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## **Literature as a Diagnosis of the Times —A Suggestion on How to Handle Literature in European Studies**

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### **Abstract**

Literature is a vital expression of human beings. As such, it reveals the essential structure of our existence, our *Sein*. In this paper, I examine how we can understand the meaning of a literary text both in its unique individuality and in its interwovenness with the epoch. Against the literary relativism, I argue that even creative reading requires some kind of objective standard that guides the reader through the labyrinth of literary texts. I hereby discuss the crucial question as to where we can derive such an objective standard from. I think the answer lies in the Literary Component Analysis (LCA). To substantiate this claim, I first introduce the fundamental premises of the LCA, and then interpret three different kinds of literary works to illustrate this theory.

**Keywords:** Literary Component Analysis; Wolfgang Herrndorf; Kim Ji-ha

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## Literature as a Diagnosis of the Times —A Suggestion on How to Handle Literature in European Studies

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Current European Studies tend to place their emphasis on European politics or economics, rather than on literary works. This trend is largely attributable to the growing need of Europeans experts on the job market. Many universities try to meet this demand by equipping students with the entrepreneurial knowledge, offering multitudes of courses in European politics and economics. Yet, this usually happens at the expense of literary courses, since the number of courses they can provide is limited. As literary scholars, we cannot be content with this trend.

The study of literature is indispensable, for every literary work is a vital expression of human beings. It reveals the essential structure of our existence, or in German: our *Sein*. Hence, a proper understanding of literature leads to a better understanding of ourselves and what it means to be a human being in a particular time and place. Students will develop a much more self-conscious and robust personality, if they engage with literature intensively. Moreover, since every concrete literary work is closely linked to the history of mankind, literary studies will help young students find their own place in it. In this sense, I would like to summarize my vision for literary education as “intellectual orientation in the world”.

My notion of literary study is primarily inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder, a German scholar of the 18th century. He tried to examine each literary work under two distinct, but intertwined aspects, namely its individuality and historicity. This is because he believed that a literary work owes its existence not only to the creativity of a particular author, but also to the historical epoch to which it belongs (Gutzen, Oellers, & Petersen, 1981; p.147). Thus, he claimed that to interpret literature is to understand it both in its unique individuality and in its interwovenness

with the epoch.

Up to this point, I suppose that most of my colleagues would deem my ideal of literary interpretation as admirable. But, the crucial question is yet to be answered: How can this goal be achieved? Some may raise skeptical voices and say that almost every ambitious theory of hermeneutic - ranging from Intellectual History, New Criticism, Structuralism to Marxism - has tried to offer a systematic approach to literary analysis, but failed eventually. While seemed promising at first, they turned out to be not as fruitful as hoped. Disappointed with earlier theories, the post-structuralists then came to the conclusion that the objective meaning of a literary work does not exist at all. Or even if it were to exist, it cannot be found, they say.

In fact, for many, the effort to make out an objective meaning of a literary piece has become not only impossible, but also undesirable and unfashionable. Scholars like Christine Lubkoll (1990) argue that you ought to 'play' with the piece in such a way that you create your own meaning of the piece. She holds that reading should no longer be a one-sided reception, but rather a process of mutual exchange between the text and its reader. In its essence, this kind of approach corresponds to the widespread belief in our democratic society: Everyone is entitled to his or her own interpretation; everyone is equally qualified to make out some personal meaning from the text. This approach may have its own merits. However, the other side of the coin is an extreme relativism, which threatens to invalidate every attempt to establish a binding interpretation. In the face of this relativism which has become pervasive among contemporary scholars, the Herderian ideal of literary studies seems to be at stake, more than ever.

Against this trend, I argue that even creative reading requires some kind of *objective* standard that can guide the reader through the labyrinth of literary texts. To justify this claim, I first want to elucidate my notion of literature. My thesis is that literature is a verbal expression of the *care-structure*. The concept of care-structure originally stems from Martin Heidegger, who defines in his book *Being and Time* 'care' as 'Being-ahead-of-oneself-Being-already-in-(the-world) as Being-alongside

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(entities encountered within-the-world).’ – or in German: ‘*Sich-vorweg-schon-sein-in-(der-Welt) als Sein-bei (innerweltlich begegnendem Seienden)*’.

As for our present topic, it suffices to understand the main idea of the Heideggerian notion. Heidegger asserts that, when penetrated to its core, the structure of human beings manifests itself as a care-structure. ‘Care’ in this context does not simply mean our daily concerns about money, housing, food or clothing, though they could be expressions of care as well. Rather, Heidegger understands care primarily as the possibility to actualize a certain vision of future, while still being in the present. As Heidegger puts it, care is being ahead of itself, while being already in the new state of Being, and being with the current one (Heidegger, 1993, p.191; my translation). Thus, a human being with care-structure means nothing but a being that possesses a certain potentiality at the present time and insists on its actualization in the near future.

Now, I would like to introduce a literary theory based on this conception of care. It is the ‘Literary Component Analysis’, or LCA, proposed by Walter Falk, a German professor of literature. He holds that the Heideggerian care-structure could be divided into three components: the Actual, Potential and Resultant Component. The first component, or the Actual Component, designates the already existing reality, in which human beings find themselves. The second component, or the Potential Component, stands for the possibility to alter the already existing reality; but this possibility has not yet been realized, thus calling for its realization. Then, the third component, or the Resultant Component, emerges from the confrontation of the two former components, i.e. of the already existing reality and the possibility to alter it. As such, the Resultant Component is the outcome of an encounter between two opposing forces; an outcome which now represents a genuinely new reality that has never been before.

Now, Falk says that these three components are inherent in every literary work. I suggest taking these components as the *objective* guide in the literary analysis. I would even go so far as to say that, when you

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analyze each literary work by identifying these three components, you will soon experience a ‘hermeneutic wonder’. This approach sheds light onto many dark spots of literary works that otherwise would have been remained largely opaque.

Let me summarize the characteristics of the three components once again.

**The Actual Component (=AC)** represents the current reality, in which someone or something finds itself. It is a fixed reality, of which formation has already come to an end.

**The Potential Component (=PC)** stands for the will or power to change the AC. As such, it entails the potential power to innovate the already existing reality. The potentiality PC presents urges to be materialized.

**The Resultant Component (=RC)** is the outcome of the encounter of the AC and the PC. As such, it always represents a new situation or reality; a reality that never has been before in the same quality.

Due to the limits of space, I cannot explain the theory in a more detailed way. But the Literary Component Analysis is so simple and intuitive that it can be applied even without much detailed explanation. To illustrate the LCA, I will analyze three concrete literary works. I thereby wish to demonstrate that the LCA genuinely keeps its promise as a literary theory, empowering us to grasp a literary text both in the unique individuality and its epochal context.

For my exemplary analysis, I have chosen three different works: a short story and a novel by the German author Wolfgang Herrndorf and a poem by the Korean poet Kim Ji-ha. Let us turn to the German author first. Born in 1965 in Hamburg, Herrndorf was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor in February 2010. Soon after, he published his digital diary where he recounts his life with the fatal disease. Unfortunately, he passed

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away on August 23, 2013 – ending his life by suicide. I selected his story partly in remembrance of him, but mostly because of its literary quality and practical benefits.

*On This Side of Van Allen Belt* is our first example, written in 2007. There we get to know two protagonists whose names remain unknown to the reader. One is a precocious boy about 12 years old, who usually roams alone around the streets. The other is a man in his mid-thirties, recently abandoned by his girlfriend. Ever since the break-up, he lives a life that seems to be void of any meaning. Despite their age difference, the two become friends, and the older one invites the other to his house. The boy follows him into a dilapidated house in a deserted area, near the home of the man. There, the host invites his young companion to alcoholic drinks and drugs; certainly inappropriate offers to a minor. Yet surprisingly, the boy shows no signs of perplexity; in fact, he is already familiar with such things. It turns out that his abnormal pseudo-maturity is due to his young, distracted mother who does not care much for him. But thanks to his ambitions, he manages to stay confident. He aspires to become an astronaut so that he can fly to the moon someday. He has a huge admiration for the success of moon-landing by NASA on July 21, 1969 and is very curious about the space technology. Not surprisingly, Niel Amstrong is one of his greatest heroes. The hope of becoming an astronaut makes him feel proud of himself although he suffers from deprivation of motherly love.

However, it does not take long before his most cherished hope is mercilessly crushed: his new friend confronts him with the ‘truth’ about the NASA’s project of the manned landing on the moon: In reality, the friend contends, it was a fake event, planned by the US government to secure the dominance in its competition with the Soviet Union during the Cold War! The scene filmed allegedly on the moon was actually staged in a Hollywood movie studio. First, the boy vehemently denies this as a conspiracy theory, but soon, the man’s explanation of what the Van Allen Belts are like defeats his protest totally. The Van Allen radiation belts are doughnut-shaped zones encircling the Earth; they consist of highly energetic charged particles, which were trapped at high

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altitudes in the magnetic field of Earth. The belt's function is to protect the earth from harmful radiations coming away from the sun. A manned spacecraft cannot fly across and beyond this belt without exposing the crew to dangers leading eventually to death. It is evident, says the boy's friend, that in the 1960s, the technique was not sufficiently developed to send a man to the moon. This scientific explanation appears to be so convincing and irresistible to the young future-astronaut that it crushes his dreams utterly. The lonely young adult could have become a good friend to the equally lonesome boy. But, his exposure of the lies about the NASA-project – under the guise of revealing the 'truth' – exerts severely damaging impacts on the boy. His only and greatest dream is now destroyed; he has lost the meaning of his life and hopes for the future. Here, we see that the man has nothing but destructive influences on the boy.

Now, let us apply the LCA to this short story. The Actual Component lies in the desolate situation of the both protagonists at the beginning of the story. Both men are suffering from a disturbed relationship at home. Then, we can observe that the Potential Component is represented by the hope of the boy to become an astronaut in future. The thought of becoming a successful astronaut like Armstrong occupies the boy in everyday life. Yet, unlike him, the adult man has no hope at all. His life is full of sheer ennui and meaninglessness. While the boy has both AC and PC in himself, the older man incorporates solely the Actual Component.

It is hereby important to notice that the Potential Component (=the boy's hope) is merely a response to the Actual Component; had the boy enjoyed his mother's love sufficiently, he might not have to cling excessively to his hope of flying beyond the earth someday. The AC, more strongly represented by the man, attacks the PC and prevents it from being fulfilled; it eventually destroys the boy's only hope. The destroyed hope of the boy is the Resultant Component.

AC: Dysfunctional human relationships, resulting in a loss of meaningful life;

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PC: A complementing hope to become a meaningful person;

RC: Destroyed hope.

Looking at the formula above, one might get the impression that it does not say much: How do we deduce further insights from here? Well, the key lies in the mutual relationships among the three components. To be specific, the LCA states that there are two possible modes of the AC and the PC: it is either aggressive-expanding or protective-enveloping. Roughly, we could say that the aggressive-expanding components correspond to the yang(陽)-quality, whereas protective-enveloping ones correspond to the yin(陰)-quality. Now applied to our short story, it becomes manifest that the story is pervaded with an AC that is aggressive and expanding, since the man attacks the boy's dearest hopes. Accordingly, the PC of the story can be characterized as protective, since it passively responds to the attack from the reality by enduring it. As such, this PC exhibits some traits of the yin-quality.

Furthermore, the LCA asserts that the epoch itself to which the literary piece belongs alternates between two different modes. Like the PCs of the individual works, the epoch exhibits either an aggressive and expanding character or a protective and enveloping character (for the sake of simplicity, I henceforth designate them as 'Yin'- and 'Yang'-character respectively, as the subtle differences between these pairs of terms are largely negligible in the current context). Through long-term analysis, the LCA has discovered that each yang or yin epoch endures approximately from 30 to 50 years each. During a yin-epoch, only literary pieces whose PC is of yin-quality appear, and during a yang-epoch, only yang-quality works do. Accordingly, the epoch to which our short story belongs must be a yin-epoch, as the PC of the story has yin-traits.

The researchers of the LCA found that the yin-epoch in which Herrendorf's short story was written lasted approximately from 1980 to 2010 worldwide. According to them, an epoch is always a system of meanings, simultaneously covering almost every culture of the globe.



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In our concerning epoch, people confront various destructive powers that cause their soul to become 'homeless'. For this reason, this epoch is named "Malicious Epoch" (Malum=evil). Within this epochal system of meanings, the possibility to overcome the destructive powers against one's spiritual 'home' appears to have predominantly motherly and protective characteristics. The poem *The Life*, written in the early 1980s by the Korean writer Kim Ji-ha, could be a paradigmatic testimony to this claim. Kim was an internationally acclaimed resistance fighter against the South Korean dictatorship

The life.

Life -

A strip of hope.

A fall into the dark abyss, holding yet at a spot,

A strip of hope.

Neither can I turn away from the spot,

Nor am I able to affirm it.

My existence's last place:

I cannot fall down unconsciously,

Nor can I quietly jump out of resignation.

A child in her lap,

The mother weeps.

The sorrow of life.

A strip of hope. (my translation)

This poem, pervaded with the image of a weeping mother, unmistakably marks the yin-type Malicious Epoch. It stands out from earlier poems by the same author that predominantly assumed a defiant and aggressive character towards then Korean dictatorial regime. Hence, *The Life* can be seen as an exemplary work that reveals the nature of the Malicious

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Epoch: an epoch in which the comforting and protecting, i.e., motherly characteristics play a significant role. Again, this epochal trend is not locally restricted only to the Korean literature, rather, it is of a global scale.

In the light of this exemplary poem, we can now understand as to why the hope of the young boy in the short story of Herrndorf was destined to be destroyed. There, we do not find any protective ‘feminine’ power. Far from it, the two women, mother of the boy and the girlfriend of the man, are respectively *femmes fatales* that destroy the human relationships at home. It is no longer surprising that this story reaches an impasse.

Keeping the above mentioned formulas in mind, let us now proceed to an analysis of the next literary work by Wolfgang Herrndorf *Tschick*, published in 2010. The plot can be briefly summarized as follows: Again, we meet two young heroes. Maik Klingenberg, a 14 year-old boy, is from a wealthy but dysfunctional family. The story takes place in a middle school located in Hellersdorf, a suburb area in East Berlin. Due to his passive and introvert character, he is seen as coward in his class, thus has been mobbed and become an outsider. Moreover, he has fallen in love with a girl in his class who does not requite his feelings. Then, one day, a boy from a Russian immigrant family is transferred to his class. Due to the difficulty of pronouncing his Russian name correctly, he is just called ‘Tschick’. And because of his awkward behavior, Tschick is unjustly regarded as gruesome and reckless by his classmates. So, the two outsiders – Maik and Tschick – become close friends. The story becomes enthralling as Tschick one day steals an old car, and he and Maik decide to drive to their dream land – to a far-away city called Walachei, somewhere in Romania.

On the trip, the two boys undergo many adventures, and their journey ends with a car accident where, fortunately, none of them gets seriously injured. This novel is often compared to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. But, what consists the particularity of our German novel?

Again, let us first identify the Actual Component in the novel. The

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crucial clue lies in the home situation of Maik. As hinted above, his family, though financially well situated, is quite dysfunctional. His mother is an alcoholic who repeatedly visits the rehabilitation clinic, whereas his father is having an affair with his young female secretary. Not only in his school but also at home, Maik has no one to connect with. Even worse, he is exposed to both domestic and school violence. As the story proceeds, readers learn that he was mobbed primarily because he has isolated himself from the outside world, which made him appear overly shy and coward. But all this changes when he meets Tschick. Unlike him, Tschick is a cheerful and easy-going boy who motivates Maik to go on adventures. With his help, Maik gradually learns to overcome his timid and coward character that has isolated him from his peer groups. Here, we see that Tschick is the main sustainer of the Potential Component.

The Resultant Component can be also easily detected. During the travel, the two boys realize that some people they meet are not as malicious as those they encounter at home and school. So at the end of the adventure, they discover some new hopes. The narrator summarizes the fruits of their journey as follows:

“The world is bad, and people are also bad. Do not trust anyone, do not go with strangers and so on. These were things my parents used to tell me, my teachers used to tell me the same thing, and it also was told on the television. If you watch the news: Human beings are bad. If you watch Spiegel TV: Humans are wicked. And maybe that was true, too, and the human beings were really bad to 99 percent. But the strange thing was that Tschick and I met almost exclusively the one percent on our trip, who were not bad”

(my translation; Herrndorf, 2013, p.209).

For the first time, our protagonists realize that life is worth living; though there are many bad people, they can always find some good people too, who will assist them in their deserted situations.

Finally, the Potential Component of this story is to be analyzed. What

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motivated the coward Maik to accept his friend's proposal to embark on the adventure? Why did he at all begin the journey that seemed to unreasonable at first? In the novel, Maik asks these questions too, especially when the car accident happens and he has to finish his journey. He says to himself that he did not do it just for fun. He realizes that he has done it for something more: at least once in his lifetime, he wanted to be someone who is not coward at all and courageously accepts the challenges of the adventure. It is his courage and determination that made the journey possible. There, he eventually realizes that the world has always been a place worth living in. His courage is rewarded.

Now, we can summarize the three components of the novel as following:

AC: Cowardliness as a strategy to survive among malicious and aggressive people;

PC: Courage to explore the world;

RC: Realizing that life is worth living, thanks to the encounters with some good people.

Let us compare this formula with that of the other work by Herrendorf, *On this side of Van Allen Belt*:

AC: Disturbed human relationships, resulting in a loss of meaningful life;

PC: A complementing hope to become a meaningful person;

RC: Destroyed hope.

Can we find any significant differences between the two? My answer is that we certainly can. We observe that the two RCs - 'destroyed hope' versus 'finding a life worth living' - are strikingly different. This noticeable shift in the RC is not merely accidental; to the contrary, it bears an epochal relevance in the sense it signifies the advent of a new

epochal system of meanings. To be specific, the LCA states that, when a new epoch arises, literary authors first discover the new possibilities of human existence that emerge with it. This happens because every new epoch brings new possibilities of meanings that are to be explored. Then, after this primary phase, authors tend to visualize the possibilities in a more detailed way. Then, in the final phase, authors concretize these possibilities by confronting them with the pre-existing reality in a more drastic way. In most cases, this last phase ends up in disappointments as the pre-existing reality or the AC often prevents the new possibilities from being fully realized. That this results in an existential crisis can be witnessed in Herrendorf's short story \. There, we encounter some of the most distinctive features that belong to the final phase of the Malicious Epoch. On the other hand, Tschick signals the arrival of a new epochal system that exhibits yang traits, as its PC (=Courage to explore the world) is clearly of exploring and expanding character contrary to the motherly protecting yin-quality of the previous Malicious Epoch's PC. The researchers of the LCA largely agree that the Malicious Epoch which began in the 1980s has gradually come to an end and a new yang-epoch has begun to rise around the year 2007.

This new epoch has not yet been named and needs to be examined further. But based on our interpretation of Herrendorf's *Tschick*, we can already identify some salient characteristics of the new epoch. It demands from us that we take a courageous initiative and embark on a journey to a yet unknown world. *Tschick* conveys us the message that we would then find a new foundation of hope. The story may seem, at first glance, to be suitable only for adolescent readers or those who reads 'just for fun'. But when we analyze it in the light of the care-structure that is composed of the AC, PC and the RC, we soon realize that it actually entails some deep reflections on the human existence – thus, it can be appealing to all readers, old and young alike. Also, we see that, when applied, the approach of the LCA can enrich not only young students, but also their instructors; they themselves can intellectually and personally profit from the subject they teach. Hence, we can conclude that a rational understanding of literature based on certain objective guidelines can serve as an intellectual orientation in

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the world we live in, as I suggested at the beginning of this article. It goes without saying that such merits of literary studies will motivate students to engage more with novels, poems, dramas, and so forth.

We may say that literary writers are indeed *poeta vates* – inspired prophets, who detect the signs of their times better than ordinary people: Consciously or unconsciously, they sense the new possibilities of human existence that emerge with a new epoch. As we have seen, the author of *Tschick* is one brilliant example of such *poeta vates*. This explains why *Tschick* is not merely an entertaining novel, but one that offers an existential consolation to its readers. In fact, Herrndorf once expressed his literary ambition in his article *Flashback*, saying: It is through the art that

“you can participate in a concrete life of people and get an access to their consciousness. You come in contact with something you have otherwise not much opportunity to hear about in your life (...) You will realize that there is a difference between art and crap. A difference between the existential consolation of a grand novel and the garbage that I read undoubtedly too much recently”

(my translation; Herrndorf, 2014).

In conclusion, to engage with literature is to reflect on the unique possibilities of human existence that become manifest in each epoch; and literary studies thus understood is a meaningful, even necessary endeavor, with which we as intellectual beings cannot dispense. Through this endeavor, students will gain solid cultural competence to meet the challenges of modern European societies more effectively.

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