



## Literature and Its Waning Impact

Sabbar S. Sultan Albarrak<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Independent researcher, Amman, Jordan  
Email: albarrak\_2013@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.53103/cjlls.v3i6.132

*“Literature is a question minus the answer”*  
Roland Barthes

*“sure a poet is a sage,  
A humanist, physician to all men  
That I am none I feel, as vultures feel  
They are no birds, when eagles abroad.  
John Keats, ‘The Fall of Hyperion’*

### Abstract

The following article attempts to explore and discuss a very thorny problem in humanities, i.e., the decay or even death of literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the current 21 century. It is in these critical times that one can hear such calls for proclaiming the death of literature or its declining status. The corpus of the article is devoted to shedding illuminating light on the different aspects of this controversial topic. The introduction gives representative examples of the heyday of literature and its glorious milestones. The purpose behind this is to show how literature has flourished throughout more than twenty centuries. In contrast, the main argument explores the different manifestations of the weak position of literature and the different reasons behind that. The conclusion is meant to verify the basic postulate of the abstract and how some of the frequent calls of the death of literature are in fact question-begging.

Keywords: Literature, Death, Philosophy, Literary Criticism, Reading

### Introduction

Literature in all its subgenres (poetry, drama, literary criticism, and epic and prose fiction) dates back to centuries B.C. whether in India (Mahabharata and Ramayana) Ancient Greece, Rome or Mesopotamia. It is in those ancient times that literature has shown itself as the only feasible device of reflecting the hopes, aspirations, dreams and frustrations of human beings in the different parts of the world. Although illiteracy was prevalent in those dark times, drama was a pioneering art in making people get the

lessons of literature in a direct and memorable way. This indispensable role of literature in the lives of communities all over the world gives the impression that its appeal will last forever, irrespective of any impeding and debilitating factors. However, the author-recipient relationship which seems to be lasting forever is predestined to lose some or most of its power in our highly technological ages.

The present section highlights the times in which literature is the only factor affecting the lives of people, elite or laymen. Some representative examples of these wonderful times typify the greatness of literature and its irresistible appeal. Indeed a passing look at the Epic of Gilgamesh shows that it was one of the earliest literary texts that humanity has ever known. Its composition was in Akadian between C.1600—C.1155) and its author was named Sin-Leqiunnimni. The great interest of this seminal text is represented through the desperate attempts of man or half-man and his challenges to flee death and its inevitability. The greatness of such a text is shown through its philosophy emphasizing the biological needs (eat, drink and be merry). Despite its hedonistic tendency, the epic excavates very serious questions in the lives of people. Historians and scholars unanimously agree that Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the early texts “that attach to ancient tales the current religious teachings” (Jastow & Clay,1920, p.11).

No doubt, this is a text that carries multiple themes simultaneously and reminds the recipient of such themes as the arrogance of rulers and its catastrophic outcomes. For instance, the search for immortality is a point that runs counter to human existence. Such dreams are the exclusive privilege of gods and goddesses. The human part in Gilgamesh renders him vulnerable to forgetfulness and pursuit of ephemeral matters. Although it dates back to centuries BC, the text has all the ingredients that empower it to address issues common in our present life. Literature proves to be capable of raising issues that bypass time or history. This is one reason why it addresses all types of people and modes of thinking. It is sufficient to recall the initial words about Gilgamesh who “saw” the painful facts of life. His exclusive vision of seeing what is not permissible remains the memorable feature of this great text.

The multiplicity of topics is once again felt in Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex (430-420 BC). The seer in Epic of Gilgamesh will be reiterated in this tragedy about man’s blindness and failure to sort out between what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, blindness and sight. Oedipus is partly a human figure whose gross errors (killing his own father, King Laius, and unknowingly marrying his own mother) and begetting four children (Eteocles, Polynecies, Antigone and Ismene) --- all this is irrefutable evidence of human naivety and moral blindness. The shameful act of both Oedipus and his mother-wife, Jocasta, is a reminder for the audience that incestuous action is a terrific and unpardonable sin leading to perdition: her own suicide and his blinding himself in order to keep away from that scene are the terrific and inescapable outcomes of his primary sin.

Although Oedipus Rex was composed at the dawn of history, it has worldwide appeal to address all types of people and cultures concerning the family ties. They remain the sturdy foundation of human life, irrespective of creeds, races and classes.

The idea of fate or preordained acts is definitely the main issue in the classical tragedy when compared to his fellow-dramatists: Aeschylus and Euripides. Sophocles occupied a distinct position in drama and literature as a whole. The following judgment identifies his great achievement in literature, "It is said that Greek tragedy ends with Oedipus; in other words, it is the greatest tragedy ever written" (Misra, 1992, p.1).

The two above-mentioned texts (an epic and a tragedy) written in ancient times and places (Mesopotamia and ancient Greece) are a reminder that literature was taken seriously by both writers and audience. Actually, literature in those ages, was considered to be the only vent people could find in dealing with their daily affairs and concerns.

Of all literary genres, poetry remains the field that engages a special and matchless position. Historically speaking, it is the oldest literary genre and its role in human life is unparalleled. Scholar Sam Hill finds that poetry remains an indispensable field for all human beings and cultures:

Poetry is not commerce; that energy, that experience we name poem cannot be traded on the market place. {...} It won't light a light bulb, run heater or an air conditioner or a microwave oven. It is only necessary, and inviolable, an articulation of a world beyond the possibilities of money (Hill, 1990, p. 480).

No doubt, there is a unanimous consent among people, irrespective of their race and culture, that poetry has a universal appeal. It is the cradle of literature whose origin dates back to centuries BC. To be more exact, literature basically hinges on poetry and its wonderful world. Such is the grace and attraction of poetry that even King James I could not resist its enticement. King James I, we are told, that "he was not only a poet but also a theorist of poetry, and he was also the author of poetry; he was also the author of numerous prose works in political philosophy and therapy" (Evans, 2020, p.8). Below is a sonnet whereby King James I engrafts the lyrical with critical touches:

We find by proof, that into every age  
 In Phorbus' some glistering star did shine,  
 Who worthy scholars to the Muses sage,  
 Fulfill'd their countries with their work divine.  
 So Homer was a sounding trumpet fine  
 Amongst the Greeks into his learned days;  
 So Virgil was among the Romans syne  
 A spirit sublim'd, a pillar of their praise!  
 So lofty Petrarch renowned blaze  
 In tongue Italic, in a sugar'd style,  
 And to the circled skies his name did raise;  
 For he by poems that he did comp'le,

Led in triumph, love, Chasteness, Death, and Fame (qtd. in Greco, Alberto N. et al (2014).*The Book Publishing Industry*,Third Edition. New York: Routledge. (Evans, 2020, p.3).

A very distinguished Italian poet, Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), finds that he is the outsider when he compares himself with other people. His estrangement is complete and he feels as a total outsider in an environment which is hostile to his longings and aspirations:

### **A Different Nobility**

I disdain this prideful age,  
which feeds itself on empty hopes,  
in love with slogans, enemy of virtue,  
this foolish age ,which wants what's useful  
and doesn't know that life  
is becoming constantly more useless.  
I feel superior, and have contempt  
for human judgment.(qtd. in Rosengarten, 2012, p.39)

Another relevant name in this regard is Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) who combines the two faculties of creative literature and criticism simultaneously. He makes a preliminary statement about who makes poetry superior to other arts: it is not constrained by the laws of the material universe:

1. Proposition: Poetry is to be valued for what it is: imitation which aims to teach and delight its recipients.

2. Division: Divides up poetry into its different kinds in order to clarify the definition he gave of it in the proposition.

3. Proof of confrontation; Argues for poetry's superiority to its rival disciplines, philosophy and history, by showing that it is more effective in persuading people to virtuous action.

4. Refutation. Demolishes the case that has been made against poetry by its protagonists (qtd. in Evans,2020, p.32).

What is noteworthy about Sidney's judgment of the best poetry is his emphasis on the moral content of the poem, a point which brings him to the long line of philosophers and reformers in their characteristic judgment of fine poetry:

A great poet celebrating a virtuous person was in some ways even more important than the virtuous person himself or herself. A virtuous person might influence some contemporaries, but a great poem could inspire countless readers or audiences, in era after era, to want to imitate the virtue they read about or witnessed on stage (qtd. in Evans,2020, p.12).

The romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) holds a very sublime idea about poetry, enshrining it with what is best and wonderful in this literary genre, "Poetry is something divine" he argues, "It is at once the center and conference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred"(qtd. in Johnson, 2007, p33). This halo created by Shelley will have its opposite in the second part of the article here where readers will be shocked to come across the debasing judgments of classical philosophers in addition to the Victorian representative ( Fredrick Nietzsche).All this convinces the readers that at the end of the nineteenth century there were seeds of revolting against poetry and literature in general and how the value of literature is getting more and more questionable. The main argument will be fully devoted to explicating and highlighting the different manifestations of such urgent and endless questions.

### Short Reviews

--Roland Barthes (1967) 'Death of the Author' is an essay whose date of publication shows that it was written in the second half of twentieth century. It represents a radical orientation. Written at the time of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the essay follows the linguistic orientation in stressing the signifier-signified relationship and cancelling the traditional role of the author. Such arguments follow a mechanical process of generating meaning, irrespective of the one who wrote it. Barthes in his book, *Image-Music-Text* draws the reader's attention to a new perspective of viewing the author. As he puts it," The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tasks while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire 's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man" (1977, p.143).

--Sean Burke (1998).*The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. This book is an important one in that critic Sean Burke seeks to refute Barthes' assertion that the literary text has got nothing to do with its author. Indeed, Barthes finds that the death of the author is a must for the rebirth of the reader, a preliminary step for the birth of the reader-response theory in criticism. It is the reader who is going to fill the vacuum left by the inevitable absence or death of the author. Burke contends as follows;

the 'Author' whose death Barthes declared in his famous essay of 1967 was an Aunt Sally, an object of criticism, (or its pc equivalent).Once he had cleared the air of this figure made falsely, or at least anachronistically analogous to God in his omnipotence. Barthes was free to give way in a variety of different ways to what proved to be a fascination with the connections between life and work (p.331)

--Jeff Herman (2016). Jeff Herman's *Guide to Book Publishers: Editors & General Agents. Who They Are, What They Want, How to Win Them Over*. Novato, California: New World Library.

This is a book about the trade of books in all their categories and types and how the sales of such books gradually dwindled so that in the first three decades of the present century, publishers gradually found themselves almost unable to pursue the process of publishing and getting profit out of it. In his impressive introduction to stating the gradual decline of publication and the production of literature as a whole. In part 1(Advice for Writers) he had the sad news to display to authors and the bleak future awaiting them:

Welcome back, or welcome for the first time. This is the latest edition of the book I 've been producing since 1990, and I have invested considerable time and revenues and resources into revising almost every aspect of it.

Much has changed and much has remained the same. Hence my journey in publishing began in the 1980s. Dozens of long-lasting independent (mom-and-pop) publishers have either disappeared or been absorbed into a numerically tiny oligarchy or multinational, trillion-dollar conglomerates, and relatively few start-ups have emerged. Digital retailing has displaced physical retailing, and most books will soon be bought in digital form. Though aggregate revenues have been enhanced, even fewer writers are able to support themselves by writing (p.IX).

This brief but cogent advice to all those involved in the process of writing and publishing books regarding the gloomy future awaiting them. This is a time when the digital process gradually began to replace the printing and paper books.

--Alberto N.Greco et al (2014). *The Book Publishing Industry*, Third Edition. New York: Routledge.

This book is similar to Herman's in that it is concerned with the book marketing system and how this step can be a means of success or failure. This depends entirely on the efforts and intentions of critics and reviewers in making books especially the literary ones, appeal to readers and students. The book raises the central question pertaining to marketing and its unpredictable outcomes:

Are current marketing systems undermining the book industry in this nation? Are flimsy, intellectually empty books being sold aggressively to consumers while deserving titles wither and ultimately die on the vine because they lack the glitz and buzz associated with bestsellers? Have books become commodities? Is the bestseller list a depressing collection of third-rate or fourth-rate products (many of which are not "books") while authors of serious literary fiction and non-fiction are unable to get their works published ? (p.274)

Such arguments of the type mentioned in the previous paragraph highlight the problem of producing and marketing books in America and all other countries, for that

matter. Producing a valuable and serious book is not enough. What matters here is the contribution of critics, publishers, reviewers and journalists in order to shed illuminating light on the new product and its merits. In short, book industry in the West and the world at large is subject to factors and conditions that make such a project face challenges and even unexpected hazards.

### **Methods**

The rationale behind the format of the present research with its unmistakable division (introduction and main argument) is the disparity between the two stages literature underwent and their thematic implications. What is given in the main argument (Conclusions and Findings) highlights the striking differences between literature in the past and its present status. As seen in the introduction, one can easily notice the first great stage of literature whether in the East or West through the different examples provided (Epic of Gilgamesh, Oedipus Rex and poetic excerpts from different epochs and stages). All these are a reminder that literature throughout its various manifestations has been an invariable means of expressing and reflecting human needs and aspirations--- human dreams, moments of euphoria or defeat, triumphs or setbacks.

In contrast, the second section, the main argument (Conclusions and Findings) provides examples of the declining status of literature in terms of popularity and quality for different reasons to be discussed in the rest of this paper. In the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, there have been variables and modifications within the creative process and the literary strategies used and their subsequent outcomes. One of the factors affecting literature negatively is the frustrating role assigned to criticism in the twentieth century. Movements like New Criticism, Modernism and Postmodernism are merely casual examples of the subverting role of criticism in perceiving and judging literary texts. Other factors are related to what readers find in the literary process. Devices like play games, films, the internet, visual aids are instances of the shift from reading to viewing the literary texts. Reading or listening to literary passages which used to be the only means of pleasure and knowledge has lost its former interest and gradually got replaced by other more appealing and accessible means of handling literature.

### **Main Argument (Conclusions and Findings)**

What has been stated so far concerning the premium position literature has deservedly engaged, thanks to such heartening views about poetry and literature in general is a point which might be missing in the following pages. Indeed, this is a dialectic relationship which presents the thing and its opposite as the logic of history decrees. As in the case of so many phenomena and trends, literature faces different situations and demands which eventually led to harmful effects.

### Alvin Kernan, *Death of Literature* (1990), Yale UP

The book mentioned above can be considered as the incentive for the present article which seeks to find out the reasons that have subverted or at least debilitated the great constituents of literature and its long history. The shocking impact of this book on specialists and common readers is huge, as its tone is marked by extreme pessimism and dark predictions concerning the present and future states of literature. Critic Richard A. Lanham (Feb.1992) in his article titled 'The Death of Literature in College English' confirms that, "Kernan is deaf and blind throughout to how powerfully the electronic word feeds back on Western literary theory." The change from printing to electronic form is an issue that Kernan is unable to put up with, let alone accept. "The movement from printed book to electronic screen is making us, for a start, the distortions and practice in poems like *The Iliad*, or plays like *Hamlet*, by fixing theory in print and in the print ethos (Lanham,1992, p.200).

Internally, the traditional romantic and modernist literary values have been completely reversed. Author (Alvin Kernan), whose creative imagination has been said to be the source of literature, "was declared dead or the mere assembler of various bits of language and culture into writings that were no longer works of art, but simply cultural collage or "texts" (p.201).

*The Death of Literature*, is a book whereby the author Kernan argues in ways which are radical and unprecedented:

What were once the masterpieces of Literature, the plays of Shakespeare, or the novels of Flaubert, are now void of meaning, or what comes to the same thing, filled with an infinity of meanings, their language indeterminate, without foundation; their organizational structures, grammar, logic, and rhetoric, verbal sleight of hand (Kernan, p.165).

One of the various scholars of contemporary life, Jon Adams, contends that the author of Alvin Kernan's book, *The Death of literature*," shows a deep hostility to scientific modes of investigation of the arts expressed in a tendency for the arts to set themselves methodologically in opposition to the sciences" (p.129).

Why does the scientific method appear to Kernan or his followers appear detrimental to literature? The particularity of art and literature makes it different from such common methods in research and writing books. Adams has the following to say in this regard:

Scientific rationalism has been the official mode of knowledge in modern society, but the artist has inevitably been distinguished by the possession of its mirror opposite, an intuitive art of the creative imagination (Adams,2007, p.129).

Another article bemoaning the death of literature is written by David L. Ulin. Its main point centers on the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) and his struggle



for a modest living as a writer. He began with fiction-writing that provided him and his family with a reasonable income:

When I started out in 1997, it was possible to make a living as a free-lance writer of fiction, and live out of your mailbox, because it was still the golden age of magazines, and it looked as though that I could go on forever ( August 27, 2018).

The new development lies in technology which proved to be detrimental to his profession as a creative writer. The main problem lies in technology, the endless distraction of the internet, the breakdown of an authority in an age of blogger and twitter, multi-networked world (August 27, n.p.). Indeed, poetry in the present age with its highly sophisticated technology and unpredictable trends has undergone radical changes which ultimately underrated literature's former effect and significance. The following is an elaboration of this point:

One might argue that people have been conditioned—ironically, by the mass media—to pose such doomsday questions. And a wave of media concern about a literary crisis did follow the neo progressive moment in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, a lengthy Network article blamed “allowing students to work with contemporary media of communication such as film, videotape, and photography “for a new decline in literacy (Purves & Niles, 1984, p.17).

### **Philosophy vs. Poetry (by extension, literature)**

Philosophy throughout its long tradition represents a serious problem facing poetry and its great achievement. Socrates, one of the peripatetic philosophers (born C 470- died 399 BCE Athens) was the master of Plato. Both of them had a low idea about poetry and poets. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Plato wrote and published his books whereas Socrates was content with oratory and oral discussions and dialogues. As such, it is expected that Plato would jot down his (Socrates') main thoughts and judgments about poets and poetry:

To philosophy, poetry can look like childishness since philosophy demands that we should mature to appreciate poetry. Recall how in the tenth book of *The Republic*, Plato insults poetry by supposing that it stimulates childish emotions, and depends upon childish credulity. Philosophers, in Plato's account, are as far away from children and women as you can guess (Edmundson, 1995, p.37).

### **Fredrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and His Conception of Poetry**

Although more than twenty centuries separate Nietzsche from the classical judgments of classical scholars like Plato and Socrates, his view of poetry is not entirely different from theirs. His pessimistic view of life inevitably leads him to a dark perspective of all things around him, including poetry. The fact of the matter is that

Nietzsche's own poetry was seen in his watershed experience, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* :

Laments that he is weary of poets who have perversely fulfilled Plato's denunciation of poetry by inscribing their own distance from the difficult path of truth. The latter exiled the poets from the polis on the grounds that they lied too much (Luchte, 2010, p.28).

It is worthwhile to recall that Nietzsche himself published one volume of poetry even though he kept criticizing poetry and downgrading it as a literary genre that runs counter to his own philosophical speculations. The same holds true to Plato whose attitudes toward poetry are negative, though at heart he cherishes poetry and its impressive worlds. In Socrates' case, the situation is different in that his speeches and judgments remain oral and do not substantiate anything as he is confident that what is oral is more effective and lasting than writing.

Plato who assumed the position of Socrates in his book, *Apology* (399-387 BC.) has the following to say concerning the poetry-philosophy duality:

Socrates argues that poets are the worst interpreters of their work. Well, gentlemen, I hesitate to tell you the truth, but it must be told. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that any of the bystanders could have explained these poems better than their actual authors. So soon I made up my mind about the poets too. I decided that it was not a wisdom that enabled them to write poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean (McCaffrey, 2001, p.5).

In another context, Socrates reiterates his argument about the reality of 'soul', 'gods' and 'immortality'. "He responds that they are mystic words coined by poets and religious people to tell fanciful stories of their imaginations. Such initiative arts cannot represent the true reality; they may mislead the ignorant populace to believe as if they were true" (Aeon, 2010, p.3).

The irony in the following item lies in the fact that although Socrates had his own reservations and misgivings concerning poetry and what it presents, many anonymous texts were written assuming the personality of Socrates as shown here:

The veil of physical appearance, shown here  
 All bodily affections, and aspire  
 To rid themselves of the illusions spun  
 By poets. Hence their inchoate desire  
 The words take sensuous shape yet circumvent  
 And transcend the sensory cause and fire. (qtd. in Norris, 2020, p.17)

Even a great name in romantic poetry and a co-founder of Romanticism (1798-1837), William Wordsworth had his own stipulations regarding this influential romantic

trend initiated by him and S.T. Coleridge. Wordsworth finds the opposite of what Nietzsche would suggest in his above-mentioned views. Here, poetry is described as follows, "More than most great poets, he had a contempt for literature, if by literature is meant the verbal decoration of a theme and the creation of an aesthetic object for its own sake (Sharock, 1958, p.XXX1).

This upward line of poetry reaches the zenith with the influential contributions of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe. However, it has to put up with depreciatory remarks and judgments from philosophers, thinkers and people with scientific orientations. Such seminal hints and judgments will find their support and enhancement in the years to come.

### **Swift and Unpredictable Developments and Challenges in Literary Criticism and Literary Theory**

This is one of the cogent factors that precipitated the regression or decline of creative literature. According to the discourse of structuralists:

'Man' in the optimistic humanist sense was dead, replaced by the rather wretched creature referred to as 'the subject'. The point behind such arguments is the emphasis laid on the illusion of individual self-determination as a linguistic political mirage: the 'subject' is merely an empty grammatical category [...] which we may occupy without recognizing that it subjects us to the higher laws of language and culture (Baldick,1996, p.64).

What is striking about the critical and cultural developments in literary theory is the significant contribution of the French Roland Barthes to this heated controversy. His memorable essay, 'The Death of the Author' (1967) contends that the author's role is negligible or even next to nil:

While Derrida never mentions Barthes' essay, 'The Death of the Author' in this place, I nonetheless find in Derrida's memorial for Barthes a contribution to the theorization of the author's death. This essay is written in response to the death of his friend (Barthes) combines the personal loss with a more general theory of the author. The very combination to the heart of the theoretical authorities of the present book--- a reconceptualization of the death of the author so as to include inextricably both theory and personal loss (Gallop,2007, pp.7-8).

Jzbieta Chodakowska Pomorska and other scholars draw the reader's attention to the marginal place of the poet when viewed from a temporal perspective. In their arguments, we learn that:

The only 'authentic' life of the poet can be found in his poetic word, that the poet's work anticipates the future and thus belongs to the future. Therefore, the poet according to Pasternak's dramatic statement, is always 'displaced' in his own time (Pomorska et al,1890, p.6).

Linguistic developments left ineradicable changes in literature, particularly the recent movements like deconstruction or modernism which proved to be detrimental to the entire literary process. According to John D. Caputo, “to attempt to deconstruct something, then, would not be to oppose outright, and especially not in order to deprive it of all possible force” (Lucy, 2016, p.2).

The name of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) is always associated with deliberate ambiguities and needless obfuscation as far as literature is concerned. In his “Ghosts Dance”, he argues that “technology does not drive out the ancient belief in ghosts---or , I would add ,with Michel Serres, in angels---but enhances it , that the future will be more and more a matter of ghosts.[...]His prediction of the rising ascendancy of specters and spooks, phantom and virtual realities, is positively eerie (p.XIV).

A British critic declares his gloomy speculations and ironic judgments of Jacques Derrida by the term he ironically coined “ Derridizing a text” which “turns the readers away from the meaning of a text and imposes a set of metalinguistic dictatorship , by virtue of the fact that , apparently deconstruction is closely related to other words that start with de-- : decrepitude, depravity, derision, destruction” (Anderson,2017,p.5).

In sharp contrast to the confusion and ambiguities raised by the advocates of modernism , structuralism, and post-modernism, the poet and the public relationship is a reminder that such a relationship has firm foundations and there is no room for misconceptions about poet-public relationship,” :how poet and public stared at each other with righteous indignation, till the poet said: “ Since you won’t read me , I’ll make sure you can’t—is the most complicated and interesting of all stories” (Jarrell,1951; qtd, in Dieveven, 2003, p. 1X).

### **Reading in the Last Three Decades of the Current Century**

Reading is the last item in the present study. Why do we read literature? Is it just for entertainment or passing time? Definitely, it is much more than that. This is one reason why such activities are deeply rooted in history. The following is a brief account about the invaluable role played by reading in human life, ”By reading you may ascend to those remote regions where other spheres encircle other suns , where other stars illuminate a new expanse of skies, and enkindle the most sublime emotions that can animate the human soul” (Rose, 2018, p.90).

The points that have already been raised concerning the difficulties and challenges the reader encounters in reading literary texts will be supported by this section and how the act of reading is no longer the first choice for researchers and scholars. Accordingly, one can easily notice a decline in reading, whether in buying the book or borrowing it. In his interesting article, “The decline of Literature: A Public Perspective”, M. Albalawi finds that: “For a long-time literature has been considered a treasure by

which universities have been privileged. It has played a dynamic role in the humanities and English departments” (2015, p.89). However, this positive role of literature and its reception will pass through a stage of impoverishment and decline.

One reason behind the decline of literature, according to Albalawi, is the fact that there are many distractions in the students’ way like television or play games. Here he reaches a very important point in that the student spends a lot of time in these distracting games which are often done at the expense of reading:

The amount of time spent in watching TV is a series of problems, according to a recent New York article,” an average of four hours and 39 minutes consumed by every person every day. This massive amount of time equals reading minimum of twenty books per month (p.90).

The same holds true to the translation from one language into another. The translation of American fiction into other languages underwent a number of setbacks. “American literature was marginalized, to say the least at this time.: only 27 % of the books translated originated in the United States. Thirty years later, American literature had seized 1 % of the market almost the same figure as that of French literature, whose share has shrunk drastically” (Houe & Rossel, 1998, p.132).

Producing and publishing books underwent a negative stage in the first part of the twentieth century. It is left for the publishing census to show the downward line of selling books: “the activity of U.S.A. firms having at least \$ 5,000 in annual sales. This by itself trimmed the reported number of U.S. book publishers by over 35 per cent” (Altbach & Hoshino, 1995, p.348).

Poetry that has been the most attractive field for readers from all sorts of social and cultural classes is now losing its former appeal and popularity. The dwindling popularity of poetry is vividly discussed by one of its scholars in his argument that:

Poetry suffered between 1982 and 2002 with few people reading poetry or listening to live poetry readings. Creative writing is one of the few literary activities in which a higher percentage of people participated in 2002 than in 1982. Although nearly half of the Americans read literature in 2002, literary participation is clearly less popular than it used to be, including videogames, movies, and the internet (Weigart, 2008, p.54).

In Australia, the position of literary books is not different from the statistics above-mentioned. Poetry and drama share in this country the same figures above or much less: “Poetry accounted for only 2 % of books bought and less than 5 % of those borrowed; for drama the figures were less than 0.5 % respectively “(Milner,1996, p.123).

What does all the main argument lead us to conclude and infer? One fundamental issue comes to the fore here: literature definitely is not dead, nor will it be. However, its former and widespread popularity has lost much of its appeal for reasons pertaining to radical changes in society, culture, and modes of living. Literature is now just one of the fields that we read and enjoy when we have leisure or free time. Not many people and

specialists have the guts to carry on their customary judgments and appreciation of literature. However, creative writers whether poets, dramatists or novelists still persist in pursuing the craft of literature and some of them get the Nobel laureates. This by itself is evidence that the death of literature is not in the offing and its followers and admirers are everywhere.

### **Conclusion**

It has become evident by now that literature is a very controversial point about which there is no final and conclusive consent. Literature in all its various genres (poetry, drama, epic, prose fiction and literary criticism) has stirred heated arguments oscillating between great admiration and sharp castigations. The paper is divided into two sections: the first one is the introduction, a brief discussion of the historical significance of literature exemplified by *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Oedipus Rex*. These two works represent the heyday of classical literature in ancient Greece and the Mesopotamia successively. Indeed such works are concrete evidence of how great literature always finds a niche for itself despite frustrating circumstances pertaining to language and the uncommon way of presenting them.

Poetry as the glaring field and typical example of the best in literature engages a considerable amount in the arguments on this topic. Obviously, poetry has attracted the attention of statesmen, gentry and highbrows, including King James I and King Charles I. The rest of the introduction is about poetry, its manifestations and stipulations. The highly significant role of Sir Philip Sidney in his recommendations for writing typical poetry is discussed and clarified. The marginalization of poetry and poets in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries hinges on the popular view that poetry is not superior to prose and that there is no difference between the creative writer (poet) and the critic. In Jacobson's view, there is no difference between the poet and the innovative scholar (Pomorska et al., 2015, p.6).

The second part, much the longest, deals with the different aspects of the demise of literature as seen through Alvin Kernan's book bearing the striking title, *Death of Literature*. This is followed by another article of the same title and the same orientations.

The other section is about literature-philosophy dialectics. Since times immemorial, there have been conflicts and misconceptions between poets on the one hand and philosophers on the other. Socrates, Plato and Nietzsche are just examples selected randomly to show how the three have played a substantial role in depreciating literature and playing havoc in the lives and interests of men of letters and their literary writings. Plato and Nietzsche sought to demean and underrate poets' literary achievement.

The equally powerful factor that hindered the march of literature is technology

and the wide and accelerating vistas it opened in the last three decades of the current century. In terms of development and invention, this counterforce driving literature is manifested through sophisticated devices, inventions, and unprecedented findings and explorations.

The technological developments were coupled by parallel challenges in the field of literary criticism. Critics like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida present a totally different concept in writing literature and its guiding principles. Science and philosophy are at the roots of this trend. Gone are those times when the critic's task lies in highlighting the biographical sides of the writer or the moral and social dimensions of the literary work. The devices here are exclusively rational and scientific, and sometimes self-referential.

The last outcome of these factors has already been discussed. The only inference here is the receding process of buying and reading of literary works in terms of content which runs counter to what readers have taken for granted in their former experiences. Accordingly, reading literature is getting less and less and the number of readers is downward, thanks to the competing devices and strategies in our complex age.

The views and judgments presented above give the impression that literature with its long and glorious tradition is expected to keep its tempo and powerful effect on specialists and ordinary readers. However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has proved to be a counterforce against those predictions. The second section of this study is entirely devoted to showing and verifying the changes taking place in literature in terms of content and form. What is most outstanding here is the persistent calls for declaring the death or at least regression of literature for different reasons shown above. Such expectations that often sound gloomy might crystalize or not, depending on social, cultural and technological factors. The survival of literature, irrespective of its dwindling status, is a reminder that it remains the power that keeps the flame of culture and knowledge kindled.

### References

- Adams, J. (2007). *Interference patterns: Literary study, scientific knowledge, and disciplinary autonomy*. Lewisburg, Becknell UP.
- Aeon, A. (2010). *Last dialogues of Socrates*. Aeo Press, Nova Scolia.
- Albalawi, M. (2015). The decline of literature: A public perspective. *Advances in Language and Literature*, 6(3), 88-92.
- Altbach, P. G., & Hoshino, E. S. (eds.) (1995). *International book publishing: An encyclopedia*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Anderson, L. V. (2017). *Irvine –Boca Raton*. Brown: Walker Press.
- Baldick, C. (1996). *Criticism and literary theory to the present*. London: Routledge.

- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. Fontana: London.
- Burke, S. ((1992). *The death and return of the author: Criticism and subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Caputo, J. D. (ed.) (2021). *Deconstruction on a nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University.
- Diepeveen, L. (2003). *The difficulties of modernism*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Edmundson, M. (1995). *Literature against philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A defence of poetry*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Evans, R. (2020). *Literature and the theatre in Shakespeare's day*. New York: Chelsea House.
- Gallop, J. (2007). *The death of the author: Reading and writing in time*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Greco, A. N., Jim, M., & Wharton, R. (2014). *The book publishing industry*. Third Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Herman, J. (2016). *Jeff Herman's guide to book publishers: Editors & general agents. Who they are, what they want, how to win them over*. Novato, California: New World Library.
- Hill, S. (1990). *Shadow work' in Conversant essay, Contemporary poets on poetry*, ed. James McCorke. Detroit: Wayne UP.
- Houe, P., & Rossel, S. H. (eds.) (1998). *Images of America in Scandinavia*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Jastrow, M., & Clay, A. T. (eds.) (1920). *The epic of Gilgamesh: An old Babylonian version*. San Diego, California: Yale UP: The Book Tree.
- Jonson, J. (2007). *Why write poetry? Modern poets defending their art*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Fairleigh Dickinson UP.
- Kernan, A. (1990). *The death of literature*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP
- King James 1 & King Charles 1. (1899). *Kings' lyrics: Lyrical poems of the reign of King James 1 and King Charles 1*. Selected and arranged by Fitz Roy Carington, London: Duckworth &Co.
- Lanham, A. R. (Feb.1992). From book to screen: Four recent studies (Review of writing space. The computer hypertext and the history of writing by Jay David Bolter, disappearance once through the skylight culture and technology in twentieth century by O.B.Hanlison; The death of literature by Alvin Kernan.Teleology: Grammatology in the age of video by Gregory Ulmer, *College English* 52(2),pp. 199-206.
- Lucy, N. (2016). *A dictionary of postmodernism*, ed. by John Hartley.Chichster:Wiley Blackwell.
- Luchte, J. (ed.) (2010). *The peacock and the buffalo*. London: Continuum.
- McCffrey, S. (2001). *Prior to pleasing: The protosemantic and poetics*. Evanston:



- Northwestern UP.
- Milner, N. (1996). *Literature, culture, and society*. New York: New York UP.
- Misra, K. S. (1992). *The tragic hero through ages*. New Delhi: Northern book Centre.
- Norris, C. (2020). *Socrates at verse and other philosophical poems*. Anderson, South California: Parlour Press.
- Pomorska, K., Chodakowska, E., Mclean, H., & Vine, B. (eds.) (1890). *Trubetzskoy Majakowsky Jakobson*. Berlin: Mount de Gruyter
- Purves, A. C., & Nikes, O. (eds.) (1984). *Becoming readers in a complex society: Eighty third year of study of education, part 1*. Chicago: Chicago UP.
- Rose, J. (2018). *Reader's liberation*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Rosengarten, F. (2012). *Giacomo Leopardi's search for a common life through poetry*. Madison: Fair Leigh Dickinson, MP.
- Sharock, R. (ed.) (1958). *Selected poems of William Wordsworth*. Oxford: OUP.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. (1973). *An apology for poetry or the defence of poetry*, ed.. Geoffrey Shepherd, revised by R.W. Maslen. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Ulin, D. L. (2018). 'Is literature dead?' August, 27 (n.p.)
- Weigart, P. R. (ed.) (2008). *Teaching and education: 21 century issues and challenges*. Nova Science Publishers.