

## Panacea

I have fractured eyes and a jigsaw soul.

Years of perusing the stiff, sharp-edged pages of just-bought books have broken and crushed me physically. My eyes are not clear-sighted, despite the endless dishes of squash that my grandmother insisted would cure my deteriorating vision. My spine has curved in subtle ways over time, and perfect posture has always been more of a detested chore than a habit.

*You read too much*, Papa would whisper, pulling away the novel from my hands and locking it inside the cabinet. *You need to study your lessons*.

But it feels like I'm forever stuck in a swirling vortex of letters and punctuation, trying to make sense of the words building themselves up all around me. Chaotic, confused, lost – and yet I'd rather be in the thick of it all. It's a beautiful moment, one where you look past just the coherence of well-written sentences and see the message underneath.

My mother would always tell anyone who'd care to listen that I'd started reading when I was three years old. I'd picked up a children's storybook and had scanned it, armed only with a fragmented knowledge of syllables and the alphabet, and somehow I'd read it. I'd read and I'd loved the way the words had been put together, and I'd read until I had to beg for more to read. Perhaps it had been a little dose of curiosity that had prompted me to get the book, but it had been a love for literature that had driven me to actually understand it in my own three-year-old way.

So I'd grown up as a voracious bookworm, spelling *giraffe* and *hippopotamus* and *balloon* while my peers were learning *cat* and *rat* and *mouse*. In my later years I would find a little corner in a library or a book shop, getting lost in imagined worlds. I would travel to India, go to school at

Hogwarts, and befriend a lion in the midst of Narnia's stormy woods. Aboveall, I was entranced by the infinite possibilities of literature.

Literature is a tricky thing. It begins with thought, is expressed through language, is made timeless by publication, and ends up being interpreted according to the reader's perspective. It's multi-dimensional, encompassing different worldviews and schools of thought, confined only by the limitations of the reader's understanding. That's what makes literature so special – it may seem simple, but it also has the ability to morph into something more complex.

Just the other day, I came across *Reading and Guilty Pleasure* by Gary Gutting. The first question in Gutting's article is this: "Are some books objectively better than others, or are literary preferences ultimately just matters of subjective taste?" It's a valid question, to be honest. I cannot quote a particular set of statistics, but I don't think it would be too presumptuous of me to say that the number of people who have read Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* are greater than, say, the ones who have read Haruki Murakami's *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. It comes down to commercial viability rather than technical skills. Meyer is no Kafka, Twain or Tolkien, and yet she sells.

We may argue, time and time again, over which authors are actually good at writing. What we fail to realize is that the interpretation of literature is dependent on the reader's literacy and cultural background. As a result, the author's message is not conveyed completely, the same way a constructed building does not quite resemble the original blueprint. Sometimes people would rather read crude jokes about someone's ass than face a thought-provoking piece written to the point of perfection.

Going back to Gutting's question, I do think that literary preferences *are* ultimately just matters of subjective taste. People read what they want to read, and what they want to read often depends on the dictates of society.

Why is this so important? Why am I fixating on people's literary tastes and on the correlation of literature and the society?

In the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "The decline of literature indicates the decline of a nation." I don't mean to imply that our nation is in a state of decline. But if we tweak that quote to have a positive connotation, it will be like this: "The improvement of literature indicates the improvement of a nation." Take note of the word *improvement*, which can also mean *development*. In a way, I agree with von Goethe. Against the backdrop of the ever-evolving 21<sup>st</sup> century, literature plays an important role in the development of a nation.

It begins with how we consume literature: by reading. "To learn to read is to light a fire" – the words of Victor Hugo cannot be truer. The act of reading is in itself crucial to the enrichment of a nation's constituents, due to the fact that literacy is defined by Merriam-Webster as the *ability to read and write*. What is the material we use in order to achieve literacy? Literature. We *read* literature, and learning how to read alone provides a foundation for cultivating an intellectual economy in the country. After all, a country's most important resource is its people, and in order to develop the Philippines' inherent human resources, we begin by teaching Filipinos how to read and how to write.

Aside from that, reading is vital in the formation of an individual. The scope of literature is broad in nature, and it encompasses so many ideologies. Through reading, an individual empathizes with characters and formulates his/her own perspective about the dynamics of the world in

general. Barbara W. Tuchman once said, “Books are humanity in print.” In effect, an individual who reads can relate with the rest of the world and opens his mind to concepts outside of his/her natural sphere of learning.

The second key point is that literature is basically a historical record. Even the most outlandish fiction you come across is founded on the ills and projections of society. Literature disseminates information and educates the people. Information is transcribed and printed on hundreds of pages, and these pages are then made available throughout the globe. Yes, even those tiny pixels on the screen that we squint at can be considered literature. In the truest sense, literature is the world’s omniscient diary, one which we can peruse in order to study the literary movements over the years, the political treatises which have ripped apart the world, and the progression of society in general. Essentially, literature is the know-it-all kid who everyone hates but secretly copies off of.

In short, literature stores knowledge and we use that knowledge to avoid making the same mistakes of humanity in the past.

Lastly, literature is an important factor in creating a national identity. A nation’s literature is the most accurate reflection of the nation itself. We begin developing the nation by teaching the general populace how to read. Then we segue into the fact that literature is, in essence, a historical record and a comprehensive study of humanity through the ages. Now that the nation’s constituents have gained perspective and are able to understand the documents of the past, they begin writing new literature. It is a cycle: we read, we understand, and we share what we understand. In the process, literature evolves and expands. Not only does it include the rules and restrictions of society *before*, it also grows to include society *now*. This is the most valuable aspect of literature: its development of a nation by reminding the nation of its own self. In the

end, what is a nation without an identity? What is a country without a shared trait? What is a human being without character?

I have lived and breathed literature ever since my formative years. I have suffered the consequences of reading until midnight with a flashlight under the sheets, and reading while a car is in motion. I do have fractured eyes and maybe a bent spine – physical indications of my journey with literature, and they’ll never go away. But I also have a jigsaw soul, one that is pieced together by patches from each world I’ve visited, each concept I’ve learned, each character I’ve grown attached to. Literature has changed me the same way it continues to change this nation, this continent, and this world.

I have fractured eyes and a jigsaw soul, and I know that I am not the only one. I am not the first, I am not the last, but I am one of the people who believe that literature can make a difference. Perhaps it is the panacea that our nation is looking for.