may call it a luxury, but given its inherent value, why can't we spoil ourselves every now and then with the opportunity to truly grow as persons? From there, the possibilities are endless.

This is our time to navigate our nation into the right direction. As we sail towards national development, our greatest contribution is nothing else other than ourselves. By investing our time on literature, we form ourselves into citizens equipped with the necessary experiences, attitudes and outlooks, and, in turn, capable of offering something to the nation and to the larger world. It may seem very ideal, but I have great belief that the returns of this investment is beyond measure. It might not be the exact answer to our problems, but I am sure that it is the catalyst to change. There are still a lot of books left for me to read, but I know that my relatively limited encounter with the world of literature has inspired me to become the best Filipino that I can be. I will stand by the fact that it has transformed me...in so many ways.

Amidst the glorification of the fast-paced, literature invites us to take it slow, to spend a portion of our time immersing ourselves into the world. It remains there to remind us of the things we have overlooked in pursuing the goal of a globalized world, like the hymns of the mountains and the dreams of the stars, essences which have been obstructed by the views of our own skyscrapers. I would like to believe that they are just there, cradled by the bookends, waiting for us to be ready to carry them with our own hands... to be ready to make wonders.

The stars are conspiring. Soon, the sun will bleed through the daybreak sky.

We will be *trending*, one book at a time.