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## Denny Gonzalez '13

*Words, Words, Words: What's the Point: Modes of Knowing in the Philosophical Study of Literature*

“Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.”

- C. S. Lewis

“What is wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote.”

- E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*

My friend Peter and I would always argue. A more scientifically inclined student, he would always pester me, begging the question, “Why do you read literature?” to which I would respond, “Because it’s what matters; it allows me to understand a certain aspect of humanity that you can’t get in the sciences.” The banter to follow would always lead us in the direction of asking the question: “To what extent does literature help us gain an understanding of the world?” More directly, why is literature, particularly reading narrative and discussing it, important to us?

On the surface, a work of fiction seems to be false. Despite being written by an author, a work of narrative fiction does not seem to provide any sort of truth, a concern most philosophers have with fiction. How do words, words, words, as Hamlet would say, matter or relate to a philosopher, deeply rooted in the pursuit of truth and understanding? Finding the answer to life’s deepest questions are presumably at the forefront of the philosopher’s mind. To these philosophers, narrative fiction fails to help us draw deeper and more intricate conclusions about the nature of reality and its contents. A novel is a fabrication; another human being has contrived it with some hidden agenda about which only he knows.

Something that can be tested and proven, something with a concrete answer, would provide a greater breadth of wisdom than a set of ideas or a philosophical treatise. Ideas, however grandiose they may be, are not concrete and thus cannot be trusted. For example, the more scientifically inclined person would believe that a biochemistry textbook could provide more knowledge than Anselm’s *Ontological Argument*. Although both written items are indeed recorded, the biochemistry textbook is filled with substantial information that, when tested repeatedly, prove true. With the *Ontological Argument*, however, two people could argue extensively of its truthfulness. This ceaseless debate would cause a scientist to believe that something written down – in this case, a work of philosophy – would not provide an adequate understanding of the world because the results are inconclusive.

By extension, this same sentiment could apply itself to works of narrative fiction. The fact that the subject matter is concrete – that it is definite in what it has to say – is the grounding on which someone would base his claim on narrative fiction and its relationship with a deemed “truth.” Furthermore, scientists would believe that the ultimate truth lies not in rhetoric, literature, or anything deemed false by their standards;

rather, it is through discipline, experimentation, and the reporting of evidence that people can realize the truth. Like philosophers, scientists believe that only what is actually provable is effective in discovering the truth.

Not only do scientists take this claim to heart, but also – in certain cases – even students do so. Reading a long narrative seems poignant and a bitter reminder that reading *Mrs Dalloway* for a class they did not wish to take is absolutely pointless. Thus a student would believe that by reading the abridged, i.e. the Spark Notes or Cliffs Notes of that novel, he can know what the overall gist of a literary work is. Moreover, he would think there is nothing to be gained from reading a novel, play, or other work of narrative fiction. Instructors, however, would respond that their pupils would need to read the work, only to be answered by a, “Who cares?” The answer on part of the teacher or professor would also take the form of a question: “Why would we not assign a work to you if it were not pertinent to you and your life? Why would you not want to get to know something?” Educators are aware of a specific factor that contributes to someone’s understanding of the literary text in relation to the world around them: the second-person experience.

This missing factor, this “second-person experience” (Stump), helps people to realize what kind of truth narrative fiction can provide its audience. Stump explores this concept of the “second-person experience” or “second-person account”, which states that there is a way in which people can understand this “other,” whether this individual is a crying teenager or a fictitious character. This sense of knowing someone, the ability to know what it is like to be that individual, whether that individual is a character in an Aeschylean tragedy or a romance novel is due to the second-person experience.

Eleonore Stump defines the second-person experience as “[conscious and direct interaction] with another person who is conscious and present to you as a person, in one way or another”. Furthermore, this second-person experience is “the paradigmatic sort of experience in which one gains the kind of knowledge of persons” (Stump). It is the way in which people can relate with another individual. Some would argue that there does not seem to be a process by which someone can interpolate that an individual is sad; however, one would not say, “The scrunched-up face of this person, the tears streaming down her face, the red cheeks: by my analysis, she is sad!” The person in this example, however, would state in this situation, “She’s sad.” There is no series of thoughts that are catalogued so that one can surmise or draw conclusions about whether someone feels a certain way; he simply knows (Stump describes this knowledge as “knowledge” versus “knowledge that”) someone is feeling a specific emotion.

The same can be said for narrative fiction: it can play a role in understanding the way in which people can acquaint themselves with this figure of the “other,” this “second-person.” By reading a work of narrative, people would gain a perspective on a certain matter, whether that point-of-view is that of the character or of the reader. For instance, one would read a work such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and learn what it is like for someone to travel through the Congo and observe how the native Africans live in this immense darkness. At the same time, a reader can, through the lens of the protagonist-narrator Marlow, see into his thoughts and envision how Marlow perceives his world. The way in which the narrator depicts the indigenous people of Africa, particularly those of the Congo, is an application of the second-person experience: what the person reads is not always assumed to be what is received.

Eleonore Stump says, “A story gives its reader some of what she would have had if she had had unmediated personal interaction with the character in the story while the were conscious and interacting with each other, without actually making her part of the story itself” (259\*). Essentially, this experience is a “second-person account” (259). Diligence in studying what is written down and interpreting what has been said are two essential qualities of knowing – in the second-personal sense – the significance of this account. Put into more specific terms, what is garnered from reading a work of fiction is a broadening and deepening of human experience. An individual, by reading works from different eras or places, can comprehend the mindset of any author or character and that of the world around them, both real and fictitious. In the case of Conrad’s work, one can know what the journey to the heart of the African continent during the time of grand imperialism is like for Marlow, or what it is like to live in the world of Middle Earth in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. This knowledge is the broadening of human experience: someone can travel through both space and time by reading literature of a specific era or in a specific geographical region. This new familiarity with the world provides a new sense of understanding the other and the reader’s place in the world, whenever he is reading.

Eleonore Stump mentions, “While both literary and philosophical examinations of a narrative might engage in character analysis, a philosophical study is more likely to ask whether the character in the narrative is violating moral standards in doing what she does or whether the worldview ascribed to her is coherent” (262). The philosopher would have to infer that there is truth that can be derived from a philosophical analysis of a fictional work. He can make this inference by exploring thematic concepts and applying a philosophical perspective in that exploration. Furthermore, a certain truth can sometimes only be understood through narrative prose; for instance, Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* is written as an interior monologue. The entire autobiography is a piece of creative nonfiction that works as a stream of consciousness that Augustine employs for him to explore his innermost thoughts. By using that writing style, Augustine of Hippo can communicate his thoughts to his audience in a more direct manner approachable by both parties. Narrative highlights human experiences and underscores the nature of the human condition. Reading works of great depth and great magnitude, in short, make us human.

Despite this fact, a philosopher would argue, “Still, what is the point of knowing the human condition and ‘being human?’ What is to be gained from reading narrative?” A response to this question could be related to how the philosopher is reading through a biased filter; his stance is firmly rooted in the pursuit of truth and that what is said needs to be stated in concrete terminology. In addition, he believes that fiction has a biased perspective mainly due to the author; he could say that the author of this work has a hidden agenda and is writing a manifesto instead of a narrative. However, when looking at Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Augustine’s *Confessions*, the philosopher can acquire a greater awareness of himself and the world around him from reading that work in particular; the philosophical knowledge hidden in a literary work can emerge if the philosopher opens his mind to the possibility of gaining a kind of dimensionality. Thus reading literature is less about what it is necessarily, but more so about what is perceived.

The perceptions lead to perspectives. No two people are alike, and thus no two thoughts on literature are the same. The perspectives vary; thus discussion will spawn

when two different individuals read the same work. No two people would share exactly similar beliefs about a work of literature. Someone would make a claim about a part of a work, and someone will almost always have an argument against it or a somewhat contrasting view on it. For instance, one could argue that in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the famous soliloquy "To be or not to be" is exemplary of existentialist thought; however, another may contrast that claim by stating that the soliloquy focuses more on the tyrannical nature of monarchy and its relationship with his current situation. Whether one of these perspectives is correct is irrelevant; what matters is the conversation that develops from these two differing thoughts. By engaging in a dialogue, discussing the overall pertinence of a work, its moral ideas, literary concepts in philosophical terms, and overarching philosophical themes, the two philosophers can discuss whether one approach to a work seems more significant or relevant. At the same time, the duo establish this dialectic that poses a thesis and antithesis; they develop this synthesis by conversing. At the same time, the exposure to the other's argument brings the philosophers to a greater capability to understanding the significance of a work of narrative fiction.

By providing the philosophers exposure to the other's argument and a greater capacity to comprehend a literary text, the dialectic demonstrates how discovering truth is not always a necessary aspect of reading truth. Our philosopher, though pleased with the conversation, may realize that in that conversation, no one reached a conclusion; "We do not reach this truth we're searching for," he may say. However, the expansion of knowledge, insight, and wisdom can be the greater gifts to be received by those who delve into fiction and attempt to comprehend its overall message. Whether an objective truth is reached is insignificant. The point of literature is to be examined and digested. Philosophers explore their own literature; narrative only helps provide a greater framework of understanding the world around them and to broaden and deepen human experience. For the philosopher, the same can be applied to them; the broadening and deepening can occur in or outside the conversation. So long as there is wisdom to be attained, the point of reading literature will never change. The knowledge of the world is what the philosopher seeks; only by reading is he able to attain it.

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