

The Connection between Literature and Aesthetics: Is it Problematic?

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Abstract: Most literary critics are reluctant to accept the relevance of aesthetics to literature. This paper aims to show how aesthetics can be related to literature in terms of values, among other concepts. The aesthetic experience and the aesthetic value of literature have long been discussed resulting in many divergent theories from philosophers in general and aestheticians in particular. This paper revisits Peter Lamarque's objections to the connection between aesthetics and literature and argues for and against these objections, referring to accounts written by several philosophers, amongst whom Monroe C. Beardsley, Robert Stecker, Noël Carroll, and Kendall Walton. I claim that the connection between aesthetics and literature is possible if a literary genre is transformed into an experience which is mostly subjective, and generates aesthetic values which, on the other hand, are more objective and universal. As Lamarque claims, literary critics seem to emphasize more the instrumental values of literature than its more purely intrinsic values. Moreover, they keep away as much as possible from value judgements of any kind. All this seems to separate literature from aesthetics. There are common factors, however, such as aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic vocabulary, which are used by both aestheticians and literary critics, proving that literature holds a strong place in contemporary aesthetics. Most aestheticians regard literature, especially poetry, as one of the arts. However, the most common issues that philosophers write about are the cognitive and ethical values of literature. Such debates lack the literary and hence the aesthetic aspect of literature. It is not so obvious that when philosophers write about literature, they are really engaged in aesthetics. This paper focuses on whether the concept of aesthetics of literature really connects aesthetics to literature and, more precisely, on which criteria make literary works suitable for aesthetic evaluation? The key to these questions lies in the aesthetic experience of pleasure.

Keywords: aesthetics, literature, experience, values, properties.

According to Peter Lamarque ‘literary critics on the whole show a marked reluctance to acknowledge the relevance of aesthetics to literature’.¹ This statement implies that most literary critics do not accept or deem significant any connection, direct or indirect, between aesthetics and literature. There are several reasons for this situation as literary critics emphasize instrumental rather than intrinsic values and tend to keep a distance from any kind of value judgement, while not ascribing any importance given to emotions, to experiencing pleasure in the act of reading, and also to the aesthetic vocabulary expressing conceptions. Such factors are put aside by literary critics because of their minimal importance for criticism. On the other hand, when aestheticians write about literature and aesthetics, they often discuss topics which are also common among literary critics. So the question which arises here is: why do aestheticians accept the relation between literature and aesthetics whereas literary critics do not tend to do so? Most aestheticians, unlike critics, agree that literature has a place within aesthetics. However, they seldom emphasize the specific literary or aesthetic characteristics. This means that it is not so obvious that when aestheticians are dealing with literature, they are dealing also with aesthetics.

The relevance of aesthetics to literature is quite complex because it involves the organization of certain aesthetic features while distinguishing literary characteristics. In other art forms, such as painting and film-making, this process is not so complex as the connection is more evident in terms of perception or sensory or visual experience of the work of art. But what can be said about literature, whose only medium is words? This can be possible through the conception of appreciation. Appreciating literature for its own sake or as an art for different reasons means that it is possible to write about an aesthetics of literature. This principle is illustrated by Monroe C. Beardsley when he maintained that when we call an artwork a good one ‘we must be ascribing some form of value to it, and that this must be a distinctive

1 P. Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative* (London, 2014), 169.

and special form, properly labelled “aesthetic”.² The emphasis here is on a special kind of values, which can lead to experiences of interest and desire. According to Beardsley, a literary work which has such an aesthetic value transmits an aesthetic character to experience, a character which is worth having. It is this quality which makes it valuable. Any literary genre can be transformed into such an experience which generates aesthetic values.

The Aesthetic Experience

Noël Carroll claims that the ‘promotion of aesthetic experiences’ means ‘the production of beauty’.³ He argues that audiences including literary readers, are often interested in aesthetic experiences and this is where literary criticism has failed – in providing a conceptual theory of aesthetics. He distinguishes between such an experience and its interpretation. But, in spite of this distinction, interpretative criticism and aesthetic criticism can coexist and generally they are often complementary.

The pleasurable experience a reader goes through when reading a literary work can provide an aesthetic value to the work. To establish the connection between aesthetics and literature is to take note of what goes on during this aesthetic experience of literature, that is to attend to the content of such an experience. Carroll called this process ‘the deflationary account’⁴ which focuses on the content of such experiences. This type of account describes what goes on during aesthetic experiences. Form is of utmost importance to all artworks but especially to narrative. Instead of the term ‘form’ Carroll makes use of the phrase ‘design appreciation’⁵ because when the reader of a literary work pays attention to the structure of it, if there is unity among the parts, then the reader has an aesthetic experience. It is this appreciation of the structure of the work which leads the reader to the said experience. Design appreciation

2 M.C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd edn. (Indianapolis, 1981), p. lix.

3 N. Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics* (New York, 2001), 42.

4 *Ibid.*, 58.

5 *Ibid.*, 59.

does not include judgements based on taste. On the other hand, this activity engages the reader in the mechanisms of a literary work, that is how a particular work is structured. Such involvement in the design appreciation of a literary work is the aesthetic experience itself.

Besides the design appreciation, an aesthetic experience can result from the detection of the expressive qualities of a literary work. For instance the aesthetic experience of reading a poem can be that of anguish. This experience is based on sensuous cognition. Carroll goes a step further when he maintains that ‘Design appreciation and quality detection are each disjunctively sufficient conditions for aesthetic experience. Moreover neither of these experiences requires the other.’⁶ For example, the reader of a novel could search for the aesthetic qualities without analysing its structure or vice-versa. Nevertheless design appreciation and quality detection often come together because giving attention to the structure, often involves the role of the aesthetic qualities in a work. This could also work the other way round. However, whether together or independently, they are sufficient to make an experience aesthetic.

At this point I wish to refer to Kendall Walton’s theory of aesthetic experience which contrasts with that of Carroll’s. Walton emphasizes pleasure as the principle quality of aesthetic experience. His theory is two-fold: (i) the experience of pleasure which comes from the object itself, and (ii) the pleasure which is felt when positively evaluating the object. When talking about literature, the second option is more suitable because it illustrates a certain way of experiencing the literary work.⁷ The emphasis here is on experience rather than on the effect of it which is secondary. Thus one can admire a poem if one observes certain characteristics that make it a good poem and, in the process, takes pleasure in it. Value judgements are not involved in this activity.

In this regard aesthetic pleasure is more directed to the artwork itself as opposed to the attitude towards it. It is an aesthetic experience of pleasure which rests upon appearances as they present themselves to the senses. But how does this work within the literary world? Setting aside obvious aesthetic features such as the print of the work

6 Ibid., 60.

7 K. Walton, ‘How Marvellous: Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value’. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51 (1993), 510.

and the type of font chosen, the look and the texture of the paper, the aesthetic experience of a literary work which involves appearances, can include the stanzas or paragraphs, the sound of words, sentences, the appearance of the poem on paper, the rhythm of the lines, and so forth. Still, in spite of all these features, the one important aspect of the said experience which is found in most literary works is that of the imagination. Unfortunately this is often lacking in criticism. Besides the experience which is based on the senses, the imagination is crucial to most poems and narratives. Stecker maintains that ‘Recognizing that the appearances interact with and contribute to the meaning presented to the imagination, I nevertheless call the latter the core aesthetic experience of literature.’⁸ This experience consists of the contemplation of the conceptions the work presents to the imagination and this is done for the sake of pleasure arising from such an experience.

The conception of the aesthetic experience of a literary work as presented by Stecker seems to focus more on representational content than on the formal aspects such as the pattern of a novel’s plot, the development of the story, how one event leads to another, changes in the points of view and how one image or symbol moves to another. All these seem to have been left out. However these are implied in Stecker’s conception in order to understand and appreciate properly literary works.⁹ As a rule, formal features can be regarded as the expression of content carrying several conceptions. Attention can be drawn to such features more than the concepts themselves. This is a pleasurable activity for its own sake. This aesthetic experience is similar to the enjoyment of the sound of words in a poem. But is this pleasurable experience sufficient to the work itself? The work is the object of these formal features which tend to be inadequate because they leave out too many characteristics of the work. An author can make use of several conceptions to display the work’s formal features such as the use of concepts which convey certain sounds and rhythms. Without aesthetic experience one cannot distinguish aesthetic value.¹⁰ In fact the aesthetic character of a literary work can include a number of properties that, although difficult to describe, are not difficult to experience. These may

8 R. Stecker, *Artworks – Definition, Meaning, Value* (Pennsylvania, 1997), 275.

9 *Ibid.*, 278.

10 M.C. Beardsley, *Aesthetic Value in Literature* (Pennsylvania, 1981), 240.

include the sense of unity or lending attention to a particular aspect of the literary work. Therefore those properties that give the literary work its aesthetic value are basic.

Aesthetic Values

Several aestheticians have discussed and written about the aesthetic values of artworks or specifically of literary works. There have been many divergent ideas about these values but it seems that there is one fact that most aestheticians agree about – the fact that a literary work provides an experience to the reader and that this experience is created from different aesthetic values the work itself might contain. This is one clear reason how aesthetics can be connected to literature. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* might clearly illustrate this conception. The aesthetic value of this comedy lies in the fact that by means of humorous scenes, Shakespeare is offering to his spectators the opportunity to experience pleasurable moments. Literary critics would emphasize features such as the characters, the setting, and the dialogue, while aestheticians would focus more on the experience of pleasure which becomes an aesthetic value. Although there is a difference on the emphasis of the literary critics and that of the aestheticians, the effect, that of humour, unites both perspectives.

The definition of aesthetic values is of great importance in the aesthetic debate about literature. Although Michael Slote regards such values as a tendency, he maintains that they are a 'dispositional property' in the reader.¹¹ He argues that there is no need to specify the conditions in which the reading is taking place, because the reading itself will provide an experience of the aesthetic features which define it. The aesthetic value of a novel includes certain characteristics such as unity and complexity which makes it valuable as a literary work. This implies that experiences of some duration can acquire an aesthetic value because the set of criteria found in artworks in general helps to form experiences and the combination of some of them results in an aesthetic experience.

This idea is further developed by Robert Stecker who believes that 'Aesthetic value is frequently used to refer to whatever is valuable

11 Id., *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd edn. (Indianapolis, 1981), p. lx.

about art, that is, as a synonym of artistic value'.¹² But here the use of the term is too vague especially when the artistic or literary functions of these values are discussed. For this reason, I am going to limit this discussion to the conception of pleasure since this can be applied to all artworks and also to other objects such as natural objects. Aesthetic value is found in enjoyment. This implies that anyone who is enjoying reading a novel or a poem is going through a pleasurable experience which is not only caused by a literary work, but it is also directed to the same literary work. Thus one can claim that the literary work has an aesthetic value because it is enjoyable. The cause is the work itself, the effect is the aesthetic value of pleasure. 'The more an element seems to serve no ulterior end but to be an end in itself, the more aesthetic the effect.'¹³ Therefore aesthetic value cannot ignore the experience nor the object itself because it consists of the pleasurable experience elicited from the literary works.

Although Stecker's theory implies an element of subjectivity, Horn insists that 'aesthetic values are "objective"'¹⁴ because they depend on the human mind. There are two reasons for this. Firstly because they construct the link between the human mind and the aesthetic properties of literary works and secondly because they only become actual and more realistic within the human mind. Therefore the said values are objective because their valuableness does not depend on the opinion or taste of the individual. Blackburn's view presents the reading of literature at its best, that is reading literature in a better way by paying attention to several aspects of it. It 'is an activity that ... has a good chance of telling us more about our own minds, and the lives they enable us to live'.¹⁵

Besides the 'emotion-centred' value, the conception of the aesthetic experience of a literary work increases gradually the work's aesthetic value. Understanding and interpreting the literary work, undoubtedly leads to aesthetic enjoyment. The ability to produce such an enjoyment creates the aesthetic value of the work. Aesthetic enjoyment can

12 Stecker, 270.

13 A. Horn, 'Aesthetic Values in Literature: The Dialectic of Permanence and Change', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (1989), 7.

14 Stecker, 3.

15 S. Blackburn, 'Some Remarks about Value as a Work of Literature', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50:1 (2010), 88.

originate from a historically correct understanding of the work. Thus the work itself is responsible for such pleasure. On the other hand, the value of pleasure can be also derived from any plausible interpretation of the work. Such interpretations may not have been intended by the author and would not have necessarily been justified by the work's historical circumstances. Therefore any acceptable interpretation can produce aesthetic enjoyment. In both cases the responsibility of pleasure lies in the literary work.

Aesthetic Properties

To conceive an idea of anything means that it possesses certain specific properties. Lamarque refers to Sibley's view that since such properties are emergent, they go beyond a mere sensory perception (2014, 172).¹⁶ He emphasizes the fact that not every person can discern such properties. A certain type of sensitivity is important to the application of aesthetic appreciation of these properties. This means that language alone is not enough for the appreciation of a literary work as this is not only a question of linguistic competence. As Lamarque points out, 'Literary appreciation is not a natural but rather a trained mode of discernment'.¹⁷

Sibley claims that there is no relation between the non-aesthetic and the aesthetic properties of an artwork. The presence of one does not mean the presence of the other. Non-aesthetic properties such as perceptual, structural or physical, do not imply that there should be aesthetic properties as well. In the case of literature, aesthetic properties cannot be elicited from textual features alone. Sibley's theory is opposed by Walton's argument in claiming that 'a work *seems* or *appears* to us to have certain aesthetic properties because we observe in it, or it appears to us to have certain non-aesthetic features'.¹⁸ This statement is clearly understood if we keep in mind Walton's definition of aesthetic properties. He describes them as characteristics existing within the works themselves just as much as non-aesthetic ones and these can be

16 Lamarque, 172.

17 Ibid., 173.

18 K. Walton, 'Categories of Art' in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, edited by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Oxford, 2004), 214.

seen, heard and perceived. Bearing in mind the importance of such non-aesthetic properties that can be found in artworks and that aesthetic properties depend on these as well, Walton divides non-aesthetic properties in three types: the standard, the variable and the contra-standard. The first type places the work into a specific category, for example a literary work is categorized as Medieval, Romantic, Modern, and so forth. A variable feature is when it does not indicate whether the work falls within a certain category. This means that such a feature is irrelevant to categorize a work. The third type is the absence of a standard feature, the presence of which will disqualify the work from a specific category. Of course, this is not clear in all cases.¹⁹

All this suggests that the notion of perception is crucial to place a literary work into a category because it entails to perceive into a category, the basic qualities of a work. This process depends on the perception of particular features that are relative to different categories. Perception is a continuous state which may last for quite some time as opposed to recognition which involves shorter moments. Perception helps in the recognition of the relevant features of a literary work so that it will find its place into a suitable category. Perception of aesthetic properties goes much deeper than recognition as sometimes it may be very vague and its properties are relevant to categorize a work of art.

The reader of a literary work forms a conception of the text he is reading. This means that he/she thinks of it as having certain properties. This is more likely in certain forms of writing, as in the case of poetry, than in other forms. Such conceptions make possible aesthetic enjoyment. The reader enjoys thinking about a particular conception and literary works are commonly designed for such contemplation. 'Fictional literary works tend to present both sorts of conceptions ... conceptions that are of something and conceptions that are not. A lyric poem that presents a conception of a fictional someone's grief may imply... a conception of grief. A novel whose fictional characters inhabit nineteenth-century Russia presents a conception of nineteenth-century Russia'.²⁰

19 Ibid., 144.

20 Stecker, 277.

Conclusion

I have by no means exhausted the subject of the relation between aesthetics and literature. However, I have argued that there exists a connection between the two disciplines, although not always direct. In this paper I have shown the importance of aesthetic value for the appreciation of a literary work. Today this type of value is endangered and tends to be more neglected by critical theorists and critics themselves. I believe that to speak of aesthetics of literature one must avoid emphasizing only intrinsic textual properties such as figurative language, imagery, metre, and so forth. The surface meaning should also not be given priority and, finally, the debate about literary aesthetics should never be reduced to mere perspectives of plot and character. These areas can be congenial to the literary critics but one has to admit that there exists an overlapping of critical views over aesthetic ones. As Lamarque states ‘the aesthetic elements identified in literature are not simply well-crafted turns of phrase or expressive images ... but rather emergent qualities that become salient when appropriate attention is directed to works’.²¹ This statement implies that the study of aesthetics cannot be confused with other disciplines when applied to literature.

Developing this conception further, I would say that these go much deeper than meaning because, to appreciate literary works, one has to adopt specific techniques of reading which transform the texts into what David Davies called ‘aesthetic symbols’.²² This goes beyond the meaning of the literary text because literary aesthetics takes into account a much wider range of properties of the modes of expression such as the cultural resonance, the sound of the words and their associations and so forth. Aesthetically speaking, literary works are the vehicles for expressing content.

Most aestheticians have tackled the connection between literature and aesthetics from different points of view. However, I believe that there is one common factor that is found in most of the theories discussed by aestheticians. The common ground which illustrates the relation between literature and aesthetics is found in the distinction made by several aestheticians between textual features, more common

21 Lamarque, 182.

22 D. Davies, *Aesthetics and Literature* (London, 2007), 15.

with literary critics, and aesthetic features.²³ Textual features are found in all texts as they are concerned with style, structure and factual content. These are the instrumental values mentioned by Lamarque.²⁴ (2014, 170). On the other hand the aesthetic features are capable to bind literature with aesthetics because such features change a text into a literary work and these may include experience, values and properties which I have discussed in this paper and which Lamarque called intrinsic values.²⁵

It is quite tempting to reduce aesthetic properties to textual qualities because they are more familiar. But these can obstruct the successful appreciation of literature. One possible connection between literature and aesthetics is when literary works are treated as objects of aesthetic appraisal and such appraisal is promoted through them. This idea helps to resist the reduction of literature to something else such as ethics or pure philosophy. But if literature rests within the limits of the idea of literature as art and adheres to the conception of literary works as having distinctive characteristics in contrast with other art works, then an aesthetics of literature is possible.

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23 S.H. Olsen, *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge, 1987), 1.

24 Lamarque, 170.

25 *Ibid.*, 170.

Further reading

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