

Epistemological Echoes: Ancient Texts Shaping Contemporary and Literary Thought

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2026-140311169

Volume: 14

Issue: 3

Month: June

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 19.04.2026

Accepted: 20.05.2026

Published Online: 01.06.2026

Citation:

Glory Blandeena, T.
and Manmohan Singh.
“Epistemological Echoes:
Ancient Texts Shaping
Contemporary and Literary
Thought.” *Shanlax
International Journal of
English*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2026,
pp. 37–44.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/
english.v14i3.11169](https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v14i3.11169)



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Abstract

This study explores how the epistemological shift from sacred wisdom to the modern secular system is constructed, validated, and represented in modern society and literature. This study adopts a semantic and theological transformation of the term “Shastra” in the 21st century globalized religious landscape. This dialogue chiefly focuses on how ancient texts established knowledge between Sathya Shastra (“The Treatise of Truth”) and Dharma Shastra (“Treatise on Duty”) through an intercultural hermeneutic interdisciplinary study. Both Indian Shastra and the canonical text as Middle Eastern/Western thought act as fair statutes and are viewed as a shared “horizon of meaning” ensuring that ancient laws are applied to the modern context. Whether it is Sutras, Sathya or Dharma it is fundamental principles to any doctrine (Achara Samskaras) but these concepts and texts are marked with a blend of tradition and modernity providing a comprehensive manual for social, ethical and religious conduct. By evaluating these two distinct theories of justification, Shruti(oral/eternal) and scriptura (written/historical), we can intersect culturally for spiritual liberation (Moksha) within Indian traditional philosophy and merge our world with a new unique perspective. “To understand a text is not to relive the past but to participate in a present meaning.” – Truth and method (1960) Knowledge is rearticulated through shifting cultural and ideological power structures related to identity, gender, and social issues. Thus, contemporary literature preserves abstract concepts such as faith but reinterprets and conceptualizes them to reciprocate for modern social realities.

Keywords: Wisdom Literature, Narrative Identity, Comparative Literature, Cultural Hermeneutics, Sathya Shastra, Dharma Shastra

Introduction

The word “Shastra” etymologically is derived from the Sanskrit root (sas) meaning “to teach, instruct, govern and command” to teach, instruct, govern, and command, combined with the suffix (tra), which literally means instrumental. The semantic meaning of Shastra encompasses a broad range of systematic knowledge, from divine to technical manuals. Philosophically, it is defined as “that which has been instructed or decreed.” Shastra serves as a guide for what we should do and what we should not do (Vidhi and Nishedha), referring to any authoritative body of knowledge, treatise, or manual of instruction in a specialized field. In Hinduism, it functions as a pramana, a valid means of attaining knowledge that cannot be known through simple perception or reasoning. In Christianity, the term Shastra is not an inherent concept, but it is practiced in the Christian doctrine as sacred scriptures called Sathya Shastras or “Treatise of Truth.” Likewise, “Shastra” and “Scripture” are often swapped in their connotations within different cultures.

People in Britain read literature for social and political reasons rather than for the love of the subject. According to John Sutherland, professor of Modern English Literature at University College London and a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, literature accretes educationally, especially the canon exists primarily to winnow out from the chaff what Arnold calls 'The best that has been thought and said in the world' literature's richest harvest.' The state-ordained curriculum by the British government, via its education ministries, had taken on itself the responsibility for establishing the canon of British Literature as prescribed for the school examination that are the gateway to university studies. As a result, literature was shaped by ideology in the historical context of the early 1800s, with classical studies (Greek and Latin) dominating the field of education at elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge.

A modern example of the more practical wisdom might be Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac," source of the wise saying "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." Wisdom has been a central concept in philosophy, religion, and literature in ancient civilizations. The earliest wisdom literature comes from Sumerian and Egyptian texts. In the Sumerian tradition, wisdom was considered a divine principle given by the gods, as recorded in proverbs and myths. Wisdom was a major theme in Greek philosophy. Socrates equated wisdom with knowing one's own ignorance, whereas Plato argued that wisdom is the highest form of knowledge. Aristotle distinguished between practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), defining wisdom as the ability to deliberate well on the good life. In Roman philosophy, wisdom (*sapientia*) is regarded as the virtue of the Stoic sage. Cicero and Seneca viewed wisdom as self-discipline and rational living, which are essential for achieving inner tranquility (*ataraxia*).

Wisdom literature is found in many cultures and religious traditions, especially in Indian texts like the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Tirukkural, and Chinese works such as the Analects of Confucius. Similarly, western canonical writings like Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. Despite these cultural differences, these texts share common themes to guide individuals toward ethical living

and social responsibilities. Consequently, wisdom literature continues to influence both classical and contemporary literary works offering profound insights into the human psyche. Wisdom literature is not limited to one tradition or religion but it represents universal belief system with a deeper understanding of ethical principles'. Since wisdom literature has timeless relevance these texts still speaks to modern society because they address questions that are universal and eternal. Although the inscribed words are amalgamated by different people at different point in time centuries ago it still invites readers to explore the complexities of life, seeking truth and cultivating a sense of harmony with themselves, others and people across the world. This is what the ancients were commended for, By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." (Heb: 11v 2 & 3) Thus, ancient canonical texts were also called as prophetic poetic books.

Literature Review

According to Jean Francois Lyotard, knowledge is historically produced and culturally mediated. Ancient texts operate as subtexts that shape modern moral reasoning and are not epistemologically autonomous. Knowledge evolves through reinterpretation rather than being substituted. Wisdom literature is often interpreted as overtly didactic, neglecting its narrative, symbolic, and experiential dimensions. Existing studies largely neglect reader-centered, interdisciplinary, and secular approaches, thereby limiting a holistic understanding of wisdom as a dynamic and evolving literary mode. Scholars like Murphy, Crenshaw, and Perdue emphasize wisdom as a genre rooted in didactic reflection, moral instruction, and experiential knowledge, but their analyses remain textually and historically confined to canonical books. There is a research gap in examining how wisdom paradigms reappear in contemporary narrative texts, including novels, allegories, and popular fiction, such as *The Alchemist* and *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* by Paula Coelho. Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity posits that our personal identity is constructed through the stories we tell about our

lives, connecting past events and future ventures into a coherent, through dynamic self this “Narrative Identity” is a response to the question of how we can remain the same person over time and also change. Our narrative identities are not fixed. We can reinterpret our past and present through new narratives, making our identities dynamic and open to new understandings. Narrative identity has a moral dimension, as it involves not only an account of our actions but also the ethical values that shape our lives.

Research Gap

According to Literary critic Timothy Aubry, contemporary readers in the United States “treat novels less as a source of aesthetic satisfaction than as a practical dispenser of advice or a form of therapy” Wisdom literature often overlooks women-centered wisdom narratives and marginalized perspectives, and there is a lack of feminist and postcolonial readings of wisdom literature and its modern adaptations. The expression of wisdom in graphic novels, films, social media narratives, and storytelling fiction remains largely unexamined, as does wisdom communication in the digital age. Conceptual ambiguity necessitates a clear theoretical model that distinguishes wisdom literature from contemporary literature in modern contexts. Despite extensive scholarship on classical wisdom literature, there remains a significant gap in exploring how wisdom traditions are recontextualized in contemporary narrative texts and adult fiction.

There is a lack of systematic studies on non-religious wisdom narratives that convey ethical insights, self-realization, and life guidance outside sacred traditions. There is a limited interdisciplinary framework in the wisdom literature and moral development theory. Traditional scholarship rarely considers young adults the primary audience for wisdom literature. Insufficient research has been conducted on wisdom themes and adaptation, simplified or re-imagined in contemporary fiction. Existing research is predominantly text-centered, emphasizing themes and structures rather than reader impact. There is a need for empirical studies on how readers interpret, internalize, and apply wisdom themes in their personal and social lives.

Theoretical Framework

T S Eliot’s concept of tradition is the foundational modernist framework for understanding how ancient and canonical texts continue to shape modern literary thought. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), he opines that tradition involves an awareness of the entire literary past and its simultaneous presence within the present. He states that no poet or literary work exists in isolation; instead, each new work alters the existing literary canon. This establishes that ancient texts remain active and dynamic rather than static historical artifacts. The creation of a new work causes a re-evaluation of earlier works, demonstrating the continuity and transformation of the literary tradition. The paper analyzes ancient texts not only as religious or philosophical documents but also as continuing knowledge systems that influence contemporary literary imagination and modern social thought.

Methodology

This study is descriptive in nature, and this deliberation reinterprets wisdom in multigenre contemporary realities. Data was amalgamated with both Primary texts and secondary sources for comparative analysis between wisdom literature texts such as “Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes” and literary text for instance “Rabbi Ben Ezra” Poem by Robert Browning (1864), “The Waste Land” Poem by T S Eliot (1922), “Of Studies”, “Of Truth”, and “Of Friendship”, Essay’s by Francis Bacon (1625), “The Alchemist” (1993) and “ By the river Piedra I sat down and wept” Novel (1996) by Paula Coelho Fiction. Secondary sources include academic research papers, journals and articles.

Historical Background of the Shastras in the 21st Century

Shastra vs Scriptures in Hindu traditions, Shastras (like the Vedas) shruti are often considered as eternal and unauthored primarily of oral traditions (apauruseya) manifested at creation. “Shastras” (from the root shas) literally denotes “that which instructs or rules.” In other words, Shastra operates within a cyclical view of time and reincarnation as a manual for living and liberation. In the Bhagavad Gita, the analogy of a radiant lamp is presented in chapter

10, verse 11. Where Lord Krishna states that out of compassion for them (mankind), I, who dwells within their hearts, destroy the darkness born of ignorance, with the “luminous lamp of knowledge”(Atma-bhava-stho -Jnana-dipenabhasvata).

Shastras are broadly categories as follows:

- Dharma Shastra: Manuals on ethics, social duties and religious laws (Manusmriti)
- Artha Shastra: Treatises on statecraft, economics and military strategy (Kautilya’s Artha Shastra).
- Kama Shastra: The works related to the pursuit of pleasure, love and emotional fulfillment.
- Moksha Shastra: Philosophical texts dealing with spiritual liberation and the six (schools of thought) Darshanas
- Nyaya Shastra: Logical and reasoning Method
- Vedanta – Shastra: Perfection of Knowledge of God, Man and Discipline

Technical Science

- Vastu Shastra: Science of architecture and design.
- Natyashastra: The art of performing arts, theatre and dance.
- Ayurveda: The science of life and medicine.
- Jyotisha: Astronomy and Astrology

At the outset, this study focuses primarily on Dharma Shastra(Manusmriti)the amalgamation of (Logos and Rhema) is used in philosophical context to refer to sentences or propositions central to syllogistic logic. In ancient Greek, logos is a multifaceted word, meaning “word, ”” reason,” or “speech.” It also signifies a fundamental principle in the universe derived from the word logos “to say” or “to speak.” Logos describes the power of rational thought and discourse, the rational structure of the cosmos, and the divine reason that brings order and meaning to all things. The core meaning of the word/speech encompasses any spoken or written communication. The faculty of thinking rational thought with reason and the ability to discern and understand the logical way of literature.. Some Stoics interpret logos as the immanent rational order of the universe, a divine presence within all things. In 1966, Philip Rieff suggested that an emerging therapeutic culture would transform how and why people read, and further prophesied that literature would in the near future be “preserved mainly for

its therapeutic potentials.”Today, verbalization or articulation has become a,n Art Therapy“Art Therapy” and personal journaling, poetry writing and story writing has become another new art called “CreativeBibliotherapy” Creative Bibliotherapy. This therapeutic impact is cost-effective and safe for a lifetime without a drug. It is evident that words and art have the power to heal people and improve our society. Quoting Margaret Atwood,“a word after a word after a word is power,” is indeed truly powerful.

During the Elizabethan age, parable-like narratives, morality tales, and mystery plays were not merely treated as entertainment but were widely expounded as moral and religious instructions. Although this practice gradually declined after the Reformation, its influence remained strong in English imagination and dramatic art. At present, the storytelling art or (Art Therapy) functions as a public medium for teaching ethical and spiritual laws. Elizabethan audience were deeply accustomed to allegorical interpretation and served as a kind of public exposition, blending symbolism, social critique and moral teaching.Parables and dramatic spectacles were not simply enacted; they were interpreted, debated and understood as reflections of the spiritual struggles of both the individual soul and the wider society.In 1980s-2000s postmodern constructive therapies began with Michael White and David Epston calling it as narrative therapy where people construct meaning through stories and re-authoring life narratives.In 2000s-2010 it is known as integrative and third wave therapies for example Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT). Contemporary trends have advanced further, such as trauma-informed therapy (EMDR), culturally adapted healing therapies, technology-integrated therapy, online therapy, neuroscience, and psychotherapy. As profound Turkish proverb says, “A kind word opens an iron door.” is a traditional folk saying in Middle Eastern wisdom traditions however, the closet canonical idea is “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Pr: 15 v1. The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge, and addressing the readers with a smileignites better feelings and sets the stage for discourse.

Analysis of the Primary Texts

The phrase “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Psalms, chapter 119: v105) metaphorically describes how scriptures illuminate light and guide mankind while the world seems dark and bleak with doubts and dangerous paths. The word scripture is derived from the Latin word “Scriptura” denoting written word with authority. In canonical writings, scripture is viewed as a historical revelation given by God to prophets at specific times to specific persons. Therefore, Sathya Shastra represents the canonical text, positioning it as the ultimate “manual of instruction” for spiritual and ethical life by showing the path to enlightenment through Dharma Shastra. “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, I find no pleasure in them” (Ecc: 12). v1.

In the cultural context, some modern spiritual teachers and scholars use the term Shastra broadly to mean transcendental literature or revealed truth. Traditional religious faith has been declining in the scientific age. However, humans feel the need for moral guidance, emotional comfort, and spiritual meaning. Therefore, Arnold believed that great literature, especially poetry, could fulfil these needs. Thus, literature functions as a moral and cultural guide, as religion manifested centuries ago. The characters of wisdom literature, first of all, refer to the teacher and the student in similar relationships, such as parents, children, and well-wishers. Solomon is the archetypal wisdom figure of the canonical writings as their author.

As we observe proverbial verses suggesting discernment, discipline and wisdom in these lines

“Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you. Pr 2: v11

“My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves as a father the son he delights in.” Pr 3: v 11 & 12.

“My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgement and discretion; they will be life for you...” Pr 3: v 21.

Since “Wisdom” is grammatically feminine in Hebrew, she is personified as a woman, as in “Proverbs”9 v1 Wisdom has built her house; she has set up its seven pillars. As a result, Wisdom is

very significant and pivot for our understanding of epistemological echoes of wisdom in these lines, “She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.” Pr 3: v15 emphasising that wisdom is not fixed to a particular era or belief system but applies to all genders. Thus, wisdom surpasses all ages and continues to echo in the contemporary world with modern literary thought, and this personification becomes an even larger ontological study. In the Book of “Ecclesiastes” shows us one of the wise man’s voice, called “Qoheleth” in Hebrew, and translated as “the Teacher,” The well-known quote saying: “Vanity of vanities,” says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! “All is vanity” (Ecc 1:2). “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?” Generations come and go, but the earth remains forever.

In Francis Bacon’s Essay’s from counsels, civil and moral by John Haviland (1625) like “Of Studies”- Studies serve for delight, for ornament and for ability, “Of Truth”- Truth is a naked and open daylight, and “Of Friendship”- Friendship doubles joys and halves grief’s, reveals a deep therapeutic process of mental refinement, emotional balance and moral healing beyond acquiring knowledge. The book emphasizes how literature and its study acts as a tool for self-correction and psychological growth even in the 21st century. Similarly quoting Alexander Pope lines “A little learning is a dangerous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring” (An Essay on criticism) stresses on study and disciplined life

Browning was one of the great Jewish poets and scholars of the 12th century. In his poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864) echoes the biblical idea of “Remember thy Creator in the days of your youth” Ecc: 12 v 1 strongly reflecting that same message of faith, age and divine purpose embodying a philosophy that encourages acceptance of life’s temporal limits and impregnates moral and spiritual growth in midst’s of adversity. Youth is for dispute and age for counsel; each year, each period of a man’s life is but the necessary step to the next

“Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made:

*Our times are in His Hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all nor be afraid!"*
(1-6) lines

The poem affirms in faith and tenor the readers about the divine order and promotes hope, self-understanding, emotional restoration, and inner peace. The culmination of the poetic lines is assuring, with trust and faith in humanity, reflecting on human life as a designed journey. A central metaphor symbolizing human life as (clay) on a potter's wheel (God), where human life is divinely planned, and what looks like in completeness in old age is actually part of God's design. In stanza 29, the speaker claims that God intentionally created human life as a process, not as something complete at birth, as a finished or whole perfect image. Humans were not created as finished products; instead, life is shaped like a gradual spiritual journey. Therefore, incomplete achievements are not signs of defeat but part of how humans are prepared for something greater. Furthermore, it claims that the soul continues beyond physical life. Humans may not finish their work, but God will complete the design.

"My times be in Thy hand! Perfect the cup as planned!" (Stanza 32)

Matthew Arnold believed that Literature could replace religion as a moral guidance and social harmony since religion could no longer hold society together; literature stepped in to civilize the society through emotion, imagination and morality. Poetry is a literary genre that focuses on morals, imparting practical and philosophical guidance for human life. This type of canonical literature is found in many ancient civilizations, including Hebrew, Greek, Egyptian, and Indian traditions. Instead of telling stories of heroes or historical events, the goal of wisdom literature is not merely to provide information but to shape a person's character and guide them towards practical and mature decisions on a daily basis. It seeks to explore fundamental questions about existence, ethical conduct, suffering, happiness, and the meaning of life through reflection and lived experience rather than through narrative history. Its teachings are often universal in scope, addressing common human experiences across cultures and time. Themes such as identity, justice,

self-control, the transience of life, and the pursuit of knowledge recur in reflective forms such as proverbs, poems, dialogues, and didactic narratives.

In the poem "The Waste Land" by T S Eliot (1922) we perceive a classic image of existential absurdity where human life collapses into nothingness echoing futility and deprivation. "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow, Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, You cannot say, or guess, for you know only A heap of broken images" (19-20) lines Similarly the absurd struggle to find growth is noticed or spiritual bareness in the lines. "The dry stone had no sound of water. Only There is shadow under this red rock," there is no water but only rock, rock, and no water, and the sandy road. A bleak, absurd vision of humanity moving like the dead: alive physically but dead spiritually. Either ancient scriptural sayings or 21 century literature it echoes the same thought "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." Ecc: 1:v 9

Coelho's *The Alchemist* is regarded as his monumental work; his writings are full of optimistic views, and his characters always face many obstacles in their lives, but they never give up and never lose hope. The objective of studying "The Alchemist is to highlight how a simple shepherd boy named Santiago achieves his dreams and transforms himself on his quest. Santiago meets a powerful alchemist who guides him spiritually and teaches him that fear is the greatest obstacle to achieving one's dreams. At the pyramids, Santiago digs for treasure but is attacked by thieves, and one thief makes Santiago recollect his original dream of finding treasure. Eventually, Santiago realizes that the treasure was back in Spain all long and he returns to the old church and finds a chest of gold and jewels. As a result, the protagonist learns to listen to his heart and understand the "soul of the world" a spiritual force connecting to life. The novel symbolizes dreams, courage, spiritual growth, perseverance, destiny, and self-discovery. Santiago's journey appears to be a remarkable sign symbolizing wisdom that is found in the process of the journey and not in the destination. Hence, Santiago finds his own personal legend to fulfil his dream and quest to complete his successful journey.

The novel “By the river Piedra I sat down and wept” is a spiritual-romantic fiction about love, faith, and self-discovery. The story is narrated by a young woman named Pilar who lives a quiet and ordinary life in Spain. Pilar’s journey from fear to faith and self-acceptance mirrors self-knowledge, leading to transformation. Her friend becomes a source of spiritual leader and preacher; as they travel together to different places in Spain and France, she begins to struggle emotionally and is seen torn between her rational mind and her growing spiritual awakening. She also fears about the concept of love because she thinks love can bring suffering but Pilar is surprised to see how her life had changed forever by a chance encountered with a childhood friend. (“my friend”) It is an experiential learning with insights taught by her friend that love and faith can co-exist together moreover; she also accepts both her emotions and her spiritual quest. Throughout the journey the novel explores themes like the feminine face of God, faith, sacrifice miracle and the idea that true love does not destroy spiritual purpose but can strengthen as a spiritual discipline. The novel symbolizes with a sense of hope, modern settings and language and can be read as contemporary literature to guide readers toward inner growth and meaningful living.

Results & Discussion

Ancient literary traditions are re-contextualized with modern literary works, showcasing continuity, revision, and transformation. It also focuses on how past and present literature functions and influences the social knowledge system. It enhances ethical values and literary theories beyond religion, resisting dominant knowledge power systems. Modern literature often functions as secular wisdom, replacing doctrinal instructions with lived experiences. Clifford Greetz opines that wisdom literature transcends religious boundaries and appears across cultures and periods. He also states that the wisdom literature perspective influences anthropological studies.

The term “Bildungsroman” was coined by Karl Morgenstern (a German philologist and literary critic) around the 19th century. Bildung means education or formation, and Roman means novel. Literally, it means “novel of formation” or “novel of growth” and

wisdom literature intersects in its shared concern with human growth, insight, and the pursuit of meaningful living. Although Wisdom Literature traditionally belongs to ancient philosophical and religious texts, bildungsroman novels represent a modern narrative form through which wisdom is dramatized rather than prescribed. Nicholas Maxwell, a philosopher in the United Kingdom, opines that academia ought to alter its focus from the acquisition of knowledge to seeking and promoting wisdom. This kind of rational thought he defines as the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others should emerge into new knowledge, and technological known facts ought to increase our power to act. He also cautions that this new knowledge may cause human harm as well as human good. However, he argues that the pursuit of knowledge is indeed valuable and good, but it should be considered as part of the broader task of improving wisdom.

Conclusion and Implications

This study shows how ancient wisdom continues to exert a significant influence on modern social realities, not as a rigid authoritative voice but as a dynamic source of knowledge that reverberates life. Ancient wisdom re-emerges in the contemporary context through narrative forms by addressing present-day concerns such as identity, ethical issues, responsibilities, and resistance rather than being merely confined to canonical texts or manuscripts. Hence, modern literature functions as an alternative epistemological insight where inherent ideas from ancient texts are revised to reflect lived experiences and marginalized voices. In this process, wisdom shifts from being static and hierarchical to dialogic and experiential, allowing literature to challenge dominant social systems and counter-discourses. Eventually, the continuity between ancient texts and modern systems reveals that knowledge is not linear but cumulative and evolving. Thus, the echoes of ancient texts revive, adapt and transform by upholding ethical values while re-shaping it to the social demands of the contemporary world. No literary work exists in isolation; instead, each new work alters the existing literary trajectory in order to demonstrate the continuity and transform the literary tradition. By reconceptualizing tradition

as a living system and emphasizing impersonality, Eliot provides a foundational modernist framework for understanding how ancient and canonical texts continue to shape modern literary thought.

“The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” -- T.S. Eliot

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