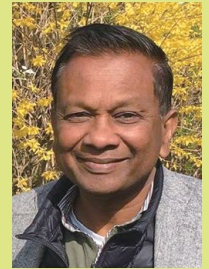


The Power of Literature



Author Mukesh Williams

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There are those who read literature and those who do not read literature, and the two are different categories. Not everyone reads literature. When you read literature slowly, you become conscious of the way language moves, the way it constructs a world through a sentence, and the way a consciousness expresses itself. The word literary implies the way language creates reality or communicates an experience. About a decade ago Terry Eagleton warned us that the art of “slow reading” was in danger of vanishing. I wonder what he would say now. Nietzsche, who first drew our attention to slow reading, called it a dying art. In our world of fast reading few will enjoy the flow of language, the turn of a phrase, and dwell upon an utterance. Writers have always been involved in creating a parallel universe and at times revealing the shadows of a new universe. Great events in history have shaped the way we construct reality. The way this reality is perceived shapes the writing of literature. An organic connection of literary texts with each other and the centuries they are

produced in creates our literary inheritance. They encapsulate time and determine the quality of life.

The Power of Literature

Everything has power. Literature too has power. It has the power to free us from bondage, help us to enter the skin of civilizations, and create a parallel world of aesthetic pleasure and significance. Literature may arise from many social factors, but the literary text must interact with the reader in profound ways to release meaning. Literary criticism must recognize the interaction of the text with the reader and not spin a story to claim its superiority. In his ideal state Plato did not allow literary texts to exist as he privileged philosophy over poetry. Aristotle reversed the equation and made poetry superior in value to philosophy. The poet was forced by the structure of the artwork to explain the inner logic of human actions to his readers.

Literature grows out of the inner urgencies of mankind. It comforts, cajoles, and castigates. It alters our consciousness. It is both cathartic and therapeutic. Even though the reality of literature is created through words, it makes us cry and cringe. We are shaken by its power. We are taken in by its emotions. The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge unraveled the art of poetic appreciation some 200 years ago in his *Biographia Literaria*. He wrote poems about fantastic themes such as cruel warriors, the cursed sea and witchcraft. Coleridge explained that if we wish to appreciate his works, we must willingly suspend our critical faculties and “disbelieve for the moment”. This, according to him, constituted a “poetic faith”. If we do not disbelieve, we cannot appreciate literature. Contrary to the general dislike for truth and morality in literature, reading literary texts will help develop ethical evaluation, balanced judgement, and aesthetic appreciation. We need a literary faith to believe in the unbelievable. When a person reads a literary text, he responds to emotions. Literature pulls us into its world through the power of words.

Literature interacts with the universe and transforms us. It connects people and centuries. The way we define and understand literature is always changing. Literature refers to the culture,

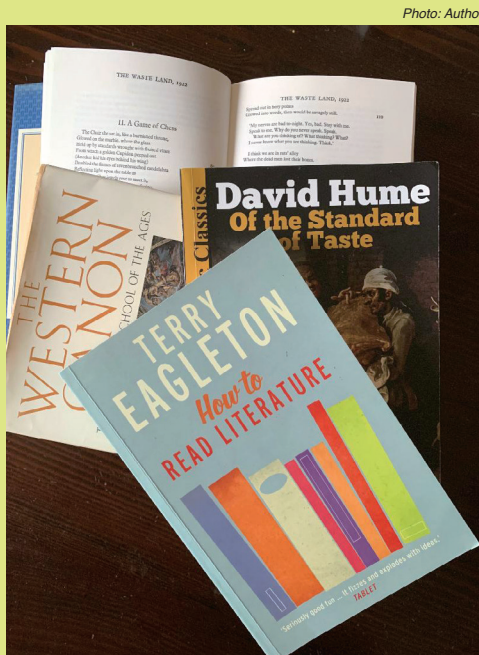


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Reading and understanding literature

tradition, and language of a distinct people. Literature is not just history and culture but an entry into a new world of experience. Eagleton points out in *The Event of Literature* (2012) that a literary work is both edifice and event; it can have abiding value. It can stand as an unchanging historical artifact and a linguistic device to enter history and transform its narrative. A literary work is always moving, always changing while we read. A literary work helps us enter into human experience and transform it. In his *Mimesis* (1946) Erich Auerbach developed a genealogical model of literary history based on figural representation and fulfillment. It is possible to see an organic connection between different genres of literature and different centuries, from epics and Homer to literary classics. Creating world literature or laying down standards to evaluate literature depends on the dominant cultural mood, the significant literary value, and the aesthetic temper of an age. A global writer possesses, either through the endorsement of literary scholars or promotion through the digital media, some popularity, locally and nationally, even before being globalized.

The Myth of the Cicadas

Literature renews the body and soul. The fire of emotion and the intensity of intellectual reflection creates good literature. The voice of human beings and the voice of literature echoes in cultures and escapes it to become immortal. A mature evaluation of a literary work is an essential part of reading. We assess a literary text based on analytic, descriptive, and evaluative aspects. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates admonishes young Phaedrus not to imitate the buzz of cicadas, but to pursue an intelligible dialogue to discover truth. Socrates narrates the story of the cicadas, who were once a happy breed of men. Though they sang and danced, they forgot to eat and perished. The Muses transformed them into insects who could sing without eating, drinking, or sleeping. After their death, they were expected to report to the Muses whether people honored the deities. Literature strives to be the cicada of celestial creation. The voice of literature often synchronizes with the voice of literary criticism, which reveals the eternal soul of literature. Sense should meet sensuality in literary criticism. Human logos can become divine music or dissolve into animal sound. The literary critic must judge and comment on the quality and character of a literary work.

Developing Character Through Literature

Mathew Arnold once said that English school students could develop character if they memorized 100 to 300 lines of good poetry. If literature circulates as the lifeblood of human consciousness, it will fire imagination and introduce a global conviviality that will transcend boundaries. Whether we enjoy or interpret literature, it possesses the power to connect the world and reduce the gap between self and others. The American literary critic Harold Bloom was sad that we

measure the value of literature by judging its contribution to social justice. We do not want to overhear ourselves in reading aloud, in observing changes in ourselves, in traversing seamless paths between life and death, between reality and artifice. We do not see poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" or as "emotions recollected in tranquility" (William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800). Today poetry is seen as an imperialist view of the world where ulterior motives and misdemeanors hide (Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978).

Representing the World Through Language

Literature has the power to represent the present, recall the past, and imagine the future for us. It studies human nature and reveals our joys and sorrows, our heroism, and our weaknesses. It allows us to enter the minds of characters and understand their motives. Through literature, we escape the real world and return to find meaning in it. Literary works reveal our inner lives and the lives of those we do not know at all. Plato's concept of literary imitation creates the idea of literature as a reflection of society. Gertrude Stein said that remarks are not literature. There is *omerta*, or an author's silence, in a text. The author and reader meet like Virgil and God but do not speak. Instead, the text speaks whether it is written, oral or digital. The Western novel traveling abroad through trade and colonialism reflects life and modern ideas of liberty, reason, and individuality. Writers of the modern novel use good storytelling techniques of symbolism, action, and point of view to capture the attention of the reader.

The Story of Literature

Literature evokes memories of a contrived past through images and symbols. History reconstructs the past using tools from literature such as rhetoric to tell a convincing story. Hayden White in *Figural Realism* (1999) brings out the artifice of history built on the rhetoric of a passionate story. History is so much an arrangement of facts. But how convincingly a historian narrates the past makes it plausible. If the actual event has no verifiable existence, then it exists in us as an emotional shadow. We cannot recall the past. The past is constantly being negotiated by the present. The dialectics of rationality and events tell us that reason cannot give rise to an event.

Literature draws us into its world. We get involved in the action of the story, the emotion of a poem and the intensity of a drama. Socrates brought up the idea that poetry stirs our emotions and Aristotle introduced the concept of mimesis, where a heightened use of language forces us to empathize with the characters.

Individual Consciousness at the Center

The individual occupies the most important position in modern

literature. Without him there is no storytelling. His consciousness and perception occupy literary writing. The individual has always been at the center of the modern novel. He is more interesting than society. His consciousness, perceptions and emotions are the main concerns of the modern novel. Literary modernism came into existence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Anglo-American world. It represented a self-critical and performing individualism distinct from traditional forms of writing about social stereotypes. The absurdity and destruction of the two great wars had a deep impact on modern writers who found different ways to represent them through words.

Literature has the power to represent the present, recall the past, and imagine the future for us. The way a story is told encapsulates the heart of literature. Stories do not just provide information; they put emotion into the information. The combination of emotion and information makes the message memorable. By creating characters, dialogue, image and symbols, stories give color and depth to ordinary details. They help the reader connect to their message. A story opens a window of opportunity to learn from the experience of another person. It can shape or challenge our opinions and values. When a story gives us pleasure, it catches our attention. A story opens a corridor of opportunity to learn and grow. It allows us to learn from the experience of another person. Literature studies human nature and reveals our joys and sorrows, our heroism, and weaknesses.

Literature Disturbs & Frightens Us

Literature both disturbs and frightens us. It signifies something other than itself, possessing a figural presence. In his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1781), Jacques Rousseau reveals that speech constitutes the original form of communication. It represents our “tones of voice, cries, lamentations”. Writing erases such passions. For Rousseau writing becomes a debased form of speech used in the absence of the speaker. The human cry, passion, and immediacy are invariably lost through linguistic representation as it substitutes, erases, and supplements the passion of inarticulate sound. Languages come into being, change, and die in response to “men’s needs.” In his essay *White Mythology* (1972), Jacques Derrida argues that philosophy creates metaphors when there is a “provisional loss of meaning”. The creation of an “inevitable detour” from the “literal” meaning creates an experience other than itself. The loss of linguistic meaning in a literary text frightens us as it erases the promise of a presence. Literature is metaphorical and figural in its articulation signifying something other than itself and therefore subject to change. It is not just an articulation of feeling but a selective articulation of feeling.

The Reading of Literary Texts

Reading is an individual enterprise. Great works of literature bring the “delicacy of imagination” and renew life (David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*, 1757/2013). The ideology of analyzing a text cannot take away the pleasure of reading. In an essay “The Heresy of Paraphrase” in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) Cleanth Brooks explains that it is not possible to paraphrase a poem and still retain its meaning. The paraphrase invariably misconceives the “function of metaphor and meter”. The meaning of a poem lies in its very form. Archibald McLeish expresses the same logic in “Ars Poetica”:

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

The metaphor and meter explain it all.

Literature as Culture

Different centuries understand literature differently, but literature refers to the culture, tradition, and language of a distinct people. It comes from the word *litteratura* which means “writing formed with letters”, and refers to works of poetry, fiction, and drama. Recently, the meaning of literature has expanded to include nonfiction, reportage, songs, kitchen diaries and spoken tales. Literature can be intellectually stimulating or emotionally pleasing. These two kinds of literature can be termed as highbrow and lowbrow. T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* would classify as highbrow, while Disney’s *Aladdin* would classify as lowbrow. Once highbrow literature was included within a literary canon. It is difficult to say if all written texts can qualify as literature. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors believe that anything “written” or “invented” from Mark Twain and Bob Dylan to the Winchester rifle and the telephone qualifies as part of the American literary canon (*A New Literary History of America*, 2009). This is rather hard to digest.

A Canon in Literature

Books explain that texts become classics and classics acquire the force of a canon. Many things go into making a classic – literary assumptions, consensus, representative values, and taste-forming groups. They force scholars to believe in their veracity. Ideological attacks on established literary standards or calls for their expansion are often connected to altered demography, professional survival, identity politics or a desire to create a tolerant world. Literary criticism which should elucidate a text becomes a means to strengthen an ideology or a cause. Making the reader get involved in a story requires a style and a technique. Writers are always busy trying to create situations to tell a story and conclude a story when the time is right. The 19th century English novelist Wilkie Collins

once said that no writer could be a great writer unless he was first and foremost a great entertainer. To him Charles Dickens was a great entertainer, so he was a great writer.

A literary canon selects books that are representative of a culture, genre, or age. Invariably, this selection is done by the reading lists of reputed universities or well-known literary scholars. Bloom's *The Western Canon*, written in 1994, explores the works of 26 authors central to the Western literary tradition. Campaigning for the "autonomy of the aesthetic" he placed Shakespeare at the center of the canon, calling his works touchstones for all playwrights, poets, or storytellers. Bloom believed that Shakespeare had no predecessor in the creation of character and had left no one untouched. Writers such as Milton, Samuel Johnson, Goethe, Ibsen, Joyce, and Beckett were all influenced by Shakespeare. Tolstoy and Freud wrote against him, while writers like Dante, Wordsworth, Austen, Dickens, Whitman, Dickinson, Proust, Borges, Neruda, and Pessoa created a new canon based on him. Bloom was infatuated by Shakespeare. He heaped praise on him for inventing a rational human being who could think "too well" about any "truth" he may champion (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 1998). Bloom places Shakespeare at the center of the Western literary canon. However, what is valued in one age as good literature may not be considered valuable in another. When Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851) was published it was considered a failure, but over the decades it has come to be seen as a great literary work of symbolic significance. The epic fight between Captain Ahab and the white whale has inspired and disappointed generations of readers. But its value as a great work of literature is never in doubt.

Strangeness & Originality

In the process of reading literature, we confront unusual, difficult, and often unexpected experiences. They become special to us as they are hitherto unknown. We are enriched by their sentiments and suggestions. Literature possesses a strangeness and a mode of originality, as Bloom suggests. The first implies that works add strangeness to beauty, while the second means originality that cannot be assimilated. It also means that when literature assimilates us, then we cease to see it as strange. A literary canon may be a byproduct of class, race, gender, or national interest. If all literary works reflect a particular ideology, then reading them would not be liberating.

The Modern Age in Literature

The 20th century destroyed the moral and intellectual self-assurance of the Victorians and their belief in a structured world. It introduced a new tightening of language to represent the malice and beauty of the human condition. The 20th century searched for a window to connect the imagination with history. In "London Letter"

Eliot pushed language and reality into a tight fist, until the words jumped out with new meanings – "art has to create a new world, and a new world must have a new structure" (*The Dial*, July 1921). The modernists believed in the stability of the word and its object. They held that language could remake the perception of the world. They felt that sense perception could be captured in a sentence. Then the world would survive in a book like a beam of sunlight in the bedroom. The modernist dreamt of making the individual enter history, transparent and naked. James Joyce was anguished that he could not find a window in the house of fiction to connect imaginative structure with historical reality. Marcel Proust introduced the olfactory and gustatory in remembering lost time. The Proustian phenomenon brought smell and taste as a "vast structure of recollection" to literature. A taste, odor, texture, temperature can release a forgotten childhood event from the subconscious in ever-widening detail. Smell triggered distant emotional memories and made the novel come alive. Sense memories opened the door to lost memories and were quite useful to writers. Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927) refers to a subjective time in which each individual life is located. The phrase *temps perdu* refers to time lost, bringing an irretrievable forfeiture and regret. The word "remembrance" brings a shocking mission to *à la recherche*, or what he is looking for. Proust created autobiographical memories through olfactory stimuli. In *Swann's Way* he hunts for the meaning of love and time. He uses taste and smell to provoke memory and consciousness to access half-remembered events. Every writer possesses a style. A style has to do with the way something is expressed. It reveals the inner self, perception, and sensibility of a writer.

Literature pulls us out of the daily routine of life and invigorates the senses. It generates a consciousness of the significance of events and actions, laying bare human intentions and emotions. It presents a worldview and an angle of vision through a selective arrangement of words that gives us a new perspective. Literature intensifies the urgency of life and opens the imagination to new suggestions that can invigorate and change perspective. Umberto Eco points out that human beings are surrounded by innumerable "intangible powers" such as the power of square roots and religious traditions (*On Literature*, 2002). Among these powers we find the power of literary texts. These works are read not only for pleasure but also for edification. The intangible power of literature keeps language alive and creates a sense of identity and community. It helps us to enrich our personal and communal experience. After reading literary works we often come to understand the phenomena of life and death better. **JS**

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