

A house without walls: is literature devoid of values a literary possibility?

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ABSTRACT

The question has been asked: Is there such a thing as literature—adult or juvenile— which does not advocate any value system? Is it possible to write something so objective, so nonjudgmental, so free of moral considerations as to be utterly detached from all conventional human beliefs? As a writer, I often wonder: If it **were** possible to write thusly, what could such literature possibly offer the reader? What relevance could it have for him, for life, for the world we live in? The answers, in my opinion, are an unequivocal "No" to the first question and "Nothing" to the second.

Every story ever written or told has a bias, some subjective orientation or direction which espouses or negates an existing or imagined value system. No individual, no society exists in a void, and no writer writes from one. You are either for or against a thing; it either appeals to your sense of justice or aesthetics or your belief system, or it does not. If you don't care either way, this, too, is a way of saying, "Neither of the offered possibilities is obligatory. I'll choose one or the other or something completely different."

When dealing with juvenile literature, for example, these questions loom large. Should families in stories be portrayed as traditional and intact or are alternative possibilities just as good—single parents, same-sex parents, ex-parents, or friends in loco parentis? Is divorce an earth-shaking experience or is it tolerable, perhaps even desirable, as a solution to marital difficulties? Any mention, even in passing, of family, marriage, sex, education, money, love, hatred, professional sports, crime, career, peace, war, religion, friendship or apple pie necessitates an evaluation: positive, negative, questionable or OK-as-long-as-you-can-get-away-with-it.

The great classics—both juvenile and adult—all deal with the universal struggle between man's personal, compelling needs and desires and his obligations to community, society, the world, and to some form of transcendental experience—God or whatever is currently in fashion as a God-substitute. Tom Sawyer, Little Women, Black Beauty, Robin Hood—each story is presented and filtered through some sort of value system which gives it meaning.

Sometimes books are popular precisely because they free us from the value systems we are forced to tote around. They may not offer us realistic, alternative routes (Robin Hood is not a good role model for young readers to follow!), but they can offer us temporary respite from the demands of conscience and civilization—a free flight into the world of fantasy. In short, any story, on any given topic, will impart a sense of right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, whether the author wills it or not.

Civilization, society, tastes and values—life itself—are in a constant state of flux. In contemporary culture, where values are no longer considered Divinely inspired and are therefore no longer compelling, we have lost our sense of absolute commitment to any particular value system. Each value is held up to the light of our reason and judgment. Does it fit in with our plans, our lifestyle? What good will we derive from it? Does the good outweigh the bother? Man/Woman is now the main frame of reference; all values are judged by the individual's needs and desires.

Does this situation bode well for literature (or for society!) ? As part of a religious tradition which is the basis for the Judeo-Christian ethic in the western world, I personally accept and am bound by a very specific value system. Whatever I put to paper is examined in the prism of my values and beliefs. Whether I write adventure stories, love stories, nonsense poems, fairy tales, history, geography or jokes, everything will somehow embody my value system. I can't write any other way, nor would I want to. I can attempt to understand other value systems, but to write a book which negates my own world-view, my own sense of right and wrong, would, in my eyes, be a desecration of all that I hold dear.

In practical terms this means, for example, that a character who is antithetical to my value system may appear in one of my stories but he will not be a hero. Some critics find this type of internal censorship too limiting for their artistic expression; but they are simply refusing to acknowledge that all authors are circumscribed by and advocate their own value system (or lack of it.)

Does that mean that all writing must be reduced to teaching, preaching, informing and educating? No, it doesn't.

Shouldn't writing be stimulating, thoughtful, creative, enjoyable, entertaining? Yes, it should.

Good writing contains all of the above—the formative, educational components as well as the stimulating, entertaining dimensions. If it's not a good read, no one will read it. But once it's being read, every word is constantly filling and shaping the mind and heart of the reader (especially the young reader) and, by extension, the world around him.

A house requires a foundation to rest upon, a roof to cover it, and walls to contain and protect the life within it. A literary "house" needs protective walls as well. Values are the framework which structure, protect and give form and meaning to our lives. Without them we are exposed and vulnerable, left to battle the elements and fend for ourselves as best we can without guidance or direction.

So let the author beware. Whenever he or she puts pen to paper, a diverse array of value-systems is being activated and employed. There is no neutral ground, no "objective," value-free writing. And since a book can be read and reread over and over again, its meanings and messages will continue to influence the reader so long as they remain anchored to a sheet of paper.

It's a sobering thought every writer should keep in mind.