Good in Evil: the Dichotomy of Morality in Literature

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Literature is full of abstract concepts and ideologies that rely on the reader to infer his or her own interpretation. A common abstraction is that of morality. This term, while seemingly easy to determine, is proven to be a bit trickier when viewed from multiple angles and situations. For example, an action may be considered immoral—or bad—in one circumstance maybe considered moral—even compassionate—in a different circumstance. . Modern literature is rife with such instances of moral ambiguity.

In Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 post-apocalypse novel, *The Road*, the use of morality and the ambiguity that coincides with such is heavily apparent. The unnamed father and the unnamed boy spend the entirety of the story trekking from place to place, heading south from an unknown location to an unknown shore. Throughout their journey, the man and his son encounter a myriad of hurdles, such as starvation, cannibalism, and isolation. McCarthy intensifies the feelings of morality and ambiguity by his choices in writing style and characters. The entire story does not mention the names of either the man or the son, which makes it easier for the reader to fall into the “what would I do” mentality; if no names are included, it is much easier to place one into the situations. McCarthy furthers these feelings by not including any specifics with regard to location.

McCarthy uses dialogue quite sparsely, with the first words spoken between father and son as a way to set the tone of the relationship they have with one another. McCarthy juxtaposes the short conversation between the man and the boy with the surrounding setting, writing that, “This was not a safe place. They could be seen from the road now it was day. The boy turned in the blankets. Then he opened his eyes. Hi, Papa, he said. I’m right here. I know” (McCarthy 5). In this passage at the beginning of the book, McCarthy establishes a number of points without outwardly telling the reader such. First, McCarthy shows his readers that, for some unknown reason, the world in the novel is much different and more dangerous than the world known to the reader. Secondly, the author uses the short conversation between the two to imply that the father makes his son’s safety his priority. By immediately letting his son know that he was right there with him, he is reassuring the boy that he is by his side and intends to remain so.

McCarthy’s uses of setting and language also lend to the overall sense of morality. McCarthy blends language and setting to show the juxtaposition between the bleakness of the world and the unconditional love between the father and the son when he writes, “Then they set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash, each the other’s world entire” (McCarthy 6). When McCarthy refers to the sunlight as being reminiscent of the color of gunmetal, there is an inferred violence, especially when it is coupled with describing the pair as merely shuffling through a world of ash. When one thinks of shuffling, the notion of sickness— or at least struggle— is brought to mind because the word is not one that implies an ease of gait; under most circumstances, an untroubled person is not described as having to shuffle.

The minimalist tradition of writing is one that McCarthy embraces and exemplifies. The style lends itself to *The Road* in particular because it allows the story to become more unsettling, even frightening. By omitting the details of locations, names, and even the details surrounding the events that led to the state of the world, McCarthy forces the reader to place one into the story, even if subconsciously. By forcing the reader into the mentality of the characters, McCarthy also compels the reader to apply one’s own morality to a situation that would not be normally applicable. One example of this notion that McCarthy places on his readers numerous times throughout the novel is the fate of the boy. In one scene in which the man and his son are hiding from a group of miscreants, the man is forced to put his son in the direct face of death when

He took the boy’s hand and pushed the revolver into it. Take it, he whispered. Take it. The boy was terrified. He put his arm around him and held him. His body so thin. Dont be afraid, he said. If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. (McCarthy 112-113)

By putting his nameless characters in a situation such as this, McCarthy obliges the reader to make his or her own judgment call. The passage is rife with ambiguity and morality, in that it brings to mind multiple questions of whether the father is right to force his son to shoot himself if they are found by the pack of villains. The father is forced to be ready to use their last round to ensure that his son experiences no suffering, while also knowing that he himself will be likely to endure torture, captivity, or worse.

Not only does the immediate situation in the passage imbue such questions, but it also sparks deeper philosophical points. Such points relate to whether the man was right to keep the boy alive in a world as it is in the novel at all. Readers cannot help but to wonder what good can come from a world in which *The Road* offers. Along the same lines, there are multiple situations the pair faces that puts the boy and his father against each other, showing that, although the man’s sole purpose is to keep the boy alive and safe, he himself has moments of questionable morals. One such moment in the novel is toward the end when a thief takes the pair’s grocery cart, leaving them with no belongings. Once they find the man that has stolen the cart, the father draws the revolver with one remaining round and forces the man to not only let go of the cart, but also strip off all of his clothing. The son begs his father not to kill the man, but the man hears none of it. As the scene progresses, the thief is now begging, saying, “Dont do this, man. You didnt mind doing it to us. I’m begging you. Papa, the boy said. Come on. Listen to the kid. You tried to kill us. I’m starving, man. You’d have done the same” (McCarthy 257). The entire sequence of events forces the reader to consult their own personal values in order to make a determination of whether or not they agree with the father’s actions.

Issues of morality are not always related to life and death situations, as shown by Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City.* The novel, written entirely in second person, deals with the cocaine party culture of late 1980’s New York City. The novel is full of moments in which the narrator— an implicating “you”— finds himself in situations that he neither wants to be in, nor feels as if he belongs. McInerney launches his reader into an intimate and shameful world from the first line when he writes, “You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning” (1). McInerney’s opening line sets the tone for a narrator that is a walking contradiction of himself, but with the use of the second person narration, the author successfully points a finger at the reader.

McInerney relies on the omission of details to help the narrator tell his story while also ensuring that the reader becomes immersed. What grabs the reader more than the omission of details is the way McInerney tells the story in the middle of the narrator’s spiral. While the narrator is conscious of the fact that he should not be behaving in the manner he does, he also puts in no effort to stop it. During an earlier part of the novel, the narrator is thinking about he wanted to become a writer, even having tried it. As he sits down to write a story and runs into difficulty, he gets frustrated when he is confronted with who he has become. McInerney works in a myriad of feelings when he writes, “You read it over. Then you tear the sheet out of the typewriter and insert a new one. Go farther back, maybe. Try to find a source of this chaos. Give her a new name and a place” (41). In this passage, the narrator shows a rare trait in the human psyche: a realization of what sent him into the drugs and lack of self-control. McInerney also illustrates that realization of a problem does not necessarily equate to action.

The narrator realizes that he needs to make the necessary action to become the person he strives to be, but he also continually surrounds himself with a friend that is nothing more than an enabler. Approximately midway through the novel, the narrator’s best friend, Tad Allagash, asks him to spend the evening entertaining Allagash’s cousin, Vicky. While out with Vicky, the narrator (and the reader, since we are the same person, after all) discovers that she is both similar and the exact opposite, in that she is an ambitious woman who does not hide herself from others; Vicky is honest with everyone, including herself. The next day, the narrator is at his place of employment worrying about a massive mistake he made on an article when he suddenly thinks back to something that Vicky said to him the night before. She tells him to imagine himself as a bat, then, “She said that certain facts are accessible only from one point of view— the point of view of the creature that experiences them. You think she meant that the only shoes we can ever wear are our own. Meg can’t imagine what it’s like for you to be you, she can only imagine herself being you” (101). This passage is extremely effective for McInerney’s audience and serves as a reminder that, while it may be easy to judge the narrator for his lifestyle, the reader would be better off realizing that, while he or she may have an opinion, they are not actually in the situation portrayed. In other words, it can be quite simple to project one’s own beliefs of morality onto the actions of another, but one cannot fully comprehend another person’s motivation or mentality.

McInerney’s narrator has flashes of introspection and awareness of his situation at the moment. As he is in the apartment of his friend and former co-worker, Megan, the narrator finds himself facing a dilemma. As they are drinking alone, “Megan comes out wearing a maroon silk shirt with puffed sleeves which is not open for immediate interpretation. One less button buttoned might mean *sexy*, but what you see suggests *casually dressy*” (McInerney 137). On the surface, the scene is quite innocuous, but, McInerney says much with little words. As the narrator points out, the shirt is not an easy interpretation, so he is left to interpret the meaning— if any meaning at all— on his own. As the reader progresses, he or she is shown that the narrator does make his own interpretation of Megan’s shirt, and it ends up being an incorrect reading. The awkward scene encourages the reader to take into consideration that, although humans are in charge of their own actions, those actions very well could have negative consequences.

Aside from the sentiment of the ambiguity of choices and their consequences, McInerney also points out the hypocrisy of morality. During yet another night in a club, described as an establishment for singles, the narrator looks around and notices that there are men wearing different sorts of religious neckpieces. As he surveys his surroundings, the narrator notices that, “Gold crucifixes, Stars of David and coke spoons hang from the chains. Some trust in God to get them laid; others in drugs” (McInerney 153). The line, borderline comical, places two groups of people at opposite ends of the moral spectrum and gives them one goal. That universal goal is to sin. McInerney offers his reader a choice. The reader is tasked with determining which of these men is worse; the one that uses sin as the carrot at the end of the stick to commit more sin, or the man that hides under faux righteousness to commit sin?

Unlike McCarthy’s *The Road*, McInerney does offer his narrator, and his readers, some hope. After many nights in different clubs and many mornings recognizing his faults, the narrator stumbles out of yet another club after sunrise. This time, however, the narrator smells freshly baked bread. After the narrator trades his sunglasses for a bag of roll and they are tossed at his feet, McInerney writes, “You get down on your knees and tear open the bag. The smell of warm dough envelops you. The first bite sticks in your throat and you almost gag. You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again” (McInerney 182). With these closing lines, the author offers the reader an opportunity to leave the story with an inkling of an idea that the narrator has made the change in becoming the person he wants to be. Just as with eating the rolls, the narrator also recognizes in himself that he will have to take things slowly because he is learning everything all over again.

When considering literature that forces both characters and readers to learn everything all over again, one must consider Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta*. While there may be contention about the use of a graphic novel as source of literary study, *V for Vendetta* is arguably more literary than many traditional novels. From the start, Moore puts his readers in a position to decide which entity is the lesser evil: the overbearing totalitarian British government, or the masked vigilante known only as V. During the prologue to Book one, the voice of Fate, a government agency that spreads the word to citizens, is heard giving news and weather reports to the people of Britain. Throughout the prologue, there are panels depicting the governmental buildings, citizens, and even one of a security camera with a sign underneath it with the saying, “For your protection”. Once the prologue ends and chapter one is introduced, readers are also shown V for the first time with a placard reading, “Chapter One The Villain”. By setting the story in this manner, Moore is subtly making the reader decide whether the government that watches its people is the villain or the strange masked man is the person to worry about.

After V has killed two members of The Finger to save young prostitute Evey Hammond, and then blown up Parliament and Big Ben, it can be simple to surmise that V is the villain of the story. In Chapter Three, V jumps into a train car in which sits Commander Prothero and two of his bodyguards. V turns out the lights and kills the two bodyguards, says, “Hello” to Prothero and kidnaps him before vanishing. What is remarkable about this scene is the response that Edward Finch, a member of The Nose, has during the crime scene investigation when he says, “Think about it. He killed them ruthlessly, efficiently, and with a minimum of fuss. Whatever their faults, those were two human beings and he slaughtered them like cattle” (Moore 24). In saying this, Finch is leaning toward compassion, but also Moore’s choice in words proves to be an interesting combination. Finch making it a point to distinguish his men as human rather than cattle, which can be interpreted that the government officials are human, but the citizens are viewed as the herded cattle being led to slaughter.

To put the way the government views its citizens in a different light, it is possible to look at familial roles. The different branches of The Head (Eyes, Ear, Nose, Finger) may be viewed as distant relations— most likely comparable to aunts and uncles. The Leader, Adam Susan, would then be considered to have the paternal role. This assumption could be used to explain it when Susan says to himself, “The only freedom left to my people is the freedom to starve. The freedom to die, the freedom to live in a world of chaos. Should I allow them the freedom to do that? I think not. I think not” (Moore 38). The page solidifies the familial concept when Susan speaks of his bride that does not love him back, which is Fate. While a familial concept is not one that is negative, per se, family members, just as with Moore’s British government, can be too nosy and overbearing. The question remains, however, of which entity plays the villain, which one the hero.

On the opposite side of the familial argument lies V. The only reason V would be considered the black sheep of the family is because he has radically different ideologies as the majority of other people around him. There is a scene in which he introduces himself to the statue of Lady Justice atop Old Bailey in London. As he speaks to, as he deems her, Madame Justice, V admits an obsessive love for her, followed by accusations of going astray. While this conversation may be slightly unnerving, V tells the statue that, “You are no longer my justice. You are his justice now. You have bedded another. Well, two can play at that game… Her name is Anarchy. And she has taught me more as a mistress than you ever did. She has taught me that justice is meaningless without freedom” (Moore 41). It is at this moment that V shows what his true ideology is: not destruction, but personal freedom. Through V’s words and actions, Moore backs his reader into a corner, making them side for freedom with V, or a skewed sense of justice with the government that mistrusts and manipulates its citizens.

What *V for Vendetta* offers the reader that a traditional book does not is the ability to tie words with images. Moore takes the opportunity of this to show the juxtapositions between words and actions. To exemplify this theory, one can view a scene in which a high-ranking priest has a sexual encounter with Evey, whom he believes to be fifteen years old (even commenting on how she is older than usual). Throughout many panels, there is an overdub of the priest reciting his sermon from earlier in the day. Moore shows the idea of juxtaposition splendidly in one panel in particular in which the art shows two men of the government that V has just killed, with the priest’s words of, “An avatar of damnation, who will seek to sully thy truth with his vain lies and shallow sophistications. Oh God, thou who knowest all that we do” (Moore 52). The duality of the scene plays the priest’s words against the image, while also putting the reader in a position in which he or she is obliged to determine which of the men’s actions are the worse sin: V’s killing, or the priest’s blatant hypocrisy and pedophilia.

There are many instances throughout *V for Vendetta* that ask the reader to form his or her own opinion on the actions, but there is a central question lying under the surface of the text. While specific points within the text show the duality of the actions and words of both V and the government, readers are also contracted to decide whether V has the right to force his beliefs onto the masses. V’s ideologies may be valid and for the good of all, there is an argument to be made as to whether the concept of anarchy is good for everyone, or if it is merely good for the few.

In the the performance of negative acts under the guise of good, the actions of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* are yet another point of contention. The beginning of the novel shows a mother, Sethe, and her daughter Denver living alone together in a haunted house in Cincinnati, Ohio. It is revealed that Sethe is an escaped slave and that she had two sons that had left home at an early age. The talk of the dead in the house is common, and the family just assume it is a normal thing, also revealing that the inhabitants are aware of who the sprint that torments them belongs to, as well as commenting on the fact that “she” was two when she died. Morrison trickles in the details of who “she” is and the events that transpired rather than giving the reader everything at once. Through the details that Morrison lets out, the reader discovers that Sethe was found by slave hunters and was imprisoned after she slit the throats of her baby girl and her two sons rather than allowing them to be enslaved. The unnamed baby is killed, while the others survive.

As Sethe, her new lover— known as Paul D— and Denver return from a carnival, they come across a young woman sitting in front of their house. When asked, the young woman says her name is Beloved. Upon hearing this, “Sethe was deeply touched by her sweet name; the remembrance of glittering headstone made her feel especially kind toward her” (Morrison 63). As is later revealed, Beloved’s name is the only word written on her daughter’s tombstone and that fact instantly gives Sethe a sense of duty toward the young woman. Morrison’s use of ambiguity coupled with morality in the tale guides her reader to make a determination onto the validity of Sethe’s actions.

As the story progresses, it is discovered that Beloved is not the sweet, simple woman that stumbled upon the home of 124 Bluestone Road. Beloved’s actions become increasingly disruptive, which pushes Paul D to move to different rooms in order to get away from her. Paul D seemed to be the only person in the house that saw the malicious intent of Beloved, and, “He wanted her out, but Sethe had let her in and he couldn’t put her out of a house that wasn’t his. It was one thing to beat up a ghost, quite another to throw a helpless coloredgirl out in territory infected by the Klan” (Morrison 79). It is at this point in which Morrison reminds the reader that, although things may be difficult in the household, there is a world outside of the house that is much more dangerous. In this passage, Morrison forces her readers to make their own judgement call as to which of the options is morally right; it is a plea for the reader to consult his or her own belief system and justify their reasoning.

Morrison’s use of language serves as a reminder the constant state of fear that Sethe lived in as an escaped slave. During a flashback sequence in which Sethe is caught, Morrison calls the slave hunting team the four horsemen; an allusion of the biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse that signal death and destruction. After Sethe has killed her baby, the group is dumbstruck until, “The sheriff turned, then said to the other three, ‘You all better go on. Look like your business is over. Mine’s started now’” (Morrison 177). The author uses this moment for two different reasons: one is for the reader to make a determination of whether Sethe’s actions were justified. The second reason for the scene— especially with the sheriff’s line— is to illustrate that Sethe is still going to be sent back into slavery, although of a different kind, but her children were not going to face the horrors of slavery. Sethe gave up her freedom for that of her children.

After it is discovered that Beloved is Sethe’s dead daughter reincarnated, Sethe looks at the opportunity as a chance at redemption. The redemption becomes all-consuming for Sethe, to the point she neglects not only Denver, but herself as well. Denver finally leaves the house to garner support from the neighborhood and, as the group for and heads to the home, “Sethe opened the door and reached for Beloved’s hand. Together they stood in the doorway” (Morrison 308). In this moment of redemption, Sethe again faces a group of people coming after her family, but she is resolute in letting no harm be done to her daughter again. This time, however, the group is more understanding of her situation, as well as coming in with the best interest of Sethe in their minds. Sethe is given the redemption she so badly needed, and the group— her neighbors— find the forgiveness that they had been so reticent to give before.

Toni Morrison’s novel is one of morality and redemption for many different characters. In the conclusion of *Beloved*, readers return to Paul D, but this time he has a different mentality. Now, “As a matter of fact, Paul D doesn’t care how it went down or even why. He cares about how he left and why. When he looks at himself through Garner’s eyes, he sees one thing. Through Sixo’s, another. One makes him feel righteous. One makes him feel ashamed” (Morrison 315). This passage is one that is extremely important not only for the redemption of Paul D, but is equally as important for the reader. Morrison takes this opportunity to point out to her readers that, although it can be a knee-jerk reaction to place one’s own morality onto the actions of another, it is an impossibility to understand another’s rationale.

The topic of morality and its ambiguity is not an easy one. The novels and their situations force the reader to not only experience uncomfortable situations, but also to evaluate one’s own moral compass. All of the authors mentioned show their readers many different instances that are difficult, but do not attempt to sway reader opinion. In writing in such a manner, each author takes away the comfort of a definitive answer for their reader, which also has a tendency to change the interpretation of such works, depending on the perspective of the reader. No matter the opinion of the reader, each author writes in manner that ensures the reader will indeed have an opinion; one that is largely based on the individual’s personal stance, as opposed to being guided on how to feel or interpret the situation.

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