**Fiction (as a form of literature) and Truth**

In Philosophy truth is a central theme. Around it has been built a lot of theories. These theories try to answer the question of the nature of truth. Here we find the commonest as correspondence theory, coherence theory, phenomenological theory, and pragmatic theory. You need to look up what these theories are all about, to help you understand how truth is articulated in terms of theory. But in principle, truth usually refers to a fact or reality. Example man is an animal. In itself this claim that truth is about fact, is also contestable, because even the nature of fact or reality is not definite since a lot depends on how each philosopher decides to define reality, either by relating it to something tangible or historical fact or relating it to something believed in or accepted. Here issues of morality or claims about God can be truthful just as much as saying that there is a city called Lagos. Like all philosophical problems, truth is not easy to pin down. But this concern about the nature of truth is too general. This is not the direction we would be travelling or the line of thoughts we shall be pursing here. That is the field of epistemology. It does not represent what we need to know in this course of Philosophy and Literature.

Now, for this course, the question needs to be made clearer and narrower. Rather than just asking the question of the nature of truth as a theory, this course seeks to determine how our perception of that reality or our acceptance of a certain belief can be conveyed by means of a form of literature called fiction or imaginative writing. In other words, can or cannot a forged story help us to perceive reality (whatever it is) as it is. The framing of this question is very important because it moves it away from the nature of truth as such to the way the piece of literature portrays a certain reality.

Let us point at some of the biblical stories and the kind of truth they portray. The biblical story of Job is fiction, but can it tell us about God? Are the claims made about God in the Book of Job true? As stated in some other passage, did Jonah get into the belly of a whale? Did Jesus go without food and water for as many as forty long days? Did the angel appear to Mary to speak to her about God’s choice to make her the Mother of Jesus? Did Satan appear to Jesus during the temptations? Did he take him from here to there, having a conversation with him? These examples from the bible, are they true in the sense of occurring just as the description goes?

Same goes with some of the secular writings and literary forms. While reading Shakespeare’s drama Macbeth, can we be led to understand the true nature of man or some aspects of him? Reading the novels of Chinua Achebe, what kind of insight does it give you about Nigeria as a country or about Igboland? Can those insights said to be true? Can those insights have philosophical value? For instance, can a non-Igbo man, maybe an American man, get an insight into the culture, cosmology, worldview, and philosophy of Igboness? If this insight is derived from a fictitious story, can it have truth value? Are there novels or stories you read that bring you to a moving appreciation of epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, or anthropology? Concerns like this are the main point of today’s lesson. Please do not miss it, it is very important.

It is important to note that even fictious writings have varieties. Some of them are representations or exaggerations of actual events but rendered in a prose or drama form to conceal the actual persons or events that is written about, yet leaving no doubt to anyone who knows about the event that indeed it is this event that is being described. Usually names and dates of actual persons may be changed just as details and outcomes may be adjusted to fit the authors intentions. Good example of this is when people write about actual wars or conflicts, while changing the names of places or persons. It is fiction but of course also factual in a sense. Good example of this is Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is a fictitious story of the Nigerian Civil War. *Death and the King’s Horseman* by Wole Soyinka is a telling example. It is a drama about an event that happened in Oyo State of present-day Nigeria. In like manner, prose may be purely imaginative although drawing from real life stories. Good example is Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which though a fictious novel, is of course a story of Igbo culture before the coming of the white man. But great care must be taken, not to take it that the renditions of Achebe in that novel correspond to actual events or that the places he uses are in fact real and historical. But are the things he says in the novel true? Is it a true representation of any people?

From the foregoing, you can see that it is quite confusing and a matter of debate whether fiction has a truth value. It is up to you to take a position as to whether you are convinced that some elements of truth can be deduced from a purely forged story or not. As already mentioned in passing above, the things to look out for in any fiction of whatever type, is whether the writing exhibited sufficient depth as to be able to capture correctly aspects of human nature and human behaviour, questions of morality and foundations of ethics, insights into metaphysics, worldview, cosmology, origin of the world or man’s sense of meaning, or explain the culture of a people in such a good manner that its epistemological traditions stand out. It is to the extent that writers are able or unable to make some of these things clear and evident in their writings that make its truth value compelling to readers or not. Therefore, whether a fictitious novels can have truth value, in the context we are investigating it in this course, will depend on your own personal take on the prose or drama in question and the author’s ability to shed light on the some aspects of reality that you are conversant with. It is up to you to argue and defend whether indeed any fictitious book has made you come very close to reality. Or made you understand yourself or mankind more. Or made you see new perspectives or possibilities in life. But then, you will have to tell what it is that you see that is true and why.

Written by Fr. Ikechukwu Odigbo.

**Lesson Note.**

**School: Bigard Memorial Seminary**

**Class: Philosophy Three**

**Course: Philosophy and Literature**

**Topic: Fiction and Morality**

**Lecturer: Fr. Ikechukwu Odigbo**

**Date Delivered: Thursday 29th April, 2021.**

Fiction is a form of literary composition that is forged, that is, it originates from nowhere other than from the mind of the author. Morality of course is always about practical human action: whether an action or character is right or wrong, good or bad. It is an interesting and extensive problem in philosophy and religion. Philosophy is always bothered by whether something in human action is right or wrong. It is also concerned with the nature and sources of the principles of morality of human action.

For today, there are three ways to answer the question posed above of whether fictitious literature has moral value. First one can review the characters in a fable, a novel or a drama and make moral judgements about them. If a certain character be called villain or brave for instance, it is a form of moral judgement about such a character. In the book of *Genesis*, Cain is a villain. We all react with moral repugnance when he kills his own brother Abel out of envy. There are many fictitious stories we read that will get a moral grip on us and cause us to make a judgement quite swiftly about the character that is unfolding in the plot. Sometimes we are so worked up emotionally that we feel like punching the author, were he or she close enough. This particularly happens when our hero in a prose become victim, rather than victor. I leave you to find the best examples of the such characters in some fictitious books you have read.

Care must be taken, however, not to confuse the moral value of fictions with the moral value of actual characters. The Apostle Judas Iscariot for instance is a villainous and treacherous man, but the moral value of his character is a different thing from what we are dealing with here. Unlike the story of Genesis which is a fable, the story of Jesus and his apostle Judas is factual. So, while the gospel (I did not say the entire bible) is a form of literature, it does not fit the kind of fictitious literature that we are discussing today. Take note of this distinction. Of course, we all know and accept that figures like Judas who was at some point a living follower of Jesus, should not be emulated. Unlike Judas therefore the moral value of Cain’s character is of a different kind, philosophically speaking. Such subtle distinctions are the character of philosophical sagacity. Some people might say, ‘does it matter, such hair-splitting distinctions?’. Well, it does.

The second way that we can answer the question posed above is to look beyond specific characters and see if we can draw principles of action and morality, in a general sense. This time, it is not just that the character in question is condemnable or praiseworthy, the question is whether we can build a moral theory from it. And why? So, it is not just that you like or hate that character, it must be drawn now to a higher level of philosophical generalization or abstraction. Take for instance Cain the brother of Abel. It is not just that Cain’s envious character is bad. Can we, by the same token, erect a theory of envy from that story. It is true that it might appeal to us as individuals or that we might decide to adopt the lessons in the story as our guidelines. But then, we move from applying it to ourselves and seek to make it a standard for everyone. Can it stand? Why? What is it that gives the theory of envy its moral power? Where does that power come from? What is it in that story that can make it effectively connect to everyone?

But there is a third point to note, before we end. If envy is obviously bad, why do people frequently engage in it? Is envy a wilful action? Can we decide not to be envious? Is it beyond us? Does it just happen? We are only making examples with envy. It can be with lust, greed, wickedness, drunkenness, sloth etc. But the point is, is it within the power of man, to grow beyond these so-called vices? Are they anthropologically fixed? Are we as humans inexorably vulnerable towards them? If one man can overcome it, does it follow that every other man is supposed to do so? What is the validity of moral generalizations? If one person can live up to it, does it follow that everyone should live up to it? These and similar questions are what we should grapple with in today’s lesson.

**Week 4: What is Philosophy of Literature?**

**Introduction**

The lesson of today is building on the last ones. But it is important to note that today stands out because today we shall discuss the peculiarities of this course and explore its substantial nature. With a good knowledge of what Philosophy is and what Literature is, as well as their many branches and forms, we are now in a position to dig deeper. We should now answer the questions such as: What philosophy of Literature is not; what the relationship between philosophy and literature is and then what actually is Philosophy of Literature. In other words we want to study the kind of questions that this field of concern deals with and which methodologies are peculiar to it. We shall try to answer the question of what is Philosophy of Literature from a nominal and conceptual standpoint. In other words, we should give a kind of definition that can be true or/and applicable to the different writings of philosophy of literature.

**What Philosophy of Literature is not.**

It is import to delimit this course so that we do not confuse it with any academic activities that are close or related to it. (a) Literary Criticism, (b) Literary History, (c) Literary Theories (d) Philology or Philosophy of Language (e) Analytic Philosophy.

**Relationship Between Literature and Philosophy**

Clearly, there is a relationship between philosophy and literature which is why we study one (literature) in the light of the other (philosophy). If literature is raw material, philosophy is like a set of lenses by means of which it is dissected, analyzed, interpreted and evaluated. Without the branch of learning called literature, there will be no ‘philosophy of literature’. So, one depends on the other. Or mutually, you might say. Without a good understanding of literature, its philosophical analysis might be difficult if not impossible, since one builds on the other.

**Philosophy of Literature**

Because it is still philosophy, the philosophy of literature according to Jonathan Gilmore of the Oxford University “addresses the most fundamental questions about the nature of literature as an art”[[1]](#footnote-1). Other branches of knowledge especially those listed in the above paragraphs deal with literary works from varying and various perspectives, so we need to be sure what is specifically philosophical about the philosopher’s approach. According to Gilmore ‘the philosophical approach to literature, while often productively drawing on the empirical study and first-order analysis of literary works, tend to adopt a more systematic, theoretical and ahistorical and foundational approach than commonly found in other fields” We will rely on him to further understand this section. In general, Philosophy of Literature poses and answers important questions about literary works of art. For instance the philosophy of literature addresses:

1. the metaphysics and ontology of literary works: what for instance, is the fundamental distinguishing factor between novels, poetry, drama, from other literary forms such as scientific reports, religious texts, manuals, etc which of course are also forms of literature.
2. What norms govern our engagement and understanding of literary works: for instance which interpretations of literary works are correct? Is the meaning and interpretation of texts and passages fixed or does it change over time?
3. Can we have a genuine emotional response to characters or events in literary works which are fictitious
4. Can morality or truth be derived from fiction as forged and unreal literature? Example some biblical passages are fiction just as most novels, yet theories of truths are erected on them?
5. What essentially is the value of literature? Does it offer any distinctive form of knowledge and insight? Can their cognitive merits count as artistic merits?
6. Do all literature have philosophical value? What is it in literature that is of interest to philosophy?
7. What is the criteria for assessing whether literature has philosophical value?
8. Etc

**Week Five: Theories in Philosophy and Literature**

1. Introduction.

Today, we are moving deeper into our subject matter. We shall deal with theories in the philosophy of literature. Theories, as you know, are intellectual and systematic responses to academic or real life problems or dilemmas. Developed and suggested by experts in the field, theories are meant to answer or help to resolve the most challenging problems and questions in that particular field of learning. Theories provide framework with which to make meaning of the most difficult issues in a particular field of learning. Let us deal with at least two theories in the philosophy of literature traditions.

1. **Paradox of Fiction Theory**, also called make-believe theory in philosophy of literature is a theory that responds to a dilemma observed by philosophers to the fact that people can feel strong emotions to clearly fictional stories or dramas. Collin Radford and Michael Weston first noted this dilemma in their 1975 paper “How Can we be so moved by the Fate of Anna Carenina?”, a philosophical reaction to the novel Anna Carenina written by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy . Although readers knew that the character Anna Carenina was fiction, they had strong emotional reaction to it, hence the question of the paradox of fiction. The paradox is represented in three direct questions namely:

* People have emotional reaction to characters, objects, events which they know to be fiction
* In order for us to be so moved, we must believe that these characters are real or true
* Nobody who takes characters or events to be fictional at the same time believes they are real

In the case of the authors of the article written above, they sought to understand how people can react emotionally to such fictitious characters. This forces them to come to the conclusion that such emotional reactions to fictional characters are irrational. In 1978, Kendall Walton published a paper titled “Fearing Fiction” where he developed the ‘make-believe theory’ which is his own response to the paradox of fiction dilemma. To resolve this dilemma, it might be good to look in the direction of cognitive theory which deals with such things from an epistemological point of view. The cognitivists think that emotions involve beliefs or judgments, which means that indeed the mind considers the act real. What of when people are moved by irrational phobias? Or by hypothetical things? Or by projections of the future? Or by sharing the pain of neighbours? But different people react in different ways to scenes of fiction or such situations. Other theories that seek to explain this paradox include Pretense Theory, Illusion Theory, Thought Theory.

1. **Speech-Act Theory**. Was originally developed by JL Austin in his seminal work ‘How to Do Things With Words’. It was JR Searl who deepened it to understand the degree to which spoken words are said to perform illocutionary acts, locutionary act and perlocutionary acts. Searl offers explanations of the five illocutionary points that speakers can achieve with spoken words.

* Speakers achieve assertive points when they present how things are in the world;
* Commisive points when with their words they commit to doing something
* Directive point when with their words they get their hearers to do something
* Declaratory point when they do things in the world at the moment of utterance solely by virtue of saying that they do
* Expressive point when they express their attitude about objects and facts about the world

Scholars believe that speech act theory has been useful arguing that when applied to the analysis of direct discourse by a character within a literary work, “it provides a systematic framework for identifying the unspoken presuppositions, implications and effects of speech acts (that) competent readers and critics have taken into account, subtly but unsystematically” (Abrams and Galt Harpharm 2005).

**Week 7: Lesson Note.**

**Topic: Fiction and Morality**

**Introduction**

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**Discussion**

For today, we shall discuss three ways to answer the question posed above of whether fictitious literature has moral value.

1. First one can review the characters in a fable, a novel or a drama and make moral judgements about them. If a certain character be called villain or brave for instance, it is a form of moral judgement about such a character. In the book of *Genesis*, Cain is a villain. We all react with moral repugnance when he kills his own brother Abel out of envy. There are many fictitious stories we read that will get a moral grip on us and cause us to make a judgement quite swiftly about the character that is unfolding in the plot. Sometimes we are so worked up emotionally that we feel like punching the author, were he or she close enough. This particularly happens when our hero in a prose become victim, rather than victor. I leave you to find the best examples of the such characters in some fictitious books you have read. Care must be taken, however, not to confuse the moral value of fictions with the moral value of actual characters. The Apostle Judas Iscariot for instance is a villainous and treacherous man, but the moral value of his character is a different thing from what we are dealing with here. Unlike the story of Genesis which is a fable, the story of Jesus and his apostle Judas is factual. So, while the gospel (I did not say the entire bible) is a form of literature, it does not fit the kind of fictitious literature that we are discussing today. Take note of this distinction. Of course, we all know and accept that figures like Judas who was at some point a living follower of Jesus, should not be emulated. Unlike Judas therefore the moral value of Cain’s character is of a different kind, philosophically speaking. Such subtle distinctions are the character of philosophical sagacity. Some people might say, ‘does it matter, such hair-splitting distinctions?’. Well, it does.
2. The second way that we can answer the question posed above is to look beyond specific characters and see if we can draw principles of action and morality, in a general sense. This time, it is not just that the character in question is condemnable or praiseworthy, the question is whether we can build a moral theory from it. And why? So, it is not just that you like or hate that character, it must be drawn now to a higher level of philosophical generalization or abstraction. Take for instance Cain the brother of Abel. It is not just that Cain’s envious character is bad. Can we, by the same token, erect a theory of envy from that story. It is true that it might appeal to us as individuals or that we might decide to adopt the lessons in the story as our guidelines. But then, we move from applying it to ourselves and seek to make it a standard for everyone. Can it stand? Why? What is it that gives the theory of envy its moral power? Where does that power come from? What is it in that story that can make it effectively connect to everyone?
3. But there is a third point to note, before we end. If envy is obviously bad, why do people frequently engage in it? Is envy a wilful action? Can we decide not to be envious? Is it beyond us? Does it just happen? We are only making examples with envy. It can be with lust, greed, wickedness, drunkenness, sloth etc. But the point is, is it within the power of man, to grow beyond these so-called vices? Are they anthropologically fixed? Are we as humans inexorably vulnerable towards them? If one man can overcome it, does it follow that every other man is supposed to do so? What is the validity of moral generalizations? If one person can live up to it, does it follow that everyone should live up to it? These and similar questions are what we should grapple with in today’s lesson.

**Conclusion**

As philosophers we are also expected to think out more points in answer to the leading question of our discussion. We can also dispute or deepen the points already made here. As we know, a philosopher can make any claims but he should be able to defend it and marshal arguments and evidence to support his claims.

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**Group: 2**

**Course: PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE**

Death and the King’s Horseman, a play written by the winner of the 1986 noble prize literature, Wole Soyinka tells of an explosive dilemma between traditional African culture and the West. This story, however, revolves round Elesin, the king’s horseman who is expected to “commit death” as the tradition demands in order to accompany the late king to heaven. Nevertheless, this little work has the task of bringing out the aspects of philosophy (ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, and anthropology) in this piece of literary work. We are going to point out some aspects that portray ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, and anthropology in the chapter three of the aforementioned literary work.

**ETHICS**

1. **Temptation:** Temptation is the battle in the mind that pushes one to go to the wrong. However, in this chapter, we can see how Elesin is pushed to the wrong to commit death; due to the fact that he sees it as a demand from their tradition, regardless of the fact that he does not fully want that to happen.
2. **Fairness:** Fairness simply means that which is acceptable and appropriate in a particular situation. In this chapter, Amusa (sent by Pilkings) to go for the arrest of Elesin in order to bring about fairness in the sense that the king’s horseman will not make the ritual which involves “committing death”. Thereby, that which is appropriate will be done, which is the sustenance of the life of the king’s horseman.

**ANTHROPOLOGY**

**Man that can change:** This is an aspect of anthropology that can be seen in the chapter three of this work. Simon Pilkings, the District Officer tries to change the culture of the people which entails that Elesin who according to the tradition of the people has to “commit death” in order to accompany their late king to heaven. Pilkings stands as a man that can change in this chapter in the sense that he has started a process of the intended change which entails sending Amusa to go and arrest Elesin. This could in the future bring out another aspect of anthropology which is man with freedom.

**EPISTEMOLOGY**

1. In this chapter, we can also find **transfer of knowledge** as an aspect of epistemology in the work. In the chapter three, Amusa who was sent by Pilkings to arrest Elesin had an exchange of interrogation with the women, and also with Iyaloya. In these interrogatives, one could notice that there was also a transfer of knowledge. First, in knowing why Amusa was there, and also on the part of the women, to know what the festival is all about which brought about the transfer of knowledge.
2. **Opinions and truth:** Through the exchange of their opinions, truths were revealed gradually. One is that Amusa revealed that he was there for an official business, hence creating awareness to the women that he was there for an arrest which is official. Another is that through their words, it showed how bad they feel about the white man, who they said have hid their son (Elesin’s eldest son) away.
3. **Deception:** Towards the end of chapter three, one could see the act of deception displayed by the praise singers toward Elesin. Though they know that Elesin was about to die, yet they continued to praise him while they know that there is nothing glorious for a man to take his life. If the principle of reversibility were to be applied there, most of them would refuse such act of which they praised Elesin of.

**METAPHYSICS**

**Worldview:** Worldview is how a particular people perceive the (their) world. In the chapter three, the people have the belief that once the king’s horseman commits death, that he will accompany their late ruler to heaven. For them it is the right way to live, it has formed their belief and perception about that aspect of existence. This perception that they have is too strong that even the supposed arrest led by Amusa was hindered by the women and girls, since they believe that the ritual that they are about to take is a necessity and appropriate in all ramification.

1. Gilmore, Jonathan ‘Philosophy of Literature’ in https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0213.xml [↑](#footnote-ref-1)