

**'Values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction... A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop.'**

**Are we free to decide what is of value when it comes to fiction? Discuss from the point of view of either:**

- a) A writer**
- b) A reader**

**Perspective a**

"It rests with novelists to break down the barriers. It is they who should imagine what they cannot know, even at the risk of making themselves superbly ridiculous"<sup>1</sup>

Fiction gives humanity the opportunity to explore realms of which we can have no real life experience. Yet, is it possible to write of them without the inflection of our own, or our society's normative values? A writer's freedom to determine value is not only limited by themselves and their past and context, but it is also limited to an extent by the reader. An author cannot elect exactly what the reader will find of value within their work, and in order to sell and make a living writer's must be, to some extent, deferent to the wishes of their readers. Thus, just as "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please,"<sup>2</sup> writers' freedom to decide what is of value is inevitably circumscribed by the limitations of their own experience and context, and the interpretations and desires of their readers.

As Virginia Woolf writes, fiction must have a "correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life"<sup>3</sup>. David Hume would have agreed because from his empirical stance, "all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience"<sup>4</sup>. Such a basis in experience must mean that the values in fiction, must be from the life of the writer – and reflective of their own times. It is impossible for any writer to entirely escape the values their society upholds, whether they be conforming to or opposing them. Jane Austen is perhaps the epitome of an author who reflects the values of her contemporary society. Her novel *Pride and Prejudice* opens with the line "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife"<sup>5</sup>. The novel then proceeds to explore this statement and the value that marriage holds for people in various different social positions. Despite Austen's criticism of aspects of her society, such as the pride of the very upper echelons of society, and the prejudice of those one or two ranks below, many critics argue that she largely conforms to the conservative

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*

<sup>2</sup> Marx. *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

<sup>3</sup> Woolf. *A Room of One's Own* p.74

<sup>4</sup> Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* p.13

<sup>5</sup> Austen. *Pride and Prejudice* p.5

views of the time about the propriety of behaviour. Woolf herself described how Austen “accepted life too calmly as she found it”<sup>6</sup> and Marilyn Butler describes Austen as a “conservative Christian moralist”<sup>7</sup>. Of her six novels, all of them end in marriage, demonstrating that though her fictional explorations of the institute of marriage in her society reveals some of its flaws, she ultimately seems to uphold the value which is placed on marriage by her surrounding society.

Even when authors rebel against predominant social mores, they are still defined by their opposition to them. Take as an example the surge of dystopian fiction in the mid to late twentieth century, which can be viewed as a reaction to what some saw as the imminent consequences of contemporary developments in technology and social and political thought. Aldous Huxley presents a dark vision of the future in which humanity has lost the values of individuality, love and pain in his novel *Brave New World*, written in 1931. The fears which drove Huxley to write the novel were partly caused by the technical revolution which occurred in Europe in the early twentieth century. Driven by the needs of war and technological advancements, mass production was increasing. Huxley briefly worked in a chemical factory in England where he witnessed first-hand humans being replaced by machines, and this seems to be what inspired Huxley’s fear of loss of individuality. Additionally, a trip to America seems to have heightened this fear by what he observed to be the grotesque worship of blatant hedonism<sup>8</sup>. The repeated mantra “everybody belongs to everybody else”<sup>9</sup> which is indoctrinated into everyone in Huxley’s imagined society is clearly scorned by himself as the author and is perhaps a conservative opposition to the start of sexual liberation that the twentieth century brought. As the novel unfolds the reverse of the statement is also revealed to be true to an even sadder effect – nobody belongs to anybody else as no one has any family and the formation of close relationships is prevented by the ideals of the society. Even love no longer exists. As such, Huxley, in his attempt to defy some of what he sees to be the developing values of his time, perfectly demonstrates the limitations context imposes on our freedom as he becomes defined by his reaction.

An important factor in the writer’s freedom to determine value in fiction is to what extent they must be deferent to the values of the reader in order to sell books. Jane Austen chose to write of domestic matters of courtship and marriage, almost exclusively, and never explicitly mentions politics or social events despite writing at the same time as the Napoleonic wars and huge political turbulence<sup>10</sup>. Butler saw Austen as reacting against the permissiveness

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<sup>6</sup> Woolf. *A Jane of One’s Own*

<sup>7</sup> Butler. *Jane Austen and the war of ideas*

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard. *Control and Resistance in the Dystopian Novel: A Comparative Analysis* p.10

<sup>9</sup> Huxley. *Brave New World* p.40

<sup>10</sup> O’Connor, *The Anonymous Jane Austen*

associated with the French Revolution by her refusal to discuss political matters explicitly<sup>11</sup>. Another reason may have been because she published as a woman – though she published anonymously, her first novel *Sense and Sensibility* was published under the name ‘A Lady’<sup>12</sup> – thus although her exact identity remained concealed her gender was known by her readership. Female authors were often snubbed by male readers and the reading of novels was generally thought to be a feminine activity at the time, therefore, she would have been trying to appeal to a female readership who were largely excluded from politics. Thus Austen’s choice to write solely about what were, and often still are, considered to be predominantly feminine matters, and place value on the everyday issues affecting women, was perhaps not simply an expression of her own interests but may also have been an attempt to appeal to her readership. For the audience that Austen was trying to appeal to, a scene in a shop, or domestic settings, held far more relevance, and therefore a sense of value, to their lives than scenes of war and action. Austen’s deference to her female readership can be seen even in the chapter length of her novels. An 18<sup>th</sup> century woman of the upper classes – few of the lower classes would have been literate<sup>13</sup> – would often have read in the drawing room, but would still be expected to engage in small talk, and thus would be required to put down her book at frequent intervals. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, a 362 page novel has 61 chapters averaging just under 6 pages a chapter<sup>14</sup>.

As well as the content and form of a work of fiction, the author’s power over the reader’s interpretation of their work must be examined. The author’s authority post-publication has become a particularly pertinent issue in the age of the internet and ‘fan fiction’. Annie Proulx published her short story *Brokeback Mountain* in 1997 and it reached worldwide success when it was turned into an Academy Award-Winning film in 2005. However, she regretted her work, stating in a 2009 interview with *The Paris Review* “I wish I’d never written the story”<sup>15</sup>. After the film was released, the story became the subject of many fan fictions and rewritings which often would change the tragic ending which Proulx felt was to miss the point of the message she had been trying to convey. “[People] can’t bear the way it ends— they just can’t stand it...They can’t understand that the story isn’t about Jack and Ennis. It’s about homophobia; it’s about a social situation; it’s about a place and a particular mindset and morality. They just don’t get it.”<sup>16</sup> The uses and adaptations of a story are now beyond the author’s control. Proulx could not convey what she found to be of value within her own work to the audience that was created by the film and internet adaptations. Although

<sup>11</sup> Butler. *Jane Austen and the war of ideas*

<sup>12</sup> O’Connor, *The Anonymous Jane Austen*

<sup>13</sup> Free education was not provided at all until the 1891 Elementary Education Act

<sup>14</sup> These figures refer to the Penguin Classics 1996 edition of *Pride and Prejudice*

<sup>15</sup> Proulx in Cox *The Art of Fiction*

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

different interpretations by the reader do not necessarily inhibit the freedom of the author to decide what is of value within their own work, it does seem to undermine the point of fiction if the author's message can be so easily upturned by the readership.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf talks about her own reading of a novel and her delight at "such freedom of mind" of the male author, but that "after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter 'I'."<sup>17</sup> Such an insight seems to indicate Woolf's idea that an author's presence can be over-bearing and spoil the reader's experience. Woolf was one of the many "great British modernists ... [to try to] withdraw from their work, eliminate the intrusive author, and move to objectivity and impersonality"<sup>18</sup>. By removing authorial presence one might argue that the author is limiting their power to determine what the reader should find of value within their work. This is not necessarily the case, however. Many modernist authors were attempting to create identity and value via a stream of consciousness. Instead of the author being the omniscient voice of the novel they become one of the central characters, which, in many ways, gives the reader a more explicit interaction with them and their values as the characters in turn interact with the other characters and events of the novel.

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Marlow narrates almost the entire novel with streams of speech that carry on for several pages; in the first chapter Marlow's speech is unbroken for 25 pages<sup>19</sup>. Conrad's conflicted views on British colonialism are brought out through Marlow narration. As Marlow describes some of the worn out African workers, he starts by stating that "they were not enemies, they were not criminals"<sup>20</sup> and goes on to describe their pitiful state as a result of their awful working conditions in a condemnatory tone. Conrad's need to justify why he feels it is morally objectionable to reduce the workers to "nothing but black shadows"<sup>21</sup>, demonstrates the benign view of colonialism that Conrad is challenging. According to Owen Knowles' introduction to *Heart of Darkness*, the novel played a part in the linguistic shifts of the time as "in 1897, the words 'Imperial' and 'Imperialism' carried hardly any pejorative meaning"<sup>22</sup>, however, given the aftermath of the Boer War and the 1895 Congo Scandal "the terms began to acquire a less reputable associations and could no longer be used as a form of unthinking national self-

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<sup>17</sup> Woolf. *A Room of One's Own* p.98

<sup>18</sup> Schwarz. *The Transformation of the English Novel, 1890-1930: Studies in Hardy, Conrad, Joyce, Lawrence, Fdrster and Woolf* p.8

<sup>19</sup> This refers to the Penguin Classics 2007 edition of *Heart of Darkness* p.8 to p.33

<sup>20</sup> Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* p.20

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Knowles. *Introduction to Heart of Darkness* p.xix

congratulation”<sup>23</sup>. Conrad’s implicit prejudice is displayed, however, by his generalisations. Marlow describes a man who “seemed young – almost a boy – but you know with them it’s hard to tell”, which seems to indicate some of Conrad’s own visions of Africa as one large, dark mass, full of shadows but not distinct figures. The general term “them” whilst talking about the singular man, insinuates Marlow’s lack of recognition of the man’s individuality, and the whole statement has a patronising tone, as if no African is capable of the maturity required for an adult to be distinct from a child. Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, even accused Conrad of eliminating “the African as a human factor”<sup>24</sup>. Marlow may not precisely mirror Conrad’s views, but he is no doubt representative of them to some extent, and Marlow is perhaps the tinted glass through which we can see into Conrad’s own thoughts. Thus Conrad’s choice to convey his values through their partial embodiment in a character rather than the omniscient narratal voice, far from removing them from the text, rather gives them a more direct presence.

One of the few narrative interjections at the beginning of the novel does, however, also seem to contain something of Conrad’s own voice – perhaps it is impossible to completely remove authorial voice – as he comments on “the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear”<sup>25</sup>. Given that the weakness referred to in this instance is Marlowe’s reluctance to “bother” the reader with “what happened to me personally,”<sup>26</sup> and it is known that many of Conrad’s novels bear a strong correlation with events of his own life – many of Conrad’s novels had nautical settings due to his having been a sailor for 16 years of his life, and many of his characters were drawn from people he had met during his travels<sup>27</sup> – it would seem that Conrad is indeed imposing his view of what constitutes good fiction on to the novel. However, since this view consists of satisfying the readers’ implicit demands, it can also be seen as a limitation on the writer’s creative freedom to explore values other than his own.

Thus it seems there are inevitable restrictions on a writer’s freedom to decide what is of value when it comes to fiction. Everyone’s individual self, which is inevitably shaped by our surrounding society and history, moulds the exact values that we hold and therefore convey through writing. The interplay between reader and writer would also seem to be a limitation on the writer’s freedom, whether the author tailors the values of their work in order to sell or

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Achebe. *An Image of Africa* p.782

<sup>25</sup> Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* p.8

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Joseph Conrad*

through their inability to restrict the reader's freedom of interpretation. It would seem that to write without "deference to the opinion of others"<sup>28</sup> verges on the impossible.

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<sup>28</sup> Woolf. *A Room of One's Own* p.75

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