



Research Paper

Redefining Classics in the Digital Age: A Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Digitization, the fourth Industrial Revolution and the advent of Social Media platforms is transforming Creative Writing in English and the English language itself. Now any aspiring writer has an opportunity to become an author by publishing his written works on various social media platforms. This has resulted in redefining the meaning of what is considered to be Creative Writing.

Traditionally, a novel or a classic was defined or understood in a particular way. Stalwarts like T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee have actually written on and explored what makes a work a classic.

If we take a close look at what makes a classic, we find that it is part skill and part the emotions it evokes in a reader which eventually leads to its popularity. Though the latter is a matter of subjective judgement. Each person who reads a book has his/her own relationship with it and views it differently. In one way, we can say that the "invisible forces" of the market end up deciding what work will enter the exalted realms of being called a "classic".

However, out of the various works that we read on classics, one thing is clear, it definitely has an aspect of being "eternal" or "permanent." Something that stands the test of time and that people return to time and again to read and explore and find new meanings in. In the background of this, with the evolution of the medium into a digital space and introduction of e-books, digital publishing and even publishing on social media platforms – does the meaning of classic change? Will the "classic" definition or understanding of "classic" still stand the test of time? Or does the medium mar the message? The paper explores such questions and the idea of classics in today's digital context and compares it with what it has been defined traditionally.

Keywords: *Social media, Creative Writing, Impact, classics, novel*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Digitization, the fourth Industrial Revolution, coupled with the advent of Social Media platforms is dramatically transforming Creative Writing and the English language itself. Now any aspiring writer has an opportunity to become an author by publishing their written works on various social media platforms. This has resulted in redefining and reconsidering the basics as to what can be considered in the purview of "Creative Writing".

Koehler (2013) in his essay "Digitizing Craft: Creative Writing Studies and New Media: A Proposal" examines the engagement of the author with the technologies today and the impact it has on the process of creation itself, thus leading to the argument that the traditional understanding of a creative work and a novel, has undergone a sea change. Besides, it also acknowledges how the age-old criteria still stay relevant in the new era of technological advancement. In this backdrop, we take a look at the discussion on "What is a Classic?" This paper explores the idea put forward by esteemed researchers/authors in this field who have expressed, and attempted to contextualize 'classics' in the new technological human interface. Besides, we also trace the evolution of the novel, specifically fiction, on a social media platform, like Twitter, which now hosts a Twitter Fiction Festival, to understand whether the criteria of classics still holds true on the unique format that the platform presents.

The last decade has witnessed tremendous changes due to technological advancement resulting in scholars and economists terming it as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. There has been a paradigm shift in our way of communication with others and also the way we consume and assimilate information content wise. With the introduction of blogging platforms, innumerable apps and e-publishing, the process of reading as well as writing has undergone a sea change. The popular language for communication – English – is itself

metamorphosing into something entirely new. Internet slang, Emojis and appropriation of words are some trends driving this transformation. Another area that has evolved considerably due to this change is publishing. We now have e-books or self-publishing platforms co-existing with traditional book publishing. Moreover, all this has led to a dilution of the role that gatekeepers, like editors, play in the whole process. Add to this, the ease which blogging and social media platforms offer to their users to publish any form of fiction or creative writing has led to the birth of a new generation of authors. Not only that, there are as many formats now in the market as there are platforms. While some allow you to instantly publish your work but within a 280-character limit (like Twitter), there are others that allow you to e-publish a novel complete with music, special effects and voiceover!

In such a scenario where language changes constantly or “trending” content rules the roost, it is imperative to ascertain the way we define a classic. The question that comes to our mind in this scenario is that, “Can such works which fade from public memory daily, can really be called classics? Or is it now time to redefine the term to suit the new context?” Add to this, with platforms enforcing restrictions on the number of words that can be written on them such as Twitter, and people still attempting to write fiction on them can these be called classics? Or, finally, the trend of creative content becoming ‘viral’ online begets the question of what is a classic in the new digital age?

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Traditionally, a novel or a classic has been defined in a particular way. Stalwarts like T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetze have actually written on and explored what makes a work a classic. If we take a look at the other definitions of classics that researchers and scholars have examined - timelessness, eternal truths, and their ability to have a special relationship with the reader – are themes that underscore all these interpretations. Language is another aspect that takes center-stage in these arguments.

Given these, how do we deal with the speed with which language is transforming? Or for that matter, if people write fiction on a platform like Twitter, where there is a character restriction will it still be considered a classic. Another argument to consider at this point is that in today’s internet-driven world, once something is published online, it always remains in the virtual sphere and can be pulled up whenever one searches for it - pieces of works are becoming eternal just by way of their existence online – then in that case will they all be called classics?

Alternatively, it is also the case that there is so much content that is published daily across platforms that often a published work is consumed and forgotten as fast as it is published online. A subset of this trend is that of content becoming ‘viral’ online, or ‘trending.’ In such situations, can a piece of content be called a classic just by it merely being popular? Or for that matter consider the use of hashtags on Instagram that are equally important to build a narrative on the platform.

In an interesting experiment, Rick Moody, a famous scriptwriter wrote the first Twitter short story in 154 characters in 2009. The experiment raised several questions - how does one trace the plot, character and timeline in small snippets that could involve active participation by readers too? Would it firmly come within the scope of creative writing?

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

1. To study the traditional definition of a classic.
2. To assess the impact of social media platforms and e-publishing on creative writing.
3. To identify the definition of a classic in the digital age.

IV. TRADITIONAL DEFINITION OF A CLASSIC

What is a classic? T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetze explored this question in their lectures 47 years apart in the 20th century. Before we delve into their exploration of this timeless question, it would be interesting to see what constitutes a classic work. If we look closely, we will find that classic is one part skill and one part the emotions it evokes in a reader; though the latter is a matter of subjective judgment.

In her paper “What is a classic?: International Literary Criticism and the Classic Question,” Mukherjee (2010) observes that “classic” pertain to the literature that survives critical questioning. It is like the canonical work, a book that is read long even after it has been written for quite some time and still qualifies for a good read in the present time. Though Mukherjee (2010) explores the classics in context with literary criticism, the essay highlights an essential criteria of a classic, its timelessness. There are many factors that transform any written work into a classic. In his work discussing the ancient Chinese Book of Changes, Richard J. Smith puts forward a definition of a classic which is also corroborated in the work of Italian writer Calvino (2014) in his book “Why Read the Classics?” If we read these points closely, we sense that a classic is as much about the skill of the author as it is about a reader’s experience. For instance, he says, “A classic is a book which with each rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading”. He further says, “The classics are those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the

culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed.” This brings us to the next aspect of a classic, that they are the product of the socio-political and historical epoch in which they exist. As we know, an author is a by-product of his times and is as much influenced by it as he influences it. It is because the writer assimilates and comments on what he sees and thus puts down eternal truths, that they connect with the reader and leave such an imprint on their imagination, that it refuses to leave them. Even Eliot (1945) says that, “it is only by hindsight and in the historical perspective that a classic can be known as such”. This implies that often a classic is termed so by history and when it stands the test of time. Sometimes in their own era of existence they may not achieve the cult status that time ascribes to them.

Mukherjee (2010) states that, “a classic occurs when a civilization and a language and literature are mature and there is a community of taste and a common style”. This is supported by Elliot who also stated that “A mature literature has a historical trajectory behind it, the history of ‘an ordered though unconscious progress of a language to realize its own potentialities within its own limitations’”.

What these explain is that a classic not only takes in the sweep of the past, present and future but is steeped in the living language of its times. As we observed above, an author is a by-product of the times he lives in and by that same stretch also expresses himself in the language of his times. After all, if we start writing in Shakespearean English, other than for research purposes, no one will understand us. More importantly, that is not the “living language” of the current time.

Saint Beuve (1850) opines “What is a classic? And while exploring this question records that the word was first used in ancient Rome as “classici” to describe the citizens of the first class. Thus, the word as a mode of classification originally equated social and literary rank. In his 1858 lecture he offered several definitions of the classic. He describes it as among other things as something that constantly renews itself; is a living entity; is new and ancient in equal measures.”

This throws an interesting mix into the equation of a classic. It characterizes it as a living entity that stays ever relevant. That means that it is as much a contemporary of the modern literature as it was in its own time with each new generation ascribing a new interpretation and meaning to it.

V. ADVENT OF THE INTERNET AND E-PUBLISHING

The Internet, a complex and revolutionary invention, came into being in 1965. Today, it has become the mainstay of modern life. The term e-publishing was introduced by William Dijkhuis in 1977 and the first e-publication was plain text emails (Velmurugan&Natarajan, 2015). Through the e-platform, “books, short stories, collections and works of non-fiction” can be published (Velmurugan&Natarajan, 2015).

The new technologies that have developed have impacted the art of creating or composing itself. Koehler (2013), in his paper “Digitizing Craft: Creative Writing Studies and New Media: A Proposal,” discussed the impact of the digital technologies on composing. With e-publishing, hypertext and now new media, multimedia and non-linear narratives have come into fashion. Koehler while tracing the emergence of 2.0 technologies, observes how creative writers rode the wave of technological advancement and how “digital technologies redefine the boundaries we draw around fiction, poetry and non-fiction” (Koehler, 2013). Technologies are redefining genres as well.

Add to this social media platforms and blogging sites, and you have new form of authorship altogether. Let us take an example. If we look at Instagram, one of the handles on it ran a campaign called “Terribly Tiny Tales.” This was a work of fiction by readers, where they submitted their new format of stories, rightly called tiny, in the form of text messages or poetry or prose, and editors selected the best ones to feature on the handle. They were expressed in the new “English language” of today and ran for a short period of time becoming immensely popular across platforms including Facebook, so people could read it where they wanted. In such a case, how do we distinguish which piece of work is a classic?

Lets take the example of another social media platform, Twitter, a microbloggingplatform which allows only 280 characters for people to write in. It was initially created for people to post their statuses but has now become a popular tool for narratives. In their essay “Character Development,” Franklin &Maayan (2014), explore this interesting phenomena. They write about the first fiction festival held by the site. Popular and well-known authors participated in it. They ‘tweeted’ their stories which readers could read and ‘retweet’. Though it did not get the best traction when it was introduced, today, writers around the world produce original work on it (Franklin &Maayan, 2014). However, the essayists raise the question as to whether the works being produced on the platform can come under the purview of literature as we know it.

Now, imagine for a moment that your favorite author is to tweet his or her book, as amply explained in the essay, some of us will have to stay up way past midnight just to be in the same time zone to catch every installment. Also, since tweets are posted one at a time, it breaks one’s reading experience since unless re-tweeted in one go, or collected on an external platform, you cannot really find all the tweets together. Further, readers can comment and retweet on the author’s work. But the question is will the retweets exert the same impact as the original composition. An important aspect of reading is getting immersed in the book, with a tweet

how would it be possible? Or for that matter, with hundreds or thousands of tweets being posted everyday, and some becoming trending for the day, week or month, how will you find your “classic”? How does a disappearing piece of work become timeless or be re-read or reinterpreted in every new era, as a classic is meant to be? As Franklin & Maayan (2014) observe with ample examples, that it could be that Twitter is more a way of experimenting with a platform and it mostly lends itself to be a marketing tool for an author’s actual book.

Social media platforms are also transforming the English Language as we know it. We are in midst of what may be the most exciting times of evolution in a language. Due to the Internet and platforms, new forms of language are emerging as fast as they are going out of fashion. The need to communicate with speed has resulted in the breakdown of grammar rules and the emergence of a new form, which is an amalgamation of Emojis, Internet slang and abbreviations. In fact there are authors writing today who use the new language in their works. The question is will these trends stand the test of time? Is it possible to identify a classic whose language may be incomprehensible after a few decades? Though the very identity of a classic says yes, only time will tell if that happens so.

VI. THE STANDARDS OF A NEW CLASSIC - CONCLUSION

In his lecture Eliot (1945) observed, “There is no classic in English”. Mukherjee (2010) also writes that English is a living language with various vagaries and possibly the greatest capacity of changing yet remaining itself.

The classics are always a reflection of their times with an element of immortality. The works produced in current times reflect the socio-political and technological advancements of this epoch. The very art of composing has been transformed due to the new technologies and the author is not isolated from that.

As discussed above, a classic stimulates the reader and if the reader is to be found online on different platforms then that is where the writer will also be. Therefore, just as we are witnessing the evolution of a new language, maybe it is the time to see the evolution of the classics. After all eternal truths can be expressed in 280-characters and a determined fan of a work will find the published work online if he/she really wants to.

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