



Fictional Characters, Real Problems: The Search for Ethical Content in Literature

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Literature is a complex and multifaceted expression of our humanity of a kind that is instructively resistant to simplification; reduction to a single element that would constitute literature's defining essence would be no more possible than it could be genuinely illuminating. Yet one dimension of literature that seems to interweave itself throughout its diverse manifestations is still today, as it has been throughout literary history, ethical content. This striking collection of new essays, written by an international team of philosophers and literary scholars, pursues a fuller and richer understanding of five of the central aspects of this ethical content.

After a first section setting out and precisely articulating some particularly helpful ways of reading for ethical content, these five aspects include: (1) the question of character, its formation, and its role in moral discernment; (2) the power, importance, and inculcation of what we might call poetic vision in the context of ethical understanding and that special kind of vision's importance in human life; (3) literature's distinctive role in self-identity and self-understanding; (4) an investigation into some patterns of moral growth and change that can emerge from the philosophical reading of literature; and (5) a consideration of the historical sources and genealogies of some of our most central contemporary conceptions of the ethical dimension of literature.

In addition to Jane Austen, whose work we encounter frequently and from multiple points of view in this engaging collection, we see Greek tragedy, Homer, Shakespeare, Charlotte Bronte, E. M. Forster, Andre Breton, Kingsley Amis, Joyce Carol Oates, William Styron, J. M. Coetzee, and David Foster Wallace, among others. And the philosophers in this five-strand interweave include Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Shaftesbury, Kant, Hegel, Freud, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Levinas, and a number of recent figures from both Anglophone and continental contexts. All in all, this rich collection presents some of the best new thinking about the ethical content that lies within literature, and it shows why our reflective absorption in literature is the humane--and humanizing--experience many of us have long taken it to be.

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