

The Moral Measure of Literature

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Stephen L. Tanner

What does morality have to do with literature? In an essay on “The Idea of Moral Criticism,”¹ and in his book *On Moral Fiction*,² John Gardner asserts that moral affirmation is the most fundamental artistic value. In his view, most criticism in our century evades the real task of criticism, which is the evaluation or assessment of literary works. He singles out the New Criticism as the most influential of such evasions³ and asserts that “true art treats ideals, affirming and clarifying the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Ideals are art’s *ends*; the rest is mere methodology. True criticism, what I am calling ‘moral criticism,’ may speak of technique, but its ultimate concern is with ends.”⁴ He thinks the schools of criticism in our age are “too neat, too intellectual, too ‘scientific’ to deal with so lively and unpredictable a creature as art” and “they ignore the very essence of art, which is emotional affirmation.”⁵ He explains that “a man writes a novel to find out what he can honestly maintain, not just with his head but with all his nature. He gives it to readers not only to delight them and instruct them but also to support them if they are the right kind of people already, and stir doubts if they’re not.”⁶ For these reasons, “true criticism is, at least some of the time, morally judgmental.”⁷ To avoid such judgments, Gardner insists, is to treat art as a mere plaything. “It may not really legislate for humanity but whether it is heard or not, it is civilization’s single most significant device for learning what must be affirmed and what denied.”⁸ He concludes by saying, “It is precisely because it affirms values that art is important. The trouble with our present criticism is that it is, for the most part, not important. It treats the only true magic in the world as though it were done with wires.”⁹

In one sense, there is nothing original in these statements. They simply reiterate Matthew Arnold’s assertion “that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life—to the question: How to live.”¹⁰ And Arnold, of course, speaks from within what is probably the oldest and most influential tradition in criticism. But in another sense, Gardner’s assertions are novel and unorthodox. In recent criticism, the moral approach has not been fashionable. Gardner himself is a successful contemporary novelist, and we hardly expect a contemporary novelist to come to the defense of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

That Gardner's opinions, taken within the context of recent criticism, have a radical flavor tells us something about the diminished role of the moral approach in contemporary literary criticism.¹¹ But by the same token, that a contemporary novelist fully conversant with existing schools of criticism should reassert the prime value of moral affirmation in art confirms that moral criticism is fundamental and enduring.

The following statement by Northrop Frye expresses a position all but universally accepted in the past few decades: "The fundamental act of criticism is a disinterested response to a work of literature in which all one's beliefs, engagements, commitments, prejudices, stampedinings of pity and terror, are ordered to be quiet. We are now dealing with the imaginative, not the existential, with 'let this be,' not with 'this is,' and no work of literature is better by virtue of what it says than any other work."¹² Literature cannot be lifelike; it can only be "literature-like."¹³ Like the disciples of the New Criticism, Frye is saying that the important thing about literature is not what it says or affirms or promulgates, but only how well it works as a self-contained, organic whole doing whatever it does. There is truth in this, but it leaves out the primary business of literature, which is direct or indirect (ironic) affirmation. According to Gardner, a position like Frye's shrugs of the question of evaluation because it thinks it knows the answer: "Beauty is Truth and Truth is Relative."¹⁴

It is interesting to speculate about the causes of the reluctance of modern critics to take evaluation seriously. The broad causes undoubtedly include the relativistic temper of the modern mind, current philosophical concern with description and methodology rather than with the ascertainment of order and value, the subjectivist inclination furthered by some branches of psychology, and the attempt to emulate the dispassionate objectivity of science. Any one or any combination of these might influence an individual critic, and each may lead to the conclusion that evaluation is neither meaningful nor possible.

From some research I have been doing in American criticism of the 20s and 30s, I would suggest one specific cause. The moral critics of that period were discredited by the creation of a myth—a caricature. It was the Myth of the Nasty, Mean, Horrid Old Man. According to this stereotype, moral critics such as Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More were narrow-minded and hard-hearted old men determined to maintain their authority against aspiring youth; they were fixed in ancient ways and petulantly annoyed with novelty; and they were trying to elevate their own narrow preoccupations into universal edicts. Pairs such as the following were set up: critical-creative; repressive-liberating; intellectual-emotional; old-new; cold-warm; realism-imagination; business-art; dogma-choice; reaction-progress; authority-individualism; tradition-experiment. The moral critics were

always left with what was considered the negative in each of these pairs. This myth has been pervasive and long-lived.

Another important cause is the changes wrought by literary modernism. Modernism no longer finds in the literal reproduction of actuality, in the system of social mimesis that was the motive impulse for realistic fiction, an adequate means of representation. Not finding in nature itself an adequate subject for the expression of artistic intention, the modernist novelist uses it as the raw material out of which, through method of presentation, distortion, and rearrangement, he creates meanings individual to himself. In *The Novel and the Modern World*, David Daiches suggests that such individualized meanings and the turning away from mimesis are connected with the breakdown of communal standards and values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "The modern novelist is born when that publicly shared principle of selection and significance is no longer felt to exist, can no longer be depended on."¹⁵ He implies that if a culture can no longer provide a standard for what is important and valuable in life (and, therefore, in fiction, which "imitates" life), the artist is forced to replace cultural values in his work with literary or "formal" values. In *Character and the Novel*, W. J. Harvey discusses this same shift: The individual feels insecure in a time of contingency and flux, when "man's relation to his world [is no longer] given stability by being part of a divinely-ordered cosmos."¹⁶ Harvey suggests that the novelists early in our century were trying to salvage a sense of stability in the work of art itself: "Because the work of art—viewed as a self-sufficient artifact—is a necessary and not a contingent thing. It is a thing wrenched from the chaotic flux of the experienced world; it has its own laws and its own firm structure of relationships; it can, like a system of geometry, be held to be absolutely true within its own conventionally established terms."¹⁷ The novelist is thus presenting an ordered world in contrast to, not in imitation of, the world of experience. Criticism's response to this has been to focus its attention away from moral concerns and toward aesthetic concerns.

In a recent issue of *College English*, Jerome Klinkowitz complains of teaching and criticism that is practiced on the assumption that literature imitates life and consequently concerns itself with ethical questions.

The heroic models and ideals which the moralist professors prefer "have been made outmoded by changes in the nature of the modern world and in the nature of man's relation to it," argues Larry McCaffery. A universe which is now seen as "indeterminate, uncertain, chaotic, or relative" simply will not support the "optimistic or humanistic premises" which underlie traditionalist art and ways of teaching it. Instead, literature has kept pace with science and philosophy, to the point of agreeing that all fictions are primarily systems of meaning which owe the standards of their success to internal consistency and not to the way in which they mimetically represent the outside world.¹⁸

Obviously, such anti-mimetic theories of literature view the moral approach as obsolete.

Whatever its causes, the reluctance of modern criticism to take moral evaluation seriously creates tension within the Mormon critic. Becoming skilled in the methods of twentieth-century criticism and at the same time devoutly maintaining one's religious beliefs can be an unsettling process. I have found myself at times feeling a little embarrassed and apologetic about my moral preoccupations when responding to literature as a teacher or critic. I suspect that others of my generation who were trained under the influence of the New Criticism have experienced the same ambivalence.

Questions concerning the role of evaluation in criticism (what is good and bad, right and wrong) are extremely complicated and will never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. But a Mormon critic can and should resolve them to his satisfaction. I do not see, for example, how a Mormon critic can avoid subscribing to some kind of edification theory. His world view necessarily causes him to see literature as a criticism of life and to value it according to what it affirms or promulgates. This does not mean he must reject modern critical theories and methods, but he must complete or supplement them so that ends as well as means are assessed.

If there be any conclusion to be drawn from the history of literature, it is that the writer of stories must teach whether he wishes to teach or not; his very denial of the pertinence of the moral law to literature becomes, in practice, inevitably a form of teaching. The fact is that ethics and aesthetics are inseparable in literature. Or, more precisely, just in proportion as the practice or criticism of literary art becomes superficial, ethics and aesthetics tend to fall apart, whereas just in proportion as such practice or criticism strikes deeper, ethics and aesthetics are more and more implicated one in the other until they lose their distinction in a common root. What I wish to assert is summarized in this fundamental syllogism: Literature cannot be separated from life, and life cannot must have a primary role in the understanding and appreciation of literature.

Consider this group of statements:

Henry James:

The great question as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? What, in the last analysis, is his philosophy? When vigorous writers have reached maturity, we are at liberty to gather from their works some expression of a total view of the world they have been so actively observing. This is the most interesting thing their works offer us. Details are interesting in proportion as they contribute to make it clear.¹⁹

Leo Tolstoy:

The cement which binds together every work of art into a whole and produces the effect of life-like illusion, is not the unity of persons and places, but

that of the author's independent moral relation to the subject. . . . Whatever the artist depicts, whether it be saints or robbers, kings or lackeys, we see and see only the soul of the artist himself.²⁰

T. S. Eliot:

The "greatness" of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards.²¹

Flannery O'Connor:

For him [the novelist], judgment is implicit in the act of seeing. His vision cannot be detached from his moral sense.²²

Ralph Ellison:

Still I believe that fiction does help create value, and I regard this as a very serious—I almost said "sacred"—function of the writer.²³

Such statements by distinguished writers could be multiplied to fill volumes. The point I wish to make is that we must not be intimidated or misguided by prevailing attitudes in recent criticism. Realizing we have on our side the weight of a tradition tested for centuries, we should espouse unashamedly and unhesitating an edification theory of literature and then strive for a moral approach of criticism that is perceptive and wise. Let us stop fretting over the legitimacy of moral criticism and get on with the business of learning to do it well.

It is not easy to do it well. To assume that it is, is a common error that has discredited moral criticism. Formalistic criticism *is* often easy to do; the glut of articles in scholarly journals is evidence of this. One often encounters graduate students who can effortlessly do a slick job of pointing out patterns of images, archetypes, or phallic symbols. This kind of analysis is a skill that can be taught and learned with relative ease. But to determine exactly what a work of literature affirms and then perceptively examine the full moral implications of that affirmation is a difficult task requiring maturity and wisdom in addition to formalistic skill.

I want now to make some observation and suggestions regarding moral criticism. What I say has most direct application to modern fiction. I have chosen this focus because the fiction of our age is the most widely read and most morally problematical kind of literature. Wise and discerning criticism is much needed to guide readers through the moral labyrinth of the contemporary novel, where the danger—particularly for immature readers—is very real indeed.

Behind every character in fiction is a world view. What a character says and does depends ultimately upon the author's fundamental attitudes and values. How do novelists embody their ethical beliefs, opinions, and

prejudices in novels? What must the novelist have believed in order to disclose and portray as he did such characters, actions, and thoughts in such a work? These are the most important questions the moral critic must answer. And notice that they are literary questions, not moral ones. The moral critic translates aesthetic signals into ethical statements. This is the hard part. Judging the ethical statements is fairly easy for anyone possessing moral convictions. Certainly any member of the Church should be able to handle that part, but being able to do it does not make him a literary critic. The first part of the process, the translation part, is where training, skill, experience, creativity, and gifts are required. The more precise our knowledge of how the writer accomplished his artistic ends, the more accurate will be our inferences about his ethical beliefs.

Discerning the values expressed in a novel is difficult because the artist is deliberately subtle in disclosing them. He is trying to recreate life, but life that is ordered and in which ethical beliefs are tested in a complexity of human action corresponding to actual life. The value of ethical statements in good art is that they are not abstract; they always come embodied in concrete human situations. And in addition to the subtlety of disclosure, we must also take into consideration the complexity of the creative process. The writer cannot know in advance the exact nature of the values he will portray. The process of writing itself, involving both the conscious and unconscious mind, creates values or shadings of values the author cannot foresee and sometimes does not recognize even after the fact. That is part of the mystery of the creative process. The critic must reconstruct intention implicit in the work, which frequently transcends the author's conscious intention.

Since perceptive moral criticism is difficult, a satisfactory Mormon criticism will be difficult. A knowledge of the restored gospel is of great value, but its usefulness to the critic is confined largely to the easiest part of his task: judging ethical statements after they have been translated or identified. Besides this, we must realize that although the principles of the gospel are fairly simple, recognizing and applying them in concrete situations is not all easy. Fiction resemble those concrete situations, and consequently even the critic with a good understanding of gospel principles must struggle in perceiving and interpreting moral elements in fiction.

More often than not, Mormon standards get in the way of good criticism because they are applied too narrowly. We do not like foul language nor adultery; therefore a novel that uses foul language and treats adultery is bad. This approach shuts one off from most of contemporary fiction. A few years ago, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*²⁴ was banned from the school in an Idaho community because it contained objectionable language. The most recent novels of Bellow, Malamud, and Updike, to take

three respected contemporary writers, contain language and situations as bad as or worse than those of *Cuckoo's Nest*. If we apply superficial standards, or even if we apply the most significant moral standards in the wrong way, we will be unable to do justice to the fiction of our time. I think there are moral objections to be made to Kesey's novel, but they have nothing to do with the language or the explicit description; and even granting those objections, there are still pleasure and profit to be gained from reading the novel. Reading contemporary writing requires a good deal of intelligent sifting and winnowing.

It is unreasonable to expect or require writers with no appreciation of or commitment to Christian doctrine—let alone Mormon doctrine—to reflect overtly and specifically such doctrine in their novels. We must be willing to examine their work on its own terms. In order to convert the world, we must know something about it. How do people with beliefs and values different from ours think and act? Are all differences real or only apparent? The Light of Christ influences all men, after all, and the Mormon critic should penetrate to the moral core of a work; that is where the Light of Christ will reveal itself. A serious novelist, one who is successful, will capture life truly: and any true portrayal of life, regardless of superficial trappings, will reveal the centrality of moral law. Thus, paradoxically, a novel focusing on sexual promiscuity can reflect important ethical truths. As Latter-day Saints, we should be pleased to have our basic moral values confirmed in the writings of those who perhaps do not consciously subscribe to all of them. That is, if a writer with no religious scruples about adultery shows in his portrayal of life that adultery cannot bring happiness, the principle of chastity is confirmed, on empirical grounds, as it were. There are, of course, authors who portray sin as generating happiness, but they are not the ones who recreate life truly. They are often seeking in their fiction to confirm their faulty morality and cheat to do so. When a literary work cheats or lies or achieves its right or wrong ends unfairly, or celebrates what ought to be scorned, or mocks what should be praised, the critic should announce what has gone wrong and point out why. But this can only be done by a person having thorough knowledge of how literature works and tolerant patience in getting beneath surface appearances as well as having clear moral vision.

How does a critic go about penetrating to the moral core of a novel? Is it possible to deal with ethical values with any degree of objectivity? To what extent are value assertions cognitive and to what extent are they emotive? I think some answers to these questions are supplied by the concept of value objects. There are certain things (I will call them objects for the sake of simplicity) that we have to make judgments about. We have to make assumptions concerning their existence and characteristics in order to

function within a social world. A novelist will necessarily treat them and consciously or unconsciously assert or imply his attitudes concerning them. If in interpretation we focus our attention on them, we are most likely to recognize and identify the values expressed in a particular literary work.

Here are some basic value objects:

1. *The Self*. What is the nature of the human person? Is he distinguishable from other animals? Does he have soul? Does he have intrinsic worth and, if so, on what grounds? What is or should be the basis for his choices and the standards for his behavior?
2. *Nature*. What is or should be man's relation to nature? Is nature benign, hostile, or indifferent toward man? Is harmony with nature possible and, if so, on what basis and for what reasons? Is there any connection between nature and spirit? Should man's ecological sense produce a feeling of obligation or reverence toward other life?
3. *Other minds*. What is or should be a man's relationship with other individuals? What kind of communion is possible or desirable? Does man have obligations towards others and, if so, on what grounds?
4. *Time*. What meanings does history have? What bearing does the past have on the present? What should man's attitude be toward the future? How is the present moment to be valued in relation to past and future?
5. *Society*. What is or should be the nature of human community? What is or should be the relationship between the individual and society? Is social reform possible or even desirable? On what grounds?

The human mind responds to these value objects by cognitive knowledge and emotion. It is the combination of cognition and emotion that produces meaning, and meaning invested in the object is a value. The task of the critic in considering value objects is to determine the author's cognitive knowledge of them—how he perceives and understand them—and then to determine what emotions he attaches to that cognition. This combination of cognition and emotional commitment reveals the meaning the objects have for him, what he affirms about them. It is possible to attach unethical meaning to value objects, and it is here that the critic makes moral judgments. It is in the process of determining cognition and emotional commitment that questions of technique are important. In that process we can use all that modern schools of criticism can teach us about artistic means, the techniques of artistic disclosure.

Analysis of value objects can be directed toward three fundamental aspects of a literary work:

1. Individual value claims and direct expressions of value commitments made by the narrator or characters.
2. The behavior of characters as a reflection of underlying values.
3. The symbolic expression of value commitments in objects, events, and characterization.

Directing attention to basic value objects is the best means for getting at the moral core of a novel and thus avoiding being misdirected or mired down by less basic elements (e.g., profanity and explicit sexual description), elements in which values are only partially expressed and consequently cannot be assessed very objectively.

To summarize what I have said, although the moral approach has a diminished role in contemporary criticism, and the Mormon critic who practices it may feel a little insecure, a little like a second-class citizen in the modern community of literary criticism, it is nevertheless the most fundamental and enduring approach. We should be unequivocal in our commitment to it and should strive to revitalize it. It is a demanding method because it requires maturity and wisdom in treating ends and encompasses methods such as the formalistic, psychological, and archetypal that primarily treat means. It had better not be practiced at all than practiced narrowly or incompletely. To practice it tolerantly and perceptively and wisely involves penetrating to the ethical core of a work of literature, and this can best be done by setting aside superficial characteristics and focusing on fundamental and unchanging value objects.

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1. John Gardner, "The Idea of Moral Criticism," *Western Humanities Review* 31 (Spring 1977): 97-109.

2. Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

3. Gardner, "Moral Criticism," p. 98.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 101

5. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. Ibid.

10. Matthew Arnold, "Wordsworth," in *Criticism: The Major Texts*, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1953), p.478.

11. Most of the reviews of *On Moral Fiction* were antagonistic to the idea of a moral approach to criticizing fiction. Gerald Graff, in *Literature against Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), provides an excellent survey and critique of recent anti-mimetic (and consequently anti-moral) theories of criticism.

12. Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 140. The extent of Frye's influence is indicated by a recent editor's column in *PMLA* (95 [January 1980]: 3). A member of the editorial board proposed acceptance of an essay on the basis of "its boldly unconventional approach: 'It does not,' he pointed out, 'contain a single reference to Northrop Frye!'" An earlier editor remarked that at times "it seems that authors feel their articles would not be given serious consideration without a quotation from Frye, preferably in the opening paragraph."

13. For Frye's concept of "literature-like," see "The Keys to Dreamland," in *The Norton Reader*, shorter ed., 5th ed. (New York: Norton, 1980), p. 237.

14. Gardner, "Moral Criticism," p. 100.

15. David Daiches, *The Novel and the Modern World* (Chicago: University Press, 1960), p. 5.

16. W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. 43.

17. Ibid., p. 45.

18. Jerome Klinkowitz, "The Effacement of Contemporary American Literature" (rev. of *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1979]), *College English* 42 (December 1980): 387-88.

19. Henry James, "Ivan Turgenev," *The North American Review* 154 (April 1874): 350.

20. Leo Tolstoy, *Novelists on the Novel*, ed. Miriam Allot (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 131.

21. T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), p.97.

22. Flannery O'Connor, "The Teaching of Literature," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p. 130.

23. Ralph Ellison, *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. and comp. John Richard Hersey (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 8.

24. Ken Kesey, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking, 1962).