

The role of literature



The role of literature Read also: Why we should read. I wrote up this post some time ago when I was asking myself, “ what’s the purpose of literature and reading? ” I think this is an appropriate follow-up to David’s post below, about literary criticism of the Bible. The seemingly trivial nature of this question is perhaps the reason why it often goes over looked. This is a shame, because this question is an important one, and one that ought to be given more attention. So, what is the role of literature in the lives of individuals and society?

Literature has two roles, an active, engaging role and a passive, reflective role. The active role represents the very action of reading. This role is a significant part of an individual’s development. From reading, an individual forms ideas and concepts about the world in which they live. These ideas and concepts form together into an ideology of sort. From this ideology stems individual motivation, action, and engagement. For example, one’s decision to become a social activist may stem from a reading of Karl Marx and his discussion of the alienated worker or Gayatri Spivak and her musings about the subaltern.

One’s decision to become a Christian – be it a ‘ born again evangelical’ or a traditional Episcopalian – is heavily influenced by the act of reading John 14: 6. The second role is distinguishable from the first in that it is a thing observed, rather than a thing done. The reflective role of literature is to “ show” to society the history of ideologies, of thought, and of action. It reveals what people thought during a particular time and how they thought about it. It allows the individual to understand how a society functioned and why it functioned that way.

For example, an individual reading through Ernst Bloch will peer into the hearts and minds of the German people during the early 19th and late 20th century. There, one can find the ideas of the German ideology and how it functioned in central Europe during the given time period. Or, returning to the Judeo-Christian example, the principles upon which ancient and classical societies were built can be inferred from reading the Bible – Hosea’s rebuke of an immoral nation or Paul’s condemnation of discrimination based on class.

Of course there are myriad of other influencing factors, such as institutions, communities, and families; literature does not exist in a vacuum. It does, however, have a unique function in shaping and teaching society at-large. For such a seemingly petty question, it involves the contemplation of the essence of society and how individuals work within the confines of society’s structure. Understanding how literature motivates the individual and how it is reflexive of the individual’s society is something that ought to be given more attention and consideration.