**Language:** Through language we can transmit really complicated thoughts to one another. These thoughts and ideas can be transmitted across vast reaches of space and time. We are able to transmit knowledge across minds.

Through language, one can put a bizarre new idea in the listener’s mind. So, for instance, if one were to say, ‘Imagine a jellyfish waltzing in a library while thinking about quantum mechanics!’

Now if everything has gone relatively well in your life so far, you probably have not had that thought before. But now that you have listened about it, you might have been tempted to think it through language.

Now, of course, there is not just one language in the world, there are about 7000 languages spoken in the world.

And all the languages differ from one another in all kinds of ways. Some languages have different sounds, different vocabularies, and they also have different structure.

And this begs the question: ‘Does the language we speak shape the way we think?’ This is an ancient/historical question that has been around for a long, long time now. People have been speculating about this forever.

Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor, said, ‘To have a second language is to have a second soul’. Now this bespeaks of a strong statement that language crafts/shapes reality.

However, you also have Shakespeare whose character Juliet (from *Romeo and Juliet*) says, ‘What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet’. And this may suggest that maybe language does not craft reality.

But if we look closely, languages of course are living things, things that we can hone and change to suit our needs. And therefore, it gives you the opportunity to ask, ‘Why do I think the way I do?’

‘How could I think differently?’ And also, ‘what thoughts do I wish to create’.

Language is one of our most nuanced and powerful tools. The relationship between language and society is basically reciprocal since there are certain ways in which language works in society and similarly society governs in a sense the use of language.

The way to look at literature is to look at it as an instrument that sensitises us to different things. We all know that if five different people are asked to describe one scene, they will all describe it differently.

Some may describe the light, others may focus on what people’s feet were doing, others may look at the material, shape of the room or the setting. A great writer picks up on those things that matter.

It is almost like their radar is attuned to the most significant moments. What literature is about is a record of people with very sophisticated radars who are picking up on the really sophisticated stuff.

The interesting thing is that for us that radar is not something that we should simply passively accept while we read the book. It is something that we should learn from. The intelligence giving power of great literature is that we are sensitized by the books we read.

And the more books we read, and the deeper their lessons sink into us, the more pairs of glasses we have and those glasses will enable us to see things that we would otherwise have missed.

**‘What is Literature for?’ – Allain de Botton**

Allain de Botton begins with a very fundamental question regarding the utility of literature in today’s world. One of the corollaries to this is also ‘Why should we spend our time reading novels or poems when out there, big things are going on’?

Botton then moves on enumerate the various advantages, benefits, and virtues of reading literature such as:

**1 It saves time:** At the very outset, it appears as if reading literature is a huge waste of time.

But if you come to think of it, it gives us access to a staggering range of emotions, ideas, thoughts, opinions, feelings, perspectives, and events that otherwise would take us years, decades or even a lifetime to try to experience directly.

Botton calls it ‘a reality simulator’, a machine that puts you through infinitely more situations and circumstances than you could ever directly witness.

It safely allows us from the comfort zone of our reading room to see what it is like to get divorced or kill someone and feel remorseful or to quit your job and take off to the desert or make a terrible mistake while leading your country.

In other words, what we are basically hinting at is the fact that literature permits us to speed up time in order to see the arc or trajectory of a life from childhood to old age. It also introduces us to various settings or mise en scènes such as palaces, countless bedrooms so that one is constantly tempted to compare or assess one’s life in relation to that of others.

Similarly, reading literature can open an entirely unexplored world of fascinating characters: it could be Roman general, an 11th century French princess, a Russian upper-class mother embarking on an affair.

It takes you across continents and centuries thereby curing us of provincialism and almost at no cost, it turns us into citizens of the world.

**2 It makes you nicer:** It basically allows us to look at a particular situation from someone else’s point of view. It pushes us to consider the consequences of our actions on others in a way that we otherwise would not.

It also provides us with vivid and arresting examples of kindly, generous, and sympathetic people. More often than not, literature stands in opposition to the dominant value system, the one that usually rewards money and power.

Writers are thus on the other side, as it were, and they make us sympathetic to ideas and feelings that are of deep importance but that cannot afford airtime in a commercialised, status-conscious and cynical world.

**3 It is a cure for loneliness:** Many of us are more socially maladjusted than we actually care to admit. We often face difficulties when trying to say what is really on our minds. But in books, we find descriptions of who we genuinely are and what events are actually like.

That is, there is an unfiltered/uncensored/honest description which is qualitatively different from what ordinary conversations allow for. In the best books, it appears as though the writer knows us better than we know ourselves.

Because of their extraordinary capacity to communicate with words, writers find a way to describe the fragile, bizarre, and unique experiences of our inner lives.

It could be anything ranging from the light on a summer morning to the anxiety that we felt at the gathering, the sensations of a first date, the envy or admiration (as the case maybe) when a friend told us of their new business.

The sense of nostalgia or desire that we felt looking at the profile of another passenger we never dare to speak to.

Writers open our hearts and minds and provide us maps to our own selves so that we can travel in them more reliably and less with a feeling of paranoia and persecution.

As the famous 19th century American essayist Emerson rightly observes, ‘In the works of great writers, we find our own neglected thoughts’. Literature, in that sense, is a corrective or solution to the superficiality and compromises of friendship.

Books are our true friends, always available, never too demanding, and giving us unadorned accounts of what things are really like

**4 It prepares you for failure:**

Throughout our lives, one of our most haunting fears is that of failing or being what is otherwise fashionably labelled as a ‘loser’. At an ordinary, everyday level, the media takes us into stories of failure.

And even though a lot of literature too is also concerned with failure, that is, in one way or another, a great many novels, plays, and poems are about people who have ‘messed up’, people who committed a crime with no premeditated intent, who let down their partner or who died after running up some debts on shopping sprees.

If the media got to them, they would undoubtedly make an example out of them and crucify them. But the fascinating thing about books is that they do not judge as harshly or as one-dimensionally as the media.

They evoke pity for the hero and fear for ourselves based on a new sense of how near we all are to destroying our own lives.

The question that arises here could be summarised thus: That if literature can really do all of the above, then should we not be treating it a bit differently to the way we do now?

We often look at it as a distraction or an entertainment (something for the beach perhaps). But its utility value exceeds far beyond that since for all intents and purposes, it is really a kind of therapy in the broad sense.

We could train ourselves to treat it as doctors treat their medicines, something we prescribe in response to a range of ailments and classify according to the problems it might best be suited to addressing.

But above all, it deserves its prestige because of the fact that it’s a tool to help us live and die with a little more wisdom, goodness, and sanity.