

A Book Review Essay on
Landy, J. (2012). *How to Do Things with Fictions*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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Abstract

In choosing literature for their classes, English teachers look for works that not only engage students but that also fulfill learning outcomes stipulated in curricula documents. Finding works that do both is often difficult, and this is especially true with diverse student bodies. This essay seeks to review Landy's (2012) "How to do things with fictions" in relation to how it may help teachers choose works that both engage students and help achieve particular student learning outcomes. In this book review essay, I examine Landy's central claims about what fiction can do and relate it to my own moral (Austin, 1962) practice of teaching, which aspires to be culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Introduction

I can still pull out the reader provided in an undergraduate class on literary criticism and turn to an earmarked page within an excerpt titled *How to Do Things with Words*. On this earmarked page, your attention would be drawn to one particular line underlined, circled in red, and with a few stars in the margin next to it. No notes offer an explanation as to why that one line is highlighted, but I can tell you what I remember about it. Although I knew it was necessary to learn critical theory in order to satisfy degree requirements, I felt out of my element in a class meant exclusively for upper-year English majors who had gone beyond lower year survey courses that covered the Western canon. On the syllabus were the likes of Shklovsky, de Saussure, and Derrida, and all the philosophical complexities they bring to literary criticism. It was not easy reading. I had almost given up hope of ever *getting* what it is they were saying and the esteem I once held for the ineffable power of a great poem to simply, miraculously evoke emotions was getting lost in the abstract labyrinth of defamiliarization, signs, signifiers, and différance. I had hoped that J.L. Austin (1962) would prove easier to read, that making meaning from his words would come more readily; but as I read and reread, only that one highlighted line loomed large. That line is this: "Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*" (p. 10).

It would, perhaps, be melodramatic to state here that that one line salvaged my academic investment in critical literary pursuits or even that it galvanized the way I teach literature to my own students. Nonetheless, I have returned to it often enough in my academic work, as I seek to understand what the relationship between words and actions entails. In the development of his speech-act theory, Austin (1962) describes utterances that have performative functions, those phrases or words that perform actions like taking someone in marriage by solemnly swearing to take him or her as your lawfully wedded. Words in such instances are not used to depict or express a state of being; rather the words themselves *do* something, they act to make a state of being *be*. That is not to say that the words might be fallacious or that perhaps, s/he who promises 'to have and to hold in sickness and in health' might only be after the alimony money. Maybe the honour associated with those who consider that giving their word to someone means it is as good as done is the trait of a bygone era (romanticized as such an era may be by literature students who live for the emotionality of a great poem!).

While I might admit to sentimental appreciation for classic poetry I have, nonetheless, attempted in the years since my days of undergraduate classes on literary criticism, to honour the premise that words are powerful, that they do *move* states of being, and that the promise between us (as speakers of words) and others (as receivers of our words) constitutes a bond. It is this endeavour with which I turn to the text under review: Joshua Landy's *How to Do Things with Fictions* (2012). Inspired by that one line from Austin (as Landy clearly is by the entire work), I ask to what extent the text upholds the premise of words as bonds and how much it aligns itself with the quest for morality. Ultimately, I seek to answer whether the imperatives it touts may be useful for practice in a language and literature classroom comprised of a culturally, racially, and socioeconomically diverse body of students. If students are not typically the type of reader for whom works on a more *traditional* literary canon are addressed, what culturally relevant practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995) might work better in my classroom and sustain the moral imperative Austin articulates?

The (Im)possibility of Reading Fiction for Moral Gains

Morality is subjective, no doubt. If morality can be most simply understood as a behavioural system that pits right against wrong, then the extensive range of difficulties posed by the question of what defines a moral lesson comprises a host of other questions, the most laden with possibilities, of course, is the one which may be asked: whose standards of morality are *the* standard? Practically speaking, what is moral to me and what I hope to impart to my students may not be true and moral to another teacher and what he or she hopes to impart on his or her students. Embedded in notions of moral education are varying academic and organizational histories and contexts. To generalize, we might agree that moral education entails the endeavour to engender citizens who pursue the good and honourable life as defined by the culture in which they live. The query into what exactly defines an exemplary moral education is an ongoing dialogue—one in which there is a host of participants and a plethora of concerned parties. It is also a query where the dynamics are ever-shifting, fluctuating to keep up with a world that is constantly changing. If, for example, morality in the past was measured by a person's adherences to the social constitutions and mores of his or her culture, it might be fair to say that in the postmodern era moral character is a psychological state that indicates an individual's values and virtuous life choices (Lipovetsky, Charles, & Brown, 2005). But what makes for a virtuous and moral life? What role do literary fictions play in the process? If fiction finds its etymological roots of meaning to be, "that which . . . is imaginatively invented; [of] feigning, counterfeiting; deceit, dissimulation, pretence" (OED, 2015), how might the enterprise for accuracy or truth in its moral milieu be negotiated despite the incongruity with which the very form and function of literary fictions are situated?

For Landy (2012), the pursuit of a good life is about training ourselves to read literary works. These works should not be read so that they can improve moral behaviours; rather, they should be read in order to enrich our capacities for understanding the how they operate on our intellects. Landy touts the benefits of what he calls "formative fictions" (p. 9) or those works that are not "quick fixes" (p. 14) to our deficiencies (whether of the scholarly or spiritual sort). He stresses that formative fictions have the ability to train the mind in key competencies like rational thinking, maintaining necessary illusions, tranquility of mind, and religious faith. Our task, he states, when we read such works is not to find meaning or seek out an automatic bettering of the self through the moral instruction they may provide; but rather, it is to recognize how such works sustain and hone our intellectual acumens. In the Aristotelian vein, Landy contends that intellectuals are what they repeatedly do and that excellence in reading is a matter of continuous habit. He states he seeks to reclaim fiction from the "meaning mongers" (p. 8) who would focus on what a text *says* as opposed to what it *does*. From the onset, Landy maintains that the reading of literature that has been seen as having the capabilities to change their readers for the moral better cannot be described as doing so through an affective process but as the way in which readers come to know what they *already* believe. He argues that we do not claim that our favourite works are life-changing because they go against what we already believe, but because they align with our own moral dictates. Landy writes that in lieu of informing readers of their meaning, formative fictions "present themselves as spiritual exercises (whether sacred or profane), spaces for prolonged and active encounters that serve, over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are" (p. 10). As such, Landy pits his means of reading against any movement towards reading literature for any perceived moral benefits.

Moral 'Teachings' vs Formative Thinking: Examining the Text's Contents

Landy begins his argument through a succinct breakdown of theories of fiction, organized by how they act on their readers. Under three broad categories, he outlines thirteen ways that literary philosophers and theorists have told readers what fictions are supposed to mean to them. The first category is the *exemplary* school of thought, which generally invites readers “to consider characters as models for emulation or avoidance” (p. 4). Next is the *affective*, which considers the work fiction does on reader emotions and which proponents say “strengthens our capacity for empathy and hence our propensity to do good” (p. 5). Third is the *cognitive*, which holds that fiction grants readers “access to knowledge, and that increased knowledge is indeed the very point of our engagement with it” (p. 6). To these three broad category uses of fiction, Landy intervenes by adding a fourth: the *formative*—or the thought that, he argues, should be the one to cancel out all the others. The book is divided into three parts. In Part One, *Clearing the Ground*, Landy speaks against the contention that fictions work to improve readers’ moral compasses, arguing that it helps us insofar as it agrees with what we already believe to be moral. In Part Two, *Enchantment and Re-Enchantment*, Landy begins the discussion on what he sees as the most useful aspect of fictions, namely the way in which they stretch our minds to think in parables. In Part Three, *Logic and Anti-Logic*, Landy looks to Greek philosophy and the famous dialogues between Plato and his character Socrates, the sophisticated logician who falls into fallacies much too easily. The central argument in this final portion of the book is about the crucial need for a method to live well. While Plato might have suggested that the key to the well-lived life is acquiring knowledge, Landy counters that the dialogues demonstrate the necessity of learning to think for ourselves—and how to do so.

Traditionally, students in literature classes are asked to critically examine texts as if they were seeking out messages in them, but the practice, he states, is detrimental to the process. This is because to do so is to reduce them to modes of delivery which devalues the true benefits to our minds that they offer. *The meaning mongers* Landy speaks of morph into real critics, or those who would have us believe that literature provides morals and teaches us how to act in the world and treat others. He criticizes, for instance, Wayne Booth and Marta Nussbaum, especially for the latter’s benevolent egalitarianism, despite “only shaky empirical evidence at hand to suggest that well-intentioned art actually makes a difference in how people act” (p. 33). Landy almost mocks her view that “the mere fact of recognizing subtleties in the interpersonal world constitutes ‘moral conduct’ all on its own [so that] we can score virtue points simply by (correctly) reading a Henry James novel, even if we return the next day to running the plantation” (p. 33).

It perturbed me to read Landy’s reduction of the extensive body of Booth’s (1988) work on the need for ethics to reposition itself vis-à-vis literary periods and historical moments to a mere mention. Furthermore, that he would so flippantly attack Nussbaum is, I think, suspect and symptomatic of a more generally demeaning voice that runs throughout the text and that made me want to defend Nussbaum’s position on the power of literature to engender moral affect. Indeed, Nussbaum’s close reading of *The Golden Bowl* argues that what the novel demands is not a guileless process in which the reader understands the complexities of a bad situation for the characters involved; rather, it is work that implores readers to respond to the text’s *realities* with imagination and feeling (Nussbaum, 1998).

In reading Landy, this is where I think he might have, even begrudgingly, come to Nussbaum’s side, because his argument also stresses the more complex work that is required from the mind as it reads formative fictions. Furthermore, it is clear that his own readings are highly imaginative and express a passion (a form of *feeling* to follow Nussbaum) for both the material he examines and his interpretation of it. Landy’s reading of Jesus and the parable of the Syrophenician woman is particularly thought-provoking and daring in its intentions. Landy states that he speaks to three very diverse communities, amongst whom are “believing Christians ...to offer a new way of understanding their Christianity” (p. 52). Landy goes on to deconstruct the parable and argue that Jesus was a master of metaphor who worked to train his followers to appreciate and imagine their own metaphoric and figurative language—indeed that their very salvation depends on it. I am not sure that I belong to any of Landy’s 3 diverse communities (neither might all my students, for that matter), but I can certainly appreciate his contention that the ability to fathom the poetic and to train our minds to continually do so may very well be the marker of salvation. However, is this enough to warrant using the text to guide my teaching practices?

Why Using How to Do Things with Fictions with a Diverse Body of Students is Problematic

Insofar as I want to value Nussbaum's remarks and her reading of James, the fact remains that the ownership of an ethical imperative implicit in the text seems to inherently belong to a privileged white Christian ontology. The novel's very title comes from Ecclesiastes and is set in a world of material wealth. I am forced then to ponder on whether or not the reading she engages in would also engage a diverse student body. Furthermore, that *The Golden Bowl* also addresses morality from the viewpoint of privilege, and does not tell a story that would speak to the socio-economic or cultural contexts of students, is a point with which I am grappling. I am not saying Nussbaum or James or Landy cannot articulate their positions in terms outside of privilege; rather, I contend that the way in which they engage fictions to speak to moral dilemmas and how it works to train our minds is divorced from the everyday realities and lived experiences of those in my classroom. For his part, Landy contends that the way forward when it comes to reading fictions, which he categorizes as formative, is to "reinvigorate the pragmatic outlook in its broadly ethical, rather than narrowly moral, dimension" (p. 10). That his choice of case study readings effortlessly align with those fitting a cultural capital theoretical paradigm (Bourdieu, 1984) is clear; as are Landy's own readings of them which fail to confront the ethical responsibility to speak to issues of otherness despite knowing full well that they exist. So, for instance, he mentions Richard Rorty in his short discussion, and dismissal, of the ethical turn, and the argument that Rorty makes on the ability of literature to "foster empathy with an ever-widening circle of human types, gradually bringing more and more of 'them' under the designation of 'us' (Landy, 2012, p. 29). Rorty's contention that "detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation . . . [are] the modern intellectual's principal contributions to modern progress" (Rorty, 1989) is further, and briefly, disputed in Landy's endnotes (p. 161).

Conclusion

Landy does not venture beyond this superficial statement that philosophers—not just literary critics—have grappled with the idea of how literature can engender humanistic and moral sentiment. He chooses to remain firm in his intellectually superior, and privileged, readings. So while a teacher possessing training in the literary arts may find Landy's debunking of Platonic dialogue to be brilliantly shrewd and his positioning of the Beckettian Spiral to be worthy of "aesthetic contemplation" (Landy, 2012, p. 141), I question what responsibility s/he has to students who may not care much about fictions that do not *do* anything for them. And by doing things, I do not mean giving them a moral message, as Landy defines it by stating in his opening paragraph that "it is *our* fault, the fault of those whose job it is to tell people how to read. For some reason, we have systematically—albeit unwittingly—engaged on a long-term campaign of misinformation, relentlessly persuading would be readers that fictions are designed to give them useful advice" (p. 3). Rather, I mean that the fictions my diverse body of students are encouraged to read need to *do the thing* necessary to engage their capacities for the mind work that Landy stresses is part and parcel of the formative fiction package he would have us embrace; this, as opposed to alienating them by not speaking to their positioning outside of the works he posits to be formative. Compromised then would be my pedagogical practice of teaching literature that I feel speaks to the spirit of Austin's statement. If our words are bonds, should I not present my students with texts that engage their lived experiences, those that speak to their diversity and uniqueness (see Bickmore, 2012)? I think Landy and most literature teachers would agree with the premise that great fictions challenge readers and ask them to consider what is outside their lived experiences, certainly; but in thinking about the work that ethical criticism seeks to actively do, we must consider our definition of "great literature" and whose moral truth it seeks to legitimize. Undoubtedly, Landy's text gives us much to reflect upon. English teachers would be well advised to reflect upon the arguments he presents for including formative fictions in their curricula. However, I argue that when choosing works for our classrooms, we need not be confined to the sort of highbrow list he seems to favour.

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