

ETHICS IN LITERATURE: Q&A AT BYU-IDAHO

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Editor's Note: Fortuitous events made it possible, on short notice, to receive Dr. Booth in the English Department on 17 August 2004. He met with faculty members for lunch and then conducted this Q&A with students and teachers.

I think we should move quickly to questions about ethical matters in their relationship to fiction. But perhaps I should begin by saying something about how I got into this whole subject.

When I was in graduate school the primary emphasis of my major professors, the ones I admired the most, was strictly on the structure of literary works. The preceding generation had been entirely concerned about historical matters. One of my least favorite professors taught Chaucer, and we spent all of our time finding out, if we could, who the models were of the characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. It bored me silly.

That was the preceding generation—historians. The new generation was a group of so-called formalists, or close-analysis readers, who believed that the quest of all literary critics should be to find how a work is put together, what is the real quality of what Aristotle called the “imitation of life.” And this school—it was sometimes called a school—never referred to ethical matters. The fact that a work would have some kind of qualitative ethical effect on readers was something never mentioned. My dissertation was on the structure of *Tristram Shandy*; my emphasis was on finding its structure. This is the least organized work ever written in one sense, but I thought I could prove the organization of the text. Not a word about ethics, not a word about the ethical impact of the book on any reader was mentioned in my dissertation. My teachers thought I should publish the dissertation, and over the years slowly I got more and more interested in ethical matters.

Three years after I started teaching at Haverford, I received a Fullbright fellowship to study the history of ethical thinking of the great philosophers. I started with the pre-Socratics and worked down from there. It was a fabulously revealing experience to have a full year with no requirements. I didn't even have to make a report at the end of the year, just being able to read the great philosophers. This drew me into feeling that I wanted to do classical criticism. Slowly, over the next few years, I began to work on the rhetoric of fiction, thinking that I was going to deal with not just the ethical impact of the works but also the way in which authorial intrusions on the work would have some kind of impact on us.

By the time I was doing that, there was a strong school of critics saying that true novelists only show; they don't tell. They never tell you

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what you're supposed to think. They only show, and the reader makes the judgment. My book was an attack on this sharp distinction on the grounds that when really skillful novelists intrude, George Elliot or Jane Austin for example, they are fantastically good at making their intrusive comments worth something. And I found myself thinking, "Why can't I deal with the rhetoric of those intrusive comments?" But slowly, over the seven years I worked on the book, it became clearer and clearer that I wasn't just dealing with the rhetoric of those intrusive comments; I was dealing with the rhetoric of the whole work. What is its impact on those who read it? And that was where the transformation occurred.

My teacher for whom I did the dissertation had said, "You haven't solved your problem, but I'll accept it." I was pleased about that. But then when my book came out, he was really a bit upset because he felt I was imposing ethical matters onto what should be just structural matters. And he wasn't the only one, of course. Slowly, over the years, I became more and more engrossed in ethical matters, and finally produced the book that you have just mentioned, *The Company We Keep*.

Now I would like to begin by asking you whether you care about distinguishing the good guys from the bad guys. Is this something that engrosses you while you're reading, or do you just take it for granted that you've unconsciously embraced the good side and repudiated the bad side? Do you do it automatically, or do you think about it? So I'm going to ask you to tell me what you do when you read a book, in the matter of the ethical quality. Who's first?

So I'm going to ask you to tell me what you do when you read a book, in the matter of the ethical quality.

Student A: I'm more into looking for the concept of good and bad, and then good overcoming the bad. It's interesting to me, the concept of good versus evil, or the concept of good always winning over evil and evil never winning over good.

Booth: Have you read any book recently which you thought had an evil impact on you or was trying to?

Student A: I can't say that one really has had an evil impact on me. They have more of a good impact on me than an evil impact.

Booth: Do you have an example?

Student A: In my English class we just read a play called *Oedipus the King*, and that had an impact on me.

Booth: How many have read *Oedipus*? [Students raise hands.] Everybody! You must be doing good things here!

- Student A: Is *Oedipus the King* just the good overcoming the evil in the end?
- Booth: Close reading of *Oedipus* is really a wonderful ethical experience because *Oedipus* is grappling with ethical questions at every point. Sometimes he does very badly, very awkwardly, and sometimes well. But his final decision is so shocking that you don't know how to deal with it, but you know that he knows he's in bad shape.
- Student B: It seems to me that the way I evaluate characters in literature is parallel with the way that I evaluate my life. For example when I was young I was taught that too much alcohol is bad, therefore alcoholics are bad people. It was kind of an automatic reaction. I think that reading literature has often been that way for me. All those good guys and bad guys were just a subconscious thing, but I think that as my view of the world has progressed I've been able to change my view of literature also. And I see some characters' motivations and what has made them the people they are, or that maybe underneath they aren't what I automatically think they are.
- Booth: I think that's a wonderful point about the impact a literary work can have upon you and how it can educate you. You were recognizing that what you thought were absolutely unforgivable faults before are not absolutely unforgivable, that the people are redemptive and can be redeemed, and that Christ's message can be actually true about the way the world works. And you can learn from the way the author handles it, if he or she is a good author. You can learn that you've been blind in judgment against that guy because of his blunder and fall, but actually in the larger picture he or she is wonderful and totally admirable. But the author behind the scene is even more admirable because I can love that author and really enjoy what the author is doing regardless of what the characters do.
- Student C: Recently I've read *The Great Gatsby* again, looking at it with a more critical mind and in relation to what you're talking about. I've felt that these characters in *Gatsby*, for the most part, are not ethical at all. In fact in my research of critical studies on it, I've found that

Fitzgerald wasn't necessarily the best person in the world, but I look at the book and I enjoy it. I take things from it, but I'm lacking a Christ figure. I don't know if you've done any critical analysis on *Gatsby*, but what would you say is the ethical lesson? Is there an ethical lesson in *Gatsby*?

Booth: I taught it years ago and it's not fresh on my mind. But in my view, the Fitzgerald who creates the book is much more virtuous than the actual flesh-and-blood Fitzgerald. If the Fitzgerald who created that work really had a strong ethical center to it, as he makes judgments against the behavior of the various characters, the central character is the most virtuous of all of them in the sense that he doesn't commit any major crimes. But all of the others, including Gatsby himself, are doing terrible things again and again. And all the while you're living with Fitzgerald behind the scenes, you might say, and you're joining him as he makes these judgments. In real life, probably Fitzgerald would have had difficulty in making those judgments. At least he didn't judge himself as much as the authorial Fitzgerald does. Does that make sense to you?

Student C: It does, and I have a follow-up question. As I'm trying to make my own decisions on what's good literature and doing my own criticism, should I focus on good intentions or should I focus on the fact that the author's actually teaching? You say Fitzgerald had some good intentions in the characters he portrayed. He was judging them, showing their lives so that I could judge them and make decisions, but still, are good intentions enough? It seems that there are still some more things in there. Which weigh more, the good intentions or the facts?

Booth: I think that is a very good question, but I'm automatically going to respond that the good intentions are the important matter. That is, the friendship you create as you bond with the author behind the scene, as the author is creating this or that kind of trend: that friendship with the author produces your knowledge of what that author thinks is good and bad. So regardless of how badly the character behaves, if the author makes it clear that he thinks it's bad, then you and the author have

joined, and your judgment has been affected by joining that author.

Student D: Just going along with what's been said, I think that literature is a great reflection upon human nature. It's kind of like looking into a mirror and seeing our own nature and what we can do.

Booth: What's so important about great literature is that the authors themselves, as they create their works, think harder about life and about what's good and bad in life than they ever do when they're just leading their flesh-and-blood lives. I once encountered Saul Bellow. How many of you have read Saul Bellow's work, any? Well you should; it's first class work. I met him on a sidewalk, and I said, "What are you up to these days, Saul?" And he said, "Well I'm just revising a novel I call *Herzog*." He said he was spending four hours a day revising it. And I said, "Why are spending four hours a day revising that work?" And he said, "Well I'm just wiping out those parts of myself that I don't like." Just think about that now: he's wiping out parts of himself that he doesn't like. He's presenting himself to you infinitively superior to the Saul Bellow in real life. The Saul Bellow in real life can sometimes be really awful. He was a terrible egotist, but he wiped out all those bad parts and created a self that could judge life in profound ways that are just fabulous. He's still one of my favorite novelists, though there are lots of others.

S. Samuelson: The implication of the fact that a historical person can be superseded by an implied author in a work suggests that there is something redemptive about the act of writing itself. To my knowledge you haven't written novels, but you have written...

Booth: I have written two: total failures.

Samuelson: ...many wonderful works of criticism! But I wonder if writing criticism and theory has had a redemptive effect on you personally?

Booth: Oh, absolutely. Just like the novelists I described, when you sit down and try to write an essay for your teacher or your publicist, you simultaneously create a superior version of yourself, don't you? Just think how awful

your grades would be if you revealed your true feelings when you wrote that essay. Or just think how awful the world would be if all the waitresses in the country revealed their true feelings as they came to your table and waited on you. We all practice a kind of masking, in a good sense of the word, and sometimes in the bad sense: hypocrisy. But we do enact versions of ourselves that are superior. If you read one of my books and then met me at a time when I was having trouble with my computer, and my wife came in and interrupted me while I was on the computer, and then I suddenly took a valuable book and flung it on the floor, breaking its spine, what kind of person is that? It's not the Wayne Booth you're meeting here.

S. George: This is a question that comes up in our English-495 class, and we talked about it there. How do you respond to someone who would say that the ethical and the aesthetic are two separate realms? That they really don't interact, or if they do that there are really trivial connections between the aesthetic and the ethical? We spent a great deal of time talking about how these two reinforce each other and how there are very strong connections. I just wondered what you would say if someone said that aesthetics and ethics should be separate.

Booth: I would say exactly what you just said. They are not separable because the aesthetic effect, the excitement or whatever you want to call it that you have as you read the book, is inseparable from its ethical effect on you. It will either win you to better behavior or to worse behavior. You can be sure that the pleasure of the reading is going to be inseparable from what that reading will do to you as you go about the next day.

Student E: I've just read John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*. I have this concept that the main character is going to be good. And somehow because of that I'm going to be skewed into thinking that he is good. And I really question myself as I read. I argue that Ethan Hawley, even though he's doing despicable things throughout the book, is a good man and that he didn't mean it. And I don't know if I'm just in love with the character and I want to forgive him. I'm a sucker for villains, maybe. I love Heathcliff too. I don't know what's wrong with

me. But should I be judging whether he's a good or bad person, because from his perspective it gives balance to the book? But should I even be concerned? The main character can't be bad; you can't have a book that way. But should I be judging his moral tendencies? Should I judge whether he is a good or bad person?

Booth: I haven't read that one for about four decades, so it's not fresh in my mind. But in general, do you find that the implied author is generally convinced that this is a good man who is doing bad things? I've just been re-reading St. Augustine's *Confessions*. How many of you have read that? [Students raise hands.] About half, maybe. I've been re-reading it because I'm going to be teaching it next fall. And I'm struck by many confessions where he does some really bad stuff, particularly his lustful pursuits: how good he is at making it clear that "I, the author of this confession, am infinitely superior to the guy I'm portraying here." Do you find that in the book you're reading Steinbeck is implying at every step that this is a good guy doing bad things?

Student E: I think so. It's the first book I ever put down right before the last chapter that I didn't want to pick up again, and I couldn't pick it up for a week because I was so involved. I knew what was going to happen. I was convinced that this is a good man, and I wanted the redemption but was scared of what might happen.

Booth: Does he get redeemed at the end? I can't remember. I'll go back and reread that. [Student E nods head.] Yes?

Student F: I had a roommate last semester who was reading C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, and she hated reading the book. She would put it down, be mad, get depressed, and she would say, "I don't want to read this; I feel almost evil reading this." Then she started reading some critics about the book and seemed to reach an understanding. She still didn't know how she felt, but when she got to the end she really liked the book and enjoyed it. But before, she was almost depressed reading it. Do you think it's fair that critics can change your mind?

Booth: Oh absolutely. What she had missed, I assume, was all the ironies the author was making behind the scene. Only on second or third reading did she finally catch

the ironies. The author didn't mean these words to mean such and such; rather the author meant these words to mean such and so. And that happens all the time. Too many readers of all ages simply don't catch the ironies when the author says the opposite of what he or she really means. And that's one of the bases of my first book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. I was really motivated strongly by the fact that so many of my readers, so many of my students, were not catching the ironies as they read. For example, they read *The Catcher in the Rye*, and many of them totally sided with Holden Caulfield, as if the author made no distinction between the character and the author's views. But when that book is read carefully, you recognize that the author, at every point, is revealing faults in the hero, who is a wonderful kid but making mistake after mistake. And that was one of the things that motivated my doing the book, just feeling that we've got to have more students alerted to the fact that authors don't always mean what they say. They often mean exactly the opposite of what they say.

Student G: I have a question following up with that. Several years ago I read *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. When I first read it I didn't understand it. I didn't know how I felt about it because I wasn't sure what the author was saying. So I gave myself a couple years, read it again, understood it a little bit more, and started to draw my own conclusions about it. But when I was in high school I read a poem by Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." My English teacher said, "This poem is about contemplating suicide." I thought to myself, "That's not what I get from this poem." But my teacher was in a position of expertise, and she said the poem was about this, so I based my feeling on it. How do we draw the line between taking someone else's opinion, who says, "This is what the work is about," and judging for ourselves?

Booth: That's a really fantastic question because it harasses us all the time. Especially when a teacher has what you think is the wrong view. I'm entirely opposed to that teacher's interpretation. Is he here? [Laughter.] I don't think that poem is about suicide at all. "Miles to go before I sleep; miles to go before I sleep": that's not about

suicide; that's about all kinds of things. I think your general question is absolutely on the problem because again and again a teacher will have a bias and want to impose it, or a fellow student will have a bias and want to impose it. You have to just learn to think, go back and look again, reread, and make up your own mind.

Sometimes you'll find that the split doesn't go away. You still have a teacher's view and your view, and no way of reconciling them. On other occasions you find that you can really change your mind, or change his or her mind, and make some progress. One of the terms I use in my book, in several of my books, is the term "coduction," as distinct from induction and deduction. Coduction is when you work together to come to some kind of conclusion. Rather than separately saying, "I can discuss it inductively or I can prove it deductively," you and your friend discuss it, working on it and coming to some kind of friendly agreement as to what the author was trying to do. That seems to be terribly important, and sometimes it just gets violated if some dogmatist insists, "I've got it right, and you've got it wrong." What do you do? But if you open your mind and try to get that dogmatist to open his or her mind, then something can happen.

Student H: I'm curious. We've talked about the aesthetic effect in literature being pleasure, but I think we're walking around the edge, and I'm curious to step into the idea of ethical effects of literature or drama. I think I understand what we mean when we talk about the author's ethics and the character's ethics, but what do you mean by the ethical effect on the reader?

Booth: Well, what does it make you want to be? What does this work assume I have to be in order to understand it? If I have to be a fully perceptive and ethical creature to understand what's going on here, then he and I, or she and I, have joined behind the scenes of the book, regardless of how many atrocities the book portrays. I'm not sure I'm meeting your question adequately. Go ahead, say it again.

Student H: I think you are, actually. It was just the idea that what we read has an ethical effect on us.

Booth: Great books leave me aspiring to be as perceptive and intelligent and ethically judgmental as the author himself or herself. When I read George Elliot, I just wish I could be as good as that woman. I'm quite sure that in real life she was much inferior to what she presents there, but who cares about that? The woman she portrays in *Middlemarch* particularly is so admirable, so perceptive, so wise, so generous, so morally perceptive, that I just can't resist wanting to be as bright as she is—even though I'm not.

Student I: In one of my writing classes, we're learning that to write fiction you want to pull out the darkest parts of yourself and put them in writing. You need to take the parts of you that you don't necessarily like to face. When you do that, it helps you face those parts but it also helps other people face them. But how do you make yourself the author who is virtuous and superior to the character you are portraying?

Booth: You revise and revise and revise. [Laughter.] No kidding! After Saul Bellow told me he was wiping out the parts of himself that he didn't like, a graduate student looked into the original manuscript and found that it was just awful. It had many versions of Saul Bellow that he later wiped out. I think revision is the only way for that kind of cleansing. I think cleansing is a pretty good word. You clean out the versions of yourself that are inferior, and you portray the kind of judgment you want. If you were to see the number of manuscripts for every one of my pieces, you'd be shocked. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, as I said, took seven years to write—version after version after version, and finally it was accepted by the University of Chicago Press, and I went on revising and revising. I added a new first chapter, cut out Chapter 14, and so on. Then my wife and I read it aloud together and she would correct this and correct that sentence. I really should have said that it was written by both of us and not just by me. But it's that kind of revision, just the cleaning up of what you would like to be. You know you're not really reaching that most of the time; you reach it only as you write that book or that article or that version.

- K. Hartvigsen: The question I would like to ask is about ethical criticism not being well known. It appears to be dogmatic and especially biased, and people who are well intentioned end up alienating people who might be interested in the discussions. A lot of us here would be interested in doing good ethical criticism. What suggestions could you make to help us do good ethical criticism and not alienate an audience? You see the world that way, I see it this way; you live your way, I live my way. It seems to be a hard thing to do well.
- Booth: I think that's the toughest question anyone has asked yet. How do you manage to avoid your own dogmas as you write your work, and how do you avoid succumbing to others' dogmas as they write theirs? I don't have any easy answer to that except going back to revision. You go through a work of your own and you find, "That just sounds absolutely dogmatic; I haven't given my reasons for it." If you have an opinion and you can give your reasons for it, then of course that's a very different thing than simply saying, "I know absolutely that such-and-such is wrong."
- That doesn't get anywhere at all. But if you can point out why it is wrong, or why this work is inferior because it seems to celebrate that wrong, then you can make some progress on it. It's rough. It's not easy because all of us do have biases. Many of us don't even recognize that we have them, and they sneak into our work. If you read my books, you find a strong bias that ethical matters matter, and a lot of people think that's crazy.
- Student J: For instance I'm a big Stephen King fan, and there is a lot of junk but some of his works are just great. The problem is that his novels contain things a lot of people, like other students and my instructors, find really offensive. At what point does the level of that content counter the moral lessons and points made in the work? At what point does it become a waste of time?
- Booth: That brings up the whole issue of the so-called popular page-turners of which King is one of the masters. So many of the popular page-turners almost celebrate crime as if it were okay or as if it didn't matter. I don't think his works quite do that, but...

Student J: There are some that just aren't worth reading because they go into stuff that has no moral stimuli at all, but there are others that are just amazing.

Booth: ...the popular page-turners (which I read a lot of, sometimes feeling embarrassed about it), really raise this issue very prominently, because very often they almost seem to be celebrating murders rather than condemning them. I don't have a good answer for your question other than the kinds of answers I've been giving to the other questions. You just have to think about it, as you obviously have done. You've already revealed that you were able to distinguish the bad ones from the good ones, right?

Student J: Yes, sir.

Student K: It seems to me that literature falls into some of the same pitfalls as any type of ethical evaluation in the sense that a lot of times the reader will determine what effect it has on him or her. It becomes very subjective. I was just wondering what kind of standard would you suggest so as to evaluate that and avoid "Oh well, it just depends on the reader." I mean, you mentioned that it depends on the author's intention, but obviously there seems to be also the interaction of the reader.

Booth: That's a very good question and it brings up the whole school of criticism that we talked about with the teachers just an hour ago. There was one brand of literary critics who decided that it all depends on the reader, and whatever the reader says, that's okay. If the reader reads it this way, okay, let him or her read it that way—that's all that matters. A lot of us fought against that, particularly Louise Rosenblatt, a wonderful writer. She was partly a reader-response critic but she also knew how to attack the excesses of reader-response stuff.

She knew that if she just let every reader have total say, all was lost because all of us readers make mistakes. It just has to be acknowledged. I don't think there is a general answer to your question. Just be sure that you don't get sucked into a work that simply is the bias of one reader, and be sure you can show the evidence in the work that a given reader is wrong, having ignored

this or that part. Go back and read it yourself and find out whether the reader was right or not.

Student K: Wasn't it the Sophists who said you can prove something with any argument or that you can prove anything you want as long as you argue it correctly? I'm just wondering how you avoid that type of view because even if we provide reasons you'd imagine that people who interpreted it completely differently could also provide some sort of reason too.

Booth: As you've probably detected, I don't feel that I am a Sophist. I think that they went much too far in the direction of thinking that all clever reasoning is equally good, and that brings up the question of rhetoric, which is my central interest throughout my life. You've just got to be able distinguish good rhetoric from the bad rhetoric, and good rhetoric is not just the kind that is clever but the kind that really speaks some kind of truth to you. I. A. Richards once said, "True rhetoric is the art of removing misunderstanding." I think he went too far in that direction because rhetoric also is the art of producing misunderstanding. But if you learn to distinguish the good and bad forms of rhetoric, then you will find ways of avoiding the trap you're talking about. But it's a real trap. I think it's an extremely important question. ☺