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# Literary ethics and the novel; or, can the novel save the world?

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**Shady Cosgrove**

**Literary ethics and the novel; or, can the novel save the world?**

Abstract:

Gayatri Spivak links literary reading and ethics when she writes: ‘If he (Paul Wolfowitz) had had serious training in literary reading and/or the imagining of the enemy as human, his position on Iraq would not be so inflexible’ (Spivak 2002: 23). The inference here (as Dorothy J Hale notes) is that if Wolfowitz had majored in English over political science, he would have made ethically superior decisions. Recent literary ethicists have argued that it is not only the particulars of the text, but the reading process itself that makes literary novels worthy of ethical investigation. Paying particular attention to work by literary ethicist Hale and narratologist James Phelan, this paper will examine new ethical theories of the novel to unpack the question of whether or not the novel can inspire ethical mores.

Keywords:

Ethics – Literature – Reading – Political – Novel

Biographical note:

Dr Shady Cosgrove teaches creative writing at the University of Wollongong. Her research interests are in both the theory and practice of fiction and creative non-fiction. Her manuscript ‘She Played Elvis’ was shortlisted for the 2007 *Australian Vogel* literary award.

## Introduction

For me, the question of literature and ethics is a personal one: under pressure from my older sister, I was supposed to study Spanish and international development at university. I rebelled and became an English major. As she was driving ambulances through war zones in Nicaragua and escorting union leaders who'd been given death threats in El Salvador, I was curled up by the window, reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. While those two texts are certainly political in scope, especially when considered together, I still felt my passion for literature was not political activism. I was not 'changing the world' from the windowsill in the manner of my older sister. This paper may be born out of guilt: should English majors give up their books, which are in danger of becoming obsolete anyway due to technology's increasing reign, or is the novel a site of ethical engagement that can affect the very nature of the human subject? Gayatri Spivak (2002: 23) certainly argues for the ethical power of literary reading when she says: 'If (Paul Wolfowitz) had had serious training in literary reading and/or the imagining of the enemy as human, his position on Iraq would not be so inflexible.' The inference here (as literary ethicist Dorothy J Hale notes, 2007: 199) is that if Wolfowitz had majored in English over political science, he would have made ethically superior decisions. This paper will define its terms before advocating a new theory of ethics in relation to the novel (based on Hale and narratologist James Phelan's recent work), and finally raise doubts that I've had in relation to ideas of new ethics and the novel.

## Paving the way: theories of ethics and the novel

A pivotal text in the study of ethics and the novel was literary critic Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) as it theorised 'the ethical effects of rhetorical practices' (Hale 2007: 187). Twenty years later, Martha Nussbaum examined the role of literature from the perspective of a moral philosopher with her article 'Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy' (1983). Her later works *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) and *Love's Knowledge* (1990), and literary theorist J Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) formalised this academic interest along with Booth's later book *The Company We Keep* (1988). Post-structuralists have also been keen to chart this field, including: Geoffrey Harpham, with his emphasis on post-structural theory; Judith Butler, with her focus on gender studies and psychoanalytic theory; and Gayatri Spivak, through a lens of Derrida and the postcolonial. This wide body of work dedicated to notions of ethics and the novel demonstrates theoretical interest in the topic, despite the 'romantic' overtones that plagued ideas of ethics under structuralism. As literary theorist Jonathan Culler (1975: 230) states: '(s)tructuralism runs counter to the notions of individuality and rich psychological coherence which are often applied to the novel'. Notions of individuality and rich psychological coherence are critical aspects of the fictional character for a theorist who is investigating notions of ethics within the novel. After all, if a character is a product of combinations, denoted by the recurrence of semes, as Barthes argued in *S/Z* or simply a tool to further plot, as Todorov advocates in *The Poetics of Prose*, then the idea of analysing an ethics of literature takes on a different

meaning. However, as I argue later in this essay, we haven't returned to a pre-structuralism where the character is upheld as a representation of the unified western liberal subject but rather to a post-structuralism that takes account of the mimetic component of the fictional character and its capacity to affect readers through alterity. And of course, it's not just the novel, but also the lyric narrative that has attracted this kind of ethical engagement. Academics such as narratologist James Phelan (2004) and literary theorist Charles Altieri (2001) have traversed this territory however due to time and space limitations, this paper will focus exclusively on the novel.

## Theories of literature and ethics

### The role of the reader

The Collins Australian dictionary (2003: 563) defines ethics as: 'The moral fitness of a decision, course of action, etc.' So an examination of literature and ethics entails an engagement with the moral principles or values intrinsic to literature. 'Moral', in this context, being '[c]oncerned with or relating to human behaviour, esp the distinction between good and bad or right and wrong behaviour: moral sense...' (Collins 2003: 1058). Already those schooled in post-structuralism would be wary of 'rules and principles that *ought* to govern (my emphasis) human conduct because they raise issues of subjectivity and power: who is deciding what rules *ought* to govern the rules of human conduct within literary fiction and who decides if those rules are being upheld or questioned? Is the purpose of an ethical inquiry into the novel to draw up a list of texts and search them for moral meaning? As Hale (2007: 189) reminds us there is a difference in looking at the ethical value of literature as the ethical value of novels and an ethical theory of the novel. This paper is interested in an ethical theory of the novel, that is, how reading 'the literary novel' (as a category of books) can be an ethically charged activity as opposed to combing certain, specific novels and discussing the ethical values of their characters and plot lines.

New theories of literature and ethics (such as Hillis Miller, Nussbaum and Booth) focus on the reading process because 'literary fiction debates norms and values' (Pavel 2000: 532). To take this a step further, I have decided that three prerequisites must be in place for a piece of fiction to be categorised as literary. First, it must engage with the human condition. Literary theorist Thomas Pavel (2000: 522) states that literature is a springboard for reflection on the human condition. That is, literature provides a forum for contemplation about what it means to be human and this is critical to its definition. Second, I argue that literary fiction must operate on multiple levels – that is, subtext and symbolism exist, offering potential for multiple readings of a text. Phelan (2004: 630-31) supports this idea of layering when he states that rhetorical literary ethics sees 'the literary text as a site of a multilayered communication between author and audience, one that involves the engagement of the audience's intellect, psyche, emotions, and values'. So the literary text must have multiple layers with which to communicate and the reader must be engaged in order for the reading process to take place. If the reader is not interested – if her intellect, psyche, emotions and values aren't engaged – then it's likely she will stop reading and the writer-reader circuit will be broken. And thirdly, there must be a synthesis

between form and content: the way the story is told cannot be separated from the story. The narrative techniques at play in a literary work – structure, characterisation, point of view, setting, pacing, use of language, imagery – must operate in a dialogic relation to the topic of said literary work. The literary ethicist, when approaching a novel, must be able to focus on both the ‘ethical dimensions of *what is represented* and on the ethical consequences of *how those things are represented*’ (Phelan 2004: 630-31). That is, a rhetorical literary ethics focuses on the text as a constructed object, with an awareness of the interplay between the events taking place in the narrative and how those events are represented. This is because ‘[a]ny character’s action has an ethical dimension, and any narrator’s treatment of the events will inevitably convey certain attitudes toward the subject matter and the audience...’ (Phelan 2004: 632). It’s the interplay between author, narrator and reader that is inextricably bound with the ethical: ‘The doubled communicative situation of fictional narration...–somebody telling us that somebody is telling somebody else that something happened–is itself a layered ethical situation’ (Phelan 2004: 632) meaning the author is telling the reader that the narrator is telling an implied reader a course of events and the very nature of this layered account is an ethical one.

As has just been evidenced, inextricably bound in this definition of the literary is an idea of ethics – both in the writing (the author must choose what story to tell and how to tell it) and in the reading. Despite the considerable work done on reader response theory, the ethical act of reading is often overlooked or deemed passive. However, as Phelan (1996: 259) reminds us, both telling and listening are acts with ethical implications. Hale (2007: 189) advocates this idea as well when she writes:

to open a novel is to open oneself up to a type of decision-making that is itself inherently ethical. For the new ethicists, the novel demands of each reader a decision about her own relation to the imaginative experience offered by novels: Will I submit to the alterity that the novel allows? An affirmative answer launches the novel reader into a transactional relation with another agent, an agent defined by its Otherness from the reader.

That is, picking up a book involves a string of decisions that are ethical – the reader must decide if she will acquiesce to the imaginative experience of the novel, she must decide if she will continue reading, she must consider whether or not she will engage with the othered positions on offer by the novel. This alterity, or access to otherness, is the basis of the new literary ethicist arguments: that empathy and thus more thoughtful decision-making come from ‘submitting’ to an othered position – that is the characters, the points of view on offer within the text.

For Hale (2007: 189) this act of submission is two-fold. The representational other is ‘produced by two related readerly acts: the act of self-subordination that enables the apprehension of alterity; and a prior act that makes self-subordination itself possible–the will to believe in the possibility of alterity’. I think this is true – the reader must be willing to put aside her grocery list, her work stress, her ‘flesh and blood’ worldly concerns and commit to reading the story of the protagonist. Surely few readers believe that *Jane Eyre* begins to relieve her experiences in the actual world every time the reader picks up the book, however, the reader suspends disbelief, engaging

imaginatively, and in this suspension opens herself to Jane's point of view. In order for that to happen, the reader must be willing to believe that one can access other points of view. So, in order for characters to affect readers and engage them in an ethics of literature, the reader must commit to believing they can understand an othered perspective and that it's even possible to understand othered perspectives.

Hale (2007: 189) goes on to argue that this readerly subordination and the 'hailing' performed by the novel (in an Althusserian way) is 'a necessary condition for the social achievement of diversity, a training in the honoring of Otherness, which is the defining ethical property of the novel—and is also what makes literary study, and novel reading in particular, a crucial pre-condition for positive social change'. So, in essence, Hale is arguing not that reading literature can help readers build empathy and in turn affect social change but that reading literature is essential for social change. That this reader-training in diversity is the very lynchpin for creating empathetic individuals who can bring about positive social change. If we were to take Hale's argument to its end, then an increased commitment to the literary in high schools and universities (sanctioned mandatory reading lists) could help create a more peaceful world. Or conversely, one can ask, has the world become a more just place since the advent of the novel? If you are a woman living in the first world who has felt the increasing opportunity made possible by her feminist sisters perhaps you would think so. If you were the target of US foreign policy in Nicaragua and had witnessed the slaughter of your family, perhaps you are more wary.

On a side note, in this discussion about the reader process, I find the terms 'submission' and 'subordination' to be problematic. Certainly I understand that the reader must 'submit' to the text because if a reader does not continue reading, the ethical effects of the novel cease to exist as the writer-reader circuit is broken. However, 'submission' and 'subordination' – especially when used together – imply a passivity to the reading process that fails to take into account the reader's active role in *imagining* the words the author has written. Therefore, I prefer the term 'committed'. That is, the engaged reader is *committed* to reading the text and through that reading, she has access to points of view outside of herself. By merit of this alterity, she gains experience in the 'honouring of otherness' that is critical to Hale's vision for social change.

### Questioning Norms

Phelan (2004: 632-3) further theorises the reader's ethical relationship to literature when he says the reader's ethical position results from the interaction of four ethical situations:

1. that of the characters within the story world...
2. that of the narrator in relation to the telling...
3. that of the implied author in relation to the narrator, the telling, the told, and the authorial audience... [and]
4. that of the flesh and blood reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations operating in situations 1-3.

The first three ethical situations are those set forth by the author: how the characters relate within/to the established context, how the narrator tells the story and how the implied author relates to the narrator, the story and the authorial audience. However, the final one, how the flesh and blood reader relates to situations 1-3 is the one I find most interesting as the reader's relationship to the text exists beyond the author's control. Certainly there are limits (a reader would be hard-pressed to say Jane Eyre turns into a wild bear after she marries Rochester) however the subtle nuances of character are certainly up for readerly interpretation. For example, was it romantic or manipulative when Rochester flirted with Blanche at Thornfield? This issue could be debated at length with readers citing the same passages in evidence of their contrasting views. The point here is that reading operates differently for different readers, especially in light of ethics.

Does this issue of differing perspectives actually matter, though? For literary theorist Pavel (2000: 533) the point is not so much how a reader interprets a given scene, but how that given scene, in the reader's imagination, differs from the actual, physical world. It is in this difference that the reader can observe a norm-related message:

In order to depict the blurred, uncertain relationship between the realm of moral ends and the observable world, fiction posits imaginary universes whose very differences from the observable ones foreground the norm-related message.

So for writers interested in affecting positive social change, the matter is not one of setting up ethical situations in an effort to engage the reader on specific issues, but rather one of setting up situations that intrigue the reader and operate on multiple levels and by nature of the reading process, this will inevitably ignite ethical inquiry via the nature of alterity. This raises the issue of books, like Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, that question norms in violent, graphic ways. It certainly depicts the 'blurred, uncertain relationship' between morals and the observable world, though many critics (feminist and otherwise) were horrified by its publication. Ironically Ellis received death threats, hate mail and anonymous phone calls from people angry at the violence represented in *American Psycho*. I think an ethics of literature cannot afford censorship because the very things that incite alarm are of a temporal and subjective nature. Phelan (2004: 633) notes that ethical responses will frequently differ and that welcoming that difference is part of the ethics of ethical criticism.

This is not to say that writers need not be aware of the ethical quandaries and moral issues within their texts. While I'm wary of authorial intention (the writer desirous of affecting social change) given the 'death of the author' (Barthes 1978) it's indisputable that books can have political impacts through their readers. That is, if readers are affected by the books they read, this in turn can affect how they engage with the political arena. I'm reticent to pinpoint this exact impact (as I will discuss briefly, there is an unverifiability to the reading process which keeps these theories of literature and ethics within the realm of post-structuralism) but reading involves an engagement between the reader's moral code and that represented by the literary: a dialogic relation. It is the depth and variety of these textual engagements, varying from reader to reader, that make the literary so compelling. Even further, I would argue, this power to inspire reader engagement rests in an implied realism that is

based on the mimetic: ‘authors and readers take fictional characters to be full-blown individuals, not mere incarnations of abstract properties’ (Pavel 2000: 535). And it is the synthesis of character and plot that is central to literature and this synthesis offers comment on the nature of human existence, which is essential to my earlier definition of the literary: that it must be multi-layered and engage with the human condition.

### **Role of empathy**

The new literary ethicists (of the post-structural strand) work off the assumption that reading builds empathy with the other through a shift in perspective and the subordination of the flesh-and-blood world for the fictional one. Empathy, therefore is a critical component of this theoretical debate, one that is inextricably bound with the novel writing/reading process. As Suzanne Keen (2006: 209) states: ‘[n]arratives in prose and film infamously manipulate our feelings and call upon our built-in capacity to feel with others’. She goes on to say (2006: 207) that neuroscientists have ‘already declared that people scoring high on empathy tests have especially busy mirror neuron systems in their brains’ and fiction writers are likely to be among these high empathy individuals. Certainly this ties in with the idea of capturing ‘otherness’ on a literary level if indeed fiction is about portraying other perspectives and making readers aware of the inner lives of other humans (Pavel 2000: 524). Through literary fiction, readers are able to ‘occupy’ other perspectives, engaging with other situations, contexts, and moral dilemmas. Pavel (2000: 529) links this sharing of ‘otherness’ to understanding the world.

We certainly enjoy fiction because it helps us better understand the world to which we belong. We like to recognize our world in the worlds of imagination, but we also appreciate fiction for its ability to make us less dependent not just on actual stimuli but on actuality as such. In other words, we also appreciate it for its power to create alternative sets of situations, thereby putting the actual world into perspective, challenging its supremacy. All fiction wields this power.

Thus, readers enjoy learning about other perspectives because it helps broaden their sense of the world. And by merit of this power, fiction is thus able to offer a perspective on the ‘real’ world: anyone who has ‘escaped’ into a good book can understand the feeling when the textual becomes urgent. And this, Pavel suggests, is important because it allows readers to question the actual world, putting it into perspective.

### **Difficulties with the ‘Ethical’ Novel**

Back to the question that originally began this essay: is Spivak correct in asserting that Paul Wolfowitz would have made ethically superior decisions if he’d been trained in literary analysis? Can I make a case of reading as political action in relation to my sister’s clear political commitment? Do English majors really have an ethical edge? One immediate concern is that English literature as a discipline is based on ideas of the canon. Jane Tompkins theorises the issue of gender interests being served through the literary canon (Hale 2007: 188) and Phelan (1996: 257) addresses the



shifting attitudes to the canon but I wonder if indeed attitudes to the canon are shifting or if it's just that the perimeters of the canon are opening up within academic institutions to include women writers, writers of colour, etc. The issue relates back to Audre Lorde's statement that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house. However, there are other issues with the novel. DA Miller argues that the novel is an instrument of normativity and Nancy Armstrong argues that it projects an idea of the 'universalised "individual subject"' (Hale 2007: 188). The novel may force its readers to question the idea that their subjective points of view are the only ones that exist, however, the novel often supports notions of the individual subject – after all, realist trends have corralled most books into controlled point-of-view schemas (first person, third person-fixed point-of-view, etc). Too, Spivak's notions of the subaltern are absolutely relevant here: if we have a literature that voices dominant perspectives (those who have access to a room of one's own for instance) isn't that in danger of reinforcing the paradigms of power and voice that the new ethicists are trying to question through social change? And finally, are we aging dinosaurs overly committed to the printed word and giving the reading process too much credit? After all, what proof do we have that the subject's imaginary life clearly influences her actual life?

The other matter here is that not all novels question hegemonic norms. Much theoretical work has been done on how various genres (the romance genre especially) work to support socialised norms and do not operate within a framework of alterity. As Hale (2007: 195) states: '[n]ovels that present blueprints for social policy dampen the novel's generic capacity for alterity since they fail to hail the reader into a position of emotional binding, fail to install the reader into a loving relation with the characters as social others.' Surely the reader can be emotionally bound to characters and situations that support hegemonic social structures, though admittedly the vital ingredient of alterity is missing from the ethical reading equation. However, if we follow Hale's point, then it's not simply the reading process but the novel's aesthetic that affects a novel's potential ethical impact. Is this problematic? Phelan (2004: 648) says no; the two are entwined: 'the problem of the aesthetic is most easily resolved by rhetorical literary ethics, because rhetorical ethics views the ethical dimension of literary experience as part and parcel of aesthetics'.

Another concern is whether or not humanist values of readerly emotion can have a positive political value after post-structuralism. After all, hasn't post-structuralism theorised us to a political impasse? And if we are trying to resurrect an idea of ethics, isn't that dependent on pre-structuralist ideas of the autonomous liberal subject? After all, it was Henry James who said: 'Two things will guarantee the broader moral reach of the novel: the acuity of the novelist and the degree to which his or her novels can stimulate critical investigation and reflection' (Rallings 2006: 107). That statement seems to ring very true to the post-structural ethics of literature that I've been espousing here but Hale says the return to ethics is more complicated. For her (Hale 2007: 188) this theoretical shift is not about returning to a pre-structuralism and reviving notions of agency for the reader or author in light of political action – it's about theorising the positive social value of literature and literary study. She goes on to say (2007: 190) that this new theory of ethics is different from the idea of an

autonomous liberal subject because of ‘the self-consciously unverifiable status of the alterity that the ethical subject seeks to produce—an unverifiability that retains the post-structuralist’s scepticism about knowledge as a tool of hegemony...’ I interpret that to mean it’s impossible to pinpoint the reader’s level of alterity and this ‘unverifiability’ serves to keep the theory from falling into a naïve pre-structuralism.

## Conclusion

We can say the reader is open to ‘othered’ perspectives when she picks up a book of literary fiction but it’s impossible to quantify that alterity or its effects. And this is an important point for my question of reading as political action. My sister can drive an ambulance and save someone’s life: the effect is tangible. I can read *Jane Eyre* and perhaps my ability to imagine the other is affected – however, this alterity is immeasurable. Does this mean that it matters less? Perhaps. If I was the sick person in San Jose de Bocay, I’d rather someone who could drive ambulances than read books. But that doesn’t negate the power of literature. Indeed, if Spivak is right and literary reading could have affected the policy decisions of World Bank leaders, then perhaps I wouldn’t have needed the ambulance to begin with – perhaps a hospital could have been built in my township.

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