



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Situational and Perennial Themes: A Blend of Philosophy and Literature

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to highlight the fact that great literature of the world is not meant for entertainment only but for the proper understanding of the world around. The international Literature of the World have always been very philosophical in nature. Now the question arises what is the difference or the similarity between Philosophy and Literature? In the humble opinion of the writer of this article, this difference and similarity can be explained by the proper understanding of the Situational and Perennial Themes in Literature. For this purpose, the plays of Shakespeare (especially tragedies), the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and the short stories of Gorky and Chekov are studied. The study is fundamentally theoretical and qualitative in nature. Finally, the author recommends that one needs to understand the importance of great literature and the role of imagination; necessary for every kind of creation.

**KEYWORDS** Literature, Particular, Perennial Theme, Philosophy, Situational Theme, Universal

#### Introduction

Philosophy always tries to give the world a universal learning. For example, the Philosophical Metaphysics has always been busy in presenting before the world the true concept of God, soul or world hereafter etc. The Philosophical Epistemology has always been trying to search the ultimate source of knowledge (For Rationalists it is reason and for Empiricists it is the sense perception) (Popper, 1960). Ethics (the branch of Philosophy which deals with Morality) has always been trying to formulate the universal principles in Morality (take the example of Kant's Categorical Imperative) (Russell, 2003). In the field of Aesthetics, philosophers have been trying to formulate the universal principles of Aesthetics (for Kant Aesthetics it is the Subjective Universal) (Kant, 1973).

Literature on the other hand deals with day-to-day life, common characters, their relationships and the actual situation. Apparently, there is no link between Philosophy and Literature because the former tries to universalize things and the later takes interest in the individual, personal and subjective lives of people. The relationship between Philosophy and Literature cannot be understood without the proper understanding of what is called Situational Themes and what is called the Perennial or Universal themes in Literature (Griffiths, 1984).

#### Literature Review

For the preparation of this research article the great tragedies of William Shakespeare (especially *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*) have been studied carefully. The great Novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky (especially *Crime and Punishment* and *Idiot*) and *Anna Karenina* of Leo Tolstoy and have also been studied, more than once. Many books of Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics have been studied, especially the *Principles of Art* by R. G. Collingwood, *What is Art?* by Leo Tolstoy and *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* by Anne

Sheppard. Great short stories of the world have been studied especially the stories of Chekov and Tolstoy.

### Discussion

In order to explain we can take the example of *Anna Kerenina* by Leo Tolstoy (Tolstoy, 1916). *Anna Kerenina* is supposed to be the great novel of Leo Tolstoy in which the main character, a married woman with a child, falls in love with another man. Her husband is not a bad man. He is very disciplined and dutiful, but lacks romantic emotions. Anna does not resist the charm and beauty of another man and involves with him. She is not happy because in the arms of her lover she misses her child and in the presence of her male child she tries to avoid the memories and thoughts of her lover. Torn with these conflicting emotions, Anna commits suicide. Apparently, there is no philosophy in the story. To be in love of a married woman to some stranger is a usual but unfortunate thing in the world which happens again and again. Tolstoy beautifully portrays the upper middle class or the feudal class of the then Russia, the people and their behaviors belonging to those classes and the weather and the geography of the then Russia (Tolstoy, 1916). But again, these things cannot be universalized. They can be considered the part of Literature but not Philosophy.

The above-mentioned description of *Anna Kerenina* is basically the reading and understanding of a common reader. It cannot be considered the whole truth. The novel *Anna Kerenina* raises many serious questions.

- i. What is the difference between pleasure and happiness? (Durant, 1926).
- ii. What is more important in human life - Happiness or pleasure?
- iii. What is love?
- iv. What is duty?
- v. What is sacrifice?
- vi. Where does guilt come from to make a person capable of committing suicide?

Being a great writer of the world, Leo Tolstoy not only presented a story of a forbidden love but actually presented before the world some Perennial or Universal themes. *Anna Kerenina* is torn apart because the motherhood within herself did not allow her to live a life of her own and the woman within her personality compelled her to move on. There must be a decision. The previously mentioned two elements within her personality could not go side by side. Every decision had its own limitations and consequences. In other words, the battle was between getting pleasure or happiness. If any person only wants his or her own happiness without sacrificing anything and without being dutiful, he or she hardly gets happiness. One can get pleasure for a small time but not happiness which is more important and longer living. The novel also tells that in front of a dutiful husband, Anna feels more guilty and embarrassed.

In order to explain the novel in depth, one has to understand the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard in one of his great books explained in detail the three essential stages in human life (Kierkegaard, 1843). They are as follows

- i. Aesthetic stage (Aesthetic era)
- ii. Moral stage (Moral age)
- iii. Religious stage (Religious age)

In Aesthetic stage, an individual only wants his or her own freedom and happiness. He or she is not in a mood to sacrifice or to give service to anybody. Most of the Romantic artists or writers can be considered at this stage (Sartre, 1957). They people can be creative, talented and imaginative but are difficult ones to cope up with. The biggest reason behind the unsuccessful marriages of very famous people is not being ready to sacrifice anything. They seem selfish, careerist and self-centered. It is difficult for them to be sacrificing and dutiful. In the second stage according to Kierkegaard, individuals learn to grow by taking a moral decision avoiding their personal interests. In the third stage, the individual is before God. Now he or she is ready to surrender before God and do what God wants them to do and to sacrifice what God wants them to sacrifice.

Keeping in view the above-mentioned view of Kierkegaard, Anna Kerenina of Leo Tolstoy seems entangled between Aesthetic and Moral stage. That is the reason of her being extremely guilty. That is the reason of her being suicidal. The novel also tells the other insecurities of Anna Kerenina. She is not that young as her lover. The mother of her lover is also against her. The growing child of her is disturbed by the situation. In different pages of the novel, we notice Anna seeking help from God (Tolstoy, 1916). But the problem is that without being sacrificing, God does not help. Unfortunately, the mental operation and growing tensions pave the way for her to commit suicide. An Existential decision was needed but Anna did not muster up courage to take it.

We can take the other example of *Othello* a great play by William Shakespeare (Shakespeare, 1905). Othello is a jealous husband who loves his wife enormously. Desdemona (his wife) is very innocent and loyal to him but Othello doubts her fidelity. He thinks that his wife cheats on him. An evil character of the play deliberately enhances the doubts of Othello. With the growing tensions and anger Othello murders his wife. After committing the heinous act, he realizes, that he commits a grave sin. With extreme agony he commits suicide (Shakespeare, 1905). Again, the previously mentioned description does not lead to the inherent universal themes of the play. The readers should be cultured enough to appreciate and understand the great works of Literature. This play is not only the play of doubts, anger or crimes. This play suggests many outstanding philosophical points

- i. Excess of everything is bad.
- ii. Even in a love relation one cannot shut the window towards reason, rationality and logic.
- iii. The evil forces of cosmos enhance the doubts of the individual if he or she is not careful.

In spite of being trapped by the evil forces of the nature and in spite of being trapped by a bad person, Othello cannot be considered innocent. He is not a puppet but human being and a human being must think, decide and act.

One can take some more examples. Maxim Gorky in one of his great short stories named '*Twenty-Six Men and a Girl*' narrates the story of 26 workers belonging to a very poor and marginalized class (Gorky, 1902). They have to work hard in order to get their basic earnings. The owner of the factory, treats them badly and take them on sub-human level. They all are sad, over worked and depressed. One day a girl called Tina comes to the factory and gradually she becomes the regular visitor over there. Actually, the main purpose of her regular visits is nothing other than to meet the factory owner. She is pretty having a soft heart. She treats them well by having a little gossip with them or by exchanging smiles. All the factory workers fell in love with Tina. They feel great jealousy realizing the secret relationship with the factory owner. One day they start blaming her,

considering her a woman of no moral character. Sad and furious, she never comes to them again.

Apparently (according to the situational theme) this is the story of the folly or innocence of 26 poor workers (Gorky, 1902). But actually, it is not. The perennial theme of this short story is great and actually and this theme makes the story outstanding. The perennial theme (or themes) of the story is as follows

- i. Everybody (every human being) wants to be loved and respected.
- ii. Every human being wants to bow down before a higher entity.
- iii. We cannot judge the beauty of a person only by judging his or her outward personality.

Now we take the example of a story by Anton Chekov. In English it is called (translated) *A Lady with the Dog* (Chekov, 2005). Apparently (according to the situational theme) this is a story of a forbidden love. This is a story of love between two married persons. The male character of the story is in a habit of betraying his wife but for female character it's a new experience, mixed with pleasure and guilt. Noticing the innocence and the purity of the female character, one strange thing happens to the male character. He falls in love for the first time in his whole life. The remaining story is nothing but the description of their secret meetings. For an ordinary reader, who is not intellectually trained to appreciate the great work of fiction, this is nothing but a simple and start forward love story. Again, the perennial themes of this story are great.

- i. The first and the foremost perennial theme of the story could be - love transforms a human being.
- ii. There is a great difference between pleasure and happiness. Pleasure is temporary, momentary and transitory while happiness is longer living and relatively permanent.
- iii. Guilt destroys happiness.

### **Description, Interpretation and Evaluation**

The simple description of any work of Literature is nothing but a narration of the story, plot, the events and characters. Description, most of the times, explains only the situational theme (Sheppard, 1987). Interpretation is the process through which we infer the longer living messages or themes inherently present in any work of Art. In other words, it is not wrong to say that interpretation is more philosophical than description. It is more personal than public. Now again take the example of *Anna Kerenina*. The description of the novel is nothing but to narrate the events from beginning to end. The interpretation needs an individual approach. There could be many interpretations of a single soul piece of Art. The many interpretations of a work of Art cannot be considered a weakness of it but a strength. There could be many interpretations of *Anna Kerenina* and there could be many interpretations of *Othello* and other great works of Shakespeare. Interpretation is basically a process to infer universal from particular, to infer perennial from situational. The existence of many interpretations of the same work signifies the nature of the text. The more interpretations, the deeper will be the text! (Eaton, 1988). In the process of evaluation, one can evaluate the importance and significance of the work but without proper interpretation, the proper evaluation cannot be made.

We can take the example of the great novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky named *The Idiot* (Dostoevsky, 1887). The description of the novel tells only the story, plot and the big events written in the novel. Description can also tell that unlike other people Prince Mishcon is a

character who speaks from his heart. He is not greedy, complexed and snobbish, like the other characters of the novel. Interestingly, he is very childlike (but not childish). Observing his child like personality, the other characters of the play call him idiot. The novel is filled with many events which explain the interaction of Prince Mishcan with other characters. The description of the novel does not explain its greatness and on the basis of the description, no one evaluates the novel properly. There could be many interpretations of this great piece of Literature. They are as follows

- i. In the character of Prince Mishcan, Dostoevsky actually presents his concept of an ideal human being.
- ii. When a genius is judged by the common people, usually they call him idiot.
- iii. The behavior of an extraordinary person, usually is not conscious and deliberate but spontaneous and innocent. A great person, usually, does not start conflict and when in reaction he does something wrong, he becomes apologetic soon.

### **The Philosophical and Social Justification of Literature**

Apparently, Literature deals with make belief situations, fictitious characters, fictitious course of events and a fictitious beginning and end. Apparently, the whole story revolves around a situational theme which is as fictitious as the story itself. For example, the great characters of World Literature i.e., Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, Desdemona, Raskolnikov, King Lear, Prince Mishcan and Anna Kerenina etc. never exist. They are the brain children of great artists. The question arises, what could be the philosophical justification of them? As discussed above, Philosophy like Science investigates the world around. All the branches of Philosophy do the same thing. They want to capture Reality – Reality of Metaphysical Concepts, Epistemological and Moral Concepts. Karl Marx was so practical a person that he considered him a social scientist rather a philosopher (Hodgen, 1951). Apparently, Literature is very different from Philosophy. As discussed above in Literature every essential element is fictitious and the product of human imagination. The answer to this puzzling question is that in Literature, all things are fictitious but not the description of human situation. The characters in World Literature are not real but more than real. They are larger than life. And one should also remember that imagination is not the contradiction of Reality but an extension of it (Warnock, 1978). Keeping in view the above discussion, it is appropriate to say that Literature and Art enhance the concept of Reality. Common Man identifies the meanings and cognition of anything with language. Art and Literature, are the only things which can challenge the traditional approach of meaning and meaningfulness. One can take the example of Music. In pure Music (instrumental music) there is no word, there is no human voice or vocal cords but we cannot consider the pure Music as meaningless. The abstract painting is very different from landscape, portrait or still life. It is non-imitative, non-representational and non-linguistic yet meaningful (Collingwood, 1937). Even in the case of poetry, the poet has language as the medium but this language is quite different from the ordinary usage of it. Great aesthetes explain the point by explaining the difference between communication and expression. Great works of Literature are the great expressions of the artists shared by others. The great works of Literature enhance the concept of Reality and not try to damage it.

### **Conclusion**

In this article an effort has been made to explain the relationship between Philosophy and Literature. Apparently, they do not seem to be related with each other. Philosophy, most of the times, tries to Universalize things in the fields of Metaphysics,

Epistemology, Ethics and Aesthetics etc. Literature seems interested in the affairs of day-to-day life, common men and common situations. The characters, the stories, the plots and the situations created by great writers all are fictitious in nature. If Philosophy tries to reach at Reality, Literature seems busy in make belief situations. In this article a humble effort has been made to explain that through situational themes of Literature, we can infer the perennial or universal themes. It is like to infer universal from particular. That is why it is appropriate to say that Literature is more than real because it portrays the human situations in detail. In this article it has also been tried to establish the fact that imagination is the extension of Reality and not the contradiction of it. Literature and Art enhance the concepts of meanings, cognitions and communications.

### **Recommendations**

The writer of this article recommends the following points

- i. It should be kept in mind that great Literature of the world is not meant for entertainment only.
- ii. The great Literature enables people to understand the world around like Science and Philosophy but in a different way.
- iii. It should be kept in mind that imagination is necessary for every kind of creation.

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