

Digitization of Literature: Twitterature, E-Literature, Hashtags, Interactive Fiction and Electronic Hypertext as Emerging Novel Literary Genres

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Abstract

The growth of the Internet and the advent of digital social networks have altered the way we communicate today. This has been expedited by the widespread availability of smartphones, which enable people to stay connected, build groups, and participate in continuous conversation flows. Mobile devices are utilised not just to maintain social relationships, but they also play an important role in cultural consumption, which is progressively gravitating towards formats that encourage involvement and personalization. This new paradigm has enabled consumers to become active participants and content providers. Thus, the rise of new formats and genre of literature comes into play. Short-form fiction and entertainment are now widely accepted by the public and critics alike, and have expanded into many artistic representations. These hybridizations open up new opportunities for the creation of digital contents that are relevant to the users' interests as they enhance and enjoy them, which has contributed to twitterature's success. The immediacy of digital social networks, particularly Twitter, is critical for making story threads appealing to the audience. Can the exponential growth of Twitter's influence on literature be far behind? Can such works have any substantial value to be regarded as literary? If so, what types of e-literature fulfil the criteria and which ones do not? Does the rise of digitization mean an end for printed books? These are some pertinent questions which shall be attempted in this paper.

Keywords: Twitterature, e-literature, digital literature, haiku, hashtags, interactive fiction.

Introduction:

Fast paced society demands effective time management to secure optimum productivity. People seem to be in a constant rush as if they are running an endless marathon. In such a lifestyle, it is not unusual to wonder whether this generation has the luxury of delving into literature of volumes and depths. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the world has become pronouncedly globalised than before, E-mails are not the only communication means which work at the tap of a button. Advancement in

technology is not concerned with only the scientific and technical arena but its rippling effect can be felt in the world of literature, politics, economy, and society at large.

The rise of English literature in terms of reading and listening is no longer restricted to only libraries and classrooms with the arrival of the digital age beginning in the early 1990s. Well-known historian Anthony Grafton once remarked,

“For now, and for the foreseeable future, any serious reader will have to know how to travel down two very different roads simultaneously. No one should avoid the broad, smooth, and open road that leads through the screen.”

“The narrow path still leads, as it must, to crowded public rooms where the sunlight gleams on varnished tables, and knowledge is embodied in millions of dusty, crumbling, smelly, irreplaceable documents and books.” (Anthony Grafton, ‘Future Reading’ in *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2007).

Even though, the quotes are from the archivist perspective, it is of profound importance to the aspiring litterateurs of the world today. The changing scope of reading in terms of accessibility and medium cannot be discarded any longer. Platforms like twitter which originally came into being as a means of sharing few anecdotes with close friends have blossomed into a turf bleeding “words and ideas”. It is one of the most controversial social media platforms to have dawned in existence for the infamous political tweets and perhaps now controversies arising out of the internal policies of the app itself.

According to Renne Wellek and Austin Warren (December 1948 copyright-1942, 1946, 1949) one of the limitations of literature is something written or printed. Twitter is definitely a medium that produces 'written' words, hence, it may be classified as literary. Despite twitterature being considered a new genre of literature, it is still an open-ended talk when it comes to the quality of twitterature's literary ventures. If audience appeal is the criteria, then it is hugely acceptable. However, audience or readers are fluctuating elements determining literariness of any work. Reference to canons and previously existing literature must also be taken into account. The trouble is ‘which canons must be referred to this landscape of literary transition?’ Nevertheless, the wide acceptance from the readership yields to, perhaps, certain traits highlighting literary value in the current works of e-literature.

Twitter (now X):

Twitter was initially intended to be an SMS-based platform, where tweets are limited in character count. In the beginning, twitter's character count was limited to 140. Thanks to the SMS protocol standard imposed by mobile carriers, which left little room for creativity. The 140-character limit remained in place as twitter finally developed into a web platform for reasons of branding. It has been increased to 280 words to encourage more tweets and less pondering, thereby making the app more engaging to its users.

Necessity is the mother of invention and innovation is borne of necessity. This statement reigns supreme for this blue bird social network as twitter's user-base started growing which drove its users to create new jargon and different ways to use the service. Much like how the user's creativity innovated the features of the app, it has now become a platform hosting literature in 280 characters. The beginning of this trend and how it has established itself as a promising platform for literary activities has become a study of keen interest in the recent years.

Twitterature:

The term "twitterature" combines the words "twitter" and "literature," with the intention of using the 280-character constraint of a tweet as a tool for literacy. One might assume that Shakespeare and twitter have nothing in common, but two students are bridged by it in this generational gap. Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin are students at the University of Chicago who authored '*Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books Retold through Twitter*' which was published on April 1, 2010. In this work, over eighty of the greatest works of western literature - from *Beowulf* to Bronte, from Kafka to Kerouac, and from Dostoevsky to Dickens – each distilled through the voice of twitter to its purest, pithiest essence. However, it begs the question: Is twitterature still regarded as twitterature when it is printed? Do tweets have to be published online to qualify as twitterature? These questions have been validly raised and the response is divided without clear and conclusive answer.

The origin of this genre, twitterature, is of recent times, more specifically of the digital era. It began through the literary use of the microblogging service of twitter. It includes various genres, including aphorisms, poetry and fiction written by individuals or collaboratively. The emphasis is more so on the later as collaboration or shared authorship is widely practiced in Twitterature. The imposition of 280 characters, then 140, by the medium provides a creative challenge to the aspiring writers who have intense interest in brevity. Some of the genres which have been popularly hosted on twitter are: Aphorisms which are well-liked because of their inherent brevity and it is ideal for

twitter. On twitter, people frequently tweet well-known adage, but some additionally endeavour to create and share their own witty observations on any subject at hand. Fan fiction, retellings of literary classics and folktales, 140-character stories, twitter novels, and collaborative works are all examples of twitterature fiction.

Twitter Novels:

In 2008, two years after the social network was established, the first twitter novels were published, though the beginnings of literary aspects of twitter are obscure, Aciman and Rensin's book, mentioned earlier, is credited with popularising the term "twitterature". Although it has been referred to as a literary genre, twitterature is actually an adaptation of different genres to social media. The writing is frequently experimental or playful, and some authors are interested in learning how storytelling on twitter is affected by the platform or how a tale spread through it. Rarely bestsellers and classics are allowed to ever rest on their success. As soon as they become well-known, a whole series of imitative works are released, all of which have the same long-term goal of becoming classics or at the very least the next big hit. Then attempts are made to adapt the classic or best-seller into a movie, a TV series, or even both. Classical parodies aren't too far behind in terms of publication or filming. Then there are the critiques and reassessments of these well-known books. And given the popularity of social media, it is not surprising that some of these texts are being modified or rewritten to meet these requirements.

Taking into account, the hugely successful work called '*Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books Retold through Twitter*', it is an attempt at "*facing and understanding ... the greatest art of all arts: Literature*" through Twitter. The authors, both were then, 19-year-old students, wrote it with the intention of mastering "*the literature of the civilized world, while relieving [the reader of] the burdensome task of reading it*" in its original form. In other words, 'twitterature' is a like a novel retelling of literature in the form of tweet stories in twitter language.

Aciman and Rensin (2009) have taken a wide range of classics for their Twitterature endeavour. Greek classics (*Oedipus, The Iliad, Lysistrata, The Aeneid*), Russian literature (*Anna Karenina, Notes from the Underground, Crime and Punishment*), French Literature (*The Three Musketeers*), Shakespeare (*King Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest*), English Literature (*The Old Man and the Sea, Emma, Great Expectations, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, Sherlock Holmes*), and many more can be found as tweet stories in this book. Each classic featured in

twitterature has been rewritten in a series of tweets with the author of each book getting an appropriate and extremely creative twitter handle. For example, *Crime and Punishment*'s Fyodor Dostoevsky is @RobPeterPayPaul, while *Moby Dick*'s Herman Melville is @greatwhitetale, and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is @TheRealDesparateHousewife. Some books have more than one twitter handle as in the case of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: @JulieBaby and @DefNotaHomeo. The tweet stories in twitterature is a mixed bag. In twitterature, a story is told in approximately twenty tweets. A young reader will be drawn to the language because it is modern, informal, wicked, irreverent, politically incorrect, and chauvinistic. The authors have very thoughtfully included a glossary to serve as a guide to this book's obscure and esoteric terminologies and idioms for the benefit of luddites and old-timers so they may understand and enjoy the humour and wordplay herein contained. It is also full of acronyms commonly used on twitter.

The authors claim that by presenting the classics as tweet stories, one is relieved of the burden of actually reading them in the original. Now the pertinent question is, do literary enthusiasts want to be relived of this burden? The answer is a staunch 'No'; however, the litterateurs do want to explore any new form of genre which has potential for transforming the literary landscape in the future. This is precisely where the popularity of twitterature comes into effect, where avid readers, out of sheer curiosity of the new genre, savour the taste of this novice narrative unfolding. However, many critics and reviews from readers who have not yet read the prequel to a novel feel disconnected from the tweet collection novel. They revealed that the writing at times seemed incoherent, that it did not clearly define a location, storyline, or time. Even the portrayed conflicts are excessively dispersed, with endings that make it difficult for the reader to follow the plot. Thus, the drawback of twitterature is that it cannot stand alone as a literary work without provision of some context where the author provides the background, narration and also the setting in a compiled book.

It is not just about providing links or threads for a larger body of work with twitterature. The platform has been used by many authors to tweet out entire novels, one at a time. '*Small Places*' by Nicholas Belardes and '*The Good Captain*' by Jay Bushman are credited as the first twitter books, both of which were tweeted in 2007 and 2008. 'Small Places', written by Belardes over the course of two years, was about 30,000 words long overall and detailed the mundane corporate existence of a man in California. *The Good Captain*, a science fiction adaptation of *Benito Cereno* by Herman Melville, was first published as a series of tweets from November 2007 to February 2008 and later compiled into an e-book.

The form's briefness does not in any way preclude a certain breadth. Several Twitter users have taken to the game of the novel divided into tweets, modelled after the "novels by sms" that were popular in Japan in 2008-2009, the *'keitai shosetsu'*, in addition to poems and short fiction texts. Thus, from December 2008 to April 2010, Thierry Crouzet (@crouzet) published *'Croisades'*, a thriller or rather a twiller, in 5,200 tweets. Mélusine (@TwittLitt) publishes his micro-novels in Canada and makes them available to read in order via tweets. LeRoy K. May (@leroykmay) and Eric Bourbonnais (@ebourbon) have tried the four-handed twiller adventure: *'Buboneka'*, making the most of the collaboration characteristic trait in social media platforms.

Some people have chosen to adapt historical masterpieces and present them to a contemporary audience by using twitter, similar to the serialised email newsletter that has been sending out Dracula every day. Over the course of a few years, Chindu Sreedharan of the account @epicretold retold *The Mahabharata* in more than 2,000 tweets and 1.8 million words. *The Mahabharata in tweets: An Epic Retold* was later released. In 2010, the Royal Shakespeare Company released a retelling of the well-known tale over the course of 4,000 tweets, giving *Romeo and Juliet* the "twitter treatment" as well.

Haiku:

The *haiku* is a Japanese poetic form that consists of three lines, with five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third. According to Britannica, Haiku is defined as an unrhymed poetic form consisting of 17 syllables arranged in three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively. The haiku first emerged in Japanese literature during the 17th century, as a terse reaction to elaborate poetic traditions, though it did not become known by the name haiku until the 19th century. The traditional Japanese poetic form has been used suitably in twitter generating a new genre of its own. Some people disagree that 280 characters lack depth and thoughtfulness to be considered of any literary importance. However, Dick Costolo, the former CEO of twitter, sees this method of communication as a new art form. In an interview, he argued that short bursts of information like 'tweets' open up new avenues for creativity. When there arises the issue of 140 (now 280) character's work implicates that people do not think deeply any longer, he simply chooses to respond that the Japanese traditional poems of Haiku are not shamed for its format. That its brevity is not equated with shallow thinking. He feels that people develop language for creatively communicating within whichever constraints is set for people.

The hashtag #haiku can be used to search for numerous examples of the succinct haiku poetic style, which is well-suited to Twitter. By using different hashtags or "following" users that use their

Twitter accounts for journals or poetry, one can find diverse types of poetry. This grand narrative, that only longer texts hold literary significance is being dismantled with the idea of twitterature. Micro-form material, such as tweets, facebook status updates, or video snippets, has emerged as a particular set of techniques to create pithy or compelling insights as these types of social media platforms have become more and more commonplace. A haiku of 17 lines might be preferable to one of 500. 500 words do not, in fact, constitute a haiku. The advantage of using fewer words is that they have more meaning and, in their best forms, can elicit thousands more questions and discussions.

Use of Hashtags:

Initially, users had no way of replying to one another on twitter. Some users would include '@' symbol before a username to identify another user within a tweet. This became such a prevalent way to acknowledge another user that the twitter team added the functionality natively to the twitter platform. The same thing happened with hashtags, which are now an integral part of the twitter ecosystem. Hashtags (#) can be taken as signs that point readers or audiences to the work of body published on twitter. Twitter's terms of service forbid using "excessive, unrelated hashtags in a single tweet or across multiple tweets." Technically speaking, some in the know also think that twitter's algorithm penalises tweets that include too many hashtags, making it less likely that your readers will see them in their feeds. Nevertheless, twitter has provided the following advice on hashtags: As a best practise, "we recommend using no more than 2 hashtags per tweet, but you may use as many hashtags in a tweet as you like." In conclusion, while your results (or readership) may vary, using one or two hashtags each tweet should make it easier for you to engage with your followers.

There is constant blurring of lines between literature and digital world. The emphasis on the short form and the quick reception in the postmodern scenario influences how people perceive the world around them. The *Times Literary Supplement* acknowledged cartoons as literature, or an alternative style of storytelling some years ago. Therefore, the question of where the limit is set when it comes to the various forms that are being recognised as literature needs an answer.

The so-called electronic literature (e-literature) is without a doubt the most prevalent outcome of the interplay between literary and the digital world. In reality, every type of written literary content that appears on the internet might be considered one of its forms, including other neologisms like twitterature or fictitious blogs. The statement that literature is in danger of extinction is one we hear frequently today, but it is also completely erroneous. Literature will continue to be produced as long as people have creative minds. The context in which art exists has changed, and each day we

see new and distinct features of the creation of a brand-new niche. Given this, literature has to absorb these new forms which are products of the digital space.

Interactive Fiction:

The phrase "interactive fiction" is sometimes used to refer to virtually any type of fiction work in which the reader has some control over the outcome of the story. Interactive Fiction is most easily recognised in the field of electronic literature by its game components. Interactive fiction has some similarities to games because the reader is given options and the story advances in accordance with those choices. Even authors consider their own writing to be a game. But unlike video games, all communication is done through text. Text-based text commands and descriptions of the location, scenario, and story are used throughout.

The concept of shared authorship is just one of postmodernism's many distinguishing traits. In its most basic form, shared authorship refers to the idea that the author and the reader both took part in the creation of a piece of literature. Each reader will have a distinct experience because the author only provides a framework; the reader is free to navigate through it as they see fit. In this paradigm, interactive fiction is a prime example. The meta-narrative lives within a framework that the author has created, a world. In actuality, the user engages; the reader directs the "author" on what to do. As a result of the narrative's choice-driven nature, each reader experiences a different experience.

E-Literature: An Aesthetic Shift in Reading:

A significant aesthetic shift in electronic literature has to be highlighted: born-digital literary work created and consumed on computers and smartphones. Not only is a significant amount of contemporary e-literature shared via social networks, but facebook, twitter, and their preferred communication styles (tweets, posts, statuses) are also progressively influencing its form and content.

Electronic literature is transitioning from its experimental phase, when modernist avant-gardes of the twentieth century served as a point of reference for contemporary writers to establish their identities, to a more ludic approach where e-literature seeks out a larger audience via social media and in the language of social media, a trend which Jessica pressman called "digital postmodernism". The development of the digital world has significantly altered reading habits. The future of the printed book is being called into doubt due to the swift growth of electronic books.

There is no doubt that the majority of publications on the nature of the book make the forecast that the printed book will eventually come to an end in their conclusions. The print media appears doomed in the backdrop of globalisation. It is viewed as an antiquated technology because the digital medium serves as a better substitute. While philology, or the study of reading slowly, appears to be incompatible with the new fast media marketing reading strategies, the art of slow reading appears to be nearing its end. Literature changes; it neither ceases to exist nor fades. This transformation highlights both the literary work's great potential along with the audience's interests which propel this transformation.

The idea of the book's conclusion refers to a shift in perception of the world and the mind. It comes about due to the introduction of electronic hypertext. As a result, the world is now read like a hypertext with its diverse and interactive space rather than as a book. While the book is a closed environment, the internet provides countless contexts. Although the radical changes in the world have caused our way of thinking and how we organise our lives to shift, it seems impossible to just remove printed media from the core of our daily routine.

However, the alteration of the printed version of the book itself can be an option. The printed body of the book can be transformed in a wide range of ways today. This does not speak of the end of the book, but rather, as previously said, of the nature of the book's abundant potential to be easily modified and to absorb new forms.

The impact of digitization in literature:

The printed text's convention is being innovated by the digital literature scene. Now that technology is developing, "people can generate, process, reformat, and share data in new creative, flexible, and easy ways that have transformed the ways they communicate, learn, and even think," according to a study. Digitization of literature has availed ease of access and cost effectiveness to many readers. An array of websites today offers their visitors access to a sizable library of electronic books. In their hands (hand-sets), there is a literal treasure trove. As a result, a student or scholar no longer needs to rely on a physical library, visit it in person to obtain the books, or spend a fortune buying the books they need for their studies. The ability to always have the books on hand allows the reader to pace oneself while updating his or her expertise. Even an occasional reader seeking for a quick read would save time and money by visiting such websites and reading the hosted e-books. In reading English literature in this digital era, Lee says:

Researchers enabled by the new technologies, including networked information systems such as the internet, can view digital facsimiles of the artefacts from the comfort of their homes, can make comparisons, collate their own collection, and can develop effective and efficient research strategies. (The personal experience of the Author in reading English Literature in this digital era, Lee 2001 May & 2011).

This phenomenon has cultivated an outlet for artistic creativity and encouraged it. Anyone with a passion for writing can now achieve their goals by turning to self-publishing thanks to digitization and access to electronic self-publishing, also known as e-publishing. Writing down one's ideas and feelings in emails and blogs is a common practise, and the entire networked globe serves as the instantaneous audience for such publications. In the age of digital publishing, all types of writing - fiction, non-fiction, essays, poems, etc.- find an immediate outlet.

The effect of the digital tools on literature is that due to its current universality, it reduces inequality and promotes inclusivity. However, one must not shy away from the unsustainability, which comes as part of such developments. According to research by the Green Press initiative (2011), the carbon imprint left by a paperback is miniscule in comparison to the imprint left by an iPad. Therefore, there is a point at which a reader can compare using an e-reader to using a paperback. The toxic wastes produced during e-waste disposal are challenging to handle and dispose of, in contrast to paperbacks that may be recycled to create new volumes. Therefore, both writers and consumers of the written work must learn to walk a thin line that environmental sustainability posits as per necessity.

Conclusion:

Conventionally, written texts are 'actual' written words, such as fiction, nonfiction books, articles and poems. However, with the advancement of technology and science in the twenty-first century, we can now find other ways of writing which does not necessarily have to be on print. Online articles, blogs, e-books, and other non-physical reads are all possibilities. Twitterature will not be the first or final Internet phenomena in the field of language and literature. Twitterature, despite its irregularity, can be regarded a literary work due to its chronological order in the transitory phase of literature. Even when the concepts are disjointed, the context remains and the reader can still understand what the author is saying which contributes to major success of tiny fiction and witty quotes.

The mighty spread of social media platforms as publishing units themselves provides convenience to aspiring writers alongside flexibility. The opinion from the readers through the comment section in a post or a tweet provides immediate feedback on the written work which allows the author of the present generation to know what their readers desire. For every outcome, there will persist debatable crevices and the purview of literature can be no exception to it. Twitterature and E-literature may be at its erratic stage, however, with the ever-progressing digitalised world, these new genres may become the reference points when defining literary phenomena in the future. In a world of print and void called the internet, “*We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories.*” - Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid’s Tale*, 1985, p. 42, Chapter 10).

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