

# Fiction-Reading as an Exercise in Moral Education

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Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy. One day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.

This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome.

(Vladimir Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark*)

I want to argue that fiction—the novel—in both its form and subject matter is uniquely suited, among possible kinds of reading, to the enterprise of moral education. If moral education involves learning, which it seems to by definition, then what kind of learning can novels foster?

On the face of it, the claim that novels can educate morally seems reasonable. People love stories. Early on, children are intoxicated by the stream of narration, asking “what then?” at every pause in the telling. Stories supply details of character, of setting, and of the passage of time, which are the “essentials of our moral existence,” says Roger Shattuck (76). And it seems reasonable to assume (certain modern schools of criticism notwithstanding) that many novelists are motivated, at least in part, by the desire to “improve” their readers, to impart some wisdom about the living of one's life. In *Authoritarian Fictions*, Susan Suleiman persuasively traces the evolution of the didactic impulse embedded in fiction, beginning with exemplary narratives such as fables and parables that provide the reader or hearer with clear injunctions or recommended rules of action. We are all familiar with the “moral of the story.” Some of us remember from literature survey courses Sir Philip Sidney's claim that literature's purpose is to “delight and instruct.”

In claiming that novels can be morally instructive, however, I am not arguing for any direct causal connection between reading a novel and becoming a “better person.” While it may be true that people are sometimes influenced directly to act in certain ways solely as a result of reading novels, such a claim would be empirical at best, given the obscurity of the connection between changes of opinion and changes of conduct. As Wayne Booth reminds us in *The Company We Keep*, “A great tale of moral courage may lead me to a private oath to be more courageous, only to discover next day

that I am still a coward” (277). Even a person's claims to have been inspired by a favorite novel to change his or her behavior in specific ways (fairly common in Booth's experience) are inherently untrustworthy, as he points out, since such a change would not have taken root unless the reader brought this predisposition to the reading.

What I do want to argue is that the close reading of a novel can exercise our powers of concentration and observation in ways that open us to newer and deeper moral possibilities in our everyday lives, and therefore help us, albeit indirectly, in our struggle to live well.

Certainly the notion that a fictional encounter can help us understand anything about the real world is fraught with difficulty. I feel that I am somehow changed by my acquaintance with certain fictional characters, whose stories may haunt me more than the stories of real people I have known or heard about. But what might I have actually “learned” from them? Being unreal, how could they have contributed to my, or any reader's, moral education?

Catherine Elgin in “Understanding: Art and Science” puts the problem this way: Granted that works of fiction can exemplify actual feelings or states of mind, they can do so only metaphorically, so how can exposure to these feelings or states of mind contribute to our understanding of anything outside the fiction (24)? Elgin's solution to this epistemic puzzle is to think of fiction as a sort of thought experiment in art, analogous to thought experiments in science such as Einstein's calculations, mathematical models, or computer simulations. She reminds us that these sorts of scientific experiments do not actually involve physical experimentation and therefore can only instantiate the natural phenomena they seek to exemplify in a metaphorical way, yet no one questions their ability to shed light on real-world scientific problems by exemplifying conditions that often lead to later discoveries. In much the same way, Tolstoy's fictional characterizations improve our understanding of the human condition by providing us with exemplars—telling instances—of emotional states that can help us to recognize and more clearly understand further instances of them, as well as their families of alternatives and even opposites, as we encounter them in life. Thus, Elgin says, fictional exemplars “equip us to go on . . . to apply the categories they highlight to new cases” (26).

What I find most provocative about Elgin's account of how “unreal” characters and events can affect one's “real” life is her notion of the function of exemplars as offering far richer possibilities for the reader than they are usually thought to offer in traditional didactic fiction. Rather than providing a clear, conventionally understood example of virtuous behavior to emulate, Elgin's exemplars are capable of teaching us “something about the moral ambiguities and complexities of human life” (27). Rather than

closing down possibilities in the interests of urging us toward some “right” course of action, Tolstoy’s exemplars open up new ones, showing us configurations of emotions we might have not previously imagined. Their “cognitive contribution” may not necessarily consist of changing a belief so much as “augmenting one’s conceptual repertoire, refining one’s discrimination” (27). We may be exposed, for example, to the coexistence within the same fictional person of certain traits we had previously not thought possible, which leaves us open to the possibility of such surprises in real life.

This conception of moral exemplars as opening up possibilities, even discouraging closure, is central to my thesis that the sort of novel most likely to offer real opportunities for moral education will be, paradoxically, the sort that insists on the difficulty of clear-cut moral choice. This thesis will seem strange to champions of didacticism like William Bennett, editor of *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, and others willing to dispense reassuring recipes to those searching for moral direction. In what follows, I will try to show how it is that the most morally useful novels are actually those that are the least didactic, the least willing to “wrap things up” for us and send us forth into the world with added confidence in our powers of moral discernment.

At the heart of my argument is a recognition of the tension, as articulated by Suleiman, between the didactic and the mimetic, or artistic. The “figural approach to truth,” while presumably more effective because of its dramatic immediacy, is admittedly always in danger of being misunderstood (7). On the other hand, to the extent that writers try to preach directly to their readers, to get them to think or act in specific ways, they are in danger of sacrificing the “illusion of intensely lived truth,” to use Henry James’s phrase, that comes with indirection and dramatization (qtd. in Booth, *Rhetoric* 42).

One important species of novel, what Suleiman calls the “roman a these” (7), does seem to try to have it both ways. Writers of novels falling into that category are constantly having to negotiate between clarity of message—unambiguously recommending a clear rule of action of some kind—and artistic merit—not oversimplifying their depiction of reality. It can be argued, however, that the agenda for a “roman a these” is always suspect, in that the sort of utopian reassurance it provides about the possibilities of human perfectibility is condescending and false. While the impulse to enlighten the reader must be respected, there is always an element of paternalism involved in insisting on a particular, unambiguous world-view and then recommending that the reader act in certain ways in accordance with it. As with all paternalistic efforts at moral improvement, the didactic novel is ultimately in danger of robbing the reader of the chance to develop the sort of moral self-reliance that can come only from

grappling with complex and open-ended human predicaments. It seems, then, that there must be an inverse correlation between a novel’s direct attempt to show us how to behave in specific circumstances and its claim to be morally educative in any serious way.

This claim, of course, presupposes a certain account of the nature of moral education itself. If one thinks of it as being limited to the imparting of knowledge that can be distilled into propositional form, then the autonomists are correct in insisting that art cannot be a vehicle for moral education (Carroll 130). Artistic works are simply not that kind of animal. Art that reduces to maxims is both bad art (if art at all) and unhelpful as moral instruction. As Booth suggests in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, try reducing a Shakespearean play to a series of propositions about life without the specifics of Shakespeare’s language, and you will get the idea. The maxims (“we should avoid causing others to suffer” or “we should be true to our friends”) are usually trivial—we already know this!—and too general to be of much help in our own situations.

So we do not go to novels to learn basic moral precepts. In fact, one of the paradoxes involved in trying to describe what the narrative arts can teach us is that in order to engage emotionally with a novel, we must bring to it some prior understanding of those moral precepts on which the book is grounded (Carroll 143). Without some basic operating assumptions about the readers’ prior knowledge, the novelist could not devise an artistic strategy that could effectively call their attention to salient features of the work (Booth, *Rhetoric* 141). For example, if a reader does not have at least a rudimentary understanding of the importance of truth-telling, there would be no dramatic impact in a story that revolves around a lie. I will attempt to revisit this issue of what the reader brings to a novel, versus what he or she takes away from it, in the ensuing discussion of two novels that are in my view good vehicles for moral education.

The novels I have chosen to discuss—*All the King’s Men* by Robert Penn Warren and *Billy Budd* by Herman Melville—are emphatically not of the kind that Suleiman would define as “roman a these.” There is no clear presence in them of “an unambiguous, dualistic system of values” or of an implied or directly stated “rule of action addressed to the reader” (56). These novels are different from each other in many obvious ways—plot, setting, narrative strategy—but they have in common a certain ambiguity of “message.” If it can be said that they have a message at all, it is that ambiguity and moral decision-making go hand in hand.

These two works do fall into the larger category of “realistic” novels as defined by Suleiman:

Founded on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation, the realistic novel places in the foreground, and follows the destinies of, fictional characters who are presented as “real,” and whose life unfolds in a context that corresponds, at least virtually, to the everyday experience of readers who are contemporaries of the author. (56)

Or, I am tempted to add, readers who share the same community of beliefs with the author.

Realistic novels may share certain characteristics with the “roman a these” in their attempt to communicate to the reader some truth about real life, but are, in Suleiman’s words, “more open, more uncertain, less categorical in their affirmations.” They “position the reader differently” than does a “roman a these”—“instead of pointing to the right road or the wrong one, they allow the reader to glimpse multiple, partial, relative solutions; they are invitations to quests without a conclusion; in short, they propose not definitive answers, but questions” (243). In Suleiman’s terms, these novels try to have it both ways: move the reader toward some greater understanding of what it means to live well, yet avoid the authoritarian and anti-aesthetic tendencies of the most didactic sort of fiction by offering a certain freedom of interpretation that signals respect for the reader by doing justice to the ambiguities of his or her daily life.

This freedom of interpretation has certain limits, of course—too much open-endedness can lead the reader to misinterpret the author’s moral position altogether. To paraphrase Booth, we might agree on the importance of justice without necessarily agreeing on whether a particular action is just, or what the precise measure of blame should be if one is deemed unjust (*Rhetoric* 183). The skilled author’s challenge lies in conveying the extreme difficulty of making such decisions, while at the same time establishing a certain amount of control over the reader’s range of judgment. By revealing the implications of certain simplistic or monstrous attitudes, for example, the author can offer a framework within which a reader can legitimately wrestle with the moral complexities of each situation. But it is useful to keep in mind Suleiman’s warnings about the inherent tension between the didactic impulse in fiction and the wish to create art that does justice to the distortions and illusions of everyday life. She reminds us of how difficult it is to give a clear account of how a novel can be a vehicle for “teaching the truth” (256).

Because of their ambiguous “message,” the novels I have chosen might seem to be the worst possible candidates as vehicles for moral education. Certainly their complexity is satisfying from an artistic point of view, but they are troubling in that they seem to rob us of assurance; a careful reading of either one would not enable us to come to easy answers about the moral

worth of the characters or the value of their decisions. While they certainly encourage us to approve of some characters more than others, anchoring their rhetorical strategies to certain basic emotions and beliefs that are hopefully shared with the reader, there are no conventional moral exemplars for us to emulate. If anything, these books seem to remind us of how little we do know about the perplexities of moral decision-making.

However, *All the King’s Men* and *Billy Budd* are good vehicles for moral education for just that reason—that they cannot be interpreted as endorsing clear-cut rules of action. The authors struggle as artists to present us with as clear a picture as possible of the difficulty of finding a livable course of action in an imperfect world. Henry James, in fact, wrote in his *Notebooks* that his most interesting subject was a fine but “bewildered” mind dealing with life, and went further to insist that without bewilderment there could be no illusion of life for the novelist (qtd. in Booth, *Rhetoric* 45). I want to claim that there is more to what these books offer than just a refusal to simplify, though that in itself can be a major “moral” task, as Nussbaum argues throughout *Love’s Knowledge* (see particularly “Flawed Crystals” and “Finely Aware and Richly Responsible”). Using their rhetorical skills to create for us an intense illusion of reality, these authors offer us, through participation in a mutual exercise of discovery about the meaning of their invented characters’ lives, the opportunity to refine our moral judgments, to exercise and therefore “enlarge our powers of recognition with respect to abstract virtues and vices” (Carroll 148). We are all guided in general ways by certain abstract propositions, yet it is not always obvious how these should be applied to particular situations. A notable example is the current conflict over abortion among people who all agree about the “sanctity of life.” Reading these novels helps us learn, “as Aristotle might put it, to apply the right emotion to the appropriate object with suitable intensity” (144). Viewed in this way, moral education involves the development of a sort of skill, or practical competence, but not the acquisition of a set of precepts that unerringly guide us to “do the right thing.” I will attempt to show how this works in the following analyses.

### *All the King’s Men*

Willie Stark is the central narrative focus of the book, and the issues surrounding his rise to power are clearly of moral importance. From a humble, idealistic beginning, Willie has ultimately grown cynical and sophisticated enough to survive as governor in the putrid world of Louisiana politics, while at the same time doing some good for his downtrodden constituents. The impact of his transformation can be felt in the evolving language of his speeches, which occupy an important place in the story. In experiencing directly the beauty and complexity of the language at his

command, we can appreciate not only how vividly he himself seems to believe in his mission, but also how his charisma operates on those around him, which is, at least in part, the secret of his political success.

Willie's undeniable attractiveness is dramatized in his relationship with Jack Burden, the narrator and in most ways our spiritual guide through the story. Jack probably comes as close as anyone in the book to serving as a conventionally understood exemplar, though his obvious critical intelligence and erudition are mixed with a passivity and weakness that make him particularly vulnerable to Willie's power. Initially quitting his job as political reporter and signing on with Willie because he was impressed with Willie's idealism and conviction, Jack has long since been serving, as he ironically puts it, as the administration's "historian." A failed history scholar, he is charged with using his reportorial skills to "dig up the dirt" (140) on Willie's cronies and enemies alike, as a guarantee against political opposition. Since Jack is perceptive, we are able to see—as he grows to see—the complexities and questions involved in trying to view Willie as a hero. It becomes progressively tougher to do so as Jack is drawn more deeply into the inner workings of Willie's world. While he vehemently defends Willie to his own family early in the book, Jack finds himself increasingly questioning Willie's moral status, and his own role in the administration, as the story unfolds. Since Willie's political opponents ultimately succeed in having him assassinated, Jack never really has to make a choice about whether to quit. But he, and we with him, spend the final part of the novel musing on the meaning of what has happened, trying to find his place in the world after Willie has left it. The trouble with Willie is that he is so attractive, and so exciting to be around. Not only do we get the direct experience of his speeches, but also Jack's description of how it feels to be swept up by them:

You saw the eyes bulge suddenly like that, as though something had happened inside him, and there was that glitter. You knew something had happened inside him, and thought, "It's coming." It was always that way! . . . I would wait for the roar. You can't help it. I knew it would come, but I would wait for it, and every time it would seem intolerably long before it came. It was like a deep dive. . . . There is nothing like the roar of a crowd when it swells up. (9)

Jack, the thinker and behind-the-scenes guy, feels most alive when he is around Willie. Watching a crowd of Willie's supporters storm the capital to protest an impeachment attempt and already knowing the outcome of the vote, thanks to his strategic use of damaging information about Willie's enemies, Jack feels like "God-Almighty brooding on history" (151).

This is what Suleiman would call "subversion" as opposed to "redundancy" in a narrative—keeping Willie in the forefront of the story and dramatizing his attractiveness serve as counterpoint to another strain of the composition—the intelligent and largely reliable narrator's struggle in his encounter with Willie's nastier traits. Jack gradually begins to feel less authentic when he is around Willie but clings to the idea that Willie's belief in the welfare of the voters justifies his staying in power, which in turn seems to necessitate certain acts of blackmail and bribery.

To complicate matters further, nearly all of Willie's cronies, as well as his enemies, are nastier people than he is, which helps Willie to make a convincing case for the necessity of his tactics. In this case, he argues, the end justifies the means. And while we are made to feel uncomfortable by some of the vivid scenes in which Willie humiliates his cronies, we are constantly subjected to his often brilliant defenses of his world-view. Penn Warren's treatment of Willie's speeches, in fact, is an example of how the rhetorical stance of an "implied author" can offer a clue to the author's intentions. "Implied author" is Booth's term for the voice representing the cluster of values and beliefs embodied in a given work, "not only the extractable meanings, but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action" (*Rhetoric* 73). By giving Willie the most eloquent speeches in the book, and keeping him at center stage throughout, Penn Warren's implied author encourages us to take Willie's views seriously. A careful reading of the book makes it impossible to dismiss Willie as a mere demagogue: The complications of the narrative will not allow it. At the same time, there is an undercurrent of opposition that deliberately undercuts our confidence in the validity of Willie's world-view.

Willie seems a classic utilitarian when he argues that certain of his actions should be judged only in light of his ability to bring about greater good for the citizens of his state. There is a significant dramatic exchange in the book that allows us to see the real-life impact of this philosophical view as contrasted to one that can be described as Kantian—held by the state's attorney general, Hugh Miller. The importance of the scene, however, lies in the nuances Penn Warren is able to bring to it, such that both the seductiveness and the ugliness of Willie's position are brought out simultaneously.

In brief, the scene involves Hugh Miller's announcement of his resignation as attorney general over Willie's handling of the attempt to impeach the state auditor, Bryam White, for embezzlement. It is important to know that Hugh has served Willie for fifteen years in this job, and, as Willie reminds him, has kept at it this long because it has given him a platform from which to "take a Louisville Slugger" to all the bad guys. However, Willie's "saving White's hide," allowing him to "commit a felony with impunity," is too

