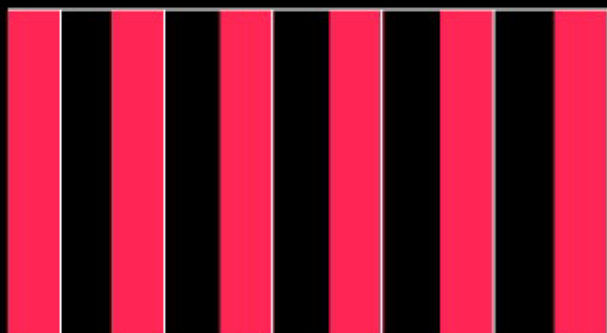


ETHICS AND NARRATIVE
IN THE ENGLISH NOVEL,
1880–1914



Jil Larson

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A revitalization of the field of ethics and literature has recently gained the attention of scholars in philosophy and literary studies. Drawing on interdisciplinary work in this field by a diverse range of thinkers, including Martha Nussbaum, Emmanuel Levinas, and Paul Ricoeur, Jil Larson offers new readings of late Victorian and turn-of-the-century British fiction to show how ethical concepts can transform our understanding of narratives, just as narratives make possible a valuable, contextualized moral deliberation. Focusing on novels by Thomas Hardy, Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Oscar Wilde, and Henry James, Larson explores the conjunction of ethics and *fin-de-siècle* history and culture through a consideration of what narratives from this period tell us about emotion, reason, and gender, aestheticism, and such speech acts as promising and lying. This book will be of interest to scholars of the nineteenth century and modernism, and all interested in the conjunction of narrative, ethics, and literary theory.

JIL LARSON is Assistant Professor of English at Western Michigan University. A former managing editor of *Victorian Studies*, she has published on Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, and ethics and literature. She is currently a member of the Executive Board of the Centre for the Study of Ethics in Society at Western Michigan University.

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For my parents and my friend Jonathan

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CHAPTER I

Ethics and the turn to narrative

Can the reality of complex moral situations be represented by means other than those of imaginative literature?

Bernard Williams¹

The dilemma cuts two ways. On the one hand, how much of what is genuinely important to people can be rendered in universal theories? On the other hand, are stories valuable for ethics, if no moral is attached?

Tobin Siebers²

I began planning this project in the late 1980s, during the heyday of critical theory when interdisciplinary studies of literature had become common and literary critics were writing from theoretical vantage points developed through work in other fields, especially history and philosophy. Given my interest in the ethics of fiction, I noticed that the seemingly natural combination of moral philosophy and literature was virtually non-existent in literary criticism, despite all the attention to other branches of philosophy. Why? In an essay published in *The Future of Literary Theory* (1989), Martha Nussbaum concedes that to answer this question fully would be a long story, which “would include the influence of Kant’s aesthetics; of early twentieth-century formalism; of the New Criticism. It would include several prevailing trends in ethical theory as well – above all that of Kantianism and of Utilitarianism, ethical views that in their different ways were so inhospitable to any possible relation with imaginative literature that dialogue was cut off from the side of ethics as well.”³ Like Wayne Booth, who had articulated his answer to this question a year earlier in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988),

Nussbaum also faults the writing that gave ethical criticism “a bad name, by its neglect of literary form and its reductive moralizing manner” (“Perceptive Equilibrium” 62). While traditional ethical criticism was too often essentialist, normative, and blind to the implications of narrative choices and rhetorical relations both within a text (between narrator and narratee, for instance) and outside a text (between readers or listeners and narrators and implied authors), the formalist correctives to this type of literary criticism tended to leave ethics behind altogether.⁴

These reasons drawn from the history of literary studies and moral philosophy are persuasive, but the neglect of ethical criticism can also be explained by examining the anxieties that have lingered in the wake of this history. These anxieties and prejudices are evident in the way most intellectuals, especially those in English departments, respond to the word “moral” by distancing themselves from it, automatically associating it with censoriousness, life-denying rigidity, coercion. The expectation of this response is palpable in nearly all of the seminal studies of ethics and literature. Booth’s admirable and ambitious book on the subject, for example, is marred by a defensiveness of tone, undoubtedly because he anticipates just such a hostile audience.⁵ Not surprisingly, Geoffrey Harpham begins his 1992 study of ethics, language, and literature with a discussion of ethics as an “embattled” concept: “Ethics often provokes from other discourses the same resentment and belligerence provoked in the subject by ethical laws or by the conscience.”⁶ Partially for this reason, ethical theory and literary theory have, until recently, remained separate discourses. In his *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism*, Tobin Siebers also alludes to the reaction typically provoked when these discourses are brought together, and he too, in a prefatory warning, employs a military metaphor: “I ask those readers interested in a less polemical evaluation of the relations among ethics, politics, and literature to consider my work in *Morals and Stories* . . . It is less a battle cry than this effort . . .” (*Cold War* xi). Since this battle to gain a hearing for arguments about ethics and narrative has been fought so ardently and intelligently by Siebers, Harpham, Booth, Nussbaum, and

others who have entered the fray either along with them or later, fortified by their example, my hope is that my own book can build on their work, not by continuing the battle but (to return to Nussbaum's gentler metaphor) by participating in what it has made possible – a newly revived dialogue among novelists, literary theorists, and moral philosophers.

This book has two broad purposes: the first is to read ethics through narrative by reflecting on ethical concepts or problems as they take shape in the telling of a story; the second is to further an argument about late Victorian aesthetics and ethics. This second purpose makes my project similar to William Scheick's in *Fictional Structure and Ethics: The Turn-of-the-Century English Novel*.⁷ We share an interest in Hardy and Conrad (a juxtaposition that Scheick concedes might strike some as odd) and in the ethics of their fiction, particularly their ideas about compassion. My work departs from Scheick's, however, in the philosophical lenses through which I read these texts, and, perhaps most importantly, in the literary historical direction of my overall argument. While his book focuses on Hardy, Conrad, Wells, and other writers of their generation in relation to twentieth-century fiction (both modernist and contemporary), my study considers late nineteenth-century English novelists in relation to Victorian culture and the work of those writing earlier in the century. One reason for this emphasis is my interest in the turn-of-the-century obsession with the new, which went hand-in-hand with sometimes defiant, but more often ambivalent efforts to break free of the trammels of the old, including both mid-Victorian moral culture and novelistic traditions.⁸

At the end of the last century there existed a similar desire for a clean break.⁹ In late twentieth-century moral philosophy this turn toward the new has often meant a turn to literature, a move that has accompanied recent skepticism about foundations, including those grounded in reason and ahistorical, hypostasized conceptions of human nature. If nothing else, this interdisciplinary work has stimulated debate. Because the questions posed by moral philosophers writing about literature have done so much to revitalize the

thinking of literary critics writing about ethics, I would like to consider briefly what has motivated this turn to narrative and why some philosophers resist it just as much as some literary theorists object to a focus on ethics. Before I attempt to read ethics through narrative, in other words, it will be useful to explore some of the arguments for and against such a methodology.

ETHICS AND NARRATIVE DETAIL: THE EXAMPLE OF FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

Among the controversial but influential philosophers who have made a case for the ethical value of studying literary texts, Martha Nussbaum provides a striking example because she has gone so far as to argue that literature can be read *as* moral philosophy. Although it is not accurate to call her work antifoundationalist (since she makes it clear that principles play a role in ethical deliberation and that good judgment involves an element of universalizing), one of the main reasons for her turn to narrative is that it offers the particularity that philosophical discourse lacks. Like the antifoundationalists, Nussbaum is wary of philosophy's emphasis on general descriptions. In her view, "the particular is in some sense prior to general rules and principles" (*Love's Knowledge* 165); reading a novel, then, can be "a paradigm of moral activity" (*Love's Knowledge* 148) because long narratives, by definition, unfold stories rich in complicated details.

This idea becomes especially intriguing in the context of Victorian fiction because one of the reasons novel reading was thought to be not only less respectable than other forms of literature but even morally suspect (especially from the perspective of certain nineteenth-century religious sects) was that fictional details enchant and seduce and are therefore liable to distract readers from the moral of the story.¹⁰ To locate the ethics of fiction in its particularity, however, is to refuse the assumption that the "moral" must reside in a general, normative truth.¹¹

Nussbaum's essays on philosophy and literature have much in common with work in feminist ethics, one of the fields currently

developing philosophical ideas through literary texts. Margaret Urban Walker, for instance, describes an alternative epistemology for a feminist ethics that will lead to “questioning barriers between philosophical, literary, critical, and empirical investigations of moral life.”¹² Like Nussbaum, Walker responds to the regnant paradigm of moral knowledge by advocating increased attention to the particular, a “contextual and narrative” construction of ethics (here she is also drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan), and an awareness of the crucial role of emotion in our ethical lives. Walker and Nussbaum desire a moral philosophy that accounts for both the unique and the socially situated, for “individual embroideries and idiosyncrasies, as well as the learned codes of expression and response” (Walker, “Moral Understanding” 167). In other words, they want a philosophy with historical awareness and a detailed narrative dimension.¹³

To say, however, that these two philosophers and this position represent feminist ethics would be to oversimplify a dynamic, contested area of inquiry. One of the points of contention hinges on whether or not rejecting normative philosophy in favor of what has come to be thought of as postmodern ethics – in its resistance to universalism and its dismantling of philosophical tradition – will lead to positive change for women. Virginia Held, for one, suspects that it will not, for she fears a corrosive skepticism that distracts attention from gender; she argues that “the alternative to a philosophy which has become a handmaiden of the sciences should not be a philosophy which becomes a handmaiden to literature.”¹⁴ Maintaining a clear distinction between philosophy and literature, according to Held, offers a safeguard against subjectivism and relativism by keeping the focus of philosophy on general, shared understanding; in her view, that will do more to further feminist moral inquiry than giving in to what she describes as “literary post-modern fragmentation” (*Feminist Morality* 16).¹⁵

Nussbaum’s privileging of the particular and the literary would undoubtedly be subject to Held’s critique, but she resists, as does Held, what both writers perceive as counterproductive arguments in feminist philosophy, such as the idea that reason, as a product of

patriarchy, must be replaced with some new mode of thinking that overturns the old demand for objectivity. Like Held, Nussbaum questions how these arguments, formulated in the wake of post-structuralist critical theory, further women's progress; in Nussbaum's view, "the opposition to women's equality . . . derives support from the claim that traditional norms of objectivity are merely a parochial liberal ideology. Women in philosophy have, it seems, good reasons, both theoretical and urgently practical, to hold fast to standards of reason and objectivity."¹⁶

What interests me about this debate and others in current moral philosophy is that they have emerged through interdisciplinary discussions that are shaking loose formerly stable ideas. As much as I share Held's goal of transforming culture by developing a feminist morality, I do not see why literature and postmodern theory must necessarily be threats to this end. On the contrary, I find intrinsic value in the questions that arise once the barrier between ethical theory and literary theory has fallen – regardless of how those questions are answered. For this reason, I see a distinction between Nussbaum and Held, similar as their positions are in certain respects. And this is also why I argue for integration of traditional philosophical standards with postmodern skepticism about those standards. Seyla Benhabib develops a similar argument, pointing out that norms of "autonomy, choice, and self-determination" must be central to social criticism that is helpful to women in their struggles, but also stressing that it is possible to imagine a universalism that is attentive to gender, context specific, and interactive rather than legislative – what she calls "a revived, post-Enlightenment universalism" (*Situating the Self*).

Nussbaum and Benhabib are right that traditional standards of reason and objectivity do women's causes more good than harm, but at the same time, the students of subjectivity (including those of us who read novels and poststructuralist theory) have at least made everyone more alert to bias masquerading as objectivity by calling for scrutiny of the assumption that authority be granted to whatever or whomever claims to be disinterested. And such wariness can benefit women as much as well-reasoned argumentation can –

hence the value of integrating the two. As Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, our way of talking about morality “is not what it once was”¹⁷ because subjectivism is such an integral part of our culture, but we appeal to reason in our arguments nonetheless: “Does this not suggest that the practice of moral argument in our culture expresses at least an aspiration to be or to become rational in this area of our lives?” (*After Virtue* 10). And do not certain forms of subjectivism aspire to a kind of “objectivity” by unmasking pseudo-objectivity?¹⁸ Although I admire Nussbaum for rejecting, rather than simply tolerating, absurd and potentially destructive extremes (such as the idea that we should seek a form of reasoning that abandons the rational), I also see reason to value the questioning of philosophical tradition that happens to be one of the consequences of a turn toward the literary on the part of ethical thinkers, including Nussbaum herself.

Just as I stress the value of integrating the objective and the subjective, tradition and the critique of tradition, I also believe in benefiting from the work of very different philosophers – such as Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel Levinas – whose work is not often included in the same study (or at least not accorded equal authority). In subsequent chapters I hope it will become apparent that I seek not to flatten out or even to reconcile divergent perspectives in so multivalent and contentious a field as contemporary moral philosophy, but rather to demonstrate how and why ideas that emerge from a variety of philosophical orientations can illuminate different dimensions of ethics – especially ethics during the Victorian *fin de siècle*, a period passionate about the new and yet, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out, better than we are at seeing rival ideas – old and new – as compatible instead of merely antagonistic.¹⁹

STORIES, THEORIES, AND MORAL REMAINDERS

In light of these complications, rather than speaking of uni-directional influence, it might be more accurate to say that it is the cross-fertilization of philosophy and literary theory that has