

English Literature in the Digital Era

Dr Andre Rafael Fernandes

Introduction

We have come a long way from writing on clay tablets, parchment, metal plates, papyrus, paper and plastics to electronic and digital text or media. Through digital proliferation and exponential explosion of knowledge, our intellectual and emotional comfort levels are being disturbed (though our physical comforts may improve with technology). We are getting into more uncertain or multi-dimensional areas of literature or cultural studies. The theme of the seminar broadly encompasses three areas. First, literatures in English with which we are most comfortable. Second, literature supplemented with audiovisual media facilitated by the digital revolution. Third, digital or electronic literature, which is an emerging area that has been given special attention in the seminar paper presentations.

But before I delve further into these aspects, let us briefly look at a few authors of the past whose works have gained metaphorical associations through the ages. Our study of literature is enriched by making associations with the past to understand the present or predict the future.

We see our existentialist dilemmas in Dostoevsky's characters, or the machinations of an incomprehensible bureaucracy of the modern state as Kafkaesque. Joseph Conrad opens our eyes to 'the vilest scramble for loot...that disfigures the history of the human conscience' when we see exploitation and corruption today under the guise of development. Karel Capek wrote about Robots in 1920. Many of the predictions of science fiction or futuristic writing have been fulfilled. In 1959, Arthur C. Clarke predicted worldwide satellite TV broadcasts across national boundaries which would make hundreds of channels accessible anywhere in the world. He also envisioned a 'personal transceiver, so small and compact that every man carries one' just as we have mobile phones today. He wrote that the time would come when we would be able to 'call a person anywhere on earth merely by dialling a number.' Clarke foresaw that such a device

would also include means for global positioning so that 'no one need ever again be lost.' (And yet, the fate of Flight MH370 still remains a mystery.) Such a listing could continue, like the 1001 Arabian nights of Scheherazade's narratives. And of course the digital media brings to us stories of hope and pain, compelling us to reflect whether Oliver Twist's plaintive appeal 'Please sir, may I have some ...?' has become even more desperate, when we see the stories of migrants and refugees, brought alive on our TV sets or cell phones. Writing media have evolved tremendously over the centuries. Gutenberg's printing press has been considered by many as the greatest invention of the last five hundred years - obviously for the proliferation of knowledge made possible by it after the Renaissance. Thanks to improvement in printing processes we have inherited many of the great literary masterpieces. Writers have been obsessed with time, memory and their disruption. Quite often they have sought to predict the future. In brief, literature encompasses all areas of human life.

If we are required to talk about English literature, or literatures in English as we now prefer to say, most of us will have no difficulty. In fact, we can be highly creative in drawing parallels between characters of the past and contemporary situations as in the Biblical Job for undeserved suffering, or matching Eklavya and Rohit Vemula, when subalterns' ascent to achievement and fame is cruelly cut short by the powerful and privileged.

Students and teachers of literatures in English are expected to be up-to-date with all the diverse areas of knowledge. Which brings us to the question of how far can we keep up-to-date with technology for teaching literature. If Gutenberg's printing press had its ramifications on the spread of knowledge, the consequences of the digital age challenge us either to keep up or become dinosaurs. We might be able to perform in our classes with the help of theatrics, but soon our students will find us old-fashioned if we are not half as up-to-date with technology as our teenage and young students are.

With the transition from literature to cultural studies, our 'texts' are no longer limited to words only, but anything and everything that is audio-visual. That brings us to the challenges of using multimedia texts which we might develop, or use those available on the Internet.

Have a look at this text:

'... we just reached there in the jeep and at once a cloud came down and sat on the ground, right along the frontier, like it couldn't get across without a visa,.... [Rushdie, Shame 24].

We would be left wondering if a cloud could behave as described in the passage.

And observe this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xawWVT9F8E>

There is no doubt that the integration of audiovisual media into our literature classes has made the subject more interesting. What began with the use of simple augmentation through audio and films has now been revolutionized through the use of digital media. The Internet has brought the media right into our classrooms as and when we wish to integrate it into our sessions. It makes our literature classes more exciting, if we can manage to locate appropriate media. Instead of spending a lot of time in trying to explain or interpret passages, an audiovisual presentation makes it much easier. But perhaps this is easier said than done as lakhs of pages turn up for every online search.

The medium for literature has also changed with technology. Civilizations began with oral literature and evolved through all the various written forms. The oral form returned with the invention of the phonograph in 1877 and was again transformed through the inventions of the magnetic tape, analogue vinyl records and digital compact disks. The combination of the audiovisual through films, videotapes, VCDs, DVDs, Blu-Ray discs and video-on-demand has changed and challenged our approaches to literature altogether.

Just as the discussions about 'the first' in literature can be contentious, it is also difficult to pinpoint the exact dates of electronic content. The development of computers and the Internet and various software is linked to this discussion. A substantial change of medium to e-text took place close to 50 years ago.

E-texts, or electronic documents, have been around since long before the Internet, the Web, and specialized E-book reading hardware. Fr. Roberto Busa, an Italian Jesuit, began developing an electronic

edition of Thomas Aquinas (Index Thomisticus) in the 1940s, while large-scale electronic text editing, hypertext and online reading platforms such as Augment and File Retrieval and Editing SyStem, or FRESS, appeared in the 1960s. Michael Hart posted the Declaration of Independence as Project Gutenberg's first document on 1 December 1971, and by 1989 it had posted its 10th e-book. The pace was rapid after OCR systems were developed and distributed proofreading was initiated. As of 3 October 2015, Project Gutenberg reached 50,000 items in its collection. Over 100,000 free e-books are available through its partners, affiliates and resources. Entire courses in literature have been made possible as the primary texts can be sourced from Project Gutenberg, e.g., my course on Joseph Conrad. In the 1980s, meanwhile, the CD-Rom revolution permitted reference books to move to electronic editions, with the Grolier Encyclopaedia published in 1985. This version had music and short videos in it. The Oxford English Dictionary was available on CDs in 1989. By 1994, Dorling Kindersley published a range of interactive multimedia titles. The 1980s also saw the launch of computer adventure games based around stories, such as *The Hobbit* (1982), through which the user progressed by typing in instructions. Poet Robert Pinsky brought out *Mindwheel* in 1984, an interactive fiction game which is explicitly labelled an 'electronic novel'. The first print publication sold in large quantities in an electronic edition; meanwhile, the Bible was released in several versions by Franklin as a stand-alone hardware device in 1989. When we try to ascertain the first in digital media, we often find a lot of early projects that were important in different ways but have already been forgotten. When Peter James published his novel *Host* on two floppy disks in 1993, journalists and fellow writers criticized him; one reporter even dragged a PC and a generator to the beach to demonstrate the ridiculousness of this new form of reading. The transformation in readers' attitude is amazing, though not surprising.

Amazon revolutionized the e-reading industry with the introduction of its devices. The Kindle keeps company with Nook and Kobo besides many other e-book readers. But these devices often limit the content that can be read on them. The production of e-books fuelled the sales of these devices but in terms of volume only

20% of books are read as e-books. However, students are increasingly turning to digital devices to carry their texts or listen to the audio versions. There is a need to distinguish between digitized literature and the newer digital literature. A digitized work is likely to have been created for another medium such as print but made accessible through a digital medium. On the other hand, electronic literature, or E-lit, refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer. They are works created exclusively on and for digital devices. These cannot be easily printed as elements crucial to the text cannot be easily contained in a printed version. Some of the forms within the broad category of e-literature have been indicated in the seminar brochure.

The field of electronic literature is an evolving one. Literature today is increasingly 'born digital', that is, works are created explicitly for the computer. Electronic literature often intersects with conceptual and sound arts, but reading and writing remain central to the literary arts. E-literature is not restricted to any single medium or institution. The term Literatronica was coined by Colombian mathematician and author Juan B. Gutierrez who developed a literary hypertext authoring system. Some E-lit is not very different from animated poetry or stories. Of course, there have been experiments and productions through interactive fiction, terribly tiny tales, stories and poems generated online through mails and blogs. 3D films are increasing in number, and virtual reality too is being developed rapidly. All of these will impact our choice of texts. Interactive or text-based games combined with visuals dominate the list of notable E-lit works. Among these are: Colossal Cave Adventure by Will Crowther (1975-76); Zork by MIT students (1977-79); creations through Storyspace software such as Patchwork Girl by Shelley Jackson; Journey for Playstation3; Pry (or Tender Claws) by Danny Cannizzaro and Samantha Gorman; Jason Nelson's creations; Gone Home by Steve Gaynor; and Nightingale's Playground by Andy Campbell and Judi Alston. There is now an Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) to facilitate and promote E-Lit (<http://eliterature.org/>). We shall leave further discussion on E-lit for the seminar paper presentations.

There is still an ongoing debate between the preference for printed books and e-readers. With the increasing availability of portable devices such as tablets and smartphones with multimedia capabilities, I do not think we have to sentimentally worry about how the text becomes available to us as literature. In fact, the digital form seems to be preferable for the enhanced multimedia possibilities it offers us.

Future Problems or Situations

Multiplicity of choices or problem of unlimited sources and limited time: Some years back, sources were limited, generally restricted to printed texts. Now besides multiple editions of printed texts (particularly the popular ones whose copyright has expired), we have often an unlimited number of electronic texts. How can we manage to view so many sources? How can we be assured that the material meets some standards? Earlier we could go by the reputation of the authors or publishers. Now with the proliferation of publishers, especially on the web, we cannot be sure. Sometimes we end up wasting a lot of time before we can locate some worthwhile material. Perhaps, as in online purchases, some rating system will be evolved over the years, which might assist us in choosing the reference material and saving our time and efforts.

Stability of formats: Physical texts will survive, but there is no such guarantee about digital texts unless they are constantly converted from one format to another. Just as there are multiple coding systems (morse, semaphore, colours), there are multiple formats for digital media (for text: .odt, .txt, .pdf, .rtf, .doc, docx; for images: .jpeg, .tiff, .cdr, .png; and motion pictures: .mkv, .avi, .mp4).

Will everyone have the physical capability to keep up with conversions to newer formats or file types? We have already seen the difficulties of attempting to open older files with newer software. One saving grace is that Free Open Source Software (FOSS) generally gives us more options than proprietary, copyrighted or licensed software. OSS alternatives to commercial programs such as Libre Office, GIMP, VLC, etc. give us free options to open such older restricted files. There's also another scenario that gives us confidence. Many old films and sound recordings have been

converted from analogue to digital format by new techniques. As in photo shopping techniques, even minute portions of such media can be restored through a copy paste or transformation process.

The digital era is providing us with an ever-increasing array of tools (just as in Android, there are thousands of applications). The problem is of being able to cope and effectively use these multiple aids. Students need not miss any lectures as these can be transmitted live through interactive video-conferencing or recorded and uploaded. So the traditional excuse of 'I did not know' becomes obsolete for students. With learning management systems such as Moodle, students and teachers can stay connected 24*7. Social media (blogs, chats, and messaging) are being used effectively in education. Of course, in our country, we have to consider the cost and affordability of technology. But given the fact that tech developments take place in geometrical progression, access will become affordable, as seen through the spread of smartphones.

To sum up, I would say, teaching and learning literature in the digital era is exciting and effective but is also highly challenging.

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