Literature as a Factor in Education

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In order to think of any one of the factors of an education, as related to all others, we must have for a foundation, a definite understanding of the end to be sought, and the means to be denied thereafter.

In general we understand education to be a process of development of the intellectual faculties, an unfolding of the latent capabilities of an individual; the bringing out and training to known, and the development of the true self. This true self Mr. Horace Mann, in his "Aims of Literary Study" talks of as an immovable thing, a very small part of which we can ever become conscious of in this life; but which is influenced in its development by our thoughts and actions, and in turn prompts our thoughts, directs our activities, and guides our life here, and determines our course in the great eternity which follows, along the line of its greatest development.
Each of the many branches of education tend especially to develop some one, or few, of the several different powers, or different faculties of the mind. But what we study so much as that of literature touches all points, and especially this essential “innermost” of the “innermost” of man? While the laws of matter, as found in science, do have a close connection with physical and moral laws, this relation is not so evident but that it may be passed unnoticed. The untrained mind would hardly discover it. But spirits as well as matter are mutually attractive. “As we water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.” As one has expressed it, “Companionship with gifted minds is in itself a liberal education.” And next to a personal acquaintance is an association with them as they have given themselves to the world in their published works. The great and noble in their speech through their tomes and the great and noble in the reader is awakened.
Literature probably has a greater influence on the formation of individual and national character than anything else. A study of it brings us in touch with the thoughts, feelings, impulses, and passions of the foremost men of all time. And we cannot doubt the statement that: The destruction of all literature would relegate us to the values of savage life. And certainly man has left to man, no richer gift than the literature of ages past and gone.

Wordsworth calls poetry the soul and spirit of all knowledge, the unpassioned expression which is the counterpart of all science. And Mr. Converse again says: "Literature, especially poetic and dramatic, is the expression in letters of the spiritual, cooperating with the intellectual man." "Spirit" in this sense includes all emotions, the susceptible, impression, sympathetic, and intuitive parts of man. Such a study, in combining the spiritual and intellectual culture, gives the most vital kind of knowledge.
There can be no true literary study, no literary training, except as the soul is stirred with lasting impressions. And it is the study of such literary works as reveal the good, and the highest culture of the past, that excite the loftiest ambitions and hopes in the present age, and to a great extent determines the future.

So great and determining an influence in the educative of an individual, should certainly begin when educative itself begins. For then it is that character formative begins. Among the first things a child learns is to like, and dislike. Tastes are being formed, and such tastes are much easier formed and fixed than corrected when once wrongly formed. Great care, and even tact, is certainly required in selecting the books which are to become the personal friends of a child. But certain it is he will find some kind for himself, if they are not chosen for him. The young mind should be carefully guarded from the acquaintance of any author...
who might be distasteful, until more capable of judging and choosing; otherwise a dislike might be formed for all books. Again, the mind to develop perfectly, must be allowed to do so by its own natural steps, just as a flower must have its own time and way for opening, to be perfect in form. That masterpieces of literature can do no good, indeed may do great harm to the infant intelligence. But if bright, sparkling, pure and simple, classical literature there is an abundance. And by contact with such literature, suited to it, the young mind is influenced just as the more creative mind is by the more creative literature: it is broadened, stimulated, and more perfectly developed. It is the human sympathy, passion and feeling, found in good literature, that is necessary to move the will, and touch the sensibilities of the child and awaken in it an interest. Reading from good authors enlarges the vocabulary, by giving a knowledge
of the shadowy meaning, in words, as no definitions ever could. And when
the mind is just learning to think, if
the superior spirits of the good author
can lead it into right lines of thought,
and teach it something noble to be
thought of, it means a great step in
the education of that individual. It
means that those great minds,
through books, have done much toward
giving form and value to the thought
of more mature years.

Schools of all kinds can at best only
open and outline some great fields for
students, and especially in scientific
branches they can lay only a very general
foundation. Some need some studies
that have more directly upon the moral
life: that touch heart and conscience;
average sympathy and kindle
imaginative. "Studies that recognize
the visible world as a symbol of the
invisible." Relatively too much attention
is given to intellectual brilliancy.
Narrowness and meanness may exist
with mental sharpness and vigor.
Deep scientific study may sharpen, quicken, and strengthen, yet not
evolve the mental power, nor suggest any social or civil duty. The aim of
literary study is moral elevation and inspiration through beauty and
publicity. Then such studies should be selected for their inward grace,
purity, and power, as well as their outward perfection of form.

Dr. Innes classifies literature as the literature of power and the literature
of knowledge. True literature is that of power, or that which speaks from
heart to heart. All science belongs to the literature of knowledge, which
leads farther and farther ahead, but are the same plane. While the emotion
al and imaginative, the literature of
power elevates with each step.

Encyclopedias require frequent
revision, and finally become useless.
So with all knowledge of simple tasks.
But the marks that guide, inspire,
train the human passion, and kindle
and sustain lofty sentiment is
unchanging, is universal in its effect. It is this class of literature then, that we select to study. Not to analyze, pull to pieces, work over, and criticize; but to read, interpret, and absorb for the helpful and pleasing sentiment it contains; to make our hearts acquainted with the heart of the writer. To learn to sympathize with, and profit by the experiences of that other human soul. So we may have books for friends to whom we may go, not only for profit, but for pleasure and comfort. One has said, "It is the business of a book to give us enjoyment, or teach us endurance in life." Literature exists to please. To lighten the burdens of men's lives: to make them for a time forget their burdens and their sins, their silenced hearts, their disappointed hopes, and all their grim futures." How worthy an office is fulfilled in the education of an individual!

The training of the imagination is no small part of the husbandry derived
from literary study. "In the imagination of man exists the seeds of all moral and scientific improvement. Coleridge says, and it is this imaginative which helps to lead our onward and upward. The chief work of every school, and every branch of education should be to create and maintain in every student the highest ideal of human life. And there is no study like that of the best literature to form and glorify such an ideal." It reveals possibilities, touchbes to finer issues, broadens the thought, kindles faith, sets the soul on fire, quickens and greater as nothing else can." If one can be made to see as the great authors have seen, one's life is greatly widened. Thomas Arnold said he had rather his son should know the sun round around the earth than that he should be entirely deficient in knowledge of beauty, of poetry, and of moral truth. But in a well-rounded development, in a well balanced education, we need both fluids of knowledge. And their relative
importance in business life may be considered. A literary education does not lack in strength because it excels in the cultivation of the emotions, tastes, and passions; indeed, a cultivation and control of these powers is one of the greatest proofs of strength of the highest kind. Some of the strongest men of the past have been literary men. England's foremost man of the present age, William E. Gladstone, is a man of letters. One of America's greatest lawyers, William M. Evarts, won away the highest literary honors at Yale. History is full of such examples of powerful men who owed much of their ability to the study of literature. One student and writer on this subject even believes that the most valuable preparation one who intends to enter active service in the cause of humanity can make is a study of the greatest works of the greatest author. And that he who will thoroughly master the Bible, Shakespeare, and Milton will have a better business educational than many tens of the
College graduates, for he will know
human nature, which is a better
preparation for success than a
knowledge of all the laws of matter, if the
process of machinery and tricks of trade.

But a business education is not all
we want nor is it the most desired.
Somell says: "If such a study as Miller
does not help us earn our bread, it
suresly all we do get." But even this is
not of first importance, for our duty in
life is not simply to get all the sweetness
we can for ourselves, but to be able to
give it out to all the world. The special
object in all study should be always to
approach perfect meekness and
meekness; and the chief joy that
accompanied such a study is the
association with heroic manhood and
angelic manhood. And the best
result is selfless service enriching
mankind."