

A Slice of Academic Life

The Uncharted Path



The Plot

As is their wont, the two academicians and senior professors nestled into their comfortable chairs on a pleasant wintry day with cups of insipid coffee from the college cafeteria to engage with each other and deliberate on some of their recent abstruse ideas.

Although from different academic, cultural, and professional backgrounds, the two have an excellent rapport, a rare trait in academicians, with their shared love for compelling, rational, and logical critiques on matters of mutual interest – while analyzing, comprehending, and appreciating each other's views, culled and decanted over a century of their cumulative experiences.

The Muse

The topic for the day was the abstractness of *reading* and *writing*, the two typical, essential, and intricately intertwined human pursuits. What is fascinating is that the covert inherent abstractness, intriguingly, gushes out in torrents into plain sight upon serene reflection.

The Musings

All living organisms communicate to share information using some form of signaling involving varying forms, methods, and complexities, with communications taking place using sensory organs of sight, sound, and touch.

Scientifically and philosophically, *reading* and *writing* are essential tools for communication driven by science and technology and, therefore, evolve with time and location. Without restricting to the general meanings of *reading* and *writing*, *i.e.*, without implied assumptions about specific modes and mediums, if one were to probe the methodology of how people communicate, the conventional horizons for *reading* and *writing* quickly broaden and expand to the usage of any, or all, of the sensory organs of sound, sight, and touch for communications.

Time and again, we realize that *reading* and *writing* have varied connotations dictated by the societies we live in and deal with, technologies adopted by communities, and local and global cultures.

It is essential to realize that *reading* and *writing*, in the traditional sense, are not the only way to gain knowledge or entertainment. Many other forms of media, such as movies, TV shows, podcasts, and video games, can provide similar benefits.

Discussions regarding the efficacy of spoken vis-à-vis written communication are often peppered with arguments for the primacy of the written word as the pre-eminent mode of communication, duly countered by an advocacy of the unique power of the spoken language to ignite the listener's imagination, often leading into veritable long-winded debates. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that *reading* and *writing*, associated with the medium of text, are effective modes of communication in varied languages, if not the only ones.

Conventional wisdom has already established that *reading makes a full man, conversation a ready man, writing an exact man, and practice a perfect man*. However, evolving societies with their paradigm technological shifts dictate and drive the metaphorical processes of *Reading* and *Writing* into esoteric and unexpected realms.

Therefore, the seemingly banal everyday actions of reading and writing transform into interconnected, esoteric, puzzling, and complex human pursuits necessitated by social, psychological, philosophical, and physical factors, compelling the probing mind to contemplate and confabulate.

The Modern Day Conundrum

Contemporary societies face the peculiar problem of a significantly high decline in the readership of the innumerable tomes of written matter (prose and poetry, in numerous languages, in the form of technical documents, in varied shades and genres of literature), with most people not being able to read more than short texts, primarily with the advent of burgeoning digital technologies of the day. This fact, therefore, begs the question of whether the vast majority of the writers' works lie untouched in the annals of oblivion, laden with dust.

The declining ability of society in general, and the younger generations (*Gen Z* and the *Millennials*) in particular, to read and write detailed notes and documents and the pernicious usage of communication abbreviations fostered by digital technologies have ushered in a unique situation where generational and socio-cultural differences make comprehension difficult.

The backdrop of literacy statistics, the asymmetric ratio of readers to writers (with more readers than writers), intrigues the probing mind to ponder the readers' relative role and importance vis-à-vis the writers. Not surprisingly, the subject of readers and writers can, at best, be confounding as it depends on context.

The Torrent of Questions

Why do people *read*? What goes on in the mind of the reader? What does a reader look for while reading? Does the reader benefit from reading? Is the reader interested in reflecting, learning, understanding, comprehending, and gaining knowledge? Or do they only look for pleasure and titillation?

Do readers get affected by reading? Do they get influenced and transformed into different thinking individuals based on their reading? Are readers essential spokes in the complex wheel of society and life in general?

Why do people *write*? Does the writer benefit from writing? Does the writer have the reader in mind while writing? What goes on in the mind of the writer? To share, connect, correspond, communicate, teach, feel good, exhibit, document, or just pour out the thoughts for the benefit of eternity? Do writers get their due credit in contemporary society? Or do they attain greatness after their lifetime? If so, what drives the writers to pour their thoughts out for posterity? What incentives do writers derive from the readers, in addition to aggrandizement, fame, and glory? Do writers want to push their ideas into the readers' mindscape or share their thoughts after serious research, reflection, and contemplation, owning shared responsibilities for societal development and forming the hub of the complex wheel of society and life in general?

Can societies flourish without writers and their writings? Can communities exist without readers reading the writings? Can we imagine a scenario where the writers and readers do

not benefit from each other? What happens if writers vanish? These are intriguing questions to ponder.

The Writers vs the Readers

Writers are essential to society as they create literature that reflects, criticizes, and enriches the human experience. Literature influences readers's values, beliefs, and attitudes and inspires them to think creatively and imaginatively.

Writing is critical because it creates content, expresses ideas, shares knowledge, and stimulates thought. Writers can influence, educate, entertain, and inspire others through their words.

Some possible consequences of losing writers are *(i)* a decline in the diversity and quality of literary works, as fewer voices and perspectives would be represented, *(ii)* a loss of historical and cultural memory, as literature preserves and transmits the stories and experiences of different times and places, *(iii)* a reduction in readers' critical and analytical skills, as literature challenges and stimulates the mind to question and explore various issues and themes, *(iv)* a decrease in the empathy and compassion of people, as literature exposes them to the feelings and thoughts of others and helps them understand different points of view, and *(v)* a lack of innovation and creativity, as literature sparks the imagination and encourages the expression of new ideas and possibilities. Therefore, writers play a vital role in shaping and enriching society, and their disappearance would negatively impact humanity's cultural, intellectual, and emotional development of humanity.

Reading is essential to human life and has been a source of knowledge, entertainment, and inspiration for centuries, as it is a unique experience that offers many benefits, such as improving cognitive function, reducing stress, and increasing empathy.

Readers can always broaden their perspectives, gain new knowledge, and be inspired by what they read. If people stopped reading books, it could lead to a rapid decline in literacy rates and a ripple effect on education, employment, and the economy. It could also lead to a loss of history, cultural heritage, and traditions, as books are often used to preserve and pass on knowledge from one generation to the next. Readers, therefore, are equally important.

By and large, the number of readers in any society is substantially higher than that of writers; the onus of sustaining the fragile balance by incentivizing writers effectively rests on the community at large. As readers consume the content writers create, engage with it, and often provide feedback, they make themselves an integral part of the complex activity of communication.

The Sum and Substance

Vedas, Upanishads, World folk epics, and all other literature orally transferred and transmuted over the millennia always remind us that there are many different ways to share and gain knowledge.

The reader-writer relationship is prosaically symbiotic in nature. Writers need readers to engage with their work, and readers require writers to provide content. Both roles are crucial in the realm of literature and communication. So, one may argue that neither is more important than the other, and they both hold significant positions in communication and learning.

If all readers vanished, it would significantly impact the world. If the number of writers were to disappear, society would lose a valuable cultural expression, education, and entertainment source.

On reflection, the rhetorical questions regarding the everyday mundane banalities of *reading* and *writing* quickly transform into deeply philosophical inquiries with myriad complexities.

The End

Having regaled each other with abstract musings and consumed their cups of coffee without actually savoring the taste, the two academicians parted ways to follow their other daily academic pursuits.

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