

Alan H. Goldman

Philosophy & The Novel.

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Alan Goldman's *Philosophy & The Novel* pursues its core objectives without blatantly or repetitively restating its thesis in each chapter. There is a primary philosophical issue running throughout the text, but it never needs to be stated in bold text or incessantly paraphrased. This is a book which deals primarily with values, for it is values and value theory which unite the otherwise contradistinctive disciplines of aesthetics and ethics. Here we find well-plotted argumentation supporting the status of literature amongst great works of art. At the same time, there are multitudes of analogies and textual examples of how the novel, and critical readings of literary works, imbue the reader with some of the essential aspects of a moral education. What is a good artwork? What is a good action? The ancient question concerning what anyone might actually be speaking of when designating an object or deed as 'good' is the centrolineal inquiry of the text. However just as the best novels place their key themes within their subtext, Goldman leaves this question for the reader themselves to interpret.

The study begins by contextualizing the novel within great works of art by listing and defending a set of aesthetic criterion, not just for literature, but for art itself. The checklist ignores a wide selection of historical definitions in favor of an explication based on human psychology. Cognitive engagement is the general idea. The standards break down more specifically into the ability to magnetize the imagination, motivation and emotion of the viewer through the formal and creative elements of the work. It is a claim toward full mental captivation being the highest attainable goal for a painting, a song or a story may share with its audience. Although this definition is key to Goldman's book, he states it only briefly before moving on to his primary strategy of demonstrating these ideas through specific examples and meticulous analogy, rather than endless theoretical debate.

Not much space is devoted to aesthetic issues at all. Certain claims of categorical status appear throughout the book, such as his convincing reasoning concerning the inclusion of popular mystery and genre writing within the higher rank of literature, but overall the focus is on two main points. The first is that interpretations are a form of enhancement, providing the reader with additional levels of cerebral engagement. Whether or not the interpretation is the precise one intended by the author or it has reached some consensus by literary critics is irrelevant. The second is a detailed study of how literature can provide a moral education to readers. Here is where close examinations of selected novels provide the necessary illustrations. It is also the bulk of the volume's content, leading the reader to think perhaps his work ought to have been titled "Ethics & The Novel".

The titles chosen for examination range from Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* to Irving's *The Cider House Rules*. Each novel is selected to serve as an archetype for a particular ethical attribute. For example, the section on *Huckleberry Finn* deals with moral motivation in the absence of rational judgment. The final example, from Conrad's *Nostramo*, addresses the non-paradoxical behaviors of people who end up acting against their sense of self, contradicting their own moral character. Here Goldman makes the argument that nobody is incorruptible, while also interpreting

Conrad's morality as a precursor to our contemporary social problems with selfish corruption and oblivious fraudulence.

There is very little commentary on issues of prose and form. There is no critical assessment of the evolution of the modern novel. This is primarily an investigation into values. On the topic of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the characters are not dealt with as fictional creations inasmuch as they are utilized as models of ethical development. Goldman says of Mr. Darcy's role:

"He clearly comes to recognize, and we therefore see, that knowing what is right and internalizing social rules are not sufficient for moral maturity: we must also feel for those affected by our actions and act accordingly." (p. 126)

In a sense, what Goldman is really arguing here is that novels are pieces of moral philosophy. Some of the strongest positions in ethics can be best supported by analogies and case studies. Goldman is suggesting that literature is essentially a collection of examples and role models, teaching the reader how to act properly as well as how they ought not to behave in society. Detailed narrative and the slow development of a character's maturation provide concrete representations of abstract philosophical positions. In other words, through fiction we get to role play and take test runs through various moral quandaries, better preparing ourselves to make better decisions in our real lives. Or as Goldman writes on *The Cider House Rules*:

"Philosophers have pointed to the use of rules in avoiding errors in personal judgments, but the novel makes the danger of ignoring rules in such contexts more vivid and motivating by having us vicariously experience the dire consequences that can result." (pg. 164)

College courses on philosophy and narrative tend to focus on metaphysical issues such as the problem of the privacy of first person experience, or linguistic issues concerning the alteration of a word's meaning in divergent contexts. Goldman is attempting to reclaim a more pragmatic usefulness for the novel as a primary pedagogical tool for philosophy and he aligns himself with Nussbaum's position that the novel is a means toward "moral capacity".

Finally there is a wonderful marriage of aesthetic values and moral values in the book's powerful treatment of the role of interpretation. There is always the question of whether or not the reader willfully inserts their personal philosophical ideas into their interpretation of a work of art. This is especially controversial in literary criticism, where different readings often produce contradicting explanations. The ultimate question concerns intent versus outcome. This issue is essential to a moral education, regarding questions comparing meaning to do good and producing a negative result, or the inverse of immoral intent accidentally leading to an ethically positive outcome. By which of these aspects are we to judge the goodness of any given action? Cleverly overlaying the same conundrum of values on to the job of literary interpretation, Goldman liberates the reader from the task of finding the correct meaning of a novel. He sides with outcome over the author's intent. The author of a novel might achieve insights and engagements that were never set out to be communicated. Nonetheless, those meanings are still present in the work if the reader wishes to see them there. Or as Goldman succinctly puts it: "understanding this potential effect, later actualized, is a part of fully appreciating the work". (pg.32) He further supports this claim with an example of looking back in time to someone who was a heavy smoker in the 1920's. It would not be a false statement to propound that this person was putting themselves at risk for lung cancer and emphysema. This was not the intent of the smoker and could not have been known to the individual at the time. However, the truth would still remain that the outcome of heavy smoking would be more important than the smoker's intent.

After the introductory aesthetic briefing and a chapter on interpretation in general Goldman moves into the bulk of this edition, all of section two is devoted to close moral interpretations of four specific novels. The last of these readings deals with *Nostramo*. Then the book simply ends. There is no grand summation and no rhetorical oration to support an ultimate “therefore”. Once again, it seems as though this book is an analog of sorts for how to properly approach the reading of a novel. The best lessons and philosophical themes do not need to jump off of the page in bold print or be incessantly repeated in semantic variations. If the author has written their message into the book with some skill and the reader engages fully with the work, then the job has been done. The themes and lessons of the writer will be embedded in the mind of the reader without any need for redundant clarifications. It is, once again, a demonstration of principles rather than a set of specific instructions.

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