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# The after-life of books: metaphors of reality

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The aim of this article is to discuss various works of literature which deal with the theme of books, looking at how books have taken on symbolic meaning in our culture over the last five centuries. The approach is selective as there are many more instances of literary works (or films) than those mentioned which include references to books or which are based in libraries or bookshops. However, the intention is to point readers to a fascinating tradition of meta-literary writing which identifies books in a rich variety of dramatic roles. In this tradition, books are personified and take on human attributes, while libraries become kingdoms or realms. The article poses the question about what meaning books will have in the future in the face of the technological revolution, the internet and electronic media. It argues that books still have a future. If the internet leads to higher levels of literacy, then there will perhaps be more demand for quality editions, while it will be paperbacks which will be easily replaced by electronic texts. Meanwhile, books will retain their symbolism, their usefulness and their aesthetic value. The article concludes by drawing together the various themes and assessing the ways in which books retain symbolic meaning in our culture.

**Key words:** dramatic roles; electronic text; existentialist; language games; library; manuscripts; metaphor; meta-theatrical; modernism; Renaissance; Shakespeare; symbol

## 1

In *The Shadow of the Wind* (2001), by the Spanish writer Carlos Ruiz Zafón, the Prologue is entitled 'The Cemetery of Forgotten Books' (2004, 1–5). The narrator, as a young boy, is introduced to a bookshop by his father and asked to choose a book to adopt so as to ensure that it will always stay alive. The book he chooses, which has the same title as Zafón's novel, turns out to be a rare book – the only one in

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existence, he discovers – because a stranger has systematically bought up and burned the author’s works. Here we are introduced to the main ideas which are dealt with in this article, the idea of a book as a person, a possible friend or enemy, and the book as an object to be either loved or destroyed. Another interesting novel which deals with the theme of books is Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* (2005), which has become a popular film. Set against the Nazi burning of books and the persecution of Jews in the period leading up to World War II, ‘the book thief’ is a young girl who so strongly believes in the value of books that she is prepared to steal them.

It was during the eighteenth century in England that book collecting became fashionable among the nobility and wealthy merchant classes. Ian Watt has written that in England there were still very low levels of literacy by today’s standards, while books were comparatively expensive, so that only wealthy members of society could afford them (1972, 38–65). Hence, books were symbols of economic prosperity and not just symbols of knowledge. Gentlemen took pride in their libraries; Alexander Pope, in Epistle IV of his *Moral Essays* (1731), believed that a man’s tastes and character were evident in his collection of books:

His study! with what authors is it stored?  
 In books, not authors, curious is my Lord;  
 To all their dated backs he turns you round;  
 These Aldus printed, those Du Sueil has bound.  
 Lo, some are vellum, and the rest as good  
 For all his Lordship knows, but they are wood.  
 For Locke or Milton ’tis in vain to look,  
 These shelves admit not any modern book. (1965, lines 133–140)

The gentleman in Pope’s essay is more interested in the impression his books make with their high quality printing and bindings than he is in the actual contents of the works. Furthermore, his interest in books is of an antiquarian kind. He is clearly not interested in modern thought. Books therefore have strange and unusual ways of relating to the individuals who collect them, often revealing the preoccupations and interests of their owners, as much as those of the authors who wrote them. Furthermore, books have a physical existence as artefacts and as such have been used as visual symbols, such as gifts or prizes. In this essay, I will be looking at some of the interesting ways in which books have been referred to by writers, and discussing the symbolic meanings which books have had in relation to the world.

## 2

In Anthony Powell’s novel, *Books do Furnish a Room* (1971), a character by the name of Bagshaw appears. His nickname is ‘Books-do-furnish-a-room Bagshaw’ (1991, 29). The origins of this name are lost in the past, but there were two main

stories relating to it (p. 32). One claimed that Bagshaw was heard to say, 'Books do furnish a room' shortly after he had drunkenly overturned a large glass-fronted bookcase while searching for a quotation for a radio programme. The other story was that he had muttered exactly these words as he made amorous advances on a woman in her husband's book-lined study (p. 33). Bagshaw's nickname is shortened to 'Books'. The nickname is somewhat ironic as Bagshaw is a journalist and not particularly interested in books. However, there have been a variety of characters in literary history to whom the nickname could have been applied, for example, George Tesman in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1891). Tesman is bookish to a fault. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872), the character of Edward Casaubon is unduly preoccupied with books. Shortly after his death, Mr. Brooke remarks, 'Poor Casaubon was a little buried in books – he didn't know the world' (1977, 526). A similar preoccupation characterizes Cecil Vyse in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908).

When *Everyman* first appeared in print in the early sixteenth century, it is unlikely that books would have been part of the life experience of the central character. A person from that period could hardly have been nicknamed 'Books'. Publishing was in its infancy and what books existed were in the safe hands of the clergy. In *Everyman*, the character of Everyman in his journey towards death has to bid farewell to a number of allegorical figures, but he doesn't have to say goodbye to 'Books'. If we move ahead, less than a century, to the Elizabethan period and a morality play (if such it be) like Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, we find an altogether different situation. At the very beginning of the play we find Faustus in his study, bidding goodbye to his books, to the different branches of learning which he has mastered. One by one, Faustus rejects the different sources of knowledge before turning to books on magic. The Good Angel urges Faustus to, 'lay that damned book aside' and to 'read, read the scriptures...' (1.1. 69–72). After Faustus has made his pact with the devil and the play has run its course, the twenty-four years elapsed, as he is about to be whisked off to eternal damnation, he cries, 'I'll burn my books. Ah, Mephistophiles!' (5.2. 200).

Renaissance writers frequently refer to books or to libraries of books. Book learning is very much a theme of *Love's Labour's Lost*, and the bookish characters range from a pedantic school teacher to the King of Navarre, who has declared a moratorium on women (and life), while he and his courtiers devote themselves to book learning. Berowne asks if this study involves knowing, 'Things hid and barr'd, you mean, from common sense?' (1.1. 57). In contrast, Duke Senior in *As You Like It*, believes that there is knowledge in Nature and finds, 'tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything' (2.1. 16–17). Nature seems to be a giant, benevolent library.

Montaigne isolated himself in his tower – his library became his kingdom: 'there is my seat, that is my throne' (1946, 49–50). Prospero was isolated on an island with his library of books. He tells Miranda, 'my library / was dukedom large enough'

(*The Tempest* 1.2. 109–110). Prospero's power on the island is closely linked to his books: 'Burn but his books', observes Caliban (3.2. 93). Later in the play, Prospero talks about drowning his book. His book takes on dramatic significance. So it is with books in later dramas through the centuries: books take on dramatic roles, become people. Milton, in his *Areopagitica* (1644), so believed in the life of books that he wrote '... as good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye' (1973, 914).

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), in 'Franklin's Epitaph on Himself', at the start of his *Autobiography*, likened his own life to a book:

The body of Benjamin Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out and stripped of its lettering and gilding, lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost; for it will, as he believed, appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author.

In Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler* (1891), Eilert Loevberg's book, his manuscript, is referred to as 'a child'. Mrs. Elvsted likens the destruction of it to 'killing a child'. She says, 'But how could you? It was my child too!' In fact the book has not yet been destroyed, it has simply been lost by Loevberg, 'after a night of debauchery' (Ibsen 1980, 315). However, Hedda has the manuscript, which has been found and handed to her by Tesman. At the end of the scene, Hedda burns the manuscript:

Hedda (*throws one of the pages into the stove and whispers to herself*). I'm burning your child, Thea! You with your beautiful, wavy hair! (*She throws a few more pages into the stove.*) The child Eilert Loevberg gave you. (*Throws the rest of the manuscript in.*) I'm burning it! I'm burning your child! (1980, 317)

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) wrote a poem entitled, 'In a Library'. The books in the poem are personified. She writes about meeting 'an antique book, / In just the dress his century wore'. The poem goes on in this manner, the poet taking the book's 'venerable hand', inspecting 'his quaint opinions' – the book takes on a male role (Dickinson 1994, 6). For Hedda Gabler, the book is the child she will never have, while for Emily Dickinson, the books are the men she will never meet. It is only a short step from *Hedda Gabler* (1891), where a manuscript is confused with a child, to Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), where a baby is left in a handbag at Victoria Station, while a manuscript of a three volume novel is found in a perambulator. In a moment of mental abstraction, Miss Prism has muddled them up (1985, 310).

In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847), Becky Sharp finds a unique use for a book, Johnson's Dictionary, given to her as a parting gift as she leaves Miss Pinkerton's academy, which she flings out the window of the coach. Part of the dramatic impact of this episode has to do with the sheer weight and size of Johnson's Dictionary,

which gives it authority, much like the editions of the Bible which were used in Churches during the period. Although not quite as large as some of these bibles, Johnson's dictionary would still have made a healthy thump when it landed in Miss Pinkerton's garden. If a modern day Becky Sharp, in a departing limousine, threw a CD Rom out the window, the effect would be somewhat less resonant.

In many plays and novels throughout the nineteenth century, crucial scenes are set in libraries and gain dramatic intensity from the setting. In Henry James's *The Lesson of the Master* (1888), the lesson given by the Master to his young colleague is given in the library. Where Montaigne's library was a kingdom, here St. George's library becomes a cage. Described in detail by James, the library becomes a metaphor for the lesson the master has to teach: the library excludes all sunlight, all reference to the outside world. The Master asks Paul Overt, 'Isn't it a good big cage for going round and round? My wife invented it and she locks me up here every morning' (1983, 111). In James's novella, the world of the library takes on an almost malevolent quality.

In E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), books become even more dangerous. Introduced to the world of literature by Helen Schlegel, the frail young man, Leonard Bast, eventually dies after being beaten with a sword, when he catches hold of the bookcase which overturns on him: 'Books fell over him in a shower' (Forster 1991, 340). The scene has dramatic and symbolic meaning. Bast is eventually defeated by his own aspirations. His intellectual curiosity is not up to the materialistic weight of the Wilcox family books. Forster was particularly interested in the symbolism of books and used the theme on other occasions, for instance, in his early story, 'Ansell', where a large box of books falls into a river (1972, 1-9).

When crucial scenes are not set in libraries, but in drawing rooms, there is usually also a bookcase nearby. In Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), at an absolutely crucial moment in the action, when the play is rushing headlong towards its brilliant conclusion, Jack needs suddenly to consult the Army Lists in order to identify the Christian name of General Moncrieff. Sure enough, a bookcase is ready at hand. With tremendous speed, rivalling a google search, he finds the information. His name is indeed Ernest.

Oliver Parker's film of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is very interesting in relation to this final scene. When Jack needs to search the army records of the past in order to identify the first name of his father, there is a very strong suggestion that he consults the book merely in order to fabricate the desired information. He is so earnest about being Ernest (and marrying Gwendolen) that he simply invents his father's name. Lady Bracknell notices the book and looks up the name herself. It is in fact John Moncrieff. She then smiles with approval and tosses the book over her shoulder – memorably played by Dame Judi Dench. A book can be the source of authority on any topic, even if it is fiction. In this film, in order to prove his earnestness, Ernest finally has his fiancée's name tattooed on his 'jack', hence it is

a tattoo rather than a book which is the final proof of earnestness. Perhaps this is not in the sense Donne intended, 'But yet the body is his booke' (Donne 1977, 77). Where Orlando engraved Rosalind's name on trees, hung odes upon hawthorns, and elegies on brambles, today, in a paperless, bookless society, lovers engrave names (and poems) on their own skins, so not abusing the trees, which anyway have helped to fuel the technological revolution. In fact Parker's film stresses the relativity of book knowledge. A book can be an ideal form of deception.

All this has gone – the authority of books. They are no longer needed on the shelves. The educated man (or woman) is no longer required to have his own library. If one collects books today it is for reasons other than the information or knowledge they contain. The collector keeps books for aesthetic reasons as ornaments for his room or study, 'Books do Furnish a Room', but not as absolutely crucial and indispensable objects of study. It is a situation which is strangely anticipated (dialectically so) by Walter Benjamin's essay, 'Unpacking my Library: A talk about Book Collecting' (1931). In this essay, Benjamin shares his precious books with the reader as he gradually unpacks them, evaluating them, giving us a sense of their rarity and historical significance (1977, 59–82). So today, we're packing up our books and in the process, re-evaluating them. Some will still survive and for exactly the reasons that Benjamin valued his own books, for their aesthetic and antique value – and their symbolism.

### 3

The questioning of the authority of books began before the age of the internet, perhaps in line with the development of existentialist thought and modern language philosophy. Many twentieth century novels (including popular novels) question the traditional value of books. For instance, in John Buchan's *The Three Hostages* (1924), Sir Richard Hannay is entertained by the villain, Medina, in his vast library which is described in some detail: 'It wasn't an ordinary gentleman's library, provided by the bookseller at so much a yard. It was the working collection of a scholar, and the books had that used look which makes them the finest tapestry for a room' (p. 927). Medina has a very positive public image, and his library is an essential aspect of his deception, for it is in the library that he tries to hypnotize his guest. Hannay is so taken in by the books that he does not at first realize Medina's intentions. Buchan had used a library setting in a previous novel, *The Power-House* (1913), for an encounter between the hero, Edward Leithen, and the villain of the piece, Andrew Lumley:

It was a library, the most attractive I think I have ever seen. The room was long, as libraries should be, and entirely lined with books, save over the fireplace, where hung a fine picture which I took to be a Raeburn. The books were in glass cases, which showed the beautiful shallow mouldings of a more artistic age. (pp. 53–54)

At first, Leithen is taken in by the plausibility of Lumley on account of his hospitality and sensibility: ‘We talked about many things – books, the right furnishings of a library, a little politics . . .’ (Buchan 1913, 55).

In Agatha Christie’s *The Body in the Library* (1942), the author tunes in to one of the clichés of detective fiction, the idea of a dead body being found in the most unlikely of places. Colonel Bantry is convinced that his wife is dreaming and has been reading too many detective novels, ‘Bodies are always being found in libraries in books.’ (1970, 171). Perhaps it is because it is such a well-worn convention that Miss Marple suspects the scene has been set up, that someone other than the murderer has placed the body in this place.

In D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1921), the library of Shortlands is the setting for a wrestling match between Gerald and Birkin (1978, 300–310). The chapter is entitled ‘Gladiatorial’: the implication is that the spectators in this contest are the books on the library shelves. The world of literature (and book knowledge) is gravely silent in the face of the physical and spiritual awareness of the two men.

In James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), there is yet another library setting, a public library, the chief librarian’s office in the National Library of Ireland. This is Chapter Nine, the ‘Scylla and Charybdis’ episode, where Stephen enters into a discussion or intellectual contest with several librarians, an author/editor and finally Buck Mulligan on the topic of the relationship between Shakespeare’s life and art. Before unleashing his thoughts, Stephen reflects on the setting itself:

Coffined thoughts around, in mummycases, embalmed in spice of words. Thoth, god of libraries, a birdgod, moonycrowned. And I heard the voice of that Egyptian highpriest. *In painted chambers loaded with tilebooks.*

They are still. Once quick in the brains of men. Still: but an itch of death is in them, to tell me in my ear a maudlin tale, urge me to wreak their will. (Joyce 1978, 194)

By the end of the chapter, Stephen’s invocation of the ancient God has been answered and the chapter ends with a tribute to the gods from *Cymbeline*, one of the plays around which the discussion centres. There is a sense in which the library is transformed into Stephen’s own mind, which is able to bring the coffined thoughts to life. The centre of knowledge has shifted from the library to the individual himself, who, for the modernist consciousness, is the real source of knowledge.

An interesting aspect of Stephen’s perception is the notion of ‘tilebooks’, the idea that originally books were tiles in ancient tombs. Frederick Harrison, in *A Book About Books* has suggested that books were at one time bricks with writing on them, found on the site of the city of Ninevah (1943, 1). As in the case of Stephen’s perception of ‘tilebooks’, what we see increasingly in the twentieth century is a dislocation between the physical, functional attributes of books and the intellectual awareness of the individual.



The nurse, in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) returns books to one of their original functions when she uses them to repair the two lowest steps of the staircase which had been destroyed by fire (Ondaatje 1993, 13). The South African poet, Mari Peté, has written a memorable poem, 'Books', as yet unpublished, based on this incident. In it she compares the lightness of a Kindle to the weight of leather-bound volumes of *Anna Karenina* or *War and Peace*, which could be used to prop up the stairway.

Returning to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* (1974) finds its primary setting in a section of the Zurich Public Library. Revolving around a production of Wilde's play in 1917 and the imagined meeting of James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Lenin in the library, as recalled in the mind of Carr (who played Algernon), the action whirls through a series of coincidences in which Joyce's and Lenin's manuscripts are confused, the whole piece becoming an incisive parody of *Earnest*. The library in this play is not a setting for book learning but an opportunity for language games.

Lenin also frequented the British Library, which 'had reportedly earned it the accolade from [him] of possessing (in the 1900s) a more comprehensive collection of Russian books than libraries in St. Peterburg and Moscow' (British Library 2015). It's ironic that in the Soviet Union, under both Lenin and Stalin (and subsequently) books were banned. This brings us to a major theme in literature, alluded to earlier in relation to *The Book Thief*, the banning and in some cases burning of books for religious or political reasons. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), in the projected society of the future, books are considered to be so dangerous to own that even one with nothing written in it, 'was a compromising possession'. If such a book was detected, 'it was reasonably certain that it would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labour camp' (Orwell 1981, 5). In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), which depicts an American society of the future, books are banned and any found are burned by 'firemen'. In South Africa, during apartheid, a curious number of books were banned by the Censorship Board, including *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, a children's book about a horse (PostDesk 2015).

An interesting 'book-about-books' is Ashwin Desai's *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island* (2012). Desai discusses reading and education among the prisoners on Robben Island during the apartheid period, but central to his concern is Sonny Venkatrathnam's edition of the Complete Works of Shakespeare, in which individual prisoners chose quotations against which to sign their names. The story of the book is now too familiar to repeat here – how it was originally confiscated from Venkatrathnam then returned to him after he claimed that it was his 'Bible', how it was subsequently disguised as a Hindu religious text and passed around the prisoners – but suffice it to say that it is now one of the most famous Shakespeare

editions in existence (Desai 2012, 13–30). Some of the extracts were chosen simply as favourite quotations, while others were chosen as messages of hope, strength and resilience. As a symbol of the struggle it is a book of unique importance. I somehow doubt that an e-book will ever be as famous or contain within it such a range of symbolic reference.

#### 4

Books have taken on a surprising number of roles throughout history: burnt, drowned, humanized, demonized, used as tiles or bricks, gifts or weapons. Libraries have become kingdoms, dukedoms, cages, arenas. They have hidden crimes, contained mysteries, facilitated meetings, discussions, debates and revolutions. What are the common themes which appear and how will books affect the future?

The following themes can be identified:

1. Books as people, children, individuals, men
2. Books as friends or enemies
3. Books as prizes or possessions, gifts or weapons
4. Books as enemies of the state which can be banned, burned or destroyed.
5. Books as emblems of knowledge, success, magic, wisdom
6. Libraries as kingdoms, dukedoms, arenas, cages, dramatic settings
7. Books as tiles, bricks, physical objects
8. Books as ornaments, furnishings or artefacts

Film directors, designers and other artists have taken a particular interest in books as artefacts, exploring the potential of books as visual images. Helen Hanff's *84, Charing Cross Road* (1970) became a popular film, starring Anne Bancroft and Anthony Hopkins, in the late nineteen eighties. The original book was adapted for theatre, television and radio as well as film. Hanff recounts the story of a relationship between herself in New York and Frank Doehl, who works in London for an antiquarian book dealer. The two characters never meet, yet a close friendship develops based on their mutual interest in books and Hanff's desire to buy books not available to her in New York. Such a friendship would probably not be possible today, where books are ordered online and where the human dimension of collecting books is being increasingly minimized.

One of the most important films which heralded the new age was Peter Greenaway's, *Prospero's Books* (1991). This film has stimulated discourse about the role of books in history and the relationship between the revolution of Gutenberg and the electronic media. Where various stage productions have stressed the meta-theatrical dimensions of the play, *The Tempest*, Greenaway's film stresses the meta-literary aspects, the theme of books, knowledge and the re-writing of history. Another film which explores the theme of books is Martin Scorsese's film of Edith Wharton's

novel, *The Age of Innocence*, first published in 1920. Where many period films of novels have used libraries of books as settings, or as stage props, in Scorsese's film the books are given much more emphasis, foregrounded as it were, the camera lingering on them, mirroring Newland Archer's aspirations and perceptions.

Contemporary authors (and film directors) are increasingly finding books of symbolic interest at just the point in history when bookshops and publishers are going out of business, while electronic publishing is increasing at an exceptional rate. Susan Hill's book, *Howard's End is on the Landing* (2009) is an example of such a new response to the question of reading and the culture of books. Hill's novel is based on the notion that she decided to spend one year rediscovering the books in her library, collected during a lifetime of work in the field of literature. The journey brings back to mind the writers she has met in libraries or in connection with interviews, publishing or literary awards. She gives a list of books she hasn't read, or is unlikely ever to read (including *Ulysses*) and in one chapter, entitled, 'It Ain't Broke', gives an account of why books are still important, even in the face of the electronic media: 'No one will sign an electronic book, no-one can annotate in the margin, no one can leave a love letter casually between the leaves' (Hill 2009, 77). The new media seem to have provided us with a less rich and varied world. It is also a world which is curiously less human. As Peter Strauss puts it, 'Written works are beginning to feel like ghosts. They will soon be something you call up on a screen like a fortune-teller in front of her crystal ball rather than something with a unique presence, a smell and feel of its own – something you can hold in your hand, or put away on a shelf, or even own for yourself' (Strauss 2012, 68).

However, this is probably too gloomy a picture for us to contemplate. We need books in our lives for practical purposes and not just as symbols of the past. For example, it is doubtful if a theatre director will work from an electronic version of a text, or expect his actors to learn their lines from a Kindle. The director, the stage manager, the designers, the actors need printed texts in front of them which they can annotate, cut, revise, or use to indicate stage directions. Promptbooks will always be needed in the theatre. These promptbooks in their turn become interesting books, which are collected by libraries specializing in theatre history. The same is true of musical scores. It is highly unlikely that a conductor and his orchestra will work from electronic copies. Hence new printed texts will constantly be generated. Meanwhile, established libraries still have huge collections of archival resources. It is impossible to think that all these texts will ever find their way into electronic versions. It is only those books for which there is a reasonable demand that will become available on the internet. Even then, the scholar needs more than just one or two electronic versions of a play like *Hamlet*. He will inevitably wish to consult a variety of printed texts of the play in addition to any electronic version. My argument therefore is that books still have a future, as rare collector's items from the past, as important sources of

knowledge and information in the present and as ‘working texts’ which can be used more easily and readily than electronic texts.

Walter Benjamin, using a source which is paradoxically difficult to trace, wrote: ““The only exact knowledge there is,” said Anatole France, “is the knowledge of the date of publication and the format of books”” (Benjamin 1979, 60). In the twenty first century, when websites are constantly being updated, there can be multiple dates of publication, and it is the date of accessing information which becomes important. Books, which had once been the objects or forms of knowledge, are shifting, as Strauss intimated, into the world of shadows. However, is it not electronic books and the internet itself, rather than books, which have returned us to the world of shades? Even if the internet and electronic publishing have become predominant, the objects of knowledge to which writers refer retain their physical existence in the world. If this were not the case, literary studies, along with other intellectual disciplines, would find itself in a situation of extreme relativism.

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