

Play Theory and Literature: An Interview With Professor Massimo Verdicchio

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In the following is an article of dialogue between Professor Massimo Verdicchio and Professor Huang Kaihong. Professor Huang Kaihong, along with the help from Professor Wang Jinlong, carried out the interview on the topic of the relation between play theory and literature with Professor Massimo Verdicchio. On the one hand, Professor Huang Kaihong points out that play theory has been stemmed and developed from game theory but pushed forward a further step in its application to the analysis of literary works, while Professor Massimo Verdicchio regards play theory just as another approach to the appreciation of literary works. Both Professors agree on that literary works can be analyzed and appreciated from different perspectives, and they also discussed about something concerning the ethics in literature. The article ends with the correspondence via email between Professor Massimo Verdicchio and Professor Huang Kaihong on exchanging more personal opinions towards play theory's crucial issues.

Keywords: interview, relation between play theory and literary works, ethics

Massimo Verdicchio is professor emeritus of Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. He has written on Dante's *Commedia* and the philosophy of Benedetto Croce. He has also written on the Chinese lyric of Tao Qian, Du Fu, and Li Shangyin. He was giving lectures on comparative literature in English as a visiting professor at Southwest University of Science and Technology (SWUST) from September to November, 2017. During this period of time he was interviewed on the topic of play theory and literature by Professor Huang Kaihong (and Professor Wang Jinlong, who made the introduction and got the interview realized), professor of English from SWUST. In the interview, the relation between play theory and literature was discussed. While Professor Huang Kaihong argues that play theory is a new breakthrough of game theory applied to literary criticism, Professor Verdicchio claims that play theory is really only another approach to literary works. In addition, both professors discussed the issue of ethics and literature. The following is their interview (the first part of the whole interview): (Notes: V for Professor Massimo Verdicchio; H for Professor Huang Kaihong; W for Professor Wang Jinlong).

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WANG Jin-long, MA of English language and literature, Associate Professor of English, School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Mianyang, Sichuan, China.

W: Professor Massimo Verdicchio, I'm glad to introduce Professor Huang Kaihong to you for an interview on the topic of Game Theory. Prof. Huang has been interested in game theory for a long time. Up to now he has published some papers in journals concerning this topic.

V: But you know, game theory is not my topic. I mean, game theory is not my academic research focus.

W: Well, anyway, you can give your ideas concerning game theory.

V: Oh yes, I see.

H: Professor Massimo Verdicchio, it's my great honor to have the opportunity to conduct this interview with you on the topic of game theory. Here I'd like to discuss game theory a little further on to sth. new...

V: Sth. different.

H: Yes, sth. different, but sth. new too, because I use the term "play theory" instead of game theory. Maybe we can have a talk about it with sth. new and different.

V: Sure.

H: Well, as far as I know, you are an expert in comparative literature. Then what is the field that you are interested in as to your academic research?

V: Literature. More specifically speaking, comparative literature of English, Italian, French, and German, and now Tang poetry in translation.

H: How about theory? Comparative literature theory, I mean.

V: Literary theory.

H: I believe that comparative literature is fading away.

V: Is what? Sorry?

H: ...is declining or disappearing. Is this the case?

V: No, I don't think so, because it can never disappear. Departments of Comparative Literature may close down, but not the idea of comparative literature or literary theory. Where there is literature, there is the theory of literature; because whether right or wrong, the issue is always the way we read literature. We have always a theory when approaching literature. When I read literature, I read it according to a theory, or I read it and then I think of a theory, or I can develop a theory. So I think what you mean is that there are a lot of theories of literature, such as formalism, structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, etc., that are getting us nowhere. So in this sense I totally agree with you. But not theory per se is in decline because reading is doing theory and vice versa. Only various approaches are fading away because they are no longer practical and useful for the time being.

H: You mean just the approaches we are using are no longer useful?

V: Exactly! Only the approaches are dying out. You know, we have had colonial, post-colonial, modern, and post-modern approaches etc. Approaches are always changing, but theory will always be there; however we define it. But theories are not the rules with which we read in literature, for there are no rules to read literature. There is only theory. I guess that when you call reading literature with a new theory, you just mean a new approach to literature.

H: Yes, that's it.

V: You have a theory. You have a game theory. You think that reading literature is like reading a game?

H: Er... in my opinion, yes! In my opinion, everything is a game. Every activity is a game. Every behavior is a game. Every person...

V: OK, yeah?

H: Every person's life is a game.

V: OK?

H: Or even the universe is a game.

V: So, basically what you are saying, game is a metaphor.

H: A metaphor?

V: Yea, a metaphor, because basically you see everything as a game, and a game is just a metaphor to allow you to understand the universe, from literature to family, and things like that. But, tell me how you define the term "game"?

H: I define "game" as a kind of movement an action, or the moving process of anything, any affair.

V: This is a bit vague. Can you be more specific?

H: Yea. From the very minor standpoint or from the micro-standpoint...

V: Just minor. When you say "game", I think right away of rules.

H: Oh, you mean sports?

V: Yeah, sports like soccer, volleyball, basketball, and all those activities people take part in. Is play not the same? Is play not a game? When you say play or game I think about rules. And the rules do not apply to the universe. You know, Aristotle made rules for Greek tragedy in his *Poetics* but poets are always breaking the rules. Rules are for critics. Rules make their lives easier. No great writer writes according to the rules.

H: Well, I have just developed a game theory into a play theory.

V: Oh? A game theory into a play theory?

H: Yes, and I think it's my discovery.

V: OK. Can you explain it to me so that I can get a better idea?

H: OK. Game is a matter of facts, maybe. You can set rules between or among the players. Well...

V: Well, there are no players here. There are no rules.

H: For a play there should be some players. Sometimes you yourself are just the player. You are the sole player.

V: But where are the other players in the play?

H: If you are the sole player, the players are all in your mind and, especially in literature, the player is the author himself/herself, together with all his characters inside the book he/she has been depicting.

V: Yeah? There's only one player?

H: Yeah, in a sense there's only one player.

V: One but not two or more players as in a game?

H: Only one player sometimes. But in the author's mind, he/she has a variety of characters. He/she plays as one role (referring to as one of all the characters respectively on the same occasion in the literary work) when he/she is writing.

V: Right! But, most of the time a writer doesn't really have a clear view of what is happening in his/her work. Most writers don't actually know what they have written until they are finished writing.

H: Intuitively? I mean they are writing intuitively?

V: They do not write intuitively. They take great pains at writing. A writer is a master craftsman. He constructs his sentences slowly and carefully. This, however, does not mean that he knows what to do next. Because poetic or rhetorical language is always the issue here and a great writer knows that he has no total control over his language. In fact, it is usually the opposite. As St. Augustine said: We don't speak language; it is language that speaks us. So the writer is the first one to know what he/she wrote.

H: So...

V: In a game there are rules so that one can make sure that the game goes according to the way it should be played, but in literature there are no rules. The writer makes his own rules as he goes but, most of the time he is not sure where he is going. So we play the game, you and I. You are the author, I'm the reader, but I don't know what games we are playing. So as a reader or a critic I make (arbitrary) rules as to what literature is and I apply them, so I can read it. You see what I mean? But you go ahead. You want to say something?

H: I regard play theory very broadly: anything concerning willpower which means a process in which the participants' power or capacity has been accumulated and applied to any activity. This activity is going throughout all the participants' life. But anyhow I focus on and advocate the positive and active play rather than the negative and passive play, even though some plays are not positive at all. What about you? How do you think about willpower in play theory?

V: I don't understand why willpower comes into this. Of course, it is always a question of willpower but I don't understand how it applies to a theory of play. First of all I don't do play; second, I believe that if you do play you have to focus on both positive and negative play, though you can just do the positive.

H: Yes, I only appreciate the positive play and pay my attention to it. Furthermore, I am interested in the question of ethics, which I regard as a game. You may regard ethics as a game but it is not a game. It is very serious business especially when the ethics board finds you guilty of some ethical transgression. My development of game theory concerns the relations between ethics in literary theory and comparative theory, which I also regard as a game. So this is also the focus of my interview.

V: Fine, but you cannot regard everything as a game otherwise "game theory loses all meaning. There has to be something that is not a game. But you say ethics?

H: Yes, ethical literary criticism. You once mentioned Nabokov's word "Morality or ethics is the price the writer has to pay". You say there is nothing as ethics in literature because literary characters are out of the writer's control when the writer is inventing an artistic work. The issue of ethics is just a concern in the reader's mind?

V: Oh! Yeah. I don't believe that there is such a thing as ethics in literature at all! You'll have to be more specific. Ethics and literature don't go together. Ethics is something you apply to literature but one does not write "ethically" unless one is writing a religious or a political treatise. There are critics who believe that literature should be ethical, but no writer ever thinks that. A writer just writes; it is a critic that reads what the writer writes, ethically. I think you have mentioned Nabokov, right? *Lolita*, right? *Lolita*, is a

good example of a novel that has been considered immoral because of some of its content, but from the point of view of the author, the novel has nothing to do with issues of morality. What Nabokov meant to write had everything to do with poetry and literature (i.e., with the American poet Edgar Allan Poe) than with the whole world. Nabokov never meant to write about a young woman who is desired by an older man, Humbert Humbert (Of course, to a certain extent, Nabokov does not approve of Humbert Humbert's behavior. In the novel he is really a pathetic and an innocuous character). These are fictional characters that arise from the imagination of Edgar Allan Poe. When you read *Lolita* as a book where someone is trying to seduce a 13-year-old girl, and you are obviously shocked by it, you are not reading the novel that Nabokov wrote but appreciating the story itself. When you start raising ethical questions that have to do with sexual perversion, you are not reading Nabokov's novel anymore. You are using his novel to address similar issues that in the novel are equally condemned. But this is the fate of reading great literature, to be read literally, and to be misread. Nabokov, as every other great writer, realizes that this is the price he has to pay in order to write great literature. Of course there are contemporary post-colonial novels that pose ethical questions, but a great novel is never "ethical", never moralizes, but confronts the reader with moral issues and leaves the reader to decide.

When I teach *Lolita*, my students are equally shocked by the novel and don't believe that Nabokov is just being literary, and I have a hard time trying to convince them of the contrary. The same goes for James Joyce's *Ulysses*. As you know, the book was censored for years because there are a lot of scenes in *Ulysses* that can be considered immoral but when Joyce wrote them, he thought that he was perfectly justified to show a man masturbate. For Joyce it was natural given the circumstances of the novel, but it became immoral when taken out of context.

H: So here's the point: The author himself/herself doesn't have any ethical opinion in mind in advance at the time when he's/she's writing the book, but the readers do have. They have their own viewpoint or perspective to consider whether the book is ethical or not. As a result, we have at least two standpoints, one from the author, the other from the readers?

V: Not really. The writer has also an ethical point of view, but he just does not write an ethical novel. It's like a carpenter who is very moral but when he makes a table, he does not make an ethical table. Ethics and morality is not something you write but something you read. People read ethically because they don't read what writers are saying. It's easy to say this is good and this is bad, but it is more difficult to read a great novel as one should. Reading is very subjective. For some *Lolita* is immoral; for some it is not. For some it is a great novel; for some it is not. This kind of judgment whether positive or negative has nothing to do with the novel, but it has everything to do with the reader. For one tragic example, someone who became so infatuated with J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* that he went on to kill John Lennon.

(This is the end of the first part of the interview. Then on Nov. 27, 2019, Huang Kaihong conducted another interview on the same topic as the previous interview with Professor Massimo Verdicchio by email. The following are Huang Kaihong's new interview questions, which are followed by Professor Massimo Verdicchio's answers to Huang Kaihong's questions concerning play theory. The whole interview ends up with Huang Kaihong's newly raised issues for further research.)

Dear Mr. Massimo,

How are you? Long time no chat! I'm writing to you to have an interview about the last chat topic on the relationship between ethical literary criticism and play theory. Would you be kind enough to send me your present opinion about that topic by answering the following questions? Thank you a lot of millions!

Professor Massimo Verdicchio, it's my honor to have an interview with you on the topic of "play theory and the issue of morality in *Lolita*". I just have several questions as follows:

Question #1: How do you think about the term "play theory" when it is used to analyze literary works such as *Lolita* or the like?

Question #2: In my opinion, I just regard *Lolita* as a novel peculiar in its play of words as far as its contents are concerned, since it is considered a pure artistic work and has nothing to do with the real world morality labeled by some censorship agents. What do you think about it as to its author's intention? Do you think it just a pure play of literary words? Or do you think it's a novel which is deeply concerned with morality?

Question #3: From the theory of ethical literary criticism initiated by a Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao, who is professor of English Language and Literature, any literary work should contain some ethical teaching. Do you agree with him?

Question #4: In your mind (as far as I could imagine from the previous interview), you think that literary works are something spontaneously or intuitively written down by their creators, who should/or may not have any preset intentions for their works? How would you make that clear?

Dear Walter Play,

It's great to hear from you after a long time.

I am glad to see that you are still working on your theory of play.

Here are the answers to your questions:

Answer #1: Yes. Play theory can have an important role in analyzing literary works. Depends, of course, on how it's done.

Answer #2: I agree that *Lolita* is an important work for play theory precisely because it is a play of different literary conventions. Nabokov, the author, has said himself that he did not intend to write an ethical work.

Answer #3: I think that it is inevitable that a literary work contains some moral lesson. I don't agree that these works teach moral lessons because it depends a lot on the reader. Nie Zheng Zhao, for instance, can see ethical lessons in a work (and probably in all works) and others do not. For example, I would not because I don't think that literature contains moral lessons but one can always find evidence of them in novels like *Lolita*, for instance.

Answer #4: I don't think I ever said that literary works are written spontaneously or intuitively. On the contrary, to write a novel is a lot of work, and takes a lot of writing and rewriting. What I probably said, and I believe, is that the objective of a writer is never to teach moral lessons: Moral philosophers do that but not writers of literature.

As for play theory, I agree that it can analyze literary works but, once again, it depends on how it is done.

Dear Walter Play, I hope you are satisfied with my answers.

Glad to hear from you again.

Till next time

Massimo

Thus ends Professor Massimo's reply.

In the end, Huang Kaihong stated his personal own viewpoint about the definition of play theory and left some more issues for further arguing and researching in the previous same email letter to Professor Massimo:

Definition of play theory—From my understanding, play theory is a kind of theoretical tool which can be used to analyze any phenomenon universally. Literature is a kind of phenomena of humankind's activities, so we can use play theory to analyze any existing literary works.

Play theory is derived from game theory. But play theory has a much wider and broader meaning; namely, it can refer to anything and/or anyone existing in the universe, and even the universe itself can be understood as a result of play, since it means any moving process of anything and/or anyone.

The essence of play theory used in literary works is to see the works as results of play. The key terms for play theory are mainly as follows:

Participants (or players)

Actions

Positive play(er)

Passive play(er)

Play conditions/surroundings/situations

Play attitude(s)

Play levels/planes

Play fields/ground

Play psychology

Play process

Play results

Psychological/physical preparations for play

Play relations with other issues

...

Of course, Play theory is a brand-new idea and still under trial. Maybe we'll have something more to chat later on. Thank you for your kindness to offer me interviews!

Truly Yours

Huang Kaihong/Walter Play