

What Is Literature? A Wittgensteinian Reading of the Language Game of Literature and its Manifestation in *Trout Fishing in America*

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Abstract

The question “What is literature?” has always aroused controversial answers throughout the history of literary criticism. Classic theories of literature have tried to characterize the essence of literature through proposing a unique textual property common to all instances of literary works, yet this essentialist approach has always faced an intractable challenge: with the emergence of “avant-garde” works, which did not have that particular “property” yet somehow came to be regarded as “literature”, the explanatory power of such theories were challenged. In response to this challenge, in this paper, it will be argued that, from the later Wittgenstein’s perspective, an analysis of the rules governing literary writing demonstrates that literature is a language game wherein there are no “wrong moves”. One advantage of this new definition, despite its essentialist character, will be that it will face relatively fewer challenges in considering “avant-garde” works as literature. Finally, it will be demonstrated how this new Wittgensteinian definition of literature contributes to an understanding of the “reflexive” meaning of Brautigan’s *Trout Fishing in America*.

Keywords: literature (literary composition), Ludwig Wittgenstein, language games, rules, Richard Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America*

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