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Poetic Justice

Abstract: The well-know and highly American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum explores the role of literature, especially the novel, in shaping moral imagination and ethical judgment. The main thesis of theis article is that reading literature contributes to the development of empathy and the ability to see different perspectives, which is essential for fair decision-making in public and political life. Nussbaum argues that the literary imagination is essential to the formation of "just judges" in a democratic society. Novels, in her opinion, allow readers to identify with the characters and their circumstances, thus developing the ability to understand the needs, sufferings and lives of other people. Such empathy empowers morally informed decision-making, which is sensitive to human vulnerability and diversity.

Keywords: Martha C. Nussbaum, literary imagination, ethical judgment, emotions

Sprawiedliwość poetycka

Streszczenie: Znana i szanowana amerykańska filozofka Martha C. Nussbaum bada rolę literatury, zwłaszcza powieści, w kształtowaniu wyobraźni moralnej i osądu etycznego. Główną tezą owego artykułu jest, że czytanie literatury przyczynia się do rozwoju empatii i zdolności do postrzegania różnych perspektyw. One są niezbędne do sprawiedliwego podejmowania decyzji w życiu publicznym i politycznym. Nussbaum nadal twierdzi, że wyobraźnia literacka jest niezbędna do kształtowania „sprawiedliwych sędziów" w społeczeństwie demokratycznym. Powieści, jej zdaniem, pozwalają czytelnikom identyfikować się z postaciami i ich okolicznościami, rozwijając w ten sposób zdolność do rozumienia potrzeb, cierpień i życia innych ludzi. Taka empatia umożliwia podejmowanie decyzji opartych na moralności, które są podatne na ludzką wrażliwość i różnorodność.

Słowa kluczowe: Martha C. Nussbaum, wyobraźnia literacka, osąd etyczny, emocje

Introduction

It is often suggested that great novels offer valuable insights into the world. In a straightforward sense, they can indeed convey factual details about events like the world wars, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Winston Churchill etc. However, beyond these historical or factual lessons, novels are frequently regarded as sources of deeper

understanding regarding human nature and morality. Many authors have emphasized that the most significant learning derived from reading great novels is emotional. This occurs both through observing the emotional growth of characters and through our own emotional reactions to them. Martha C. Nussbaum contends that much of the psychological depth and moral significance in a novel is grasped through our emotional engagement with its narrative.

For millennia, people have believed in a profound and distinctive link between emotions and the arts. In his *Republic*, Plato famously criticized poetry for its morally harmful effects, arguing that it appeals more to emotions than to reason, which he considered the "highest" faculty of the soul. Aristotle later embraced the connection between emotions and the arts but interpreted it in a more favorable light. Since then, the idea of a unique relationship between the arts and emotions has been a recurring theme among many thinkers.

When we read thoughtfully and with attention, we become emotionally involved with the characters, experiencing a continuous flow of changing emotions as the story unfolds. Our emotions shift as we follow the evolving emotional journeys of the main characters. Different readers may have varying emotional responses, and even the same reader may have distinct experiences upon rereading the novel. Like the main characters, the reader undergoes a constant flow of shifting emotional reactions. At times, his/her emotional responses may align with those of the characters, while at other moments they may differ. If learning from a novel involves an emotional response, it is inevitable that different readers, with varying levels of knowledge, interests, and values, will interpret the same work in different ways. They will fill in the gaps within the text based on their own perspectives and inclinations. If the reader truly gains valuable insights into human behavior from the novel, it will not just be the simple realization that moral principles, without a sensitive understanding of others' emotions, are inadequate for guiding good conduct, or that emotional experience holds as much significance as abstract moral principles in determining the right path in life. Instead, the series of emotional events within the novel will gradually shift his/her perceptions and refocus his/her attention. Our role as moral agents is to live as virtuous characters in a meaningful story do - invested in outcomes and creatively addressing new challenges as they arise.

Martha C. Nussbaum argues that every style inherently communicates a message, including abstract theoretical styles. Such styles, like any other, convey assumptions about what is significant and what is not, as well as about which faculties of the reader are essential for understanding. Consequently, certain plausible perspectives on key aspects of human life may not fit within the confines of an abstract theoretical framework without creating an implicit contradiction. Her additional claim is that, for a notable range of such perspectives, only a specific kind of literary narrative can express them completely and appropriately, without contradiction (Nussbaum, 1992, 7). She claims that some novels are irreplaceably works of moral philosophy and articulates and defines the claim that a novel can be a paradigm of moral action (Nussbaum, 1992, 1995, 2001, 2019.).

1. Art, Emotion, and Moral Philosophy: Nussbaum's Integration of Literary Imagination in Ethical Thought

Storytelling and literary imagination are not in conflict with rational argument - rather, they can serve as vital components within a rational argument (Nussbaum, 1995, xiii). Certain works of literature delve into significant questions about humanity and the nature of human life, presenting a particular perspective on existence. This perspective is conveyed through the way the story is told: the choice of genre, formal structures, sentence construction, vocabulary, and the overall approach to engaging the reader's understanding of life. All these elements reflect a sense of what is meaningful and valuable, what deserves attention, and what does not. They also embody a vision of what learning and communication entail, as well as life's relationships and interconnectedness. A text never merely presents life: it always portrays life as something, shaped through its representation.

Style inherently conveys meaning and embodies a particular sense of significance. Literary form is inseparable from philosophical content: it is itself a dimension of that content and plays a vital role in the pursuit and articulation of truth. Martha Nussbaum's first claim is that, in any carefully crafted and richly imagined text, there exists an organic relationship between form and content. Certain ideas, emotions, and perspectives naturally find their expression through specific literary structures, stylistic choices, and linguistic patterns. Just as a plant takes its form from the interaction of seed and soil, so too does a novel grow from the author's conception, expressing their sense of what is meaningful. Form and content are intrinsically linked: finding the right words and structure involves discovering a precise and, in a sense, honorable harmony between thought and expression. When a work is skillfully written, a paraphrase in a significantly different form or style generally fails to capture the same meaning. The second claim is that some truths about human existence can only be fully and accurately conveyed through the language and forms characteristic of narrative art (Nussbaum, 1992, 4-5.).

Nussbaum approaches the topic of emotions from her background in classical studies[1], aligning more closely with Aristotle than with Plato. While Plato, despite his evident love for poetry and the literary style of his philosophical dialogues, famously argued that the arts cannot truly serve as a source of knowledge and instead appeal to the lower, emotional part of the soul, Aristotle took a more favorable stance. Writing in a methodical and scientific style, Aristotle acknowledged that the arts evoke emotions but argued that this emotional engagement can be a means of learning. Through the arousal of our emotions, he believed, literature provides valuable insights and understanding.

We look at form as an expression of a view of life. The literary imagination is a component of public rationality but not its entirety. Nussbaum believes that replacing rule-based moral reasoning with empathetic imagining would be highly problematic, and she

[1] She received her doctorate in classical philology in 1975 on Aristotle's *De Motu Animalium*.

does not advocate for such a substitution. On the contrary, Nussbaum supports the literary imagination because she sees it as a vital element of an ethical perspective that urges us to care about the well-being of others whose lives differ significantly from our own. Such an ethical stance necessarily incorporates rules and formal decision-making processes. At the same time, an ethics grounded in impartial respect for human dignity cannot effectively reach or inspire real individuals unless they are equipped to imaginatively enter the lives of distant others and to feel emotions connected to that engagement. These emotions, experienced by readers or spectators, have been recognized by numerous ethical theorists as crucial to sound moral judgment, even within frameworks that emphasize impartiality (perhaps most notably by Adam Smith). While these emotions have limitations and pose certain risks, and while their role in ethical reasoning must be carefully delimited, they also offer a compelling, albeit partial, vision of social justice and serve as strong motivators for just behavior (Nussbaum, 1995, xvi).

The notion that art exists solely for its own sake and that literature should be appreciated with a detached aesthetic attitude, devoid of practical concerns, was foreign to the Greek world, at least until the Hellenistic period. Art was regarded as inherently practical, with aesthetic interest seen as a form of practical engagement - an investment in the good life and in the shared understanding of a community. Responding to art in a particular way was viewed as a step toward achieving this deeper understanding (Nussbaum, 1985, 3-28.). From Socrates and Plato to the Hellenistic schools, there was a strong consensus that the purpose of philosophical inquiry and ethical discourse was to cultivate the pupil's soul, guiding him/them toward living a good life. If, like Socrates, one believes that a good person cannot be harmed and that virtue is the only thing of true importance, then one would not see stories of reversal as having profound ethical meaning. Such a person would not wish to write as if they did, nor would they portray as worthy heroes those who believe they do. If we consider perception as a crafted work of art, we must also acknowledge that artists are not free to create whatever they wish. Their responsibility is to faithfully and accurately depict reality. In this endeavor, they are greatly supported by general principles as well as by the habits and attachments they have internalized. Situations are all highly concrete, and they do not present themselves with duty labels on them. Without the abilities of perception, duty is blind and therefore powerless. Obtuseness is a moral failing: its opposite can be cultivated (Nussbaum, 1992, 156). In the war against moral obtuseness, the artist is our fellow fighter, frequently our guide (Nussbaum, 1992, 164).

1.1. Narrative Ethics: How Martha Nussbaum Connects Literature to Moral Philosophy

Martha Nussbaum admits in her work *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1992, 11) that her best friends as a child were novels. There we also read (23):

"The essays here represent simply a beginning of one small part of this larger inquiry, a beginning rooted in my love for certain novels and in my closely related concern with certain problems: with the role of love and other emotions in the good human life, with the relationship between emotion and ethical knowledge, with deliberation about particulars."

Certain works of art evoke only wonder and delight, without engaging our deeper, eudaimonistic emotions. This is clearly the case for some visual art, music, and even certain literary works that captivate primarily through formal sophistication without addressing fundamental human concerns such as time, death, love, and other eudaimonistic themes. In contrast, entire literary genres rely heavily on profound eudaimonistic connections with their audience for their effectiveness. These include tragedy, romance, melodrama, the realist novel[2], and certain forms of comedy.

A novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life (Nussbaum 1992, 162). This genre is a morally provocative form, conveying through its structure, style, and interaction with readers a normative view of life. It directs readers to focus on certain aspects and disregard others, encouraging them to engage in particular ways and adopt specific mental and emotional stances (Nussbaum, 1995, 2). It is a cultural construct that helps shape its readers as social beings. It uses the language of community, forging connections between readers, characters, and the author, thereby creating bonds of shared experience. The reader vicariously engages with a variety of lives, some privileged and others less so. In realist social novels, which are the focus here, these lives are intentionally depicted across different social classes, and the degree to which these diverse conditions permit human flourishing becomes an integral part of the reader's experience.

Nussbaum argues that the novelist's detailed and concrete descriptions offer more morally relevant insights into a situation. Firstly, the novel, in presenting a moral "record" and "projection," portrays its specific characters and events as examples of possible occurrences in a human life. Secondly, the reader's moral engagement involves not only a sympathetic participation in the lives of these concrete characters but also an effort to see the novel as a model for something that could happen in their own life. Thirdly, two individuals in the same situation, with identical contextual features and historical specifics, should, in many cases, act in similar ways. Fourthly, we must acknowledge that the novelist's

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[2] "When we read a novel such as *Hard Times*, reading not as literary theorists asking about theories of interpretation, but as human beings who are moved and delighted, we are judicious spectators free from personal bias and favor. At the same time, we are clearly not skeptics. We do not all react in exactly the same way to the characters and their situation. But the structure of the novel - its ways of presenting the world to us and its enticements to identify ourselves with certain characters rather than others - set us up, if we respond to them, in a posture of the heart and mind that is not one of skeptical indifference, that does not feel that anything at all that happens to these people is as good as every other thing" (Nussbaum, 1995, 83).

language is, as Nietzsche somewhat dismissively calls it, "herd[3] language". This means that even the most "alert winged creatures" are part of a public and shared discourse, common to all who engage with the language (Nussbaum, 1992, 166).

The author of a philosophical treatise, when the work is carefully constructed, conveys through their formal choices just as much as a novelist does, a perspective on the nature of life and what is of value. Nussbaum regards literary texts as creations whose representational and expressive elements stem from human intentions and ideas.

Incorporating novels into moral philosophy means connecting them with our most profound practical explorations - for ourselves and for others - the same explorations that originally gave rise to influential philosophical conceptions of ethics. It involves examining these conceptions in relation to one another and to our lived experience. More accurately, it is an acknowledgment that novels are already part of this search: an effort to highlight and articulate the connections they inherently possess for readers who cherish them and engage with them as a means of understanding life (Nussbaum, 1992, 24).

A novel inherently conveys specific evaluative commitments. These include an acknowledgment of the ethical importance of unforeseen events, the epistemological significance of emotions, and the diversity and incommensurability of what is truly important. Literary works are not impartial tools for examining every possible perspective; rather, embedded within the very fabric of a novel is a distinct understanding of what holds value.

In short, by agreeing to see events in the novel's world as the novel presents them, we as readers are already ethically breaking with some characters while agreeing and empathizing with some others.

Nussbaum's engagement with novels reflects her interest in the connection between a specific conception of life and the narrative structures these novels embody. She contends that a particular ethical perspective, which she identifies as the Aristotelian conception, necessitates the forms and structures found in these novels for its thorough and comprehensive exploration. If moral philosophy is understood as a pursuit of truth in all its manifestations - demanding a profound and empathetic examination of major ethical alternatives and their comparison with our lived experiences - then moral philosophy must incorporate such literary texts and the practice of attentive, reflective novel-reading to achieve its full potential (Nussbaum, 1992, 26-27.).

"A novel, like a bereavement, shows us the truth of our situation - though only briefly, in a way that is quickly eclipsed by the "oblivion" and the "gaiety" of daily routine" (Nussbaum, 2002, 254).

The novel, as a type of narrative, mediates the truth about the circumstances of the human situation. As a genre, the novel is dedicated, first of all, to the individual, observing

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[3] Nietzsche distinguishes between individual morality and the morality of the herd. Furthermore, between the morality of timidness and the morality as a self-discipline of a daring and powerful will. Today's morality is the morality of the herd (Fink, 2003, 113).

him as a qualitative and separate individual. The novel, as a type of work, is focused on the interdependence of people, and by depicting a network of intertwined relationships, Nussbaum insists on respecting the separate life of each individual and understanding the individual as a separate experiencing center (Nussbaum, 2005, 101).

1.2. The Literary Judge and the Common-Law Tradition: A Humanistic Approach to Judicial Neutrality

Martha C. Nussbaum emphasizes that effective judging requires technical legal reasoning, a deep understanding of the law, and adherence to precedent, which set the limits within which judicial imagination must operate. She contends that, when appropriately constrained, the type of imagination that was previously described, can significantly complement other aspects of judicial reasoning. Nussbaum argues that the combination of the literary (Aristotelian) approach with institutional constraints creates a nuanced ideal of judicial neutrality, which presents a compelling alternative to other prominent interpretations of this norm.

The literary dimensions of judging can be most effectively integrated into an understanding of judicial reasoning rooted in the common-law tradition, which already emphasizes the particular in an Aristotelian manner.

In her work *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1995, 82) Nussbaum talks about the literary judge and his three rivals. Nussbaum "contrast the literary judge[4] with three rivals: a judge who cultivates skeptical detachment, a judge who conceives of judicial reasoning on the model of formal reasoning in the sciences, and a judge who cultivates a lofty distance from particulars for reasons of judicial neutrality. I shall argue that the literary judge has good reasons for eschewing skeptical detachment and for preferring to quasi-scientific models an evaluative humanistic form of practical reasoning; these reasons are deeply rooted in the common-law tradition".

The literary dimensions of judicial reasoning are most naturally integrated within the framework of the common-law tradition, which inherently reflects an Aristotelian focus on the particular and the specific.

We can choose to resist the novel's invitation to engage with it on the terms it proposes (though it raises the question of why we would continue reading in such a case). However, if we immerse ourselves in the story, responding to its prompts and becoming emotionally invested in its characters, we inevitably make judgments - about the industrial revolution, utilitarianism, divorce laws, and the education of children, etc. This process reflects

[4] It must be borne in mind that Nussbaum considers the specifically literary aspects of her "literary judge" to be just one aspect of the thinking of a real-life judge. The real-life judge must also have other abilities and knowledge and is constrained in many ways by his/her institutional role and by the demands of statute and precedent, which already establish what he/she may and may not consider salient.

a confidence that some arguments are more compelling than others and that certain ways of treating human beings are inherently superior, justified through reasoned evaluation. In doing so, the novel shapes us into a particular kind of judge, says Nussbaum.

"As judges we may dispute with one another about what is right and proper; but insofar as the character(s) matter to us, and we are active on their behalf, we do not feel that the dispute is about nothing at all that we are merely playing around. ...our experience as readers leads us to think that such standards would be unnecessary for our search, for as concerned readers we search for a human good that we are trying to bring about in and for the human community, and it is not evident why norms external to the experience of human striving should be required for such a project. Our search is guided, as well, by the judgments and responses of our fellow readers, who themselves are seeking such a comprehensive fit. What we are after is not just a view of moral education that makes sense of our own personal experience, but one that we can defend to others and support along with others with whom we wish to live in community. This, too, anchors our reading and makes it fundamentally different from the free play of interpretive faculties" (Nussbaum, 1995, 83-84.).

2. From Tragedy to Empathy: Nussbaum's Theory of Emotions in Literary Works

Martha Nussbaum argues that certain moral truths are best expressed in the form of a story. A good story makes people curious, tense and interested in what is going to happen. The action can make you laugh or make you sad and cry. Narration can stimulate a person to feel fear and anger, horror and disgust, love and compassion, in fact the entire repertoire of emotions that are present in human culture. Emotions, therefore, work by alerting us to important aspects of the story, namely the plot, characters, environment, perspective (Robinson, 2005, 107).

Nussbaum claims that emotions have a narrative structure. That is why art is extremely important to her. Art, namely, helps a person to understand himself/herself, to understand his/her own and other people's emotions. Narrative works of art thus directly affect the emotional life of others, readers, listeners, art lovers. Moreover, Nussbaum explains that reflection [meditation] on poetic images has always been for her one way of approaching the human meaning of a philosophical position. The most important learning that people achieve by reading great novels is emotional: they learn by observing the emotional development of characters and through affective experience, reactions to everything that happens. In general, literary works are important for the normative part of the conception of Martha Nussbaum's theory of emotions. They show us possible patterns of action, "what could happen" in human life. When we understand the patterns highlighted in the work, we also understand our own possibilities (Nussbaum, 2001, 264).

As for the requirements of the form of literary and musical works of art, they should be rich in expressed emotional content. Nussbaum takes an ancient tragedy as an example. In it, namely, people who are presented are good, but who suffer, suffer through no fault of their own. This is exactly part of the content of the emotion of pity or compassion. The painful experiences that people encounter in these works can offer certain knowledge about individuals and groups of people, but also about the world that surrounds us. When a person realizes that he/she is limited and fragile, a finite being, this realization causes him/her pain. On the other hand, knowledge itself is a valuable thing that gives a certain perspective, directs the gaze to what is valuable. Ancient tragedy has another important contribution. It indicates, namely, how terrible evils and great suffering can befall certain persons, characters on the scene, but they do not completely destroy them. In fact, they mediate the conclusion that a person can survive anything when he/she is put in a situation where he/she may not have a choice, that he/she simply cannot give up, and that he himself/she herself is not aware of what he/she can and must bear.

If the audience or the viewer accepts the work being performed, the reactive emotions will be sympathetic: they will therefore feel sympathetic anger because of the circumstances of an event, they will sympathize and be empathetic because of the grief or fear of the characters. In all of this, the perspective of the viewer (listener, reader) has similar possibilities - he/she can also find himself/herself in similar, unfavorable circumstances: evil can happen to him/her without any responsibility or guilt.

Therefore, in her works, Nussbaum brings certain levels and types of emotions that are incorporated into the literary structure of the work of art itself (Nussbaum, 2019, 294):

1. Emotions towards characters: (a) sharing the emotion through identification and (b) reacting to the character's emotions.
2. Emotions towards the "implicit author"[5], the worldview embodied in the text as a whole: (a) sharing that worldview and its emotions through empathy and (b) reacting to it, either sympathetically or critically.
3. Emotions according to one's own capabilities. These emotions are multifaceted, and function on multiple levels of specificity and generality.
4. Emotions of elation and delight because, as humans, we have learned something important about life and about ourselves.

[5] Two figures can be distinguished in a literary work: the implicit author and the real author. An implicit author is a voice, attitude or worldview that pervades the work. The real author is a person with his own daily life, successes, failures and other things that have no role in the work.

Conclusion

In a world where many individuals' daily lives are shaped by various forms of exclusion and oppression, is there any value in telling stories? Our understanding is shaped through the emotional experiences elicited by a novel or a drama. What we gain is not theoretical knowledge, but practical insight: engaging with literature enhances our ability to perceive and interpret human motivations, vulnerabilities, and accomplishments. Martha Nussbaum, in her work on literature, has examined the ethical dimensions of this idea.

Learning about life through fiction can thus be understood as the formation of beliefs. When we are emotionally immersed in a novel, we often remain uncertain until the conclusion about what we truly think of the characters and their actions. It is typically only after finishing the novel that we can reflect on its events, consider their significance, and formulate a coherent interpretation or belief about the story. During the reading process, we are exposed to a succession of impressions and perspectives on the characters - often conflicting and shifting. Only when the narrative is complete do we synthesize these views into a more stable understanding.

Nussbaum believes that thinking about narrative literature does have the potential to make a contribution to the law in particular, to public reasoning generally (Nussbaum, 1995, xv).

The meaning of a great novel is inseparable from the reader's experience of engaging with it. A well-crafted novel prompts us to engage in cognitive reflection on the entire emotional process, encompassing affective evaluations, physiological reactions, behavioral impulses, perspectives, and areas of focus. The most important truths about human psychology cannot be communicated or grasped by intellectual activity alone: powerful emotions have an irreducibly important cognitive role to play (Nussbaum, 1992, 7). Through novels, we do indeed learn about life, and this learning is inherently emotional.

In this article, I aimed to highlight the individual differences in interpretation that arise from varied emotional responses to a text. Different areas of focus, as well as distinct attitudes, interests, desires, and goals, will inevitably lead to interpretations that, at the very least, differ in what aspects they emphasize. If our goals, desires, and interests are too disconnected from those of the characters, we may find it difficult to emotionally engage with the story, thus preventing us from learning emotionally from it. However, if the reader does emotionally connect with a novel like *Hard Times*[6], what they take away from it is partly shaped by their own emotional experiences with the text, including, crucially, their emotional response to the implied author.

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[6] *Hard Times: For These Times* (commonly known as *Hard Times*) is the tenth novel by English author Charles Dickens, first published in 1854. The book surveys English society and satirises the social and economic conditions of the era.

A reader's engagement with a text is shaped by the author's guidance, but the author cannot predict or control every response a reader might have. When readers are emotionally immersed in a novel, their reactions will continuously evolve and differ from one person to another. These variations depend not only on their familiarity with the author and the historical context but also on their individual interests, desires, and values. While the author seeks to direct us through the narrative, his/her influence is limited. Readers must also approach the novel with emotional openness, ready to embrace the experiences it offers.

Authors aiming to guide their readers present characters and events from specific perspectives, intending to evoke emotional reactions in predictable ways. However, cultural differences can pose challenges to understanding, and readers must adopt certain attitudes to engage emotionally with a story in the first place.

In conclusion, a novel is a moral achievement in itself, and a life well lived is a work of literary art.

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