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Where Literature and Philosophy Meet and Diverge



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18 April 2018

*A Senior Honors Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Bellarmine University Honors Program*

Under the Direction of Dr. Evanthia Speliotis

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*“We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us,
with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and
a presumption that once our eyes watered.”*

-Guildenstern, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead by Tom Stoppard

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t”

When I was a child, reading felt as natural as breathing. I did it thoughtlessly, taking the pleasure of words as something simple and obvious. I did not begin to ask questions about the nature of literature and stories until an incident occurred when I was fifteen, involving a run-in with a grumpy history teacher at my high school. I had not personally taken any of his classes, but I had certainly heard a lot about him.

You see, the rumor had it that this irascible, militaristic history teacher had killed Osama Bin Laden. Everybody at my high school knew this. Even the teachers blatantly ignored the ridiculousness of this notion, and gave right into the joke. “Will you thank him for his service?” I heard my science teacher ask before sending a student with a stack of papers to his classroom. My older sister and several of my friends had spoken about the giant packets he sent home with his AP World History students, and the rigor of his quizzes. Some said that despite his short grey hair, he could do more pushups than the rest of the class combined.

Even though I had never met him, I knew exactly who I was dealing with when he barged into the library where the school’s recently-formed Harry Potter club had been meeting regularly. “Why waste your time with something that isn’t real?” He demanded of us. Then he turned to the girl beside me, and barked out like a drill-sergeant, “What happened in 1492?”

“Columbus sailed the ocean blue?”

“No. The reconquista.”

He stormed out of the library. And as I watched the short, angry man receding into the distance, I found myself—for the first time—in a position where I felt that I had a duty to defend my love of fiction. I wrote him a strongly worded letter, speaking of the value of literary truth and literature's potential to have an impact on society. I passed his room a few times before I dropped it in the little plastic mailbox next to the door.

Sitting in my first class that day, I felt vaguely sick. I spent the next week worrying about that letter with no reply, but it wasn't until two weeks later that my friend Lu saw the letter still sitting in the bottom of the mailbox and dropped it on his desk.

He told the whole class about it.

He told *all* his classes about it.

And then my friends in those classes told me.

Apparently he found the letter well written, and seemed to like it. He also said he still thought the idea of a Harry Potter club was stupid, but at the very least I believe I convinced him we were sane.

Six years later, I mentioned this anecdote to a student who is now studying at my former high school. Although she must've been nine or ten when this incident occurred, she is now one of his history students.

"Wait," she asked me, stunned. That letter was from *you*?"

Apparently he still talks about it.

After high school, I went to college where I ended up as an English major within the first week. In my studies, I never really stopped thinking about the questions that incident had put in

front of me. *Why is something that is made-up still valuable? And what is literature capable of accomplishing?*

Before too long, I was also wandering around the university with a big, fat philosophy book tucked in my backpack. It was usually one I was reading for fun and going to discuss with my professor outside of class time.

In philosophy I found the same kinds of questions I liked to ask about the nature of things in themselves. I also noticed certain similarities between literature and philosophy, such as their lack of interest in that which is factually, scientifically and observably true, and their similar struggle to be recognized as legitimate in some more factually and scientifically oriented circles.

I remember a philosophy club meeting where we met to discuss a video in which a scientist and a philosopher had a debate about whether or not philosophy had any value in the modern world. At the start of the debate, the scientist—much like that history teacher—argued philosophy was useless as it had no scientific rigor. He said that science could explain everything, including morality. But, as I remember it, the scientist finally conceded that the structuring principles of how people conduct science are ultimately the product of philosophy.

As I continued to study both Literature and Philosophy, I noticed a significant amount of overlap between the two disciplines, beyond this interest in the nonfactual. I read works of philosophy that appeared very literary in form and content, such as the Platonic Dialogues which read much like a play. I also found many works of literature that were philosophical in nature, such as plays like *Hamlet*, *Oedipus*, and *No Exit*. I wondered if there might be any texts which discussed this overlap. While I found that many writers and philosophers have asked “What is

Literature?” or “What is philosophy?” it was difficult to encounter a text where these questions are set beside each other. In my thesis, I wanted to look more closely at why there might be this overlap between literature and philosophy as well as if—and where—a line might be drawn between them.

To begin, Literature and Philosophy share an implicit contract with a reader which allows these texts to, at times, depart from the facts. These two disciplines begin with life and experiences, but go beyond the realm of particulars to deal with meaning and abstractions. The different kinds of abstraction that each text concerns itself with, along with the different way each discipline engages with these abstractions, can help to reveal the different concerns of literary and philosophical texts. The different ways in which these texts are studied and evaluated as works of literature or works of philosophy can help to further reveal the distinctions between literary philosophy and philosophical literature, as well as the strengths of each discipline, and what might be necessary for a text to succeed both as a work of literature and as a work of philosophy.

Part 1: Literature and Philosophy as Texts



Tell all the Truth but Tell it Slant

Literature, Philosophy, and the Matter of Fact

Literature and philosophy both deal with meaning and abstractions, but these two types of texts also have a similar relationship to facts and particulars. At first the contract seems fairly straightforward: if something is presented as fictional, it is alright to ignore facts, and if something is presented as factual, to ignore the facts would be to break the contract between the reader and the writer. After all, there are cases in which works of literature and works of philosophy must honor facts. In literary works of fiction and creative nonfiction, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, or other factually true accounts which draw on people's lives, the particular facts cannot be subverted or ignored without deceiving the reader. This is also true of works of philosophy which present themselves as factual, such as Descartes' works on science. In these cases, to present something that is not scientifically sound or historically accurate would negatively affect the quality of the work.

On the other hand, a fictional or fantastical story, such as *The Tempest*, can include many components and details that are in conflict with certain particular, factual truths. For example, there is no verifiable evidence suggesting the existence of magical spirits that can decide to turn invisible, as Ariel does in the first scene. Yet no one in a theater is saying that the actor playing Ariel is actually a flying sprite. No theater is advertising that they have hired a real monster to play Caliban. These elements of the play are more subject to what Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief" than any form of deception. One is not lying or concealing the facts if,

within the frame of the contract, one never presented these details as factual in the first place. For this reason, it does not represent a case of concealing a truth that someone “ought to make manifest,” which was Rousseau’s criterion for what constituted a lie (*Reveries* 45). This is also true of philosophical works which present themselves as more fantastical, such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In works such as these, fiction is permissible. Following this understanding, one can see the basic frame of the contract: if something is presented as factual it should be faithful to the facts and if it is presented as fictional it does not need to follow the facts.

However, there is some grey area within this contract, as well as some complications. The line between fiction and nonfiction is not always precise and clear, as in the case of creative nonfiction, and works like *In the Time of the Butterflies* which may tell a factual story in an innovative way which might, at times, require some filling in of the facts or invention of details. In addition to these kinds of works, certain ways of representing stories based on historical facts—such as plays or short stories— can complicate the dynamic between what actually happened and how best to represent what happened. In these cases, the expectations of the reader and the author’s obligations to fact are not always cut and dried. It is fairly commonly understood among writers that even when a story is based on historical events, it is often best not to be a slave to the facts. A simple how-to-write book, such as *The Playwright’s Guidebook* will explicitly state this: “Too many writers become bogged down with trying to follow a literal (in this case historical) truth in their plays. Plays are not about this kind of truth, regardless of what many critics, historians, and literal-minded hacks who don’t understand the function of art will say” (160-61).

Creativity and good judgment are often necessary in deciding where one should closely follow the facts or take certain liberties in order to create a coherent text, especially when a text must work within conventions such as length or style. Plays are a particularly good example of a case where the nature of a text might necessitate that one go beyond simply selecting facts. There are many limitations in presenting a story in the form of a play: there is reduced time, a limitation to the number of characters that can physically fit on a stage, and some limitations to the number of characters that can be thoroughly developed and explored in the space of a couple of hours. In cases like this, one sees scenes, such as the one which takes place across the second, third, and fourth songs of *Hamilton*, in which the title character meets Aaron Burr, Marquis de Lafayette, Hercules Mulligan, and John Lawrence within the space of one day, encountering the latter three characters together in one bar. This scene can be found nowhere on the historical record; these people did not all conveniently meet on the same night. But this scene functions well as a way to introduce the characters in a quick and seemingly natural way. In order to get to the essence of who these people are in a reasonable amount of time—to understand the truth of their desires, fears, and actions—the play cannot dwell too much in the details. This is a case where, due to the demands of the form of the text, it is in the interest of the story to ignore (or at the very least take liberties with) certain historical facts and accuracies. Even though this is a story based in history, the audience is aware that the playwright took liberties with language and structure.

The founding fathers also did not break out into song or rap. But ignoring this fact is necessary if one sets out to tell a story through a rap musical, just as ignoring the fact that historical royalty didn't often speak in clean and eloquent verse is necessary to write a play in

iambic pentameter. Because the audience does not expect to see an exact replication of a historical figure's life in under three hours, the author is free to draw from history while taking some liberties with how the story is told. After all, an audience will not expect the same factual rigor from a biography of Alexander Hamilton spanning hundreds of pages as they will expect from a rap musical spanning a few hours in which the founding fathers break out into song. Modern audiences understand this, just as Shakespearean audiences understood that historical English figures did not speak in perfect iambic pentameter and that an entire battle cannot be replicated by a couple dozen men. In these cases, the contract between a writer and an audience becomes more flexible, as a reasonable audience will not expect exact replication of historical events within a limited, fictional frame.

While historically-based fiction may take liberties with some facts, there are also cases when fiction (and particularly realistic fiction) must remain faithful to reality on some level. This is because the contract between author and a reader does not simply operate in terms of fiction and nonfiction; it also operates in terms of realism and fantasy. The academic Christopher Ricks makes the argument that this is often the case in his essay "Literature and the Matter of Fact." Rather than talking of abstract and particular truths, he uses the terms "imaginative truth" and "matters of fact" (Ricks 289). He gives examples such as a potential inaccuracy in the color of the Vatican's drapes in a work of George Eliot (Ricks 282). In this case, she was representing fictional characters and events within a realistic setting. The color red reflected well on the emotional state of the character, but when a reader pointed out that the liturgical color would have been different at that time of year, George Eliot became concerned. Although the color did turn out to be faithful to Vatican tradition, it raises the question of whether or not George Eliot

should have been troubled by this factual inconsistency in a fictional work. Mr. Ricks believes that this concern was legitimate, and that in cases of factual errors in realistic fiction, “we must not simply relax into letting the matter pass” (281). Although he concedes, “I am not proposing accuracy as a necessary, let alone sufficient, condition of literary worth” (283), he acknowledges “The crucial question is that of the terms on which a work of literature offers itself” (286). This, I agree, is a crucial point. If a work presents itself as representing something fictional within a realistic setting which appears to have the same characteristics and history as the real world, then it *ought* to pay attention to those characteristics and that history. When the work fails to do this, out of either carelessness or purposeful inaccuracy which adds nothing to the piece but a distraction, then the quality of the work is diminished. As Mr. Ricks puts it, “You can’t get mileage from the matter of fact and refuse to pay the fare” (299). Although a story can present itself as completely fictional or fantastical or postmodern in order to escape the necessity of respecting certain facts, when it does draw upon the real, the facts must be respected. Ultimately the work must obey the rules of the world it presents.

There are cases where the facts can be bent or ignored in nonfictional works, just as there are cases where the facts should be respected in works of realistic fiction. Although this contract can also apply to philosophical writings, it is typically works of literature—particularly postmodern works such as *The Things They Carried*, or *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*—which intentionally play with the complex relationship these kinds of texts have with the facts. In this kind of postmodern work, details and events are often presented to the reader as factual and then later undermined and revealed as fictional. These works still succeed, despite (and perhaps because of) these negations. This is because, ultimately, the value of literature and

philosophy does not rest on the truth of any fact or event. Where these works do draw from history and respect the historical record, it is not a matter of literature or philosophy being inherently reliant on facts; instead, it is the contract with the reader which establishes the need—or the lack of the need—for factual accountability.

Abstract Truth

This brings forward an important issue. Although the contract with the reader can allow an author to ignore certain historical or scientific facts, it does not explain why an author would turn to fiction or fables in the first place. Are there not enough wonders in heaven and earth that a writer could use them in order to construct a good story? Although there are fine examples of nonfiction or creative nonfiction, there are also compelling reasons why an author would want to ignore the facts in order to better craft a text. People do not experience life in a purely factual, objective way. Part of the reason for this is that there are truths other than factual truths. There is meaning that cannot be reduced to singular facts, and there are abstractions such as concepts and ideas which have an immense impact on human experience.

Fictions, beliefs, and misconceptions all contribute to human life and experience. Stories make up an important piece of nearly every culture. Even when someone does not literally believe a story to be true, fictional stories can nevertheless deeply affect one's life, actions, and experiences. Stories can teach lessons and bring people together; people have been making up stories since before humans learned to write words down. Many of the oldest stories modern people have access to, such *Beowulf* and Homer's epics, contain fantastical elements such as monsters and gods. Even if these creatures and demigods did not exist, many people at that time

did believe in gods and monsters, fairies and ghosts. Those creatures became a part of their reality. This is because people experience the world subjectively, through bias and emotion and confusion and often superstition. People might believe they see something, such as a figure out in the dark, even though it is only a shadow. Though it is not real, this belief in a non-factual reality can have a real effect on one's life, actions, and experiences. Even when they are not factual, beliefs, fictions, and misconceptions can retain a strong power in human experience and the human psyche. For this reason, it can be extremely powerful—even desirable—to craft a text which is not wholly based in fact.

Although some disgruntled high school history teachers and scientists may disagree, this interest in something other than a historical and scientifically viable truth is not a weakness. This is because there are other kinds of truth present in meaning and abstractions that go beyond the truth of facts and particulars. Rousseau discusses this in his “Fourth Walk” in *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. In this walk, he differentiates between particular and abstract truth. Rousseau began to examine this distinction when he recognized his tendency to “lie with a gaiety of heart” by telling fictions and fabrications (44). He asked whether there are circumstances in which it is possible—or even desirable—to tell a lie or an untruth in a way which was still morally upright. In his discussion, he calls one category of truth “general and abstract truth” which he referred to as “the most precious of all goods” (45). “Particular and individual truth,” on the other hand, can be good, evil, or indifferent (45). An example of a particular truth could be a fact or figure such as “there have been a million jobs created.” On its own, this particular fact is neither good nor bad. A politician could say, “We’re doing great, there have been a million jobs created,” or “Three million jobs were created last year, but only one million jobs

created last year.” Although the fact could be true in both cases, it means something very different in the two contexts. The intention and the meaning presented in these cases can be honest or dishonest. Although the statistic by itself is a neutral fact, it can either represent or misrepresent the reality of the situation, depending on how it is presented. One can only judge what this statistic really signifies after the fact is put into a proper context. One can see if the politician is doing a good job, or if he is mediocre and attempting to convince the public that is not the case. In order to arrive at the *meaning* or the abstract truth, it is necessary to take a step beyond the particulars. One must look to context and situation and consider the relationships and the patterns among them. This process of abstraction opens the way toward Rousseau’s “general truth,” and makes clear how very different this type of truth is from the truth of facts or “particular truth.”

In the example of the million jobs, meaning arises from context. In a written text, the context and the general picture presented by text is constructed out of the relationships between particular details. To create a coherent text, an author must decide which facts and details to include and which to exclude. Although it is technically part of the context, one does not need to know the history of the universe to understand job growth or what is happening on the molecular level of a dollar bill. If every single exhaustive macro and micro detail of a situation were listed, right down to the chemical composition of every object and the number of hairs on every person’s nose, one would lose sight of all meaning and drown in the wealth of details, even if all those details could be listed or read in a lifetime. For this reason, an author must necessarily be selective when shaping a text.

Because of this process of selection, there is a personal, human authorial intention in a text that is not present in the wider world. An author can choose particulars that will describe and convey, as fully as possible, the shape of the wider situation he, she, or they wish to convey. One could also distort this shape by selecting certain particulars which suggest an alternative relationship that is not an accurate reflection of the full context. One can take that figure of one million jobs out of context and sandwich in between a lot of other things that, on the surface, sound impressive. Is that fact inaccurate in this case? No. But it can be used in such a way that its meaning is misrepresented. In this way, the meaning suggested by a collection of particulars in a text can either be accurate or inaccurate, truthful or untruthful. The selectivity and the intentionality of a text turn it into a closed system in which the author can stack the details in such a way as to present something which is not truthful to the patterns present in human experience. Or, on the other hand, a skilled author can select details and present them in such a way as to reveal something truthful about the relationships and meanings present in the wider world. This intention towards truth or falsehood separates the abstract truth of a text from the abstract truth of the world, and also separates intentionally constructed abstract truth from indifferent details and facts.

Literature and philosophy share this similar relation to details and abstract truth. Both kinds of texts are primarily interested in meaning and abstractions, but deal with particular facts on the basis of how realistically the text presents itself. However, while these types of texts are both interested in abstract truth, they are not necessarily interested in the exact same kinds of abstractions.

Kant's discussion of the sublime in *The Critique of Judgment* offers some help in delineating between two particular types of meaningful abstractions: concepts and ideas. Even though there is no way to look at a pure, physical, scientifically verifiable example of a concept or an idea, these categories—like fiction and human imagination—have an immense impact on how people experience the world. Kant uses these words in a very specific way, and—although literature and philosophy both make use of these abstractions—these two types of texts relate to these abstractions in distinct and specific ways. Examining the differences between these two categories of abstractions and how each type of text relates to these categories can help to make sense of the different interests which help to guide the creation of works of literature and works of philosophy.

Kant associates concepts with the beautiful and the faculty of understanding, both of which deal with images and the senses (265). An example of a recognizable concept might be a tree. A person can experience different examples of trees, such as maples, dogwoods, hollies, and douglas firs. After experiencing all these different particular examples, one can step back and notice the commonality between these objects and form a sense of the concept of “tree.” This concept is an abstraction that goes beyond the particulars while also drawing from them. Though specific examples can participate in the idea of what-it-is-to-be-a-tree, none of these examples, on their own, fully capture the essence of what-it-is-to-be-a-tree. Though there is not one particular example of this concept, when a tree is mentioned, it is not difficult to call to mind the image of a tree. In reading that word, you can almost certainly picture what a tree looks like. One need not even picture a specific example, but a generalized, conceptual picture of “tree” is

also possible to conjure up, like a little symbol for a tree in a children's book. In this, one can see that with concepts, the abstraction remains connected to images.

Concepts have an immense impact on people's lives. Even though there is no way to find a pure example of the concept of "tree," when looking at a forest I can't help but look at the shapes in front of me and see them as trees. It is difficult to un-see concepts. I look around me and I see cards, a computer, glasses, phones. Everywhere I look, I do not see an endless array of particulars or a senseless mass of shapes. The patches of light that enter my eyes are instantaneously organized into neat, classifiable objects. Even when objects are unfamiliar to me, they are almost always connected with familiar concepts. I do not need to have previously seen a particular tree or even a particular type of tree to register that it is a tree upon seeing it for the first time. Every memory, every experience I can call to mind is infused with concepts. In this way, concepts form a fundamental organizing principle of human experience.

Kant states that unlike concepts, "ideas cannot be presented" (134). An example of an idea would be something like "the good" or "the beautiful," which cannot be directly represented. The process of forming ideas is very similar to the process of grasping concepts. But in the case of ideas, it is typically a certain quality of an object (rather than the object itself) which participates in the idea. One does not find an object which is an example of "a beautiful" or "a good" but rather an object that has qualities that are beautiful or good. Noticing this common quality can help someone form the conception of an idea.

There are some ideas which are more closely tied to concepts, such as the idea of nature. Someone may think 'nature' but will visualize—not the idea of nature in itself—but rather mountains, streams, or maybe even trees. These concepts help to contribute to the idea of nature,

but nature-in-itself is something larger than any wilderness. The idea also includes aspects of nature such as the cycles of life and the terrible power and vastness of nature, which goes beyond the power of any stream. In forming these kinds of abstractions, which are not taken from specific examples of similar objects, but rather the qualities or patterns in concepts, the abstraction stands at a farther remove from the senses. Although someone can picture things that are beautiful or good, a person cannot picture “good-in-itself” or “beauty-in-itself” or even all of “nature-in-itself” For Kant, this is the principal distinction between concepts and ideas: the imagination can grasp a concept, but it cannot directly grasp an idea.

Like concepts, ideas are incredibly important to the human experience of life. What someone believes to be good will almost certainly influence his, her, or their decisions. Ideas can be extremely powerful, not only in influencing personal decisions, but also on a societal level. Many people spend their whole lives chasing the ideal of beauty or trying to do what is right and good. Every violent ideological revolution in history has shown that people are willing to die for—and to kill for—ideas, even though they are something no one can see or measure. This is uniquely human. We are the only creatures who are willing to destroy or to create magnificent things in the name of an idea.

More wonders in Heaven and Earth

Literature, Concept, and Idea

Literature relates to concepts and ideas in distinct ways. Literature—whether it be fictional or factual—must lead with concepts abstracted from people’s experiences. Stories need people, places, and things within them. When one looks into a play like *Hamlet* one can find kings and queens and poisoned cups, along with many other concepts that can be pictured. Even when reality is abandoned, concepts are not abandoned. A fairly abstract story, such as *Flatland*, in which all the characters are shapes or lines, still draws on concepts of geometry that can be pictured and imagined, such as triangles and lines.

Images drawn from experience are even present in stories which make use of concepts for which there are no physical examples readily available. For example, a unicorn cannot be observed, but it can be easily pictured and imagined. With concepts like horses and horns in one’s experience, a unicorn is not difficult to invent. Even with some of the shortest and most abbreviated literature—the poetry of the imagists—the last thing remaining in these distilled poems is an image, informed by concepts. If this connection to the senses (and particularly sight) were completely removed from a piece of writing, and if it were left with no setting or characters or anything which can be pictured, then the content of that work would become something other than a story. If the piece contains nothing other than disembodied voice discussing a string of

ideas without anything to be pictured...that sounds much more like a piece of philosophy or an academic essay than a story.

As long as there are characters that remotely resemble humans, ideas will be present through the particular ideas of the characters. This is because, though humans are physical creatures, humans are also filled with the capacity to reason, with ideas and desires influencing every visible action. Although one can imagine the concept of human being—one can see, in the mind's eye, what a human looks like—this image encompasses only the physical life of a human being, and not the mental life. In this way, *the human* is a strange hybrid between concept and idea. Any work which attempts to describe something which is human, or near to it, will necessarily have to represent both concepts and ideas within it. Even when protagonists are animals, often through anthropomorphic representations, these characters will exhibit the ability to think. Monsters like Frankenstein's creation or Bram Stoker's Dracula, though they are not human, nevertheless exhibit the ability to think. Where there is character, there will almost certainly be thought. And where there are thoughts, some may be about concepts or concrete things, but in many cases, thoughts are centered on ideas. Those ideas of beauty and goodness and justice do not only influence people; they influence characters as well.

The ideas present in these cases are typically the character's ideas, rather than the author's ideas. Occasionally there will be characters whom some consider to be a "mouthpiece of the author," which can be vaguely problematic if the remarks feel out of character, but useful if the expression of the author's ideas is carried out well. Even when the author's ideas are not directly present through the speeches of the characters or direct commentary within the story, the author's ideas can also be present in a less direct way: through theme.

We often spoke about creating theme or “story truth” in my creative writing nonfiction class. The teacher made a point of saying that we should not simply write about what happened. We should re-tell the story in such a way that it showed what those events really meant. I attempted to do this in my first piece called, “The Bedrooms I have Slept in.” Although I wrote a story which is, on the surface, a story about the different places I have lived, I did not include every single hostel or hotel where I rested my head. I chose very specific examples that allowed me to explore what the idea of home means to me, and perhaps what it means to others who are in the same transitory phase of life. This look at the idea of home did not come through something that I directly told the audience, but rather as something that I attempted to show by representing the places where I struggled to feel at home, along with places where I felt comfortable. That meaning was already present in my experiences. I simply needed to select the experiences where this was evident and describe them in a coherent and evocative manner. In this way, an author can craft a story where meaning arises organically from the particular details and ideas. In this way literature can incorporate idea, not only on the level of an individual character’s ideas, but also in the author’s ideas presented through the selection of details and a carefully crafted narrative.

The incorporation of theme, meaning, or “story truth” is often very prominent in stories considered to be more philosophical literature. It is not only the specific philosophical ruminations of certain characters which might contribute to theme, but also other details within the story which reinforce and contribute to the exploration of an idea. This is the case in *Hamlet*, in which there is a persistent engagement with the idea of death. This comes, partially through Hamlet’s thoughts expressed in soliloquies, from his first line spoken in solitude, “Oh that this

too too solid Flesh, would melt” (1.2. 129) to his description of death as “the undiscovered Countrey from whose Borne/ No Traveller returns” (3.1. 80-81), on to his last words looking onto death: “The rest is silence” (5.2. 356). These all contribute to the exploration of the idea of death, and they are all consistent with the character Hamlet’s dark, questioning nature, his journey throughout the story, and his very personal preoccupation with his own death.

Even though these concerns seem proper to the character, the playwright selected a wealth of other details within the play which all help to express the inescapability of death. This includes the presence of the ghost, which puts the idea of death on the stage from the very first scene(1.1); the moment when Hamlet holds up Yorick’s skull and looks into the reality of death for someone he has known (5.1); and the large number of characters who die within the play. Each of these elements points to the power of death, showing this idea rather than directly telling the audience about the idea. It is through the confluence of these details that meaning arises. Through the presence of the ghost, Yorick’s skull, Hamlet’s ruminations, and the many deaths throughout the play, the theme of death’s presence is made palpable. The play’s focus on death throughout helps the reader better understand what Hamlet faces as he knowingly accepts an invitation to a duel that might bring his death: “If it be now, ‘tis not to come: if it bee not to come, it will bee now: if it be not now; yet it will come; the readinesse is all,” (5.2. 207-209). When the audience is shown the presence of death throughout the play, these words can be *felt*, in addition to being understood.

Philosophy, Concept, and Idea

Philosophy's relation to concept and idea is distinct from literature's relation to these abstractions. Philosophy is directly and primarily interested in idea, with concepts being of secondary importance. This philosophical interest in an abstract idea is often set off and informed by particular experiences. For example, someone can experience good things and bad things. That person might then try to formulate an idea of what it is to be good, and what specific qualities ties those good things together. This is inductive reasoning, when one makes a general conclusion based on specific examples or details. On the other hand, someone could propose a general definition for what is good and a person could see if that fits with his, her, or their personal experiences of good things. This would be a case of deductive reasoning, when one takes a general principle and see if its application works practically. Often, a mix of both of these methods is useful for coming to a better understanding of an idea. One can start with experiences, propose a way of formulating an idea they seem to embody or illustrate, and then explore whether it fits all particular instances well. Although particular details and examples are useful for refining an idea and making it more precise, in asking questions of idea one must move beyond the particular details. This is because the truth of a form or idea does not lie merely in the factual nature of any particular detail or example, but rather in the patterns and meaning suggested and abstracted from the multiplicity of examples.

This direct interest in idea is clear when one looks across the different divisions and subsections of philosophy, many have ideas as their direct subject of study. Disciplines such as Aesthetics and Ethics directly concern themselves with abstract ideas or rules. Aesthetics, though it often looks to art or nature, does not find its end in these examples, but rather seeks to better understand the idea of what art or beauty is, which involves that same process of looking to

patterns which is necessary when seeking abstract truth. Ethics concerns itself with the good.

This is an idea which, perhaps, every good human action aims at, but no human experience can purely exemplify. A kind gesture of welcome does not contain all the goodness in the world, and even sacrificing one's own life cannot speak to all the goodness done in quiet moments. The idea lies beyond any particular.

Even philosophical investigations which are concerned with more concrete and observable things, such as nature or political systems, are in search of abstract truth, ideas, and the structuring principles surrounding these concrete phenomena. This is true of disciplines such as political philosophy which has, as its focus, the *polis* or political community, which can be observed and studied directly. Political philosophy is not simply the science of observing the population; instead it looks to the ideas, structuring principles and theories of how one should act concerning this *polis*. After observing human beings acting and interacting, political philosophy asks questions about the nature of human beings and seeks to discover the order and structure that will best respect that nature and allow for its protection and flourishing. These theories that political philosophy provides—ideas such as the social contract or the veil of ignorance—begin from observations of a society, but go beyond what is observed, toward the idea of a justice and a just society.

Even metaphysics--which is what Aristotle, among others, named the philosophy which asks about what lies beyond or behind the physical world—is an investigation which goes beyond mere facts or observation. It does not seek to measure and observe the physical world; instead it seeks to understand the structures and structuring principles of nature. In doing so, it looks beyond simple points of data to seek out the patterns and principles that those facts

suggest. In all of these examples, philosophy is not simply concerned with observable facts. Instead, philosophy is either concerned with ideas which cannot be directly observed, such as beauty or the good, or, in disciplines such as the philosophy of science or politics, philosophy looks to the patterns present in things which are observable, such as the natural world or a population of people, and attempt to understand the abstract rules which govern these areas .

Although Philosophy is primarily concerned with ideas, at times it also makes use of concept and image. The use of image, as well as the popularity of imagery in general, highlight an important quality of human thought and human experience. People often use analogies, metaphors, and similes in daily speech. These tools can be incredibly effective for explaining an idea. Concrete description through story can create a vivid, lasting impression, which, as in the famous case of the Cave, can illustrate something essential about something quite massive, abstract, and difficult to grasp. People tend to experience the world in a very visual way, interacting with concrete objects. As it is impossible to find something which is the pure embodiment of Wisdom or Death or Knowledge in this world, a storyteller or philosopher who wishes to engage with or discuss these ideas can create a character or symbol, give it many characteristics of the ideas in order to talk about them in a way which is analogous to the concrete, often very visual everyday experience of human beings. For thousands of years, thinkers and prophets have turned to telling stories. Allegories appear in holy books and children's tales, and symbols and metaphors also exist in our most ancient stories, from the "whale-road" of the sea in *Beowulf* (1) to the dawn's "fingertips of rose" describing sunrise in the *Odyssey* (66). Allegory, metaphors, and symbols also have an ability to speak of moral lessons or the abstract ideas which philosophers so often examine in a way which parallels

human experience. This type of language has the power to tap into the patterns of human thought and understanding and can help to make some sense of abstract or unfamiliar notions, offering a way of understanding these ideas through that which is familiar and concrete.

In his dialogues, Plato makes use of concepts on several different levels, yet all of these different instances of images and concepts all serve to further the understanding of ideas explored within the dialogue. On the most basic level, there are metaphors present in the language that his characters use in expressing their concerns and ideas. There are also, images which function on a more complex level, such as the story of “The Cave” and “The Earth Itself.” These are not meant to express either the factual way the world works or to function as mere stories in themselves; instead, these metaphors and fables can help us work our way toward the understanding of a complex, more abstract idea.

Metaphors are a useful way to describe an idea or notion in concrete, familiar terms. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates’ death bed dialogue which describes the last day of his life, his followers are understandably concerned about the fate of one’s soul after death. They want Socrates to convince them that the soul is immortal. After his first explanations, Simmias and Cebes present concerns about the argument Socrates is making about the soul by offering metaphors or allegories. Simmias uses the example of a “tuning and a lyre” (86A). He wonders if a human might be like the lyre. When the instrument is gone and the strings are broken, the tuning could be gone as well (86B). In this way he wonders if, once the visible part of the human (the body) is broken and destroyed, could the invisible part (the soul) be destroyed as well. Though both the soul and music are invisible, people can have direct experiences of music through the sense of sound. However, no one can directly see, hear, taste, or touch a soul. In this way, Simmias uses

something concrete and familiar in order to describe something which is much less tangible.

Cebes expresses his concerns in a similar manner, using the example of a cloak and weaver-man (87 B) to describe the relation of the soul to the body. These images help to facilitate the discussion in a way which is more easily grasped and remembered than a more abstract description of the soul might be.

Platonic dialogues are a particularly complex and interesting example to discuss when examining the use of image and concept in philosophy. This is because metaphors and stories are not only used within the philosophical discussion recorded in the dialogue, but they are also the vehicle that conveys the dialogue itself. After all, these dialogues are typically spoken by characters in a determinate space. Not only do the characters make use of concepts and images in their speech, on some level they also function as concepts and images in themselves. Plato uses concepts on the level of the characters and settings of the dialogue through which the philosophical discussion is presented. Even the setting and the presence of some characters can help to further the understanding of the philosophical discussion which takes place within the dialogue. This frame is not incredibly typical of most philosophy. Aristotle, Plato's student, formatted his philosophical texts more along the lines of essays or treatises than dialogues, and modern works of philosophy are not typically written in the format of a dialogue. However, this frame for conveying the discussion can serve as another, less direct way for concepts and images to help convey the ideas explored within the main body of the philosophical discussions. This is true for examples such as the setting of the *Phaedo* in a prison, which reflects themes directly explored in the discussion.

Near the beginning of the dialogue, Phaedo speaks of waiting with his friends to enter the prison where Socrates was kept (59 D). This introduces, quite literally and concretely, the idea of captivity. But the setting of the prison also reflects the content of the argument Socrates presents through his question of whether Death, “is anything but the freeing of the soul from the body?” (64C). This evokes the idea of body as cage or prison, directly connecting the content of the argument to the setting where Socrates’ last days were spent. This notion also remains on a fairly direct metaphorical level. The soul is represented here almost as a physical thing that can slip out of the body and escape to Hades. However, later in the dialogue, this discussion takes on a less metaphorical and a more philosophical bent.

Socrates begins to speak of the “Visible” and the “Unseen” (79C). Colloquially, “the unseen” (*hades*) can also mean Hades, the place of the dead (Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem 10). This play on words allows Socrates to shift the discussion away from treating Hades as a physical place where the soul travels after death to discussing a “realm” of the unseen that the soul is engaged and concerned with every time it thinks, questions, and philosophizes, dealing with ideas and forms which cannot be seen. Although, the image of Hades as a concrete place is quite easy to picture and remember, this is not what Socrates is interested in. Rather, he uses the image of Hades in order to speak of the Unseen in a much less literal and concrete sense, connecting the unseen with the soul and the forms, which are also things which go unseen (78D). In this sense, the Dialogue moves from the literal physical concept of prison into a more metaphorical conception of the soul leaving the body, and, finally, by the end of this discussion, freeing oneself is not seen as escaping a prison or the prison of one’s body, but rather freeing oneself from particulars and perceptions and going toward universal “unseen” truths. The setting

informs this understanding in the concrete way it clues the reader into these themes of freedom and imprisonment.

In these examples, concepts help to express, examine, and reinforce ideas. This is true on the most basic level of using a metaphor to express an idea in a way which is more concrete and easily grasped, as in the case of Simmias and Cebes concerns. One can also see this use of concepts can help to interrogate and express an idea, not only within the content of the discussion, but also in the way in which the discussion is presented. Elements such as the place the discussion takes place are not merely incidental. Instead, the themes that they introduce concretely are integrated throughout the dialogue, moving away from the concrete and toward more abstract instantiations of these themes and ideas.

Part 2: Literature and Philosophy as Disciplines



Literature and Philosophy as Disciplines

Up until this point, I have been discussing Literature and Philosophy in terms of texts. To some extent, both the *Phaedo* and *Hamlet* reflect the concerns of both literary and philosophical texts. Both involve the discussion of ideas. This can be seen throughout the *Phaedo* and in scenes such as *Hamlet*'s famous "To be, or not to be" speech examining ideas of death and suicide. Both also employ images and concepts. *Hamlet* presents a text which can be imagined throughout, using concepts in addition to ideas, which is fairly typical for literature. Unlike many other philosophical texts, the *Phaedo* is presented in a fairly literary form, through a play-like frame which uses images throughout, as it presents the discussion in the form of a dialogue and a story. Although both of them reflect certain concerns of both literature and philosophy, I am not convinced that either text carries out the concerns of both disciplines in a way which equally successful in terms of both literature and philosophy.

Now, I would like to take a step back from looking at literature and philosophy in terms of the qualities of text and concerns in creating them, and turn to look at how literature and philosophy—in their roles as disciplines and areas of study—evaluate and examine these texts. *Hamlet*, while it is often taught as a piece of literature, is rarely studied as a philosophical text.

And though the *Phaedo* has been read and discussed for thousands of years as a philosophical text, it has never performed as a play. Why might one discipline study one text, but not the other? In looking at how each discipline examine these texts, as well as how each discipline studies texts in general, it is possible to see how *Hamlet* and the *Phaedo* might exemplify the qualities of a literary text and a philosophical text respectively, while not quite reaching the same standards in the qualities that the other discipline tends to study and examine. Neither quite manages to be both equally. For this reason, these two texts can help to further clarify the relationship between literature and philosophy, not only as texts but also as disciplines. Where these texts succeed and where they fall short can help to indicate, not only the advantages and disadvantages of each discipline, but also what a text might need to accomplish in order to be studied as an exemplary work of both literature and philosophy.

Literature as Discipline

The formal academic study of literature and art as an object to be examined rather than a craft to be practiced is a fairly recent development. Although ancient philosophers, such as Plato in the *Republic*, did discuss the nature and potential uses of art, Aesthetics did not fully emerge as a subsection of philosophy until 1750, with Baumgarten's work titled Aesthetics (Notes p 2). Baumgarten is connected with the German Idealist school of thought, and within this group, Kant looms as a giant. In his work, *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant looks at aesthetic judgments made concerning the beauty of objects, whether they be works of nature or—as are often included in his examples—works of art. This text on aesthetic judgments has been enormously influential in shaping how Western cultures think about fine arts, for philosophers and scholars as well as for

artists. For this reason, it is useful to begin with this text when looking at how literature, as a discipline, examines literary texts.

Aesthetic judgments are connected to the senses. The origin of the word aesthetics is the Greek word *aisthetikos*, which is related to sight and perception. This points to physical sensations, such as touch and sound, as the origin of the aesthetic sense. Aesthetic judgments must necessarily begin with human perception. One must hear a song or see a visual art piece in order to interact with it. However, the result of these interactions is often a sensation of pleasure and harmony, or a sense of discord. The pleasure and pain associated with an aesthetic judgment, however, is not based on a directly physical sensation of pleasure or pain. One does not physically react to a painting as one might to a physical shock or caress. Instead, the artistic object is first received through the senses and then re-presented to the mind. The aesthetic quality of the object affects the viewer and creates an internal, mental sense of either mental harmony and agreement to one's taste, or a sense of discord.

Because the aesthetic judgement focuses on the sensation of the one perceiving the object, Kant calls these judgments subjective—that is, a judgment about the subject: “We use imagination (perhaps in connection with understanding) to refer to the presentation in the subject and his feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (246). When one stands in a museum and contemplates a painting, the senses are presented with many images. The eye wanders. Kant refers to this period as the “free play” of the imagination and the intellect (253) in which the imagination provides more representations of a work than the intellect can initially understand. But then the intellect makes sense of the representation as a whole. During this time, the object creates a sense of mental harmony or discord in the viewer (the subject). This non-physical sense is a judgment

made by the *subject* in relation to the object, and it is not a property of the object alone. Without a subject and a mind to experience these representations, there is no aesthetic judgment of a work of art. For this reason, Kant insists that the subject's response to a work of art is what must be judged, and that a judgment of taste cannot be objective—that is, a judgment about the object. Kant goes on to say that even if the judgments do deal logically with the object “they would still be aesthetic if, and to the extent that, the subject referred them, in his judgment, solely to himself (to his feeling)” (246). Although the object of an aesthetic judgment cannot be dispensed with, in these judgments, the emphasis is on the response of the subject.

Kant continuously emphasizes detachment from the existence of the object in these judgments. Kant insists that one cannot care “about the things's existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation” (247). This leads Kant to argue, in sections 3 and 4, that this type of judgment cannot be connected with agreeable sensation or even to the use of concepts. In a judgment, an agreeable sensation would be connected with an interest in the object's existence because one wants the object to continue to exist in order to continue experiencing pleasurable sensation. If I am enjoying pleasant warmth under a blanket, I can judge that I have a feeling of pleasure, but this pleasure is dependent on the blanket's physical presence. If someone takes the blanket away, the pleasure ceases and I am upset. Therefore, that would not be an example of a pure judgment of taste due to the interest in the existence of the object.

A judgment involving the cognizing of a concept, on the other hand, is a judgment about a quality of the object, rather than a judgment about a subject's pure reaction to the object. One's personal connections and biases toward certain concepts cannot affect the judgment, and to judge that the work represents a certain concept is to examine the work itself rather than one's reaction

to it. For Kant, one must remain detached, both from a physical interest in the object and from making judgments about the object in order to properly analyze one's natural subjective aesthetic response to the object of judgment. Then one can examine, not a physical sense, but an "inner sense" of judgment (257) that *responds* to an object, rather than actively analyzing the object.

In making aesthetic judgments, Kant emphasizes form rather than content, asserting that, "beauty should actually concern only form," (256). For him, "*design* is what is essential," (257). Kant gives examples of "designs *à la grecque*" which are patterns on wallpaper, often fairly abstract or echoing shapes such as foliage. He also mentions "fantasias in music (namely music without a topic [Thema])" (260). This type of music, known as "pure" or "absolute music" does not seek to explicitly describe something, such as the four seasons, nor does it make use of lyrics as opera does. Because these melodies did not seek to convey a specific concept or idea, the form alone, rather than anything particular content that form is meant to convey, is what is important. For Kant, even when there is content or purpose, the judgment could still be pure "if the person judging either had no concept of this purpose. Or if he abstracted from it in making his judgment" (261). These types of "contentless" art show that it is possible to have an aesthetic response which is not focused on the content of the art or any concept it is meant to convey, but rather on the form alone.

This emphasis on form makes sense given the necessity of concepts in literature as well as literature's double relation to idea—expressing the ideas of the characters directly and the ideas of the overall work indirectly. Although ideas cannot be directly represented by an image or fully expressed by a word, concepts can be imagined and pictured in the mind's eye. Literature, in making use of imagery, can directly describe concepts. In this sense the form of

literature with its emphasis on imagery is well suited to the content of concepts, which are connected with images. Because of this connection between concept and image, there is the possibility of conveying a concept well or conveying it poorly. One can paint a tree which fits the elegant structures of nature or one that looks like a messy blob. One can select details and imagery which convey the environment of a space, or one can provide a description which fails to evoke a vivid image in the reader's mind. As the saying goes, "Art is not what you see. But what you make others see." The form is what makes that possible. The form and the selection of details is also what helps to convey the theme, or the author's ideas in a piece. For this reason, it also makes sense to study, not what an author is directly saying, but how the author is saying it.

This emphasis on form is not only present in how Kant views aesthetic judgments, but it also plays out in how literature, as a form of study, tends to analyze a text. In a literary analysis, there is an emphasis on the quality of the way in which the author expresses ideas, rather than an evaluation of the ideas expressed. A literature class would be much more likely to look at the use of iambic pentameter in the "to be, or not to be" speech rather than to examine whether or not Hamlet came to the correct conclusion. In examining characters as foils, a literary analysis does not speak of them as people and ask whether or not their actions were right or wrong; a literary analysis looks at them as crafted characters with traits selected to mirror and emphasize each other. This type of analysis focuses on craft rather than contents. With the use of literary elements such as motifs, foils, and meter, it emphasizes the text as something intentionally and designed. The yardstick to measure whether a text is good or bad is the the quality of the design rather than whether or not it succeeds at any exterior purpose, such as to persuade the reader or

to examine an outward topic. It does not look to the quality of the ideas expressed, but rather the quality of the expression.

This is, theoretically, how a literary analysis functions, but it is also useful to look toward specific, practical examples of literary analysis to see if this holds true to the way literature, as a discipline, examines a text. Looking at how literature, as a discipline, analyzes a certain text can also help to suggest how well that particular text holds up under literary analysis as it typically understood and practiced today, perhaps elucidating why *Hamlet* is so often examined within literary studies.

Hamlet is actually a very helpful case for looking at the difference in emphasis between form and content in determining the value of a work of art because it is not actually an original story. The note on the sources of *Hamlet* in the Signet Classics edition opens saying “the story of Hamlet is ancient,” (167). It was first written down by Saxo Grammaticus in his *Historiae Danicae* in the twelfth century (Bullough 6). Although several of the names are different and certain plot points vary, the story is largely the same: the son of a murdered Danish king feigns madness in order to enact revenge after his uncle has married his mother. The story was expanded by multiple authors in the year between when it was first written down and when Shakespeare first crafted his adaptation. In 1576, Francois de Belleforest added the idea that the queen had committed adultery before the first king was dead, and the ghost appeared in a play from 1580 “attributed more or less confidently to Thomas Kyd” (Signet 168). Scholars often refer to this play as the “Ur-Hamlet” (168). This play is lost and unremembered, although its content is roughly similar to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This use of pre-existing stories is common, not only with Shakespeare, but also with drama in General. The overwhelming majority of

Shakespeare's plays are based on extant texts and stories, which is reflected in the several volumes Geoffrey Bullough wrote on *The Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. While many texts containing these same stories have been lost and forgotten to time, these versions have been remembered and held up as examples of great literature. It is not the basic content that is being told that makes these plays exemplary literary texts, but rather the way in which the story is shaped and expressed.

This use of a preexisting story freed Shakespeare to focus on form and how the story is told. Although the basic story alone did not lead to other works dealing with the Hamlet story to be considered as great literature, this does not necessarily mean that the basic story had no bearing whatsoever on Shakespeare's success in telling the story. The basic content of the original story is still significant in that the seeds for the basic form of drama—desire, obstacle, and stakes—are already present in the original story. There is the desire for the prince to avenge his father's death, and the obstacle of him living under the rule of his uncle. The stakes are very high, as the outcome of his failure or success in achieving his goal will determine both the fate of the kingdom, and the prince's own survival. Yet, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the playwright complicates even this basic structure of the content, through his use of the ghost. The obstacle in *Hamlet* is not simply Claudius, but also Hamlet's own doubt that the ghost's call to revenge is genuine. He says, "The Spirit that I have seen / May be the Divell, and the Divel hath power / T' assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps / Out of my Weaknesse, and my Melancholly...Abuses me to damne me" (2.2. 561-565). In this case, the stakes are also raised. It is not only the kingdom and Hamlet's life which are at stake, but also Hamlet's very soul and salvation. Shakespeare did alter the basic content, but in such a way that it might have a positive

effect on the basic dramatic form of the play. Shakespeare complicates and improves upon the original story, shaping the conflict into one which is both inward and outward. These changes in content within the story allow the structure of the narrative to fulfill the needs of dramatic form in a more interesting and complex way than that of the original story. The content affects what is possible within the overall shape, structure, and design of the work, and because of this, it cannot be wholly ignored when assessing a text.

The design and structure of the play is tailored to the content, not only in the broad sense of plot structure and the basic form of drama, but also throughout the whole work, right down to the shape of the language. In studying and analyzing *Hamlet* as a piece of literature there is an emphasis—not merely on the content story, but on the craft of the language and way in which the story is constructed and designed. An example of this is the use of iambic pentameter, and how where it is employed or not employed often reflects a difference in what is being said. Quincy Guy Burris examines this in his article, “‘Soft! Here Follows Prose’--Twelfth Night II. v. 154.”, looking to where the play follows or breaks with the rules typically put forward to suggest where characters will speak in prose or verse. He notes that Hamlet, “speaks prose when, to Ophelia, he pretends madness. Likewise, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and to Polonius, he simulates madness to avert danger. However, in the frenzy of his grief at Ophelia's funeral, when he leaps into the grave to struggle with Laertes, he speaks blank verse,” (234). This does not follow the often proposed rule that characters will speak in prose when they are mad or distressed (as in the case of the scene at Ophelia's funeral), yet “there is method in't.” When he is feigning madness, the majority of Hamlet's lines are spoken in prose. His speech reflects the disorder and irregularity of madness, rather than the clean meter of iambic pentameter. However, in his true

distress, he still retains a sense of elevation and organization. In this case, the design employed within the story reflects, not only the general needs of the narrative, but also what is being conveyed at a specific point in the story. In this, one can see the close reciprocal relation between content and design. The content determines what techniques and design will be best to shape the story into a good piece of literature.

One might also look toward literary techniques and the form of the story for the way in which they allow the author to convey, not only the ideas the characters express, but also the ideas, themes, and implicit commentary conveyed through the construction of the story. For example, there is an intentionality in the construction of the characters, which points to broader themes. This can be seen in the inclusion of three avenging sons: Fortinbras avenging his father's death, Laertes avenging his father's death, and finally Hamlet avenging his father's death. The similarities of these characters' situations invites comparison. Fortinbras and Laertes are often held up as foils to Hamlet. The prince's habit of "thinking too precicely on th' event" (4.4. 41) is thrown into a starker contrast and emphasized by the way in which Fortinbras acts, leading 20,000 men into battle over a scrap of land and some honor (4.4.) and Laertes—rather than thinking rationally—screams, "the drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard" (4.5. 118). The use of foils in each case throws the different reactions of the avenging sons into sharper relief and provides a commentary on the different methods of revenge.

In looking at *Hamlet* and the way it is typically studied as a piece of literature, one can see that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* holds fairly true when applied to literary analysis. Kant emphasizes form and design rather than content of the words in and of themselves. At the same time, the story and the content of a piece cannot be ignored. This is because, in well-crafted

literature, there is a harmony between the form and story—suiting, “the action to the word and the word to the action” (III.ii) as Hamlet says, regarding acting. With *Hamlet*, even down to an analysis of when the iambic verse is broken, one can see form working to express the content in the most appropriate and artful way possible. The content, in this case, affects what the most appropriate expression of form will be, leaving its mark on a work, like the fingerprints of a sculptor left on a piece of clay. Nevertheless, the emphasis does lie on the form rather than the content. It is not the basic content of the story told which makes a work a great piece of literature. Rather, form and craft and careful construction are what contribute to the quality of a literary text. These are the characteristics which are typically examined within literature as a form of study. Literary analysis—much like an aesthetic judgment—looks to how well the work is crafted, and *Hamlet*, with its intricate and elegant construction, provides much to be examined.

Philosophy as Discipline

Very early on, philosophy began to ask what the nature and best practices of philosophy might be. Plato, who describes Socrates examining education and philosophy in dialogues such as *The Republic*, certainly contributed to this discussion. As he is one of the first great western philosophers, Socrates’ teachings—much like Kant’s works of Aesthetics—have been immensely influential in the field of philosophy; these texts have helped to shape how philosophy—as a discipline and an area of study—reads and evaluates philosophical texts. These discussions of the nature of philosophy appear in the discussion in Book 6 of *The Republic*, and are later illustrated within *The Republic* using the image of the Divided Line and the story of The Cave.

Whereas literature incorporates concepts and abstractions connected with the physical world as an integral part of the literary text, philosophy goes a step further. For Philosophy, it is not simply enough to move beyond the agreeable; one must move beyond appearances and particulars. In discussing what an ideal ruler would be like in the *Republic*, Socrates describes a philosopher king and says that “philosophers are those capable of getting a hold on that which remains forever exactly as it is” (484b). He later provides examples of that which remains forever as it is: “Beauty by itself, as opposed to the many things that are beautiful, or anything by itself as opposed to the many whatever it is” (493e). Philosophy must move beyond the instantiations of an idea in order to get to idea itself. Because ideas cannot be directly represented by images, it is logical that Philosophy would be less interested in aesthetic representations, which are necessarily connected with the senses. Socrates’ discussion of philosophy emphasizes this point, saying that philosophy, “is one sphere in which nobody needs to be told to scorn mere appearances” (505d). Though Socrates may use images to further explain and examine an idea, the appearance of that image or any particular instantiation of an idea is ultimately less important than the idea in and of itself.

Even a human life and the human relation to an idea is not the chief interest in Philosophy. Socrates asks, “Do you suppose, then, that to such an elevated mind, spectator of human life and all that there is, human life can seem at all important?” To which his companion in the conversation replies, “Impossible” (486a). Although there might be some philosophy, such as political philosophy, which seeks to take an idea such as justice and apply it to society, the application and the examination of the idea applied to human life is ultimately less important than achieving the most complete and accurate understanding of the idea as possible. This is one

of the chief differences between literature and philosophy: literature, with its connection to concepts and the physical world, remains close to the human realm of experience, whereas philosophy must go beyond the human realm toward the realm of idea.

In order to further illustrate this point, Socrates describes a line divided into four segments delineating the difference between “clarity and obscurity.” The first, visible segment contains “mere images” (510a). In some respect, art remains on this level, presenting images. Yet what these works can deal with ranges across the whole expanse of the line. The other segment of the visible part is “what the images in the first are images of,” such as the concrete objects that a person experiences (510a); this would be physical examples of books. The higher, intelligible segment contains “originals for the images below them.” this is where concepts that can be imagined and pictured are situated (511a). Socrates believed that the “being” of these concepts is “prior” to their physical counterparts, but this might be prior in principle, not necessarily in time. But whether the objects are created from the concept or the concept is abstracted from examples of objects, their close relation is clear. Finally, the last segment contains “only forms” or pure idea (511c). This is the segment with which Philosophy is concerned, the realm of “that which remains forever exactly as it is” (484b). Ultimately, a philosophical text is not evaluated on how well it draws out or describes a certain concept or how beautiful it appears, but rather how well it explains and examines this final segment of the divided line.

This is also true of philosophical education and philosophy as a discipline. Plato offers the story of The Cave as an image “in relation to education, and the lack of it” (514 a). He speaks of “human beings in a cave-like dwelling underground” (514b). These humans are chained so that they cannot move their heads, but by the light of a fire placed behind them they see shadows

on the wall of objects paraded on the wall (514b). They take these mere images to be reality, as if they were chained to the bottom segment of the divided line and could see nothing higher. But then, Socrates asks what would happen if one of these prisoners were set free, and forced to see the fire (514c-d). This process of education and learning that what one took as reality was only an image is not a pleasant one. It is, at first, quite jarring. But with it, one moves further up the divided line, gaining the ability to recognize the distinction between mere images and the physical objects these images are meant to represent.

Within this story, the full scope and reality world goes beyond the dark world of the cave. So too for Socrates, true reality lies beyond the physical world the cave is meant to represent. For him, true reality lies in the realm of ideas, above and beyond—not only images and objects—but also beyond concepts. In describing someone emerging into “true reality” in this story, Socrates shows the prisoner leaving the cave and walking, “into the light of the sun” (516e). The sun, in this story, represents the highest idea: the good, which makes all other ideas possible (516 a-b). For Plato, the goal is not only to get to ideas such as justice itself or beauty itself, but rather to the idea that governs these ideas: the good. In this way, the good functions like the sun, whose light makes all other life and vision possible. In this parable, one can see that the goal of philosophical education, much like the goal of a philosophical text, is to reach a better understanding of idea-in-and-of-itself. This has less to do with the craft or beauty of a text, and much more to do with the content and the quality of the ideas presented within the text.

This emphasis on the evaluation of ideas within a text has also played out within my time studying philosophy. In the most effective classes, we were asked to write essays over the texts we read. It was not enough merely to summarize and repeat the ideas presented within the text.

We also had to evaluate the quality of these ideas through examples. These evaluations looked at what the ideas were, rather than how they were expressed. We did not look at whether or not Socrates was a well written character, we looked at definition of Justice given at the start of the *Republic* was the best idea. In these classes and in these cases, we were not merely learning about the history of philosophy or the philosophical ideas expressed by others. We were expected to take part in philosophy as well, examining and evaluating the arguments presented in order to gain a better understanding of an idea-in-and-of-itself.

This interest in idea, rather than particulars, is present in the *Phaedo*, which looks at the soul in itself. Although Socrates' followers might be interested in the fate of Socrates' particular soul, Socrates moves the discussion beyond this, to souls in themselves. He begins his discussion of the soul and death by speaking of "a man who's genuinely spent his life in philosophy" (64a). That is to say, he begins from a particular example—himself. His discussion, however, soon moves to speaking of souls in general. Where concepts and particulars are presented, such as the image of the prison at the start of the dialogue, these concrete concepts follow through the dialogue as it moves along the divided line from an image toward a purer idea that these concrete images can thematically help to suggest. In the end, the understanding toward which the discussion is driving is not merely an understanding of Socrates' soul, but an understanding of the idea of soul itself and death itself.

The Phaedo as Literature

The *Phaedo* reflects the concerns of philosophy as a discipline, and can serve as a rich philosophical text to study. Yet, even though it is presented through the frame of a

dialogue—much like a narrative play—I have yet to see any example of the *Phaedo* being studied as a literary or dramatic text. I certainly cannot imagine a theater company performing the dialogue as a play. This is partially because, while the text has similar concerns to a literary text insofar as it employs images and concepts, it does not reflect the concerns of literature as a discipline. Although, on the surface, the *Phaedo* follows the literary form of a dialogue, it does not reflect the basic form of drama.

Were this text to be read literally as a play, Socrates and many of his followers would not appear as characters. Their story, although it dominates a majority of the narrative, is presented through a frame story, in which the character of *Phaedo* relates the events of Socrates' death to a friend who inquires as to what happened. This outward frame, particularly, lacks any strong structure involving desire and obstacle. At the start of the dialogue, *Echecrates* is talking with *Phaedo* and asks about Socrates: "What is it the man said before his death? And how did he meet his end? It'd be a pleasure for me to hear," (57A). Here is a basic desire to hear a recounting, but there is no obstacle, as *Phaedo* immediately begins to answer him. Were the dialogue performed as it is written, it would consist of two people having a conversation where there is absolutely no obstacle and one character spends about 35 pages (in the translation I am using) answering him before the first interruption (59D- 88E). Here, dramatic function is not the primary concern; frame story is primarily advantageous for describing certain elements surrounding Socrates' death. Particularly because Plato did not use "stage directions" in his dialogues, this frame allows for a better description of the events which took place such as the entrance into the prison and Socrates' death by Hemlock, which were largely non-verbal. Although the frame lacks any good structure concerning desire and obstacle, it does help to

provide better context for Socrates' argument.

The story told within this frame does appear closer to that basic dramatic form involving desire and obstacle, but it does not quite fit this form. Although desire is present, the characters' desire is roughly aligned. Socrates tells his followers, "I want to render my account to you my judges, to tell you why it appears reasonable to me that a man who's genuinely spent his life in philosophy is confident when he's about to die and has high hopes that when he's met his end, he'll win the greatest goods There" (64A). Socrates' followers also want him to render this account and convince them. They push Socrates to make a better account, and as Socrates tells them, "The upshot of what you're searching for is this: You demand that our soul be shown both imperishable and deathless" (95C). The conflict does not arise from their interactions or something within the story or characters. It is not character versus character, or even a character versus themselves. Rather, what stands in the way of their desire is something outside the story: the universal difficulty of coming to understand an idea, in this case ideas of death and the soul. Socrates struggles, not against his followers' doubt, but against the uncertain nature of the soul and the wisdom of the Unseen. He wants no "witchery to rout the argument" (95B). There is less of a conflict here, and more of an outward grappling as Socrates asks questions of the idea, examining it in order to better understand it. His goal—to weave the best possible argument concerning the soul—also becomes the concern of the dialogue as a whole, which is responsible for relating a convincing argument. Because of this, argumentation and examination take precedence over an internal dramatic structure of desire and obstacle. Although the characters' alignment in their desire to understand the soul removes any conflict between the characters, it functions well in order to help push the argument forward. In this sense, the characters here do

not function as aesthetic ends in themselves, but rather as tools to present a better argument. It is ultimately that argument—rather than an exploration of character—which is emphasized within the text, marking it out primarily as a work of philosophy.

Hamlet as Philosophy

Hamlet is filled with rich examples of craft, form, and theme. It is a text which reflects, not only the concerns of a literary text, but also the concerns of literature as a discipline with its intricate and well-crafted form. However, even though the text does share the concerns of a philosophical text insofar as it is interested in exploring an idea, when evaluated by the standards that philosophy as an area of study uses when evaluating a text, it does not fulfill the concerns of philosophy as a discipline nearly as well as it meets the concerns of literature as a discipline. In the text, too much emphasis is placed on particulars. Though discussion of idea is present, the majority of the text is not taken up with this discussion. And even where ideas are examined, they are introduced—not due to a general concern with the idea—but rather as a particular character's concern.

The main body of the text is simply not concerned with the examination of an idea. This can be seen in sharp contrast to the *Phaedo*. In my roughly seventy-five page translation of the *Phaedo*, the first half dozen pages are taken up with introducing characters and setting, much of which is integrated into the later discussion. The last few pages describe Socrates' death, but the main bulk of the text is taken up with the discussion of ideas. It is true that in *Hamlet*, there are some speeches dealing with the soul, salvation and death, such as the “to be, or not to be” speech (3.1) or the beginning of the “Oh that this too too solid Flesh, would melt” speech (1.2. 129). But

these are a couple of speeches among many monologues and soliloquies. Claudius speaks of the state of the kingdom (1.2), Polonius gives life advice to his son (1.3), and Ophelia bemoans Hamlet's madness (3.1). Inside the text, there are plots and plays within plays. While the text does examine certain ideas through the selection of details, in the end, the text concerns itself with much more than the examination of idea.

Even where these discussion of ideas are presented, they remain largely on the level of the characters' thoughts. All of the examples given in the earlier discussion of theme in *Hamlet* are examples of the character Hamlet's personal concerns about death, right from "Oh that this too too solid Flesh, would melt" (1.2. 129) on to "The rest is silence" (5.2. 356). Although details such as the Ghost of Hamlet's father, the skull of the old court jester (5.1), and the large number of characters who die within the play do help to form a wider commentary on death, this commentary remains tied up in the discussion of Hamlet's own soul, salvation, and death. It takes little for an actor or director to suggest that the "To be, or not to be" speech is Hamlet's questioning whether he personally should kill himself, rather than a reflection on the idea of all of humanity fleeing from the "Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune" (3.1). The presence of a dagger, as in the Kenneth Branagh film, or even a high ledge, as in the Kentucky Shakespeare's 2014 summer production, can show the audience that this is a personal question for Hamlet. The audience is shown his sufferings, his desires, and his death. In focusing on character, the play spends much of its time resting lower down the divided line. It fails to achieve the heights of philosophy as it achieves one of literature's most powerful functions: to examine the human, and the life of a human being. Hamlet does not represent all human beings, though his character may reveal something powerful about what it is to be human.

Limitations

Before concluding, it is important to note that there are some limitations to this examination of literature and philosophy as disciplines and areas of study. In order to have a coherent discussion of literature and philosophy, I have somewhat restricted the understanding of the disciplines presented within this thesis.

In some cases, Literature can be broadly understood as anything which is written, or written well. The literature represented here is largely restricted narrative literature, partially because within the broadest definitions of literature, nearly all philosophical texts would be considered literature and any distinction between literature and philosophy would then be impossible. I have also limited this understanding because of the influence of how Literature is studied today. I have tended to focus on narrative literature, as these types of works are often emphasized much more than philosophical works in the typical literary canon. Though we are required to take a Shakespeare class, for example, we are not required to take a Descartes class or a Plato class.

One of the other limitations in my particular discussion of both literature and philosophy has been the need (for simplicity's sake) to discuss these fields of study in a context which does not look at the often interdisciplinary nature of contemporary studies. It is fairly common to see literary analysis is combined with sociology, history, or even philosophy. Feminist or Marxist or even Existentialist readings of plays such as Hamlet often blend literary and philosophical

studies. Class discussions in philosophy can bring in literary examples, just as discussions in English classes often step outside strict literary analysis. Though it might be less academic to ask questions of content such as “Do you relate to these characters?” or “What can you learn from this text?” questions such as these often form an engaging part of a discussion. Although interdisciplinary discussions form an interesting and useful aspect of these studies, for the sake of a coherent discussion, I have focused on each of these disciplines in isolation.

The Division Where They Meet

With this understanding of literature and philosophy in mind, it is possible to see what characteristics might make a work a piece of literary philosophy or philosophical literature, rather than both. I originally selected the *Phaedo* and *Hamlet* as texts to examine due to their similar form and concern with the theme of death. I also selected these two texts due to the fact that, at first glance, they both seem to contain qualities of both literature and philosophy, while each is typically studied by only one discipline and not the other. In this sense, one was literary philosophy and the other was philosophical literature. Yet, after examining the concerns of both literature and philosophy it is easier to determine what this means, not in terms of tradition and how these texts are typically studied, but rather in terms of the characteristics of these texts and what characteristics each of these disciplines examine. After all, these elements are what influence why these texts might be perceived as literary or philosophical while studied only by one discipline or the other.

The *Phaedo* is literary insofar as it makes use of concepts to tell a story. But it remains primarily a work of philosophy rather than a work of literature due to the text’s concern with

idea. The form of the text, while literary on the surface, fails to follow literary form. Instead, the text is crafted in order to facilitate the examination of an idea. *Hamlet*, on the other hand, is philosophical insofar as there are characters which examine ideas and a theme presented through events and details which also reflect on these ideas. Still, these discussions and these ideas are not the primary concern of the text. The story is firmly situated in a world which feels very concrete and very human. It is the crafting of this story and the exemplary way in which the basic story is realized which makes this text an exemplary piece of literature.

The Strengths and the Struggles

This examination of literature and philosophy as texts and as disciplines can help to show what makes the difference between a literary piece of philosophy and a philosophical piece of literature. It also suggests what might potentially be necessary for a text to fulfill the concerns of both literature and philosophy, and how that text might be studied differently through the lens of each discipline. However, it does not concretely or practically show *if* and *how* a work could effectively balance the concerns of both disciplines.

In order to succeed equally as a piece of literature and a piece of philosophy, a work would need to balance the concerns of form and of content. The work would need to engage with idea-in-itself and with a world beyond the senses while also paying respect to the aesthetic nature of the piece and the way in which the text is presented. The work would have to pay respect to literary form, while also moving beyond the concerns of individual characters. Although I have selected texts which tend to largely be studied either *as a piece of literature* or *as a piece of philosophy*, there are some texts which are studied in both disciplines. Works such as *No Exit* and *Oedipus* come to mind. These works contain robust characters that the reader can empathize with and recognize as very human. Yet these characters are placed in situations that prompt them to grapple with ideas and offer examinations of ideas in themselves. These works deal with ideas that are incredibly close to human experience, such as free will and the pain of human existence. That might be an area in which the intersection of literature and philosophy can be incredibly useful and successful. An in-depth examination of specific works to determine whether or not

they can succeed equally well as both as literature and philosophy and to what extent they may accomplish this feat is beyond the scope of this thesis, but that might be an interesting area to which this line of questioning could be extended in the future.

Even if a work were to succeed both as literature and philosophy, however, it would likely be read differently depending on whether it were studied *as a piece of literature* or *as a piece of philosophy*. I have been in a philosophy class where I have studied works such as *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*. Yet when we looked at *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* we did not examine their dramatic structure; we looked at what these plays could illuminate about justice and free will. In British Literature classes, we have looked at essays by Alexander Pope and Mary Wollstonecraft. Yet when we looked at these essays, we focused less on the soundness of the ideas contained within them, and more on how these texts were constructed. Even if a text could manage to balance both the concerns of literature and philosophy, different aspects of the text will still be emphasized and examined by each discipline.

There are limitations to literature and philosophy as disciplines when texts are solely examined or created through the lens of one discipline and not the other. Literature, with its emphasis on concepts and aesthetics, can remain bogged down in appearances. Art can become so focused on beauty and form and appearance that it loses all substance, reduced to nothing but design principles and color on a canvas. This danger for art in general remains a danger for literature. When content is forgotten, literature can be hollow and beautiful. One could study it to learn how to say something well, but ultimately have nothing to say. With Philosophy, there is a different danger. Lost in the world of ideas, philosophy could lose its

connection to lived experience. It can become so abstract that it is nearly incomprehensible, useful to none but those who seek to live solely within the world of the mind.

Though there are limitations to these disciplines, there are also incredible strengths to both of these areas of study. Philosophy, with its focus on idea, can help to further one's own understanding of ideas and arguments, which can be incredibly useful in daily life. Knowing what one values as the highest good can help a person orient himself, herself, or themselves toward their goal and plan actions to approach it. Without an understanding of ideas, one is lost like a person without a compass to guide toward north. Still, these ideas function on a level of abstraction that is, in some respects, removed from human experience. Ideas can be well conceived, but when they are also well expressed, they gain a greater power. Where philosophy borrows from the strengths and techniques of literature, it does not lose its substance as a work concerned with idea. Instead, it recognizes human limitations in comprehending the unfamiliar and the abstract and, putting its ideas into more human terms.

Literature can dramatize how people interact with ideas. In a way, literature mirrors human nature, as human beings are both physical beings and more than simple bodies. All great art is something which is both physical and more than physical. A book is both pages and story. A painting is both canvas and the image presented by the canvas. Literature's great power is that it can make use of both of concepts and ideas to hold a mirror up to our own nature. When these ideas are strengthened by the process of philosophy, literature has the power to say something which is not only beautiful, but meaningful as well.

The Tale

I.

The Philosopher sat in a castle of air
With ceilings made of stars
And floorboards made of skies

She looked down through the floor of her Unseen fortress
And saw the world below

She wanted to sink right through the floor
And bring her kingdom down
Down to that mass of ants below her
Twisting along winding roads
And up building cities
So that they, too, could see the skies

II.

The Writer looked up from her place on the ground
With her dirty feet sunk into the warm earth

She saw the kingdoms around her
Saw the cities stretching out
And sat to record it all on a beautiful surface
More permanent than her own breath

Her records gleamed like constellations
Drawing out all the patterns of the earth
But when she looked at her work, the surface reached beyond
Her own dirty sphere
And reflected the skein of stars above

With words she built up her work
Weaving it wider and wider
Until it reached up to the sky
Onto floating space

III.

The Philosopher, poking her head out of the palace
Saw the net of words stretching below her
With the Writer riding up upon it
Floating just below the Kingdoms of Air

The Philosopher slipped right through the floor
Jumping from her palace
And landing gently upon the floating web of words
Finding in the fictions
New structures with which to build

The Philosopher saw,
Not just the words' beautiful surface
But the power held within them

She built up from the Writer's net of words
And wove a ladder
Reaching up into the Kingdom of the Constellations

The two structures of words twisted into a bridge
Between the Kingdom of Earth
And the Kingdom of Air

Encircling it all
In one net of words
Stronger than each kingdom in isolation

Forming in their unity
A Kingdom of Meaning

The Kingdom of Abstract Truth

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