Literature, empathy and the moral imagination


Great works of literature are often love-letters to the form itself, but moral philosophy has rarely taken story-telling seriously. The work of Martha Nussbaum shows that the novel is key to social justice, through the role that reading plays in developing our moral imagination.

Keira Knightley as Anna Karenina in a recent film adaptation of Tolstoy's novel. Credit: Youtube.

Does literature make us more human? Great works of literature, from Ulysses to The Famished Road, are often love-letters to literature itself: self-conscious replies to story-telling and the humanity involved in embracing a plurality of voices.

While literature can be seen as engaging in a dialogue with itself, however, moral philosophy has rarely taken story-telling seriously. In defiance of this tradition, philosopher Martha Nussbaum draws on the 19th century novel, envisaging it as a building-block of social justice due to the role that novel reading plays in developing our moral imagination.

Echoing Simone Weil’s conception of the core needs of humans in The Need for Roots [2], Nussbaum emphasizes empathy [3] as part of a capability approach [4] to human flourishing. Capability theory holds that a core group of entitlements - particularly including goods such as education and participation in cultural life - must be fulfilled for each person to exercise their full humanity.

Nussbaum uses the concept of disgust [5] to illustrate the necessity of empathy for social justice. She shows how disgust has been deployed to deny the full humanity of marginalised people by constructing taboos around issues such as menstruation, or through policing rigid frameworks of sexuality, which limits the scope of those who are considered worthy of humane treatment. If those we dehumanise exist outside the circle of our empathy, beyond the concern of state or society, empathy must play a role in engendering humanity.

The importance of empathy feeds through into Nussbaum's defence of literature as one of the nutrients that feed our human needs. Novels, she argues, are nourishing because they expand our
empathy and develop our moral imagination. Empathy is something we practice, and literature helps us to flex these muscles. By encouraging us to exercise our moral imagination, we develop our capacity to put ourselves in another person’s situation so that those who are different to ourselves in circumstance, identity or practice can no longer be dehumanised.

It could be argued that this centralising of empathy has always been crucial to literature. The aim of encouraging readers to engage their own moral compass was the goal of many writers including George Eliot. Virginia Woolf saw Eliot as a rare English writer for ‘grown-up people’ [6], perhaps because in her work Eliot helps us to feel empathy for complex characters that are at odds with one another. As they brush past in their own narrative orbits, the imperfect, inner, human world of each character is revealed for readers to meet with their own humanity, even as they warp one another’s lives like magnets.

Similarly, the 18th century literary emphasis on ‘sentiment’ celebrates sensitivity - to the realities, emotions and mood-states of those around us, which in turn shapes our own feelings and responses. Sensitivity is exalted as an ideal because it indicates a high level of moral imagination. Here the endurance of Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary come to mind. It's true that both Tolstoy and Flaubert problematically ventriloquize women’s largely-silenced experiences through the literary equivalent of the ‘male gaze’, both perpetuating - through worn tropes and through silences - some of the prejudices of their period even as they seek, in various ways, to unpick them. Even so, if Bovary and Karenina initially drew contemporary readers because they touched on the 19th century fascination with female sexual infidelity, they have perhaps endured as figures of the cultural imagination instead because, through the cumulative building of the inner worlds of their heroines, they allowed the reader to travel through the protagonists’ experiences, feeling the constraint of their circumstances from within.

Through literature we can live more than one life. Our imagination takes us to times, places and realities that we have not personally lived. By entering the viewpoints of others from within, we can experience their experiences through our reading. And after we have ‘lived’ people through literature, it is harder to find them alien or disgusting, however much governments and media may try to make them so.

Does it follow that literature should also be ‘moral’? This question makes us uncomfortable, because we do not want literature to be moralistic. Arguments about literature’s moral value have been deployed by many interests that run counter to social justice, conceiving of writers as patrician figures who speak in code to one another as members of a poet-caste.

Perhaps it helps to differentiate between the author and the writer, whose conscience as a moral agent is real. Writer Susan Swan speaks of the role of the writer's conscience as a responsibility to preserve the humanity of the stories they tell. In a similar vein, Susan Sontag uses the post-war rehabilitation [7] of Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl to demonstrate that morality applies to artists and writers as people, just as it applies to everyone else. In Nussbaum’s reading of the role of literature as a device for developing our empathy, the duty of the writer is always to write with humanity.

A related criticism is that Nussbaum elevates literature only in terms of the western canon, a position that is necessarily at odds with social justice if it implies that western voices are more valuable than those of the rest of humanity. The canon of western literature (the ‘Dead White Men Books’ as they could be described), variously silences, ignores, sidelines or essentialises most of the globe. How could looking at the world through such narrowly-focused eyes expand our empathy for others?

Now, however, much literature, from Joyce to Atwood to Rushdie, works as a reply to the silencing of voices by the western canon. The diversity of literature self-corrects when it is allowed to thrive. And a better way to think about Nussbaum’s argument is to think of story-telling as a central facet of our humanity, not something limited to a body of literature defined as worthy of literary merit by one group or another. It follows from this that literature which perpetuates dehumanising depictions fails not merely on the social justice score-card, but also as literature. Stories that harm [8] are bad...
The loss of bodies of literature and story-telling is a loss to humanity because it hinders our ability to stretch our empathy through our experience of a multiplicity of voices. Nussbaum’s argument for the moral imagination hints at how stories can form the collective voice of humanity. There is no such thing as a perfect novel or a single story [9], as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us: it is the vast ocean of stories that, taken as a whole, articulates humanity. And it is through our engagement with these stories that we continually stretch our empathy muscles.

In this context, the censorship of literature and the destruction of libraries from ancient Alexandria to Sarajevo in the 1990s [10] are dehumanising acts because they rob us of the range of stories we can hear and tell. Through the loss of cultural heritage they diminish potential points of affinity and cross-pollination. We can see this damaging process enacted in more subtle and structural ways, such as in the widespread closure of public libraries [11] under the British Coalition government or the marketisation of higher education [12] that severs the function of education as a social good. Such measures act against our humanity by depriving us of avenues through which we can develop our moral imagination and recognise each other’s inner worlds.


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