1897

The Ethical Tendency of the English novel

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The Ethical Tendency of the English Novel.

A Thesis

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Preface:

The following thesis was written for the degree of Master of Arts and was presented to the Faculty of Iowa State University, May, eighteen ninety-seven.

The selection of the subject of the Ethical Tendency in the English Novel arose from a desire to learn if the English Novel in its development had recognized the principle of Art and Ethics as English Poetry has done, and if both branches of literature had come to the same conclusion. I have given a great deal of care to the accumulation of material from the study of the English Novel in form of notes and criticism. The effect of minute criticism has merely been to strengthen my conviction that the theory I have laid down is substantially true. I think I may at least claim from the critic who is inclined to reject my views a careful consideration of the arguments and evidence upon which they are founded.
It would be impossible for me to speak too warmly of the kindness which Dr. Hancher has shown me in connection with my work, and I am especially indebted to him for criticism, both general and minute, that has been of the greatest service.

A. W. Harvey.

Sewan City,

May seventeen.
The novelist ought to be the happiest of all authors, for he enjoys the most perfect freedom known to literature. Any way of genuine, any special faculty whatever which he may happen to possess, is at full liberty to develop itself in the direction which best suits it. The novelist almost alone among his brethren of letters may "walk his own wild way whether that lead him." As one thinks of ordaining for him that he must tread in one particular path and no other; that he must beat around and around forever in one prescribed circle. For him, there is no dignity of history; there are no dramatic incidents; no laws of rhythm, no dactylic and spondaic, no Spencerian or English heroic. There are no codes of critical laws to ordain that a romanticist must follow a certain pattern, must not deal with a certain topic, must only introduce this character, or that situation
on given conditions. In poetry and the drama, and I might perhaps even add in history, hardly any man has ever become great except by bravely in the first instance the literary dangers and penalties of rebellion. The historical novelist escaped. No one insisted that "Tom Jones" ought to have talked in the style of the "grand Cyrus"; and the existence of "Tom Jones" did not necessitate sentence of death upon "Haverley"; nor did "Haverley" interfere with "Oliver Twist"; nor did "Oliver Twist" darken the rising prospect of "Pendennis". If a man or woman attempt to be a novelist and fail, the blame cannot be laid to the account of pedantic critical legislation.
Perhaps this happy freedom is greatly owing to the fact that criticism deliberately ignored the novelist, and regarded him as a creature outside the pale of art, no more responsible to rule and law of critical counts than Richardson is expected to conform to the dramatic.
unities. It is only since the popularity and influence of prose fiction that critics have given serious attention; however, it was then too late to lay down rules, or form schools for prose fiction. He may write for a purpose, or for no purpose, he may be a politician, a satirist, or a mere teller of stories; he may be a realist or an idealist; he is sure to be criticized and judged on the ground which he has spontaneously assumed. He will be estimated for what he has done and for his manner of doing it and he is not likely to receive criticism because he has not done something which he never professed nor desired to accomplish.

One result of all this is that the novelist is now our most influential writer. If he be a man of genius, his power over the community he addresses is far beyond that of any other author. Macaulay's influence over the average English mind was narrow compared with that of Dickens; even
Early's influence on the whole was not so great as that of Tennyson. The readers of *The Idylls of the King* were but a limited number when compared with the readers of *Jane Eyre*; nor can Mrs. Browning's finest poem pretend to attract as many readers and admirers, even among people of taste and education, as were suddenly won by *Adam Bede*. Yet our English novelists are not by any means the most cosmopolitan in the public they address. As English authors are read in France as George Sand, and Victor Hugo, and Dumas, and Balzac have been read in England. All this shows how decisively the current of public feeling at present sets in favour of prose fiction.

The influence of the novelist is now publicly acknowledged, for a long time his power over society, except as a mere teller of stories was ignored; nevertheless, this was felt an influence almost all pervading, almost
 irresistible, yet silent, secret and not to be openly acknowledged. Only within the latter half of the present century have cabinet ministers ventured to quote from popular stories, and princes pay tribute to the genius of departed novelists.

Can this influence be turned to any direct and deliberate account? Is it given to the novelist to accomplish any definite social object, to solve, or even help towards the solution of any social question? Is his mission, to use the conventional phrase, merely that which Lessing assigned to art: to delight? I am not undervaluing that mission. Taken in Lessing's sense it involves see that art needs to attempt or to accomplish. It contains a distinct social purpose; having an independent important, elevated influence; an essential part of education, civilization and progress. I do not ask
therefore in any deprecating tone, but merely as a question interesting and appropriate, whether this is all the novelist can do? Can he without detriment to his artistic faculty set himself to solve some difficult social question or to preach down some evil influence? Is there any real use in producing that class of books which our readers can easily and distinctly identify if we call them, for a lack of a better generic title, Novels with a Purpose?

By novels with a purpose, I do not mean that an abstract idea shall be put into the form of a human allegory, nor should it be branded with an aphorism, nor must there be a moral; but there must be a direct and distinct purpose, sometimes this notion may be vaguely expressed; but in all alike, the story is not the end, only the means and it shored planks to realize George Eliot's ideal
of the intimate realm of presentation with the highest idealism of conception.

All art has a purpose, which may be broadly defined as the presentation of truth in the form of beauty. Art is great and enduring in direct proportion to the universality of the truth it expresses and the grace of the form it chooses. If the truth transcends time, and the form follows deep, immutable instincts of harmony, the art will endure through all changes of custom and accidents of opinion; we shall have Homer forever singing the beauty of the physical life, the Gothic Cathedral forever praying upward, Dante forever disclosing the pilgrimage of the soul, Shakespeare forever revealing the relations and contrasts of character and circumstances.

With the novelist as an artist, the purpose is to present his motif as honestly as he.
see it, and the value of his book is in direct proportion to the largeness of his vision and the fineness of his touch. At the highest, his work is poetic - that is, beautifully and significantly true; at the lowest, it is journalist - that is, true to fact, to sense. But in every case, with the authentic artist, it is true to the actual proportions of life. If a novelist does not show us that success may be the worst failure and failure the best success; that poverty may be better than riches; if he does not gather the scattered parts of life and show "the apex on which the frame of things turns" - he might as well leave for human nature to turn its eyes upon life itself. It is what Art is for at its highest and I count him the greatest genius who teaches the divine chord in humanity and who teaches that the world is ruled in righteousness.
It is easy, comparatively speaking, for a novelist to appeal to the emotions, but it is hard to appeal to the heart. This may sound somewhat contradictory at first, nevertheless there is truth in it. The outward emotions are in real life much more the expressions of the temperament than of what we call the heart. That we call the heart in each man and woman seems to mean the whole body of innate and inherited instincts, impulses and beliefs taken together, and in that relation to one another in which they stand after they have been acted upon through-out the individual's life by the inward vicissitudes and outward circumstances to which they have been exposed. When all this is quiescent, I think we call it Self, when roused to emotional activity, the Heart; but whatever we call it, it is to this Self or Heart that everything which is to this and
(and) therefore permanent must appeal.

The foundation of good fiction seems to be ethical rather than aesthetic. Everything which appeals to the taste, to the aesthetic side, may ultimately perish as a mere matter of fashion, but what speaks to man as man, independently of his fashions, his habits and his tastes must live and find a hearing with humanity so long as humanity is human.

The literature of the English people has always had the idea that there is a necessary connection between art and ethics. True, it has contained many mischievous or frivolous books; it has wandered between the austerity of Bunyan and the licence of the dramatists of the Restoration; it has been successively influenced by Homeric Frenz, Italian, Latin and Greek culture; but it has never lost sight of the principle that
A book should have a definite purpose, a real reason for being, if it expects a long life.

Before the novel, the poem afforded our intellectual ancestors their means of amusement and in early English poetry the moral element was seldom lacking; and when fiction took the place of poetry as an intellectual amusement, the same principle held good.

It so happened that the growth of the English novel began when English society and religion were in a degraded state, but in the indecency and coarseness of the novel of the eighteenth century there still appears something that is not French, not Italian, not Spanish.

Until the middle of the eighteenth century, the novels were written merely for pleasure. "Bold bawdy and open manslaughter," says Arden, were their themes in the Elizabethan age and it was not until the middle of
Bunyan in the seventeenth century do we leave

The knights of the Round Table and the princes and princesses of Arcadia.

In the eighteenth century, we find that Richardson and Fielding had their confessed moral and social purposes, especially Fielding, but they subordinated these to the story and to the play of character. Richardson, the precursor of the long-regnant school of sentimental novelists, spent his literary lifetime in trying to show that integrity and uprightness of the Grandisonian order are more attractive than the vices of the "town" in the era of the Georges. Fielding says pointedly in the preface to *Tom Jones* that by displaying the beauty of virtue he has attempted to convince men that their true instinct directed them to a pursuit of her. So the was much given to good, sound, and simple moralizing of the Benjamin Franklin kind and his Robinson leaven is a moral Englishman abroad. Moralizing,
if not morality, is not absent from the homely sayings of Steele, and Swift in his malignant half-insane way, at least had reforms in view. Goldsmith's pictures of virtuous rural life are still beloved because in Taine's phrase, "the chief of these unite and harmonize in one character the best features of the manners and morals of the time and county, and create an admiration and love for fierce and orderly domestic and disciplined labours and rural life; Protestant and English virtue has not a more approved exemplar." Their romance prevailed with Mrs. Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, Miss Porter and the forgotten novelists of chivalry and medieval history, whose fame was overshadowed by that of Scott, who in a romances none and simple.

I think it undeniable that as a whole the fiction of the nineteenth century compared with that of the eighteenth, the ethical element in
the newer work outweighed that in the older. In England, the novel met a purpose began its source with Miss Edgeworth and she showed that the facts and analogies of real life, afford better materials for instinctive and even for amusing fiction, than imaginary characters and improbable adventures. She executed the most delicate and difficult office of moral fiction with greater ability and skill than any of her predecessors or contemporaries; yet all she has done, is but the type and shadow of what Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Mrs. Humphrey Ward has done. During the early part of present century the movement towards purposive fiction did not make much headway, its place was taken by the purposive poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats; but as the century advanced, gradually fiction began to think and to teach, instead of merely amusing. 

Disraeli in 'Ithil' anticipated our modern
takes about social problems and, although
Dickens' and Thackeray's novels are preeminent
for character drawing, in Dickens we find
the purpose element promoting humanity
and good fellowship, and attacking abuses
in prisons, schools, law courts, and home
life. Thackeray, "whose eternal moral purpose
element" M. Paine unjustly renounces, loyally
attacks the social shame. The morality of
Thackeray's work is a work of art and this
idea is so justly and distinctly enunciated
by Hazlitt, who says: The most moral writers
after all, are those who do not pretend to
inculcate any moral. The professed moralist
unavoidably degenerates into the partizan of
a system; and the philosopher is too apt
to warp the evidence to his own purpose. But
the painters of manners give the facts of
human nature, and leaves me to draw
the inference; if we are not able to do this,
or do it ill, at least it is our own fault."

Against this way of genius on the side of conscious moral intention, Carlyle mentions the name of Scott and deplores that Beyond earning fifteen thousand a year to buy farmes with, Scott contemplated no results from his novels. "No man of any generation had less value than Scott for the immaterial part of his mission."

This is not just, for Scott held his country dear and his purpose was to attempt something for his country which might introduce her to the world in a more favorable light than she had been placed and to procure sympathy for the virtue of her nation and indulgence for her foibles. He finds the purpose element in reddened but brave Charlotte and Emily Brontë in the novels of "Jane Eyre"; in George Eliot, describing the few as she
believed him to be in reality, doing justice to stern righteousness of a Daniel Boone, or telling how Savanarola became a Protestant in spite of himself. George Eliot held her gifts so earnestly as a minister that she was never tired of enforcing her lesson. "Great facts," says she, "have struggled to find a voice through me and have only been able to speak brokenly.

George Meredith is a novelist of the philosophic school and is one of the boldest and ablest of his class in our day and anyone who follows him from "The Shaving of Shagpat" and "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" down to "Siena of The Crossways" and "One of Our Long Ago" cannot fail to observe the constant growth in importance of the underlying purpose.

What does all this mean? Is a book great because its moral purpose is sound, or is all
literature had as art and literature if it lacks
the righteous purpose? Not at all, neither has
English literature monopoly of righteousness and
purpose. It means that this literature has
insisted more strongly than others upon the
necessary connection between art and ethics;
that it has never prized a profitless vulgar
beauty; and that so long as the world can
be made better by literature, bookmakers can
and ought to help. Between two books of equal
literary merit, but of unequal purpose, it
gives greater and more lasting favour to
the more useful book. It believes that taste
holds intimate relation with the intellect and
the moral sense. Whether it is right or wrong.
in this general idea, it is certain that
any change in it, whether wrought by belief
in "Art for Art's sake", by pseudo Greek poets, by
cosmic bars who sometimes confuse right
and wrong, or by strictly realistic novelists,
will change a principle in accord with which the race has acted for ten centuries.

The last decade or two, in particular, has given us an increasing proof of the growth in popularity of the novel with a purpose. The appearance in a single year of three novels of such power and charm as "Marcilla," "Trilby," and "The Manxman" would go a long way toward settling the question of purpose. For they have the reach, the force and the vital city of great novel writing; and they have the contact with life, the varied skill, and the ease and fullness of genuine art; they are works of power and purpose. Whatever we may think of "Marcilla," we get a sense of the range and volume of the mystery we call life from the spectacle of a nature so spacious passing through experiences so various and so rich in emotional and moral quality. "Trilby"
takes vast men and women into a world
so new to them that it has all the delight
of a discovery and it is accepted as a
protest against prevalent English and
American Puritanism. The history of the
depth and touching experience of Philip
Christian in "The Manxman" translates with
compelling power the taleful word Tate into
the blessed word Providence.

During the past few years, we have been
overwhelmed by stories like Mrs. Ward's—
insistent with moral lessons—and the
popularity of these novels is a marvel
to those who believe that the idea of the
novel is to amuse; still, the fact remains
that these essentially purposeful books, be
they good, bad, or mediocre, have attained
an enormous circulation in our own
time, and have done so mainly on
the strength of the purposes.
Of one set against these distinctly purposing successes, the successes of such other writers as Rider Haggard, Anthony Hope, Stanley Weyman, Conan Doyle, it will be clear; I think, that the former class as a whole marks the taste of adult men and women, of the more thoughtful, of the moulders of the coming century; while the latter class as a whole marks the taste of the youth and casual reader of the conservative as against the progressive element. I do not mean that Doyle and Weyman have not done admirable work of its kind; I merely mean that their work as a rule does not aim at the highest audience and even this is not true of Doyle's work in all cases. Books on the other hand like Hardy's 'Tess' and 'Jude' strike the keynote of our century. They are instinct with our hopes, our fears, our
problems. They could not have been written in any age save this; while 'the' and 'a' Gentleman of France might almost equally have stepped out of some older country. I do not deny that the romantic temperament and the love for books of adventure will always be on; but I believe side by side with this, the taste for books of thought and ethical teaching will always increase, and in an accelerated ratio. I think men and women will be less and less content like children with mere hearing of a story, they will demand from the novelist something that at the same time instruct and elevate them.

But where do I place Stevenson in this gallery of recent writers? Al, Stevenson is — Stevenson. A great artist — perhaps more of an artist than Meredith and Hardy, though less of a thinker. Nevertheless, an artist.
He had his ideas, time, his rebellions, his fancies, and these may often be read. Yet I regard Stevenson as a survivor of the nineteenth century, then as a precursor and herald of the twentieth century. He was a semi-barbaric Scandinavian Celt of the Western Islands, at home at Skye and among the foam of the Atlantic. His boyishness with its concomitant in love of adventure is one of his most charming and lovable characteristics and this childish side in him endeared him to all of me. But I cannot help thinking the adult and virile temperament of Meredith, the adult and civilized temperament of Hardy, is higher and deeper than the boyishness and delicious waywardness of the hermit of Samoa.

Himling is undoubtedly a great face in our literature, a typical embodiment
of the instincts of the Englishman; but he
stands somewhat aside from either of
the main currents of the day. Nor do I desire
to class all writers as better or worse,
simply in so far as they happen to represent
or not to represent purpose in fiction;
nevertheless, I must say that, in a wider
sense, Kipling is too purposeful. His aim
is speculative and his mission is daily
becoming more and more complex. It is
the mission of interpretation. He set out to
an extent as the literary exponent of
"The Romance of The Clash of Races". Our planet
is shrinking - and also expanding.
Shrinking as regards distance and the
time taken to traverse them; expanding
as regards the number of nations, races,
creeds and moral codes. East and West
have joined hands; Egypt, Japan, South
Africa are part of us. Kipling has made
himself, on one side of the work, the laureate of the resulting strife and internecine strife. In this direction, many other writers of the day may be classed with him—Stevenson in his Pacific stories, Rider Haggard in his wild South African tales, Kipling in his Morocco romance. I am not classing these writers together, as regards literary merit; I am merely grouping them into the same rough category as exponents, each on his own plane, of the ideas necessarily engendered by an age of rapid expansion. To make me group in its entirety the vast and varied world is purely in itself an adequate purpose.

Closely allied with this group of quasi-purposeful authors whose vague shows the interest felt by the general reading public I would place the other, and partially coincident group of authors who deal with underlying factors or minor elements.
in our own domestic civilization. Time may when English fiction dealt mainly with the ladies and gentlemen of England, or more than that, then at least it concerned itself with the farmers of the Midland Counties, the rough Yorkshire moorlanders; but at the present time, the intense desire of half the world to know how the other half lives has produced a new type of fiction. Gargantua tells the West End all about the Jews in the slums of Whitechapel; Thomas Hardy transports us to the old world cabin of Wessex peasants and woodlanders; William Blake to the battle of Highländ crofters. And I hold that this tendency to minute specification and localization is closely bound up with the purposing tendency in fiction: both because the same men and women are engaged in either type and because the delineation of strange undercurrents
and phases of human life is in itself educational.

Hardy, for example, who gave us "Far from the Madding Crowd," is also Hardy who gave us "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "Jude the Obscure." Hall Caine, who set before us the life of Man and its D<em>ec</em>um<em>tr</em>ae, is Hall Caine who approaches these same underlying problems of life which form the main theme of Hardy and Meredith.

Moreover, the passion for the description of local, rural and distinctly tribal or provincial life is closely bound up with the result of race, the settling and pervasive democratic movement which in Europe is bringing the Celt and the Slav to the front. Hence the modern Celt revival in Scotland, represented by Sir James MacLe<em>do</em>id; hence the Celtic revival in Ireland, represented by Nora Kappes and many vigorous new writers; hence the Scandinavian north-west and the first group
Russian literature. This movement is also found in France with Guy de Maupassant. Is it not even a significant landmark in the same direction that England has read with deep attention Miss Mary Hitchins' "New England Tales" and Mrs. Harold Frederick's "Illumination," in which forlorn story we are transported on a carpet of fiction to a village in Northern New York, where mention of Europe is not, yet where the selfsame problems of faith and life meet the local minister, which meet every thinker in the world? It is the purpose which makes such localized work universally interesting.

If we take Europe as a whole, I do not think we can doubt the constant progress of its literature in purposiveness during the past half century. From first to last, the nineteenth century has constantly demanded, and has constantly
been supplied with, more and more purpose.

The demand and the supply still continue to increase; therefore I infer that
the literature of the twentieth century in turn
will be increasingly purposeful, and in
being so, it will also be right. It will follow
a law of literary development from the
beginning of all things; for every literature
begins with naive and somewhat childish
narration — the myth, the epic, the fairy
tale, the saga. As it progresses, it grows deeper,
more philosophic, more ethical, more purposeful.
The best never comes out of a civilized man,
unless he is profoundly stirred by some
overpowering social or moral emotion. One
step of the higher as opposed to the lower art
is just after things equal, the proportion
of the philosophic and ethical interest
to the mere aesthetic element. I do not
mean to say, that the highest literature,
as literature, is the scientific treatise, the philosophic essay, the ethical pamphlet: and to guard against that mis conception, I insert above the phrase "other things equal."

Literature must needs above all things be literary — it must have grace of style, beauty and aptness and novelty of wording; it must appeal first of all to the aesthetic sense, not to pure reason or the moral nature. But granting the presence of those purely literary qualities that literature is highest which most combines with them a deeper philosophic and moral value. This is not only true of English literature, but of all literature. And we all instinctively feel that the greatest and truest poets and romancers are those who have taught the age somewhat: Wordsworth, not Scott; Shelley, not Byron. Even outside the more definite purpose of work, we feel that relative height may
test be gauged by intensity of purpose.
Karte himself when judged by this standard
is really transposing; for in a world to
ideal to the world of pure beauty, he revived
the Greek ideal of the simply beautiful.
With Tennyson, his highest work is surely
that which strives to realize some aspect
of the philosophic and religious thought of
the epoch, he mirrored. Thus it is clearly
seen that the greatest poems are those which
mark time for humanity. A work of art,
I admit, is not a pamphlet, or a proposition
in English, but it must enunciate a truth
and a new truth, if it is to find a place
permanently in the front rank of its own
order. Even of other arts than literature, this
is essentially true—Painting, Sculpture,
Music to be truly great must create its
wave of their own Epoch. In literature,
however, no work can be considered as
first-rate unless it teaches us something—not merely please us. The critic who insists on absence of purpose is shown—by the greatest examples of the past, and by the working of the time-spirit—to be an antiquated anachronism. Undoubtedly, the novel without a purpose will continue to be written for the younger generation; but in the twentieth century, I believe, the adult and educated public will more and more demand from its literary workers adult interests, adult sympathies, a philosophical aim, an ethical purpose.