

# Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** Ethical literary criticism is a theory of interpreting and analyzing literature from an ethical perspective. It examines literature as a unique expression of ethics and morality within a certain historical period, and argues that literature is not just an art of language, but also an art of text. Ethical literary criticism is aimed at interpreting literary texts, claiming that almost all literary texts are the records of human beings' moral experiences and contain ethical structures or ethical lines. Ethical lines form the main ethical structure. Compared to the written text in literature, the text of oral literature, which can be termed as brain text, is stored in the human brain. The material and fundamental existence of literature is based on written context. The evolving definition of literature is dependent upon the culture and context from which it originated.

**Key words** ethical literary criticism; ethical consciousness; brain text

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## What Is Ethical Literary Criticism?

Ethical literary criticism is defined as a critical theory for reading, analyzing, and interpreting the ethical nature and function of literary works from the perspective of ethics. Seeing literature as a product of morality, it argues that literature is a form of ethical expression in a specific historical situation. The theory examines literature as a unique expression of ethics and morality within a certain historical period and

<sup>1</sup> The main body of this article is the first chapter of the monograph 《文学伦理学批评导论》 (*Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*), translated from Chinese to English by Luo Liang-gong, et al.

that literature is not only an art of language but also an art of text. Literature is, in essence, an art of ethics. Out of the demand for ethical expressions, human beings invented written symbols to record their lives and their understanding of ethics as texts. Consequently, the first form of literature came into being.

In the conceptual system of ethical literary criticism, “ethics” mainly refers to ethical relationships and moral orders that maintain human relations in the world created by literary works. In modern times, it also encompasses the moral relationship and moral order between humans and nature, humans, and the universe. In literary works, the central concern of ethics is the accepted ethical relationship established between man and man, man and society, and man and nature. In addition, it is also concerned with the moral order derived from the ethical relationship and various ethical norms. The task of literature, accordingly, is to depict how ethical relationships and moral order undergo changes, examine their consequences, and ultimately provide experience and lessons emerging from human life for the progress of human civilization.

In Darwin’s theory of evolution, human beings evolved from apes into an advanced species. Although apes evolved from bipedal animals into human form and developed complex brains that enabled them to communicate with each other using sounds and symbols, they did not acquire the qualities to define them as humans. They could hardly distinguish themselves from animals until the emergence of ethics. Realizing the misfortune caused by the disintegration of the familial relationship, humans became aware of the importance of maintaining blood relationships. Gradually, they began to consider why the order of blood relationships was so important and sought reasonable explanations. The understanding of blood ties led to the development of ethics. Due to the emergence of ethical consciousness, human beings attempted to be free from ethical chaos and establish ethical order. They realized the necessity of ethical order for human survival and reproduction, and abided by basic ethical rules such as taboo, responsibility, obligation, and so forth. Humans made the choice to be different from animals after achieving human form. Human reason made it possible for human beings to learn about themselves and how to make choices in their ethical life. It is also the reason that motivated human beings to look for fixed forms to save their ethical experiences, to pass on to future generations. Once ethical consciousness and the strength of desire to establish ethical order matured, human beings invented written symbols and developed texts of literature.

From the earliest days of humanity, literature was produced for teaching people to be moral humans. According to ethical literary criticism, moral enlightenment

is the fundamental function of literature, which is achieved through the reader's esthetic experience in the process of reading. Esthetic experience relates to a process in which the reader reads and appreciates literary works. In this process, the reader is the subject and literature the object. With regard to the reader, esthetic appreciation is used to discover and fulfill the instructional value of literature. Thus, esthetic appreciation is not a function of literature, but a means to achieve the moral teaching function of literature. Literature enables people to understand society and life from an ethical perspective, offers moral warning for people's material and spiritual life, and provides moral experience for reference in their pursuit of self-perfection.

From the perspective of the history of human civilization, literature cannot be divorced from history but instead reflects history. Literature is produced in different historical periods and is circumscribed with particular ethical contexts; thus a premise for literary interpretation is to understand literature based on the ethical environment and the ethical context of its particular historical period. Literature cannot be read and interpreted in accordance with the current ethical environment and context; otherwise, it would cause an ethical paradox in the literary judgment. That is, literature in conformity with morals of a particular historical period is not necessarily in conformity with today's morals. Sometimes, those literary works that were denied in history are the very ones that are affirmed today, or vice versa. Therefore, ethical literary criticism aims to examine literature from the viewpoint of historical development, interpreting the literature of different periods from an ethical perspective, so as to overcome the radical gap of literary interpretation in different ethical conditions and contexts.

Ethical literary criticism is mainly aimed at interpreting literary texts, claiming that almost all literary texts are the records of human beings' moral experience and are made up of ethical lined structures or ethical lines that string ethical knots together in various ways to form the main ethical structure of literary texts. The degree of complicacy of a literary text is determined by the number of ethical knots it possesses, as well as the degree of difficulty in untying them. Thus, the task of ethical literary criticism is to reveal, through literary interpretation, the process of how ethical knots form ethical lines, or to untie existing ethical knots.

On most occasions, different processes of forming and untying an ethical knot causes different interpretations of the same literary text. In literary interpretation, sometimes an ethical knot is presupposed. For example, in Homer's *Iliad*, the abduction of Helen, the Queen of Sparta, by Paris, the Prince of Troy, is considered a presupposed ethical cause for a series of ethical conflicts, as it does not appear

directly in the text but is mentioned in characters' narrations. In the Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, the ethical knot of the prophecy about Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother is also presupposed. Sometimes, an ethical knot is produced during the forming process of the text. In *Hamlet*, the fact that Hamlet's mother married Claudius resulted in an ethical taboo for Hamlet's revenge, which is closely intertwined with ethical knots in the tragedy and manages Hamlet's thoughts and actions. In some literary texts, ethical knots will appear as ethical chaos or reconstruction of the ethical order, such as Viola's disguise in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Anna's betrayal of traditional morality and her self-construction of ethical order in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Analysis of ethical knots by means of ethical literary criticism will enable the interpretation and understanding literary texts.

In comparison to many other forms of literary criticism, ethical literary criticism focuses on an objective ethical analysis and interpretation of literature itself, rather than an abstract moral evaluation. In other words, ethical literary criticism partakes of the characteristics of interpretative criticism and the main task of ethical literary criticism is to use its unique methods to conduct an objective ethical analysis and clarify various social life phenomena in literature, rather than simply to make moral evaluations. Therefore, ethical literary criticism requires the critic to be placed in the historical period of the literary work and act as an agent of a character in the particular situation and context of literary work—a defense lawyer of the character, that is to say—to empathize deeply with the character. An example can be found in *Hamlet*; the reader cannot find the main character, Hamlet, wronged or misunderstood in many critical contexts unless they stand with him. Considering this from a different perspective, we could find that Hamlet's hesitation in his attempts to get revenge is not because of his flawed nature, but his failure to solve the ethical dilemma encountered in the process of getting his revenge. If Hamlet does get revenge, he would probably commit the serious incestuous crimes of killing his father, his king, and his mother; however, if he gives up, he cannot fulfill his moral obligation and responsibility to avenge his father's death.

At the dawn of human civilization, the core factor that sustains the ethical order is taboo. Taboo is the foundation and guarantee of the ancient ethical order: Taboo is the origin of morality—in the progress of human civilization, we have gone through the transformation of taboos into morality. Taboos presently play a role in morality. The formation and change of the ethical order of human society are institutionally premised on taboos. The original purpose of literature is to textualize taboos and turn unwritten taboos into written taboos. The earliest form of written taboos in China was inscribed oracle bones, while in Europe, written taboos were embodied

through godly oracles. Based on written taboos, taboos are institutionalized to form an ethical order.

Ethically speaking, before the human social system actually came into being, literature served as a manifestation of the ethical order, such as Greek epics and tragedies. Literature was still a literary expression of social systems and unwritten laws even after they were established. Therefore, the ethical function of literature existed from the beginning of its formation. Since then, even though its function has changed, the ethical nature of literature remains unchanged. The task of ethical literary criticism is to illuminate the ethical function of literature, to explain different phenomena in literature and the underlying ethical reasons from the perspective of ethics, and to make a value judgment on them.

From the point of view of ethical literary criticism, literature was initially produced out of human beings' demands for ethical exposition. The literature textualizes ethics and establishes the ethical order of society. In this sense, literature from its origin is also a sign of the progress of human civilization.

### **Word, Brain Text, and Written Text**

As a critical theory, ethical literary criticism features an innovative way of understanding literature, even a rebellious departure from traditional Chinese literary theories. Ethical literary criticism subverts the traditional definition of literature, which is believed to be concerned not with nature but merely concepts of literature. Hence, it attempts to shift attention from literature's abstract concepts to literature ontology, that is, from the metaphysics of literature to specific literary works. The initial issue should be the fundamental conditions of literature: "words" and "texts."

"Literature," originating from Latin word "littera" (letter), relates to a text written in words. In terms of its origin, literature has two fundamental preconditions: words and texts. Words serve as the vehicle of meaning, while text functions in the form of literature. Literature consists of texts, and texts are composed of words. Words themselves are not literature; instead, they are just a series of signifying signs. Although signifying signs could express meanings, they cannot convey the significant value of literature. This is mainly due to the meaning of words that are simple, single-dimensional, and even scattered before texts are composed of them. Signifying signs could be assembled and synthesized as groups to form literary texts with multi-level meanings. Once words are organized into literary texts, they can transmit literary meaning instead of merely acting as an utterance or the smallest unit of represented speech.

Before written symbols were used, ancient people used their memories to store language; however, memory ceases to exist when the body perishes. At the very beginning, language itself could only convey meaning in oral form. Then, where is the meaning language convey from? It originates from brain texts, which can be defined as memory stored in the human brain. As a peculiar biological form, the brain text contains human beings' perception and cognition of the world stored in memory. Brain texts can be recollected through memorization, represented via auditory organs, and transformed into written texts that usually take the form of materials such as paper, rock, pottery, metal, and so on. Considering its biological basis, the brain text serves as the initial form of literary text. Before written texts and digital texts, non-material senses could only be stored in the brain text in the form of memory. As a biological form of text, the brain text cannot be passed on by heritage, but only orally. The only way to preserve brain text relies on oral expression, so that brain text can be kept permanently. Consequently, a vast number of brain texts possessing literary significance disappeared, and only a small part could be passed down via written texts. Fundamentally, almost all literary works result from writers' retrieving, assembling, processing, rewriting, storing, and representing the brain text. Without brain texts, there would not be texts produced by writers, and thus there would not be written texts or digital texts. It is the brain text that ensures the existence of written texts, digital texts, or literary works in any other form.

In terms of the text's transformation, with the appearance of written symbols, brain text can be transformed into written text. Only in this way could humans record, read, and analyze their invisible brain texts.

In contrast to written text, oral language conveys people's thoughts. On the one hand, as a sound transformed from a person's brain text, the manifestation of language relies on the media of sound. Language is a manifestation of sound transmitted from brain text through vocal organs and is received by auditory organs. Language can only be used in human oral communication and speech. On the other hand, words rely on the media of signifying signs that can be manifested by writing. Before the invention of print, there was no way for human beings to read printed letters and language. Once language was preserved in letter form, it no longer depended on the brain or vocal organs. Literature transformed into a new form—literary signs.

Language is in the form of sounds, while printed text is material-dependent. When language is recorded on paper or other carriers, invisible vocal language (also known as spoken language) becomes visible. Printed letters are grouped into texts

that produce complicated meanings and scilicet-literary texts. As letters come into being, abstract thoughts can be encoded by way of brain text into written or literary texts. Written texts are different from spoken language in that they can be written or printed on natural material such as paper, rock, pottery, and metal. Thus, language and ideas are retained and recognized by readers.

Literary texts can be transformed into spoken language, while spoken language can be transformed by way of writing tools and materials into literary texts. Spoken language can only be memorized as brain text rather than stored and recorded before it is transformed into literary text; therefore, the text refers to any letters and thoughts that can be recognized, read, and interpreted. In modern times, human language, thoughts, and literary texts can be transformed into a new form of text, the digital text.

### **Material Form of Literature**

The form of literature in current textbooks in China is regarded as “a social ideology” (Sun 1) or “an aesthetic ideology” (Qian 100-146). This stance believes that literature, as seen in epistemological viewpoint, is an ideology that reflects objective existence. Everything that literature represents comes from an objective existence. Another view sees literature as “the art of language” (Liu and Sun 15), and hold: “Literature must be a language text that has its own form such as voice, words, structure, etc. It can be passed down with oral form or written letters, or existing in printing works and network media” (Yan 1). Literature can be considered a complicated perceptual existence that connects the writer, the world, and the reader through the media of text. Literature is a language text that integrated the aesthetic experience” (Yan 2). Some scholars claim “literature is the manifestation of language symbolization of the subject’s aesthetic consciousness” (Ouyang 14). This definition “notices the aesthetic connection between man and the exterior world, recognizing that the subject’s aesthetic conscious is important to literature. It not only avoids the partial definition of the nature of literature only from the approach of Sociology, Epistemology, Expressionism, and Formalism, but also distinguishes literature from other forms of art in terms of literary ontology, which corresponds to the nature of literature” (Ouyang 14). The manifestation of language symbolization is merely a way of saying “literature is a social ideology” or “an aesthetic ideology.”

“Literature is a social ideology” or “an aesthetic ideology” is currently the mainstream view in China; an abundance of illustrations on what literature is can be found in textbooks and monographs. Though diverse in expression, most agree with

the viewpoint mentioned above. For example, one viewpoint argues that literature “is the reflection of the social life in human mind” (Zhang 20); literature is the product of society and history, a social phenomenon, therefore, “literature is the aesthetic ideology manifested in the implication of utterance” (Tong 75). It is only a variation of “literature is a social ideology” The expression of what literature is might be different in textbooks, but is essentially the same. The problem is that all these views on literature have not answered the question of what literature is.

From the viewpoint of ethical literary criticism, the standpoint of “literature is a social ideology” fails to illuminate the nature of literature. “Ideology” refers to abstract thought, which is only the meaning coming from literature, not the definition of it. In the network of thought, language, word, text, and literature, thought is abstract and can be stored as brain text and conveyed via language. Language and word are not literature themselves, but the conditions for the production of literature. Literature exists only after thoughts and language are transformed into texts via written words. Hence, literature is a literary text. Literature refers to literary texts, which also decide its material form; thus, literature has a material existence.

Word is the carrier of meaning and component of the text. Text is the vehicle of literature, and it constitutes different genres of literature, such as poetry, drama, and novel. Words clearly convey the meaning of the signified, so that readers can understand the meaning of the text by interpreting words. In this sense, when reading literature, we are actually reading a text that is composed of letters and words.

Words are tools for recording, writing, and saving language and thoughts. One of its functions is to record language, thoughts, and events through text. Literary creation needs character as a tool to transform abstract ideology into literary texts. Hence, literary writing denotes the process by which the writer assembles letters and words into the text. Because of the myriad letters with various meanings, there is a diversification of literary forms. Due to this, literature remains evergreen and offers nourishment for humans’ minds.

There is no limitation on the number of written words in literature, and it is possible that all written words that record events or convey thoughts become literature. As a result, literary texts may consist of several thousands of or even millions of written words that have a clear deictic meaning. In the early stages of writing, texts were not rich enough to record complicated events or thoughts, and the recordings were simple and the texts were short. At that time, even before literary genres such as poems, plays, and novels appeared, the text composed of

words can be regarded as literature. Before literature developed into different genres, all readable text, dealing with religious rituals or daily life and regardless of the number of characters, could be considered as early literature. Oracle bone inscriptions from three thousand years ago in China (they cannot be verified as letters since the inscription on the pottery is not readable)<sup>1</sup>, Egyptian hieroglyphs written on tombstones or grass paper, and ancient Sumerian cuneiform carvings on rocks and clay plates are the earliest forms of literature.

Before the intervention of digital technology, the mere form of literature is a text that consists of characters. Ideographic texts, as the foundation of the literature, are material forms of literature. Texts are made of characters consisting of various combinations of symbols, which are carved on rocks, clay plates, turtle shells, animal bones, papyrus, and bamboo slices. As the concept of literature was not formed in an age when these texts appeared, all these texts belong to the category of literature regardless of whether they are classified as literature, history, philosophy, or natural science. With the improvement of human cognition, there came a new understanding and cognition of the nature of written texts. New standards and concepts were established. Because of the value of these written texts as teaching and learning material of so-called literariness, they were gradually classified as literature and distinguished from texts of other disciplines. Typical texts of literature include poetry, essays, stories, and plays, while texts without so-called literariness were excluded from literature. Essentially, non-literary texts were classified into philosophical, historical, and scientific texts. After the concept of literary texts was established, people began to accept the concept of literature.

In the historicization of literature, literary concepts appeared, and were accepted and habitually used in the discussion of texts. As such, literary concepts were formed during the process of developing ethical choices. In the history of the evolution of literary concepts, written texts were turned into literary texts in the

1 It is arguable whether the inscriptions on pottery were the earliest characters in China among experts. There are many material on scripted pottery, such as during the period of Da Wenchuan culture, Long Mountain culture, and Liangzhu culture. Among all of them, Banpo culture, which existed between 4800 BC- 4300 BC. is considered the earliest. Due to the fact the inscriptions, which appeared as single symbols, were unreadable scholars argue on whether they are characters or symbols. Qiu Xigui believes they are “marks,” Guo Moruo thinks they are “the symbols with the nature of characters,” and Yu Xingwu and some other scholars argue they are characters. Presently, there is no evidence of the texts that are made of plural characters like the oracle bone script. Whether they are characters that record events or symbols of meaning remains unknown. This is why we cannot say they are texts of narration, and hence, the inscriptions on pottery are excluded from literature.

ethicization of textual understanding. For instance, before Walt Whitman, only those poems adhering to certain formal norms of rhythm and rhyme were considered poetry. After the concept of free verse received approval, traditional and habitual ideas of poetry were rejected. With ethical acceptance, the so-called free verse has become a new kind of poetry.

Literary texts are crucial for understanding literature. This idea is due to the material form of texts that literature can be read, defined, understood, and separated from other arts such as music, painting, sculpture, and so-called oral literature, which we now regard as a type of literature. Lacking textuality, which is essential to literature, art does not belong to literature, even though it also expresses certain thoughts and emotions. The primary difference between art and literature lies in that literature is embodied in written texts. Notably, music and painting are also dependent on texts; however, musical texts consist of notes and paintings are composed of lines, light, and colors. Neither possesses written texts. Therefore, they do not belong to literature.

Whether before or after the formation of literary forms such as poetry, drama, and novels, the written text is an essential characteristic that distinguishes literature from other forms of art. Plays and movies, for example, are art. However, only the written script of plays and movies can be considered literature. If we discuss Shakespeare's plays from the perspective of literature, it probably refers to the written script, not the performance. Regardless of the enduring popularity of *Hamlet* on stage, performance belongs to theater. In contrast, all versions of its written text can be defined as literature. Similarly, the so-called oral literature can only be understood as an oral expression of literature just like theater; nevertheless, oral expression itself is not literature. Oral literature is somewhat a pseudo-proposition, because it is not literature itself but merely an oral expression of literature. Homeric epics were originally oral performances. Long before and even after the appearance of the written text, they were performed orally; however, only the written epics, that is, written texts, can be referred to as literature. Written text is the only characteristic that distinguishes literature from other forms of art.

With the development of science and technology, both the form and concept of literature have changed significantly, prominently reflected in the media. Before the 1940s, there were no digital texts, and what we read was only printed texts. Nowadays, printed texts consisting of symbols can be transformed into digital ones, and literary texts can be digitalized so that they can be preserved longer. With the help of electronic screens, digital texts can still be read in a way similar with that of traditional texts. In virtue of the ubiquity of technology, literary texts today

are not only limited to paper-based texts such as books and magazines, but also electronic texts in television, radio, tape, and computer. Although paper is still the major carrier of literary texts today, digital technology has dramatically impacted traditional forms of text, and digital text will presumably replace written text in the future. With the change in the living environment of literature, digital texts will become one of the major carriers of literary texts.

### The Complexities of Defining Literature

Currently there is no generally acknowledged definition of literature. Even the *Encyclopedia Britannica* merely explains “literature” as “written works” and “a form of human expression,” and holds that “not everything expressed in words—even when organized and written down—is counted as literature.” For instance, “those writings that are primarily informative—technical, scholarly, journalistic—would be excluded from the rank of literature by most, though not all, critics,” but only “certain forms of writing are universally regarded as belonging to literature as an art” The purest literary form is the lyric poem, and after it comes elegiac, epic, dramatic, narrative, and expository verse.<sup>1</sup>

If we try to examine the definition of literature habitually, we should put literature back into its ethical environment. In different historical periods, there are ethical environments in which concepts of literature have been formed. Without ethical environments, literature cannot be learned or understood. The definition of literature varies in different ethical environments, so there are different definitions at different times. In ancient Greece, all written works, namely texts, were regarded as literature. The authors of scientific works were also called poets. In China, Confucian classics have always been considered as the literary essence since ancient times, although they are not aligned with Western concepts of literature in the light of its form. This indicates that there are different definitions of literature under certain conditions in different historical periods.

Literature can be defined from the following aspects:

1. All the written works, namely the texts that were written before the emergence of literary concepts such as poetry, drama, and fiction, belong to the genre of literature. The most representative texts include the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs inscribed on stele, slates, or written on papyrus, the Sumerian cuneiform characters on clay tablets, and Chinese oracle bone scripts.

2. All literary texts were defined using literary concepts. Literary texts are those previous texts identified by literary concepts, and those produced following

<sup>1</sup> “Literature,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc, 2007.

literary concepts. The formation of new literary concepts is an ethical process that results from the conceptual evolution of literary texts, and their acceptance is similar. Those written texts in accordance with the concepts of poetry, drama, and fiction were not defined as such until the formation of these literary concepts, while those newly created texts that are not in accord with the definition of poetry, drama, and fiction were no longer regarded as literature. All preceding texts still belong to literature.

3. From the theory of modern literature, poetry, drama, and fiction constitute the main body of literature, while history and philosophy have been separated from literature as independent subjects. Literature usually refers to poetry, drama, fiction, and other widely acknowledged literary forms.

Texts, namely written texts, usually refer to the words or characters written or printed on paper, but all texts, which were written or inscribed on other media such as tortoise shells, animal bones, slates, clay tablets, papyrus, bamboo slips, wooden slips, cotton cloth, or silk, and can convey meaning, are written texts. The nature of such written texts has not yet been completely determined. All these ancient texts are narrative or argumentative, so they can be called narrative texts or philosophical texts. According to the subsequent literary concepts, narrativity and argumentativeness are the most important characteristics of literature (e.g., *Homer's Epics*). Thus, all the written texts before the separation of history and philosophy from literature, including the most ancient ones, have been habitually regarded as literature.

The understanding of literary concepts has constantly changed. With the constant broadening of literary concepts, literature transcended its definition as literary works and developed into a subject. Literary studies have also been included in the scope of literature, such as the academic texts of literary theories and criticism, studies on the author and the reader, and so on. Although they are different from literary texts of poetry, drama, and fiction, they still belong to literature.

The dynamics of literature's evolution from written texts to literary texts comes from literary concepts. In literature, literary works precede literary concepts; while the nature of literary texts had not been determined, literary genres had not been differentiated, and literary interpretation was not possible until literary concepts were formed. This indicates that literature cannot be separated from literary studies. For example, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Horace's *Ars Poetica*, and Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* can never be excluded from literature. Therefore, literary texts refer to literature in a narrow sense, through generalized notions about poetry, drama, and fiction, while literature encompasses not only literary texts but

also texts, including those of literary studies.

To define literature, in its nature, is to explore what literature is—a question inevitable in understanding literature as well as a problem to be solved in the development of literature. During its development, a basic fact is that literary concepts were formed on the basis of literary texts. Without literary texts, there are no literary ideas or literary concepts. Literary ideas are determined by existing literary texts, while literary concepts result from the learning and understanding of literary texts. Before literary texts were defined, texts of different natures had not been differentiated from one another, which led people to seek a standard to distinguish literary texts from other texts.

The concept of literature is historical, and literature, from the perspective of its development to make the definition more scientific, can be defined as:

1. Before the emergence and recognition of literary forms, literature was a broad term, and all written texts belonged to literature. For instance, all kinds of texts were included in literature in ancient Greece and ancient China before the Qin Dynasty. It can also be said that all written symbols belonged to literature.

2. After the formation of different literary genres such as poetry, fiction, drama, history, and philosophy, all texts were categorized as poetic, fictional, dramatic, and historical texts according to different genres. Habitually, some texts were regarded as literary texts, while others were regarded as historical, philosophical, or scientific texts. Therefore, poetry, fiction, and drama were separated from other texts and became literature. Since the acceptance of new literary ideas, literary ethics have been exerting its influence. Historical and scientific texts were no longer regarded as part of literature, and a new concept of literature arose in application.

3. With the development of science, forms of texts have changed, and digital texts have come emerged and newer literary concepts have begun to take shape. Once such concepts are accepted, a new literary ethic will emerge. Overall, the development of literary ideas has been intertwined with habits and customs. It can be said that the concept of literature has been recognized by habits and customs, namely ethics. Therefore, the definition of literature is an ethical concept.

### **The Relativity of the Definition of Literature**

The argument on the definition of literature in China originated from its Western counterpart. With the entry of Western literary theories into China, Chinese scholars borrowed Western terms and concepts to construct their own literary theory. Both sides share similarities in their disputes regarding literary theories. René Wellek and Austin Warren's book *Theory of Literature* had a great impact on Chinese readers.

By tracing different definitions of literature in history, the two authors pointed out one viewpoint of literature, that is, all printed texts can be called literature. Specifically, whether the text is printed or hand-copied can serve as studies in civilization and literature. As Edwin Greenlaw has argued, “Nothing related to the history of civilization is beyond our studies”; we are “not limited to belles-lettres or even to printed or manuscript records in our effort to understand a period or civilization,” and we “must see our work in the light of its possible contribution to the history of culture” (qtd. Wellek and Warren 20). The mixture of the history of civilization and of literature will do no good to the explanation of literature beyond a historical context.

Wellek and Warren offered another way of defining literature, in which the criterion combines esthetic worth and general intellectual distinction. Whatever the subject is, what is emphasized here is whether it is “notable for literary form or expression” Literature is hence limited to “great books,” and the works of philosophers, historians, theologians, moralists, politicians, and even some scientists such as George Berkeley, David Hume, Bishop J. Butler, Edward Gibbon, Edmund Burke, and Adam Smith, are treated as literature. It gives no distinction between literature and non-literature, let alone a clear definition of literature. Wellek and Warren stated, “Within the history of imaginative literature, limitation to the great books makes incomprehensible the continuity of literary tradition, the development of literary genres, and indeed the very nature of the literary process, besides obscuring the background of social, linguistic, ideological, and other conditioning circumstances” (Wellek and Warren 21-22). On the basis of a historical examination of definitions of literature, Wellek and Warren concluded that the term “literature” seemed best if it was limited to the art of literature, that is, to imaginative literature. They recognized “fictionality,” “invention,” or “imagination” as the distinguishing trait of literature, with fictionality as the central quality of literature (Wellek and Warren 26).

In Britain, it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the esthetic concept of literature was established. It was closely linked to the nationalistic sense of English literature. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were innumerable esthetic and critical theories that contributed to the explanation of literature, most of which were, nevertheless, in dispute with each other. As Fowler Roger held, “for most students of literature, the concept of ‘Literature’ is a given idea, something agreed by common sense” (Fowler 5); he realized the primary fact that the concept of literature was built on theory. The theory of Roman Jakobson, Northrop Frye, Wolfgang Iser, Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, and Ann Jefferson’s *Modern Literary Theory: A*

*Comparative Introduction*, all point to a similar conclusion that theories construct different literary entities in the domain of literature. Regarding the definition of literature, there are all sorts of understandings and expressions. For instance, the French novelist J. H. Bernadin de Saint Pierre (1737-1814) compared literature to a fairy, which came to the secular world to eliminate human beings' pain. William Godwin (1756-1836) regarded literature as a dividing line between the human and animal kingdoms (Godwin 13). The French writer Charles Nodier (1780-1844) believed that literature is the expression of words (Oliver 124). The Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) treated literature as an outcome of spiritual thinking.<sup>1</sup> The British writer Robert Aris Willmott (1809-1863) took literature for an enduring language.<sup>2</sup> Ezra Pound (1885-1973) said, "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree," and "Literature is news that STAYS news" (Pound 28-29). To some extent, these ideas made sense, yet no clear definition of literature can be drawn from these discussions.

Literature is a historical concept, with its connotation changing with the evolution of history. The classification of literary works according to various standards leads to different outcomes. If we examine literary works, which were accepted in the historical periods from the perspective of fiction and fact, we understand the evolution of literary ideas more deeply. In 17<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, literature not only referred to the works of William Shakespeare (1564-1616), John Webster (1580-1632), John Donne (1572-1631), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), and John Milton (1608-1674), but also included the essays of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the sermons of John Donne (1572-1631), and the spiritual autobiography of John Bunyan (1628-1688). According to Eagleton, *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* by Edward Clarendon can also be included in this category. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the works of Charles Lamb (1775-1834), Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859), and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) were also regarded as literature. However, the works of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), Charles Darwin (1809-1882), and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) were excluded from the literature category. This interpretation can help infer how people defined literature through history.

Dating back to ancient Greece, Plato did not put forward the idea of literature; instead, he used two other ideas, namely, "Poesies" and "Poetics." Poesies, meaning

1 Thomas Carlyle, "Inaugural Address" and "Sir Walter Scott," in *Characteristics*. Rockville: Wildside Press, 2008, p. 464.

2 Robert Eldridge Aris Willmott, *Pleasure of Literature*, 5th edition. London: Bell and Daldy, 1860, p. 6.

poetry, has the same meaning as literature in the modern sense, while poetics is the study of poetry; therefore, poetry and poetics were the basic terms concerning the study of literature. René Wellek discovered that the words denoting literature—*littérature*, *letteratura*, and *Literatur*—have come to occupy the space of “poetry” only within the last two centuries. But in English, the word “literature” was first used in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. From the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, “literature” predominantly meant an intellectual property of a person. In Samuel Johnson’s two volumes of *The Dictionary of the English* edited in 1755, literature referred to book learning. In contemporary English dictionaries, literature has more definitions. For example, “literature” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) has three definitions:

Literature: 1. Acquaintance with “letters” or books; polite or humane learning; literary culture. Now rare and obsolescent. 2. Literary work or production; the activity or profession of a man of letters; the realm of letters. 3. a. Literary productions as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general. Now also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect, b. The body of books and writings that treat of a particular subject, c. colloq. Printed matter of any kind. (Fowler “Literature,” 7)

Obviously “literature” does not totally refer to literary works. In the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (1986), there are six items under the entry of “literature”:

Literature: 1. written material such as poetry, novels, essays, etc., esp. works of imagination characterized by excellence of style and expression and by themes of general or enduring interest. 2. the body of written work of a particular culture or people. 3. written or printed matter of a particular type or on a particular subject. 4. printed material giving a particular type of information. 5. the art or profession of a writer. 6. Obsolete. Learning.

In general, the entry of “literature” in contemporary English dictionaries has two basic meanings; literary works and documents of literature. The second usage is quite common, and here are some examples:

1. A list of references of the essential literature on a topic or subject.
2. The sources consist not only of various dictionaries but also of works of literature.
3. The reader will be directed to substantial discussions of the words or phrases in the secondary literature on Middle English.
4. The methodology has been tested by means of the creation of a few hundred

dictionary entries, but no complete dictionary has been compiled using this methodology.

Etymologically speaking, the connotation of “literature” has undergone a dynamic change. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “literature” mainly directed to an integral sense. The meaning of the document still exists today.

Terms for literature and their connotations have evolved with the development of literary facts. The history of literature has proven that the definition is closely associated with ideas, which is a characteristic embodied in the development of human civilization. In Europe, classical literature consists of works of history, philosophy, speech, and science. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, literature was not separated from philosophy and history, like the current situation of medical disciplines and some other modern science subjects that have not become independent from the realm of science. When it comes to ancient Chinese literature, literature refers to essays and teachings in the pre-Qin Dynasty of China, and literature contains historical and philosophical works, and essays. Thus, it lays the theoretical foundation that there is no absolute dividing line among literature, history, and philosophy in China.

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese scholars knew little about Western literary ideas. To them, the lack of a formal representation of concepts resulted in an inadequate ability to understand and analyze literature theoretically at that time. Compared to literature in the West, Chinese literary ideas focused not on literature and drama but on poetry, philosophy, and history. It is only from the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Western literary ideas and concepts of novels, drama, and poetry helped inspire Chinese scholars to talk about literature that they termed new literature. A large number of new literary forms took shape, and literature, philosophy, and history developed into independent disciplines, which have changed the traditional Chinese views of the undividedness of the three disciplines (i.e., literature, history, and philosophy) and further influenced the construction of literary criticism and theory in China.

This indicates that it is impossible to look for a single definition that can transcend history and cover the entire domain of literature. An interdisciplinary perspective of the ideas and the definition of literature along with literary ideas in different eras might be helpful for providing a relative definition of literature at a certain age. The concept of literature is relative rather than absolute, as its connotation differs regarding the historical and ethical milieu. In the infancy of literature, all written texts were regarded as literature. Some incomplete written texts discovered during excavations by archeologists, and regardless of their carrier

and content, were considered to be literature.

With the progress of human civilization, words that had been used in the beginning for recording facts were gradually used for writing. Thus, during this period, the literary genre almost came to be defined by what literature itself was. Later, tragedies and comedies, history and philosophy, essays, and other forms of literary works emerged, and literature was endowed with a richer meaning, with all the texts written in words included in the category of literature.

While the form and content of literature developed on a large scale, people found that the forms of different types of text varied. The question of literature identity arose, namely, how different types and forms of texts were distinguished. Based on the need for such differentiation, people categorized different forms of texts according to their formal characteristics. The texts of a certain category ranged into a wider scope in literature, or into other newly emerging types different from literature, such as history and philosophy. This classification separates history, philosophy, and ethics from literature and forms new independent disciplines. At the same time, new types of texts such as novels appeared in the world of literature, which demonstrates that the concepts of literature in different historical periods were constantly modified. Literary concepts connoted different meanings in different historical eras, as no one could find one single literary concept that focused on the entire history of literature.

### **Literary Concepts and Interpretations**

Literary ideas are specified by literary concepts. Globally, these ideas were not formed simultaneously, so people did not have an identical understanding of literature. For example, before literary concepts came into being in ancient China, the literary idea of the wholeness of literature, history, and philosophy had long been accepted among people. Consequently, ancient Chinese literature included philosophical essays and historical records in addition to *shi*, *ci*, *ge*, and *fu* (four different forms of poetry in ancient Chinese literature). Applying the modern standard of classification, philosophical essays and historical records are excluded from literature. This would be a great loss to the legacy of ancient Chinese literature. In ancient Greece, the earliest literary ideas were related only to poetry, and later to drama, philosophy, and history. After the formation of modern literary ideas, philosophy and history were separated from literature and became independent disciplines. Currently, the works of philosophy and history are relevant to literature; yet if they are thought to belong to literature, that is certainly against modern literary ideas. In other words, different literary ideas lead to different literary concepts.

Literature differs in form in various historical periods. As Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) humorously stated, “art is what everybody knows it to be.” (Croce 1) Everybody has their own understanding of specific questions. Literature is regarded as the expression of feelings, the imitation and representation of the real world, something consisting of language, the embodiment of intuition and instinctive desire, an artistic symbol, or a kind of social ideology. Opinions illustrate that readers cannot achieve a consensus on the definition of literature. In all those historical periods, there are different literary forms, accompanied by corresponding literary ideas that result in different literary concepts and definitions of literature.

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