Philosophy and literature: Redefining boundaries

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Abstract
Martha C. Nussbaum, along with a few other philosophers contributed towards bridging philosophy and literature, rendering it “a form that is the most appropriate one for their expression”. The multiple dimensions of literary studies were understood in the context of debates on self-understanding and the appropriateness of the methods of self-understanding. In this paper I intend to reflect upon Nussbaum’s take on philosophy of literature with the intention of finding out the reasons behind ethical grounding of literatures, especially focusing upon its impact upon the moral well-being of an individual. Nussbaum argues in favor of establishing an inter-connection between ethical enquiry and literature, directing one to act towards the ultimate morality of time. She addresses the pressure of the current scenario while discussing whether pondering upon the ethical aspect entails negligence towards the “textual content” of literature. Therefore this paper exhibits a shift in reading of literature; importance of addressing the ethical aspect of it. This transformation is a significant one in the sense that it creates an impact upon the crucial dimension of the notion of well-being.

Keywords: Literature, Philosophy, Nussbaum, well-being.

Introduction
Whether literature can be treated in the light of moral philosophy is a matter of debate based on which conceptual studies have been pursued. I am particularly concerned with the unambiguous inter-relationship between philosophy and literature on the account of which a significant philosophical interpretation of literature is possible, which would otherwise remain missed. Literary works often act in the form of an outlet for the creative side of the author which else remains under cover. Understanding such works in the light of moral philosophy provides them an added credibility, and enhances their importance. In this paper I intend to revisit this link, while highlighting the importance of it. There are a number of questions which one has to confront with while redefining the boundaries between philosophy and literature, while at the same time focusing on the relevance of philosophy in literature or vice versa. How philosophical analysis of a literature adds value to its content? Or, does the philosophical analysis of literature overshadows the story it carries. Is this interrelation necessary one based on causation or is it a mere correlation? The disagreements between scholars working in this area is rife and their arguments are often equally convincing. As a consequence, an endeavor in this field is not straightforward.

Martha C. Nussbaum, along with a few other philosophers contributed towards associating philosophy and literature, rendering it a form that is the most appropriate one for their expression in their viewpoint. The multiple dimensions of literary studies were understood in the background of discussions on self-understanding and the appropriateness of the approaches towards self-understanding.

Nussbaum argues in favor of creating an inter-connection between ethical enquiry and literature, directing one to act towards the ultimate morality of time. She discusses whether pondering upon the ethical aspect entails negligence towards the textual content of literature. The shift in reading beyond the layers has been addressed by her, particularly looking upon the importance of addressing its ethical aspects. This shift is a significant one in the sense that it creates an impact upon the crucial dimension of the notion of well-being. Individual narration of stories had many objectives behind them including entertainment. However, if one would look more deeply into the matter, then various other reasons behind creation of such stories could be traced upon leading one towards a new perspective of perceiving them.
According to some scholars, stories bear a meaning to themselves not only in order to elevate the purpose of story writing but also in order to convey the unsaid, unspoken thoughts. Literary sources often have a deep connection with the ethical dimension of philosophy based on which one could trace an intimate connection between morals & literature. If one looks into the stories portrayed by the *Dīgha Nikāya* then the profoundness of its ethical side could no longer remain unpronounced. The stories were woven by the fine threads of morality making a place for itself within the material garb of *what ought to be done under what condition*. Many of these stories had been a source of debate and have created controversy over the ages. They have been intertwined with the lives of people reading them, their backgrounds, and the conditions of the society where they lived. As a result, their content developed a number of shades under the spectrum of multiple ways of understanding them, and a single way of interpretation them was not prevalent anymore.

For example, if one looks into the *Kūtadanta Sutta*, king *Kūtadantā*’s sudden transition in approach towards animals from being merciless to being merciful to them could be subject to various interpretations. Lord Buddha's words may have unleashed the moral side of him from under the shackles of selfishness, and have brought him into the light of morality. He might have also considered the possibility of himself being born as a non-human animal in his next life and thus being subject to ill treatment. Fear in some form worked behind the transition observed in his approach. Fear of losing what he had and at the same time also worked his *desire* for mental peace and tranquility, reformed him to a new man who was a lot more different from the *Kūtadanta* whom all knew.

In a similar way, within the *Mahāsudassāna Sutta*, desire seemed to play a pivotal role. The life lived a king read about in fairly-tales, embroidered by luxury and splendor. Finally he ended up giving away all material wealth possessed by him in exchange of the reward of mental peace and tranquility, which he desired above anything else. In the life of king *Mahāsudassāna desire* seems to play a very important role. In the initial years of his life his desire for material comforts lead him towards the attainment of a luxury embedded lifestyle, while later on his desire for the attainment of peace and tranquility surpassed all other desires.

Another interesting idea has been put forward by D.D. Raphael which emphasizes upon the fact that any work of literature could be treated as a work of philosophy as well. He argues in favor of literatures being embellished by thought provoking materials which could be equally treated as philosophical writings, in the same vein as Nussbaum.¹ In order to capture the essence of any literary work, it seems crucial to emphasize upon the ethical impetus borne by it. Scholars have attempted to analyze this matter by looking at it from various perspectives in order to bring in more clarity within the understanding of their inter relationship. Any text rendered as literary could create a philosophical understanding of it with respect to a certain targeted audience, in a way diluting the gap created between moral philosophy and literary works. On the other hand, within philosophical writings one could place her arguments embossed within stories and thus choose non-relational ways of persuasion. Such inter-relation can be very well witnessed while analyzing Kavka’s *Metamorphosis*, *Dīghanikāya*, *Jātaka stories et al*. These have been based upon self-observation which in turn is inter-linked to philosophical analysis of the text.

George Elliot says the following in relation to the above discussion:

My writing is simply a set of experiments in life an endeavor to see what our thought & emotion may be capably of- what stories of motive, actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better life after which we may strive… I became more & more timid with less daring to adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure & individual experience & perhaps that is a sign that if I help others to see at all it must be through the medium of art [²].

From the above lines, it becomes evident how in Elliot’s view art forms play the role of the fruit bearer of real life stories, to which one could relate more easily without the requirement of any further medium. Literary works are made alive by incorporating characters from real life, to which one could easily relate oneself, thus making the task of understanding the authors intention easier. Authors intention could be anything ranging from giving a clear moral message or telling her own story. The purpose gets well served if and when she uses the right framework of description, which according to Elliot, is made up of real, individual experiences.

Also, when one tries to emphasize upon any problem existing within any philosophical approach, the task gets easier when supported by examples. As for example when an environmental pluralist tries to show how pluralism is distinct from relativism while building a case in favor of pluralism, using examples while making her point makes the task a lot easier. In addition if the examples used could relate to human life scenarios, well connected to human relations per se then it becomes even simpler for the reader to get hold of the ongoing discussion. Thus stories depicting human life often tend to convey important points which are not so easily conveyable otherwise.

I would like to highlight upon the example from real life, which in a way has simplified ones understanding of the distinction between pluralism and relativism. Before going into the example, defining relativism and pluralism seems crucial. Relativism is open towards all answers for any ethical query and to furnish an explanation for a conflict [³]. Also Bernard Williams says all goals, virtues and ideals are compatible and that what is desirable can ultimately be united into a harmonious whole without loss is the main theme of relativism [⁴]. Pluralism does not support the claim

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of compatibility of all virtues and is unsure whether the conflicting virtues can be reconciled within a harmonious whole. Thus pluralism parts way from relativism at this very central point.

While, on the other hand the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy sheds light on a very important dimension of relativism. It says that at the time of any moral query the doctrine of relativism places equal amount of importance to all the available answers [5]. The sole aim of this theoretical position is to focus upon the subjective points of view of the decision makers. However, in such kind of subjectivity is generally not appreciated by all and often faces huge amount of criticism.

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one to understand human behavior. [16] Parikh discusses real life scenarios and analyzes some literature in showing how consideration of epistemic conditioning of any literature helps one in reasonably understanding other people. As for example, in Bernard Shaws play, You Never can tell, A rich businessman Mr. Crompton happens to be in no good terms with his wife and three children (Gloria, Dolly and Philip). Following is the description of an event described in the play where the family reunites over dinner. (William is the name of the waiter and McComas is a family friend.):

PHILIP. Mr. Crompton is coming to lunch with us.
WAITER (puzzled). Yes, sir. (Diplomatically.) Dont usually lunch with his family, perhaps, sir?
PHILIP (impressively). William: he does not know that we are his family.
He has not seen us for eighteen years. He wont know us. (To emphasize the communication he seats himself on the iron table with a spring, and looks at the waiter with his lips compressed and his legs swinging.)
DOLLY. We want you to break the news to him, William.
WAITER. But I should think hed guess when he sees your mother, miss.
(Philips legs become motionless at this elucidation. He contemplates the waiter raptly.)
DOLLY (dazzled). I never thought of that.
PHILIP. Nor I. (Coming off the table and turning reproachfully on McComas.)
Nor you. 17

The waiter, William has been able to draw an inference of second order based on which he predicts Cromptons recognition of his wife and family over dinner. The time lag in between would not definitely have been able to undo the memory he had related to his wife. While, Dolly and Philip being less experienced than William fails in correctly predicting their fathers behavior towards them. Thus, epistemic reasoning plays an important role over here in knowing someone elsees mind without actually knowing the person in reality.

This example is from Skyrms, as highlighted by Parikh [18]:

Fireflies use their light for sexual signalling. In the western hemisphere, males fly over the meadows, flashing a signal. If a female on the ground gives the proper sort of answering flashes, the male descends and they mate. The flashing code is species-specific. Females and males in general use and respond to the pattern of flashes only of their own species.

There is, however, an exception. A female firefly of the genus Photuris, when she observes a male of the genus Photinus, may mimic the female signals of the males species, lure him in, and eat him. She gets not only a nice meal, but also some useful protective chemicals that she cannot get in any other way. One species, Photuris versicolor, is a remarkably accomplished mimic capable of sending the appropriate flash patterns of 11 Photinus species. [19]

Here the female firefly, of the genus Photuris, is relying upon some sort of convention which pre-exists within her species that a certain form of signals signifies that a Photinus female is waiting for the male one. This act while being analyzed is found to be tightly harnessed in the intention to deceive, which gets unveiled been understood in the subject under condition gets laid in an epistemic background.

Conclusion

It seems clear that many authors have used epistemic reasoning with an undertone shade. While on the other hand, moral grounding of literature provides it with a firmer base to function upon, fulfilling literature in a more meaningful way. Connecting philosophy and literature, along with the use of epistemic reasoning spells out a uniquely different way of looking at it. The sting of inter-connection between the literature-philosophy supported by appeal of this duo towards emotions & knowledge cannot be ignored. Given its diversified strands, the term "Philosophy of Literature" is also susceptible to various interpretations.

References