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# PHILOSOPHY & THE NOVEL



Alan H. Goldman

# Philosophy and the Novel

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*For Joan again, who shares my love of novels and all else.*

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# Contents

## Part I. Philosophy of Novels

- |   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction: Philosophical content and literary value   | 3  |
| 2. Interpreting novels                                      | 23 |
| 3. <i>The Sun Also Rises</i> : Incompatible interpretations | 60 |
| 4. The appeal of the mystery                                | 82 |

## Part II. Philosophy in Novels

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 5. Moral development in <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>             | 109 |
| 6. <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> and moral motivation                | 135 |
| 7. What we learn about rules from <i>The Cider House Rules</i> | 156 |
| 8. <i>Nostromo</i> and the fragility of the self               | 175 |

- |              |     |
|--------------|-----|
| <i>Index</i> | 201 |
|--------------|-----|

PART I

Philosophy of Novels





# 1

## Introduction

### Philosophical content and literary value

#### I

Why should philosophers read novels? The first reason is the same reason why anyone should: for pleasure, as it is usually called, although not the sort of pleasure we get from nodding half asleep in front of the TV or in a warm bath. It is instead the satisfaction that John Rawls subsumed under what he called the Aristotelian Principle, although Aristotle never described it explicitly, the satisfaction derived from the full and vigorous exercise of our human faculties or capacities.<sup>1</sup> The physical equivalent is intense exertion in a competitive sport, but here we are speaking of the full and interactive exercise of our mental capacities: perceptual, imaginative, emotional, and cognitive. For a work of art to so engage these capacities simultaneously and interactively is the mark of aesthetic value, as I argued in an earlier book with that title.

Pleasure here lies in appreciating aesthetic value. Aesthetic value lies in the capacity of a work to engage us in this broad and full way, not simply in the more superficial pleasure derived immediately from its surface sensuous or formal qualities. I take it that literary value is simply the value of literary works of art as such, the aesthetic or artistic value of works of literature. It therefore demands the same broad analysis in terms of full engagement. To be so captured by a work of art or literature is to appreciate its aesthetic value, at the same time to lose oneself in the world of the work, to seem to enter for a time that alternative world.

<sup>1</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 426; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1174a–1177a.

A narrower but perhaps currently dominant view of aesthetic and literary value derives from formalists, such as Clive Bell, who wrote at the birth of Modernism in art early in the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> For them, aesthetic experience and the value inherent in it involved an immediate perceptual grasp only of the sensuous “significant form” in aesthetic objects or artworks, although this appreciation of form was said to produce a unique emotional response. Literary formalists are concerned not only with the immediate perception of sensuous qualities of language and with structural relations within sentences, but also with more subtle, larger formal relations within narratives and elaborations of language and style in literary works. But their focus remains narrow.

For pure aesthetic formalists, even expressive qualities are not aesthetically relevant.<sup>3</sup> For them, aesthetic properties are only sensuous or structural. But being strident, soothing, serene, jarring, vibrant, or melancholy seem intuitively to be as genuine aesthetic properties as being unified, elegant, or disjointed. Indeed, the expressivist theory of aesthetic value earlier championed by Romantics such as Tolstoy, although equally narrow, has as much historical claim to validity as the formalist theory. And the broader theory that includes the exercise of cognition and imagination in the apprehension, or constitution, of aesthetic value has deeper and philosophically more impressive roots. For Kant, Dewey, and more recently Monroe Beardsley, appreciation of aesthetic value is not limited to the apprehension of aesthetic properties usually cited as such, but consists in the full and harmonious engagement of different mental capacities (although it is significant that perceiving the usually cited aesthetic properties typically requires responding affectively to what is imagined or thought).

A main argument for the broader view of aesthetic experience and literary value then focuses on the indissoluble link between grasp of form itself and the exercise of cognitive, imaginative, and emotional capacities. The apprehension of formal structure in a novel, for example, often depends on seeing how its characters and the moral relations between them develop in the course of its narrative, and this “seeing” requires thought and reflection as well as emotional or empathetic reactions. In regard to some of the novels we will analyze, the formal structure in *Pride and Prejudice* consists partly in the way the main characters move gradually

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Peter Kivy, *Once Told Tales* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), chs 3–4.

from an initial antagonism to a perfect blend, while in *The Sun Also Rises* the theme of moral malaise reinforces and is reinforced by the repetitive or cyclical structure of the narrative, and in *Nostromo* the theme of social chaos and moral disintegration goes hand in hand with the novel's somewhat chaotic formal structure, its rapid and nearly incomprehensible shifts in time and space. The elegance of *Pride and Prejudice*, the chilling power of *Nostromo*, a large part of their great literary value, depends on this perfect union of form and content, grasped through imagination, feeling, and thought operating together.

While apprehension of form depends on all these capacities, prominently including cognition, grasp of philosophical theses implicit in the novels in turn depends in part on appreciation of formal structure. In the novels we will consider how these theses relate to the nature of moral agency, its development, lack of development, or disintegration. We appreciate Elizabeth Bennet's and Homer Wells' states of moral maturity, what is involved in their mature moral agency, by seeing how they get there. And how they get there is brought home in the unfolding structure of the novels. While we might be able in retrospect to describe their end states independently, and describe their developments in nonliterary terms, access to these descriptions is greatly facilitated and reinforced by our implicit feeling for the developing structures of the narratives as we read.

All great works of art engage us on all these levels simultaneously, but they do so in different ways. Musical works, for example, engage us cognitively as well as perceptually in grasping their complex forms, revealed in part through our affective or emotional reactions as we imaginatively anticipate resolutions of tensions in the unfolding melodies and harmonic progressions. Novels cognitively challenge us on more levels while typically lacking the immediately perceived sensuous beauty of musical tones. But there is perceptual engagement with novels as well, both with the rhythms and textures of the language, and, more directly linked with cognition, in the grasp of the larger structural patterns, formal relations between characters, settings, and incidents in the works, captured in large-scale quasi-perceptual images. (Formalists do capture part of aesthetic value.) As in musical pieces, these patterns often involve building dramatic tension and its ultimate resolution, prompting emotional engagement along with perceptual and cognitive.

In novels there is the additional formal aspect of form or style matching content, again combining perception and cognition. Grasping this

match can be a source of aesthetic pleasure even without much sympathy for the content or beauty in the form. Among the novels we will examine, *Nostromo* sacrifices formal coherence or linear narrativity to express the theme of fragmentation in the characters' psyches, while, under one acceptable interpretation, *The Sun Also Rises* is relentlessly repetitive in formally expressing the lack of development in its characters. The role of cognition in interpreting such works is linked also to its ascribing such broad themes that reveal coherence or unity across otherwise diverse elements in the works. Uncovering these themes, a major part of interpreting many novels, reveals their underlying content, what they are ultimately about, at the same time showing how separate strands of the narratives relate to each other in formal patterns captured in quasi-perceptual images.

As mentioned, in the novels addressed in this book, themes relate to developing moral relations among the characters, which elicit our emotional responses as we imaginatively identify with these characters and with the morally charged situations in which they find themselves. In identifying with fictional characters, we imagine being those characters in those situations, and we empathetically feel the emotions we ascribe to them.<sup>4</sup> Our interpretations guide what affective responses are appropriate—emotional responses are appropriate when they fit acceptable interpretations—but the interpretations develop out of the ways we affectively respond as well. And as we interpret, our imaginations fill out the fictional worlds of the works beyond what is explicitly stated in the texts. Thus perception, cognition, emotion, and imagination combine and blend in the appreciation of literary works, as they do in appreciating other forms of art, which is why we speak of novels as literary art. Proper appreciation is fully controlled by the texts while at the same time structuring the worlds of the texts. It is both receptive and at the same time active in its interpretive responses.

As indicated, such appreciation is a deep pleasure or end in itself, and the various aspects of it are inherent ingredients of aesthetic value. There is also an instrumental benefit of reading novels that can be considered an aspect of their aesthetic value, as it is an immediate consequence of appreciation in the sense defined. I speak again of the escape from our mostly

<sup>4</sup> These claims are of course empirical. I rely on psychological evidence provided by the authors mentioned in notes 6–8, on my own reading experience, on informal surveys of the extent to which my experience is shared, and on you, the reader's own experience with novels.

satisficing efforts in the real world into the more intentionally created and aesthetically pleasing alternative worlds of artworks. In light of the full engagement of our mental capacities in appreciating musical or visual art, it is not amiss to speak of occupying the worlds of symphonies or paintings, but it is far more common and intuitive to refer to the fictional worlds of novels, defined as the set of propositions imagined to be true in properly reading and interpreting the texts. We all know what it is to get lost or wrapped up in a good novel, forgetting to call it a night as we continue to turn the pages. The cares of the day will seem more distant, if remembered at all. Such value from being so engaged and having these alternative worlds to occupy might be pejoratively described as escapist, but it is not to be underestimated.

Returning to the intrinsic components of appreciation and its object, aesthetic value or literary value as a subclass, the first point I am emphasizing here is that cognitive engagement is an essential element in appreciation, typically united indissolubly with perception, emotion, and imagination. I noted the central cognitive–interpretive task of finding underlying unifying themes in the narratives of novels. Although defined by their content, they also play a formal or structural role in tying together otherwise diverse elements. Themes in serious novels often relate to fundamental human interests, especially in the social and ethical dimensions of interpersonal relations. Such is the stuff of dramatic conflict, which is the stuff of absorbing narratives.

I will focus in the second half of this book on the themes of moral development, moral motivation, obedience to moral rules, and moral disintegration. These are typical of many serious novels, and I have chosen canonical examples. Such themes, of course, do not simply serve a formal function. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, is not just about moral development. In interpreting the unfolding of this motif throughout the novel, we infer implicit claims about the nature and causes of such development in the characters, and in us, in so far as the characters are sufficiently like us for us to identify with them. When such claims or theses are plausible, we engage with them more readily, and in inferring them in the course of interpretation, we naturally at the same time evaluate their plausibility. This is as much part of our cognitive engagement with novels as is our grasp of larger structural features emphasized in much professional literary criticism. And cognitive engagement is as much part of appreciating literary or aesthetic value as are perception, emotion, or imagination. That recurrent themes

function to unify structure does not preclude our reflection on the substantive theses implicit in them, and the latter is more often a conscious cognitive focus than the former, emphasized by formalist critics.

I am not claiming that all novels, or even all good ones, contain profound themes or make interesting or controversial or enlightening claims about them. Just as musical works engage us cognitively without teaching us about our social or moral world, so do poems and many novels. Novels of an entire genre, the mystery genre, which I will examine in the fourth chapter (and claim many instances of which to have high aesthetic or literary value), challenge us to continuously interpret as we read, yet typically lack edifying theses about overarching themes. What I am claiming is that when we do infer naturally to such theses in the course of interpreting the sorts of novels that will occupy us in Part II, their evaluation is an integral part of our cognitive (and emotional) engagement with these works, which in turn is an integral part of their aesthetic or literary value, their value as literary art. Such reflective cognitive exercise, as much as perceptual, emotional, and imaginative engagement, is part of appreciation, and to appreciate a literary work is to grasp its literary value.

As noted, part of such cognitive exercise is the evaluation of thematic theses for truth or plausibility. When the themes are such as I have described above, and the theses are therefore philosophical, literary critics may not very often concern themselves with their analyses or truth. But that most recent literary criticism is mainly formalist and concerned with the details of language and expression does not imply that evaluation of implied theses beyond mere identification of themes is not a proper part of literary interpretation. What it does suggest is that philosophers might well have something to contribute to the interpretation of great literature. The test of literary value is engagement on all mental levels including cognitive, not the learning of moral lessons, but cognitive and emotional engagement can include reflective moral evaluation. Literature is better suited to engage us in that way than are the other arts, so that such reflection is a typical part of literary appreciation and value, a subclass of aesthetic value.

## II

In evaluating philosophical or moral theses implicit in novels, we can learn important general philosophical truths. This appears to be an instrumental benefit of reading novels, but obviously an important one for philosophers

and one concurrent with cognitive activity inherent in literary appreciation. There is no sharp line to be drawn between aspects of aesthetic experience intrinsic to aesthetic value and benefits from that experience that are of only instrumental value. In the case of literary value, the line, such as it is, falls between aspects of appreciating while reading and at the same time (or shortly thereafter) reflecting on what one has read, and more remote effects of such engagement with literature. What one learns by grasping and reflecting on themes and theses in novels falls perhaps in the border area. But it is a significant part of our cognitive engagement with many novels, and it can be considered intrinsic to the appreciation of those works, and so an aspect of their literary value.

Before expanding on how such learning occurs in the course of reading and interpreting novels, I turn briefly to other instrumental benefits often cited by philosophers of literature, but less immediately related to the exercise of our mental capacities in literary appreciation. I refer to the development of these capacities—again imaginative, emotional, and perceptual—cognitive—through their exercise. Just as exercising our muscles generally improves our physical abilities, so does exercising our minds develop our mental capacities.

Begin with imagination. Many philosophers of literature claim that in reading a novel we imagine that the story is being told to us as true, or, more significantly, if we identify with certain of the characters, we imagine being them or finding ourselves in their situations and personal relations. In my view readers do not so much imagine the content of fictional narratives, or imagine that someone is reporting the story to them as fact, as much as they suspend disbelief in that content. But in doing so they may well identify with the fictional characters, see themselves in those characters' shoes, and imagine reacting to their situations. Authors of novels imagine novel situations for us that we might not otherwise encounter. In real life we decide how to respond to various situations by envisioning an array of possible responses and probable outcomes or ensuing situations. Reading novels might provide us with imaginary templates that facilitate such real-life reflection, broadening our powers of imaginative reflection. So it can be plausibly claimed (although I have not seen any experimental confirmation of the claim).

Just as actors playing roles or reading novels on tapes or discs imagine themselves to be the characters they are playing in order to imitate their expressive behavior or voices, so in silently reading we at least sometimes

imagine ourselves to be the characters we read about or to be in the situations they are in.<sup>5</sup> When we do so, and when the situations resemble real-life highly emotionally charged contexts, we naturally respond emotionally, either empathetically or sympathetically, just as we do to actors whom we know to be playing fictional characters. We either know how the characters would feel and through identification or empathy feel the same ways, or we respond sympathetically to the situations and thereby come to know how the characters would feel.<sup>6</sup> We vicariously experience the events in the novels as observers or participants and so respond emotionally, most readily with negative emotions in reaction to imagined danger, frustration, or loss. Imagination prompts emotion.

Just as when we think of something pleasant or frightening we can respond to this imaginary thought, and just as our empathetic and sympathetic reactions come to extend to distant people through verbal mediation, so can we respond to fictional characters or events. That they are fictional does not block emotional response any more than recognition of the fictional status of pornography blocks sexual response.<sup>7</sup> It is true that visual pornography involves real people, albeit acting. But readers of written pornography also react with sexual responses (or so I imagine). Such reactions are not purely physical, but involve contentful mental states as well, some empathetic.

Knowledge of fictionality might even encourage empathetic emotional response, as we drop our suspicion of real people's motives and any obligation to respond with helpful action.<sup>8</sup> A belief that something is fictional occupies an area of the brain isolated from that responsible for emotional responses, which helps to explain empathy with fictional characters.<sup>9</sup> Similarity between a character as described and a reader facilitates the process, but is not necessary, as we empathize also with fictional animals and science fiction aliens. And there are devices authors

<sup>5</sup> The analogy between readers and actors is drawn by Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> See Susan Feagin, *Reading with Feeling* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 97–8.

<sup>7</sup> The point is made by Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> So argues Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. xiii, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature and the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 185.



use to encourage identification with their characters, such as first-person narration, free indirect discourse (third-person narration but in the character's language or perspective), direct description of characters' mental states, and present tense. When saying the words in direct quotation to ourselves, for example, we play the role of the character speaking, and this makes it easier to identify with the character more generally.

Thus reading novels is claimed to increase both our powers of imagination and our ability to empathize with people less similar or more distant from ourselves, broadening our repertoire of responses to situations that might arise. Whether this increased empathetic capacity leads to more moral behavior is another question entirely. Despite empathy's being a main component in fully competent moral agency, and granting for the sake of argument that reading can broaden our tendency to empathize, it is far more doubtful and equally lacking in evidential support that novel readers become more altruistic.<sup>10</sup> First, better knowledge of the feelings and motives of those with whom we might interact can make us more wary of them or aid us in controlling or exploiting them, just as it can motivate us to help. Second, identifying and empathizing with evil fictional characters could reinforce immoral attitudes, if empathizing with good characters could encourage altruism. Third, while authors of novels report empathizing with the characters they create, there is no evidence that they tend to be more moral or altruistic than others.

A second major component of competent moral agency beyond the emotional ability to empathize is the cognitive-perceptual ability to grasp and weigh the morally relevant features of complex interpersonal contexts. Here Martha Nussbaum and those who follow her have claimed that reading novels is an invaluable tool in teaching or developing this moral capacity. I will discuss her position in Chapter 5 and more fully in Chapter 7, but I mention it here as a third morally related instrumental benefit of novel reading. Nussbaum cites the novels of Henry James as prime examples of heavily nuanced descriptions of morally complex interpersonal relations perfectly suited to develop readers' capacities to finely discriminate morally relevant features of such contexts that she takes to be typical in life.<sup>11</sup> Since we not only empathize with fictional characters, but vicariously experience the highly problematic situations

<sup>10</sup> Skeptical doubts are raised by Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, pp. xiii, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).