

Can Literature Enhance People's Morality?

-- The Analysis of Literary Functions

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Abstract

By combing western literature, it was discovered that Plato and Aristotle both realized the great influence of literature on the human mind. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, many writers and artists were in favor of using literature to educate people, improve their morality, and transform society. The traditional view of literary function holds that literature has three functions. In fact, the cognitive function of literature is to give a deep impression, and the educational role of literature is to influence people's spiritual world and play an educational role. Literature expresses the intrinsic beauty of truth and goodness, affects human emotions, and naturally affects human souls. Literature itself contains truth and kindness, and the knowledge gained by people in reading acts on their own ethics through rational thinking. Literature cannot decide morality but must have an impact on morality.

Keywords

literary functions; Literature and morality; Beauty and goodness; Reason.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, people think that the relationship between literature and morality is essentially the relationship between beauty and goodness. And how can literature affect people's mind and soul? This paper will explore the principle and mechanism behind it and examine the relationship between reason and emotion to explain people's morality. This is an important issue in literary criticism for a long time, and it also involves the discussion of the function of literature. To discuss this issue, it is first necessary to make clear that due to the different backgrounds of Chinese and Western literature, the function of literature in Western literary theory is also different from Chinese. Because western literature exists as an independent discipline, which is different from Chinese literature as a whole. Western literature does not have reduced to a vassal of politics. Therefore, the enlightenment of literature can become its objective effect or the subjective pursuit of the writer, rather than being forced by external forces. Therefore, this article mainly sorts out from western literary theory and discusses the role of literature in improving people's morality.

2. Views on the Role of Literature in Western Literature

According to different views on literature, the understanding of the role of literature is also different. Plato downplayed and opposed art, thinking that poetry mimicked reality. In *The Republic*, he stated that the function of literature is a tool used for the construction of the republic. On the one hand, he recognized the great impact of literature on the human soul, on the other hand, he believed that literature needed to guide people to goodness and to achieve realization of the political ideals of the ideal state. However, poetry at that time could not bear the responsibility of the education of the city-state young people. In order to defend *The*

Republic of Plato, Plato expelled poetry from his republic because poetry imitated “real”, did not possess true knowledge, and nourished the irrational part of people, which was not conducive to the construction of the Republic. People should pursue wisdom and rationality and abandon irrational emotions. Therefore, in Plato’s view, literature serves “reason”, so we can see that to some extent Plato affirms the educational role of poetry.

Aristotle defended art positively, arguing that art imitates reality, but is superior to reality, and affirms the reality of art recognition and the rationality of and phenomena, fiction and creation. In *Poetics*, Aristotle paid more attention to literary creation. Unlike Plato, he praised Homer, thinking that works of art bring “pleasure”, which is the main saying of “entertainment” in Western literature. Therefore, he suggests the pleasant function of literature.

Aristotle’s response to Plato’s belief that the sentiment of literature is irrational is “catharsis”. He explicitly put forward the view that tragedy is the highest form of poetry in *Poetics*, and from this he also talked about the educational function of art. He believes that tragedy inspires compassion and fear in people’s hearts. In order to make these two kinds of feelings moderate, what catharsis has to do is to remove excess emotions, to balance our feelings and reason, even if the feeling is less than reason, and to make people aware of the compassion and fear they should have when they suffer the same thing. Because of this kind of compassion or fear for oneself, people will prevent such bad things from happening on themselves, so literature achieves its goal. From this point of view, Aristotle’s catharsis is full of moral education effects. In his case, literature is ultimately designed to put rationality back into people’s minds for the purpose of facilitating governance.

From the perspective of Plato and Aristotle, truth (reason) is a measure of beauty, and the role of literature is to make people return to rationality.

Horace’s point of view is inherited from Aristotle’s “catharsis”. According to him, “The poet’s desire should be to give people benefits and pleasure, and what he writes should give people pleasure and help life. Educating and entertaining, both persuading the reader and making him love, can meet the expectations.” He also opened the school of emphasizing the educational function of literature during the period of Renaissance, Neoclassicism, and Enlightenment.

During the Renaissance, people turned their eyes from religion to themselves. The main function of literature was to express human life, the beauty of the human body, and the importance of morality. Sidney said, “Because these people’s creations are for imitating, imitating is for love and education; love is for moving people to practice the good deeds that they would have escaped, and education is for people to understand what touched them and make them long for good deeds ...”. In the period of the Enlightenment, this movement was not only an ideological liberation movement, but also a political revolutionary movement, therefore the Enlightenment literature naturally assumed the function of social education. At that time, Diderot, a literary and aesthetician, believed that art had a huge social transformation effect, and advocated that enlightenment should be carried out with art which contains morality. Art and literature can change the habits and customs effectively and a good way of influencing people’s life and ideas.

It can be concluded that the function of literature starts to be realized as the means of guiding people for good deeds. It is actually a mutual effect of the beauty and goodness.

Arnold believes that poetry can achieve the purpose of improving society by improving individuals. He believes that there are two types of charm in poetry. The charm of nature comes from the understanding and induction of the laws of external existence. The charm of nature gives readers a sense of pleasure in reading, while the charm of morality is the chant of the general spirit of human beings and brings readers knowledge accumulation and spiritual education. But literature still cannot solve the dilemma of society as he expected. It is important

to note here that Arnold's literature is limited to the genre of poetry, not only because he is a poet, but also because of the important status of poetry in the western literary tradition.

Chernyshevsky, the Nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary democratic literary critic, believes that excellent literary works should become "human life textbooks." By reading excellent literary works, people can receive rich social and historical knowledge and life knowledge and truth. Also, people will be infected and educated subtly and improve their ideological awareness and the ability to distinguish between true, good, beautiful, false, evil and ugly. At the same time, they can obtain spiritual pleasure and high-level enjoyment from reading. Another great writer in nineteenth century, Tolstoy, attributes the purpose of literature to moral education. He believed that art was not about pursuing beauty, but instead replacing vulgar and bad feelings with good feelings.

From the above, the expectations of writers and philosophers on literature are that literature can play an educational role, promote individuals, and make them pursue goodness or maintain reason. They all realize the great power of literature and think that people can definitely obtain some knowledge and truth through their reading.

3. The Function of Literature

Firstly, literature plays a specific cognitive role. When reading scientific works, everyone has basically the same understanding, the difference is the difference in the depth of understanding, not the knowledge of different nature. Therefore, literature and science are two different cognitive forms. Because literature as a kind of art, its reality is not the actual reality, but the reality of consciousness, which is a kind of artistic persuasive force produced in the reader's psychology. Therefore, art cannot be a precise intellectual material. Literature can only be an aesthetic display that reflects the appearance of social life, a form of art that reflects reality, and an aesthetic activity. The knowledge obtained in literary works is perceptual and has two characteristics. The first is that it has emotional color and personality characteristics, and it is a humane and personal understanding, so it makes sense but not necessarily reasonable. And the second is that there is no defined conceptual category as the basis. Therefore, the comprehension that people get from literary works generally manifests as the comprehension that cannot express a clear conceptual connotation, and it seems difficult to express it with an accurate word or sentence for it is unclear. This kind of understanding causes a huge shock to the human mind. Although it is impossible to obtain a certain background and concept, it can leave a deep thoughts and impression after reading.

The second point is the educational role discussed earlier. This role is to cultivate human temperament, to make people establish beautiful beliefs and noble moral sentiments, which is a "spiritual" role, rather than instilling ideas and improving the "intelligence" level. Literature is spiritual. It affects people's spiritual world through people's aesthetic experience, and inspires people to pursue truth, kindness, and beauty as a complete and unified ideal of life. Literary works do not draw certain conclusions or arguments, but they give clues to people's thinking and help people form a healthy and noble mental outlook--beliefs, morals, qualities and feelings. It is through this that art performs the function of thought, and thus plays an educational role on the spiritual level.

The third is aesthetic function. The role of literature in understanding, education, and aesthetics is unified in the field of aesthetics, and it works through emotions. Therefore, in order to understand the social function of literature correctly, we cannot examine it from the scope of aesthetic activities. Beauty is the foundation. If literature cannot give people a sense of beauty, then all its social functions will be difficult to achieve. The aesthetic function is the center of the social function of literature. The three functions of cognition, education, and pleasure are just three factors of the aesthetic function of literature. And its social role is inseparable from

emotions, which evokes emotions through beauty. A work of art that gives a person a sense of beauty requires not only form beauty, but also more importantly, intrinsic beauty (that is, the image of “true” and “good”). This intrinsic beauty acts on human emotions and arouses excitement and resonance and evoke beautiful and sublime thoughts and emotions. As a result, people unknowingly view life with a certain emotional attitude, they can naturally receive a certain moral sentiment and spiritual quality education, the entire spiritual world is sublimated, and at the same time it gives people a sense of joy and achieves rest and entertainment effect.

The above three functions are generally recognized as the three functions of literature. In summary, literature is based on its aesthetics, and affects the soul of a person subtly through emotions. From recognition to practice, with emotions as mediators, literature acts on people’s emotional domain, improves people’s emotional state, and implicitly affects the entire soul of people, thereby restricting and affecting people’s behavior. According to western traditional philosophy, morality is a part of human soul, and it is naturally influenced by literature together. Literature affects people’s practical ability through emotions. This is the most prominent feature of the social function of literature.

4. The Relationship between Literature and Morality

Aristotle’s defense of poetry derives more from his ethical ideas. He believes that happiness is associated with goodness, which requires behavior to be ethical. He believes that “the virtue of a person is the quality of making people good and obtaining excellent results.” Virtue means excellence in the soul. Aristotle also believes that the soul has two parts: irrationality and rationality. Emotion and desire belong to the irrational part, but he does not sniff emotions like Plato. He just thinks that irrationality is bound by reason. Therefore, the excellent qualities of the soul are the intellectual virtue and the ethical virtue. The virtue of intellectual virtue is speculation, which is determined by rational wisdom. Ethics does not refer to a certain kind of knowledge but refers to the generation of good qualities and the right conduct of people, which is commonly called virtue. Aristotle believes that reason is the foundation of virtue. Without reason, there is no pursuit of goodness, and vice versa. Thus, virtue is not only the excellent quality in human feelings (the irrational part of human soul), but also constitutes together with the excellence in reason. In his eyes, virtue, as the excellent qualities of morality, is a combination of rationality and irrationality which are prerequisites and interact with each other. His analysis of human morality is intended to include the irrational part of the soul in the process of moral improvement.

Writers and poets observe the reality under this world’s appearance with extraordinary perception and empathy. Literature, with its search, revealing, construction, and expression of beauty, has satisfied the aesthetic needs of human beings, enriched people’s spiritual world and cultural life, and thus established the basis and value of its existence.

An important feature of literature in grasping life and artistic expression is that literature is human science. As a form of human emotion, spirit and consciousness, literature is undoubtedly closely related to the ethical and moral aspects of human soul. Literature reflects reality. In this virtual narrative world, the knowledge that people acquire through specific circumstances and the experience of specific characters can act on ethical virtues. Then reason allows us to think about the cause and nature of the event and work with human emotions. As discussed earlier, literature works through emotions and affects human souls. Here we know that the outstanding part of the two parts of the human soul together constitutes what Aristotle called virtue. Therefore, literature affects not only human emotions, but also encourages people to think rationally. Combining the two aspects, letting rationality and ethics work together can make people pursue goodness which is the ethical virtue.

From the above discussion, we find that the moral education role of literature is spontaneous. But after entering the class society, the ruling class began to consciously use literature to publicize their moral concepts and strengthen the spiritual domination of the people. In this way, the relationship between literature and morality has changed from free to artificial. From the standpoint of materialist dialectics, literature cannot determine morality. There is no absolutely decisive relationship between literature and morality. But literature does have a certain effect on morality. For example, When the morality of a class deteriorates with the decline of the class itself, no amount of moral literary works can be remedied. When a new moral concept emerges with the change in the mode of production and the new class entering the political arena, any literary work that promotes old morality cannot suppress it. It can be seen that under different historical backgrounds, considering the influence of economic and political factors, the role of literature on morality is not absolute.

However, the role of literature in moral education is limited, non-absolute. What literature expresses comes from life, which in turn has an impact on life. It involves all kinds of issues that people are most concerned about, and people will find its deep meaning hidden between words when they are reading great literary works. The content and form of literature are diverse, so naturally its value is definitely more than one. Therefore, it does not mean that all literary works should reflect morality and promote morality. For example, some writers who pursue spiritual expression emphasize that literature expresses their personal emotions. The social education function of literature is not something they are interested in. In their view, literary creation is "personalized" and exerts its role in the private sphere. They write poems and create works but may not be willing to publish them all their lives.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing the views of philosophers and writers on western literature history, we find that literature does affect human emotions. According to Plato, literature nourishes the irrational part of the soul. And Aristotle thought that through the catharsis of emotions, literature restricted emotions to reason. We can conclude that literature indeed has a specific educational role. So, this educational function has effect on human's morality that is contained in the irrational part of human soul. Next, we discussed the traditional view of literary function that believes literature evokes human emotions by arousing the sense of beauty, thus having a cognitive, educational, and aesthetic role. These three roles work as one rather than work respectively. Therefore, the function mechanism of literature is clearly manifested. According to Aristotle, ethical virtue is the best part of the irrational part of soul, and it produces good qualities to make people behave properly. Still, ethics and intellectual thinking should work together to constitute human virtue in the true sense. Literature has an effect on the human soul, urges people to pursue goodness, and acts out of the needs of the heart, so that the soul has virtue. Therefore, literature and morality are not simply the relationship between beauty and goodness. The fact that morality is composed of reason and ethics determines that its goodness is goodness based on reason. What we said that literature affects people's morals not only includes people's emotions and their spiritual world, but it is a kind of sublimation that human reason filters out the excess emotions. Reason helps people finally reflect on themselves through the release of emotions and raise people's morality to a new level which means the pursuit of virtue.

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