

Travelling Through Literature: Exploring the Intersection between Travel Literature and Psychology

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Introduction

To drink from “the river of unmindfulness”, as Plato mentions in Book X of his *Republic*, would mean to forget all about the past lives of a soul as it gets ready for a new journey. Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, is thus invoked to perform a function that is intricately intertwined with memory— forgetting. According to Aristotle in his *Poetics*, six components define tragedy of which one is mythos which can be understood as a crucial component of other literary genres as well. Ronald Crane in the work titled “The Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*”, understands the six components and creates a distinction between mythos, ethos and dianoia by stating that mythos is movement, ethos is settings and characters, and dianoia is theme and thought (Adams, 2014). Thus, travel literature has a lot to do with ‘mythos’ which refers to plot and movement for movement lies at the core of any literary text that involves travelling to various places, spaces and time periods. Be it from a place to another, from the present to the past and future, or the literal ‘moving’ that readers often experience while reading about lands they have never been to and stories that they couldn’t have imagined, travel literature emphasises on *movement*. It must be acknowledged that another aspect of our daily lives that requires movement is memory.

It has already been established that systems related to motor movements have an important role to play in cognitive performances, especially in memory. Performing an action with one’s own motor movements has been found to be remembered more than actions being performed by others or being imagined, as we learn through the experiment conducted by Ronal L. Cohen (1981). Several studies, including those conducted by L A Thompson (1995) and Kelly et al. (1999), have discussed how gestures are also motor movements that influence how one remembers aspects of verbal communication. Research indicates that bodily movements in the form of exercise are also related to memory abilities as structural changes in the brain and benefits for the long run for memory have been found for individuals indulging in exercise (Madan & Singhal, 2012). Clearly, movement and memory go hand-in-hand and as discussed above, travel constitutes movement on various levels.

Travel and Neuropsychology

Travelling to different spaces involves activation of spatial memory which is responsible for keeping track of routes to be taken to reach locations and remembering where an event happened and where particular objects are located (Burgess, n.d.). For instance, in the work *Epic of Gilgamesh*, when it is suggested that Enkidu should be walking ahead of Gilgamesh, it is because Enkidu’s spatial memory consists of his previous encounters with the forest which suggests that he would know the routes better.

The hippocampus is an integral part of the brain which is crucial for navigation. Place cells in the hippocampus have different place fields which have been studied on rats, bats, humans, etc. These place fields can be either 2-dimensional or 3-dimensional, depending on the species being studied. For instance, place fields of rats and humans are restricted to two dimensions. However, bats have 3-dimensional place fields (Kanwisher, 2018). Related to the concept of travelling is the fact that a difference in volume of grey matter in the hippocampus has been found between control groups and London taxi drivers and these differences could be dependent on spatial representations and experiences while driving (Maguire et al., 2006). In fact, individuals suffering from dementia, a condition in which the hippocampal volume has shown to be reduced, often are unable to find their way to previously visited and familiar places like their homes (Vijayakumar & Vijayakumar, 2012; *Wandering*, n.d.). Right next to the hippocampus, lies the temporal lobe which houses the parahippocampal cortex. This structure is largely responsible for spatial navigation and processing. Research claims that larger spatial structures like walls lead to activation in this cortex but, specific locations of individual objects fail to elicit activation (Bohbot et al., 2015).

Travel and memory cross paths at two more junctions. Travel often involves coming across monuments and other symbols of history. Monuments can be understood as documentation of history and documentation is only a method of remembering. The history conveyed through monuments can be considered as a part of our collective memory and the documentation allows us to become a *member* of the shared past. What is an important part of travelling is the sense of time. While time zones may differ and are more obvious, what also differs is the amount of time spent in certain activities and experiences during the journey.

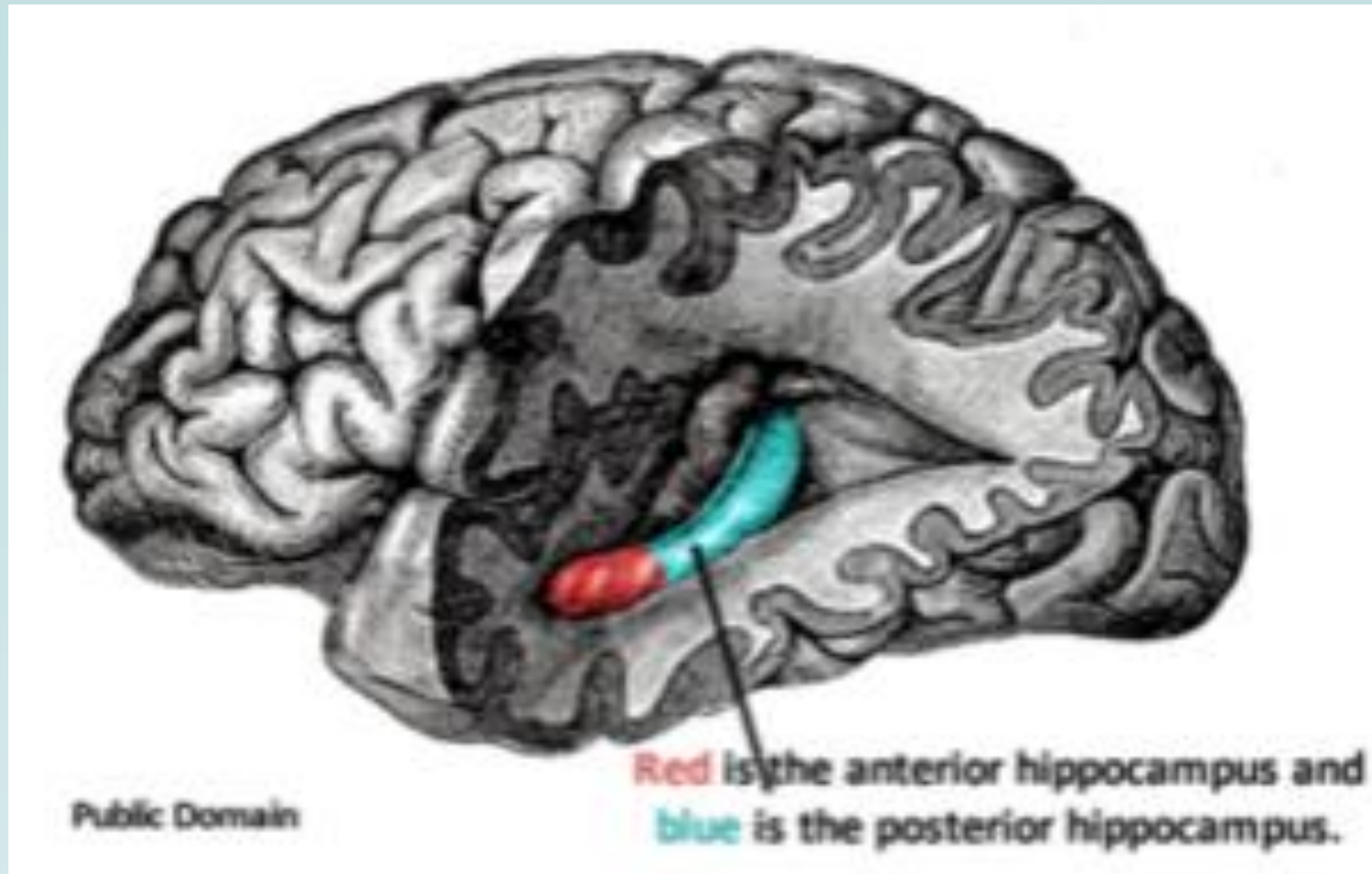


Image source: <https://nataliespsychologyblog.weebly.com/journal/october-27th-2015> .

As for the understanding and tracking of time zones, an important role is played by the suprachiasmatic nucleus which is present in the hypothalamus and is responsible for managing our everyday bodily rhythms and adjusting to environmental cues like daylight (Vosko et al., 2010). Also known as the “master clock”, the suprachiasmatic nucleus works with zeitgebers in the hypothalamus in managing the bodily time cycles (Brooks & Brooks, n.d.). Strengthening of memory related to a particular subject occurs when one spends more and more time engaging in it, as is inferred from Hermann Ebbinghaus’ ‘Forgetting Curve’ (Wittman, n.d.). This means that while travelling, whatever is delved into for longer has the potential to shape the travel narrative accordingly. More pressing is the question of whether the affected travel narrative has an impact on the reader, too.

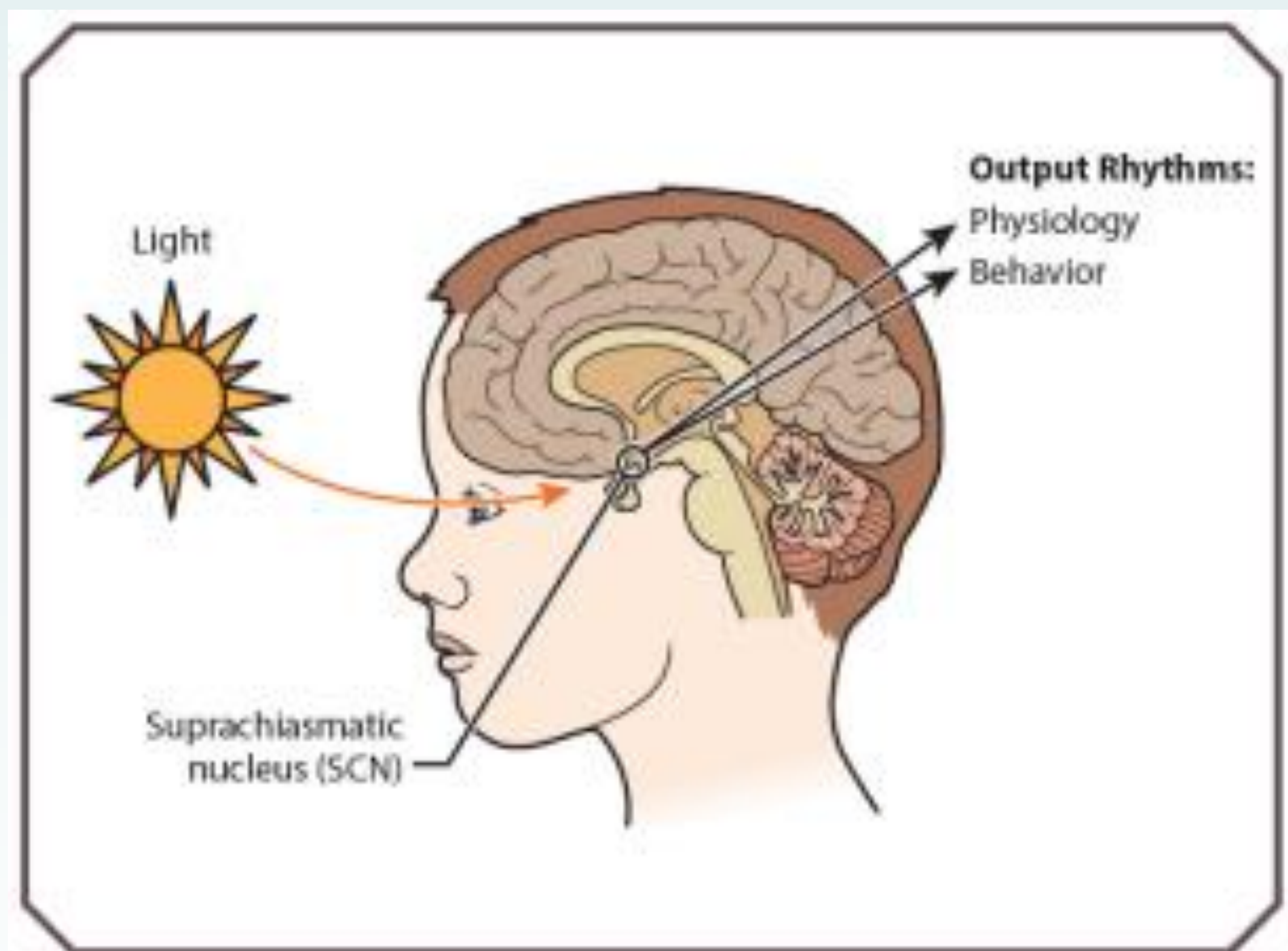


Image source: <https://obgynkey.com/circadian-rhythm-sleep-disorders-2/>

Travel Literature and Psychology

“The questor theme shapes such novels and travels, and invariably their heroes are also shaped—by their new, their continuous experiences.” - Percy G. Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*

Adams clearly states how being on a quest, like the writers of travel literature, is equivalent to shaping oneself (Adams, 2014). This claim is supported by literature in psychology. The “father of brain plasticity”, Dr Michael Merzenick emphasises on how cognitive decay can be prevented if one moves out of one’s comfort zone as is allowed by travel (Kelleher, 2019). Movement in literature therefore, is fundamentally connected with the concept of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity refers to our brain’s ability to be changed and modified as we experience various life situations (Voss et al., 2017).

Various factors such as neurotransmitters, stimulation aided by the environment, drugs, learning processes and more are responsible for neurogenesis, changes related to neuronal connectivity and neuron morphology as well as other processes, all of which come under our understanding of neuroplasticity (Fuchs & Flügge, 2014).

The base of travel literature is formed by the concept of travel which, contributes greatly to neuroplasticity. However, literary productions are two-way processes and involve not just the authors or travellers, but also the readers. Reading, too, is connected with neuroplasticity for the act of reading itself is a learned process. This means that several changes had to occur in our minds for us to be able to read. Thus, the ability to read has been developed owing to neuroplasticity (Durant, 2017). Reading, in turn, facilitates neuroplasticity. When brain waves of persons reading are analysed, the areas that light up when reading about an activity or situation are the same areas that are active when the readers are themselves involved in the activity in their own lives (Stillman, n.d.). In this case, it is vital to understand whether travel literature elicits such brain activity in readers who have either travelled to the place being read about or have been living in the same place that is being described in the book.

Percy G. Adams in *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* quotes Georg Lukacs and writes, “The novel’s heroes are seekers, but not necessarily finders.” In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh’s two accounts of travels are recited. The first travel adventure consisted of a mission rooted in consumption as Gilgamesh and Enkidu were set on killing Humbaba, who posed an obstacle in getting wood from the forest. However, Gilgamesh’s next travel was set after Enkidu’s death. This time, Gilgamesh was the true seeker that Lukacs talked about. He sought knowledge about immortality.



Tablet 11, The Epic of Gilgamesh

Image source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Epic-of-Gilgamesh>

In the ninth tablet of the epic, when Gilgamesh said “And in grief I go”, while it can be read as a goodbye to the scorpion-man, it can also be interpreted as the motive and the psychological concept behind his entire journey. Here, it is essential to take note of the types of grief travel suggested by Dr. Karen Wyatt (Baker, n.d.). We can conclude that Gilgamesh’s travel after Enkidu’s death might fall in the categories of *contemplative* and *intuitive*. Contemplative grief travel is characterised by the readiness of the traveller to be comfortable with emotions that run deeper than emotions that may be easily visible in their expression. It requires introspection and comfort with one’s solitude. Intuitive grief travel is defined by the traveller’s ability to have an open-minded outlook and preparedness to experience the unknown. Gilgamesh falls in these categories because he is ready to take note of his feelings by seeking truth about life and death and is also open to discovery and experiences. Moreover, there is a sense of reawakening as Gilgamesh realises the importance of travel in life and says the following line in the ninth tablet: “when will the man who is dead (ever) look at the light of the sunshine?” (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 1928).

Like the epic, there are several literary works which take travel as their subject and the reader becomes the object, on whom an effect is produced. To understand how travel literature, like the epic itself or travel writings of political philanthropists like Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s *The Motorcycle Diaries* or even the much referred-to travel fiction works like *Gulliver’s Travels*, intervenes with the readers who might or might not have experienced the places being described, psychological assessments must be conducted. Such research would also help in validating the efficiency of such literary works in replacing actual travel with psychological travel through descriptions that may act as navigational tools.

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