

Can literature "tell the truth" better than other Arts or Areas of Knowledge?

Contemporary Western literature deals with the fundamental questions to human existence of life and death, relationships, and transformation, conveying a particular aspect of the world specific to humans. This aspect may alter depending on the culture or society through which life is experienced, and the circumstance of the author. As such, it may 'tell a truth' about the aspect it is illuminating. Similarly, other arts – visual, aural, etc. – may 'tell a truth' depending on individual and cultural context. Social and Natural Sciences, too, look at 'truths' of our world, though from different perspectives. Thus, rather than one area 'telling the truth' better than others, different areas of knowledge attempt to explore different 'truths', giving us deeper insight into the world as a whole.

Truth may be loosely defined as "some form of accord with fact or reality"¹. This 'reality' is affected by perception, emotions, language, and reason – areas which differ across social and cultural boundaries. Due to the human awareness of death and temporality, humans search for meaning in life. Thus, patterns found develop into 'truths', creating order from chaos. In Denmark, it is an accepted social and moral truth that killing is wrong. This notion is a personal 'truth', as well as a 'truth' constructed by consensus to create a functioning society. For Catholics, it is an absolute truth handed down by God through the Ten Commandments. The latter provides two 'truths': first, that killing is wrong, and second, that it is God's word. An atheist, however, may morally believe that killing is wrong, but be a disbeliever of its being God's word. Thus, 'truths' may differ according to the individual.

Truth is affected by perception, which is affected by culture. A pygmy² from the Amazon Rainforest was taken onto a savannah with no previous experience outside the forest. In the distance, buffaloes were grazing. Having never seen anything so far away, he was certain the buffaloes were ants, and was not to be persuaded otherwise. Hence, similarly to Plato's allegory 'The Cave'³, our perception alters depending on individual and cultural context, experience, and expectation. There are, however, universal human 'truths', such as we are born, we live, and we die. It is these universal 'truths' of human existence which all areas of knowledge grapple with.

¹ Wikipedia, *Truth*. Wikipedia: The free encyclopedia. [Online] Available: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth> [28 December 2006]

² Woolman, Michael. *Ways of Knowing*. Victoria: IBID Press, 2000. pg. 21.

³ Woolman, Michael. *Ways of Knowing*. Victoria: IBID Press, 2000. pg. 38.

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Literature – novellas, drama, fables, etc. – explores these universal paradigms, raising questions of the relationship between human spirituality and temporality, the conflict between individual self-expression and social conformity, transformation, and questions related to e.g. limits of freedom and responsibility, free will and fate. In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn⁴, for example, Huck goes through a transformation on his journey down the Mississippi. In Ibsenesque and Sophoclean drama, the conflict between fate, the social environment and free will are explored: can we form our own destiny? Nora in Ibsen's A Doll House⁵ proves she is capable of transformation, whereas Oedipus in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex⁶ is unable to escape pre-destination. Sophocles transforms a myth already known to his audience and on the one hand warns of the terrible consequences of human hubris, whilst on the other raising questions as to the cruelty and irresponsibility of the gods. Ibsen's controversial work further questions cultural assumptions of his time. A contemporary woman reading A Doll House may agree with acknowledging women to equal status of men. A man of that time, however, may perceive it as an 'untruth', going against the naturally assigned roles of men and women in society, concurrent with the social and economic state of late 19th century Norway. Ibsen's statement on gender equality is a moral 'truth' to himself and some, whilst an 'untruth' to others. The plot in itself, on the other hand, being fiction, is an 'untruth'. In Danish, the word art – kunst – stems from the adjective kunstig meaning contrived. The metaphorical or fictive may, however, resonate a greater 'truth' than a factual account. Thus, literature's universal 'truths' coincide with 'truths' we have ourselves created, either personal or collective, to be communicated to the greater audience.

The arts – painting, architecture, music, literature, etc. – are said to "reflect, refocus, recollect, and reveal truth"⁷. The 'truths' explored are specific to human life and aesthetics. Unlike literature, however, the visual arts, for example, are often considered more open to individual analysis. Picasso's *Guernica*, for example, may not

⁴ Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Penguin Books Ltd.: 2003.

⁵ Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll House. *Perrine's Literature*, 7th Edition, Harcourt Brace & Company: 1998. pg. 967.

⁶ Sophocles. Oedipus Rex. *Perrine's Literature*, 7th Edition, Harcourt Brace & Company: 1998. pg. 1086.

⁷ Magwaza, C.R. 1001 English Delights. The Shipping Press: 2006. pg. 22.

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necessarily evoke the same emotions and associations in one person as in another, although some artistic intention often synchronises with response: a painting such as *Guernica* or the painting of a landscape will be understood at a basic level. Even so, very personal 'truths' may be gained more easily from the visual and perhaps more abstract art.

The written language is central to literature, and according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis⁸, the language we use affects our view of the world. For example, in Western society⁹, time and money are closely interlinked: we spend time, waste time, invest time. Also, the extent of 'truth' conveyed differs according to need. In Navaho¹⁰, if I want to pass you a stone I would add endings to the verb to tell you the stone I am passing is flat and round, which is unnecessary in English. The words we put together reflect the way we think, and give some indication of social and cultural context.

The sciences describe another 'truth' by taking a different perspective. These 'truths' are, similarly to those created by the arts, constructed. Scientists observe the world through their senses and record the information these can provide. Collecting a multiple of information, generalizations are made of the observed, providing the basis of theory. When observing something, however, we do it through individual perception, our personal perspective and state of mind at that instant. Thus, 'scientific proof' may be highly determined on the individual and his belief of the outcome. If we think something should happen, we are more prone to look specifically for that, rather than consider the experiment objectively. The cold fusion controversy¹¹ which began in 1989 has since been hushed into silence due to the scandal it created. Chemists Pons and Fleischmann claimed to have created nuclear fusion at room temperature, a violation of the fundamental laws of physics. Releasing the news prematurely, the results were scorned by physicists, and eventually caused cold fusion to be ignored. Today, however, results still suggest cold fusion could be real, but no academic journals would want to publish for fear of another scandal. Thus, though unknown whether cold fusion is

^{8,9} Wikipedia, *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*. Wikipedia: The free encyclopedia. [Online] Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sapir-Whorf_hypothesis [21 January 2007]

¹⁰ Access Genealogy, *Navaho Indian Tribe History*. [Online] Available: <http://www.accessgenealogy.com/native/tribes/navaho/navahoindianhist.htm> [15 February 2007]

¹¹ Platt, Charles. *What if Cold Fusion is Real?* Wired Science, Nov 1998.

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simply fraud or not, in-depth investigation is denied, and the 'truth' must wait.

Physics experiences continuous paradigm shifts, however, as new theories are established to match experiment. Thus, we may be moving toward a more definite 'truth'. At the beginning of the 20th century, physicists believed the 'truth' of the universe had been uncovered; students were told not to study the subject as everything was known. Now, we find ourselves struggling to understand – or create new 'truths' – through Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. Especially these two areas invert everything we have known to something foreign to previous experience. Previous universal 'truths' such as those considering space and time are now known to be inaccurate, as time, for example, goes faster on Mars than on Earth¹² due to a difference in mass and gravitational pull. Our perception of time as an absolute quantity is shaken. On the other hand, more conventional physics concerning matters such as projectile motion seems an established absolute 'truth', at least in the context we apply it.

Similarly to art, the social sciences – social anthropology, psychology, etc. – rely on human nature and the structure of society as a perspective of 'truth'. Unlike the arts, however, they use scientific methodology as a basis for observation. To understand characteristics of human behaviour, though, social scientists have to rely on their own empathy and introspection, creating bias. Anthropologists, for example, observe how society functions through differences in perception, striving to understand the 'truths' of individual cultures. When Europeans¹³ came to the New World, Native Americans for the first time saw ships and described them as floating islands with trees. As such, this is an accurate observation, though it differs from European observation. It merely provides a different 'truth', arising from different perception. Anthropologists would attempt to understand the Native American frame of mind and perhaps describe it as naturalistic – an indication of how experience affects human perception and our outlook on life.

The 'truth' is often relative to the individual or society perceiving it, and is only rarely absolute. Plato¹⁴ stated that in order to *know* something you must believe it, your

¹² Illusteret Videnskab, *Går tiden lige så hurtigt på Jorden som på Mars?* Nr. 3, 2007. pg. 11.

¹³ Chandler, Daniel. *Visual Perception* 6. UWA, July 1997. [Online] Available: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Modules/MC10220/visper06.html> [3 December 2006]

¹⁴ Woolman, Michael. *Ways of Knowing*. Victoria: IBID Press, 2000. pg. 5.

belief has to be true, and your belief must be justified. This vague 'way of knowing' illustrates the ambiguity of truth, but also it's relativity to personal belief, society, and cultural differences, affected by our perception, emotions, language, and reason. Literature attempts to explore the universal 'truths' of human motivation and life, biased with personal 'truths' of the author. Other arts explore similar 'truths'. All arts use e.g. language and symbols subjective to the individual, culture or society from which they originate, adding to the 'truth' they tell. The social and natural sciences use scientific methodology to achieve universal 'truths' and, though often also biased to human perception, these more concrete 'truths' are agreed upon cross-culturally. Even so, they are human constructs, and as our knowledge expands our paradigms shift. Thus, rather than one area of knowledge being able to "tell the truth" better than others, different areas of knowledge – including literature and the other arts – explore different 'truths', providing a deeper understanding of the diverse and universal 'truths' of our existence.

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