

## ENHANCING MORALITY AND THE HUMANE THROUGH THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

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In a world riddled with immorality, animosity and cruelty, the study of literature can help readers cultivate and strengthen moral values. The proposed paper will argue that reading literary works can not only foster character development, but it can also imbue the reader with humane values. It can bring about positive change in an individual and in society. Indeed, through literature, people learn how to effectively relate socially with others in the global community.

**Keywords:** Literature, morality, character development, values, relationships

### Introduction

The world today witnesses gruesome happenings that suggest lack of empathy and a sharp decline in moral values. For example, one survey in Kenya concluded that today's young people are more willing to engage in corrupt or dishonest practices than youths of the 1970's (Kajilwa, 2016). Fiction offers us an opportunity to understand ourselves, to understand others and help us fit in society. Oatley (2002) has confirmed that fiction readers are profoundly empathic because fiction simulates real-world experiences, in which readers practice and enhance their interpersonal skills. Reading fiction can influence our thoughts, feelings and actions. In this paper, we argue that reading fiction can shape readers morally and empathically.

Plato (1945) discouraged the study or reading of literature because it appeals to the emotions of readers instead of reason. He notes in the Republic that a poet or literary artist appeals "not to the highest part of the soul but to one which is equally inferior... He stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine the reason" (p. 337) Plato thought too that literature was dangerous to moral development of the youth. Similarly, White (1952) condemns reading of fiction and suggests that it fosters bad morals and that it should not be studied. She observes that "the practice of story reading is one of the means employed by Satan to destroy souls. It produces a false, unhealthy excitement, fevers of imagination, unfits the mind for usefulness, and disqualifies it for any spiritual things" (p. 412). Elsewhere, White (1923) adds that the reading of fiction excites a reader's imagination so much that a reader is "betrayed into sin" (p. 92). She actually argued against teaching fiction in Adventist schools.

Moreover, the new curriculum in Kenya, in a bid to transform into an industrializing, middle-income country, seeks to emphasize science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM in short; meanwhile, it relegates humanities such as literature to the periphery – the "useless", the less prestigious. This paper examines the role of literature in instilling moral values in readers. It argues that literary works play a critical role in shaping our moral senses, and making readers more empathic.

### The Nature of Literature

Horace (1970), a Roman critic, discussed the relationship between usefulness and enjoyment in literary works. According to him, the ultimate aim of literature is "dulce et utile" – to be "sweet and useful". He said, "he who combines the useful and the pleasing wins out by both instructing and delighting the reader" (p. 56). In other words, a poem should not only charm the reader, but it should also offer moral advice. The new Kenyan education system seems to emphasize the useful and neglect the pleasing. Aristotle talks about the pleasure that literature provides its audience. He notes that an audience, after watching a tragedy experiences a purging/purification of emotions of fear and pity. This results in a balanced human being (Bressler, 2011). Literature has both cognitive and affective dimensions.

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), a late nineteenth century critic, contributed to the discussion of morality in literature, thanks to the experience he acquired as an inspector of schools for about thirty-five years. During Arnold's time, i.e. the Victorian era, empirical and rationalistic methods for discovering the nature of the



world were given credence. The writers, philosophers and scientists of the time abandoned the Romantic era notions of emotions, individualism and imaginations as pathways to truth/reality. Influenced by Charles Darwin's *On the Origins of Species* in 1859, science took the place of Romanticism's "religion of nature" and the beliefs of traditional religions. According to Bressler (2011), Matthew Arnold stepped into this void and proclaimed that "poetry can provide the necessary truths, values and guidelines for society" (p. 40). For him, the crowning activity for humankind is not religion, science or philosophy, it is poetry. He noted that "more and more [human]kind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" (Bressler, 2011, p. 41) There is moral excellence in poetry. It should be noted that the controversies of Arnold's time are being replaced today in the twenty first century Kenya, in particular the emphasis on sciences, technology and mathematics at the expense of morals or values such as respect, tolerance, honesty, diversity, hard work and justice.

Goodman (2001) noted that literature includes forms of writing in which language is "creatively and deliberately experimented in order to suggest images and ideas that engage the reader's imagination" (p. vii). It is a product of a writer's imagination and it mirrors reality.

### How Literature Works

Milnes (2018) has decried the rise in violent extremism in Kenya, but suggests a prescription: "Getting schools in Kenya to create reading programs that expose children to fiction could be a cost-effective approach to reduce violence and extremism amongst youth in all its forms" (p 15). Milnes added that several studies have confirmed that "reading fiction enhances empathy" even long after one's exposure to a book (p. 15). Children are able to understand emotions of others. Children's attitudes towards stigmatized groups improved significantly and there was a decrease in stereotyping and other anti-social behavior. The reader of fiction empathizes with the character(s) or with their plight and he/she identifies with and adopts the values of the character(s). The reader may be transformed in the process of reading fiction.

Professor Evan Mwangi also condemned the

lack of basic negotiation and critical thinking skills, the lack of ethics in business deals, and the lack of sensitivity and the humane feeling in students and national leaders, -- all of which would be gained through the study of the arts and humanities. Mwangi (2016) proposed a "trans-disciplinary happy marriage of arts and sciences" so that learners can develop good communication skills and respond ethnically to the opportunities that come their way. There is need to enhance the synergy between the sciences and the arts in order to fill the moral vacuum. Mwangi affirmed that the arts teach us how to be humane to all. He added, "only the arts will save Kenya from the precipice of ethnic violence". His perceptive argument strengthens the case for integrating arts in the teaching of STEM.

Similarly, Bukenya (2016) supports the idea of humanizing the sciences. He fears that if we train our youngsters in the sciences, we will make them efficient robots, at best; at worst, we will turn them into amoral monsters with no human values, no critical sense, no imagination and no sense of responsibility.

### Morality and Empathy in Literature with Cross Reference to *God's Bits of Wood* by Sembene Ousmane

Literature can and has been used to give a moral compass to readers even as they consume works by different authors. However, for this paper, we will dive into a close reading of Sembene Ousmane's novel, *God's Bits of Wood*. There are a number of moral values illustrated in this work, some covertly, others overtly. Some of these include empathy, tolerance, hard work, diligence, dedication, honesty, faithfulness, humility, justice (impartiality), selflessness and patience.

*God's Bits of Wood*, though written in 1960, deals with traits embodied in various characters that are still relevant and can be emulated in 2018. For example, Niakoro, the old woman in this novel is described as having an ancient countenance that "had the serenity which comes to those who arrive at the end of a hard and virtuous life." (p. 1) She would listen keenly to what is going on around her without appearing to be doing so. Old Niakoro's age and experience is not fully recognized and exploited by her children, daughters in law and grand-children. She seems to be the epitome of the adage that nothing is new under the sun. She had experienced a strike before that cost her a husband and son. Thus, she feels

left out and helpless when they all make their decisions without consulting her. Her patience and tolerance is worth admiration and emulation.

Even at her old age, Niakoro “could never let the afternoon go by without doing something. Sometimes she mended or darned and sometime she would work at ornamenting gourds...” (p. 3) Her hard work is clearly a virtue Ousmane has included in the novel by design. At a time when hard work is shunned in favor of doing the bare minimum when faced with any task, the character of old Niakoro is surprisingly refreshing. Niakoro’s patience is also seen in her level of concentration. “Niakoro took up a medium-sized gourd, which she clasped between her thighs, and with a steady hand began to trace a design of arabesques. The iron made a little crackling sound but Niakoro’s eyes remained fixed on the movement of her hand...” (p. 3)

Ad’jibid’ji, the grand daughter of Niakoro surprises with her honesty in a world dominated and run by adults. Although she was only eight or nine years old, Ad’jibid’ji reasons like an adult. When her mother seeks to cane her for talking to old Niakoro in French, she boldly asks, “Is it to hurt me mother or to make me better?” This insightful question stuns the mother and Assitan’s uplifted arm remained motionless. She was dumbfounded in the face of such a simple but loaded question. (p. 6) This brings to mind the number of times we stifle the young and overlook their side and comments that one could learn so much from. Need we dwell on corporal punishment and its disadvantages?

Mabigue, the brother to Ramatoulaye is a defeatist. He has the means to give the starving women and children food but he decided to sit back and not get involved. He sees the strike against the white masters as the will of heaven

“I know that life is often hard, but that should not cause us to turn our backs on God. He has assigned a rank, a place and a certain role to every man, and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design. The toubabs are here because that is the will of God. Strength is a gift of God and Allah has given it to them. We cannot fight against it – why, look, they have even turned off the water...” (p. 44)

Mabigue’s cowardice and meanness makes him one of the hated characters in the book. He would rather sit back instead of fighting injustices. His weaknesses serve to remind the readers of what normally happens in any society when the capable shun responsibility. The opposite of his character traits like empathy and selflessness are thus magnified.

Ramatoulaye the sister to Mabigue, is the true example of empathy in action. She decides to slaughter Vendredi (the brothers ram) after it ate their earthnut cakes and trampled on their rice. She chooses to incur the wrath of her brother rather than let the widows and children starve. (pp. 66-69). She is wounded in the process but gets a sense of fulfillment knowing that she had averted starvation – even if temporarily.

Penda, another female character in God’s Bits of Wood displays hardwork, diligence and selflessness. When she meets Maimouna (the blind lady), she appears abrupt and unfriendly (pp. 136-139) but this is a camouflage for beneath this veneer is a heart of gold. She later welcomes Maimouna and her baby to continue staying in her cabin. So that Penda does not hurt Maimouna’s feelings, when the latter asks about the appearance of the daughter, Adama, Penda lies that she is beautiful even though her eyes were exuding a yellowish pus. (p. 140)

Though a prostitute, Penda has redeeming qualities like the ones mentioned above. “She kept the women in line, and she forced even the men to respect her. She came to the union office frequently to help with the work...” In the end, Penda dies but not before proving that she had many more redeeming qualities. Her character teaches us to be less judgmental and less stereotypical of others.

Bakayoko, the main character whose appearance in this text is eagerly anticipated also leads a life of selflessness. He even neglects his family for the cause (the strike).

There are other prominent characters but the chosen few above drive home the fact that characters in literature can enhance morality and the humane in human nature.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of literature through the reading of novels, poems and plays should be made compulsory or obligatory to improve on the morals within our society. Depriving a people literature is similar to fostering moral decay in our society. God’s Bits of Wood is just a single example above but many other works of fiction can be analyzed and will show the value of literature in elevating positive qualities like morality, empathy, hard work, tolerance etc.



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