

# **Philosophy and Literature: Antagonistic Ethnicities or Sisters at Heart?**

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## **I**

In metaphilosophy and generally in western metaphysics, there has been a debate about the relationship between philosophy and literature (Cascardi, 1987, p. x). Are they basically the same, but masquerading in different forms? Are they sisters or are they purely distant relatives a la the relationship between philosophy and history or psychology? These questions arise against the background of the writings of persons as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Sartre, etc. whose work have a clear philosophical underpinning, and conversely writings of philosophers that are thought to be literary. Another issue is the problems that are associated with offering an easily agreed upon definition of either literature or philosophy, as well as their respective roles. The attempt to clarify the relationship between the two disciplines has become even more intense in recent years with the exponential growth of the field of literary theory, which seems to encroach on philosophy, specifically philosophy of literature (Rickman, 1996, p.42).

While the debate continues in western thought, the question that can arise is: in non-western thought, does such a tension between philosophy and literature arise, or are there ties seen, accepted and embraced? The concern of this paper is to survey the ongoing debate with a view to identifying the most defensible position and to examine the issue within the context of non-western traditions. This will be done using a specific example of the Caribbean.

## **II**

The specific debate in western thought tends to centre on some specific issues about the relationship between literature and philosophy, with theorists tending to support one of the following positions: literature is essentially philosophy; philosophy is literature; philosophy and literature are distinct entities. The latter position is that which tends to be most vigorously supported, with views at different ends of the spectrum from the idea that philosophy should extensively utilise literary devices and literary works and vice versa to the view that philosophy should do as it does for other disciplines and only explore the formal issues of literature that is, that the main concern of philosophy with literature should be in the context of philosophy *of* literature.

### **Literature as Philosophy**

The position that literature is philosophy could be supported by examining the works of specific authors whose writings clearly explicate and expound on philosophical ideas and whose intention would clearly have been an examination of some specific philosophical issues. This is a view that is generally not supported wholesale by either philosophers or literary theorists, given that it

does not tend to coincide with the view that most theorists have of philosophy as a rigorous discipline for seeking to arrive at truths. While literature may cover some of the same themes covered in philosophy, the approach taken is quite different, with the aim not being to develop explicit arguments or to arrive at truth claims, but to present these ideas through the specific use of literary techniques, without any need for rigorous analysis as is seen in philosophy.

Those who may seem to support this view on the face of it, when looked on more closely show that there are distinctions that are seen. Nussbaum is one such theorist who argues that literary works show moral truths and that “certain novels are, irreplaceably, works of moral philosophy” (Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 148). She is careful however to limit her analysis to specific works that bear out her claim and also only with respect to moral philosophy. She argues that the distinction between literature and philosophy is an artificial one, especially in the realm of ethics, as literary works are able to explore the same themes explored in philosophy and in fact often provide greater insight into the philosophical issue than a philosophical treatise might.

The problem with the approach taken by Nussbaum, as noted by Holland is that while she has selected specific works of literature, which highlight moral fortitude; she has not included works that have questionable moral insights or that are not exemplary. Additionally, by using criteria from Aristotle (who she describes as her favourite non-literary philosophy) to determine her ethical principles, she is in fact suggesting that there is a distinction between literature and philosophy (Holland, 1998). Another view is that what Nussbaum is actually doing is exploring philosophy through literature, where literature is seen as being subsidiary to philosophy and literature is used to represent demonstrate the philosophical issue.

### **Philosophy as Literature**

This viewpoint is held and supported on the view that the distinction that exists between philosophy and literature is a result of a false dichotomy. As opposed to the modernist view of art, which identifies a work of art as not being purely rational, while philosophy is purely rational, the postmodernist and poststructuralist turn has resulted in questions being raised about many, if not all, of the dichotomies and distinctions between entities and concepts, including that between philosophy and literature. The term ‘text’ has been exponentially widened as a result of postmodern criticism; as Danto condescendingly argues, the term now refers to bus tickets, comic strips, graffiti, weather reports and so on (Danto, 1987, p. 3). Also open for inclusion in this list is any work of philosophy, which Deleuze defines as the “art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts” (Deleuze, 1991, p 471). Derrida argued that philosophy is treated as being above literature because it is deemed to be pure and rational, not involved in the use of rhetoric and figures of speech, as literature is. However, he argued, philosophy is also ruled by rhetoric, and so in the same way that a piece of literature can be used in philosophy, philosophy can be read as literature (Selden, 1993, p. 151). This is a position that has been also defended by Rorty. This defence is done on the basis of stretching the definition of literature to include “just about every sort of book which might conceivably have moral significance”, without any interest in the literary qualities of the work (Rorty in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, quoted in Lamarque and Olsen, 2002, p.194)

As would be anticipated, this conception has been frowned upon, especially by persons who label themselves philosophers. One of the arguments posited in this regard is that this approach involves going beyond looking on the writings of philosophers and arguing that they have literary merit; it means saying that the primary concern is the style and form of the work, not the intellectual content (Danto, 1987, p.4). Danto argues that such an approach is similar to viewing the Bible as literature, which would ignore the other merits of the Bible.

### **Philosophy and Literature are Distinct**

By far the greatest level of support in the literature has been for the view that the two are distinct subject areas. One theorist has argued that this distinction drawn by philosophers to ensure that literature is seen as the other (Benjamin, 1998), a distinction that was seen in some Greek philosophical writings and is exemplified in Plato's writings, where he clearly argued that poems (literary works) are "representations at the third remove from reality and easy to produce without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances and not realities" (Plato, 1987, p.365, Part 10, § 1, 598e – 599a)<sup>1</sup>.

Various arguments have been offered for the two being viewed as distinct, based on the following: characteristics; intention; institutional practices; translatability; role; focus and interpretation.

As it relates to the dissimilar characteristics assigned to each, the following are usually offered: literature is generally seen to be particular, that is there is the focus on individual cases/events, whereas philosophy focuses on the universal; literature is emotional, whereas philosophy is rational; literature focuses on feelings while philosophy places emphasis on truth. Additionally, they both have quite distinct stylistic approaches, with literature routinely using metaphor, irony, rhymes, specific sentence structures and rhetorical devices which mark the 'literariness' of the writing, but philosophy, while it may sometimes utilise these devices, don't have these defining the style of philosophy (Gracia et al., 2002). Persons who highlight these differences then go on to argue about the different ways that the two may then interact. The two dominant approaches are philosophy of literature and philosophy in literature.

There are others, however, who do not believe that these distinctions are feasible, as they collapse at some point. Philosophers sometimes utilise stylistic tools which would generally be regarded as being literary, such as the use of dialogues by Plato and characters by Kierkegaard. Some theorists argue that literature is not mainly emotional, neither is it mainly cognitive (Olsen, 1978, pp. 24-45, 58). There are philosophers who reject the idea of system building, as can be seen in the work of some existentialists, poststructuralists and postmodernists. Furthermore, philosophers and literary writers quite often explore similar topics and issues, though the approach to the discussion itself may vary. Literature can be quite serious, with the main intention being to derive truth claims. An attempt to therefore set up a concrete distinction based on style or content will fail.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato identified three levels of reality: the Forms, which is the source of objective knowledge; the realm of belief or opinion, which are our everyday experiences and the third is the representation done by artists. (Plato, 1987, translator's note, p. 369)

Possibly one of the most potent arguments for the distinction between philosophy and literature is intention; whether the author was aiming to write a philosophical or a literary work. While this criterion may be useful, it cannot be sufficient however, as one may argue that the reader is crucial in the process of interpreting what the writer has presented, and though the author may have intended. Building on Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances as furthered by Irwin (Irwin, 2002), one could argue that for a literary or philosophical work to be so labelled, one condition that should be met is the intention of the author, whether consciously or unconsciously, to produce a work that is to be labelled as either literature or philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

In another attempt at differentiation, the view is also posited that there are no set distinctions between what would be classified as a literary work and what would be classified as a philosophical work, but that there are institutions which determine whether a text is philosophy or literature. What this means is that the distinction here would be a relative one, based on the particular institution doing the ruling, and the location and time period of that assessment.

Gracia, recognising the difficulties with the previous attempts, developed his own technique to draw the distinction between literature and philosophy by examining the translatability of the text. He argues that if a work can be translated, then its focus is on the ideas rather than on the way in which they are expressed; these types of works would be philosophical. If on the other hand, the translation in effect becomes an interpretation because the translation possibly changes the essence/meaning of the text, then it is a literary work. Therefore, a literary work can never be translated, only interpreted, while a philosophical work can be translated without it becoming an interpretation. His argument is that a literary work depends on its rhetorical devices to present its ideas and gain a particular audience reaction. In the absence of the author's words (in her language), the work must become another work, namely that of the translator who decides which interpretations will be put on a particular sentence or phrase. Further, Gracia argues that the author's intentions are important in the development of the text and the choice of words to be used; and the translator will necessarily have different intentions, therefore a different text and a different work (Gracia, in Gracia et al., 2002, p. 94). He does argue that there is the possibility that a work may be literary, but have a philosophical component or vice versa.

The question does arise, however, about the plausibility of the claim that philosophy is translatable, when one examines the work of someone such as Heidegger, where there are such different interpretations of his ideas. Gracia tried to respond to challenges of this sort by arguing that there is a possibility of having a work which is both literary and philosophical, the latter would be translatable and the former not. However, since he also stressed the importance of the intention of the author in the development of the text, if someone is writing a philosophical text, then it would be somewhat unreasonable to argue that because there are problems with the translation of the text, breaking it down to its barest ideas, that it should be viewed as literary. Additionally, the translatability criterion for differentiation ignores the fact that two languages will not have the same range of words to express a similar idea, that language develops through

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<sup>2</sup> When I say unconsciously, I mean that a work may not be intended to be labelled as, say, philosophical by the author, but is treated as such by readers and if the author should look back on the work, and look on other works labelled as philosophy, then she would belatedly label hers as such also.

the culture and so the same idea may not directly translatable, even in a philosophical text (Hallen, 1995).

Another distinction centres on the role of philosophy as opposed to literature. Literature is generally seen as a subject area that seeks primarily to entertain but philosophy is a serious endeavour. It is also argued that philosophy focuses on ideas while literature focuses on life. But this position is untenable as it raises the question as to whether philosophy does not often focus on life in branches of philosophy such as social philosophy and existentialism, and whether there aren't literary works which stress ideas over or alongside the experiences of specific characters.

The final argument is that there often are clear differences in how a literary work is or can be interpreted, as opposed to a philosophical: a literary work is generally replete with ambiguities, allowing for a variety of interpretations, while philosophy does not allow for such ambiguities. However, while it may be true that literary works are ambiguous, the claim being made about philosophy is not necessarily so, as can be seen from debates that arise over the interpretation of the works of various philosophical writers.

### III

Having done this review, it is quite clear that a part of the debate about the distinction between philosophy and literature is the attempt to define both what philosophy and literature are, and what each should do. The first position excludes all literary works that do not have significant moral insight, or do not fit the criterion of being able to clearly teach its readers some important lessons; it therefore shifts the role of literature from one of entertainment to an area that is primarily of interest because of its pedagogical merit. The second position is one that stretches the meaning of literature interminably, to allow for all works to be treated as literature, including scientific discourse, on the basis that there are conventions for writing in these types of discourse. The result is that the essence of the meaning of 'literature' as generally understood is lost, and the further consequence is that there would essentially be no other subject area but literary theory. (This was actually suggested by Rorty.) Based on the foregoing, it is not feasible to support the view that philosophy is literature or that literature is philosophy, as both do not coincide with my understanding of either literature or philosophy, or what each should do. Literature is a piece of work that is defined by the creation of a text that explores a topic/subject that is of human concern, through the use of specific techniques. The definition provided by Rickman I believe captures the essence of what I and most others understand by literature and its purpose: "aims to give pleasure or satisfaction, independent of any outside interest it might satisfy...through its use or structure...use of language such as the choice of assonance, rhymes, metaphors, and sentence structures, but also the construction of plots, design of contrasts in characters, and control of perspective" (Rickman, 1996, p.14). Philosophy, on the other hand, involves the exploration of issues that are of fundamental human concern through systematic and critical reflection.

It means then that one should see philosophy and literature as being distinct. However, none of the distinctions examined above, by itself, offers a necessary or sufficient condition for differentiation. Rather, a combination of these factors must be used to explain the fact that one can generally, almost instinctively, recognise the difference between the two. Certainly each of

the criteria for differentiation discussed above has some value but some are more crucial than others.

A very important component of the distinction is the intention of the author. The author of a philosophical work approaches that work with very different objectives from a literary writer. The style of the writing also tends to be supportive of the intention of the writer, where rhetorical devices tend to be avoided in philosophical writing, but are heavily utilised in literary works. This does not of course negate the possibility that someone may intend to produce philosophy, but does not succeed in doing so, because the criterion of critical reflection has not been met (Gbadegesin, 1991, p 21). The interpretation of the reader will therefore also be important in the process of identification of the text as being either literary or philosophical.

There is the acute awareness that both literature and philosophy generally overlap with respect to the large themes that they explore, and this is a major reason for what could essentially be considered to be a 'turf war' about who should cover the particular topic and the approach that should be taken in doing so, in addition to what is the optimal medium for discussion of that issue to achieve insight and foster change.

I believe that it is generally the approach that is taken in the discussion of these major issues of concern that tend to highlight the differences between the two, and this is also linked to the intention of the author. Olsen refers in his writings to the notion of *perennial thematic concepts*, which he defines as the subjects of concern for a particular culture, themes generally discussed in literature, philosophy and religion (Lamarque and Olsen, 2002; Olsen, 1983). So literature and philosophy will often find themselves discussing the same theme, but how this is executed is what helps to define their differences.

Certainly, for the typical literary writer, having an understanding of philosophical issues may make the process of the explication of the perennial thematic concept(s) in question easier. But this knowledge does not change the essence of what the person is aiming to do, which is to tell a story. What I am therefore suggesting is that the philosopher and literary writer may start from perspectives that may reflect the same philosophical stance on an issue, but depending on the intention of the author, the orientation and methodology will vary. One may use the writings of Sartre as an example. Sartre, the philosopher, in writing took the approach of clearly and systematically laying out arguments and critically and rigorously analysing them, providing evidence to support his primary and secondary theses. When writing his plays and novels, his concern would certainly be to highlight his philosophical ideas, but to do so in such a manner that the philosophical idea becomes interweaved into the development of the plot, characters and other elements that are part of what defines a literary work. So both *Being and Nothingness* and *Nausea* have as their foundation Sartre's existentialist philosophy, but the former is philosophy in its pure form while the latter is literature with a clear philosophical foundation.

The fact that someone such as Sartre used both media suggests also that there are different roles that are played by each. Literature can be used to show a philosophical idea in a concrete setting, but it should also be there to entertain, whereas while philosophy might be entertaining, that is certainly not one of its main aims, it is there rather in an edifying role.

The preceding discussion would undoubtedly imply too that there is the patent recognition that one text can be classified as literature yet have philosophical merit, or be literature yet have philosophical merit. In other words, philosophical issues can be expounded on in a work of literature and a philosophical work may quite effectively utilise some literary devices in the aim of putting forward a philosophical argument. Furthermore, there are some literary works that may be more explicitly philosophical, in that philosophical themes are more clearly seen and/or have a greater role in the development of the plot of the work.

#### IV

Are the tensions discussed above likely to be manifested in Caribbean literature and philosophy? This tension has not been explicitly stated, but it may be one that can arise as Caribbean philosophy develops as a professional discipline. To explore whether this is probable, one can draw a parallel with another non-western philosophy, which should provide valuable insight for the Caribbean: African philosophy. With the development of African philosophy, one noticed the disagreements that arose between the approach taken by those of the ethnophilosophy and sagacity schools and those of the professional bent, with respect to what should be deemed African philosophy. Those in ethnophilosophy and philosophic sagacity utilise the proverbs, myths, stories and views of sages to signify a worldview of the various communities and ethnic groups. There are others in the professional school who reject this understanding of African philosophy and argue that African philosophy is work that is written by Africans who are professional philosophers. This debate is like that between literature and philosophy, a debate that can be situated in metaphilosophy, as to what should be defined as philosophy, what are the appropriate methods to be used in philosophy and what materials should be used as the starting point for philosophical analysis.

The debate to some extent still continues, with Mudimbe proposing what appears to be a feasible approach, that all of what is now under debate should be seen as African philosophy, though the approach may be different (Serequeberhan, 1991). I believe that it should be qualified slightly however to ensure that there is focus on how the work being done will inform and help to improve the lives of Africans (Gbadegesin, 1991).

A major part of the problem in the attempt to define African philosophy was that, unlike in western society, there tended to be less documentation of ideas, or these documents were destroyed. The question that arose was the merit associated with using essentially folk literature and philosophy in attempting to concretise African philosophy. This was based on the assumption that the written should be seen as of higher esteem than the oral (judging here from the standards of course of the West) and the oral was not available for rigorous analysis and critical reflection (Ochieng<sup>2</sup>-Odhiambo, 2005). The aim seemed in some way to attempt to remove what was unique about the African situation from African philosophy by imposing these standards on African philosophy. The recognition was there in the discussions that it was indeed appropriate and in fact necessary to include all sources of knowledge when developing (in the mode of Western thought) African philosophy. Furthermore, there is the recognition that some aspects of philosophy must be contextualised (Kresse, 2002), as philosophy is not done in a vacuum, but often represents the examination of issues that are of specific concern within a

particular culture (Bewaji, 2002). So though not explicitly stated, the debate about the relationship between literature and philosophy has also been a part of the debate that has taken place in defining African philosophy, where literature (especially in its oral forms) has been deemed by some to not be worthy of philosophical significance and appreciation.

The Caribbean finds itself in a similar situation where theorists in and of the region are seeking to define Caribbean philosophy. Up until approximately ten years ago, if someone had mentioned the idea of a Caribbean philosophy, the response would more than likely be that there is no such thing. I would like to argue, as others (see, for example, Henry, 2000) have done, that there is indeed Caribbean philosophical thought, but it has not been as explicit in this region as it has been in other parts of the world, specifically because of this region's historical foundation. The Caribbean region is populated largely by persons who were transferred by the slave trade, without being able to continue the material, spiritual and intellectual lives that they had led in their homeland. Some aspects of these were retained, but they had to be exhibited in forms that were 'legal'. Hence their Christian religious practices, storytelling, and so on, carried remnants of their culture, syncretised with the European cultural practices, into which they had been forced. A further consequence of slavery was that the population of Africans was largely illiterate.

The views of the population therefore manifested themselves in the cultural and religious practices: drumming, dancing, singing, storytelling, proverbs, religious worship, Johnkunno, carnival. These were means of expression that were not as rigidly regulated by their masters as group meetings would have been. Storytelling and religious worship were especially important as they both clearly expressed the particular system of beliefs of the people and highlight the perennial themes of concern to persons from this particular historical situation. These stories have been passed on through the oral tradition and many of them are reflected in some manner in literary works from the region. It means that these works would therefore offer scope for a serious analysis of the pervasive philosophical ideas of the region.

To illustrate this point, one can take the case of the writings of the Antiguan literary author Jamaica Kincaid. She normally uses the medium of the novel, but she also writes short stories and essays. From my readings of her work, one can clearly see the discussion of philosophical themes, and generally presented with the slant that is similar to that seen in other writers, as well as what is commonly reflected in the concerns expressed in stories and proverbs passed down from earlier generations. Even an examination of the main themes that she explores provides one with the fingerprints of the Caribbean culture: death; racial, sexual, gender and social relations, especially practices of discriminations in these realms; freedom and autonomy; identity at the personal and the collective levels; meaning in life; several aspects of political philosophy, including colonialism and democracy as systems of governance; African spirituality; appearance versus reality.

In the pioneering field of Caribbean philosophy, the work that has been done so far has embraced the idea that the region's worldview is embedded in a variety of sources and should be exposed and made available for philosophical analysis. A recent piece that highlights this approach is seen in McKenzie's successful attempt to show how several Jamaican proverbs give indications

of the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and aesthetic beliefs of the Jamaican people (McKenzie, 2005).

As yet, there has not been, as in the case of African philosophy, strong disagreements as to how literature should be used, and I hope that this will not arise, because philosophers or those documenting Caribbean philosophy will undoubtedly accept that the explication of a Caribbean philosophy, just as was seen for African philosophy, necessarily involves the use of all available sources that will lend insight to the exploration and analysis of the conceptual structure underlying Caribbean thought and the attendant approaches that should be taken to analyse issues and problems facing the people of the Caribbean.

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