

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from an article called "The Uses of Fiction", published in 1870. The author considers how in reading fiction, we can learn more about the world in general, and how in reading about character behaviour we might change our own.

The Uses of Fiction

This desire to know what other people say and do and think is universal. Every man and woman must necessarily have some sort of theory of the little world in which they move; and they cannot help wishing to know if other people see with the same eyes, and meet with the same facts. Every man knows that, outside of his own circle of acquaintances, there exists a great abstract thing which he calls the world, that has its opinions and habits, which are not the opinions and habits of any particular person he knows. He will do such and such an act in defiance of the opinions of Tom, or Jack, or Harry, whom he knows, and whose scruples he can combat or laugh over; but he will not do it in defiance of the world's opinion, which he fears. Now no single man knows this great outside world. Every man knows his own section of it; and the only way in which you can arrive at some notion of the world and humanity in general is, by taking these several reports and comparing them. You listen to men of experience, and judge of their theories of life, accepting that which is most probable. You find that some great traveller has certain odd notions about the feminine character in general; or that some great author has very decided opinions about the selfishness of humanity; or that some great philanthropist* has a no less decided opinion about its being unselfish and honest at the core; and all these various estimates modify each other, until you come to the conclusion that the logical deduction from them all would be an utter blank. [...]

However ineffectual, therefore, be the attempt of any single person to portray the world by painting the portraits of his acquaintances, that limited circle is still of immense interest to us. We meet with types of character and examples of conduct which we should not have met with in our own spheres; and are able to compare them, and select that which is most beautiful. One of the first uses of fiction is that it keeps awake a good ideal of life. In their own narrow spheres, men have a tendency to run in narrow grooves and become the victims of petty desires and mean theories. Without that constant communion with other natures which enlarges the sympathies and widens the understanding, men are apt to settle down into a sordid selfishness. Fiction steps in and shows the beauty of a healthier, active and beneficial life. It kindles new desires, awakens a little heroism to purify the tainted moral air, and lets a man see what, after all, ought to be the chief pleasures and the real aim of living. A man who loves fiction cannot be altogether a sneak. The multitude of honourable people he meets would shame him into better conduct. A man is known by the company he seeks; and your churlish*, contemptible, avaricious*, and mean-spirited man is not likely to court the society of these fictitious ladies and gentlemen, who would be constantly rebuking him by their unselfishness, their generosity, and kindly demeanour.

[...]

35 Nothing can be more natural than this tendency to construct imaginary scenes, with
imaginary people in them. Novel-building is the involuntary action of the mind in sleep. When
a man loses control of his imagination, it revels in all manner of fancy combinations of life,
weaving-up his impressions of men and women, and his recollections of scenery, into
40 more picturesque than ordinary life; for the simple reason that all the commonplace detail,
which alternates with the rapid and brilliant actions of life, is omitted.

[...]

This, then, is one great use of novels – to give us wider and better conceptions of life and its
possibilities; to keep before us an ideal which must have some beneficial effect on actual
conduct; to prevent our forming false and narrow notions of human nature from the limited
45 sphere in which we move.

Glossary

- * philanthropist – a person who seeks to promote the welfare of others, particularly by donating money
- * churlish – rude and ill-mannered
- * avaricious – having or showing extreme greed for money/material gain

This extract is from “The Uses of Fiction”, in *Tinsley’s Magazine*, Vol. 6 (March 1870), pp. 180-5, and the full text can be found online at <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=LRAaAQAAIAAJ&dq=Tinsley%27s%27+Magazine.+6+%281870%29%3A&q=uses+fiction#v=snippet&q=uses%20fiction&f=false>.

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