

## THE MORAL APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM

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### ABSTRACT

*Encouraging good values is important for societal peace, sustainable development and progress. Morality is a judgment of not trust the belief but the practice of acceptable values in relation to good or bad. The paper begins with an introduction to literary criticism. It opines that literary criticism should be guided by relevant theories for appropriate interpretation of a text. It highlights five approaches to literary criticism as outlined by Wilbur Scott, and focuses on the moralistic approaches for the purpose of the presentation. It discusses literature and morals, historical background of moral criticism including developmental transitions and major proponents relationship of moral approach to other approaches, advantages and disadvantages of the moralistic approach, and applications of moral approach to selected text such as: Soul Errand by Water Raleigh, Everyman, The Gods are not to blame by Ola Rotimi, Tess of the Dubevilles by Thomas Hardy, Dr. Faustus by Christopher Marlowe. It brings out important themes from character flaws such as: anger, greedy, selfish ambition, disobedience, and drunkenness, lie, immoral life styles, the Vanity of human life without God and associated repercussions. It also uses literary characters to bring out vicissitudes of life, the importance of time, danger of delay in telling the truth, and seeking solace in earthly humans that disappoint when time extensions are not granted. It concludes that literature has a humanizing and civilizing mission and that the major goal of a moral Critic is to examine the composition of a literary work in view of elevating the falling standards of man and society.*

**Key words:** Literature, Moral, Critic, Society.

### INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism is the study, evaluation and interpretation of literary texts. Literary critics evaluate, analyze, describe or interpret literary works in order to give them possible interpretation. According to Ann Dobie, current literary criticism involves the use of available information such as several ideas from anthropology, sociology to explain and examine literature. (xvii) She goes on to define a literary critic as a person who examines how a piece of writing works, what it says about the followings: culture, the author, human nature, its purpose (why it was written) and how similar it is to other works.(2)

For a worthy criticism, there is a need for literary theories. Literary theories are principles, frameworks and ideologies a critic bases the interpretation of a text on. Wilbur Scott in his Five Approaches of Literary Criticism outlines five traditional approaches to the study of a text. These approaches are: moralistic, formalistic, psychological, sociological and archetypal.

Attention is focused on the moralistic approach for the purpose of this presentation.

### Moral Criticism/Approach

The Oxford Illustrative Dictionary defines moral thus, "concerned with character or disposition, or with the disposition, or with the distinction between right and wrong; morally good, virtuous and righteousness."(1549) on the whole, moral deals with the principles of right and wrong behavior. Since moral deals with the conduct of man in the society, the moral critic is concerned with content and values.

This approach is to discover whether the meaning of a work of art provides lessons to man. It is also concerned with the truth in the content and meaning of literature. The business of a

moral critic should therefore be how the content postulates ideas that can help humans improve in character.

Moral criticism however should not sermonize to the extent that readers make their own decisions or choices since human values should be personally acceptable

### **Literature and Moral**

There is a close tie between literature and moral and this view has been up-held since the time of Plato till date. Plato argues that, poets are expected to set good standard for the people to follow. This is contained in his book, *The Republic*. Literature and moral go hand in hand and it is upon this assertion that Tony Afejuku says:

Every writer is a writer in morality or ought to be so. Every critic is a critic in the art and act of morality or ought to be so. Every reader of a literary work is a reader in the art and act of morality or ought to be so. In order words, every writer, critic and reader is an inquirer or ought to be an inquirer into the meaning of conduct or behavior which underlines and underlies our moral choice as we grope on the earthly plane (pg.19)

Moral criticism is based on the idea that literature should be for sanitization of humanity. This also draws our attention to the fact that literature is didactic; it teaches morals.

### **Historical Background of Moral Criticism**

The principles of this approach are based on works like *The Republic* by Plato, *The Poetics* by Aristotle, *"Leviathan"* by Thomas Hobbes, *The Lives of Poets* by Samuel Johnson and *Utopia* by Thomas More.

In the 20th century, writers' tagged neo-humanists were the chief advocates of moral evaluation. Neo-humanists see literature as it shapes the ideas and attitudes of man. They see man as a free reasonable and peculiar being who is able to put animalistic urges and egocentric tendencies under control, as he strives to maintain his peculiar status. He possesses ethical standards. The strongest proponents of this philosophy are Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt who were later joined by Norman Forster, Harry Hayden Clark and others. They were given more respectful attention in the twenties-before now this was not the case for the humanists.

The deaths of Moore and Babbitt in 1933 and 1937 respectively took away the strongest defender of Humanism. This weakened Humanism which later underwent rebirth with modification in Religious Humanism. In 1927 and 1929, T.S. Elliot strongly criticized Babbitt and Forester for the central weakness he saw in Humanist - morality was not given vindication outside of itself; such morality, he thought, should not be the basis of human views. For this religious view about the subject of morality, the term Christian humanist became a reference for T.S. Eliot

### **The Relationship between Moral Approach and Other Approaches**

**a. Psychological Approach:** the major proponent of Psychological criticism are: Sigmund Freud, the founder of Psychoanalysis, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and Karen Horney. In studying the morality of man, one would have to search deeper to man's innate psychological content which makes him decide what modes of behavior to display. This means the actions of man whether good or bad springs up from his sub-conscious, his thought patterns. In the field of psychology, morality has been defined by some psychologists. For instance, Sigmund Freud believes that morality is based on the innate sense of man to avoid guilt and shame. Carl Jung, provide the concept of the collective unconsciousness, myths, and archetypes, which have helped readers see literature as an expression of the experience of the entire human species.

**b. Sociological Approach:** In studying what is good or bad for people, the critic must also consider societal trends. This is because every society had conventions that determine ones' way of life and perception of morality. The issue of morality springs from human relations. For example

in *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, the kids are faced with the issue of what to do to ensure the smooth running of their new society.

Sociological approach looks at the relationship between the work of art and the civilization that produces it. It examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written. According to the critic, Wilbur Scott, "art is not created in a vacuum". He observes that "it is the work of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important because, articulate part.."(123) Hence, sociological criticism explores the relationship between the work of art and society. Sometimes it looks at the sociological status of the author to evaluate how the writer in particular milieu (the social environment in which he lives) influences what is written. Sociological criticism also analyses the social context of a literary works. That is, what cultural economic or political values a particular text implicitly or explicitly promotes.

Sociological approach could be traced to the work of Vico in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when he studied Homer's epic which revealed the social conditions which Homer lived. The French sociologist Hippolyte Taine made this approach more defined when he made his famous pronouncement in his book, *History of English Literature*. In the book, he has postulated that "literature is a consequence of the author's race, geographical, and social milieu and historical moment". Later in the same century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels added a fifth factor-economic interest. Therefore, author's race, geographical, economic, social and historical moments form the basis for sociological criticism.

Sociological approach to literary criticism is directed towards understanding the relationship between literature and its society, since works of art cannot be divorced from the history and society from which they have emanated. This is because the author exists in a particular society and his work takes its nourishment from historical, economic, social and geographical moment of his time. In so doing, works of literature become a mirror with which society is viewed.

According to M.H.Abrams:

Sociological critics treat a work of literature as inescapably conditioned in its- subject matter, the ways of thinking it incorporates its evaluations of the modes of life it renders and even in its form- by the social, political and economic organization and forces of its age; they also tend to view the sensibility and preferences of reading public as shapes by the circumstances specific to the era. (334)

Sociological criticism is a type of literary criticism directed towards understanding literature in its larger social context; it codifies the literary strategies that are employed to represent social constructs. Through a sociological methodology, sociological criticism analyses both how the society functions in literature and how literature works in society. This form of literature was introduced by Kenneth Burke, a 20<sup>th</sup> century literary and critical theorist whose article: "Literature as Equipment for Living" outlines the specification and significance of such a critique.

Sociological criticism is influenced by New Criticism. It adds sociological elements as found with critical theory (Frankfurt school) and considers art as a manifestation of metaphors and references directly applicable to the existing society at the time of its creation. New Criticism simply calls for a close textual reading without considering effective response or the author's intentions. It specifically considers a work of art as a systematic reflection of society and societal behaviour.

The sociological critic will ask the following questions:

What sort of society does the author describe?

- How is it set up?
- What rules govern the society?
- What happens to the people who break the rules?
- What do the people like or dislike about this society?

What change do you think the writer would make in the society?

What sorts of pressure does the society have on its members?

- How do the members respond to this pressure?

This approach has many sub classifications but the most prominent of them are Marxist and Feminist criticism.

**MARXIST CRITICISM:** According to M.H Abrams, Marxist criticism takes its theory and practice from the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx(1818-83)and Fredrich Engels (1820-95). It focuses on two doctrines- dialectical and historical materialism.

Dialectical materialism affirms that the liberation of all humanity must come out of the conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The theory then holds that the society has to carry a revolt against the bourgeois tendency of social stratification thereby creating a classless society devoid of private ownership of property.

Historical materialism on the other hand is more interested in the causal explanation of why and how oppression started in the society. Marxist criticism according to Terry Eagleton "calls on the writer to commit his art to the course of the proletariat." (35) It advocates that a work of art should be able to open the eyes of the proletariat to realize that they have a stake in the property of the state.

**FEMINIST CRITICISM:** According to the Companion to African Literature, feminist criticism looks at "the worldwide struggle by woman against social, cultural and political marginalization."(96) This approach uses the claims of the feminist movement (women are subjugated and marginalized and that male superiority is only a myth) in analyzing works of literature. The feminist critic therefore looks into a work of art to observe:

a. How women are portrayed socially, economically and culturally. b. What feminine issues are raised in the work e.g. clitorrectomy, polygamy, bride price, giving out in marriage, gender issues, children preference, baby sitting, housekeeping, etc.

c. How women are celebrated in the work of art.

According to Lisa Tuttle, feminist criticism is the art of "asking new questions of old texts."(28) The goal of feminist criticism she says includes:

1. To develop and recover a female tradition of writing
2. To interpret symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view..
3. To rediscover old texts
4. To analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective.
5. To reduce sexism in literature
6. To increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style.

The critic therefore helps to construct a personal space and identity for women through the alteration of their consciousness which leads to emancipation, upliftment and subsequent glorification of women in a world hitherto dominated by men. Some major exponents of this form of criticism are Virginia Woolf, Mary Ellmann and Kate Millet. An advantage of the sociological approach to literary criticism is that it succeeded in bringing great insight into the socio-historical background of the work thereby making clear to the reader, the ideological standpoint of the author. The disadvantage as pictured by Soyinka, in Ojogan's Literature and its criticism "leads to social gossip of the author since some critics end up wallowing in daydreams about the author's ideology and background and forget to look into the true picture of the work".

**c. Archetypal Approach:** In moralistic approach, symbols for collective and reference (archetypes) are studied base on how they can represent a picture of what is morally acceptable. Even in African folktales which are told to teach morals, archetypal characters are drawn to inform man about what is good and the consequences of an evil life-style.

The major proponent of archetypal criticism are: Carl Jung, George Frazer, Northrop Frye, Otto Rank and Joseph Campbell. Archetypal criticism emerged in 1930s and owes its origin to Carl Jung. He was a Swiss psychologist, who split with his teacher, Sigmund Freud over Freud's

emphasis on sex impulse. He studied mythology, religion, ancient symbols and rituals as well as the customs and beliefs of the ancient world. Jung believed that our conscious mind powerfully directs much of our behavior. Jung also established that man's past and future tend to guide his behavior. He believed that to live a fulfilled life, one must live harmoniously with the fundamental elements of nature. According to him, three powerful archetypes compose the self. They are the shadow, the anima and the persona.

James George Frazer Scottish anthropologist whose *Golden Bough* was the first influential text dealing with cultural mythologies. He saw myth as being responsible for the existence of several cultural and climatic phenomena like seasons and argued that the death rebirth myth is present in all cultures and it's manifested in terms of growing seasons and vegetation. To him, the death of autumn and winter are in relation to the rebirth season of spring and summer.

Northrop Frye was a Canada literary critic and theorist. He authored the book *Anatomy of Criticism* where he emphasized the "theory of myth". In it he drew a comparative analysis between seasons of the year, periods of the day and aspect of the water. To him, Comedy is aligned with spring because it is characterized by the birth of the hero, revival and resurrection. Also spring symbolizes the defeat of winter and darkness. Tragedy is known for the fall or demise of the protagonist. Satires are tied to winter on the premise that it is "dark" and mocking form of the three other genres. It is noted for its darkness and the return of chaos.

**d. Formalistic Approach:** A formalistic approach to a work of art helps the critic judge aesthetic qualities within. A moralist therefore begins by studying its contents such as the themes that are developed for the purpose of teaching morals. From the style, language and literary devices, a critic can sense the basic message the author wants to pass on to the readers.

**Historical Approaches:** A moralist can examine the author's experiences reflected in his work which teach morals. This is because a writer can write based on his experiences in the past. For example, Raleigh in *The Lie* satirizes the rottenness of the court (lines 8 and 9), the soundness of the arts (60-61) being that in his life he had experience these as a courtier and a poet. Raleigh's reference to the misdeeds of potentates depicts history of absolute monarchy in his time.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Moralist Approach**

This approach may discourage a critic from appreciating the work of art which does not seem to teach sound morals when such works have other good sides such as artistic beauty.

A critic also may tend to become judgmental in criticizing a work based on moral standards. Also new ideas that do not appeal to a moral critic because they are not positively considered based on the received standards may be discarded or negatively criticized. This means a moral critic may narrow his thinking because of the kinds and quantity of his acceptable morals.

However, this approach has advantages. Moral approach is helpful for clarifying conflicting ideas concerning what morals would apply to every reader generally. Sociologically, it helps the readers understand the ways of life that are given high importance in a society. Moral criticism can also spell out consequences of misdeeds to the readers and this helps them avoid penalties from breaking societal rules and human conventions.

## **APPLICATION OF MORALIST APPROACH TO TEXTS**

### **a. "The Soul's Errand"- Walter Raleigh**

Literature or every work of art is expected to transform the human society. The primary task is in line with Aristotle's Poetics which says literature should teach moral. "The soul's Errand" is a socio-political poem that criticizes, societal ills and individual's misdeeds or wrong doings. The English society of Raleigh's time was morally bankrupt and as such, Raleigh satirized various institutions for their hypocrisy. For example, he condemns "the lie" or double standard of the

court, church, government. Raleigh requires his soul to go on a mission to expose lies that make our society decay.

Raleigh attacks the socially elite who occupy the societal high offices, "Go, soul, the body's guest, upon a thankless errands fear not to touch the best; the truth shall be thy warrant". The poet chooses to start his attack on the rich "the best" before he goes on to the ordinary folks. He helps people to understand the vanity of human wishes that promotes vices and immorality. Raleigh attacks love, time, justice, , honor, beauty, wit, law, friendship, schools and every man at large.

The poet uses this work to wake up the minds of people who he intends to gear towards the path of morality. He reveals the destructive ends in what people clamor for every day. For example, politicians' quest for inordinate power which they, most times, achieved by brutality. Raleigh condemns this for he is of the view that hot pursuit of worldly things leads to damnation. That is, everything that profits the body is vanity. The moral lesson here is that both the rich and the poor must honor nothing but the truth and shun vanity of human wishes. Raleigh is a moralist who tries to impact positively on people by pointing their attention to what could make man err and becomes morally bankrupt,

### **b. Everyman**

Everyman is an anonymous fifteenth century morality play. It was first published in 1508. No one knows who wrote the play but historians have noted that monks and priests often wrote these types of plays. The play emphasizes the importance of salvation through the person's rituals and other methods associated with the church, such as priests and confessions.

The play opens with messenger preparing the way for God, who after an opening meditation commands "Death" to seek out Everyman's soul and warn him that God sits in judgment of Everyman's soul. "Meditation" here is instructive in the sense that it teaches that all humans must always pray before embarking on any activity. At the knowledge of the journey to judgment and eternity, Everyman pleads for the extension for this journey but his pleas are not granted. Everyman later looks for solace from friends and family members but they all disappoint him.

At the end, it was his Good Deeds, knowledge and his other attributes that aids him in preparing for his journey. In this play, various, vices, objects or activities are personified. The language of the play is Middle English. The settings are heaven and earth and the tone of the play is solemn and dignified

The themes of the play are as follows: the deceptive appearance of sin, material vs Spiritual gain, final judgment. The story teaches us to live for tomorrow. Everyman is a morality play in the strictest sense of the term. It is a reminder of the last days. It is about dying the good death, a kind of death that generates eternal life. It is based on the teachings of the Bible.

This corresponds with the views of moralist critics. According to them, literature should not be viewed merely as an art isolated from all moral implication; it recognized that literature can affect readers, whether directly or indirectly and that the message of a work of art must be instructive.

As everyone might expect from a moralist play, Everyman has clear moral, one that is delivered in the beginning, middle and end. The message is simple: earthly comforts are fleeting. Only good deeds and God's grace can provide salvation.

### **c. The Gods Are Not to Blame by Ola Rotimi.**

The major themes are fate, belief in African gods, ignorance and its consequences, truth, integrity and anger.

The play strongly depicts the belief in destiny which humans attempt to turn around. Gbonka, the caring ward, tried to re-write the destiny of King Adetugba's new born baby who should have been killed at birth to avert the future of killing his father and marrying his mother. Gbonka tried to do that by abandoning him in the bush for someone to pick up. Although a couple who had been looking for a child found him and picked him up, he still found his way back to where his destiny lies. If only Gbonka had killed him, the story would have been different. His

disobedience attracted plague in the land that resulted in the death of many villagers Odewale depicts a moral character of someone who takes responsibility for his actions. In the end of the play he faces the consequences without putting blame on anybody. His eyeballs were removed and he was banished to an unknown destination. His action was considered an abomination in the land. Thus, the moralist asserts that man has a chance to make decisions irrespective of the circumstances that befall him and that whatever action he takes must be accounted for. Odewale's flaws are pride and anger which attracts more problems for him.

The Gods Are Not to Blame is typical of a moral text in that it tends to satirize the ills in the society. it depicts consequences or repercussions of immoral lifestyle, lie, disobedience, anger.

#### **d. Tess of the D'urbervilles by Thomas Hardy**

Thomas Hardy in this book redefines the sense of purity by carving the character of Tess. She compared from other maids who kept pure from sex and sexual promiscuity is an appreciated figure of true beauty which springs from within the heart.

There are other characters as well as situations developed in the novel that teach morality. Tess's father got drunk and could not drive her to the market. This made Tess drive the horse herself and, eventually, there was an accident. It was Tess's quest to replace the lost horse (after it died from the serious accident) that pushed her to Mrs. D'urbervilles's home where she met Alec who raped her in another situation. This brings up a moral lesson that drunkenness is a light thing but also the beginning of drastic and serious issues. It can, as well, attract problems to a man and his family members. The rape of Tess by Alec and its aftermath is critical in terms of morality. This brings up a serious lesson for anyone who derives selfish pleasure from another without his or her consent. This act of rape can be connected with those who use their power to satisfy themselves despite the pain, frustration or dissatisfaction of others. Just like the baby, a tangible fruit/result of the forced sex is tagged sorrow by Tess dies later, any gain from rape-whether sexually or otherwise - is overshadowed by sorrow and will later fade away.

The same issue of truth raised in Rotimi's The Gods Are Not to Blame appears in the situation where Tess should have told angel she is really no virgin. Since she did not tell him on time, he is shocked when the truth is eventually revealed. This brings up a lesson that telling the truth on time will prevent future acrimonies and offences. It also teaches us further that no matter the fear about consequences of being truthful, it is better to tell the truth from the onset. Just like Odewale suffers the consequences of his actions, Tess is also punished for killing Alec. This further teaches that no matter the good intention behind whatever rash decision we make, consequences come sooner or later.

#### **e. Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe**

The first publication was in 1604, eleven years after Marlowe's death. Faustus is born of parents base of stock in German in a town called Rhide went to Wittenberge. Good at divinity, a scholar who has a Ph.D in theology. The tragic play opens with a chorus (Epilogue) which portrays the moral lessons in the play i.e. "...only to wonder unlawful! things." "...to practice more than heavenly power permits." In the play we are made to understand that Dr. Faustus is a man(an intellectual)well schooled, he studies astronomy, mathematics, philosophy and religion. He goes into mysticism and then wanted to live an Epicurean life (which he got) he ends up selling his life for 24years to Lucifer. Marlowe projects morality by exposing the folly of pleasure, and selfish ambitions, quest for power and wealth and thereafter the consequences which ends in death.

The play is based on a pre-existing story of a man who sold his soul to the devil. The tragic hero is an intellectual, who acquires knowledge in science, religion, philosophy and to astronomy, but he is dissatisfied with the level of his intellectual acquisition, he diverts to the realm to mysticism and magic. His primary purpose at this point is the acquisition of power. In Act 1 scene 1 line 118.At every point the good angel and bad angel appears to him. The good and bad angels

represent the forces of good and bad/evil respectively. They also represent the forces of conscience. It is also a pointer to a moral/psychological overlap. These angels create spiritual conflict and the spiritual conflict is in the mind of the major character Dr. Faustus.

The tragic flaw in Dr. Faustus is his listening to the voice of the devil which makes him acquire evil thoughts and actions. In the end, he has a reversal of fortune, but he fails to believe the solution of the Good Angel. He also fails to believe in God. Before he realizes it becomes too late. The devil claims his life as he bows to death. This is typically a moral/religious play which depicts view of morality/religion.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the content of this essay, it is safer to conclude that many writers have strong ethical or religious convictions but the moralist critics usually have broader interest on what a society defined as its morality core.

Literature has humanizing or civilizing mission and the critic values work which furthers that end: promotes tolerance, social justice, sensitivity to individual wishes and talents. Moral critics therefore examine how a work of literature tries to help readers better their standard of living. That is, though writers' works, moral critics are of the view that those who are morally deficient can be improved upon to be morally upright. Therefore, the central goal of a moralist critic is component is to see how a literary work is composed to elevate the falling standard of man and society.

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