

The Decline of Literature: A Public Perspective

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Abstract

After centuries of dominance, literature has not been in a robust health for the last few decades. Several scholars have addressed the decline of literature in a number of books and articles attributing it to institutional and economic reasons. However, a major factor has not been taken into account. It is the larger audience who receives and absorbs literature. In this paper, I argue that the decline of literature emanates from the lack of appreciation of literature among the public who have deserted this field of humanity in the present days. I will investigate the causes of this desertion and explore its consequences in the field of literature. Through using a questionnaire, this paper looks and evaluates the experiences and perspectives of public. It is expected that the findings will contribute to literature to better understanding the decline.

Keywords: Humanities-Literature Decline-Reading Literature

1. Introduction

Literature's decline and lack of power to persuade critics of its continued viability in the academic setting is a matter that remains under scrutiny. However, this paper argues that the decline of literature emanates not only from the problems that reside within the profession of literature itself, but also from the lack of appreciation and understanding of literature among the public who have abandoned this field of humanity presently. It examines the causes of this abandonment and explores its consequences not only on the field of literature. Furthermore, this paper explores the scholars' investigations of the decline—or “death” as referred to by some scholars—and its attribution to the institutionalization and compartmentalization of the profession. This paper involves the use of a questionnaire. Nevertheless, my goal is not to quantify or establish percentages; it is to broaden widely the range of possibilities out beyond my own reactions. The questionnaire has been thoroughly phrased to elicit the experiences and perspectives of the public. Therefore, this paper describes deliberately and quotes accordingly what the public consumers of literature have expressed and discusses their responses to the question: “why do you think most people do not read literature?”

For the past few decades, numerous critics and scholars have lengthily studied the decline in humanities in general and literature in particular. At first, there was a tendency to use the statement “the death of literature” instead of “the decline of literature”. It was first used in the sixties to refer the lack of interest in literature. Although the word *death* was used in that era specifically to compare it intentionally to the statement “death of God” that was coined by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, it still suggested in a stronger sense a sign of weakness and inefficiency in a field that had been influencing people's lives for many centuries.

In a book that carries the same notion, *The Death of Literature*, Alvin Kernan mentions some major factors that led to that “death”. He lists: the death of the author, the drastic change of scholars' perspectives towards classic works or masterpieces, the independence of criticism from functioning as a servant of literature, the increase of television watchers at the expense of literature, and the attack of several radicals of literature—such as Terry Eagleton.¹ However, Kernan does not take into consideration the public—the vast consumers of literature outside the academic walls. But if literature has died, how can we explain the continuation of exposure to literature? People do still buy fiction works, read poems, attend literary conferences or symposiums, or basically absorb one kind of literary form or another. Literature, to some extent, is still being cherished commonly not only among literary scholars, but also among the considerable number of people who appreciate literature in this day and age. A valid evidence of this is the number of literary works being published every year. For example, over 100 million copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey* were sold in the world—and still being sold up to this moment.² Notwithstanding this promising news, this conviction disregards, to some degree, the dissension that exists amongst the larger audience in the literature arena who has, unfortunately, begun deserting this field of humanity.

2. Literature: Its Rise and Fall

The word literature has been historically modified to carry different, yet interconnected meanings. At first, it was used to refer to poetry in all its kinds due to the stereotypical conception people had of valuing poetry and treasuring poets. Then, the meaning slightly changed to signify “polite letters”. Other meanings of “anything written” or “all serious writing” emerged later attributing literature to a much broader sense. The modern use of the term to refer to all genres of literature was adopted in the later eighteenth century. Since then, literature has gone beyond referring to older works

to encompass performed plays, recited poems, novel-based movies, and the list goes on. The works of greatest writers such as Shakespeare, John Milton, Jane Austen, the Bronte's sisters, and many others—labeled as classics—have remained mostly, and exclusively, inside the Academic walls. However, modern works are being acknowledged in academic settings immensely nowadays. Literature in its broader sense was admitted to universities as an enriching form of knowledge, being taught to students up to this moment. Students of literature are exposed a wide variety of literary works; they read them and interpret them, their research rely upon them. They flourish literature and keep it from dying. The admission was, and remains to a large extent, institutionally and systematically established.

The systemization and institutionalization of literature studies in English departments have placed faculty members into isolated sections—a notion referred to as compartmentalization—which have disordered college students due to the lack of communication between these sections, which Gerald Graff argues in his historical investigation of the profession of literature in his enriching book *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987). Approaching literature systematically makes it fall inevitably and precisely under a series of “acclaimed” works without giving the students or the audience the options to explore other works—especially upon realizing the ancient purpose of reading literature is seeking pleasure or profit of any sort. According to Graff, “...the idea that literature could or should be taught—rather than simply enjoyed or absorbed of part of the normal upbringing of gentlefolk—was a novel one, and no precedents existed for organizing such an enterprise.”

For a long time, literature has been considered a treasure by which universities have been privileged. It has played a dynamic role in the humanities and English departments particularly. But prior to that, the discipline of English appeared as two separate fields: composition and literature. These two fields represented two distinct kinds of students. The scholars David Shumway and Craig Dionne state that “composition has always had the most students; literature has had the most of the prestige (all the prestige for several decades, although composition has gained a bit in the last three)”. However, these two fields have been both employed in the service of enriching humanity. Because literature has been a valued subject in universities for almost a century, it attracted many students who came to pursue their master and doctoral degrees. However, this attraction has unquestionably changed. The number of students majoring in English as a whole dropped by almost one third. Andrew Delbanco notes, “a trend consistent with the contraction of the humanities (literature, language, philosophy, music, and art) as a whole, which fell as a percentage of all Ph.Ds. from 13.8 percent to 9.1 percent between 1966 and 1993.”

There are various reasons for this regression in the numbers of students. One reason is that it came as a result of the postwar expansion that, according to Delbanco, occurred specifically in the formerly understated science and technology fields. Delbanco states, “with increased access to college for many students whose social and economic circumstances would once have excluded them, vocational fields such as business, economics, engineering, and, most recently, computer programming have also flourished.” The growing prosperity of these fields came at the expense of humanities. Not only literature started to lose some of its value because of the increasing number of students who refrained from pursuing their studies in its all fields, but also because of the waves of criticism that attacked literature. The attack was pointed at high culture and universities in general in the sixties—an energetic era that held not only civil right movements but also radical changes in many disciplines and policies. Kernan notes, “the attack on literature first began to be noticeable in the universities in the disturbances connected with the Vietnam War...”

Moreover, in his five-chapter-book *The Rise and Fall of English*, the renowned scholar, Robert Scholes, gives a thorough critique of the nature of English studies in the United States today recalling for a critical change for the future. By providing examples of two early American colleges: Yale and Brown, Scholes gives a substantiated analysis of their rise at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Although Scholes addresses the dark situation of English, in general, literature falls under his analysis as an academic field. According to Scholes, the decline of English is attributed to the canon of theories, texts, and political issues that circled humanities extensively. He calls, at the end of his book, for an instant and essential construction of the discipline toward a methodology of composition, rhetoric. While extensively addresses the situation of English departments, Scholes fails to encompass the public in this malaise of English. It is true that inside the academic walls, English has deteriorated, but it has been neglected outside the academic walls as well.

Similarly, Alvin Kernan's book *What Happened to Humanities* offers the opinions of some of the most notable American academic commentators on the critical changes that happened in the humanities in the latter part of the 20th century. The essays in the volume ascribe the decline to factors such as demographic shifts, lack of financial support, and the shifting communication technology. They also investigate the impact of these factors on books, libraries and the phenomenology of reading in the age of images.

3. What the Public Say

What I have explored so far has indeed played an important role in the decline of literature—an internal role. Over the last few decades, the scholars, I have mentioned, and many others have scrutinized the decline of literature as a result of fundamental internal problems. Compellingly, this attribution appears valid. Nevertheless, it would be more conducive to interpreting this decline when considering the public's views and not relying solely on the profession itself. Therefore, this paper serves to establish a new perception of the decline of literature through examining the public's voice.

Forty people participated in the questionnaire (20 men, 20 women.) For the sake of anonymity and authenticity, neither the name of the participant nor the name of the institution that the respondent represents was recorded. The language in

the questionnaire was simple and straightforward—taking into account that participants may have a variety of backgrounds and different levels of understanding. Complicated concepts and terms were avoided. Although the questionnaire consisted of eight simple questions, a lot of people showed no sign of interest in filling them out. Since the questionnaire was not pleasing to most people whom I have communicated with, I could simply anticipate that reading literature would not be more intriguing to them.

The first question was: how many books do you read monthly? Although the question incorporated all kinds of books—fiction and non-fiction—and all genres as well and did not specify literature, yet some participants chose magazines as alternatives to books instead of saying ‘none’. Most people read 1-3 books per month, which shows a surge of interest in reading not only literature but also other kinds including self-help books. The purpose of asking such a question is to identify from the very beginning if the lack of reading literature is attributed to reasons that are pertinent to literature only or all books, in general. Furthermore, it is shown that women are likely to read books more than men, almost twice as much. The number of women who read more than three books per month outweighed men. Only two men said they read more than three books.

The second question was specific: what genre of literature would interest you most? The result was unpredictably surprising. The majority of men chose non-fiction as the most interesting kind of literature while all of the female respondents chose fiction, particularly novel and short stories. Only one man chose poetry, but the rest was not interested in fiction. The fact that men are not usually tempted by fictional stories implies the possibility of finding a larger portion of the actual population who do not consider fiction intriguing. The tendency to read nonfiction emanates from the concept many people have of not looking at fiction as a learning tool—a story that can teach us a valuable lesson in an esthetic and creative way. Most men, according to the questionnaire, did not believe or understand, this concept that women did.

In order to see whether or not people’s desire to read literature is driven by someone’s else recommendation or advice, the third question emerged: have you purchased a book based on someone’s recommendation? There were some variations in the results among men and women. The only commonality amidst these responses is that readers at a young age rarely purchase a recommended book, unlike older readers who said that they often read books just because they were suggested.

What is your favorite book? Who is your favorite author? These questions, four and five were proposed to understand if the public was intrigued by the world’s masterpieces—classics—or if the most celebrated authors captivated the public. Unpredictably, only one person chose a classic—John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The choices of favorite books ranged from Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), John Irving’s *The Cider House Rules* (1985), Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man* (2005), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), Ted Dekker’s *The Circle* (2011), and many others. It is shown here that the public tends not to be attracted to classics—works that have been abundantly celebrated among literature scholars for a long time. Their choices include mostly works from the 20th and 21st centuries.

As for the authors, and aside from Edgar Allan Poe, the list lacks highly celebrated writers. They chose Hunter S. Thompson, Ted Dekker, Kurt Vonnegut, Pat Conroy, and some writers that are not largely known. The absence of world major names in literature in these responses—such as: America’s Hemingway, Russia’s Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, France’s Hugo or Voltaire, Ireland’s Joyce or Bernard Shaw, England’s Shakespeare or Austen—a seemingly endless supply of well-known authors—appears to come from one of the following two accounts: (1) they have not had the opportunity to expose themselves to these classics, (2) they have read one or another of these works but they do not constitute a landmark on their journey of reading. Both accounts indicate a shocking fact; what have been labeled as a masterpiece or classic, is widely unappreciated by the majority of public.

The sixth question asked the participants if they agreed with the statement: modern authors are as good as writers from the 18th and 19th centuries. The statement was to measure the respondents’ abilities to distinguish the different writing styles of authors from various literary periods. The majority did not agree with the statement. The responses resonate with the above conviction—public do not treasure classics. The several that opposed were all women who believed that there was a significant difference as writers from the 18th and 19th centuries were exceptionally better.

To detect if the complexity of some works impedes the public’s understanding and to see if certain skills are required to be a reader of literature, the seventh question arose: reading a literary work requires some skills such as perfect grasp, flawless comprehension, and vast vocabulary. The majority believed that literature ought to be approached with these skills. However, most of the female readers, aged over 30, had an opposing view. According to them, reading literature does not necessitate acquiring vast vocabulary or having impeccable comprehension—from the context, one can understand.

Literature encompasses different degrees of complexity in all of its genres. Some writers tend to use complexity in their writings whether or not they intended so. These writings challenge the apprehension of many readers who feel undermined unlike professional readers known as intellectuals who find them uncomplicated and interesting. The idea of describing a specific novel as a page-turner shows how readers like to resort to easy-to-read books and forsake the most complicated ones such as Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* or Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The reader’s intelligence is often challenged when reading such books. While the understanding of the hard-to-read books gives the reader the pleasure of competence and mastery, the failure to understand generates feeling of inadequacy and inferiority among those who find those books challenging.

The last question specifically addresses the problem of the decline: what do you think are the main reasons that some people do not read literature? By asking such a question and, more importantly, by concluding the questionnaire in a brief essay question was an attempt to interpret the decline of literature through the lenses of the public, the common readers. The respondents' reactions varied drastically, but there is an agreement over several factors by which, the public believes, why most people have abandoned reading literature.

Lack of time is the main cause in most of the responses. This response is vague and does not provide an accurate justification. Most people tend to use this reason to defend their failure or sluggishness so they do not perform a certain action or develop a hobby. The concept of "lack of time" is not reality; it is more conviction and perception. There is time for personal pleasure, exercise, work, social communications and house chores. What one lacks is not time; it's time management, our ability to control and use it properly. For example, the amount of time spent on watching TV per day can be saved for other things. According to a recent New York Times article, "an average of four hours and 39 minutes consumed by every person every day." This massive amount of time equals reading a minimum of twenty books per month. So, limiting TV viewing to only two hours per day saves each person nearly 80 hours (almost four days) of free time each month that can be used for profitable experiences.

The impact of technology on people's lives is what the public states as another cause of the decline. It is true that technology has dominated our lives—ironically was thought of as a means to make life easier. As a matter of fact, it has been used mostly to expedite our time—or to kill out time in a common sense— without providing the expected benefits or even any kind of social values. Cell phones, computers, email, and Internet, all distract most people and negatively impact them to a larger extent. The excessive use of these devices and means of technology result in: failure at multitasking, lack of family time, and incapability of enhancing brain skills—thinking, interpreting, and analyzing, which often comes from reading. The neuroscientist Susan Greenfield addressed the undesirable impact of this digital age on people's identity emphasizing the threat on the human brain. The influence of media—primarily TV—has been a major factor providing the alternatives for pleasure and easy access to information, as some people from the public believe. According to one response, "media has resulted in an effect known as the 'dumbing down of America'". Watching takes less brainpower and people, as one man states, "are always looking for the easy way out." As noted earlier, the amount of consumed time when watching TV, or even videos, constitutes a threat to people's intellectuality.

With the growing number of TV channels and movies produced every year, it has become very challenging nowadays to plant inside people the passion for reading. And it has become even more difficult to develop reading literature as a habit for the younger generations. One response indicated that when a person is not interested in literature, this shows that reading has not become a habit when that person was a child. In other words, parents sometimes do not encourage their children to be readers of literature, or at least general readers, which would likely to result in a lack of interest when they become adults.

The lack of advertising is another reason that some people believe would be a major cause of this decline. The success of the Harry Potter series is attributed to the effective advertisements. According to one response, "the Harry Potter book series being so successful and popular to read in time in which printed media is not the most widely used source of entertainment". The case of the success of the fantasy series of Harry Potter can be perfectly used to prove this claim. However, Harry Potter was also created as a product, which explains the main goal of advertising the series. Advertisement is what insinuates people to a certain product. It is very difficult to apply the same concept to classics or most of the modern works for which publishers would not consider profitable. The advertisement can be indirectly education-based, where students are exposed to a wide variety of literary works, even simplified versions or picture books of world classics. This way or another, we will have a future generation who will receive and appreciate literature as much as they appreciate technology.

4. Conclusion

There is a decline in literature and in the number of people who receives it. The problem is not recent; however, it has not been discussed inclusively. If we continue to address this issue institutionally and neglect to adopt the public's perspectives, we will fail to come up with effective and applicable solutions to the problem. It has been a few decades since the problem was identified; it is the time now to expand it thoroughly by including diverse views from common people— both readers and nonreaders. This paper has presented some of the public's points of views. But, more research is needed to expand this issue fully. Also, more empirical studies ought to be done in order to validate any claims that may arise when tackling this issue. For a field that has had a forceful manifestation of expressions, emotions, and thoughts through the use of aesthetic language, there is absolutely an instant need to reconsider its decline in an age when literature can be used not only for pleasure but also for providing rich source of information.

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Notes

¹ See Kernan, Alvin B. *The Death of Literature*. 2-3

² Bosman, Julie. "For 'Fifty Shades of Grey,' More Than 100 Million Sold."