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Current Narratives

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Embracing Multiple Dimensions*

Article 10

8-11-2011

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Recommended Citation
Buckland, Corinne, Commentary: Narrative inquiry as a means of moral enquiry in higher education, *Current Narratives*, 2, 2010, 119-128.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/currentnarratives/vol1/iss2/10

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Abstract
Narratology has long been a formal, major strand of literary studies, and narrative theory has more recently entered the fields of social science, psychology and theology. In all these fields, analysis of narrative reveals valuable insights into the structure and meaning of story-making, and narrative is now a widely used therapeutic tool. This paper revisits an original source of narrative inquiry, literary texts, to show how they can be used in higher education as a significant means of ethical and moral thinking. More than any prescriptive moral code or set of professional ethics, these texts have the capacity to enlarge our sensibility, sharpen, yet soften, our judgements, and make an immense contribution to human flourishing.

Keywords
Ethics, morality, education

This journal article is available in Current Narratives: http://ro.uow.edu.au/currentnarratives/vol1/iss2/10

Narrative inquiry as a means of moral enquiry in higher education

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Abstract: *Narratology has long been a formal, major strand of literary studies, and narrative theory has more recently entered the fields of social science, psychology and theology. In all these fields, analysis of narrative reveals valuable insights into the structure and meaning of story-making, and narrative is now a widely used therapeutic tool. This paper revisits an original source of narrative inquiry, literary texts, to show how they can be used in higher education as a significant means of ethical and moral thinking. More than any prescriptive moral code or set of professional ethics, these texts have the capacity to enlarge our sensibility, sharpen, yet soften, our judgements, and make an immense contribution to human flourishing.*

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Introduction

> *Our predicament is precisely that we must take responsibility for what we are to become, in a world that does not offer simple moral choices of the kinds that traditional codes are at least said to have provided.* (Booth 1988: 271-2)

The study of narrative as aesthetic, artful story-making was initially the preserve of literary criticism, eventually becoming formalised into the sub-discipline of narratology. Narratology has in turn been taken up by the relatively new field of narrative inquiry to encompass all forms of storytelling, particularly in the social sciences where case studies and self-reporting of life experience are such integral features. In this paper I am going backwards in a sense to the field of literature. What constitutes literature covers a range of literary texts including novels, plays and screen productions, all of which could be described as formal narratives: self-conscious, aesthetic creations with distinct beginnings, middles and ends. In this they differ substantially from personal or clinical narratives which are often spontaneous and necessarily incomplete until the death of the 'author'. Literary texts have a teleological import: actions have carefully thought-out consequences which move towards a distinct, deliberate ending — the last page is reached — the screen goes blank — and they thus invite consideration of their moral meaning. In doing so they take us further than rational thinking; they make use of our psychological and spiritual natures in a way that reaches far beyond the prescriptions and proscriptions of rational argument and rules.

This discussion looks at the coalescing perspectives of literature and ethics from a range of views, including philosophy, psychology and literary criticism. It leans substantially

on the work of philosophers Paul Ricoeur and Martha Nussbaum, and literary critic Wayne Booth, who have each made very significant contributions to this emerging field. Firstly, I examine the different connotations of the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' and highlight their tenuous existence in the postmodern age. Next, I show how literature nurtures and expands moral enquiry. Lastly, I discuss the implications of this for higher education, offering examples of how literary narratives are already being used to create courses that are richer and arguably more influential than those of conventional professional ethics.

The distinction between ethics and morality

An important point to be made at the outset is that there is a meaningful difference between the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' though they are frequently and inevitably used interchangeably. Dictionary definitions define the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' with such similarity it is difficult to discern a useful difference. Nevertheless, Paul Ricoeur (1992) bases much of his philosophy of narrative and ethics on a distinction between them. Although *ethics*, deriving from the Greek, and *morality*, deriving from the Latin, both bear the connotation of 'that which is *considered to be good*' and 'that which *imposes itself as obligatory*', there is, he says, a conventional difference in their usage. Ethics applies to 'the aim of an accomplished life' (the good life), while morality applies to 'the articulation of this aim in norms characterised at once by claims to universality and by an effect of constraint' (Ricoeur 1992: 170). They relate to the distinction between the Aristotelian idea of 'the good that people aim at' and 'the Platonic Good' which is transcendent and immutable. In this sense, ethics is essentially teleological (based on an aim towards an end), and morality is deontological (based on pre-existing principles and an obligation to uphold them) (Ricoeur 1992). These two radically different concepts underpin most philosophical approaches to ethics and morality and it is very useful to keep in mind the distinction between them.

However, in common contemporary usage there is another perhaps more relevant and commonplace distinction. Ethics has become an *impersonal* term and refers to something that is worked out institutionally; morality, in contrast, has come to imply a *personal* position because it requires an individual to make a choice whether or not to conform to a set of beliefs or a universal principle. Universities have courses on ethics — for example, business ethics, ethics for nurses, legal ethics — where principles are analysed from largely abstract and discipline-focused perspectives, all acceptable and respectable, and the principles safely prescribed within legal and socially sanctioned guidelines. If we practise these principles we can rest easy. Or can we? Sometimes professional ethics appears to get it wrong. In Nazi Germany, that ultimate test case, the professional ethics code established by that political regime required the extermination of Jews; right now the professional ethics code of the military in some nations classifies civilian casualties in wartime as collateral damage. These types of ethics do not always seem ethical. Professional ethics are not always right or good enough.

But the term morality is also problematic. It has been largely and mistakenly relegated to the wastelands of fundamentalist religious faiths or made suspect by the undoings of postmodernism. Indeed as philosopher Raimond Gaita (2000) remarks, these days the word morality is automatically enclosed in scare or sneer quotes, those written or

gestured quotes that signal the user of them is casting an ironic distance between him- or herself and the thing denoted. Moreover, morality implies that we must take some kind of personal stance — even do something! No wonder we are scared or hide behind disdain. But in a postmodern age, how can we know what is right — and what should we do about it?

The legacy of postmodernism

Self-evidently, society is in a moral mess. While the positive aspects of postmodern relativism encourage respect for cultural diversity and difference in values, the negative aspects have led to a widely decried loss of grounding of what matters and why. The distinct lack of moral education or moral prioritising is all too evident in higher education, either reflecting, or contributing to, this vacuum. Steven Schwartz (2009, online), Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, recently lamented the fact that universities are now value-free zones, and called for a reassertion of the primary purpose of education: 'the building of the ethical and moral character of its students'. Note here that Schwartz too appears conscious of the distinction between the terms ethical and moral in that he uses both. As if to highlight the gap between ethical principles and morality, he pithily states: 'Just because something is legal does not make it right'. He harks back to John Stuart Mill's cogent statement that the primary task of universities is 'not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings' (Schwartz 2009, online).

In fact up until the mid-twentieth century, the nurturing of capable and cultivated human beings was a primary aim of English teaching in both school and university education, an aim that began with the literary criticism of Matthew Arnold and virtually died with F.R. Leavis. After a number of replacement theories, critical literacy has assumed pre-eminence. Ironically in this context, the critical literacy movement seeks to unpack the moral agenda behind all types of texts including literature, but seems to dismiss all that it finds as suspect ideology. It refers to this process as the interrogation of the text, bringing to mind the torture cell, confessions and denunciation. Although it is essential to be able to read between the lines, the overall effect of this style of analysis has been to throw the baby out with the bathwater: all moral principles become suspect and destabilisation empties the text (and the life it depicts) of meaning.

The current lack of moral thinking that characterises our society is evident in two examples from the area in which I work: teacher education. Recently published studies of the moral development of trainee teachers reveal that these future professionals show a poor understanding of moral issues and they lack appropriate vocabulary to deal with them (Cummings, Harlow and Madddux 2007; Johnson 2008; Willemse, Lunenberg and Korthargen 2008). This is surely a matter of concern considering that an increasing number of parents now pass the baton of moral instruction over to schools. One of my own postgraduate students, a teacher of final-year high school students in a prestigious independent school, asked students to respond to a dispute between an infamous English chef and a local current affairs television reporter. The chef had publicly made very abusive remarks about the reporter's appearance and sexuality. Two thirds of students supported the maligned reporter, a fact that is perhaps slightly encouraging, but a hope soon dashed when the teacher asked them why. Most said they favoured the reporter

simply because she was Australian. Yet these young men and women are not showing a lack of values so much as an unthinking soaking up of the prevailing zeitgeist. Indeed in this country's politics and the general media the highest term of denigration for a morally flawed act is not that it is wrong or damaging but that it is 'un-Australian'.

This is an excellent illustration of the fact that though we may think we live in an enlightened free age, suitably critical of fundamentalist or politically incorrect views, unless we are very aware of how we arrive at our judgements, we are simply picking up a set of someone else's. One of the chief means of this passive social indoctrination is narrative. Books, television, films and video games all teach us things whether we are aware of it or not and affect our emotions and our points of view. Studies in the fields of psychology and communications have long been investigating the ways that overtly persuasive narratives, particularly advertising, exert influence over us. However, these same researchers have 'largely overlooked the attitudinal impact of communications whose aim is not advocacy or influence' (Brock, Strange and Green 2002: 2), communications which are broadly referred to in these disciplines as entertainment narratives. Slater (2002) argues that 'the incidental and cumulative effect of entertainment narratives on beliefs, values and behaviours is one of the most important issues facing communication scientists'. Already hard data is emerging which shows that the reading of fictional accounts of events, even when people are aware they are reading fiction, has a stronger effect on people's attitudes and beliefs than equivalent facts (Slater 2002). Can this phenomenon of passive indoctrination be used to good effect?

Literary narratives

It is widely recognised that the one of the most important factors contributing to the eventual overturning of America's segregation laws was not the idealistic, abstract set of principles in the Gettysburg address, but rather the publication of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). This hugely popular novel allowed the white population of America to imaginatively walk in the shoes of the marginalised black population. A recently published Australian novel, Peter Stewart's *Demons at Dusk* (2008), is a powerful portrayal of the Myall Creek Massacre and on a lesser scale has the potential to raise the consciousness of readers concerning racial discrimination. In the early nineteenth century a group of convicts and settlers, sanctioned by wealthy landowners, hunted down and massacred 28 Aboriginals, mostly women and children. I knew about this important event as a historical fact, but when put into real life terms — in a poignant human narrative where characters are flesh and blood, and later hacked flesh and spilt blood — my understanding of the event and its horrors has been immeasurably changed. This bears out Nussbaum's assertion that although rational, ethical judgement is essentially passive and detached, and highly useful because of these qualities, people also need to be vulnerable to emotions in response to actual circumstances of human life in order to learn 'what they really think' (Nussbaum 1986: 10).

Clearly literature is an enormously influential medium and provides opportunities for us to be exposed to described situations that would be otherwise outside our experience. Literary texts, because of their intellectual depth, invite us to explore that depth as active participants rather than passive consumers. Thus while the medium itself is conducive to engendering vulnerability, it simultaneously stimulates awareness, reflection and

subsequent conviction. Unlike rational debate and moral rules, literature has the power to engross us. The title of Victor Nell's famous study of the psychology of reading, *Lost in a Book* (1988), speaks for itself, as do his concepts of 'absorption' and 'trance'. Gerrig's (1993) theory of 'transportation' is also telling. We undertake a journey when we read a book; we travel from our place of origin and we come back changed. Reading literature requires that we create complex mental imagery, which is more likely to be remembered than the abstract words of reason. These lingering visual images encourage rumination rather than passive immersion, and can be called upon to enhance understanding and decision-making in later life. Green and Brock's psychological investigations into these phenomena show that narrative persuasion, far more than rhetorical, rational persuasion, leads to belief changes 'that resist counterinfluence'. The images conjured by narrative have unique 'psychological intensity' and are relatively resistant to decay (Green and Brock 2002: 336).

Philosophers and literary critics explore this same affective power from a different perspective. For Nussbaum (1990: 5), novels, unlike histories or biographies, enable us

> to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstances, be oneself … history simply records what in fact occurred, whether or not it represents a general possibility for human lives.

Furthermore, novels are not 'raw life': 'they are a close and careful interpretive description', works of 'great precision focussing attention on each word, feeling each even more keenly'. This is very different to real life which 'goes by without that heightened awareness and is thus, in a sense, not fully or thoroughly lived' (Nussbaum 1990: 47). Ricoeur (1992: 115) views literature as 'a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations, and judgements of approval and condemnation', and as such serves as an introductory study to ethics. Thus literary narratives fall in differing degrees between description and prescription. They deploy 'an imaginary space for thought experiments in which moral judgements operate in hypothetical mode' (Ricoeur 1992: 170). Oatley (2002) argues that literature is specially placed to affect us by evoking emotions 'in the context of understanding'. Thus when we are moved by a great work such as *Hamlet* not only do we experience an array of feelings, our thoughts widen out 'to some of the great issues of the human predicament, as they affect us personally, and as they affect our fellow beings' (Oatley 2002: 65). As readers we move from vicarious experience to sympathy, to identity, and then to reflection. Sometimes we are moved to compassion. Through the depiction of life in action we see people as they aim towards their version of the good life, and through that consideration we ponder the possibility of universal rules and obligations that might determine our evaluation of their success. So as we reflect on the meaning of the work and the experience it has given us, we oscillate between Ricoeur's notions of ethical considerations (the aim of an accomplished life), and moral considerations (measuring that experience against universal principles and obligations).

Booth argues that fiction can never be severed from the realm of ethics because the books that we read both overtly and covertly affect our actions in real life. In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), he likens the reading of novels to the

cultivation of friendship, and forcefully argues that our companions in fiction are of vital importance to our wellbeing. Whilst recognising that no narrative will be good or bad for all readers at all times, we must attempt 'to discover what is good or bad for us in our condition *here* and *now*' (Booth 1988: 489). In that decision-making which involves the recognition and discrimination of values, we are defining and re-making ourselves. Booth points out that once it was assumed that one should distinguish between good and bad characters in literature, and 'the ultimate point in talking about character was to improve it, to save one's soul' (1988: 230). It is precisely this decision-making, this thoughtful discrimination of values and character, which is of such benefit in these postmodern times in postmodern education.

It is essential to keep in mind that the value of literature in this context is not that it teaches us what to think, though it can do that in ways that are neither didactic nor indoctrinating. Rather, literature, in its imaginative richness and multiple perspectives, expands our awareness of the world and gives us a wider, more compassionate and grounded range of choices concerning what is good and how best to lead our lives. It can serve to reinforce our previously held values, but it can also sweep away our unexamined moral assumptions. Tolstoy's great novel *Anna Karenina* (1877), for example, does not overtly tell us to avoid adultery. Instead it shows us the motivations and devastating consequences that interplay within the lives of the many characters whom adultery affects. Because it enlarges our understanding it thereby actually dissuades us from outright condemnatory judgement of the characters, if not of the act itself. Booth assures us that the authors who become our lasting friends are those 'who offer to teach us, by the sheer activity of considering their gifts, a life larger than any specific doctrine we might accept or reject' (1988: 222).

Some recent developments in narratology open up important new dimensions in understanding the power and the potential of fiction and its link to moral enquiry. Through its comparative dissection and analysis of texts, narratology has hitherto been largely concerned with the finding of grammatical, structural and thematic patterns, exemplified in the work of Propp (1968) and Genette (1980). More lately, especially through the work of Booth (1988) and Ricoeur (1992), it has turned towards the mapping of meaning in relation to the reader as moral agent. Booth (1988: 289) identifies a set number of meaning patterns that seem to structure all literature. They include the journey of the protagonist 'from high promise to happiness to misery'; 'from misery to maximum misery (… many modern novels)'; and 'from happiness to happiness to a higher happiness (for example, that rare thing, a reconciled death)', and he also re-conceptualises them in more overtly moral terms, such as 'from virtue to vice to virtue' and 'from ignorance to revelation'.

Christopher Booker in his monumental work *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004) not only analyses the plot and thematic patterns of epics, novels, plays and films from Homer to *Star Wars,* but also searches for their overarching patterns of meaning. He concludes that

> the very fact that [stories] follow such identifiable patterns and are shaped by such consistent rules indicates that the unconscious is thus using them for a

> purpose: to convey to the conscious level of our mind a particular picture of human nature and how it works. (Booker 2004: 553)

The seven basic plots, which underlie and motivate all his stories (Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth) are underscored by a unifying schema which encompasses them all: the extinguishing of egocentricity and the discovery of the higher transcendental self. Egotism 'isolates the egotist from everyone around him … limiting and distorting perception … seeing only what the ego wishes to see' (Booker 2004: 556). In spiritual terms, this is in fact the goal of all the world's great religions in one guise or another, the way of enlightenment or of redemption. In psychological terms it is the getting rid of the rapacious ego and substituting a healthy self-esteem and a regard for the welfare of others. It might also be regarded as the foundational principle upon which the whole of moral thinking rests.

The use of narrative in higher education to enhance professional ethics

There is a gathering momentum to use literary narratives in a range of professional disciplines to enhance the ethical and moral understanding of training practitioners. The most influential and ground-breaking work is that of Robert Coles (1989), who uses discussion of literature as the sole basis of his innovative professional ethics courses. Amongst a number of academic positions, Coles is a research psychiatrist and Professor of Psychiatry and Medical Humanities at the Harvard Medical School and Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard University. His courses span a number of disciplines at Harvard including the medical, business and law schools as well as education. Appropriately, he uses Dickens, for example, in his law classes and Ibsen's play *The Master Builder* for courses in the Harvard School of Graduate Design. His best-known book *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (1989) presents an account of his life-long journeys into great literature and records how each time he has come back changed. The US journal *Law and Literature* publishes studies of the rhetorical construction of literature and its application to the construction of legal cases; more importantly in the present context, it also publishes studies of *law in literature* (discussions of literary texts in relation to the law). Nussbaum (1997: 14) forcefully makes the point for this latter kind of legal education:

> Law students at the University of Chicago will soon be influencing life in our country in many ways. A large proportion will soon clerk for judges and write judicial opinions … If they are going to be good citizens in their future roles they need not only logical ability and knowledge, aspects of citizenship already amply stressed in their curriculum. Most of these law students have never been in a tenement such as those that still exist a few blocks from their classroom. They also need to be able to participate imaginatively … seeing how aspiration and emotion are shaped by social setting.

There is now a *Literature, Arts and Medicine Database*, an ongoing assemblage of literary texts that contribute to doctors' understanding of their practice, their patients' lived experience and moral perspectives. Articles on using literature to teach ethics are appearing in medical journals. One such article outlines the three major contributions that

the study of literary texts makes to this venture: as case studies for the teaching of principle-based ethics (the traditional approach); 'as moral guides to living a good life, not just in the practice of medicine but in all aspects of one's life'; and very significantly, as 'narratives of witness that, with their experiential truth and passion, compel re-examination of accepted medical practices and ethical precepts' (Jones 1999: 1). And the obvious fact must not be forgotten that in all professional disciplines, especially in those where people's lives are at stake, literature offers an invaluable series of moral rehearsals, a 'relatively cost-free offer of trial runs' (Booth 1988: 485).

Textbooks are now available to teach ethical and moral thinking through literature. Ethicist Peter Singer and his wife have produced *The Moral of the Story: An Anthology of Ethics through Literature* (2005). Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn's *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* (2007) is a compilation of extracts from philosophical and literary works from ancient Greece to recent times. This text has a substantial section examining the twin notions of deontology and teleology, which inevitably leads to an analysis of the ensuing problem of whether moral principles are absolute or whether they are relative and merely culturally determined. This analysis is followed by extracts from literary texts that pose pertinent moral dilemmas, and by questions designed to explore readers' attempts to resolve the dilemmas and make judgements about the characters and situations that illustrate them. Nearly all professional disciplines would benefit from the use of literary texts in this way. It gives students the concepts and vocabulary to unpack their responses to moral problems, and the richness, complexity and verisimilitude of the narrative portraits of life that embody them.

Conclusion

With many of the above theories in mind, it is perhaps appropriate to speculate on the way we make meaning from the stories of our own lives. Ricoeur makes the very significant point that just as characters acquire identity through actions that constitute specific types of plot, so we too acquire our sense of self by the narrative constructions we make of our own lives, and in fact it is actually the identity of the story which determines the identity of our character (1992: 148). And determining that identity is more fruitfully enabled by recourse to literature:

> Do we not consider human lives to be more readable when they have been interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about them? And are not these life stories in turn made more intelligible when the narrative models of plots — borrowed from history or from fiction (drama or novel) — are applied to them? (Ricoeur 1992: 114)

Remembering Booker's seven plots: if we are the authors of our own lives, living and reflecting on our own narratives, what kind of story are we writing? Are we writing a quest, a tragedy, or slaying monsters? Are we moving towards rebirth and redemption? Or remembering Booth's identification of plot patterns, are we moving from misery to maximum misery, or from ignorance to revelation? We may be in only the middle of the plot, but we need to keep the possible endings in mind. Such awareness will change us personally, and impact upon our professional obligations, whether we are reflecting on

our own histories, listening to others in therapeutic clinical settings or being a self-conscious and morally sensitive researcher or teacher. It is time that 'morality' came out from the sneer quotes and became a more welcome and focused topic of public debate and education.

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