

Literature and Morality

By

Asim Karim

English Department Gomal University Dikhan Pakistan

Irshad Ahmaed Tabasum,

PhD Scholar, English Dept University of
Management and Technology Lahore Pakistan

Saman Khalid

Assistant Professor, Govt College for Women,
Gulberg, Lahore Pakistan,

Abstract

Literature - morality relation has remained a point of vital critical debate since the ancient civilization. In the twentieth Century this question has continued to inspire critical debate despite phenomenal decline in religious and moral aspect of life. But literature and morality relationship is complex and oscillates between complete interdependence to dissociation of such a relation. The study traces the art morality relation from the ancient times to the contemporary period. It exclusively focuses on tragedy as an instance of the close relationship between literature and morality. It has been argued that modern tragedy for several reasons represent low level concerns with moral dimensions of art.

Keywords: *Literature, morality, tragedy and moral concerns, modern literature.*

1. Introduction

Art - morality relation has remained a point of vital critical debate since the ancient civilization. In the twentieth Century despite phenomenal decline in religious and moral aspect of life, this question has continued to inspire critical debate. But art and morality relationship is complex and oscillates between complete interdependence to dissociation of such a relation. Hyman (1971) writes that the symbolist movement in literature and the formalist emphasis in aesthetics and twentieth century developments in painting and music have led us away from any attempt to enlist art in the service of a common morality. Even in literature, writes Hyman modern criticism has emphasized the autonomy of the poem and the novel from their moral purposes. But the debate on the possibility of moral aspect of art/literature is going on having roots in Plato's Republic. Plato criticized literary depictions of the gods' involvement in human suffering. He argues that the rulers of the ideal state "must either forbid them [the poets] to say that these woes are the work of God, or they must devise some such interpretation as we now require, and must declare that what God did was righteous and good, and they were benefited by their chastisement" (Kaufman 1983). Plato's second criticism of tragedy is based on the belief that this kind of literature will have a negative influence on human morality. Human moralities is threatened also by the suggestion that acting justly may bring a person nothing but misery and that one could be happy by being secretly immoral. Because it shows that virtue may not lead to one's own advantage and that the wicked and unjust are often successful and happy, tragedy would have to be outlawed in Plato's republic. Aristotle unlike his master takes a different Stand on the moralistic effect of literature. His notion of *Catharsis* carries moral tone and implications.

Renaissance critic Sidney in his forceful defense of poetry declared it to be superior to both history and philosophy in teaching virtue. What according to Sidney imparts superiority to poetry over these two disciplines is its capacity for moving the readers to virtuous deeds, something that both history and philosophy lack. Likewise both Johnson and Dryden emphasized the moral dimension of a literary work. Johnson looked upon catharsis in terms of purging the mind of “impurities” (Johnson, 101) by such means as terror and pity that catharsis actually incites. The effect of this purgation is that our passions become “refined” and “moderate” (Johnson 1797, p. 101). He was also emphatic in his faith that the function of literature is to teach with delight. Dryden had earlier stressed the similar function of poetry when he remarked “to instruct delightfully is the general end of all poetry” (Dryden 1679, p. 80). He also emphasized the relative superiority of tragedy over philosophy in imparting instruction delightfully. Philosophy, he writes, instructs “by precepts”, which not a delightful example. Tragedy on the other hand, he writes, instructs by example of purging of passions of pity and fear, which in turn relieves/cures us of our two most ponderant vices of “pride and want of commiseration”(Dryden 1679, p. 80).

2. Twentieth Century Views

Twentieth century views on art mayoralty relation have their origin in Mathew Arnolds’ stance on this factor. In his *Study of Poetry*,_Arnold (1960) glorifies poetry by making it superior to religion and philosophy in inculcating the cherished ideals of beauty and intelligence. It would replace the materialized and decadent religion in all aspects of life. “. . .without poetry”, writes Arnold, “our science will appear incomplete and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry”. Richard also declares the moral side of poetry in no uncertain terms. He believes that poetry has now become central to the culture at large and therefore its interpretation has acquired greater importance. In one of his most influential essay “Poetry and Belief”, Richard discusses the significance of literature in the present day world when both science and religion have lost the authority to direct the moral and social lives of the individual and groups. “The business of poet”, he writes, “as we have seen, is to give order and coherence, and so freedom to a body of experience”, and that “we need no such beliefs factual or verifiable upheld by both science and religion] and we must have none, if we are to read King Lear” (p. 43). Another strong advocate of ethical aspects of a literary work was Richard’s disciple Leavis who upheld the Arnoldian revulsion against ruthless philistinism of mechanized impersonal civilization. Like Arnold, he believed that the study of literature could perform a determining role in rescuing the quality of life in an age of crises caused by the technological advancement, which has affected adversely and debased the standard of routine human life and emptied it of worthfulness. The opening chapters of his important work *The Great Traditions* makes it clear that for Leavis there can be no great literary art without serious moral aim. His exclusion of Charles Dickens from entry in the Great Tradition of English Novel is only because of what Leavis thinks absence of profound moral responsibility; and Jane Austin is praised for her intense moral preoccupation that characterize the novelist’s peculiar interest in life. Eliot like Leavis establishes great connectivity between pleasure that one derives from reading literature and the moral/ethical effect on the readers. He writes, “Though one may read literature merely for pleasure, for ‘entertainment, or aesthetic enjoyment’ this reading never affects simply a sort of special sense; it affects us as entire human being; it affects our moral and religious existence”(Eliot 1917, p. 49).

This art-morality relation as stressed by the renowned critics has developed into a contentious debate in contemporary thoughts on aestheticism assuming diverse radical as well as “moderate” (Eldridge 2003, p. 213) positions with respect to the supposedly moral or neutral role of art/literature. Eldridge highlights this diversity in theoretical position of contemporary theorists. On the one hand there stand Posner and Beardsley who reject didacticism or ethical understanding of literary art, and on the other hand are such strong supporters of ethical aspect of a literary work or art as Kieran, Gaut, Carroll and Nussbaum. Kieran argues that “great art works are those which may promote the imaginative understanding of many people, across many times and cultures” (qtd. in Eldridge 2003, p. 214). Gaut goes further in his defense

of the didactic role of art. He writes, "If a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitude, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitude, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious" (qtd. in Eldridge 2003, 214). For Nussbaum "literature and ethical theory can be . . . allies and not adversaries" (qtd. in Eldridge 2003, p.219). She has as Eldridge writes, articulated a "multidimensional Neo-Aristotelian theory of the good" wherein she argues in detail:

That complex works of literature offer us insight into the difficulties and possibilities of furthering values that do command our allegiance. Rich, complex, and plausibly developed novels that do command our allegiance do not just offer perceptions of the particular; they also 'shape in their readers, certain evaluative judgments that lie at the heart of certain emotions' (qtd. in Eldridge 2003, p. 219).

Eldridge (1989) himself at the other place again shows his commitment to ethics and morality in literature. He writes:

A person's moral understanding can not be captured by general theories, but must be developed and sustained by an awareness and relation of her story to the stories of others, an awareness that literature is peculiarly well placed to articulate and extend (p. 20)

Carroll on his part distinguishes between the acquisition of new propositional moral knowledge, which should not happen and typically does not happen in our encounter with a successful work and the deepening of moral understanding (Eldridge, pp. 216-77). Robert Stecker (2005) looks at art- aesthetic in terms of "plausibility" (p. 138), extending it to suggest that art ethics relation is "contingent feature of artwork" (p. 138). He discusses the possible ways that make art ethically valuable. Stecker (2005) reads substantial interaction between ethical and aesthetic value, however, to draw conclusion that such an interaction "is a contingent feature of the art work" (p. 138). There are as Stecker (2005) writes many ways that an artwork can be ethically evaluated, with lot of consequences which he dives into macro (social) and micro (individual) (p. 139). A "work can express an ethical judgment or point of view, such as condoning or condemning behavior and practices, endorsing or rejecting a set of values, or putting forward a type of character as admirable, flawed, or contemptible (p. 139) .

4. Tragedy and Morality

Tragedy is no doubt the finest art that the man has made available to the world. Barbour (1983) writes that little has been written about the moral issues raised by tragedy. Indeed, tragedy has often been perceived as a "problem" to be either dissolved or entirely avoided. His central thesis is that literary tragedies direct attention to certain aspects of moral experience for which particular understandings of ethics fail to account, for different reasons. Two aspects of literary tragedy seem to him of particular moral significance: "the depiction of a character's virtue leading to evil, and the representation of irreconcilable conflicts between different moral values and between different virtues". Tragic literature, write Barbour "shows how moral notions are bound up with broader human aims and capacities so that not only the intellect, but the emotions and the will, are actively and affectively engaged in trying to live according to a particular vision of the good life". He also writes raises all our lingering doubts about the connection between happiness and virtue and arouses the fears and uncertainties that we moralistically deny in order to reassure ourselves. The tragic spectacle does not put our minds to rest; it makes us question the adequacy of our theoretical (philosophical and theological) explanations for the good man's suffering. By raising such doubts, tragedy not only functions as an incentive to further reflection but may help us perceive more com-passionately the misery of others. The humanizing potential of tragedy lies in its ability to shatter settled notions about blame and responsibility by presenting in poignant detail the suffering of others. Lamarque (2004) is a strong proponent of moral concern in tragedy in particular. His approach as he declares is akin to that of Aristotle and calls it "humanistic" (p. 76) He elaborates it as under:

. . . that the great tragic dramas retain an enduring human interest because they develop themes of a more or less general nature; they have a 'moral content', in a sense to be explained that, while not necessarily offering moral solutions, engages imaginatively with some of the deepest concerns of human beings in their attempt and repeated failure at living a moral life. The interest of this conception lies, of course, less in its general formulation than in the way it is worked out . . . (p. 276).

Eldridge (1994) too writes about the deep moral concern of the tragic art. For instance commenting on Aristotle's theory of catharsis he writes, "Tragedies instruct us not only about the occurrence of particular incidents, as a chronicle or list of events might, but further about human life and its liabilities in general" (p. 288).

4. Modern Tragedy

The twentieth century saw phenomenal decline in religious, moral and spiritual aspects of life. Modern life is characterized by change, "but marked by the absence of the old virtues, a loss of personal responsibility and a lack of individual skill or pride in skill. It is mercantile rather than agrarian, thus removed from nature. It is greedy in its utilitarianism, confused by an absence of real values" (West, Jr. and Fox. 1960). Modern drama reflects this in absolute terms (Bower 2003 and Pizzato 1998). Santayana is right when he says that "faith is seldom an operant factor in modern drama, except in morality plays like *Murder in the cathedral* and *Man for All Seasons*" (qtd. in Shaughnessy 2000, p.110). Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Becket's *Waiting for Godot* in dramatic literature capture that abysmal depth of lack of spirituality in modern culture. Genet (Pizzato 1998), Artuad (Pizzato 1998) and Becket (Niehuis 2004) theatre represent this in absolute terms.

The relation between tragedy and society is paramount. Moral aspect also demands wider and broader perspective of the tragic experience that instructs the play with broader implications. Drama is by nature a social art and it encompasses audience as representative of society and the actor/characters owns his/her social responsibility to them. Greek dramatic art provides as an instance of relation between the stage and the society. It helped in developing audience association with the actor and develops essential affiliation with his pangs or sufferings for necessary tragic emotions of pity and fear. Burien (1997) writes that conflict in tragedy is not confined to opposition as it may involve "welfare of the community, even the ordering of human life itself may be at stake". Hall (1997) looks at the social aspect of Greek tragedy in terms of producer and consumer. Cartledge (1997) in his "Deep Plays: Theatre as a process in Greek civic Life" and Goldhill in his "The audience of Athenian tragedy" equally refer to the social nature of the classical Greek tragedy. In Orestia for instance one observes a death pattern culminating in the victory of civic forces (Gagarin 1976). One particular example of actor/society relation is to be found in Euripides *Medea*. Hamilton (2010) studies *Medea* from Athenian audience perspective. The play writes Hamilton is replete with extremes of violence made prominent through infanticide worked out in a particular fashion. "Today's audiences can consider and understand Medea's motivation while simultaneously dismissing it as both a work of fiction and as part of a past culture". But for the fifth-century Athenian audience, Medea's act would, "under the circumstances, make perfect sense". Greek civic life contrary to modern civic traditions valued the social bonds over the individual self. That is why Medea is so much disturbed, shows so much dismay at having nowhere to go after Creon banishes her. Moreover writes Hamilton, the Greeks considered "guilt a kind of contamination that spread through contact or through inheritance", therefore Medea's children innocent in their youth, they would surely manifest her evilness when they grew up because they were polluted through inheritance. The city that hosted them would bring down upon itself the wrath of the gods. Medea's killing the children while they are still innocent, then, serves as a kind of sacrificial act that purifies the city of Corinth. Premier Greek Dramatist Aeschylus' art also make provision for social and political dimension of the Greek tragedies. His *Prometheus Unbound* is replete with deep symbols carrying broader social and political connotations. The last level of symbolism, writes David (1940, rpt. 1998) shows Prometheus not merely as the champion of man but in some way as

the symbol of man himself in his conflict against powers which control him in his helplessness. Martin (1966 rpt. 1998) interprets Sophocles Oedipus as a drama with rich social appeal. He writes that "Athenian life and Sophocles' character, that the meaning of the myth in the *Tyrannous* derives from the society and culture of Athens during the fifth century". Johns (1947 rpt. 1998) analyses Sophocles technique of avoiding gruesome deeds taking place on the stage as an attempt to save the audience from the painful effect of the deeds.. And Walsh rightly argue that Interest in Antigone extends far beyond the discipline of classics, inhabiting political thought and feminist literature, German Romanticism and its legacies, psychoanalysis, and post-colonial theory and performance. Modern tragedy is predominantly concerned with the darkest recesses of the mind and what it communicates is persistency of loss. O'Neill's tragic art for instance is replete with this sense of loss (Alexander 1992, Karim & Butt 2011 and Black 1994). Pizzato (1998) specifically focuses on such postmodern dramatists as Artaud, Genet, and Becht to present this loss Pizzato's contribution is to link modern development in psychology with the theatre as an art , and his principle focus remains to interpret these post modern dramatist in the light of psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Melanie Klein, Lacan and Kristeva, connecting the theater with what he terms "mental theatre" of the artist, and treats "elements of theatre architecture as archetypal structure of the mind"(Pizzato 1998, p.5). Persistency of loss also accounts for non closure of the agony and constitute another major factor behind lack of moral concerns in modern tragedy. Westgate (2008) analyses his play *Long Day's Journey* in the light of his idea of non closure as a characteristic feature of the play's tragic vision. The memory of Mary's suicide attempt, death of young Eugene and the knowledge of Mary's addiction continue to haunt the family up to the last Act that acts as "the fulcrum of the Tyrones' suffering rather than its resolution". Chotia refers to the similar fact in her classic work that the end in the play denotes a new renewal of the cyclic process of pain and sufferings along the same lines. Characters whether taken as autobiographical representations or independent literary figures have one very unusual attribute of their persistency or operation at a fixed psychic and behavioral mode, which has been treated in detail in the following chapter. This fixity on the one hand deprives them of the process of development in emotional and spiritual planes and on the other hand renders them largely circumscribed in their representational quality. It equally deprives the plays from achieving resolution or denouement which as Lamarque comments constitutes the true moral pattern in tragedy.

Will to life and progression in understanding, intelligibility and character's overall behavioral mode is a deep moral component of tragedy. Lear for instance represents an ultimate progression in human perception and struggle. He suffers indescribably through out the play till he achieves some consolation and comfort by his reunion with sweet Cordelia. Within a few days of the commencement of his stay with Goneril, he finds himself no longer being treated properly in her household; he quarrels and goes to Regan to receive similar treatment there. Then driven to shock and grief by the collective callous treatment at the hands of the two sisters, Lear suffers physically as well as mentally: physically because he is exposed to the fury and violence the elements, and mentally because the ingratitude of his two daughters has become a torture to him. The pressure of the two is too great for him to bear, so that he goes mad. In a state of madness he makes several speeches which Oedipus like reveal his growing wisdom and tragic stature. Reunited with Cordelia, he achieves peace of mind. Now the proper ending for the play would not be to leave things here. Goddard describes this progression in character as a movement from where he possesses physical insight but moral blindness as revealed in his vanity, arrogance, choleric temperament and absolute position of authority to a stage where he is physically destitute, but gaining spiritual insight. Struck powerfully by lightening, he moves towards impersonal compassion for the poor. "More and more", writes Goddard, "from that moment, the tempest in Lear's mind makes him insensible to the tempest without. Increasingly, he sees madness lies in dwelling on his own wrings, salvation in thinking of the sufferings of others"(Goddard 1987). Herein rests the tragic transcendence, insight, progression that is the mark of aesthetic tragic experience. Modern tragedy shows extreme preoccupation with illusions as essential to survival and guilt with strong psycho-biological regression (Abbott 1990). Lowman in *Death of a Salesman* (Thompson 2005 and Ibkoff 2000) struggles with lies and dreams, for his motive is to "belong." O'Neill's *Iceman Cometh* is painfully concerned with several human deranged trying to sustain themselves with their last chance delusions. One thing that ties

them in a single bond is that all of them have betrayed the causes they had individuality upheld in the past, but now appear to them lost. Now suspended in a “timeless void” (Bigsby 1982, p. 88), they have given themselves up to drunkenness to deny consciousness as it causes them pain of their failure and betrayal. Importantly, they have given themselves up to this kind of existence “a self imposed reductivism” (Bigsby 1982, 87) which creates a vast cleavage for them between the outer world of flowing events and the personal world of evasion and stasis. They have no option but to remain in that abysmal condition, holding on to their illusive “pipe dreams” of faith in tomorrow. It is thoroughly depressive and nihilistic with obvious movement towards the ultimate death. The readers’ predictability to this end is hardly in doubt. Bloom has rightly termed as play where “harsh expressionism dominates . . . where the terrible confessions are not made to priestly surrogate but to the fellow sinners, and with no hope of absolution. Confession becomes another station on the way to death, whether by suicide, or by alcohol, or by other modes of slow decay (Bloom 1987, p. 5). Driver (1964) writes about deadly conflict between the Freudian instincts constructive and destructive instincts ending only in frustration and annihilation as was envisioned by Freud himself. Driver writes:

As in Freud, the battle between life and death forces moves back and forth from the conscious to the unconscious and among the participants known as Id, Ego, and Super Ego. Hickey (Ego) desires death unconsciously. His sensual nature (Id) desires unbridled life and convinces Hickey he could live more successfully if his wife Evelyn (Super Ego) were removed. Hickey yields, ostensibly to find peace but actually because he knows that this peace will be the prelude to permanent peace (death) (p. 118).

In fact a similar pattern of conflict between life and death forces is apparent in other plays of different periods as has been analyzed in the chapter above. The overall impression that arises from the conflict, however, accentuates the nihilistic, depressive and degenerative effect.

In Modern tragedy Struggle is against emptiness, nothingness, and spiritual chaos. The artist and the characters demonstrate a persistent pull towards annihilation, atheism and agnosticism. In O’Neill, for instance the readers come across this regressive movement in a marked degree. Born in a family of strong catholic religious faith, O’Neill soon became disillusioned with it. “Depressed and sullen”, by such misfortunes as mother’s sickness, “he found it harder and harder to keep faith”, and when he got undeniable evidence of his mother being addict, he “gave up all pretence of fidelity to religion” (Shaughnessy 2000, p. 20). But the effect of this desertion was ominous on his spiritual life. He “became a restless spirit”, who can “damn God and religion with a power unknown to those play at alienation. He became an ardent reader of “mordant poets: Dowsen, Swinburn, Wilde, Rosette, Baudelaire, and Poe (‘whore mongers and Degenerates’) (p. 21), committing “every possible prank”; and “incurring the lethal risk of alcoholism and debauchery that ended in suicidal depression. Cynical, angry, and blasphemous, Eugene sought out the companionship of the world’s drop outs: drifters, losers, whores and hoodlums” (p. 37).

5. Conclusion

The debate on literature-morality relation is endless and there is a persistent divide among the scholars and critics on the moral nature and purpose of literature. Tragedy in particular has aroused considerable interest in relation to ongoing debate on moral component of art and literature. It has been argued that classic tragic art amply reveals a close parallel between the action and its moral consequences/effects. Modern tragic art, however, dramatizes action that is predominantly replete with moral crises of mammoth dimension and corresponds with its overall pessimistic nature. But concerns with morality need not be associated with propagating a particular religious ideology or moral preaching that would circumscribe the appeal of the tragedy and restrain it to a particular agenda.

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