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# Art: A Handbook for Morality

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### Art: A Handbook for Morality

Art is one of the few cultural artifacts that survive, relatively unaltered, for generations. As such, it has developed into a vital factor for civilization. Over time, art connects generations and helps develop the common beliefs and behaviors that define a society and control our lives. It helps shape the codes that guide our actions, reactions, and even thoughts. Through literature such as *Beowulf*, and in countless other forms, we use art to explore our values, to define them, promote them, and ultimately pass them on to the next generation.

Moral structure is necessary to maintain a civilization. Common traditions bind us together, and define appropriate behavior and societal norms. As a young child, one has little or no concept of right or wrong. Young children and those without a moral code behave the same way: considering only their desires in the moment, without regard for their surroundings or the impact of their actions. The biblical story of Cain and Abel describes, “And Cain said to Abel his brother: Let us go forth abroad. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother and slew him” [qtd. in *Beowulf* 84]. Cain and Abel lived before any sort of moral code had been established, so Cain had no qualms about killing his brother out of anger. It removed a source of anguish from his life and satisfied his desire of the moment, which is all he had to consider. Those without a moral code still behave in this way, although usually to lesser extremes. In order to pass on the vital lessons that make our society function, such as the rule that murder is wrong, we must have a way to instill it in our youth and enforce it throughout our society.

Morals begin with parental instructions and pure bribery, such as promising playtime if children follow instructions and putting them in time-out if they act out inappropriately. However, over time, this outwardly enforced moral code must become internalized for a person to truly be ethical. Internalization happens when a person develops a sense of boundaries and behavior to live by without prompting. This process of creating standards draws on one's experiences and knowledge of how the world views and responds to certain actions. The moral lessons present in art, which everyone is exposed to beginning at a very young age, help shape this knowledge by modeling situations and identifying wanted and unwanted behavior. Therefore, cultural values that have lasted through several generations can be passed on and established as a standard from a very young age. Over time, one decides based on such values what is acceptable behavior and what is "beneath" oneself, and this sense becomes a moral code.

The most fundamental method of expressing cultural values through art is through the descriptions of a character's behavior and other characters' reactions to that behavior. This is where the "moral of the story" comes from. In *Beowulf*, heroic behavior is glorified and self-serving behavior is punished. Beowulf is exalted for his heroism against Grendel and his mother's attacks: "Now Holy God has, in his goodness, guided him [Beowulf] here/to the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel./This is my hope; and for his heroism/I will recompense him with a rich treasure." [*Beowulf* 12; ln. 381-384] Hrothgar exclaims when Beowulf and his troops first land. After the defeat of Grendel, they hold a great banquet in Beowulf's honor, and he receives incredible gifts in recognition of his feat:

Then Halfdane's son presented Beowulf  
with a gold standard as a victory gift  
an embroidered banner; also breast-mail/and a helmet; and a sword carried high,  
that was both precious object and token of honor.  
So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;

it was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts/in front of the hall-troops.”  
[27; ln. 1019-1026].

Typical of heroic novels and other hero-centric art, *Beowulf* glorifies the role of the hero and shows the other characters in the story bowing down to him in gratitude. Actions of the characters are also used to model sanctioned behavior. For example, Beowulf must make a difficult decision regarding kingship after Hygelac dies. Despite his country's encouragement, he refuses to supersede his lord Heardred: “Yet there was no way the weakened nation/could get Beowulf to give in and agree/to be elevated over Heardred as his lord/or undertake the office of kingship” [60; ln. 2373-2389]. This decision actually denies Beowulf power, but his people glorify him for his humbleness, which is often an admired and demanded trait. By showing the correct action through the character of a repeated story, examples and lessons on appropriate behavior can be passed through the generations to preserve the central values of the culture.

Art is often used to amplify the fears or dangers that a civilization faces. *Beowulf* has a series of evil villains who are all portrayed as fearsome and abhorred: “...the slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky/with streamers of fire. People on the farms/are in dread of him...Far and near, the Geat nation/ bore the brunt of his brutal assaults/ and virulent hate.” [58-59; ln. 2273-2275, 2317-2319]. These descriptions, like those of wolves and villains in common fairytales, are meant to instill fear and hatred of dangerous or outcast beings. Such a lesson may be lifesaving for children who live in rural societies. These creatures are often punished severely for acting this way:

“Then he who had harrowed the hearts of men  
with pain and affliction in former times...  
found that his bodily powers failed him...  
The monster's whole body was in pain; a tremendous wound  
appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split  
and the bone lappings burst....

Grendel was driven under the fen-banks, fatally hurt,/to his desolate lair” [22; ln.808-811].

These graphic descriptions serve to warn of what will befall one who chooses to hurt others. The characters serve as muses for the real threats that a society faces, and as warnings for those who consider acting in dangerous or violent ways.

A somewhat more subtle method of infusing values into a story is through the author’s portrayal of the characters. The language used acts like colored glasses, tinting the way readers perceive the story and its characters, and this impact can carry moral lessons. *Beowulf* has very strong descriptions for both the heroic and villainous characters. Grendel is described as, “a fiend out of hell...he had dwelt for a time/in misery among the banished monsters,/Cain’s clan...” [5-6; ln. 104-106]. The author returns to this imagery often: “that dark death-shadow/who lurked and swooped in the long nights/on the misty moors;...he was the Lord’s outcast” [7; ln. 160-164]. In contrast, the author describes Beowulf in admiring language, showing him as a powerful leader: “There was no one else like him alive./In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,/highborn and powerful” [8; ln. 196-198]. He later emphasizes Beowulf’s heroism with epithets leading up to the hero’s appearance: “Beowulf was quickly brought to the camber:/the winner of fights, the arch-warrior...”[37; ln. 1310-1311]. Through these descriptions, the distinction between hero and villain, or good and bad behavior, is reflected. The audience picks up on the author’s opinion of the characters and internalizes these messages along with the morals from the story itself.

The most obvious method of portraying values through art is direct statements by the author or creator. These are often used in stories to drive home the purpose of the story, and allow the direct infusion of cultural values into the art. The *Beowulf* author reminds his readers, “The truth is clear:/Almighty God rules over mankind/ and always has” [19; ln. 700-703]. This

epic was originally a pagan tale, but the transcriber, probably a monk, adds in his own interpretation of the events, reminding Christian readers of their universal truth. These direct injections serve to emphasize important values for the readers. Describing the downfall of a cruel king, the author opines, “He suffered in the end for having plagued his people for so long; his life lost happiness. So learn from this and understand true values. I who tell you have wintered into wisdom” [45; ln. 1720-1725]. Cues such as “the truth”, “learn from this”, or “true values” alerts the audience that there is a lesson stated explicitly in the text. These plainly-stated guiding beliefs provide the clearest window into the values of a society, both for those within the culture and for those studying it.

Some of a child’s first lessons come from fairytales and other forms of art passed on through the elders of the community. It is a convenient way to show the benefits and consequence of acting in certain ways, and to illustrate the impact of actions on surroundings. Over time, these stories impress certain behavior on their listeners. Repetition of stories or scenes that glorify desired behavior and vilify dangerous or unacceptable traits passes the values on through time. Art’s ability to act as a “moral handbook” for a society makes it essential for the survival of civilization. Without art, there would be no reliable method for passing on the principles that are necessary for the survival of a people.

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