

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



The Aesthetic Experience of the Literary Artwork. A Matter of Form and Content?

Author

LEEN VERHEYEN

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERPEN

Abstract: Ever since the introduction of aesthetics in philosophy, the literary arts have posed a challenge to common notions of aesthetic experience. In this paper, I will focus on the problems that arise when a formalist approach to aesthetics is confronted with literature. My main target is Peter Kivy's 'essay in literary aesthetics', *Once-Told Tales*, in which Kivy defends formalism and concludes from this approach that literature is a non-aesthetic art form. Contrary to Kivy, I will claim that we have good reasons to consider literature an aesthetic art form and, therefore, that the literary arts naturally pose a challenge to formalism. By showing the inextricable intertwining of form and content in literary artworks, I will demonstrate that the identification of so-called aesthetic properties with purely formal properties of a literary artwork is problematic.

Ever since the introduction of aesthetics in philosophy, the literary arts have posed a challenge to common notions of aesthetic experience. The main reason for this is that the traditional understanding of aesthetic experience is an experience grounded in the senses. Moreover, if we limit aesthetic experience to sensory experience, we face some difficulties trying to uphold the view that literature is also an aesthetic art form. Formalism attempts to resolve this problem by stating that aesthetic experience is caused by an artwork's formal aspects. Subsequently, it is possible to suppose that in visual or musical art forms, the relevant formal aspects coincide with the artwork's perceptual elements, but this connection is not necessary if form alone can give rise to an identical aesthetic experience. For instance, the structure of a literary work is normally not perceived directly, but can be considered an important element in the aesthetic appreciation of this work.

While most aestheticians decry formalist approaches to art as rather unhelpful, some still consider them to be the delineating feature of aesthetic experience. In this paper, I will focus on the severe problems formalist approaches to aesthetics face when it comes to literature. My main target is Peter Kivy's recent book *Once-Told Tales*, in which he not only defends the formalist approach to aesthetics, but concludes that this approach proves why literature is not an aesthetic art form.¹ Unlike Kivy, I argue that we have good reasons to consider literature an aesthetic art form and, therewith, that the literary arts routinely challenge formalist approaches to aesthetic experience. Namely, my examination of the literary arts draws attention to the inextricable intertwining of form and content. Moreover, it is precisely this intertwining that is proper to aesthetic experience itself, a view which is compatible with aestheticians who have opted to eschew formalism. Kivy's limiting the aesthetic experience of a literary work to the experience of its purely formal properties thus proves problematic.

KIVY'S CONCEPTION OF LITERATURE AS A NON-AESTHETIC ART FORM

Before considering the problems that arise from a formalist approach to literary aesthetics, we need to take a closer look at Kivy's defence of formalism. According to Kivy, the essential point of formalism is the need to distinguish aesthetic and non-aesthetic artistic properties of an artwork.² This distinction, again in Kivy's words, approximates the traditional distinction between form and content of an artwork.³ According to the formalist, to experience an artwork aesthetically means to understand the formal aspects or the structure of that work. Such an approach assumes that content-related elements of an artwork, such as its epistemic or moral value, are completely irrelevant for the aesthetic appreciation of an artwork. In other words, Kivy strategically distances himself from the conception of aesthetic experience 'in which "aesthetic" refers to our experience, enjoyment, or appreciation of any aspect of a work of art that is relevant to its experience, enjoyment, or appreciation as a work of art.'⁴ Applied to literature, a novel can, for instance, confront a reader with a previously unknown perspective on a particular issue, which is an important artistic quality of all novels, but according to Kivy is irrelevant to the aesthetic appreciation of novels.

Starting from this conception of aesthetic experience, what does Kivy's claim that literature is a non-aesthetic art form entail? In any case, Kivy does not argue that literary artworks lack formal properties. Therefore, according to his position, novels must have aesthetic properties. To function as a novel, a text must be structured in a certain way. For instance, a story can be told chronologically or asequentially. There can be a single narrator or different alternating narrators. There can be different storylines that are told

one after the other or simultaneously, etc. In addition, novels contain many other formal – in this case, linguistic – elements, such that different kinds of literary tropes are employed and sentences are formulated in unusual ways, etc. Therefore, it seems strange that Kivy considers the novel, which has certain formal, and therefore aesthetic, properties, a non-aesthetic art form. For all practical purposes, this engenders a contradictory conclusion.

Kivy's attempt to make this conclusion credible requires him to create a straw man, some 'general reader' whose literary vantage validates his claims. According to Kivy, the general reader cannot achieve an aesthetic experience from a mere literary experience. Kivy's general reader is interested firstly in the story that is presented. In other words, the general reader is primarily concerned with the novel's content. According to this view, the general reader's attention is focused on the story itself, all the while ignoring its development, which depends on the story's structure. Few doubt that novels have certain structural or formal properties, yet for Kivy the general reader will never notice this so long as he or she grasps the story's gist. Moreover, because aesthetic experiences arise from the reader's understanding of the form or structure of the artwork, the general reader will not experience a novel aesthetically. So, the special premise that bolsters Kivy's argument hinges on his conception of a general reader who fails to notice a literary artwork's form, which he acknowledges would be present upon further inspection. Such a general reader's carelessness motivates his concluding that literary artworks do not give rise to aesthetic experiences. In other words, to experience a literary artwork aesthetically requires readers to pay greater attention to the literary work's formal aspects, which general readers generally do not do.

As David Davies pointed out in his review of Kivy's book, we can question the capacity of Kivy's general reader to appreciate a literary artwork as an artwork.⁵ Since Kivy discusses 'the art form known as the novel,'⁶ we can assume, as Davies does 'that [Kivy] is [also] concerned with the kind of reader who can appreciate a novel as a work belonging to that art form.'⁷

Furthermore, Kivy's general reader differs immensely from the 'general listener' who aesthetically experiences music. Indeed, Kivy's general listener is trained or educated to listen to music and therefore pays attention to the music's formal aspects. This kind of education seems to be lacking in Kivy's general reader. Kivy's comparison of the aesthetic experience of literature to the aesthetic experience of music thus seems unfair. Appreciating something as a work of art requires one to pay attention to how a work's content is articulated through the use of relevant media, so it is questionable whether Kivy's general reader sets a good standard when considering the literary work as an artwork.

Moreover, it seems questionable whether a general reader would have little or no awareness of a novel's underlying structure, as Kivy states.⁸ As I argue below, the structure or the formal aspects of a novel often provide certain

functions that aid a novel's story development. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the reader of a novel would be completely unaware of those aspects.

However, I would like to highlight another problem with Kivy's approach, a problem Davies does not seem to notice. This problem derives directly from Kivy's formalist point of view. Namely, it is questionable whether the formalist's conviction that aesthetic experience is connected solely to an artwork's form is correct. As I argue below, the form and content of literary artworks are inextricable intertwined. Strictly separating them is both undesirable and impossible.

FORM AND CONTENT IN A LITERARY ARTWORK

The main difficulty in claiming that the form of a literary artwork is separable from its content is that, as Peter Lamarque notes, the formal aspects of a literary artwork have no intrinsic aesthetic value.⁹ Thus, a specific formal linguistic or structural feature is not an end in itself, but serves another literary purpose. When used in non-literary contexts, formal devices such as alliteration or metre might afford no aesthetic pleasure at all. It is only because these formal features are assigned a function within an artistic structure, that an aesthetic effect is created.¹⁰ It is only by interpreting; by understanding the place of a particular sentence or a part of a text in its context; or by reading it in the light of what we have already read that it becomes possible to experience this sentence or part of text as beautiful. The sentence 'Put out the light, and then - Put out the light!' from Shakespeare's *Othello* serves as a fine example. The repetition of the words has no intrinsic aesthetic value: when used in ordinary language, this sentence would probably not be considered beautiful; it would rather be considered strange or incomprehensible. It is only in light of the context that we comprehend this sentence and grasp its beauty. Because of this sentence's position in the monologue in which Othello talks of killing Desdemona, we recognize the second 'Put out the light' as a metaphor for taking Desdemona's life. It is because we understand Shakespeare's use of the same sentence to two different ends (a literal and metaphorical one) that we can experience this repetition as beautiful.

Because of the importance of literary context, it is possible that when we read a novel we are moved by the beauty of a single sentence, yet when we read it later or in a different context, we fail to grasp its beauty. Thus, a certain sentence might be considered particularly beautiful, not only because of a certain formal device, but because this device serves a special function in the context of the entire work. This, of course, makes it difficult to appreciate the formal aspects of a literary artwork isolated from particular contents, as formalists would like.

Although I focused above on small parts of a literary artwork, the conclusion also holds when we consider the global structure of a work. It is striking that, when people talk about a beautiful novel, they are often talking about

a beautiful story. According to the formalist, this cannot be considered an aesthetic experience, because this ascription of beauty applies to the work's contents. However, one can also find an interesting interaction between form and content on the more global level of the novel's structure. It thus seems logical that the story itself plays a central role in developing the story's structure or its form. For instance, readers with at least some awareness of narrative strategies would notice the author's strategic use of particular narrative techniques, such as the use of a certain narrator or alternating narrators, which guide the story being told. Namely, the narrator determines the perspective from which the story is told and, as a result, determines which story elements must be highlighted or left out.

Another interesting example can be found in the reader's attention to the impact made by the use of certain narrative structures that maximize particular story elements, such as telling the story backwards. In Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*, all the events occur in reverse chronological time, leading to absurd situations, such as healthy people leaving the hospital injured. As the story unfolds, the reader is confronted with the horror of Auschwitz, from which the torment is amplified by the march backwards in time. In Amis' story, human bodies arise from the ashes; people come to life and become stronger and stronger by working in the camp ('Arbeit macht frei'). In the end, they are suddenly healthy people, reunited with their families, free to leave the camp by train. For the protagonist narrating the story, for whom a reversed course of history is the normal state of affairs, Auschwitz bizarrely makes more sense than the other events he has experienced before. By showing how Auschwitz only makes sense when events are told backwards does it become clear how Auschwitz constitutes a break with normal human order and understanding. In this way, the impact the story's content makes thus depends on Amis' selection of an unusual structure that eases the author's ability to disclose the story's meaning.

PARAPHRASING LITERARY WORKS

The inseparability of form and content is also evident from the fact that it is difficult to paraphrase literary works. Of course, it is possible to explain to a certain degree what a poem is about or to summarize a novel, but such explanations or summaries are not considered equivalent to the original literary work. Indeed, if that were the case, we could settle for reading book reviews in newspapers, rather than reading actual literary works.

As one might expect, a formalist could not agree with the above statement. Kivy insists that a poem's content can be paraphrased.¹¹ By this, he means that a poem has a certain 'propositional content', of which he distinguishes three kinds:

First of all, there is the propositional content of sentences in poems that describe. Second, there is the propositional content of the sentences in poems that narrate events and actions. And third, there are the propositions that the totality of the poem itself might express: its philosophical or moral or other theses that the poet might wish to convey through the work as a whole. All of this is, in principle, paraphrasable.¹²

Indeed, there are situations in which people paraphrase poetry. Consider the classroom: teachers often try to explain or paraphrase poems - an approach to poetry analysis that many poets reject, precisely because it treats poetry like a 'code' to be cracked, rather than encouraging readers to direct their attention towards the appreciation of beautiful sentences or to use their imagination. It thus seems wrong to suggest that paraphrased texts could serve as adequate substitutes for the experience of reading the poem itself. I worry that paraphrased poems detract readers from aesthetic experiences with literary works since the world evoked by the poem has been reduced to 'selective' propositional content. In other words, as Lamarque remarks, a paraphrase cannot substitute for the original, since the pleasure of reading largely depends not only on our ability to identify certain contents, but even more on our ability to notice how such contents are constitutive of their presentation.¹³

The same goes for novels. Of course, it is possible to summarize, for example, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* or to analyse the story's theme, but a summary or analysis cannot replace the experience of reading the novel. One's reading of a novel like *The Trial* evokes many readings or interpretations, but a brief analysis or curt summary curtails those possibilities. Furthermore, meaning is elicited not only from the story, but also from the way the story is told. Both its selected structure and its chosen words give rise to different interpretations.

EMOTIONS AND FICTION

Another interesting example regarding the connection between form and content concerns the emotions we experience when reading a novel. Kivy states clearly that it would be a mistake to consider these emotions related to the aesthetic experience.¹⁴ Indeed, these aroused emotions often seem to result from the novel's content. Although we might cry when a character dies, feel pity for him or her, or experience joy when our favorite character triumphs, Kivy denies any connection between a reader's emotional reaction and the story's formal construction. It is interesting, however, to notice that when people talk about a beautiful story or novel, it is not uncommon for them to recall being emotionally moved by that particular story or novel. Being a formalist, Kivy considers it a mistake to regard this kind of evaluation an aesthetic evaluation. The question I turn to next concerns whether the for-

malist is correct to deny a correlation between the emotions readers actually experience while reading a novel and the aesthetic experience such novels afford.

There must be aspects of the emotions that we experience when reading fiction that the formalist overlooks. There is already an important difference between the emotions we experience when reading fiction and the emotions we experience in ‘real life’. The feeling of grief we experience when watching or reading a tragedy is accompanied by a feeling of pleasure (a feeling that would be highly inappropriate in a ‘real’ situation). As Colin Radford observes, our being moved by the death of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* is often accompanied by thoughts like ‘How marvelous! How sublime!’ and even ‘How moving!’¹⁵ This feeling of pleasure, which Sally Markowitz describes as a guilty pleasure, seems to arise from the typical aesthetic attitude associated with experiencing art.¹⁶ Markowitz describes the appropriate emotional response to fiction as an ‘aesthetic meta-response’. When we read a tragic story, we are not addressed as an active moral agent. Situations that would ordinarily motivate us don’t demand action when they occur in fictional works. Someone who watches *Romeo and Juliet* in the theatre and runs towards the stage to prevent Mercutio’s death would – rightfully – be considered a madman. The pleasures we experience when reading or watching fiction arises from exactly this fact. As Eddy Zemach notes, there is nothing we readers can do to change the story’s outcome, so we might as well sit back and enjoy the complexities of the enfolding action.¹⁷

This happens because we are just as much moved by the complex set of narrated events, as we are by the tragic event itself. The fact that we consider a certain fragment, sentence, or event as tragic or beautiful, is due to the fact that this fragment, sentence, or event has its place within a certain context. As Michael Weston notes, Mercutio’s death especially generates grief in people who have attended the play and are therefore likely to place this event within the play’s context.¹⁸ Even when, at a later time, we think back to a particularly moving passage, we remember not only this passage, but also its place within the storyline’s structure. For instance, when one thinks back to Mercutio’s death, one is not only emotionally moved (If Mercutio weren’t fictional, and in fact a friend, we would probably again be overcome by grief when honouring his death), but one remembers ‘how moving it was’.¹⁹ Thus, when one recalls moving passages, one also thinks of the aesthetic pleasure originally felt when one first read them. Because we are moved by the tragedies characters undergo, we most likely wouldn’t prefer that their stories were less tragic. From an aesthetic point of view, wishing for and receiving less tragedy would no doubt soften the blow.

Most investigation of the emotions we experience when reading novels indicates a distinct connection between our emotions and concurrent aesthetic experience. This observation leads to two ideas regarding the formalist approach to literary aesthetics. Firstly, we can conclude that it is wrong to state that an artwork’s aesthetic properties are the properties of the form

or structure of that artwork. Kivy literarily states that ‘aesthetic properties, whether perceived or thought, are properties of structures’.²⁰ As already noted, a work’s form prompts the ‘aesthetic’ emotions that we experience when we read fiction as much as its content. This poses a problem for formalism. Secondly, we notice that when we experience a passage, sentence, or event as tragic or beautiful, we do this not simply because of this particular part, but at least as much because of its context - a context that is created by the structure (the form) of the literary work. The importance of the reader’s appropriate interpretation while reacting to a certain passage, sentence, or event makes clear that the reader is not completely unaware of the literary work’s structure. The fact that a reader must appropriately interpret certain passages in order to be emotionally moved by them implies that the reader has both assigned meaning to certain formal or structural elements of the story, and has identified their function in the literary work as a whole. As Weston observes, ‘[t]o be moved by Mercutio’s death is to respond in light of one’s interpretation of that episode in the context of the play, and hence is part of one’s response to the sense we see in the play as a whole’.²¹ This also means that re-reading a literary work may change our interpretation of it and, therefore, our emotional response to it. Interpreting a literary work does not only mean understanding the content of it: it also means understanding its form or structure. These are not different forms of interpretation, but one and the same, because in literature they are inextricably intertwined.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have demonstrated that formalist approaches to literary aesthetics are deficient because they assume that it is possible to separate form and content and, therefore, neglect the fact that, in literature, form and content are inextricably linked. In the first part of my argument, I challenged Kivy’s notion of a ‘general reader’ who is almost exclusively interested in the novel’s story, but not in how this story is told. I noted that since a novel’s formal or structural elements serve certain literary functions, it is implausible that the reader would be completely unaware of those aspects. Secondly, I argued that a story’s formal elements have no intrinsic aesthetic value other than the aesthetic effects created by their function in the context of the literary work.

Thirdly, I rejected Kivy’s view that literary works can be paraphrased, since text-based works cannot be reduced to their presumed meanings, especially since a story’s meaning is not only evoked by the story itself, but also by the way that story is told. Finally, I focused on the emotions we experience when reading fiction and demonstrated how they can be considered connected to the aesthetic. In fact, the connection between form and content makes the emotional response possible.

I now introduce another argument, based on an interesting neurological experiment that shows just how such interconnections arise not only in relationship to literature, but is related to aesthetic experiences as such. The experiment I'm referring to focused on what happens in our brain when we experience something as beautiful.²² Though this experiment did focus on the aesthetic experience of mathematical formulations and not on the aesthetic experience of artworks, this experiment's results seem relevant to this investigation's process. The experiment showed that mathematicians are able to experience a sense of beauty while watching mathematical formulations. In particular, brain scans showed that, when contemplating mathematical formulations, the same brain region (the part responsible for emotions) is activated as when other people experience beauty derived from other sources. Furthermore, mathematicians showed emotional responses when they experienced formulas as beautiful. What is interesting in the context of this investigation is that such emotional responses were present only in mathematicians, though not in non-mathematicians. In other words, only those academics able to understand, and therefore appreciate the formula's content could experience the formula as beautiful. Those who were not capable of fully understanding the formulas could only make aesthetical judgements based on the formula's formal aspects, so they could not truly experience them as beautiful.

What this experiment and the above mentioned examples show is that it is hard to hold on to the idea that form and content are separable aspects of literary artworks, let alone the idea that only form is aesthetically relevant. Form and content are, especially in literary works, inextricably intertwined: they determine and restrict each other. A theory of aesthetic experience, such as formalism, that depends solely on an artwork's form inevitably fails to account for all of the relevant aspects of aesthetic experience. The fact that a formalist like Kivy claims that literary experience does not offer aesthetic experience does not prove that this is really the case, since the formalist approach to literary works is deficient.

Leen.Verheyen@uantwerpen.be

NOTES

1. Kivy 2011, 70-75.
2. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
3. *Ibid.*, 14.
4. *Ibid.*, 13.
5. Davies 2012.
6. Kivy 2011, 2.
7. Davies 2012.
8. Kivy 2011, 96.
9. Lamarque 2009, 22.
10. *Ibid.*, 22.
11. Kivy 2011, 170.
12. *Ibid.*, 170.
13. Lamarque 2009, 12.
14. Kivy 2011, 27.
15. Radford 1975, 70.
16. Markowitz 1992, 307-316.
17. Zemach 1996, 44.
18. Weston 1975, 85.

19. Radford 1975, 77.

20. Kivy 2011, 48.

21. Weston 1975, 86.

22. Zeki 2014.

REFERENCES

- Davies, David. 2012. "Review of: Kivy, *Once-Told Tales*." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. published online; accessed 2 April 2014.
- Kivy, Peter. 2011. *Once-Told Tales. An Essay in Literary Aesthetics*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lamarque, Peter. 2009. *The Philosophy of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Markowitz, Sally. 1992. "Guilty Pleasures: Aesthetic Meta-Response and Fiction." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50:307–316.
- Radford, Colin. 1975. "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary volume 49:67–80.
- Shakespeare, William. 1980. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. London: Atlantis.
- Weston, Michael. 1975. "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49:81–93.
- Zeki, Semir et al. 2014. "The experience of mathematical beauty and its neural correlates." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. <http://www.frontiersin.org/Journal/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00068/full> accessed 14 October 2014.
- Zemach, Eddy M. 1996. "Emotion and Fictional Beings." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54:41–48.