

JALDA's Interview with Professor Wendy Steiner

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Wendy Steiner is the Richard L. Fisher Professor of English Emerita at the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Steiner earned her B.A. from McGill



University in 1970 and both her M.Phil. and Ph.D. in English from Yale University in 1972 and 1974 respectively. After teaching at Yale (1974-1976) and the University of Michigan (1976-1979), she joined the Penn faculty in 1979. Promoted to associate professor three years later, she was named full professor in 1985. At Penn, she served as Chair of the English Department from 1995-1999, Founding Director of the Penn Humanities Forum from 1998-2010, Master of Modern Languages College House from 1985-1988, and director of the Penn/King's College Program in London from 1989-1990. Professor Steiner's fields are interartistic relations and literature in English of the 20th and 21st

centuries. Among her books on modern literature and visual art are *The Real Real Thing: The Model in the Mirror of Art* (2010); *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (2001); and *Pictures of Romance: Form Against Context in Painting and Literature* (1988). Professor Steiner has received awards from the Guggenheim, ACLS, and Mellon Foundations among others, and her cultural reviews have appeared widely in U.S. and British periodicals, including *The New York Times*, *London Review of Books*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Guardian*. Steiner has also created librettos and multi-media productions for two operas, *The Loathly Lady* (2009) and *Biennale* (2013), and co-created a real-time music visualization, *Traces on the Farther Side* (2011). Javad Khorsandi, Ph.D. student of English Language and Literature at Shiraz University has arranged this interview with Professor Steiner.

JK: ---- Thank you, dear Wendy, for accepting my invitation from JALDA to participate in this internet-based interview. It is a great pleasure for me to have an interview with you.

WS: ---- I'm so pleased you thought to ask me.

JK: ---- Could you please introduce yourself to our readers and share with us your literary and professional background/achievements? How about your current interests?

WS: ---- I spent my teaching career at the University of Pennsylvania from 1979 to 2013, where I was named the Richard L. Fisher Professor of English, serving as department chair and director of the Penn Humanities Forum, an interdisciplinary research and outreach center that I founded. My interests have always been interdisciplinary, and my seven authored books and six edited ones have typically focused on relations between literature and visual art. My awards include Guggenheim, ACLS, NEH, and Rockefeller Center Fellowships. Since retiring, I have focused on writing opera libretti, creating multimedia art installations, painting, and photography, and at the moment I am at work on a new scholarly book on beauty, women, and evolution.

JK: ---- I was introduced to your particular take on literature through your innovative thematic anthology entitled *Literature as Meaning* (2005). Actually I was fascinated by the way you presented literature to your readers: selecting a range of seemingly disparate texts and bringing them together to exemplify various subjects in literary themes and techniques. What exactly prompted you to take a different approach to anthology writing in literature?

WS: ---- This anthology probably struck many experts as retrograde, since they had been strictly trained, as had I, to distinguish verbal art from referential language. Formalist, structuralist, and semiotic criticism throughout the 20th and 21st centuries had insisted that it was an error to treat literature as straightforwardly “about the world,” since the function of art was supposedly to induce an aesthetic state of consciousness rather than to convey information about what existed beyond the text. I subscribed to this position for a long time, fascinated by the differences between literary and nonliterary uses of language. But with the rise of identity politics, nonfiction writing, and the internet, the distinction has become untenable. Besides, everyone has always learned about past and present realities from art, though we all understand that fiction is still “fictive.” Given the state of “truth” in political discourse and documentary media these days, it seems wrongheaded *not* to examine meaning in literature. Many novels, poems, and plays have changed fundamentally how people understand the world.

JK: ---- Over the years you have published many books and articles in comparative studies, examining the correspondences between literature and philosophy, literature and music, literature and the arts, etc. For example, in *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude*

Stein (1978), you discussed the connections between literary and visual portraits. Or in an introduction to *The Sign in Music and Literature* (1981), you compared “the essence of music” and “the essence of literary aesthetics” (Steiner, 9). Now, with your wealth of experience in comparative studies, how do you interpret the current state of the field?

WS: --- I am very happy to see the new interest all over the world in aesthetics and interdisciplinary approaches to the arts. Rather than imposing disciplinary blinkers and attempting to treat texts in isolation from everything else, academics are asking broader questions about the function of the arts in society. This is important, first, because artists themselves have always been concerned with such questions, and second, because humanities departments were making themselves more and more irrelevant to our culture. At least, this is the case in the States.

JK: --- Considering the works of scholars in the field, particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there seems to be a lack of consensus about the state and the function of comparative literature. What do you think the future holds for comparative literature and where do you think it is going?

WS: --- Comparative literature functions very differently from country to country. In the States, where few English speakers are competent in a second or third language, comparative literature is usually a program rather than a department and serves as a home for theory and any research that crosses disciplines. In Canada, Europe, and other multilingual areas, comparative literature still brings together different national and linguistic traditions and may thus address points of intersection among cultures.

JK: --- As you may appreciate, *JALDA* stands for *The Journal of Applied Linguistics and Applied Literature: Dynamics and Advances*. You may know how a glance at the net on the concept of Applied Linguistics can open up with tens of web pages on this important interdisciplinary field that deals with solving “language-related real-life problems”. Unlike the popularity of Applied Linguistics, the concept of Applied Literature that deals with what Dr. Bahram Behin, the founding editor of *JALDA*, calls “the outcome of a need to put literature to tangible uses in the ‘real’ world” (Behin, 2019, p. 21) still remains unknown and many still do not know much about its significance. My trifold question is related to your definition of the concept of Applied Literature and how you can make a distinction between Applied Literature and pure Literature. I am also wondering how your past literary conduct can mirror aspects of Applied Literature that could help our readers to be aware of the uses of Applied literature.

WS: ---- “Applied Literature” was not a term or field that I encountered during my years as an active professor. For many it will raise the specter of propaganda art, advertising, or totalitarian control over freedom of expression. A crucial question would be: *who* is doing this applying—the author or someone else? But of course, literature has always had practical uses. Children learn language through nursery rhymes and fairy tales; classic novels provide a sense of history and cultural difference; poetry is part of courtship. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* probably did as much to end slavery in the States as the combined efforts of abolitionists.

JK: ---- **What can be the possible contributions of comparative literary studies to the developments in the newly-emerging area of Applied Literature?**

WS: ---- Comparative literary studies are premised on attention to the cultural context as well as the linguistic structure of verbal art. As the first literary approach to focus on the interconnectedness of literary phenomena to each other and to extra-literary phenomena, it provides a direction for Applied Literature.

JK: ---- **As I mentioned earlier, unlike Applied Literature, Applied Linguistics is a rather well-established area of interest in academic circles. There are several distinguished Applied Linguists of international renown, including Merrill Swain, James P. Lantolf, Adrian Holliday, Rod Ellis, and Henry George Widdowson. We had the honor of having Professor Widdowson and his wife Professor Seidlhofer at the *Second National Conference on English Language Studies: Applied Linguistics Perspectives on EFL* in Tabriz, Iran in 2018. The field of Applied Literature, by contrast, is less recognized as an independent subject of study. Where do you think this lack of recognition comes from? And could you please name some scholars whose works, you assume, can be classified as Applied Literature?**

WS: ---- My other responses suggest why few would recognize Applied Literature as an established approach, and more, why many would resist it. However, there are any number of comparative scholars whose work would be relevant. Gerry Prince in Romance Languages and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania immediately comes to mind, or those involved in *Word & Image*. To find more such people, JALDA would need to publish a concise statement of its principles and aims.

JK: ---- **And for the last question: How do you think the dynamics between language and literature work today?**

WS: ---- As well as ever!

JK: Thank you ever so much for your contribution to JALDA!

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