

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

APR'19 (04 to 10 Apr)

Literature and thought process blur together like waves at a beach.

Time and place have always been the great communicative constraints. Before the advent of writing, senders and receivers always had to communicate face to face. Writing more or less banished time from the equation, and minimized the importance of geography to a certain degree. The printing press revolutionized the economics, and therefore the efficiencies of this first great transformation. And now, with information technology, both time and place have been rendered moot, more or less. We can receive communiqués from Plato anywhere at any time.

Information technology made Plato anxious. Writing, he feared, would lead people to abandon their memory, to trust in “external characters which are no part of themselves.” Now we find ourselves living through a new revolution in information technology, one with consequences every bit as dramatic and likely even more profound. How could we not be anxious? Our old ways of communicating are either becoming obsolete or finding

themselves dramatically ‘repurposed’ before our very eyes.

Literature is one of those categories that have vexed the human intellect for centuries. Typically we think of the classics – Shakespeare, Melville, Joyce, and so on – when we think of literature. If we don’t know exactly what it is, we like to think we know what it looks like. In other words, we use resemblance as our primary criterion. And indeed when you look at the output of contemporary literary authors you find no shortage of family resemblances: lyricism of prose, thematic sophistication, quotidian subject matters, and of course the all-important yen for experimentation.

The morphology of what we like to call literature has remained fairly stable since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. The ‘norms of representation’ have been smashed and gratuitously rearranged; the protagonist has been subjected to endless sessions of existential water torture; the language has been stripped bare and heaped with gaudy ornamentation, again and again and again. All the patterns have become easily recognizable, so much so that you can typically identify a

literary piece within the first few sentences of reading. Literature, as it is typically understood, is a very distinct cultural animal. Most of us can smell it even before it comes into view.

History shapes many forms of literature. We tend to get ideas for literature from things that have happened. Sometimes this comes in the form of non-fiction literature and sometimes it comes in the form of allegories or allusions. We cannot fully understand a piece of literature unless we understand its history and the history of those that wrote it. Thus, history can shape the way we view literature. Of course, that works both ways. Literature can also shape the way we view history.

The world about which Chaucer wrote was a very different world from that which produced Beowulf. Developments in language, new structures in society, and changes in how people viewed the world and their place in it produced literature unlike the heroic literature of the Old English period. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, Old English was suppressed in records and official venues in favor of the Norman French language.

However, the English language survived among the conquered Anglo-Saxons. The peasant classes spoke only English, and the Normans who spread out into the countryside to take over estates soon learned English of necessity. By the 14th century, English reemerged as the dominant language but in a form very different from Anglo-Saxon Old English. Writers of the 13th and 14th centuries described the co-existence of Norman French and the emerging English now known as Middle English. The Church and the concept of chivalry were dominant factors in the philosophy of the Middle Ages, these two ideas also figure prominently in medieval literature. While In the age of Renaissance it was believed that man is the maker of his own destiny. The writers who were born in the age of Renaissance wrote the literary masterpieces on these themes of Renaissance. The revival of classical learning influenced a content, style and technique of literature. Plato and Aristotle exercised immense influence on English Literature. The poets and writers of this period experimented with language and invented new models of expression.

While talking about the literature of the Victorian age (1837-1901) entered a new period after the romantic

revival. The literature of this era was preceded by romanticism and was followed by modernism or realism. Hence, it can also be called a fusion of romantic and realist style of writing. Though the Victorian Age produced two great poets Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, the age is also remarkable for the excellence of its prose.

In India, the seed of Indian Writing in English was sown during the period of the British rule. Now the seed has blossomed into an ever green tree, fragrant flowers and ripe fruits. The fruits are being tasted not only by the native people, but they are also being 'chewed and digested' by the foreigners. It happened only after the constant caring, pruning and feeding. Gardeners' like Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao – to name only a few, looked after the tender plant night and day. The struggle for independence was a mighty and momentous movement sweeping the entire nation and exerting tremendous impact on the sense of national consciousness among the literary fraternity. Thus the lucid description of the freedom struggle showcased images of the awakened Indians who sought to regain their freedom from the grueling and torturous regime of

the Britishers. Apart from these reflections, the writers were able to propagate their point of view, which ultimately helped to motivate and guide the masses. Thus the fixation on religious aestheticism was replaced by concerns on socio – political issues.

From the telegraph and the gramophone to cinema and cyberspace, 20th-century literature frequently addressed the wondrous and weird nature of emerging technologies. Every technological breakthrough tends to be accompanied by anxious announcements of its catastrophic effect on literature. Also, the impact of literature in modern society is undeniable. However, we can say that literature has been acting as a form of expression for each individual author since the beginning and it will remain till the end.

References:

- <https://www.thoughtco.com/british-literary-periods-739034>
- <https://academic.oup.com/fmls/article/43/2/121/529353>
- <http://www.online-literature.com/periods/renaissance.php>

Additional Reading:

- <https://www.theguardian.pe.ca/opinion/editorials/editorial-self-checkouts-rise-of-the-machine-294834/>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/opinion/brazil-rain-forest.html>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/02/briefing/exit-algeria-erdogan-cholera.html>
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