

Literature Argumentation

“Writers cannot change the world, only give it a bad conscience”

Introduction

Critical thinking should not be identified with informal logic, but in the literature argumentation is taken as central to the task of critical thinking. The clarification and analysis of arguments and the assessment of their premises and inferences are necessary and major ingredients in critical thinking. Arguments may have different supposition like deductive, inductive, or evaluative. A good writer is a person who can put forwards ideas that compel readers to think critically. Thus it can be said that writers cannot change the world but they invite readers to think critically. Writer can help the readers to arrive at right conclusion if he is allowed to work freely without any compulsions or pressure.

(Sartre 1967, pp. 12—15)

Sartre argues that the prose-writer is 'a speaker', his words are 'first of all not objects but designations for objects'. The prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure, it is therefore permissible to ask him this second question: 'What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?' The 'committed' writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change. Sartre further says that the committed writer can be mediocre; he can even be conscious of being so; but as one cannot write without the intention of succeeding perfectly, the modesty with which he envisages his work should not divert him from constructing it as if it were to have the greatest celebrity. The writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare. It is

assumed that no one is ignorant of the law because there is a code and because the law is written down; thereafter, you are free to violate it, but you know the risks you run.

Similarly, the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world. (Sartre 1967, pp. 12—15) Before analyzing the statement given in our course assignment it would be appropriate to discuss briefly the various literary theories and perspectives.

Literary Theories

It is difficult to differentiate in literature and non-literature the distinguishing characteristics of the works known as literature are difficult to define. Annas feels that theorists have wrestled with it, but without notable success. The reasons of their failure are quite evident, works of literature come in all shapes and sizes and most of them seem to have more in common with works that aren't usually called literature than they do with some other works recognized as literature. Annas argues that on the one hand, 'literature' is not just a frame in which we put language: not every sentence will make it as literature if set down on a page as a poem. But, on the other hand, literature is not just a special kind of language, for many literary works don't flaunt their difference from other sorts of language: they function in special ways because of the special attention they receive.

(Culler 1997)

Literature has been the activity of a cultural elite, and it has been what is sometimes called 'cultural capital' learning about literature gives you a stake in culture that may pay off in various ways, helping you fit in with people of higher social status. But literature cannot be reduced to this conservative social function. "Literature is to write according to existing formulas to produce something that looks like a sonnet or that

follows the conventions of the novel but it is also to flout those conventions, to go beyond them. Literature is an institution that lives by exposing and criticizing its own limits, by testing what will happen if one writes differently. So literature is at the same time the name for the utterly conventional — moon rhymes with June and swoon, maidens are fair, knights are bold - and for the utterly disruptive.” (Culler 1997)

Literature and Culture

The term “culture” has not always been used in literary studies. It can be said that “culture” does not refer to material objects. “Culture is a term that is repeatedly used without meaning much of anything at all, a vague gesture toward a dimly perceived ethos aristocratic culture, youth culture, human culture. There is nothing especially wrong with such gestures, but they are scarcely the backbone of an innovative critical practice.

Cultural analysis has much to learn from scrupulous formal analysis of literary texts because those texts are not merely cultural by virtue of reference to the world beyond themselves; they are cultural by virtue of social values and contexts that they have themselves successfully absorbed.” (Greenblatt 1990)

It can be said that most artists are themselves gifted creators of variations upon received themes. Even those great writers whom we regard with special awe, and whom we celebrate for their refusal to parrot the clichés of their culture, tend to be particularly brilliant improvisers rather than absolute violators or pure inventors. Thus Dickens crafted cunning adaptations of the melodramatic potboilers of his times; Shakespeare borrowed most of his plots, and many of his characters, from familiar tales or well-rehearsed historical narratives; and Spenser revised for his own culture stories first told, and told wonderfully, by the Italian poets Such borrowing is not evidence of imaginative

parsimony, still less a symptom of creative exhaustion—I am using Dickens, Shakespeare, and Spenser precisely because they are among the most exuberant, generous, and creative literary imaginations in our language. It signals rather a further aspect of the cultural mobility to which I have already pointed. This mobility is not the expression of random motion but of exchange. “A culture is a particular network of negotiations for the exchange of material goods, ideas, and—through institutions like enslavement, adoption, or marriage—people. Anthropologists are centrally concerned with a culture’s kinship system—its conception of family relationships, its prohibitions of certain couplings, its marriage rules—and with its narratives—its myths, folktales, and sacred stories. In any culture there is a general symbolic economy made up of the myriad structures signs that excite human desire, fear, and aggression.” (Greenblatt 1990)

Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness

In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) the colonial experience has the effect of turning the ivory collector Kurtz into a barbarian. Conrad isn’t a philosophical novelist in the way that George Eliot, Thomas Hardy or George Meredith are; we don’t feel in the presence of logical arguments or moral lessons. But if Conrad doesn’t present himself as a thinker, he strikes us as very thoughtful; the intimations of his fictional world steadily invite ethical and even metaphysical response. (Bloom 87)

Scientifically, Conrad was fairly well informed and, unlike most of the other great modern writers, he neither doubted nor discounted the findings of natural science. His position about the ultimate human implications of these findings, however, was deeply skeptical. Conrad diagnosed a “deep intellectual muddle behind contemporary attempts to force a marriage between science and culture; for his own part he contemptuously

rejected the tyranny of science and the cant of science," and concluded that "life and the arts follow dark courses and will not turn aside to the brilliant arc-lights of science."

The main plot of *Heart of Darkness* is provided, in effect, by that aspect of the evolutionary process to which Marlow is exposed in his voyage further up-river. Marlow stumbles onto a grim historical variant of the law that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny; the case of Kurtz demonstrates the process in reverse. His atavistic regression is brought on by the wilderness which, Marlow says, "whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude." At home everything conspired to keep Kurtz in ignorance of his true self; the police stopped him from devouring others or being devoured; but in the solitude his "forgotten and brutal instincts" revealed themselves as potent forces in his biological inheritance, and therefore as powerful arguments against the widespread distortion of evolutionary theory to support the Victorian faith in economic, social, political and national progress, the faith which originally animated Kurtz. (Bloom 87)

That *Heart of Darkness* operates on a highly symbolic level few readers will contest, and indeed most criticism approaches it this way. I do not wish to debate the notions that the novel is a quest, journey or descent to hell or any other worthwhile interpretation, but rather to show what each of these approaches has in common: that in nearly every instance they are dealing either directly or indirectly with some "journey within," and I suggest that this journey is not merely one of Marlow's self-discovery as is so often concluded, but the much greater journey of all civilization from its present (western European) state of development back to its primitive origins. Although the novel's concern with the nature of civilization has long been recognized, the approach to the

novel has been, almost without exception, symbolic or allegorical. The evidence for this approach is enormous: the river, the darkness, the "pilgrims," the penetration. We need not abandon this perspective when it obviously has so much to offer. (Bloom 87)

Although it depends heavily on symbolism, *Heart of Darkness* is more psychological than it is symbolistic. This is to say (using an extreme example), Conrad is here much closer to Henry James and Dostoyevski than to Hawthorne or, in keeping with the symbolist vogue of his time, Poe. The comparison might not be so extreme after all. Listen to the utterances of Dostoyevski's *Underground Man*. (Bloom 87)

Conclusion

If it is assumed that one writes for universal readers then those writings should be influencing most of the readers in one or other way. Sartre concludes that "there doesn't seem to be any doubt: one writes for the universal reader, and we have seen, in effect, that the exigency of the writer is, as a rule, addressed to all men. But the preceding descriptions are ideal." (Sartre 1967, pp. 12—15)

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