DO WE STILL NEED LITERATURE? A QUESTIONNAIRE-BASED INQUIRY

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Abstract

Our paper is a continuation of a small-scale research started in 2012, on the importance of literature in our lives and materialized, so far, in a paper on the didactics of English literature from the perspective of the student-centred approach to education (Boghian, 2012). This paper is the result of a questionnaire-based inquiry aiming to highlight the reasons for which we read/ we do not read literature nowadays and the answer to the question: Do we still need literature? Our findings reveal the fact that the greatest enemy of literature is, nowadays, lack of time: lack of time due to long days at work, family responsibilities and the impact of the Internet and the new communication technologies on our lives. However, all the respondents believe that society needs literature as it promotes human values and moral guidelines. Nevertheless, a relevant number of the respondents are pessimistic regarding the future of literature, with part of them answering that it will survive only under certain circumstances.

Key words: literature, questionnaire-based inquiry, values

1. Introduction

Nowadays, in the age of technology, it seems that it increasingly difficult to find the time to read literature in the form of fiction. But, do we really need literature, understood as fiction? Or, are the millions of articles covering all kinds of topics related and unrelated to human life, that we come across on connecting to the Internet, our inbox or our social network profile, enough to replace a well written fiction book? Social networking sites abound in messages and urges of the type "Do yourself a favour, read a book!" or pictures showing the way to success in the form of a ladder made of books. Such representations gather a large number of "Likes" and "Shares" but, in

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the end, how many of us really log out of our online social profile and spend the rest of our evening with a book in our hands?

As far as studies on the importance of literature are concerned, most of these fall into two categories: the didactic importance of literature or, in other words, the use of literature in teaching and learning foreign languages (Chambers & Gregory, 2006; Harmer, 2011; LoMonico, 2012); the more or less scientific introductory presentations of websites selling fiction books (*Qualities of Literature*[2]; *Importance of Literature*[3]).

Literature has always played a key part in the human beings' search for meaning. The main functions of literature are: "telling human beings what is important in life […] what's worthy of our admiration or our contempt, […] what it's like to be those who live in different circumstances and in other historical times and in other gendered bodies […] what we should pay attention to and what we can afford to ignore, […] how life might be lived this way rather than that way" (Chambers and Gregory, 2006, p. 2).[4] In other words, literature teaches us the meaning of life, values such as empathy, tolerance and aesthetic taste.

This paper is the result of a small-scale research started in 2012, on the importance of literature in our lives and materialized, so far, in a paper on the didactics of English literature from the perspective of the student-centred approach to the teaching-learning process (see Boghian, 2012). This paper presents the findings of a questionnaire-based inquiry aimed at highlighting the reasons for which we read/do not read literature nowadays and the conclusive answer to the question: Do we/ Does society still need literature?

Our **hypothesis** is that what estranges people from reading literature is lack of time. Or, in other words, the time dedicated to work and other activities (for example, family responsibilities) often leaves no room for quiet moments to be spent reading a good book.

2. Methodology and participants

Our research implied a questionnaire-based inquiry applied to three different sample groups of students from "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, at the end of the 2013-2014 academic year. A total number of 66 second-year students participated in the study. In order to make our findings more relevant, we have tried to apply the questionnaire to a group of students from the

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[2] http://classiclit.about.com/od/Experience_literature/a/The-Shell-And-The-Book_2.htm, accessed July 11th, 2014.
[3] http://www.buzzle.com/articles/importance-of-literature.html, accessed July 11th, 2014.
[4] Boghian, I. (2012) The Didactics of English Literature from the Perspective of Student-Centered Strategies. *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics*. 16 (1), p. 32.

real profile, a group of students from the human profile, as well as a group of students already involved in the work field. The group of students who work also covers a different age range, respectively 19-40 years of age, compared to the 19-20 of the students from the other two groups. We have also tried to approach groups differing in terms of their curriculum disciplines, respectively curricula including one or several disciplines related to the domain of literature and curricula including no disciplines related to the domain of literature.

The three different groups of students, who participated in this study by anonymously answering the questionnaire, are characterized by the following features:

- 1st group: 22 second-year students, aged 19-20, from the human profile, the Faculty of Letters, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, studying modern languages (their curriculum also including at least two disciplines per semester from the domains of English, French and Romanian literature, with diachronic and synchronic perspectives);

- 2nd group: 12 second-year students, aged 19-20, from the real profile, the Faculty of Sciences, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, studying disciplines related to the domains of biology and ecology (their curriculum including no disciplines related to literature);

- 3rd group: 32 second-year students, aged 19-40, from the specialization the Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education, the Faculty of Sciences, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău. The students in this group have a certain amount of work experience as pre-school and primary school teachers (between 1 and 20 years of work experience). They are studying to qualify for the profession of pre-school and primary school teachers. Their curriculum includes only the discipline of Literature for Children.

The questionnaire included 10 open-ended items, focusing on such aspects as: the number of hours spent reading literature per week; reasons for reading; values promoted by literature; time spent at work and time spent reading; society's need for literature.

In this section of our paper, we shall present the questionnaire items and the students' answers, highlighting the particularities of the three sample groups involved in the study. Table 1 below shows the questionnaire items and the students' answers. For items 4, 5, 6 and 9 we have expressed the students' answers numerically instead of in percents because some answers contained several reasons placed on the same positions, separated by commas. From all the 66 answers to each of the items 4, 5, 6 and 9, some of them took, for example for Item 4, the following form: 1. Pleasure and relaxation; improve vocabulary; 2. Confirm personal values; 3. Personal development, because they are part of the curriculum. Therefore, we have included in

the table the reasons highlighted at least 2 times and we have split the answers of the type mentioned above. We have counted them according to the categories of answers most frequently identified: for the example, we have counted pleasure and relaxation at the "pleasure and relaxation" category of reasons, and improve vocabulary (from the same answer) at the "vocabulary and general knowledge" category of reasons. For the other items, which required no hierarchization of views, we have presented the results as percentages. For example, for Item 1, 10 students out of 22, which means 45.45%, answered that they spend 5-6 hours a week reading literature.

Table 1. The students' answers to the questionnaire

	Item	1st group – human profile; 19-20 years of age; + literature related disciplines		2nd group – real profile; 19-20 years of age; - literature related disciplines		3rd group – real profile; 19-40 years of age; work experience; + literature related disciplines	
1	How many hours a week do you spend reading literary works (novels, poems, drama)?	*hrs/week*	*% of sts*	*hrs/week*	*% of sts*	*hrs/week*	*% of sts*
		5-6	45.45 %	0	50%	0	62.5%
		7-10	9.09%	1-2	33.33%	1	12.5%
		10-15	22.72%	4	16.66%	4-5	12.5%
		15-20	22.72%	-	-	7-10	12.5%
2	How many hours a week do you spend using/accesing information via the new information technologies?	**hrs/week**	**% of sts**	**hrs/week**	**% of sts**	**hrs/week**	**% of sts**
		3-4	36.36%	3-4	16.66%	2-5	18.75%
		20-30	45.45%	10-15	50%	6-10	37.5%
		45	9.09%	20	16.66%	15-16	18.75%
		84	9.09%	30	16.66%	20-25	25%
3	Do you prefer reading the full novel or reading plot summaries of the novel?		*% of sts*		*% of sts*		*% of sts*
		full work	36.36%	full work	83.33%	full work	87.5%
		about the work	0	about the work	16.66%	about the work	6.25%
		both	63.63%	both	-	both	6.25%
4	Why do you read literary works? (give at least 3 reasons in	**reason**	**no. of answers**	**reason**	**no. of answers**	**reason**	**no. of answers**
		because they are part of the	20	-	-	pleasure and relaxation	32

	order of relevance)	curriculum					
		pleasure and relaxation	18	pleasure and relaxation	14	vocabulary and general knowledge	28
		vocabulary and general knowledge	12	vocabulary and general knowledge	14	because they are part of the curriculum	12
		confirm personal values and personal development	12	confirm personal values and personal development	2	confirm personal values and personal development	4
5	What are the reasons which hinder you from reading? (give at least 3 reasons in order of relevance)	**reason**	**no. of answers**	**reason**	**no. of answers**	**reason**	**no. of answers**
		lack of time	24	lack of time	8	lack of time	32
		other activities (studying, work)	22	other ways to relax	6	other ways to relax	28
		Facebook, blogging	6	other activities (studying, work)	4	-	-
		certain books are not available	4	certain books are not available	4	certain books are not available	14
6	What are, according to you, the values that reading literary works promotes?	**values**	**no. of answers**	**values**	**no. of answers**	**values**	**no. of answers**
		moral (honesty, modesty, strength of character, truth)	14	-	-	moral (honesty, modesty, truth, empathy, wisdom, tolerance)	32
		cultural	14	cultural	10	cultural	32
		religious	2	-	-	aesthetic	4
7	Does work affect your time for reading?		**% of answers**	**yes/no**	**% of answers**	**yes/no**	**% of answers**
		yes	100%	yes	100%	yes	100%
		no	-	no	-	no	-
8	According to you, what is	**opinion**	**% of answers**	**opinion**	**% of answers**	**opinion**	**% of answers**

	the future of literature?	positive	18.18%	positive	0%	positive	0%
		negative	72.72%	negative	83.33%	negative	56.25%
		in-between	9.09%	in-between	16.66%	in-between	43.75%
9	Identify at least 3 factors which drive society away from reading literature?	**factors**	**no. of answers**	**factors**	**no. of answers**	**factors**	**no. of answers**
		promotion of non-values by the media	14	promotion of non-values by the media	8	socio-economic factors (lack of education, poverty)	22
		Internet, communication technology	10	socio-economic factors (lack of education, poverty)	8	lack of time	18
		lack of time	4	lack of time	6	Internet, communication technology	14
		socio-economic factors (lack of education, poverty)	4	Internet, communication technology	4	promotion of non-values by the media	2
10	Do we/ does society need literature?	YES	100% of students	YES	100% of students	YES	100% of students

3. Results and discussions

The first aspect revealed by our research is the large percentage of students associated with a very small number of hours (or zero hours) dedicated to reading per week, for all the three groups (Item 1: 45%, 50% and, respectively 62%). We can also notice that those who give no time to reading are the students from the real profile and those who also work. Regarding Item 2, the answers reveal not only a large percentage of students, from all the three groups, associated with a large number of hours spent accessing information via the new information technologies, but also the fact that the 1st group mentioned the highest number of hours (20-30) spent in this way per week, double compared to the students in the 2nd group (10-15) and triple compared to those

in the third group (6-10). Regarding Item 3, the students who have literature classes in their curriculum prefer to read both the full work and about the work (63.36%). The main reason highlighted by the students is that they are required to relate to criticism about the respective work for their seminars and examinations. The other groups usually read only the full work: 83.33% for those in the 2nd group, respectively 87.5% for those in the 3rd group.

Item 4 has revealed something interesting: all the three groups read literature for the same reasons. For items 4 and 5, although the students were required to give at least 3 reasons for the respective answers, we have included in the table 4 categories of answers, due to their frequency. For item no. 4, we have included in the table the reasons mentioned most frequently by the students. The reason "because they are part of the curriculum" occurs not only most frequently, but also as a 1st rank reason for reading a book of fiction with the 1st group of students. If we exclude the variable "$\pm$ disciplines related to the domain of literature included in the curriculum", the students' answers reveal the fact that the main reason we read literature is for pleasure and relaxation, usually on the same place or closely followed by the reason "to build vocabulary and general knowledge". We may also notice a close connection between the number of disciplines related to the domain of literature included in the curriculum and the relevance of this reason for reading: the 1st group, studying at least two disciplines per semester from the domains of English, French and Romanian literature, has mentioned this reason as the most important, whereas the 3rd group, studying only the discipline of Literature for Children, has mentioned this reason on the third position in the hierarchy of relevance.

The answers to Item 5 have clearly confirmed our hypothesis: the main factor driving us away from reading is lack of time. But, whereas the students from the 1st group have placed on the second position the reason "other activities, such as studying or working", those from the 2nd and 3rd group have mentioned on the second position the reason "other times to relax". All the three groups also mentioned the fact that certain books, which they would like to read, are not available at the library or even when available on the market, are sometimes too expensive.

Whereas the students from the real profile identify no moral values promoted by the literature, those from the 1st and 3rd groups place the moral and cultural values promoted by literature on equal, first positions (Item 6). It is interesting that both of these groups have mentioned similar values: modesty, truth, honesty. But, those from the 3rd group have also mentioned some additional moral values: wisdom, empathy, tolerance. Could this be due to the fact that we learn and acquire the meaning of these values as we advance with age?

The answers from Item 7 is also supportive of our hypothesis: all the students who participated in this research answered, in unanimity, that work keeps them away from reading literature.

The answers from Item 8 are worrying: there is a large percentage of students looking at the future of literature from a pessimistic, negative approach: 66.66 % from all the 66 students included in this research said that the future of literature is "gloomy", due to such reasons as those identified for Item 9: promotion of non-values by the media, socio-economic factors (defined as lack of education and poverty), the Internet and communication technologies and lack of time (again!). Comparing the views of the three groups, we may notice that whereas the 2nd group had the highest percentage of a negative, pessimistic view upon the future of literature (83.33%), those from the 1st group a percentage of 72.72%, those from the 3rd group had the lowest percentage of pessimistic, negative view upon the future of literature (56.25%). But, those from the 3rd group also had the highest percentage of "in-between" views regarding the future of literature (43.75%), meaning that they believed in the "salvation" of literature only under certain circumstances and conditions, such as: proper education at home and at school in favour of reading, a change in the promotion of values by the media, the replacement of traditional libraries by online libraries. The 2nd and 3rd groups highlighted no clear positive, optimistic view upon the future of literature, only 18.18% of the students from the 1st group falling into this category. At the level of the entire group of 66 students involved in the research, only 6.06% expressed an optimistic, positive view regarding the future of literature.

For Item 10, all (100% of) the students answered by a definite "yes", written by some of the respondents in capital letters and followed, in some other cases, by several exclamation marks. Some of the most illustrative answers were: "Definitely yes!"; "Of course, yes!"; "Yes, normally!"

Conclusions and further research

Although our research was a small-scale one, with only 66 students answering the questionnaire, we believe that it enables the formulation of certain conclusions. The conclusions themselves may constitute starting points for further research.

Our hypothesis has been confirmed: the greatest enemy of literature is, nowadays, lack of time. Lack of time is the result of working schedule, other activities and responsibilities, as well as the tiredness at the end of the day. The Internet and the new information technologies also play a relevant role in estranging people from reading fiction. The studies we attend also play a

significant part in what and how much we read: students with disciplines related to the domain of literature in their curriculum tend to engage more in reading literature, because of the additional extrinsic motivation translated as the need to perform well during seminars and examinations.

All the three groups mentioned, for Item 5, the fact that certain books, which they would like to read, are not available at the library or even when available on the market, are sometimes too expensive. This aspect may be correlated with the socio-economic factors identified among the factors driving society away from literature in the answers for Item 9. It is also interesting to notice the fact that although only the 1st group mentioned Facebook and blogging as activities distracting them from reading, in other words, the use of the new information technologies, all the three groups mentioned the Internet and the new communication technologies as factors driving society away from literature. In other words, we are aware that the Internet and the new communication technologies drive us away from reading literature, but why do we chose to avoid saying something like: Yes, I admit that the Internet and the new communication technologies drive me away from reading literature? and prefer to say, instead: Yes, the Internet and the new communication technologies drive society away from reading literature? This interesting aspect may constitute the object of a future research.

The fact that many of the students identified lack of time as the major factor with a negative impact upon the time dedicated to reading does not leave too much hope. We know that working hours now range theoretically and legally between 8-9 a day. But, we also know that, nowadays, few people have the advantage of working only 8-9 hours a day, with performance standards at work forever increasing. Also, for certain employees (especially from the private sector) a certain amount of overtime is not an option but an unwritten compulsory work duty. However, the definite, unanimous "yes" given in response to the question of whether we need literature or not in our lives, brings hope and invites to future research on how we could bring people (and implicitly society) and literature closer, in an ever changing and ever demanding world.

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