

## Are literature and philosophy related?

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on the idea that a literary work of art and philosophy complement each other. In the Holt's views, philosophy of literature addresses fundamental questions about the nature of literature as an art. In addition, philosophy explores, nature, historical significance, norms of interpretation, and aesthetical values of literary art. The paper also focuses on the question do people take interest in philosophy, with special reference to 'analytic philosophy'. It has been observed that people do read works of philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Hume etc, but do not find much pleasure in analytical insights provided by the philosophy. Then this paper reflects on the definition of literature by Waugh. According to E Waugh, "literature is the right use of language irrespective of the subject or reason of utterance". The paper ends with the M Ellis' remark that 'the two sides have varied their terminology throughout the ages, but the opposition between them has remained essentially unchanged. Therefore, the discussion on 'literature' and 'knowledge' is never going to end.

**Keywords:** literary work, philosophy, nature, historical significance

### Introduction

The focus of the paper in hand is how a literary work of art is complementary to philosophy and vice versa. Jim Holt observes that the 'philosophy of literature addresses the most fundamental questions about the nature of literature as an art. Some of these questions address the metaphysics and ontology of literary works'. This view states that role of philosophy is to define the nature of a literary work and to authenticate the origins of its genre. Holt further adds that historical philosophy reveals, 'what kinds of things are literary works of art that seem to exist over time'. The most important role of philosophy for literature, according to Holt is to explore 'norms govern our interpretation and understanding of such works'. He also extends it further in the realm of serious questions. Is the meaning of a work fixed, or does it change with the changes in the contexts in which it is read? Can we have a genuine emotional response to the characters, events, and states of affairs represented in such works even when we believe that they are not real? Finally, the issues regarding the value of literary art, that 'do they offer any distinctive form of knowledge or insight? Can their cognitive and moral merits and defects count as *artistic* merits and defects?'

### The Main Paper

Though Holt's view, ('philosophy of literature addresses the most fundamental questions about the nature of literature as an art) seems much appealing, but is not free from the counter argument. If philosophy explores, nature, historical significance, norms of interpretation, and aesthetical values of literary art, then what else is left for literary history, criticism, and other modes of scholarship, which address these concerns. Thus one option is left for an observer to think that philosophy is one of the many approaches to study a literary work. The approach has its strengths and weaknesses like others.

However, to glorify philosophical approach to analyse literature, Holt observes that 'the philosophical approach to literature,... productively drawing on the empirical study and first-order analysis of literary works, tends to adopt a more systematic, theoretical, ahistorical, and foundational approach than commonly found in other fields. Also,... literature as an art, has been profoundly shaped by work in other areas of philosophy... such as analytic metaphysics and philosophy of language'. Thus it has 'addressed such topics as the metaphysics of fictional characters. More recently, there has been an exciting cross-fertilization between philosophical approaches to literature and developments in cognitive science, particularly in areas devoted to the study of emotions and imagination' (Jim Holt).

It has been seen that people take interest in the literary work of their choice, like novel, poetry, drama, story, but what about their interest in philosophy. Do they find it interesting or worth reading? Jonathan Gilmore feels, 'People savour the aphorisms of Nietzsche, the essays of Schopenhauer, the philosophical novels of Sartre. They read the dialogues of Plato (and they would doubtless read the dialogues of Aristotle too, had Western civilization not been so careless as to mislay them). Some even claim to enjoy the more daunting treatises in the philosophical canon'. Now let us complicate the situation. Do people take pleasure in *analytic* philosophy? Even Gilmore does not seem to be sure about the affirmative response.

According to Gilmore, 'Analytic philosophy is the kind that is practiced these days by the vast majority of professors in philosophy departments throughout the English-speaking world. It's reputed to be rather dry and technical — long on logical rigor, short on lyrical profundity'. About its origin, he stipulates, 'Analytic philosophy got its start in Cambridge in the first decade of the 20th century, when Bertrand Russell and G.E.

Moore revolted against the rather foggy continental idealism prevailing among English philosophers at the time. Under their influence, and that of Ludwig Wittgenstein (who arrived in Cambridge in 1912 to study with Russell), philosophers came to see their task as consisting not in grand metaphysical system-building, but in the painstaking analysis of language. This, they thought, would enable them to lay bare the logical structure of reality and to put all the old philosophical perplexities to rest’.

A question can be raised here that how ‘analytic philosophy is seen in the contemporary time. Gilmore states, ‘Today, analytic philosophy has a broader scope than it used to. It’s less obsessed with dissecting language; it’s more continuous with the sciences.... analytic philosophers continue to lay heavy stress on logical rigor in their writings.... Timothy Williamson,... makes a virtue of the “long haul of technical reflection” that is analytic philosophy today’. When asked, Does it bore you? Well, he says, too bad. “Serious philosophy is always likely to bore those with short attention-spans”. Thus, this kind of philosophy, whatever its intellectual merit is, doesn’t sound like a whole lot of fun. And, of course it doesn’t sound like literature.

But what is literature then? Is this not a philosophical question in it self. According to E Waugh, “literature is the right use of language irrespective of the subject or reason of utterance”. It seems to suggest that it needn’t have to yawn a poem or tell a story to be considered as literature. Thus a laptop user manual or any instruction manual might qualify, for a work of analytic philosophy. A further question is admissible here, that what is the right use of language? Waugh responds that “Lucidity, elegance, individuality”: these are the three essential traits that make a work of prose “memorable and unmistakable,” that make it *literature*”. Here, the point of contention is that shall we place the works of specialized philosophers, like Henry James, M Dummett, Spinoza, etc into this category. Gilmore resolves the crisis by saying that it depends upon the individual readers to decide about this. Thus individuality of selection is the deciding factor here.

A literary work of art is capable of providing literary pleasures. However, Jukka claims that in ‘philosophical aesthetics, the question on the relation between literature and knowledge is perhaps the oldest. Even for Plato’s Socrates, the quarrel between poets and philosophers was ‘ancient’. Philosophers’ views on the cognitive value of literature, that is, whether literary works may provide knowledge of a significant kind, may be roughly divided into two categories: for and against, mostly against’. He further accentuates, “On one side, there is Plato, who saw poets as philosophers’ competitors on the journey to truth. Plato’s hostile view of poetry, most notably expressed in the tenth book of *The Republic*, concerned mainly the source of poets’ knowledge. As Plato saw it, poets imitate actual world objects which he considered imperfect copies of ideas, and hence they do not depict the essential but merely copy the accidental”. Plato further argued that the creative act in poetry was not a rational enterprise, but that poets composed their works under an irrational, divine inspiration”. However, ‘there

is Aristotle, who considered poetry a cognitively valuable practice. In a well-known passage in the *Poetics* he maintained that poetry is a source of information concerning possibilities’.

In the contemporary times, do we see such or new philosophical discussions or reflections on the relation between literature and wisdom. In the views of Lamarque (2009) ‘in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, the cognitive value and function of literature have been discussed in various philosophical traditions, such as existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism and post-structuralism’. He extends his argument that ‘Knowledge’ however covers a wide field in the human thought.... the various relations between philosophy and literature, that is, philosophical functions of and philosophical approaches to literature, I am interested in philosophy through literature, that is, in how literary works convey significant philosophical truth and knowledge and how the works are to be approached as communications of their authors’. In fact he is of the view that as history reveals, the discussion on literature and knowledge is never going to end. As the literary critic John M. Ellis remarks, ‘the two sides have varied their terminology throughout the ages, but the opposition between them has remained essentially unchanged’.

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