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Litvanya Konferans Konuşması

What is the impact of literature on people's comprehension of democracy?

In a world of turmoil caused by cultural and idealistic differences, only a few means have the power to bring people together no matter their background or way of living; one of which is literature. As Honoré de Balzac said, "Reading brings us unknown friends.". While reading, all differences between readers disappear and they all become one; books lead them to unite in the desire of understanding the meaning of the written words. This is why literature is an essential factor in the teaching of democracy.

The definition of democracy in the dictionary is as stated: "the belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief".

The importance of equality and freedom is first taught to a person in school: with the guidance of teachers and the books they assign to them.

These books consist of well-known works such as 'Pinocchio' or 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' or 'Tales from the Brothers Grimm' and so on... In some years, the books assigned by teachers transform into titles such as "Animal Farm" and "Fahrenheit 451" and "To Kill A Mockingbird" in high school just to name a few. I'm sure these titles sound very familiar to all of you.

These so-called 'classics', are read by students of a similar age all over the world, which allows them to take place in what we call "globalization". Also, many of these "classics" stay around for a long time and the reason why is perfectly summarized in a quote by Italo Calvino: "A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.". The reason why some books become immortalized is that their message is still relevant, or in some cases, still not resolved in the 21st century.

Students reading the same books doesn't mean that they will have the same opinions on everything. As Edmund Wilson said; "No two persons ever read the same book." After having read these books, students compare their knowledge, criticize the subject, and synthesize their thoughts which makes the outcome diverse for each reader. For example, a student, having read and liked a book from Russian literature will have a different point of view from a student who likes to read Greek scriptures and plays.

Democracy is directly connected to this notion, as for a democracy to take form, oppositions are needed. Only people who think differently but who try to understand each other and reach a compromise, can form a healthy democracy. Consequently, literature and literacy are vital for the public to be able to understand themselves and this way, sustain a functioning democracy.

I would like to end this speech by quoting Ursula K. LeGuin: "We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel... is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become."