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## **Exploring Phenomenology in Literary Analysis: A Novel Theoretical Framework**

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### *Abstract*

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach based on an understanding of subjective experience, offering a unique lens for exploring literary works. Synthesis of phenomenology and literary analysis reveal a complex relationship between human experience and creative expression. Phenomenology, a philosophical framework grounded in the study of human experience, offers a unique lens for understanding and interpreting literature. This article examines the theoretical foundations of phenomenology and its application in literary analysis, presenting in-depth analysis and case studies that demonstrate the wealth of insight it brings to the field of literary studies. Phenomenology, seeking to understand human experience and its underlying structure, has emerged as a valuable lens for analyzing literary works. Through a detailed literature review, discussion of theoretical frameworks, and examination of case studies, this article explores how phenomenology enhances our understanding of literary texts, enriches their interpretation, and explores the complex interactions between readers and texts.

**Keywords:** Literary Analysis, Interpretation, Phenomenology, Language, Experience.

### **Introduction**

Literature serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring the complexities of human experience, emotion, and perception. Phenomenology, originating in Edmund Husserl's seminal work "Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy" (1929) and subsequently advanced by thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, constitutes a profound philosophical methodology. This approach, aimed at comprehensively elucidating the subjective essence of experiences, establishes a robust framework for understanding human perception and consciousness. In essence, phenomenology serves as a

rigorous philosophy of experience, delving into the intricacies of the nature of human subjective encounters. (Heidegger 17-24). Its focus on understanding the subjective and lived experience of the individual finds a natural connection to the complex literary world. As narratives that reflect human experience, literature has the potential to be deeply explored and understood through the lens of phenomenology. By applying theoretical framework of phenomenology with an emphasis laid on Merleau Ponty's insights on literature and language based on his magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), this article is an attempt to discuss its application in literary studies. By examining the nature of lived experience, phenomenology provides a lens for analyzing complex aspects of literary texts that are often avoided in conventional analysis. In the book *Oneself Another*, Paul Ricoeur discusses the work on narrative identity and interpretation which highlights the intertwining of phenomenological understanding and hermeneutics (17-25). The literary critic, Maurice Natanson in his book *The Erotic Bird - Phenomenology in Literature* advocated the application of phenomenological reduction to literature, arguing that it reveals the "world" of literary texts (Natanson 67).

Moreover, contemporary scholars, exemplified by David Woodruff Smith, have made notable contributions. In his essay "Consciousness with Reflexive Content," Smith emphasizes the significance of inner awareness in any mental act. He posits that phenomenology's objective is "to analyze (describe, interpret, analyze) our own familiar forms of conscious experience – as we experience them from our own-first person perspective within the horizon of our familiar circumstances" (94). This perspective proves relevant to literary analysis, particularly in the conscious act of reading. As one encounters phenomena in immediate consciousness, it becomes a catalyst for recalling, recounting, describing, interpreting, and analyzing the lived experience, thus enriching the phenomenological approach to literary engagement. (94)

Merleau Ponty's emphasis on bodily perception is reflected in the way characters and readers interact with the world of the text (175). According to Drew Leder and Vivian Sobchack who extended this notion, argued that literature can evoke embodied experience, thereby encouraging deeper engagement with the text (Leder 13, 23, Sobchack 124, 228-30). These perspectives highlight the ability of phenomenology to unravel the complex layers of literary meaning.

To emphasize the above submission, in the first part I shall make an attempt to discuss 'what is literature?' and in the second part I make an attempt on how literature is available to human consciousness through language by drawing on the insights of Merleau Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

The trajectory of literary theory has witnessed a significant diversion over time beginning from "Literary Theory" (Eagleton 48-56) where the essence of literature was explicitly posited and

articulated for the first time. Many theorists and later philosophies have contributed to the decentering of the essence of literature, notably by the structuralists and later phenomenologists like Jean Paul Sartre (3-9, 23) and Jacques Derrida (33-75).

The comprehensive examination of Jacques Derrida's phenomenology constitutes a focal point in the 1995 volume titled "Derrida and Phenomenology." This anthology, meticulously edited by William R. McKenna and Joseph Claude Evans, comprises a collection of scholarly essays delving into Derrida's nuanced engagement with phenomenological perspectives. The discourses within this seminal work illuminate Derrida's distinctive phenomenological framework, offering a thorough exploration that contributes to a nuanced understanding of his philosophical contributions. The collaborative efforts of McKenna and Evans result in a cohesive and insightful scholarly resource, providing readers with an enriched comprehension of Derrida's complex interplay with phenomenology. It is *prima-facie* important to understand this shift to comprehensively understand literary analysis established on phenomenological framework. The impact of this decentering is seen in the wide range of answers regarding what constitutes literature including texts, genres, practices and the defining features that characterize it. This exploration, which we aspire to undertake, leverages Jacques Derrida's insights as a foundational backdrop. Drawing on his perspective, we aim to comprehend and reevaluate the intrinsic nature of literature. Our scholarly endeavor seeks to unravel the intricate interplay between Derrida's philosophy and the essence of literary discourse. In the interview titled "This Strange Institution called Literature," conducted in 1989 and published with that title, Jacques Derrida explores his relationship with literature. He characterizes literature as a "strange institution" that allows one to express everything in every way. Derrida raises questions about the paradoxical nature of literature, questioning whether its power to say anything is based on severing ties with reference and reality. While his response is ambivalent, he leans towards rejecting the idea that literature's freedom is rooted in a complete detachment from reality (33-39).

Derrida initiates the discussion by focusing on the fictionality of literature. He argues that literature is not solely a matter of explicit avowals of fictionality or implied conventions within the text. Instead, he proposes that literature is a fictive institution that breaks free from the rules distinguishing nature, history, and conventional law. It erases boundaries and institutionalizes the absence of institutionality, tending to overflow existing institutions (44).

The essence of literature, according to Derrida, lies in its responsibility to preserve the eternal possibility of expressing any viewpoint, regardless of how sacrosanct it may seem at a given time. Derrida contends that this freedom is justified by the necessity of the principle that ensures it can be said. The value of this principle, he argues, lies in the recognition that we

cannot predict which expression of thought may profoundly matter in the future, necessitating the safeguarding of the space where such unknown thoughts can be expressed.

The crucial question in this context is whether literature can be characterized solely by the freedom to say everything. Derrida implies that while this freedom is a characteristic of literature, there must be an independent criterion for recognizing literature, ensuring that the privilege to say anything is not abused. The defining criterion of literature, according to Derrida, remains an open question.

Later Derrida introduces the distinction between 'transcendent' and 'nontranscendent' reading as a criterion for literariness. He emphasizes that literarity is not an intrinsic property of the text or a subjective decision of the reader but results from the relationship between the text and the reader. Derrida locates literariness beyond the subjective-objective dichotomy, adopting a phenomenological framework temporarily (44).

According to Derrida, literariness is activated by the reader through a nontranscendent reading, where attention remains on the signifier rather than moving towards the referent. He clarifies that nontranscendent reading is not merely the suspension of reference but the suspension of the thetic relation to meaning or referent. This involves recognizing the 'other' of language as an effect of language, challenging the assumed primacy of consciousness in providing certainty of cognition (46).

Despite the impossibility of a completely nontranscendent reading, Derrida argues that literarity is not conterminous with no transcendence. Literarity, he contends, involves a complex play of foldings where the moment of transcendence is not merely arrested but complicated or folded. He rejects the notion of literarity as an excess of language over a norm, highlighting the absence of a ground to derive such a norm.

He suggests that literarity is revealed when, through a unique negotiation, a text neither annuls meaning nor reference but does something with the resistance to transcendent reading. Defining literarity becomes challenging due to the assumptions regarding the appropriate degree of linguisticity and the representation of truth in language. Literature problematizes the ability of language to render itself transparent and present things immediately, making it difficult to define literarity through essentialist notions of truth and essence. Despite the challenges, Derrida asserts that understanding what literature does and what we do with it must be possible, albeit metaphorically, without succumbing to essentialist definitions of literarity (44-48).

Thus, the argument above substantiates that literature is a unique event, a journey from the signifier to the referent, wherein the materiality of each layer enhances the perception of the next. Literary texts capture the uniqueness of reality by countering the iterability of signs, turning them from types to tokens or organizing them into tokens. Unlike non-literary discourse

that captures the essence of things, literature aims to express the being of things, their uniqueness. This is achieved by thickening the materiality of the signifier to capture the unique aspect of the referent that eludes normal referentiality.

In non-literary discourse, signs have iterability and denote universals, referring to the essence of things. Literary discourse, in contrast, neutralizes iterability, penetrating the generality of language to express the being of things. Literature does not turn away from life but apprehends its being, emphasizing the ontological dimension over the metaphysical description of non-literary discourse. Literature reveals the singularity of the whole text as a non-iterable sign, resisting categorization.

Literature does not escape reality but strives to perceive its being, using various devices to reach the core of uniqueness through a bracketing of structural aspects. Literature contrasts with history, stating that history seeks to understand events as members of a series, while literature makes us aware of their core uniqueness. The concluding insight is that the delight of literature, akin to art, love, and mystical experiences, lies in perceiving the truth of being.

Phenomenology assumes that consciousness is intentional and always focused on objects. This deliberate structure is consistent with the way literary characters interact with its world. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the 'living body' and Heidegger's concept of 'Dasein' analyze how the experiences of the characters relate to the embodied beings and the contexts in which they live their lives provide tools for the research. These frameworks guide the study of character perceptions, emotions, and motivations in literary texts. The core of phenomenology aims to elucidate how individuals perceive and interpret the world around them. This theoretical framework provides a solid foundation for literary analysis, as both literature and phenomenology deal with human experience, emotions, and consciousness. The application of phenomenology to literature requires addressing the subjective experiences of characters, the emotions they evoke in readers, and the complex interactions between texts and readers. At its core, phenomenology assumes that our understanding of the world is constructed through lived experience. Applying this framework to literature examines how readers' interpretations are shaped by their own experiences, prejudices, and feelings. By examining the interplay between the text and the reader's consciousness, phenomenology opens rich avenues for revealing hidden meanings and dynamics of interpretation.

Phenomenology offers a new perspective on literary analysis by focusing on the reader's engagement with the text. For example, when analyzing a character's emotions, the phenomenological approach looks at the reader's empathic responses and how the reader projects his or her experiences onto the character. This interaction between text and reader

creates a dynamic and immersive reading experience that allows deeper exploration of themes, symbolism and the human condition within literary works.

## **Discussion**

The exploration of literature as a discipline poses fundamental questions about the nature of literature, its theories, and methods. Applying a ready-made theory to literature is deemed impossible due to the inherent nature of literature. Literature is conceptualized as “a complex event, which begins with the aim of the author to create a text that would compel a particular perspective and terminates in the success of the reader in appropriating that text in a certain mode” (Sayeed 28). Similar to language, literature exists solely within the context of the speech situation and lacks material form outside of it (Sayeed 13-14, 21).

This understanding prompts an inquiry into the essence of literature. Attempting to authenticate literature with data detached from it leads to a realization that language, as a referential tool, possesses arbitrary references established through conventions and teachings. Human beings, inherently relational entities, rely on language as a medium for connection in their constant engagement with the world. Literature, then, emerges from the unique capacity for language that humans possess, a capacity distinct from that of other beings.

Examining the conventional acquisition of language reveals an arbitrary aspect that often goes unnoticed until language is viewed not as a structural component but as an ongoing, dynamic entity in constant use. Delving into the philosophical concept of intentionality, it becomes evident that the use of language is not merely a habitual act but a conscious, situational expression. Literature, as a discipline, originates from the recognition that every human possesses the capacity for language. The inquiry into the meaning of this language capacity, unique to humans, unfolds as an exploration of the human use of language as an attribute intrinsically tied to being in the world.

Merleau-Ponty's seminal work, "Phenomenology of Perception" (202-208), disrupts traditional viewpoints by asserting that readers grasp a text through intricate interplays of rhythms, gestures, and agency. This paradigmatic shift reconfigures the reader's position, conceptualizing the text as a transformative lens that shapes one's perception and interaction with the world. Consequently, it initiates a profound reassessment of interpretative dynamics. In addressing the reader's pivotal role, Merleau-Ponty unequivocally declares, "it is he who gives to words and sentences their meaning" (207). Language, the world, and the body, according to him, are not mere objects but capacities for action, integral to our existence as dynamic systems. He introduces the concept of language as an open system, capable of new expressions, emphasizing the interplay between established meanings and emerging ones through "institution" and "expression." Merleau-Ponty defines expression as the articulation of

something new, mediated by language and involving effort, contrary to expressing inner thoughts directly. Emotion is intricately linked with language, playing a central role in its articulation and contributing to inter-subjective understanding. The ambiguity observed in the body is mirrored in language through institution and expression. Despite its complexity, language, from a phenomenological standpoint, is primarily speech, intimately connected with the self (Merleau-Ponty 202-32).

Phenomenology facilitates a nuanced analysis of characters by revealing their inner dialogue, emotions, and lived experiences. This approach allows us to understand characters beyond their actions and uncover the underlying motivations and complexities that shape their behavior. Phenomenology provides a platform for examining the emotional landscapes depicted in the literature. Literary writing often blurs the line between perception and reality. Phenomenology explores how character perceptions shape our understanding of the world, and how those perceptions evolve as the story progresses. The relevance of phenomenology in literary analysis lies in its ability to bridge the gap between the fictional world and the lived experience of the reader. It encourages readers to actively engage with the text and construct meaning through their own interpretation. Because of its emphasis on subjectivity and empathy, phenomenology facilitates exploration of the emotions of its characters, making literature a conduit for sharing human experiences. The relevance of phenomenology in literary analysis is demonstrated by its ability to bridge the gap between the literary text and the reader's experiential world, thus challenging traditional approaches that tend to prioritize author intent and structural analysis. Instead, phenomenology encourages a holistic inquiry that takes into account the lived experience, emotions, and cultural context of the reader, thereby enriching our understanding of the complex web of literature.

Phenomenological reduction enables an exploration of Jay Gatsby's consciousness, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the emotions underlying his motivations, desires, and extravagant lifestyle. Within the living body framework, characters' experiences, such as the symbolic significance of the green light covering the bay, closely relate to Gatsby's perceptions and aspirations (Fitzgerald 107). Further, exemplifying the practical application of phenomenology in literary analysis, Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" undergoes a phenomenological analysis of the character Scout Finch's experiences of prejudice and innocence. This analysis helps grasp the emotional depth of her journey, shedding light on how readers navigate their own life challenges (31-33). Examining readers' emotional responses to Scout's experiences transforms the text into a platform for shared human experiences. In addition to this, Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," where a phenomenological analysis reveals how readers

engage on a deep emotional level with Gregor Samsa's transformation (39, 47), drawing on their own experiences of alienation and existential questioning.

### **Case Studies**

Case Study 1: *The Metamorphosis* (Kafka 39, 47): Applying phenomenology to this iconic work allows us to focus on the transformation of the hero, Gregor Samsa as a metaphor for the alienation and separation experienced by modern man. The reader's emotional response reflects Gregor's conflict and prompts a deeper understanding of existential issues.

Case Study 2: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf 58, 121): *A Phenomenological Analysis* reveals the inner workings of the characters' thoughts and provides insight into their consciousness and perceptions. Exploring the streams of consciousness of the characters allows the reader to understand the intricacies of the human thought process.

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: Applying phenomenology to the transformation of Gregor Samsa reveals the layers of alienation and isolation he experiences. As we explore his embodied being and self-awareness, we get a glimpse of his shifting identity. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: Phenomenology reveals the nuances of consciousness as Clarissa Dalloway goes about her day. A deeper understanding of her personality emerges by analyzing her sensory perceptions, inner monologues, and the interplay of memories and present experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Phenomenology explores the subjective nature of literary texts and serves as a powerful tool for enriching analysis by revealing character consciousness, the emotional landscape, and the complex interplay between perception and reality works. The synthesis of phenomenology and literary analysis highlights the deep connection between human experience and creative expression, providing readers and scholars with a deeper appreciation of the intricate weaves that authors weave into their works. As literature continues to reveal the complexities of human existence, phenomenology offers insightful ways to navigate its depths. The application of phenomenology to literary analysis deepens our understanding of the complex relationship between literature and human experience. By examining the emotions of characters, the responses of readers, and the interplay between text and consciousness, phenomenology provides a valuable framework for interpreting and appreciating literary works on a deeper level. As literature continues to shape our understanding of the human condition, phenomenology provides powerful tools to unlock hidden layers of its meaning and significance. Phenomenology provides a powerful tool for delving into the depths of literary works and revealing levels of meaning that may be missed by conventional analysis. By considering the complexities of human experience and perception, phenomenology enriches interpretations, fosters deeper engagement with texts, and offers new perspectives on the



symbiotic relationship between literature and readers. As scholars and enthusiasts continue to explore the mysteries of literary narratives, the relevance of phenomenology in literary analysis remains a fascinating approach to research.

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