

PLEASURES OF READING (CSS-2011)

OUTLINE:

1. The common factor in most reading is escapism.
2. This factor lasts even into later life.
3. Humorous novels are quite amusing and relaxing.
4. Most educated people have a balanced reading diet.
5. People with interest in politics crave for a historical perspective.
6. The classics provide the best comprehensive source of pleasures.
7. Poetry – a great source of pleasure.
8. Fiction – the most entertaining form of reading.
9. Conclusions.

Reading is a welcome escape from the dullness of daily routine. It is an excellent recreation which rich and poor alike can afford as most books are not very costly. Moreover, in these days the large number of public libraries makes reading cheaper and easier than ever before. A man who has developed a taste for reading asks nothing more of life if, besides the means of physical well-being, he is provided with books and the leisure to read them. Mathematics, scientific theories, doctrines of philosophy and religion are taxing to the brain. But the reading of newspapers, history, biography, accounts of travel and exploration, drama, verse and above all, fiction, is a source of keen delight. Millions of men and women nowadays find a delight in reading.

The quantity and variety of reading material available to us are really enormous. There are books of all kinds books discussing topical matters, books on sex and marriage, books on health and hygiene and books on personalities of the times, as well as purely literary books including drama, poetry and prose fiction. The variety and number of magazines and periodicals are equally amazing. Story magazines, picture magazines, film journals, literary periodicals, magazines on fashions in dress, political magazines ----- there is no end to them. Each of these types has its admiring readers who would rather miss a meal than their favourite weekly, fortnightly or monthly.

Let us analyse the cause of the pleasure which results from reading the printed matter that we buy from the book-stalls or borrow from the libraries. The common factor in most reading is that one can pick up a book of his choice and escape from the humdrum into a new world of excitement, sometimes identifying with the hero or the heroine. Girls tend to favour school stories with a touch of romanticism and later, magazine romances and romantic novels, taste for the latter often lasting well into adult life.

The attraction of escapism, modified of course by experience, lasts into later life. Most adults enjoy a detective story for relaxation. The murder or crime concerned is rarely dealt with psychologically. It is merely the peg on which to hang the clues leading to the final solution. The best of such stories also develop character to some extent and reflect the social background of the years in which the novel is set. Thus, the pleasure of reading, says Agatha Christie, is partly nostalgia and partly mental exercise. Emotion plays a negligible part.

Another genre of books written for pleasure and relaxation is the humorous novel, represented by P G Wodehouse, Mark Twain and Stephen Leacock. Here, the amusement lies in comedy of situation, turn of phrase, and very clever plotting. Again, they are period pieces, in the case of Wodehouse evocative of the idle young rich of the 30s, and entirely

without social comment. Humour draws the sting from inequality.

Then books are read for pleasure, relaxation and a good laugh. However, most educated people have a balanced reading diet which develops over the years as a result of specialization in one subject or another. Most of us have developed a general interest in politics and current events, and in democratic countries these are well covered in the responsible press and in specialized ranging from agriculture to car maintenance. In these contexts, the pleasure of reading is derived from interest in the subject.

Interest in politics and current events leads to the development of a historical perspective, and hence interest in the past. This is well catered for in an immense body of historical and biographical literature. Social history is necessary to the understanding of current trends. Historical romances often provide a good read, and the best of them are very informative about the events of past times.

However, the classics provide the best all-round sources of pleasure. It is one thing to have to study texts for one's A or O Levels. That can be hard work. It is quite another to read them for pleasure in later life. They offer a more sophisticated source of interest than can be obtained from any other genre; development of character, social and political comment, action and reflection, humour, pathos, sometimes tragedy. The appeal of poetry should not be ignored. The best of it requires the ultimate in the command of language.

Poetry can provide the richest satisfaction of all. It is the purest form of literature and its rhythm, melody and music give it an additional charm. The lyrical flights of Shelley, the sensuousness of Keats, the lavish and colourful imagery of Tennyson, imaginative intensity of Coleridge, the beautiful description of nature by Wordsworth ----- all these enchant the reader. The very diction of poets like Rossetti, Bridges, and Arnold has great appeal. The readers of Urdu poetry are not less fortunate in this respect. There is a great treasure of rich and fascinating poetry in Urdu. Look at Ghalib! Who can match the flight of his imagination! Then there are Iqbal, Faiz, Meer, Akhtar Shirani, Majeed Amjad. Fraz and many others. The beauty of "Ghazal" form is a joy forever.

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The designation 'novel' covers a very wide spectrum of literature. It comprises the classic works of fiction of all countries. By definition, a novel is a prose piece of over 60,000 words. Many are much longer. Anything shorter is a 'novella'; if much shorter, a short story. The genre grew up independently in many countries, particularly those of Europe.

Fiction of course is not limited to the classics, which form a relatively small part of it, for at least three centuries the bookshops have always been full of the more ephemeral kinds of prose; the American 'block-buster', the J Arthur Clarke type of space fiction, the ghost story, the detective 'who dunnit?', the story, the war story. The list is endless.

It is quite possible to become 'hooked' on novel reading and this has two dangers. To read novels when you should be doing something else, eg study, or practical chores, is indeed a waste of time. And it is never courteous to have one's nose in a novel when visitors arrive! Secondly, there are some people who find in a novel a means of escape from reality. This has other dangers. Too much relapse into fantasy may destroy one's ability to face facts.

If reading novels can be a waste of time, reading bad novels is always a waste of time and can be positively harmful. A really bad novel is not easy to define, but for anybody with intellect it has some, or even all of the following features: unreality in characterization and

situation, poor construction, concentration on sex and violence for the sake of it, bad sentence construction, a boring approach, expletives and bad language generally a biased attitude to people, situations and issues and stereotyping of characters.

That said, to read anything is arguably better than read nothing, or sinking out the bottom line, mindless television watching. At least the capacity to read demonstrates that one is literate. In Britain today, there is an alarming number of school-leavers from the state system who can neither read nor write.

The case for reading the classics need hardly be made. Their characters live, and are of their time. Descriptions of town and country engross the reader. Stories and therefore plots, seem to grow out of the characters. Often, great national events, wars and revolutions provide the background, but are integral at the same time. Characters and great events affect each other. The same process is seen in the good political, maritime or war story. The classical novel provides a window on another world; good contemporary novels offer new insights into our own world. The reader will inevitably gain in knowledge and understanding from this class of literature. Such reading supplies valuable background material for other studies; history, sociology, politics, psychology and economics.

However, life is not all self-improvement, or shouldn't be. Reading for pure relaxation can do the reader nothing but good. The poor, ugly girl may find a therapeutic escape in a romantic novel. Just such a person as she is may be picked up by a dark, handsome, rich, even aristocratic stranger and transported into new worlds of delight. Why not? It will never happen, but there is no harm in dreaming. And there is the comfortable, stately world of the 'country house murder', where death is relatively bloodless, and the culprit turns out to be the colonel, the butler, or a rogue vicar. Pitting one's wits against the author's is a good form of relaxation. So, to the English reader, are the novels of P G Wodehouse, which open windows on the life of the idle rich in England in the 20s, contain absolutely no social comment on the rigid class system of the time, are brilliantly constructed, and contain laughs on every page. Therefore, no sane person could say that reading novels is a waste of time.

The world wide popularity of novels tends to support this view. It is interesting that the spread of television has had little or no effect on the sale of books and that the use of lending libraries is as great as ever. Admittedly most of the books borrowed are novels of one sort or another. In a descending order of popularity they are love stories, crime thrillers and spy novels, space fiction, historical novels, biographies and classical literature. Though related to life, and sometimes dealing with its harsh realities, novels feed the human imagination. They allow us to escape from a life which may be humdrum or unpleasant, and live for a time in a world of imagination. So novels are escapist, but is escapism necessarily wrong? The novel transports the reader to another world, gives heightened emotion to those who lack excitement, and tranquility to those whose lives are too busy and active. Good novels of whatever description have a beneficial effect on the reader. After all, because one may live in a dream world for a time it does not follow that this will have any adverse effect on a person's approach to real life. Quite the opposite may well be the case. Wisdom can be gained in living other people's lives vicariously through books and mistakes avoided. People read for all kinds of reasons, and all kinds of people are readers. For many, reading the classics is their best form of relaxation. For some, the motive is intellectual stimulation, and for these the most popular categories are history, biography, philosophy and theology, sociology, archeology and anthropology. There is in addition a whole range of books special to the interests of the individual, ranging from the professions to every sporting and leisure activity imaginable. These promote interest and increase knowledge, so can hardly be described as "escapist", though taking the reading public as a whole it has to

be said that serious and factual books cater for the minority.

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The great variety of reading matter makes it possible for men of all tastes and temperaments to draw pleasure from it. For the serious and reflective types of readers, there is plenty of tragic and sentimental literature. For those of lively temperaments, there is a rich store of comedies, amusing episodes, witty dialogues, humorous skits and tit*bits. For those more interested in actual life there are countless biographies, autobiographies, histories and daily newspapers. Indeed, the pleasure of reading should not be missed by any educated person. Everyone ought to cultivate the reading habit. Reading lifts us out of our personal circumstances. We can forget our private worries and anxieties, fears and responsibilities while reading an interesting book. Not only that. Reading adds to our knowledge, and the feeling that our knowledge has increased and our understanding of life become deeper affords us a keen pleasure. Whether we are journeying by train, or we are sitting in a park, or we are at home, reading is an excellent recreation.

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