

Implicit Stereotype Reinforcement in Works of Fiction

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Regarding moral evaluations of fiction, there is a certain ambiguity I wish to shed some light on. Specifically, I intend to show that authors (and screenwriters, playwrights, etc...) are sometimes guilty of *implicit stereotyping*; and that whether or not they do this intentionally, society is worse-off for it. The impact of negativity reaches far and wide, helping to fuel the biases that result in discrimination, intimidation, assault, and even murder. But this is not a case where a clear demarcation exists between right and wrong; it is both subtle and subjective. There must be, however, some method by which we may ascertain the ethical stature of these works. Such an accounting is necessitated by mankind's ambition to become evermore civilized; we can no longer tolerate such abuses in the name of entertainment.

I shall begin by characterizing the general case of the problem at hand. Suppose that there is a fictional work which contains a character who is a member of group x (e.g. African-Americans). Such a group could be any group for which negative stereotypes exist. Now, suppose that this character, who is a member of group x , also has a trait y , such that y is a negative stereotypical trait of group x (e.g. laziness). Thus, this work contains an African-American who is lazy. We would want to say that there is something wrong with such a portrayal, but several ambiguities impede such a conviction. If a fictional work *explicitly* depicts such a character as being lazy as a *direct result of being* an African-American, then it is obviously morally implicated. However, where this is not explicit, it is not clear that we can make such a judgment. In fact, we may not even be consciously aware of the situation.

Implicit stereotyping in works of fiction, as I define it, is the purposeful portrayal of a member of group x as having trait y without explicitly stating that the possession of trait y is a

direct result of being a member of group x . The purpose of such portrayals is the enhancement of the "entertainment" value of the fictional work. The foremost difficulty in leveling a charge of implicit stereotyping against an author is that the attribution of trait y to the member of group x may be coincidental. For example, a work may portray a character who is too lazy to work, and thus subsists on the welfare system. Coincidentally, this character happens to be an African-American. Nowhere in the work is it stated that the character is lazy as a result of *being* an African-American, and after all, *someone* had to play the part. The door is left open to assume innocence on the author's part, perhaps even laying the guilt of stereotyping on the individual members of the audience. Thus, another problem is where to lay the blame: the author, or the audience who interprets the work in a stereotypical manner?

I shall first attempt to tackle the question of whether or not, in the absence of an explicit statement, we can claim stereotyping in a fictional work. Eva Dadlez has touched briefly on this problem:

... it does not seem possible to generalize over an entire group simply by selecting one of its members for inclusion in a work. ... I think there is a good deal to be said for the position that a preponderance of such characterizations and a dearth of any alternative depictions can convict filmmakers or writers, jointly rather than individually, of a repugnant form of stereotyping. But that is a conviction of the industry rather than the individuals and cannot, by itself, imply anything about the inherent generalizability of single fictional descriptions. Whether our sharing in the fictional condemnation of a character involves us in the condemnation of a larger group is a subject for a different article.¹

But consider what Hume said regarding the audiences' interpretation of fictional performances:

"We may observe, that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation ... is not conformable to that which is required by the performance."² An instance of stereotyping in a fictional work would not have its "due effect" on an audience who did not have knowledge of that stereotype. Furthermore, in cases where the author and audience share some common

cultural thread, we can assume that the author also knows of this same stereotype. The conclusion is that a stereotypical portrayal does *not* need to be explicitly stated. The author knows about it, the audience knows about it, and the work serves as a communication of it between the two.

It may help at this point to provide an example of a quite subtle case of implicit stereotyping, so that we may understand just how inconspicuous it can be. My mother came to visit recently from California. I had read the first two paragraphs of this paper to her during a commercial break in her favorite soap opera, *All My Children*.³ Coincidentally, not more than five minutes later, a perfect example of implicit stereotyping appeared on the show. One of the characters was in prison, and her daughter had come to visit. Her daughter expressed a willingness to change places with her. The mother replied something to the effect that *that would deprive her of the opportunity to learn a second language*. Had I not read those first two paragraphs to my mother, she would not have been consciously aware of such a portrayal, but subconsciously she would have. Such an implicit statement calls up a whole host of semantic relations in the mind. When the mind evaluates the meaning of such ambiguous statements, these stereotypes are called up automatically, whether or not the audience is consciously aware of it. If being in prison affords one the opportunity to learn a second language, what language could that be? The answer is obviously Spanish, but the show did not make any mention of Spanish nor Hispanics. What does such an innuendo say about the Hispanic community as a whole? It is obvious that the statement was intended by the author to convey such generalizations, but the statement also relies upon the audience to realize the implications of what was said; the meaning would be lost on an audience who knew nothing of the demographics of American prisons.⁴ This

example raises yet another question: what about cases where the stereotype has some basis in reality?

It is a sad fact that Hispanics and African-Americans make up disproportionately large percentages of the prison population in America. I think that the two biggest causes are socio-economic factors and biases in law enforcement and the judicial system. Neither the color of a person's skin, nor the language that they speak are factors.⁵ The problem with stereotyping is that we are not generalizing over groups defined by socio-economic factors; stereotyping is done on the basis of outward appearance or behavior. Perhaps not enough has been said to emphasize this point, but I shall move on. The point I want to make here is that malicious stereotyping is not an appropriate source of entertainment. Of course, if the purpose of having a character make such a statement were to portray that character as morally corrupt, then the portrayal would be fully justified. However, if the statement is made purely to elicit a stereotypical semantic reaction from the audience, then the author's motives become suspect.

In recent times, cases of implicit stereotyping of many groups has decreased due to public pressure and the formation of various civil rights organizations. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) would surely speak up against the blatant stereotyping of African-Americans in works of fiction. Likewise, there is the National Organization for Women (NOW), the Jewish Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the National Council of La Raza (NCLA), and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). What are authors to do under such intense scrutiny? The same thing they have always done: exploit a group that is underrepresented. Before the NAACP, African-Americans were the butt of many jokes and were not always kindly portrayed in fiction. The same goes for every other group mentioned above; but taxonomies of human beings needn't be specifically based on ethnicity or language spoken.

In fact, just about any identifiable characteristic will pick out a group of people. As such, individual organizations formed to protect the interest of individual groups will never solve all the problems; there will always be some group left out. It seems that the current source of morally bankrupt humor in the entertainment industry is persons of ambiguous gender.

It will be helpful at this point to elucidate the circumstances under which a fictional work may be labeled immoral; for despite an author's best intentions, their works are sometimes subject to misinterpretation. Obviously, if a work brings about negative consequences due to misinterpretation by certain members of its audience, the work *itself* is not immoral. The analysis of a work's consequences is what Dadlez calls "the consequentialist stance". According to Dadlez, "Calling the work itself immoral involves looking at what the work endorses and how the endorsement is supported." In regard to *The Turner Diaries* she says, "It is immoral because it makes us immoral when we respond to the narrative as we are intended to respond".⁶ This is easily identified when the work contains explicitly immoral statements or characterizations, as in *The Turner Diaries*, but not when such characterizations are implicit. So here we must make a distinction between works that are open to misinterpretation, as opposed to works that contain purposeful implicit stereotyping. The greatest difficulty is that making such a distinction involves ascertaining the author's intentions, when such intentions are not made explicit. What is needed is the ability to recognize implicit stereotyping and expose it for what it is: immoral.

Fiction is subjective by nature, and relies in no small part on the knowledge and beliefs of the audience. Dadlez states that, "Such beliefs are engaged when we take part in this kind of imaginative activity. They may be reinforced by what we imagine. They may be undermined by the activity, as we are asked to imagine exceptions or counterexamples".⁷ But notice that, as in the example of "learning a second language while in prison" above, these beliefs need not be

explicitly included in the work. When confronted with ambiguous language or characterizations, our minds search for beliefs that will make sense of them. Indeed, in the absence of explicit statements to the contrary, we can assume that the author intended that we interpret them that way. There is simply no other way to explain such ambiguous statements; they have no meaning outside of the stereotypes they were meant to call up in our minds. In this way we can determine that the work itself is immoral, and the author is fully implicated. Works that do contain statements contrary to the stereotype are exonerated; however, we should examine the propensity for misinterpretation of the work to determine whether there may be some grounds for consequentialist criticism. For example, in the movie *Monster's Ball*, a character makes an extremely vulgar and racist statement to Leticia Musgrove (played by Halle Berry).⁸ I don't care to repeat that statement here; what is important is that the film makes it very, very clear that the character making the statement is behaving in a highly unethical manner. In this situation, to portray a character as being morally bankrupt, such statements are fully justified. For although racists may enjoy such statements taken out of context, they wouldn't enjoy this movie as its message speaks loudly and clearly *against* racism. It is important, however, to treat such situations with delicacy, in order to avoid misconstruals by certain audience members. I say this because, given current public sentiments, the author knows full well the bigoted beliefs held by certain members of the audience. To not exercise caution is to show complete disregard for those who would be harmed by these sentiments. To further clarify this situation, I will now provide three examples of works that include the industry's current target (i.e. ambiguously gendered people), and examine the moral implications in each case.

The movie *Dude, Where's My Car?* follows the misadventures of two young men who are unable to remember the events of the preceding day, including the location of their car.

Following various clues, they find their way to a strip club they had visited the day before. While sitting at the bar, they are approached by an attractive young stripper named Wanda (played by Jennifer Garner). Speaking to Jesse (Ashton Kutcher), she says, "Remember last night when I gave you that super-special slippery wet lap dance?"

"Of course, how can I forget?" Jesse replies. "You want to do it again? This time, it's on me," asks Wanda. Now, I am not quite certain what a "super-special slippery wet lap dance" is, but it obviously involves some sort of sexual contact. After giving him a passionate kiss, Wanda leads Jesse to a private room and sits him down in a chair. Jesse's look of eager anticipation soon disappears, however, as he discovers that the beautiful young woman is a pre-op transsexual. Jesse appears a bit confused as she explains that she is a "gender-challenged male,"⁹ so she lifts up her skirt to reveal her male genitalia. At that point, Jesse's expression turns to one of shock and disgust, expressing horror at the thought of having been intimate with her.¹⁰ It is obvious that the male members of the audience have been set-up by the film to share in this sentiment, having previously found the woman to be attractive and sexually enticing.

One may object at this point that most men would react in exactly the same way in this situation, and that assessment is probably correct. In reality, however, such situations are extremely rare, and we may question the purpose behind its inclusion in the movie. It seems that the purpose is to convey a sense of disgust for this character, since she is depicted as an adversary of Jesse and Chester (Seann William Scott). The method used to elicit such feelings plays on a particularly fragile aspect of the American males' sexuality: homophobia (or, specifically, *trans*phobia). Calling up such feelings of disgust for the transsexual, for the pure fact of *being* a transsexual, is just plain wrong. To evoke such feelings toward the stripper for being transsexual is to evoke such feelings toward transsexuals in general. This is clearly a case

of implicit stereotype reinforcement, calling up such sentiments and reinforcing them. This is by no means harmless, as transsexuals have been, and continue to be, a group subject to vicious attacks and even murder simply for *being* transsexual.¹¹ If such a characterization of transsexuals constitutes an intrinsic part of the movie, then this is a movie that should not have been made.

A nice contrast exists with yet another comedic film, *50 First Dates*. There are two characters in this movie relevant to this discussion. The first is a woman ("Alexa," played by Lusia Strus) of ambiguous appearance. It is intended to be clear to the audience that this character is female, yet it is not so clear to the film's protagonist, Henry Roth (Adam Sandler). In one scene Alexa offers herself to Henry, only to be kindly informed that he (Henry) isn't interested in *men*. In yet another scene, after realizing that he cannot return to his philandering ways, Henry tells a woman, who is eagerly looking for a sexual encounter, to consider *him* (i.e. Alexa). It is apparent that Henry is confused about Alexa's gender. These examples at first seem troubling, but upon further consideration are exonerated. Firstly, the humor in these situations targets Henry for being somewhat confused, *not* Alexa for having an ambiguous appearance. Secondly, Henry has a certain amount of respect for Alexa, even asking her for advice at one point. Simply put, Henry bears no ill will toward Alexa (other than for her having eaten his roast beef sandwich).

The second character I will discuss makes only a brief, yet profound, appearance. Jonathan (Johnathan Loughran) is a post-operative female-to-male transsexual. In one scene Lucy (Drew Barrymore) is visiting some old friends and catching up on the events that have transpired in their lives since her accident. Turning to Jonathan she says, "I'm so glad you finally got that gender reassignment surgery Jennifer, I mean Jonathan".^{12,13} The mistake in using Jonathan's old name is obviously for the purpose of making Jonathan's situation clear to the

audience. The very fact that Jonathan is a very good friend of Lucy's, combined with Lucy's approbation of Jonathans having obtained surgical correction of his physical gender, speaks volumes about the writer's attitudes towards transsexuality. Furthermore, it invites the audience to appreciate that transsexuals are people too.

My third example is a somewhat difficult case. At first, my brute intuition was to regard *The Silence of the Lambs* as morally defunct in this area we are considering, but upon further consideration I must concede that it is not inherently flawed. The particular source of concern is, of course, the character Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine).¹⁴ What gets this film off the hook is that it is made explicit that Buffalo Bill is *not* a transsexual; his seeking to change gender is a result of some sort of mental illness.¹⁵ But still, the intuition remains that *something* is very wrong here, and this is a topic for concern that deserves to be fully explored.

What is wrong is the very fact that my first intuition was that something was wrong! That is, this film is subject to gross misinterpretation by the audience. Sure enough, the film does make it known that Buffalo Bill is not a transsexual; but then again, the majority of the general public is not sufficiently educated on this topic to know what a "real" transsexual is. I think it accurate to say that the common (i.e. ignorant) idea of a "transsexual" is: *a man who wants to be a woman*. Buffalo Bill certainly falls within such a generalization, and as such, various semantic relations regarding transsexuals *in general* are called up and reinforced in the minds of the audience. Due to misinterpretation by the audience, this film has a tendency to implicitly reinforce negative sentiments toward transsexuals in general. On this account, *The Silence of the Lambs* is subject to the consequentialist ground for criticism. To put it simply: the writer should have known better.

I believe that I have sufficiently illustrated the importance of beliefs in both the writing, and interpretation of, works of fiction. As attitudes change over time, so too can both the meaning and effect of a work change. I think that in another fifty years (perhaps even longer), *The Silence of the Lambs* would find an audience that was much more tolerant of, and better educated on, transgender issues. However, given current states-of-affairs, I think this movie delves into a somewhat inappropriate portrayal of an overly sensitive topic. Lest anyone doubt the importance of this consideration, let me inform you that a great many transsexuals have been *and continue to be*, raped, beaten, and/or killed, simply for *being* transsexual. Need I provide some argument to support the wrongness of that? I certainly hope not.

To summarize the position I have outlined here, we can begin our evaluation of fictional works by examining the beliefs required of the audience to make sense of ambiguous statements and situations that occur within the work. Since such beliefs are required in order to make any sense of such ambiguity, we can be certain that the author acted with full knowledge and intent to activate those beliefs. As such, they can be considered to be an intrinsic part of the work, and as explicit as any other statement made therein. When these beliefs are found to be immoral in character, then the work itself is indeed immoral. Also, if certain knowledge is required of the audience (e.g. knowledge of transgender issues) in order to fully understand the moral position of the work, when such knowledge is not a general part of the audience's belief system, then a serious moral obligation has been neglected by the author. Where misinterpretations can occur, authors should take pains to make their intentions clear, and in particularly sensitive circumstances abstain from such characterizations altogether (e.g. *The Silence of the Lambs*). Authors should exercise vigilance against accidental implicit stereotype reinforcement, and to reinforce stereotypes purposefully is entirely unethical. Also, audiences should be wary of

circumstances in which it does happen, and refrain from giving their hard-earned money to the perpetrators. Let their writings languish on the dusty shelves of bookstores; allow their motion pictures to flop in the theaters; and let their onstage performances go unwatched; raise an outcry against such abuses of our fellows, and make yourselves heard. This is not an indictment of the entertainment industry; rather, it is an indictment of *certain* authors in committing grave offenses against various groups undeserving of such characterizations.

1. Eva Dadlez, "The Vicious Habits of Entirely Fictitious People: Hume on the Moral Evaluation of Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 26 (April 2002): 144.

2. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985): 239.

3. Episode aired in March; exact date unknown.

4. Hispanics, while constituting only about 12.5% of the population of the United States (source: US Census Bureau, *2000 Census*; <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/dp1/2kh00.pdf>), make up 32.2% of the prison population (source: Federal Bureau of Prisons; <http://www.bop.gov/news/quick.jsp#2>)

5. A "language barrier" could be a factor also, but criminal behavior does not result from speaking Spanish, nor any other language.

6. Eva Dadlez, "Knowing Better: The Epistemic Underpinnings of Moral Criticism of Fiction",
Forthcoming: 9.

7. Ibid. : 9.

8. Milo Addica and Will Rokos, *Monster's Ball* (2001).

9. Note the mockery of politically correct speech.

10. Philip Stark, *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000).

11. cf. *Examples of Hate Crimes Against Transgender Individuals*,

<http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/hatecrimevictims.pdf>; see also

<http://www.rememberingourdead.org> for an extensive list of deceased transsexuals.

12. George Wing, *50 First Dates* (2004).

13. Note the use of proper terminology, in contrast to *Dude, Where's My Car?*

14. Ted Tally, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

15. Transsexuality is not a "mental illness". The fact that this is a point of contention merely reinforces my point regarding the social biases against transsexuals.