

**Bonnie Dowd**

**Hand-Out**

**For use as part of an exploration of the purpose of studying literature.**

**English Literature Personal Statement Excerpt**

**The following is a collection of excerpts taken from a personal statement written by a student applying to universities in the UK. The full statement, if you are interested, can be found at**

**[http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Personal\\_Statement:English\\_Literature\\_1](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Personal_Statement:English_Literature_1)**

Literature unites everything that I find exhilarating about life, and most of my spare time is taken up with reading. To me, literature and the written word is mankind's greatest achievement, which is why I am determined to dedicate my life to its study. I am not content with simply reading a text, as I have a hunger to learn everything I can about what I read - how it was written; why it was written; what it means; its place in literature as a whole.

I read a catholic range of literature. I particularly enjoy Romantic poetry, as I find it to be an intriguing example of how literature can be used to make a stand against society's established codes, as poets rebelled against previous literary traditions and, contrary to the doctrines of neo-classical literature, focused on emotions and on the individual. Another example of such a rebellion, and another area of fascination to me, is the dystopian novel of the twentieth century.

I see literature as both a cause and an effect of history, and so I study history in order to fully appreciate the context of a piece of writing. I find it fascinating how one's knowledge of a historical period can alter one's interpretation of a text. Also, I believe that the study of art can contribute to one's understanding of literary background, for example in the way that Blake's paintings can give an insight into his mind, and thus his poetry. I find that my study of math is useful as it contributes to my logical and analytical skills, which are vital for the critical appraisal of literature.

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**Excerpt of The Interaction of Language and Learning**

**Steinhardt School at NYU**

**Source:** [steinhardt.nyu.edu/teachlearn/english/bs](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/teachlearn/english/bs)

Language is our most important tool for spoken and written communication, but it is much more than that. Through language, we develop our sense of tradition and our social, ethical and moral concerns. Reading a novel, poem, or play, we experience, understand, and express feelings ranging from joy to sadness, from love to alienation. Language that is sensitively and intelligently shaped can help us to learn who we are and who others are. The teaching of language and literature offers exceptional opportunities and personal rewards

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**Excerpt of Mission Statement from Richard Stockton College on the Teaching of Literature**

**Source:** [richardstockton/litmission@stockton.edu](mailto:richardstockton/litmission@stockton.edu)

These are challenging days for those who teach literature and for those who study it. The old justifications don't seem terribly relevant and the new directions are clouded and unclear.

We used to say that we should study literature because it made us more human, because it taught us about past lives and, if we thought long and hard about our texts, because it could show us how we might live our lives. The 20th century confronted us with individuals who, knowing the best literature and knowing the best art, did such memorable destruction to body and soul that they will never be forgotten or forgiven.

The future seems to promise much — learning with many media, ubiquitous textualities with wondrous content, knowledge stored, archived, and available at the slightest touch, art once only available to the few now everywhere visible — but we suspect there is more technique than content, more knowledge than wisdom.

What, then, are we to believe, what goodness to search for, what connections should we make?

The Literature faculty at Richard Stockton College continue to believe and to exemplify in our classrooms, the proposition that we can have both the past and the future. We sense that what is happening to texts and textualities is deeply important, that something profoundly new and exciting is occurring; but we also sense that living in that future will be a small and petty thing without clear connections to past lives. This is not the first time that humans have confronted incredible change and, at the same time, had their past values threatened and mocked. It will not be the last.

We realize that out of these questions can come profound answers, that out of present doubts can come certainties, that out of profound change can arise profound insights.

Our mission, then, is to continue to insist that those lives so exposed in past writings are essential to a full understanding of our existence. At the same time, we believe that studying literature is a means to prepare us for the future that is sweeping down on us.

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## **Reading and Literature**

**Excerpt from an essay by Ian Mckeon which discusses the study of British literature in particular. The full essay can be found at <http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/studying.html>**

When we dip into the rich variety of novels, poems, and plays which constitute English Literature we are reading works which have lasted for generations, or centuries, and they have lasted because they are good. These works say something worth saying, and say it with artistry strong enough to survive while lesser works drop into obscurity.

Literature is part of our cultural heritage which is freely available to everyone, and which can enrich our lives in all kinds of ways. Once we have broken the barriers that make studying literature seem daunting, we find that literary works can be entertaining, beautiful, funny, or tragic. They can convey profundity of thought, richness of emotion, and insight into character. They take us beyond our limited experience of life to show us the lives of other people at other times. They stir us intellectually and emotionally, and deepen our understanding of our history, our society, and our own individual lives.

Literature can enrich our experience in other ways too. London, for example, is all the more interesting a city when behind what we see today we see the London known to Dickens, Boswell and Johnson, or Shakespeare. And our feeling for nature can be deepened when a landscape calls to mind images from, say, Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, or Ted Hughes.

Good works of literature are not museum pieces, preserved and studied only for historical interest. They last because they remain fresh, transcending as well as embodying the era in which they were written. Each reader reading each work is a new and unique event and the works speak to us now, telling us truths about human life which are relevant to all times.

We can gain a lot from literature in many ways, but the most rewarding experiences can come in those moments when we feel the author has communicated something personally to us, one individual to another. Such moments can help validate our personal experience at a depth which is rarely reached by everyday life or the mass media.

