

Can literature tell the truth better than other arts or other areas of knowledge

[Literature](#)



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Can Literature 'Tell the Truth' better than other arts or other Areas of Knowledge To answer our question, we need to look at the other arts and areas of knowledge. Philosophy, as an area of knowledge, comes to mind first. How much more accurately can a literary artist portray the truth than can the philosopher

The philosopher gets straight at the truth with axe and hammer. He does not, in general, care - or need to care - what his writings will deliver to his audience; for him, it is being true to himself in his pursuit of the truth that matters. And what is the result Various portrayals of the truth of the universe, each different from the other yet each (for the most part) consistent in themselves, and all removed from life and experience as we know it on a day-to-day basis. When we say " removed from life and experience," we're referring to the fact that philosophy is, to many people, a dry, lifeless abstraction of all that lives and is vibrant. Yes, we may appreciate certain philosophical insights and incorporate them into our lives, but how many of us can walk around declaring, after Schopenhauer, that it were better never to have been born

In this vein, we must acknowledge that the literary artist is closer to what we call life; he is less brutally frank; he paints a picture we can associate with - rather than go into abstractions that demand a painful process of intellectual mapping for sense to arise. Here, we need to bring in the concept of " levels" or " planes," by means of an illustration. Something at a higher " level," as we will refer to it, deals less with the nitty-gritty of things - it either overlooks

them, or assumes prior knowledge of them. This is in contrast to something at a lower " level," where things are spelled out in painful detail.

We have, then, literature at a higher level - something more human, something that speaks of you and me - and philosophy at a lower level, something that carries seemingly obscure but sometimes painfully accurate representations of what the truth is all about. Naturally, this is a broad generalization. It must be, for the reason that " the truth" itself has not and cannot be defined. Many say the truth is already within us, and all that any work of art can do is to awaken it; to bring to life that within us which existed as mere potential knowledge and insight.

To illustrate this better, think of the smile of the Mona Lisa, to use a clichéd example. If not for the " idea" of a smile - including the knowledge of how it connects to us, what it means, what it can imply, what facet of humanity it represents - were not all within us, how would the Mona Lisa ever impress. The artist, naturally, assumes - at a subconscious level - that we know what a smile is and what it represents; only then can he go forth and base his creation upon it!

Coming back to philosophy, can literature tell the truth better. Literature is not fact; philosophy can be. (We are here leaving out literature that is indeed fact, for the reason that it does not paint a picture one subconsciously deciphers, such as works of non-fiction or textbooks. Such works serve only to convey information.) The only conclusion we can get at is that it depends

entirely upon the consumer of the art. There are those among us who prefer to feel another person's pain brought to us by a literary work of art; then there are those who like to have pain defined. There are those who can be inspired by a novel, having deeply felt the ups and downs in the life of a protagonist; then there are those who, for inspiration, would prefer to follow through to Nietzsche's conclusion that weakness is the greatest sin. Some of us appreciate the beauty simply of the manner in which the follies and strengths of human nature are brought out in Steinbeck's *The Pearl*; some prefer "cutting to the chase," as it were, and digest philosophical aphorisms and maxims on human nature with glee.

Dare we propose that literature is the childlike counterpart of philosophy That literature simplifies philosophy That people who have not the capacity for deep, immediate insight must resort to a story being told for them If that is indeed the case, we must say that the majority of us are children; we like stories. And if it is only through stories that we can get at the truth, so be it.

On the other hand, literature's goal could be entirely different from that of philosophy: it could very well be that it attempts to get at the truth by an entirely different mechanism. What could this mechanism be We might call it "silent discourse": it is a dialog between the writer and the reader, which happens at different points in time and space. The writer, when creating his work, has the reader in mind, and "speaks" to him: he is not locked up in his own introspection. He is actively reaching out to the reader. And the reader, when reading, is "thinking along" with the writer, constantly questioning and

answering his own questions. Of course, this happens in philosophy as well on the part of the reader, but it is not give-and-take; it is almost entirely "take." In that sense, we might say literature acts by the method of dialectic, and philosophy acts by the method of rhetoric. A crude comparison, but it is indicative.

We now talk about what is perhaps the most obvious comparison: subjectivity and objectivity. The literary artist has the power and freedom to guide the consumer through his own (the writer's) mazes of thought, be they sentimental and tearful, bright and sunny, matter-of-fact, or anything else. If the reader is glad with what he reads, he will, in all probability, be tempted to "let the writer into his heart," as is indicated by what we so often hear: "I love Steinbeck!" or "I hate Kafka!" This is an ever-present danger, and is a fact of life: one must not be influenced by a particular writer in a way that leads to an emotional, irrational acceptance of what is dished out. In philosophy, this situation is not encountered - almost never, by any means. Do we hear people saying, "I love Kant! He's great!" This does not happen because the philosopher uses no plays upon words, no attempt at emotional bonding in the silent discourse we talked about, and no other method of trickery to make a fan out of the reader. Everything that is written is up for examination. In the light of this very evident difference between literature and philosophy in terms of subjectivity and objectivity, we must say that literature is unsafe. It is not a secure vehicle for the truth to be transmitted by - the artist has all the freedom to corrupt it by means of his craft.

We now drop our comparisons, and ask whether and how literature can tell the truth at all. The first thing we must mention is that much of what passes off as literary art is mental masturbation at a crude level. For Truth to even enter the picture, it is up to the reader to choose good writing. And that is not an easy proposition. How is one to tell, at first glance, whether the time spent on a book is worth it

Dropping such considerations, let us assume that the artist has indeed made a concerted effort at portraying one or more aspects of truth. Whether these reach the reader depends heavily on the differences in worldview of writer and reader, and therein lies the central problem. This is amply illustrated by the fact that what writing is profound to some can be revoltingly trashy to another; what seems surreally beautiful to one can be hackneyed and pedestrian to another. (To revisit our comparisons, philosophy and music are so direct that worldview does not, in general, enter the picture.) To belabor the point a little, a resonance between the artist and the consumer is of the essence.

To sum up this fragmented essay, literature, taken all by itself, can tell the truth only under certain circumstances - notably, if the resonance we've mentioned above exists. Literature, in a sense, spells things out; it is more easily digestible for many. In contrast, philosophy is a "crisper" representation of the truth for many, and at the same time, too abstract for some. Philosophy is more objective; the reader needs to exercise caution with a work of literature, if he wants to get at a truth, and not get swayed by

appeals to the emotion. Ultimately, our answer depends upon who it is that is doing the reading.