Fiction and the Shivering Reader

An Existential Analysis of the Realist Novel and the Reader’s Search for Answers to Questions of the Meaning of Life.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine two “large” and somewhat diffuse questions: the first is the question of why the novel reader reads; the second, the question of what the meaning of life is. The former is not often asked by contemporary literary theorists, although it does still have a “quiet” presence amongst critical and theoretical works. The latter question, despite its somewhat anachronistic and “unfashionable” nature, remains a cause of anxiety in the secularised post/modern world, where God is often defined as “dead” and the answers to the question of meaning are no longer given. It will be argued that the answers to both questions are very much related: the novel reader is what Walter Benjamin somewhat offhandedly calls a “shivering reader”—an existentially anxious reader—and his or her motive for reading is to better understand the meaning of life. The shivering reader searches for answers to the question of meaning by looking to the novel’s fictional characters from which the reader derives the warmth of wisdom and insight into the creation and revelation of meaning. These insights are derived from the characters either explicitly—from their direct, authoritative, dying revelations—or implicitly—from the reader’s evaluation of the characters’ choices of meaningful projects and their actions. These insights enable the reader to better inform his or her own meaningful choices. Moreover, as Benjamin claims, the reader looks primarily to fiction because of the modern world’s privatisation of death—a world in which death and the dying’s revelations are no longer omnipresent. This thesis will argue that Benjamin’s claims regarding the shivering reader are still very relevant for the contemporary reader, and have continued scholarly relevance in contemporary literary criticism. However, despite these claims of contemporary relevance, it will also be argued that the novel form does have its limitations, such that not all novels, particularly postmodern novels, can be regarded as “valuable” for the shivering reader: it is the possibilities of the realist novel which are of most value because realist fiction
best reflects how the individual ordinarily understands his or her own life and its meaning—an understanding which is often purposefully disrupted by the postmodern novel. Although the reader can look to real people and non-fictional representations of real people (such as auto/biography), the realist novel’s representations of fictional characters is more valuable to the shivering reader, primarily because of the manner in which these characters are represented and because of the freedom the novelist has in his or her representation of their characters. Finally, this thesis examines the rhetoric of the novel and discusses the ways in which the novelist influences and shapes the reader’s evaluation of a character’s life by his or her choice to either exclude or include certain events from the character’s story—choices which promote the meaningfulness of some events whilst deflects others.
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