

How to define literature essay sample



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Finding an exact definition of literature has confused and baffled many literary theorists throughout history. Even now, a precise definition of literature has not been reached despite countless theories developed. However, if we focus on the main function of literature by consulting ancient Western literary theorists, we will see from their diverse theories that literature is a mirror, which reflects the human soul with its good and evil sides. By looking at this mirror, societies have had the chance of observing their situations objectively and as a result of this, they have felt the need to change and renew themselves.

In the Western tradition, the first known theorist to think about the functions of the literature is the Greek philosopher Plato, who raised fundamental and enduring questions about the role of literature and its justification in his famous book *The Republic*. Although he is notorious for being severely critical against literature, he made a great contribution to the development of literary criticism because many thinkers have produced literary theories to refute Plato's arguments.

One of his central arguments against poetry is that it is harmful to human soul, for it addresses to the inferior part of the soul, and encourages us to indulge in emotions which ought to be kept firmly in the control of reason. By dealing with our emotions and activating our natural desire to weep and wail at misfortunes, literature (especially epic and tragedy) disables our rational responses and makes us incapable of using our reason in dealing with misfortunes.

He exaggerates the situation by claiming that poetry has the power to corrupt even the best of men with its seductive melodies drawing us into an emotional identification with the characters it portrays in a way that threatens the use of reason, since surrendering to our emotions is so intensely pleasurable. Because of this, Plato sees it compulsory to banish literature from his ideal society. However, this behaviour just looks like breaking all the mirrors so as not to see our ugly faces; because poetry is like a mirror that shows human soul, which is such a complex thing that it shelters all the evils and goods of the world inside itself.

Contrary to Plato's idea that literature only adheres to the inferior part of the human soul, the function of literature is to show human beings their soul, which is made up of both good and evil. Its ultimate aim is to make us change by showing us the evil sides of our soul, just as the mirror, which forces us to change our appearance by showing us the stains and pimples on our face. Aristotle, Plato's student, implicitly rebuilds the broken mirror.

His Poetics, the first work of theoretical criticism devoted specifically to poetry in the Western tradition, intended to investigate the nature of poetry through the classification of its different kinds and the analysis of their function and purpose. Besides defending that literature should imitate both evil and good, Aristotle gives it a role more than a mirror of the human soul. According to him, poetry is like a magic mirror, showing what may happen besides what is happening, which gives us a generalized view of human nature from which we can learn more than we can from particular facts.

From this perspective, Aristotle sees literature closer to philosophy than history, contrary to his teacher considering literature as the enemy of philosophy. We can extend this idea. Literature is a source for sociology, anthropology, psychology, and all sciences dealing with human nature because literature expresses human soul (what it did, what it does and what it can do). When you read Hamlet, philosophically you question revenge, sociologically you see the royal lifestyle, anthropologically you see a European race and psychologically you witness the tide in the mind of a young prince who has to take revenge.

Many literary texts express this depth of knowledge reflected in Shakespeare's play. Literature is not simply inspiration, contrary to Plato's argument. As the Roman philosopher Horace says in his Art of Poetry, a person who is prepared to produce a work of literature should 'aim either to benefit or to please, or to combine the giving of pleasure with some useful precepts for life.'¹ Horace emphasized the complex structure of literature and defended that it was not an amateur job depending on mere inspiration, but an interdisciplinary field of study, which required intense education on it, as it aims both to delight and instruct.

He knew that the function of literature was to make the society see itself on the mirror of the art and change the corrupted sides of it. Literature has proved its power to change its society throughout history. The Ancient Greek literature, which includes Homer, Aristophanes, Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus and also Plato and Aristotle, tore apart the curtains upon intellectual thinking in medieval Europe and saved it from the scholastic thinking of the church, by opening a new era called 'Renaissance'.

Europeans learned rationalist thinking and philosophy from Ancient Greeks, who wrote a bunch of literary works on the meaning of the world and nature, such as Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, which represent the entire Greek mythology. Similarly, the literary works *Candide* by Voltaire and *Emile* by J. J. Rousseau have been highly influential in the outbreak of the French Revolution. These great philosophers used the power of literature in order to provoke the oppressed classes.

In addition, among the powerful literary works throughout history, we can consider Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which awakened an anti-colonialist thinking in the West; Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which helped create a revulsion against slavery that made possible the American Civil War; George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which showed people the real face of communism; and also we can add Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which made the world to see the real history of Africa.

We have understood the functions of literature to a great extent, which will help us find the precise definition of literature. Now we can say that a piece of work differs from ordinary writings in having an effect on the reader even to create a revolution in the society by reflecting the present and future state of their soul and giving them a chance to correct their faults, just like cleaning a stain on your face after looking at the mirror. When combined with a perfect usage of language, this piece of work would have the right to be classified as a literary text.