

INTEGRATING LITERATURE AND COGNITION

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Fiction has been the dominant genre especially in its reach – its widespread appeal to people from different strata of society. Looked down upon as an inferior “*womanly*” literary activity at first, it took hold of popular imagination by its freedom and comprehensiveness. A lot of water has flown under the bridge since then. The great Victorians, the Russian masters, their counterparts in European countries and the American greats, all have made significant contributions in this regard and of course we have witnessed in recent times a tremendous output from the postcolonial writers. The novel has no doubt settled itself as the ideal form of expression of human experience.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw experimentation taking hold of the field of fiction. Most such fiction was a reaction to realistic fiction and the *mimetic* idea that fiction was representational. Alan Robbe Grillet, Wittgenstein, Saussure who started the idea that the meaning was in the mind, Heisenberg and his principle of uncertainty, Marxism, Neo-Freudianism, Feminism and various other thinkers and ideas rewrote the modes and contours of fictional writing. Self-reflexivity became the hallmark of fiction and earlier humanistic tradition of production and consumption of fiction was badly mauled by these newfangled theories. The old school seemed to have died a definite death if one was to go by the protestations of the new practitioners. The credit for causing the maximum damage should go to Jacques Derrida and his theory of deconstruction.

But it was not sepulchral silence on the other side. There were groups of writers like the “Third Avenue,” and “Domestics” who continued the humanistic tradition in fiction. And there were also critics like Eugene Good Heart, M.H. Abrams, Jackson Bate, Denis Donoghue and Gerald Graff who advocated the cause of humanist-realist literature. They were not willing to allow the essential connections between life and fiction to be steamrolled into oblivion. In fact, fiction’s humanizing power cannot be ignored and the rebellious, radical experimentalism seems to have subsided. While humanism, consigned to the coffin by its critics, lay low literature’s role was taken over by theories in other disciplines like psychology and management sciences, particularly personnel management. Anthropocentrism survives in the theories of Malcolm Knowles, McGregor, Ayrgyris, Herzberg, Daniel Goleman and Howard Gardner. There have been significant studies linking narratives and cognition and it can be said with certainty that Humanism and humanistic literature are reasserting their importance thanks to the “confederated” discipline of “cognitive sciences.” At the present, studies on literature and cognitive sciences are on the increase.

Until about 1970, cognitive approaches were merely carried out as experiments inside cognitive laboratories. Cognitive psychology arose partly as a reaction to behaviourism. Cognitive psychologists view the human mind as a structured system for holding information. According to most cognitive theories, information is picked up by the senses and then it is analysed, stored, recoded and subsequently used in various ways. It is only this feature that makes humans so special and distinct from other species. All these activities combine to form the information process. William James explains that sensation and perception differ only in their contents. James distinguishes knowledge as knowledge by acquaintance (sensation) and knowledge about (perception). Thus our first awareness of the world is sensational acquaintance – knowledge of the universe. Gradually, we classify different aspects of this universe and see the relations among them (knowledge-about) (qtd. in Dooley 43).

The schema theory answers the question of how feelings interact with the reader's experience. It was one of the earliest applications of cognitive sciences to literature. Schemas are the set of ideas formed by reading texts. The schema theory highlights the dynamic nature of the human mind. Although we *passively* receive information from external environment, we *actively interpret* much of that information. Things such as our emotional states and past experiences affect the way we interpret the incoming information.

The positive core of Carroll's book *Literary Darwinism* consists of his accounts of Darwinian adaptationism. Carroll maintains that "the subject matter of literature is human experience," (109) which "is continuous with that of physics and chemistry" but which has, however, "cognitive properties that emerge only at levels of organization higher than those with which physics and chemistry are concerned, and it is these higher levels that are the appropriate subject matter of literature" (105). Carroll in his essay "Pluralism, Post structuralism and Evolutionary Theory" argues strongly for the representational value of literature.

I would argue that the primary purpose of literature is to represent the subjective quality of experience. In opposition to the post- Kantian notion that cognitive and linguistic categories are autonomous forms that constitute their own objects, I maintain, in company with Karl Popper, Konrad Lorenz, Tooby and Cosmides, John Bowlby, and other evolutionary theorists, that cognitive and linguistic categories have evolved in adaptive relation to the environment. They correspond to the world not because they "construct" the world in accordance with their own autonomous, internal principles but because their internal principles have evolved as a means of comprehending an actual world that exists independently of the categories. (qtd. in Fromm 318)

This new phenomenon of science coming to the aid of literary interpretation effectively challenges the claims of literary texts not referring to any objective reality by the poststructuralists.

The novel takes different forms as it grows. The History of English Literature reveals that the individual, the hero, had stood at the centre of romantic fictions since the Middle Ages. The early novels placed the story itself at the centre. It was driven by incident and accident rather than being the story of a single figure. The late eighteenth century exploration of personal development created room for depictions of personal experiences. These types of novels brought out the relationship between the individual and society. The individual perspectives in these

novels allowed for personal revaluations of the public historical perception and personal development. The nineteenth century Bildungsroman became the area for such explorations of personal development that separated the individual from and then reunited it with, his or her social environment. Wherever development is present, conflict has to be there. In fact, development and conflict are interconnected. Conflicts are of two types – interpersonal and intrapersonal. Interpersonal conflict is that which the individual has with other persons and intrapersonal conflict is that which occurs within the individual. Both these conflicts help in the growth of an individual.

Looking back on the history of novels it may be argued that elements in fiction from antiquity until the end of the eighteenth century reveal a static presentation of a standard process of development. The character is static and the change is actually a pseudo-change because it accounts only for the primary and external levels with least concern for the spiritual component. The arrival of psychological novels changed the scene by giving more emphasis to the inner development of the character. The character remains fixed in his inner life from the beginning till the end and the unchanging spiritual essence determines the linear movement of the novel.

The English novel is considered to have emerged from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). This marks the beginning of the realistic fiction focusing on the central character being isolated from community and society. The concept of individualism finds significant expression here. The novels of the eighteenth century are the fusion of history, romance, apologue, biography, autobiography and satire. *Robinson Crusoe* encloses the modes of history, romance and autobiography. The first 'novel of character' or psychological novel is attributed to Samuel Richardson whose *Pamela* (1740) deals with the emotional states of the protagonist. Defoe and Richardson created a new landmark in the history of novels differing from their predecessors by giving authentic portrayals of the experiences of individuals rather than taking the plots from mythology, history or previous literature. Ideas like rationality, objectivity, scientific inquiry, individualism and universality are some of the themes of these novels.

The arrival of romanticism laid emphasis on the originality and genius in the imitation of classical authors or nature. Thinkers such as Locke, Hume, and Burke had been instrumental in these shifts of taste and philosophical orientation. The romanticists saw dualism in the world such as individual and society, past and present, sensation and intellect, reason and emotion and they tried to create a unified vision through an aesthetics based on nature. Then arrived the age of realism and naturalism. In the later nineteenth century, ideas from thinkers such as Hegel, as well as the unifying visions of the Romantics, coalesced to form Utilitarianism, Positivism, and Social Darwinism.

Humanists and deconstructionists take a contrary position in their ideas of the novel. The deconstructionists see novels as mere texts made of words while the humanists focus on the relationships among people. Leavis, Trilling and the New Critics looked for values in literature. Values are in danger of disappearing in the modern world. Humanism had earlier used an intuitive idiom which could not stand against the onslaught by theories like deconstruction designed and propagated by philosophy-oriented critics and scholars. Humanism has lain low in the second half of the twentieth century but thanks especially to theories such as Literary Darwinism and those from Neurosciences, it has now reemerged. It searches for an integrated world view of meanings and purposes using reason, science, experience and intuition.

It was Ferdinand de Saussure that brought the focus to the language itself. The early narratologists supporting Saussure gave importance only to language. Then came Roland Barthes who accounted for an interdisciplinary approach to stories which gave rise to the contextualist approaches. The latter postulates that ‘messages’ are not just seen as a code but as an interactional achievement. This initiated the sociolinguistic approaches to narrative analysis. Cognitive theorists put forth that stories should be interpreted as a mixture of semiotic and cognitive structures. Narrative theorists now argue that an integrated approach can be made with the combination of social conditions and processes to the structure, context and cognitive aspects of stories. Vygotsky was the one who emphasized the role of social interactions in developing the cognitive level of individuals. The Bildungsroman novels are rich in such social interactions that they give ample opportunities for readers to interpret them using socialistic, realistic, naturalistic and cognitive approaches.

The Bildungsroman had its beginning in Germany in the late eighteenth century and spread to various Western countries in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth and twenty first centuries, the increase in output of this genre has been rapid. Traditionally, English critics have spoken of the “novel of formation,” the “apprenticeship novel,” or the “novel of education” as alternate terms to ‘Bildung’ to imply a stable and integrative end point to personal growth. But later the ‘Bildung’ was given a more neutral term “development” to highlight the close correlation between personal and historical change. The ‘novel of development’ has emerged as a symbolic locus of the modern era denoting the importance of developmental processes.

Literature provides insights about human life and responses to situations. Humanistic criticism considers that a novel has an original meaning, a centre which can be related through perceptual reading. New Humanism is concerned with the characters’ desires, needs, fears, behaviour and emotions. Although modes of characterization differ, the psychology and morality of characters must be understood as if they were real people. Thus New Humanism without affecting the formal aspects (rhetoric and narrative codes) turns its attention to the meaning and significance of imaginative literature. Humanism used as a comprehensive term deals with the characters’ world, attitudes, values, feelings, behaviour (within their world), language and its relevance to the actual world. Humanistic criticism assumes that novels are by human authors for human readers about human subjects and so it is interested in how and why people live, think, write and act. (*Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism* 616-617)

The question of whether and how literature is connected to the actual world is answered by cognitive approaches to literature. The literary novels belong to different genres – picaresque, epistolary, historical novels, novel of manners, romance, Bildungsroman and so on. Kurland (2000) considers the novel as representing life and crises of human existence, which tells of the present or past events. Taormina states that novels provide readers a deeper awareness of life’s problems and bring about an awareness of the self (*repository.upi.edu*). The Bildungsroman is a genre that appeals to all because everybody passes through childhood into adolescence.

The present education system has given importance mostly to rote learning by filling the individual with domain knowledge without enabling the learner to think of its applicability in real world contexts. This practice restricts cognitive development. True education requires thinking one’s way to knowledge. Making sense of one’s experiences is the most important aspect of learning and it is here that the study of Bildungsroman novels help by providing maps of simulated human experiences. In recent times, researchers in literature have shown keen

interest in interdisciplinary frameworks and methodologies thereby giving scope for identifying characteristics of effective learning and thinking. Cognitive studies involving narratives bring out models of thinking and behaviour.

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