Moral & Philosophical Criticism

Paul Elmer More: It is the critic's duty, to determine the moral tendency of literary works and to judge them on that basis. The greatest critics are “discriminators between the false and the true, the deformed and the normal; preachers of harmony and proportion and order, prophets of the religion of taste.”

Overview

Critics taking a moral or philosophical approach usually describe or evaluate a work in terms of the ideas and values it contains. This often means examining a work’s ideas and values—both those expressed directly by the narrator or character and those implied by the overall design and content—in relation to a particular ethical, philosophical, or religious system (rationalism, existentialism, Christianity, etc.).

Some critics will also evaluate the quality of a work’s ideas and values by determining how well these fit certain criteria (such as truth, usefulness, clarity, consistency, or complexity). Besides looking at ideas, critics may also examine the moral effect or value of a work in a more general way, considering how the images, events, characters, and even style in a work affect its readers as moral beings.
In practice, essays taking a moral or philosophical approach are most successful when they are firmly grounded in the details of the work being discussed. Such essays often attempt to identify a work’s theme or themes or even what is sometimes called the writer’s “vision” or view of life and then to show how the “vision” or themes are conveyed through specific details or techniques in the work.

Those willing to do research (and thus use the historical-biographical approach in connection with the moral-philosophical) may also attempt to show how the “vision” or other thinkers (who may or may not have influenced the writer) or found in the general cultural context to which the writer belonged.

**Background**

Literature is, and always has been, an important source of moral guidance and spiritual inspiration.

Some modern critical theories may make us resist the idea that literature has a didactic purpose yet cannot deny many of the greatest writers have considered themselves teachers as well as artists.

- **Plato** acknowledged literature’s power as a teacher by believing it capable of corrupting morals and undermining religion.

- **Aristotle** considered literature capable of fostering virtue.

- **Horace** said literature should be “delightful and instructive.”
Samuel Johnson said that the function of literature is to teach morality, and to probe philosophical issues.

Matthew Arnold: poetry’s most important offering is its moral/philosophical teaching; it’s a source of moral and spiritual inspiration, possibly capable of replacing philosophy and religion.

Values

—“Beliefs of a person or social group in which they have an emotional investment (either for or against something).”

—“A collection of guiding, usually positive principles; what one deems to be correct and desirable in life, especially regarding personal conduct.”

• Values undergird all literature, either by their presence or absence.
• They are often unstated, yet operative nonetheless.
• Values determine thoughts, beliefs and opinions—and behaviors, actions and practices.
• To identify the value(s) underlying literature is to understand the writer’s purpose and objectives, position/stance—and agenda.
• Sometimes these values conflict with our own, but this can be apparent only when ours are clearly defined.
Common Values

- adventure
- ambition
- autonomy
- collective responsibility
- comfort
- competition
- cooperation
- courage
- creativity
- equality of condition
- equality of opportunity
- excellence
- flexibility
- freedom of speech
- generosity
- harmony
- honesty
- justice
- novelty
- order
- patriotism
- peace
- rationality
- security
- spontaneity
- tolerance
- tradition
ON MY HONOR, I WILL DO MY BEST TO DO MY DUTY TO GOD AND MY COUNTRY. TO OBEY THE SCOUT LAWS, TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE AT ALL TIMES, TO KEEP MY BODY PHYSICALLY STRONG, MENTALLY AWARE, AND MORALLY STRONG.
"When You Get Them Back To School, Get Them Back To Instant Quaker Oatmeal."

School's tough enough without laying into your metabolism. So remember Instant Quaker Oatmeal. It gives your family the nutrition they need. Think of it as food for learning. Kids love the flavor, too. It's The Right Thing To Do. And The Tasty Way To Do It!

As a matter of fact, the water you drink does make a difference.

- Matt Damon
Major Tenets

- Investigates the effects literature has on readers as moral beings
- Based on what improves and enriches human lives
- Concerned with human character and behavior
- Looks at texts as combinations of various moral qualities
- Questions how literature is influenced by plot, character, ideas and style
- Views the work through a particular philosophy or discerns a work in the "philosophy" on which it is based
- Looks at how the work influenced or was influenced by the ideas of the time
- Views the ideas in a work in relation to ideas found elsewhere
Helpful Definitions (adapted from: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/english2/handouts/)

Individual morality—basis of decisions/judgments made by individual (honesty, loyalty, responsibility, etc.)

Social morality—fairness is basis of the law; law exists to govern society and control individual behavior; law considers whether an action threatens society’s well-being

RELATIVISM VS. ABSOLUTISM

Individual relativism—right/wrong depends on social/moral commitments of individual.

Situational relativism—right/wrong varies depending on particular situation

Cultural relativism—moral norms vary by culture/society

Moral absolutism—absolute standards exist by which all rules, commitments, and behavior can be evaluated/judged
MORAL PRINCIPLES APPLYING TO INDIVIDUALS

Principle of Greatest Happiness—our happiness (and the happiness of those affected by our choices) must guide our choices and actions. Society creates and follows rules for maximizing the happiness of the greatest number of its citizens.

Example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2qRDMHbXaM

The Golden Rule—“do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12)

Respect for Others—Others’ wishes/desires trump our own (i.e., how the other person feels about being lied to is more important than how the potential liar feels about lying). Kant: “It is immoral to use other people solely and merely to achieve your own ends. We must recognize others as autonomous.”

The Human Good—emphasizes, not obligations, but personal character traits and activities which result in a good life

Natural Purpose—everything in nature has a purpose. The natural purpose of human beings is defined in various ways (life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, etc.)

Social Purpose—every person comprising a society has (or should have) a purpose, or fulfill a contributory role

The Will of God—God, as the creator of human beings, is the ultimate source of morality
MORAL PRINCIPLES APPLYING TO OR APPLIED BY SOCIETY

Individual Rights—U.S. citizens are guaranteed “inalienable rights” by the Bill of Rights (e.g., freedom of speech, of religion, of assembly, of press, etc.)

The General Welfare—government, and every level comprising it, should promote the general welfare (safety/security, liberty, property, health, etc.)

Principle of Freedom—allows individuals to pursue their own ends in their own ways, with little or no governmental restrictions.

Advantages

• Mother of all literary criticism
  —Literary theory itself is a branch of philosophy
  —Moral approach has the longest history of any theory
• More freedom for the reader because there is no simple formula to follow
• Focuses on morals and ethics; tells readers what is good for them as "the great instrument of moral good"

Disadvantages

• Critics differ on the definition of what is good and what is bad—no consensus
• Not objective—focuses on feelings, impressions
• Moral approach has become less popular and influential during the last few decades. It could be due to:
  —Critical excess (number and intensity of other critical theories)
  —The deficiencies of the approach itself
  —The moral laxness of critics
However, there are other critics/critical fields which promote a moral fervor in their writings, namely feminist criticism (see below).

What to think about as you read and write morally and philosophically:

- Identify theme and look at evidence for that theme
- Analyze characters and relationships (morality/immorality of relationships)
- Plot structure and the moral implications of the events
- Tone and symbol

Template for symbols:


**Major Players/Works**

**Irving Babbitt**
Most influential and controversial moral critic of the 20th century
“Genius and Taste” (1918)

Held that literature must help us recognize:
— The reality of evil
— The necessity of controlling our impulses

Literature that does not abide by such standards leads to:
— Self-indulgence
— Moral degeneration

*Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919)

— Critical of romanticism
— Condemns romantic morality
— Romantic poets have contributed to a moral decline in society

**Edmund Fuller**

*Man in Modern Fiction: Some Minority Opinions of Contemporary American Writing* (1958)

Critic is “to appraise the validity and the implications of the image of man projected by the artist’s use of his materials.”

Fuller sees standards and restraints as essential for moral action. Condemns much of modern fiction for rejecting these guides in the name of compassion.

“Compassion must be based on a large and generous view of life and a distinct set of values.” The compassion found in many modern novels is “a teary slobbering over the criminal and degraded, the refusal to assign any share of responsibility to them, and a vindictive lashing out against the rest of the world” (35-37)
Various religious conservatives, especially American Christian groups, have claimed that the books promote witchcraft and are therefore unsuitable for children.

**Tobin Siebers**

*The Ethics of Criticism* (1988)

—“Literary criticism is inextricably linked to ethics”
—“Literary criticism accepts the task of examining to what extent literature and life contribute to the nature and knowledge of each other”
Attempts to extract literature from an ethical context are misguided and ultimately unsuccessful.
—Faults New Criticism

Christopher Clausen


“Literary works usually embody moral problems and reflect moral attitudes, sometimes even moral theories. There is no good reason for criticism to tiptoe around one of the major reasons that literary works endure.”

Lawrence Lipking

“Aristotle's Sister: A Poetics of Abandonment” (1983)

—In addition to winning critical attention for many neglected works by women writers, feminist criticism has sparked a reevaluation of many works traditionally granted high, secure places in the canon.
—“Something peculiar has been happening lately to the classics; some of them now seen less heroic, and some of them less funny. Those ‘irrelevant’ scenes of cruelty to women . . . have changed their character.”

**Religious Criticism**

**Stanley Hopper**

*Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature* (1952)

—Much modern literature is fundamentally religious
—Quest of the Prodigal is central theme in poetry of Auden and Eliot
—Analysis of such poetry would be incomplete without taking religious themes into account
—Studying such poetry can help the reader understand vital religious issues

**Helen Gardner, Religion and Literature** (1971)

—Examined religious elements in secular works
—*Hamlet* is “a Christian tragedy in the sense that it is a tragedy of the imperatives and torments of the conscience” due to Hamlet’s discovery of all the evil and corruption in the world
—We must recognize Hamlet’s attitude as fundamentally Christian