In criticism there are indeed three individuals concerned: the artist, the work of art and the critic; and good criticism attends to all three. The good critic speaks as the intelligent, experienced individual, not as a sort of scientist, and he sees the work as an individual and as the product of an individual. He attends to both with open-minded seriousness, just as he would attend if he were attempting to assess an individual person in some other situation of importance.

… The critic is engaged as a whole man exercising many talents and many kinds of knowledge in the attempt to exhibit something densely concrete and particular to his reader. In doing this, he will use any effective means which he can muster. He may describe minutely or reflect on far off matters, theories, traditions, historical backgrounds. He may choose his methods of explanation, vary them and mix them, and we may note here that whatever terminology he may choose, it will only gain its full sense when spoken by him to his hearer in the ‘presence’, actual or well-recalled, of the object.

… Aesthetic critical language has a built-in ostensive particularity which makes it inimicable to quasi-scientific treatment.


I think you should look at what a writer has to offer and take what is offered – not complain that he’s not doing something else.

Doris Lessing interviewed by Earl G. Ingersoll. 232.

English lit. demands more that a mere knowledge of the texts, and a familiarity with the criticism of your text editor. You must do your own thinking about the books you read.

… thought is indispensable. You must realise in the first place what the writer set out to do. It is no use criticising a cricket reporter because he mishandles the report of Stollmeyer’s wedding. Having found out the aim of the writer, ponder on the difficulties of the achievement, and then see where he has failed. For heaven’s sake, don’t behave like one of my colleagues here and assume that every eminent writer is a literary god, unapproachable and infallible.

V.S. Naipaul. Letter to his sister Satti, July 1st, 1952. Letters Between a Father and Son. 207-8
Introduction

The practice of writing fiction has always presented serious writers with ethical problems, which are frequently formulated as concerns to express reality or the truth with the greatest possible clarity and fidelity. Personal and cultural ideas of what constitutes realism or truthfulness naturally vary considerably, and the circumstances in which authors live and work – their geographic and historical situations, as well as their characters and artistic aims – will have a profound influence on the way each individual writer defines these problems.

There is an assumption that writers in the period following the Second World War are to some extent writing in a moral vacuum. D. J. Taylor, for example, claims that ‘the early novels of [Kingsley] Amis and Wain show the enormous difficulty that post-war novelists have in writing about “moral issues” in an aesthetically satisfying way’ (180), and that the writer who chooses to introduce a pressing moral element into fiction … does so in the knowledge that they will run up against some almost insuperable problems. Chief among these is the knowledge that we inhabit a society in which traditional Christian morality has become steadily eroded without anything tangible taking its place. (188)

‘Traditional Christian morality’, however, was not universally accepted in the Victorian age, as Taylor himself admits: ‘God, of course, had been on the way out throughout the nineteenth century’ (169). Many nineteenth century intellectuals and writers were not Christians in the traditional sense. On the other hand, although existentialism and the theatre of the absurd have made their mark on the post-war English literary culture, the sense of moral values in art remains strong, as is evident from the works of the three novelists included in this study.

These three authors have each articulated a number of ethical problems which they have identified in the practice of writing, and this thesis is an
examination of the means by which they have tried in various of their fictional works to overcome these problems. In this way, the agenda for the work is, at least in part, set by the authors themselves, as it focuses on issues they have each been preoccupied with, rather than taking a theoretical approach in which the critic makes all the decisions about the critical apparatus. However, this research will show that there is a direct connection between the accuracy of each writer’s analysis of their situation and needs, and the consequent definition of their own peculiar set of ethical problems, and the success with which they are able to develop strategies which give their fiction internal consistency and credibility, and to fulfil their own artistic aims.

Murdoch, Lessing and Naipaul are all prolific major novelists whose work was first published in the 1950s, and who have continued to write into the 1990s. Because of their prolific output of novels over a period of 50 years, and the ready availability of interviews and essays in which they expound their artistic ideals and practices, they together provide ample material for testing the correlation between stated intentions and artistic success, and the variety of their approaches to ethical problems allows for comparison of the validity of their attempts at solutions, and of their development as writers. Although there is no suggestion that they together represent any specific cultural phase or novelistic tradition, the state of the world in this half-century and its immediate past is for each of them an important influence and forms the context in which their ethical concerns have arisen. They are serious writers who have resisted fashions and made their own decisions about the techniques that best address the problems they have identified, and their prolific output is to some extent a measure of their constant and continuing compulsion to improve on the solutions they have tried: as Iris Murdoch said in 1964, ‘Any novelist worth his salt knows very
clearly what is wrong with his work before it is ever published: why else, after all, would he be writing his next novel except to try to correct in it the mistakes of his last?’ (‘Speaking of Writing’).

That said, they are in many ways very different writers with different preoccupations. Iris Murdoch has a background in moral philosophy, and her concerns as a novelist are to a large extent conditioned by that background: they involve the creation of ‘free’ characters who are not wish-fulfilment fantasies of the author, and who are distinct individuals in their own right rather than merely symbols to be manipulated by the author. For Doris Lessing, the most important issue is somehow to capture the whole truth of experience in a novel without fragmentation, but she also perceives other problems, such as how to go about speaking for the inarticulate, and political scruples, arising from her early socialist beliefs, in writing about one’s individual experiences in a world of massive injustices and large-scale disasters. V.S. Naipaul is principally concerned with defining himself in relation to his work, firstly finding his subject, secondly finding the form which best suits it, and thirdly defining his narrative voice and point of view. Even though these seem quite distinct problems, for each author they are connected with being truthful – to themselves and to their subjects: none of them is interested in being entertaining at the expense of a commitment to the truth, although neither do they abjure the importance of pleasing and engaging their readers.

Some of these problems are connected with subject matter, and this is often the aspect emphasised by critics, but decisions about formal and technical matters like plotting, point of view and voice are as intimately connected with solutions to ethical questions as decisions about content. In Chapter One, I look at ethical concerns which have arisen for authors throughout the history of
realist fiction, and theoretical concepts connected with these issues. Chapter Two discusses some of the ethical problems considered by the three authors to be specific to the twentieth century, especially the period following the Second World War.

The remainder of the thesis is divided into three parts, followed by a conclusion and comparison of the achievements of the three authors. For each author, there is an introductory chapter in which I have examined non-fiction sources such as essays and interviews for their views on a series of questions, including their reasons for writing; how conscious they are of the creative process; what they look for in a reader, and what they believe about the status of their intentions; what they think makes a good novel; and their attitudes to a range of issues such as social and political commitment, symbolism, justice, freedom, and the ethical relationship between their activity as authors and the moral world in which their characters operate. Issues raised in these introductory chapters are pursued in more detail for each author in three chapters dealing with various of their fictional works, and in conclusion the achievements of each are examined in the light of their intentions, their beliefs about the nature of fiction and the ways they have tried to solve the problems they have identified.

In the Comparison and Conclusion, the three authors’ concerns and ethical strategies for dealing with their concerns are compared. It can be seen that, although for each of them the quest for truth is their highest concern, they have each developed very different ways of dealing with the problems connected with writing truthfully, and in addition, they have defined the particulars of these problems in their own idiosyncratic ways. Iris Murdoch’s preoccupation with a rather abstract and general philosophical concept of the
duty of the artist can be seen to have led her to try to achieve a difficult kind of invisibility and openness which conflicted with her natural impulses as a novelist. Doris Lessing, on the other hand, lacks the intellectual rigour and the will to formulate the precise nature of the problems which she senses when she writes, and the contradictions which result from this confusion are sometimes glaring, affecting the internal consistency of her novels. V.S. Naipaul, of the three, has been the most successful in identifying his own admittedly singular place in the tradition of English literature, and in developing throughout his career the peculiar strategies which best suit his needs, with the result that his works of fiction, highly idiosyncratic as they have become, are deeply satisfying and have, at their best, a profound verisimilitude combined with a strong internal consistency.

Establishing the stated intentions of these authors is an important element in this research. However, it is not my aim to use this information to support the interpretation or valuation of their work directly, but to examine their achievements critically in the light of their intentions. I will show in this thesis how the process of self-examination and self-criticism, intelligently and single-mindedly pursued, is a crucial step in the evolution of effective formal approaches to the ethical problems involved in writing fiction.
Chapter One

Ethical Strategies and the Creative Process: Theory and Practice

Throughout the history of the novel, writers have posed ethical questions for themselves, and experimented with their own solutions. That most novelists aim to write truthfully is clear from their discussions of ideas of realism and what it means, and of the formal approaches, such as point of view, narrative voice, and structure, which can be employed to strengthen the illusion of reality in fiction. The existence of a variety of techniques which have been developed and used successfully in realist fiction shows that there is no set of infallible rules, and implies that the methods suitable for one project may not suit another.

Tolstoy believed that ‘every great artist necessarily creates his own form … . [In] all that is best in Russian literature … the form was perfectly original’ (Allott 265). Nevertheless, his great works still remain well within the conventions of the novel: its boundaries are diffuse enough to accommodate a good deal of adaptation. As to where those boundaries lie, problems have always arisen. E.M. Forster accepted as his definition that of Abel Chevalley: ‘a fiction in prose of a certain extent’, adding that ‘the extent should not be less than 50,000 words’ (13). Malcolm Bradbury called it a ‘long invented story in prose with a realistic emphasis and very much the original and individual product of one man’s experience and imagination’ (What is a Novel? 7).

Margaret Anne Doody, in The True Story of the Novel, uses broader criteria, as she is concerned to include classical novels of antiquity in her study:

I believe that a novel includes the idea of length (preferably forty or more pages), and that, above all, it should be in prose. … Yet I do not promise never to mention Evgeny Onegin or The Golden Gate, and some short fictions, folk tales, or antique and modern novellas … If anybody has called a work a novel at any time, that is sufficient. (10)

This is attractively inclusive, but as all the works considered in detail in this thesis are fictional prose narratives over one hundred pages in length, as far as a
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definition is necessary for the purposes of the exercise, Bradbury’s formulation will serve (assuming, of course, that the masculine includes the feminine).

**Concepts of Realism**

In her historical survey of novelists’ opinions on the novel, Miriam Allott quotes extracts from letters, diaries and essays from the eighteenth century onwards, and a very common theme is the desire for novels to be truthful. Samuel Richardson wrote in 1752, in a letter to a Miss Mulso, ‘What a duce, do you think I am writing a Romance? Don’t you see that I am copying Nature …’ (41). George Eliot wrote, in an essay on Ruskin, ‘the truth of infinite value that he teaches is *realism* – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of a definite, substantial reality’ (quoted in Gasiorek 10). The establishment of realistic characters is of great concern: Trollope wrote in his autobiography that the novelist ‘desires to make his readers so intimately acquainted with his characters that the creations of his brain should be to them speaking, moving, living, human creatures’ (Allott 285). This does not mean they should be drawn from life, however. Henry James, in the Preface to *The Lesson of the Master*, wrote:

> We can surely account for nothing in the novelist’s work that hasn’t passed through the crucible of his imagination, hasn’t, in that perpetually simmering cauldron, his intellectual *pot-au-feu*, been reduced to savoury fusion. … Thus it becomes different, and, thanks to a rare alchemy, a better thing. Therefore let us have as little as possible about its ‘being’ Mr. This or Mrs. That. If it adjusts itself with the least truth to its new life it can’t possibly be either. … If it persists as the impression not artistically dealt with, it shames the honour offered it and can only be spoken of as having ceased to be a thing of fact, and yet not become a thing of truth. (Allott 283-4)

The concept of realism developed over 150 years from Richardson’s ‘copying nature’ to James’ ‘crucible of the imagination’, mirroring a refinement of techniques for its achievement, but naturally many disagreements occurred in
this process: for example, Thackeray believed that Dickens’ art did not ‘represent Nature duly … the Art of Novels is to represent Nature’ (Allott 67); and Georges Sand took Flaubert to task for saying, ‘when I find that my sentences contain ugly assonance or repetition then I’m sure I am floundering in falsities’, replying, ‘you seek for nothing more than the well-made sentence … it isn’t the whole of art’ (Allott 314). Henry James was ‘struck, in reading over the pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion’ in his ‘habit of giving [himself] away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously’ (Allott 272), while Trollope believed ‘that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other’ (*Barchester Towers* 130).

All these authors identified a set of problems which they approached in their own ways, and their attempts to generalise a set of rules which other novelists should, or should have, followed, are generally misguided. In some cases they may have unhappy consequences, such as those related by Cynthia Ozick in her essay ‘The Lesson of the Master’, who learned the hard way that she had to reject ‘Henry James, in his scepter and his authority’ (14), and that ‘rapture and homage are not the way. Influence is perdition’ (15). New authors must learn the craft for themselves, adapting the rules they find useful to their own situations, and rejecting those which do not work for them, although this is not always a clear and conscious process. In the chapter of Allott’s book concerning ‘Germination’, a procession of authors from Samuel Richardson to Ivy Compton-Burnett describes the beginnings of various of their novels, and the common impression is that the imagination is not entirely under the conscious control of the author: Richardson says, ‘the above story recurred to
my thought; and hence sprung Pamela’ (134); Dickens ‘thought of Mr Pickwick’ (134); George Eliot’s ‘thoughts merged themselves into a dreamy doze, and I imagined myself writing a story’ (135) – even in their rational recollections, there is a mystery as to whence the story springs. Ivy Compton-Burnett is asked by an interviewer how she works – ‘I like to know how people work’, and her reply is, ‘I daresay you do, but the people themselves are not always quite sure’ (143).

There is commonly a sense of a split personality in the author: Scott describes ‘a demon who seats himself on the feather of my pen when I begin to write, and leads it astray from the purpose’ (145); and Tolstoy says, ‘In a writer there must always be two people – the writer and the critic. And, if one works at night, with a cigarette in one’s mouth, although the work of creation goes on briskly, the critic is for the most part in abeyance, and this is very dangerous’ (150). The writer, in Tolstoy’s scheme, is the creative artist, but the critic must control and discipline what the writer produces, to create ‘a true work of art’ (235).

Ideas about truthfulness, verisimilitude, and realism have become more sophisticated, but there is still little agreement either on principles or practice. Philip Thody in his book *Twentieth Century Literature* writes, ‘all literary judgements are based on personal attitudes, and views as to what does and does not constitute realism are even more subjective than most’ (89). Gasiorek traces the history of the concept of realism, showing how post-structuralist critics, in order to attack it, caricatured it and attributed ‘a simple-mindedness to realist novelists that it is impossible to justify’: for George Eliot, for example, ‘realism directs attention to a mind-independent world through empirical observation; its
task is to produce knowledge of that world through empirical observation, and thus to guard against the subjectivism that breeds solipsism’; but this does not ‘commit her to the naïve representationalism associated with classic realism’ (10): she also emphasised ‘the synthetic role of the imagination in processing experience’ (11). David Lodge suggests, too, that ‘she was well aware of the indeterminacy that lurks in all efforts at human communication’ (‘*Middlemarch*’ 56). Gasiorek argues that realism ‘is best seen as an open-ended concept; it gives rise to different narrative modes, which derive from authors’ particular projects, aesthetic and political convictions, and changing socio-historical contexts’ (17). That it is seen in this way by Doris Lessing, for example, is clear from her claim in 1991 that she had ‘only written two unrealistic stories’ [*Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*] (Tan Gim Ean et al. 201). A definition of realism that can encompass *Shikasta* and *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* is broad indeed.

One particularly narrow definition of realism involves assumptions like that Iris Murdoch complained of in an interview, that one has ‘to write about the working class to write about reality’ (Glover 59). Subject matter for most realist novelists is grounded in some way – however obliquely – on the world they know, and authors usually know their limitations. It seems logical that before starting to write, an author must make a choice as to what to write about; but it could almost be said to be a pre-decision. Few writers seem to make their choice coolly and consciously. Naipaul, describing the genesis of *The Enigma of Arrival*, describes a process which took many years, his story becoming that of ‘the writer’s journey … my theme, the narrative to carry it, my characters – for some years I felt they were sitting on my shoulder, waiting to declare
themselves and to possess me’ (*Enigma* 309). When the time finally came to write, ‘I let my hand move. I wrote the first pages of many different books; stopped, started again’ (310). Even Iris Murdoch, who plans in detail before she starts writing, lets the unconscious do its work early in the process, with ‘deep free reflection’ (Heusel 4). However, despite the frequent insistence by authors, like Murdoch, that ‘it is very difficult to write a novel except about what you deeply understand’ (Glover 58), subject matter is frequently the basis of critical attacks on novelists, as the following chapters will show: Murdoch’s *The Sandcastle*, Lessing’s ‘Hunger’, and Naipaul’s *In a Free State* have all been subjected to such criticism.

**Narrative Techniques**

Flaubert wrote that ‘it isn’t enough merely to observe; we must order and shape what we have seen’ (Allott 69). Wayne Booth, in his Afterword to the 2nd edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, emphasises that ‘the author’s single most important creative act is to invent what Aristotle calls the “synthesis of incidents”, the “plot” in the sense of the plotted narrative line’ (436). The importance of this decision to an author’s design can be clearly seen in Richardson’s defence of the epistolary method in his Preface to *Clarissa*:

>  *Much more* lively and affecting … must be the style of those who write in the height of *a present* distress, the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty (the events then hidden in the womb of fate); than the dry, narrative unanimated style of a person relating difficulties and danger surmounted, can be … the relater perfectly at ease. (Allott 256)

He admits, however, in the Post-script, that his reason for writing in this way is that ‘he perhaps mistrusted his talents for the narrative kind of writing’, and further, ‘the author thinks he ought not to prescribe the taste of others; but imagined himself at liberty to follow his own’ (Allott 256). George Eliot
believed that ‘there must be several or many good ways [of telling a story] rather than one best. For we get interested in the stories life presents to us through divers orders and modes of presentation’ (Allott 263). Although the narrative in *Middlemarch*, a novel regarded as a classic of realism, seems superficially to follow a straightforward chronological order, some events, such as Bulstrode’s history, are related late in the novel, long after they occurred, when they became known to his neighbours in the town. The reader, however, is conscious of no dislocation: the order is dictated by the effect the author wishes to produce. The reader is presented with what Martin calls the ‘raw materials of the story (the *fabula*)’ by means of the *syuzhet* (‘the procedures used to convey them’) (107). The distinction between the two concepts may sometimes be blurred or even misleading in practice, but the theory helps because ‘we can’t discuss the “how” of storytelling without assuming a stable “what” that can be presented in various ways’ (107-8).

The aspects which, to the general reader, most plainly reveal a writer’s ethics in a novel are the point of view which is chosen, and voice. They are intimately connected with *syuzhet*, and for many authors it would be difficult to differentiate between the various technical decisions involved in a particular novel. Richardson’s choice to write in the epistolary mode, for example, is intimately bound up with the immediacy of point of view this technique offers, and what he sees as the ‘lively and affecting’ impression this will make on his readers, the purpose of which, of course, is to encourage them to continue to read. In general, a first person narrator is more likely to be unreliable, in Booth’s terms, that is, one ‘whose values, on one or more axes, or whose pictures of the facts of the narrative explicitly depart from those of the implied
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author’ (Rhetoric 431). In more recent novels, this has almost become a
convention. Even a first person narrator who is not unreliable has a built-in
restriction of his point of view, and must not, if verisimilitude is to be respected,
appear to know more than he reasonably can. In practice, this restriction is
often stretched well beyond plausibility, as in Iris Murdoch’s The Black Prince,
without most readers noticing; but in any event the first person narrative
provides ample opportunity for the author to leave gaps of fact and
interpretation to be filled by the reader’s imagination. However, if the first
person narrator is ‘reliable’ and not a major character, the difference between
the first person and third person narratives may be, effectively, slight. When a
third person narrative with multiple points of view is offered, the reader may
identify strongly with one, but is more likely to oscillate between them,
allowing one to modify another as it is presented. As Wolfgang Iser says,

> the activity of reading can be characterized as a sort of kaleidoscope of
> perspectives, preintentions, recollections. Every sentence contains a
> preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come;
> and this in turn changes the ‘preview’ and so becomes a ‘viewfinder’ for
> what has been read. (‘Reading Process’ 54)

This is true, according to Iser, in all literary texts, but it is more obvious in texts
with multiple points of view. An additional effect of the narrative with multiple
points of view is that the compulsion the reader feels to continue reading may be
intensified by the changes of scene and situation, and the resulting impatience to
reach the continuation of the broken sequences. Thus the choice of whether to
write in the first or third person is not a simple one, and its effects depend upon
many other factors.
Point of view encompasses not merely the distinction between first and third person narrators, but how the author chooses to focalise his narrative.

Henry James, in his Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, discussed his preference for dealing with my subject-matter, for ‘seeing my story’, through the opportunity and the sensibility for some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent witness or reporter, some person who contributes to the case mainly a certain amount of criticism and interpretation of it. … the terms of this person’s access to [the affair in hand] and estimate of it contributing … by some fine little law to the intensification of interest. (Allott 265)

In this way, James is able to displace his own ethical views onto this character, and avoids what he sees as Trollope’s embarrassing presence in his own novels. (Miller points out in ‘Narrative and History’ that ‘it seems as if the fictional imagination, for James at least, can be liberated as long as it hides from itself what it actually is’) (457). Martin discusses the development of the idea of focus in critical theory:

> the two basic concepts involved in the study of focalization are those of a focalizer (a perceiver) and that which is focalized (the perceived). If a story contains more than one focalizer, the shifts from one to another become an aspect of narrative structure. (145)

Focalisation is thus a major influence on the implicit morality of a novel. An intimate knowledge of a character’s thoughts can, at the same time as it explains and excuses, provide insight into a character’s faults, so that although we may sympathise, we may also tend to judge. Booth points out that ‘inside views are … one extremely effective way of revealing a moral character hidden to all but the intimate reader’, but ‘to gain moral sympathy, in addition to the generalized sympathy or warmth that inside views can provide, an author must in some way give us evidence of a character’s capacity for admirable choice’ (*Rhetoric* 418).

The classic example of the successful use of point of view is Austen’s *Emma*,
where the focus is carefully controlled to provide exactly the distance needed to allow the reader to see the heroine’s faults while retaining sympathy for her. An example of how this inside view can work against a character is Morgan in Murdoch’s *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, who has the largest share of the narrative focalization, but who is nevertheless an unlikable and unsympathetic character – it is clear that she has a limited ‘capacity for admirable choice’. On the other hand, too great a distance runs the risk of alienating readers by implying that authors despise their characters. Satirists, for example, need the utmost skill to strike exactly the right note.

The voice, or tone, of the narrative is the constant companion, as it were, of the reader, and, whether it is close and sympathetic to the characters, or distant and satirical, has to present the narrative in a way which is somehow rendered congenial to the reader in order to enlist the interest which is usually the only motivation for continuing to read: as Booth would say, ‘to win [the reader’s] friendship’ (*Company* 216). Naturally style is important here. In the case of first-person narrative, the style of the narrator is logically part of the fiction, and the reader should be aware that impersonation is taking place and be able to look past the narrator to the implied author; but third-person narratives also sometimes use a linguistic style which helps authenticate the fiction. An example of this is Lessing’s ‘Hunger’, a story about an African village boy, written in simple, concrete English by an omniscient narrator.

**Authors and Readers**

Booth’s charting of the different types of authors and readers, actual, implied and narratorial, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is a useful outline of ‘ways of talking about who meets whom in our various reading encounters’ (431), but it is often
difficult for the novel-reader to assess exactly the degree of the narrator’s identification with the author, and where the implied author stands, and without knowing this, the actual reader can draw quite the wrong conclusion about the beliefs of the actual author. Irony is potentially a particularly slippery tool in this respect. Malcolm Bradbury, in his novel *Stepping Westward*, makes the point vividly if crudely, in a scene where a British academic attempts to teach Swift’s *Modest Proposal* to his American students (323-4). Iser says that the ‘possibility of verification that all expository texts offer is, precisely, denied by the literary text. At this point there arises a certain amount of indeterminacy which is peculiar to all literary texts, for they permit no referral to any identical real-life situation’ (‘Indeterminacy’ 8). Indeterminacy comes in two kinds, although they are not mutually exclusive: one feeds into the other. The basic indeterminacy is factual, and is, in the conventional novel, usually temporary. The secondary type, which is of interest to Iser, is that of the significance of the facts, the interpretation or moral implication of the narrative. He shows how Dickens uses irony in *Oliver Twist*:

The hungry child is in the workhouse and with the courage of despair dares ask for more gruel. The supervisors of the workhouse are appalled by this monstrous insolence. What does the commentator have to say? Not only does he support them but he even gives his reasons for doing so. The reaction of the reader is unequivocal, for the author has formulated his commentary in such a way that the reader simply has to reject it. In this manner, the reader’s participation in the fate of the child can be brought to the level of actual engagement. (‘Indeterminacy’ 20-1)

Irony, it can be seen, is not always a means of increasing indeterminacy. Sometimes it is used as a strong moral weapon, leaving no doubt as to the writer’s meaning. Irony is always an appeal to the interpretive intelligence of
the implied reader, but it has many levels of complexity, and at its most simple it is taken in the stride of most readers. Wayne Booth says,

irony is always … in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded. (*Rhetoric* 304)

It can add to the pleasure of reading, but it also tells readers something about the attitude of the author – it expresses their beliefs, and implies their superiority.

This implication of superiority is at its strongest in satirical writing. It can be argued that the form and dynamics of the novel itself undermine the single moral viewpoint implicit in satire. The nature of the traditional novel, with its complex plot and large cast of characters, both requires and allows a much broader interpretation of life than that of a satirist, although irony, satire and the satiric persona may still remain elements of the novelist’s style. The Bakhtinian view is that, in addition, ‘the variety of discourses in the novel prevents the novelist from imposing a single world-view on his readers even if he wanted to’ (Lodge, ‘Novel’ 22). Lodge points out how closely Bakhtin’s theory, presumably unknowingly, echoes D.H. Lawrence’s famous claims for the novel:

Philosophy, religion, science, they are all of them busy nailing things down, to get a stable equilibrium. ...

But the novel, no. The novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own place, time, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own place, time, circumstance. If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail. … Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection, that is immorality. (‘Morality’ 528)

This process is not necessarily intentional; it does not always arise from a purpose. It can arise, he claims, out of ‘the novelist’s helpless, unconscious
predilection’ (529). Novelists who have a strong belief in a moral, religious, or, more often in the twentieth century, a political point of view, according to these theories, will have trouble expressing their point of view unambiguously through their fiction, without its being undermined by the dynamics of the form. Hayden White argues, ‘where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too’ (22). This activity is based on the ethical decisions made by the writer. However, the kind of ‘polyphonic’ narrative Bakhtin saw as inevitably characteristic of the novel will include explanations, other points of view (sometimes only implicitly) and more information than can be accommodated into a single moral code: ‘the possibility of employing on the plane of a single work discourses of various types, with all their expressive capacities intact, without reducing them to a common denominator – this is one of the most characteristic features of prose’ (200).

In this way, a conscious wish to endorse a particular system of morality can be undermined by the way a narrative affects its readers. One novel which suffers markedly from the clash of ideologies is Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*. The Catholic ideology which Waugh is trying to promote in this work merely causes frustration for a reader who does not share his beliefs: Julia’s sacrifice of happiness to the church’s inflexible rules seems misplaced and unnecessary, and Charles’ conversion to Catholicism seems perverse, in spite of Waugh’s obvious approval. As Sean O’Faolain remarks, being a man of genius, he should never, under any circumstances, have opinions, for wherever he has written out of his opinions it becomes all too plain ... that imagination is a soaring gull and opinions no more than a gaggle of ungainly starlings, chattering angrily on a cornfield. (68)
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On the other hand, Booth in *The Company We Keep* analyses *Emma* to show how Jane Austen was bound by the form of the novel to seem (to many readers) to endorse a fairy-tale ending. He goes on:

> The saving truth is that *Emma* contains within itself the antidotes to its own potential poisons. While it does not in any sense repudiate the fun of pursuing the conventional form, it works hard to alert the careful reader to the need for a double vision – a combination of joyful credulity about the love plot and shrewd sophistication about the characters of men and women. (432)

Booth thus sees the tension between the ethics and the form as firmly under the control of the author in this case. Part of the difference here, of course, is that *Emma* does not seem to have been written to endorse a particular belief system; rather, it shows the value of certain attitudes and behaviour in certain specific circumstances. Louis Menand writes of Jane Austen,

> what makes books last is not that the moral truths they contain outlive their time, and are as applicable today as they were in a society radically different from ours hundreds of years ago. It’s that the writer has revealed the endless malleability of moral truths in her own time, and the example is always entirely apt in ours, since the principles and conventions of any age can always be shown to be two-sided – or three-sided, or six sided – affairs. (15)

Whether Austen intended this effect, of course, cannot be known. David Lodge points out, in a discussion of the intentional fallacy,

> If you ask a real author what he intended by a particular scene or episode or sentence and he says, ‘I intended to produce an effect x’, his stated intention is of no consequence to criticism if the episode does not in fact produce that effect; and if it does, there is no point in asking him – unless it happens that you failed to observe this effect by independent reading. The point is not that the real author’s comments are without interest but that they do not have absolute authority. (‘Indeterminacy’ 145)

However, as contemporary authors often discuss their intentions publicly in interviews and other forums outside their fiction, it is interesting to measure their success at ‘producing effect x’ against their own standards.
Wolfgang Iser sees the literary text as a framework within which the reader’s imagination will fill in the gaps, and because there are differences in the way the gaps can be filled, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. (‘Reading Process’ 55)

Kermode, in the same vein, talks of the ‘radiant obscurity of narratives’ (Genesis 47): in his view, the text is a kind of screen through which readers glimpse its secrets, the secrets seen by each individual reader being dependent on the angle from which they are observed. And J. Hillis Miller says that ‘poets, novelists and playwrights say things which are exceedingly odd by most everyday standards of normality. Any way of interpreting literature would need to account for that oddness’ (Fiction 18). But one needs to be wary of noticing more than the text allows. As Kermode says, ‘we shall have to agree that the signals are there before we can use them to speak of the work’s larger existence’: the indirect meanings are not ‘fixed and constant, [but] they can be apprehended only through the literal sense’ (Essays 30). Miller’s oddness is linguistic and rhetorical, closer to the surface than Kermode’s secrets. When he claims that authors ‘say things which are exceedingly odd’, he is discussing the way they use language, what they ‘say’, rather than what they imply. Kermode points out that in the ordinary business of life we give great emphasis to the pragmatic aspect of language, screening out hesitations, parapraxes, fumbled performances. … But in the ‘depragmatised’ language of a novel such a mistake (whether in accordance with the author’s intention or not) might be of great importance, as a sign of that larger existence beyond the confines of the text. (Essays 31)
So when Miller notices oddness in literature, it may be that it is not outside the normal range of odd occurrences, but only that it is more noticeable, and therefore seems more significant, because it is not edited out or glossed over by the hearer in the way that day-to-day oddness is. In any event, none of these critics believes in the existence of a single correct interpretation of a literary work. Indeterminacy is, to some extent, a quality all fiction shares.

That fact that novels are not suitable vehicles for espousing causes is of more concern to some writers than others. Neither Murdoch or Naipaul wish to use their fictional writing in this way, but even though she denies the novel should be a ‘blueprint for a better way of correct thinking’ (Ingersoll 232), Doris Lessing complains in her Preface to the 1972 edition of *The Golden Notebook* that ‘there is no doubt that to attempt a novel of ideas is to give oneself a handicap’, and blames ‘the parochialism of our culture’ (13) – she believes that the European tradition is more open to these types of novels. Nevertheless, she ends the Preface thus:

> it is not only childish of a writer to want readers to see what he sees, to understand the shape and aim of a novel as he sees it – his wanting this means that he has not understood a most fundamental point. Which is that the book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion only when its plan and shape and intention are not understood. (20-21)

(As I will discuss later, this has not prevented her wanting readers to understand her intentions.) Israeli author Amos Oz is particularly wary of claiming the moral high ground: ‘I doubt if writers and poets have integrity or even should have. I think though that some of us are capable of defusing the deadly integrity of the fanatic, the monomaniac, the raging ideologist, the murderous crusader’ (235). The common thread here is the necessity of avoiding narrowness and the danger, or impossibility, of trying to shut out ambiguities in literature in the service of particular moral (including political) messages. David Parker, in
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*Ethics, Theory and the Novel,* sees the modern identity as made up of two conflicting strands of morality, the Judaeo-Christian-Kantian and the Romantic-Enlightenment-Nietzschean, and ‘we cannot deny either without narrowing our understanding of the full range of goods we actually live by’ (37). Reading and writing fiction is still an ethical exercise, however: Robertson Davies writes:

> every writer is, in one way or another, a moralist. Not, let me hasten to say, that he seeks to impose ideas of truth and conduct on his readers ... but because he observes life from the standpoint of his own spirit and personality, and he records what he sees: certain courses of action bring, inevitably, certain consequences. (220)

Narratives have many ways of implying their morality, and this tends to become more complicated as the narrative lengthens into novel form. The “‘moralizing’ ending’ which Hayden White sees as an inevitable feature of historical narration (22) is too simple a concept to carry the whole weight of the ethics implicit in even a short novel. Frank Kermode writes, in *The Sense of an Ending,* ‘the story that proceeded very simply to its obviously pre-ordained end would be nearer myth than novel or drama’ (18), and

we have to distinguish between myths and fictions. Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. ... Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. (39)

Kermode’s explanation of the dynamics of the delayed ending, the ‘disconfirmation followed by a consonance’ (18) adds the requisite complexity to White’s model:

The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naive expectations, is finding something out for us, something real. (18)
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Iser believes the upsetting of expectations in fiction is crucial. In literary texts, he claims,

we feel that any confirmative effect – such as we implicitly demand of expository texts – is a defect … For the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of the didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us. More often than not, the very clarity of such texts will make us want to free ourselves from their clutches. (‘Reading Process’ 53)

But novels are full of ‘confirmative effects’, and would make little sense without them. Martin remarks, ‘conventions are not a constraint on genuine communication; they make it possible’ (159). Kermode’s ‘daring peripeteia’ may impress readers and upset their expectations, but must be used sparingly, since the basis of communication is a shared language, a shared feeling of how narratives are usually structured; and to subvert these shared values too often will, after a while, cease to be shocking or surprising, and become just another conventional narrative device.

Booth claims that we can always find ‘writers’ religious, political and cultural programs ... embodied in their metaphoric structures’ (Company 341), and that as long as we remember that narratives are metaphoric constructions, we can ‘embrace vigorously’ what they add to our picture of reality (345). If all fiction is characterised by indeterminacy, however, the interpretation of the supposed metaphor must be inferred by the reader, whether intentionally implied by the author or not, and we cannot rely on metaphorical structures to convey the author’s moral framework, as Booth claims.

According to Iser, ‘the literary text is characterized by the fact that it does not state its intentions’ (‘Indeterminacy’ 43), and this is true of most conventional fiction (although this convention is calmly flouted by Naipaul later
Authors may try to overcome this by over-using symbols in an attempt to imply their meaning less ambiguously. Eudora Welty believes that symbols are a legitimate part of fiction ... desirable as any device is, so long as it serves art. Symbols have to spring from the work direct, and stay alive. Symbols for the sake of symbols are counterfeit ... However alive they are, they should never call for an emphasis greater than the emotional reality they serve, in their moment, to illuminate. (60)

Even more dangerously, authors may try to signal their intentions by making overt moral statements. Most readers will resist the crudeness of this approach, and dismiss the message the author is at pains to convey. John Updike writes, ‘the novel, whatever it is or was, must be more than an illustrated lecture; it must make us think without knowing we are thinking’ (‘Novel Thoughts’ 114). Kermode likens readers to children – even autistic children – in our ‘abnormally acute appetites’ (Sense 56) for ends and crises, and perhaps the demand for the sugaring of the ethical pill is another aspect of the reader’s ‘childishness’.

Lawrence claimed that ‘art must contain the essential criticism on the morality to which it adheres’ (‘Study of Thomas Hardy’ 476). D.J. Taylor gives Fay Weldon as an example of ‘the most cursory fragment of scene-setting providing an excuse for another salvo in the sex war’ (259): and complains that the conclusions of ‘many a contemporary women’s novel ... are pre-ordained, the vigour of its characters reduced by their thraldom to destiny, its claims to plausibility eventually anaesthetised by sheer good intentions’ (264).

The main problem with the overtly moralistic or over-symbolic approach is, as this implies, that it interferes with the freedom of the characters in the narrative. The precise meaning of freedom in this context is however difficult to establish. Kermode points out that characters cannot be absolutely free, ‘for
if the man were entirely free he might simply walk out of the story’ (Sense 138).

Forster writes, in *Aspects of the Novel*,

The characters arrive when evoked, but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book. They ‘run away’, they ‘get out of hand’: they are creations inside a creation, and often inharmonious towards it; if they are given complete freedom they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying, and destroy it by intestinal decay. (74)

The quest to create ‘free’ characters is nevertheless a preoccupation with many serious novelists. Virginia Woolf believed

that all novels ... deal with character, and that it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic and alive, has been evolved. (Allott 290)

**Critical Approaches**

In summary, then, ethical problems faced by all authors include their choice of subject matter; their arrangement of the events of their *fabula* into their *syuzhet*; their point of view – or choice of focalisers; their narrative voice – whether to write humorously, satirically, or earnestly, and the distance to maintain from their characters; whether to attempt to promote a specific set of beliefs, in view of the novel’s inherent unsuitability as a vehicle for propaganda; whether and how to use symbolism; and how best to create realistic characters. And the most basic question for the critic, in the end, is how to assess a writer’s success.

Murdoch has commented that ‘no novel can be as clarified and as non-accidental and complete as it seems, and as it aims at seeming, to us when we are absorbed in it’ (‘Salvation’ 239): the problem is to judge the extent of the illusion of completeness, and to make objective such subjective judgments as a novel’s credibility, internal consistency, and even perhaps the pleasure it affords. L. R. Leavis, who, in his 1989 article ‘Creative Values and the Contemporary Novel’, states that ‘literary tradition exhibiting the highest achievements in the novel … is waiting for a major successor in our age’ (347),
criticises Murdoch for lacking ‘artistic inevitability’ (‘Anti-Artist’ 142) in her novels; but such a quality is difficult to pin down. Eudora Welty tries to define the way communication occurs in fiction:

… communication is going on … when you believe the writer. … Belief doesn’t depend on plausibility, but it seems to be a fact that validity of a kind, and this is of course a subjective kind, gained in whatever way that had to be, is the quality that makes a work reliable as art. This reliability comes straight out of the writer himself. … It is that by which each writer lets us believe – doesn’t ask us to, can’t make us, simply lets us. (61-2)

The question of belief relates directly to our sense of the truthfulness of art.

One explanation for a sense of falsity is offered by Parker:

the novelist only apparently resolves the tension by attempting to suppress one sort of moral claim in the interests of the other. The drive to resolve all conflicts in this way is nothing else but a will-to-master-narrative, and where this arises … the art becomes schematic, shallow, sentimental, evasive, insistent, or non-explanatory. (57)

These qualities can only be discovered in the analysis of actual works of art in their specificity, as he shows in his chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina*, among others. Booth’s *The Company We Keep* is an extended examination of literary value and how it is established; that is, how we judge fiction. He concludes that

we must avoid at all costs the effort to reduce literary ‘goods’ to one kind; instead, we should seek to clarify and embrace a plurality of goods, exhibited in particular coductions, while vigorously expressing our reasons for mistrusting those narrative experiences that would, if taken alone, undermine all the defensible projects. (115)

‘Coduction’ is his own neologism for the communal enterprise of criticism – ‘performed with a genuine respect both for one’s own intuitions and for what other people have to say’ rather than ‘any deduction of quality from general ethical principles’ (76). Booth’s attractive metaphorical use of the concept of friendship for the type of experience literature offers has the advantage of
including the concept of pleasure: often, in literary criticism or theory, as Roland Barthes notes,

No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion. (57)

Tolstoy seems to deny the usefulness or possibility of criticism when he says that ‘one of the significant facts about a true work of art [is] that its content in its entirety can be expressed only by itself” (Allott 235). Nevertheless, by close reading, a critic may hope to establish, for particular novels, the features whereby it succeeds or fails (or both) to convince or please, using, as Booth implies, criteria which arise from the individual work of art itself, in its context; and when we have external evidence as to intentions we are, further, able to assess their success on their own terms. The long careers of Murdoch, Lessing and Naipaul provide a wealth of material for a study of this nature.
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The Twentieth Century: A New Age for the Novel?

The most obvious difference between nineteenth-century novels and twentieth-century novels is that the nineteenth-century ones are better.

Iris Murdoch, ‘Existentialists and Mystics’, 1970 (221)

… the warmth, the compassion, the humanity, the love of people which illuminates the literature of the nineteenth century and which makes all these old novels a statement of faith in man himself … are qualities which I believe are lacking from literature now.


The great societies that produced the great novels of the past have cracked. Writing has become more private and more privately glamorous. The novel as a form no longer carries conviction.

V.S. Naipaul, ‘Conrad’s Darkness’, 1974 (244)

What are the changes that have caused this perception of crisis in the modern novel? What causes a literary journalist like D.J. Taylor to declare that ‘we read Dickens and George Eliot at school and we know, we just know, that no modern writer – certainly no modern English writer – can hold a candle to them’ (xiv)? Murdoch, Lessing and Naipaul, throughout their careers, have all pondered these questions, as have many other authors and critics. Each of them has suggested remedies, to which they have aspired, with varying degrees of success. And each of them offers, implicitly or explicitly, different reasons for the change.

Of the three, Murdoch has examined the question most systematically. It is one she often addressed in philosophical essays and interviews. In her 1960 essay ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’ she discussed Romanticism in relation to the history of the novel. ‘[I]t is remarkable,’ she wrote,

and in ways entirely relevant to its characteristic and pre-eminent merits, how very un-Romantic the great nineteenth-century novel is. … There is in these novels a plurality of real persons more or less naturalistically presented in a large social scene, and representing mutually independent centres of significance which are those of real individuals. … Here one may see the Liberal spirit at its best and
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richest, disporting itself in literature, and not yet menaced by those elements of Romanticism which later proved, if I am right, so dangerous. (271)

For romanticism, in the modern novel, has developed into neurosis and produces ‘tightly conceived thing-like books’ (279). At the other extreme, there is ‘a loose journalistic epic, documentary or possibly even didactic in inspiration, offering a commentary on current institutions or on some matter out of history’ (278). Versions of this polarity were also offered at about the same time by Lessing, and by Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution*.

While what Murdoch missed in the modern novel was the individual character who is distinct from the author, Williams saw the twentieth century problem as a matter of imbalance. In the great realist novels, he says, ‘we attend with our whole senses to every aspect of the general life, yet the centre of value is always in the individual human person – not any one isolated person, but the many persons who are the reality of the general life’ (279). Since 1900, realist fiction styles, he believed, had divided into the social novel and the personal novel, a distinction closely matching Murdoch’s ‘things’ (personal novels) or truths (social novels). Lessing’s view added another dimension: obviously her reading habits were different:

If the typical product of communist literature during the last two decades is the cheerful little tract about economic advance, then the type of Western literature is the novel or play which one sees or reads with a shudder of horrified pity for all of humanity. If writers like Camus, Sartre, Genet, Beckett, feel anything but a tired pity for human beings, then it is not evident from their work.

I believe that the pleasurable luxury of despair, the acceptance of disgust, is as much a betrayal of what a writer should be as the acceptance of the simple economic view of man; both are aspects of cowardice. (‘small Personal Voice’ 15)

It is notable that these views all share an ethical dimension: the view of life which authors imply is more important than an aesthetic standard.
Richard Clark Sterne believes that ‘the idea of ethical natural law has faded in the modern mind’ (xxi), the result being ‘the depiction of existence, in much of the best imaginative writing of our age, as absurd’ (xx). D.J. Taylor claims that

we live in a highly sophisticated, technological world governed by huge, distantly glimpsed and apparently impersonal forces, in which communications as much as morals have tended to invalidate the traditional novel of character. The whole plot of a novel like Trollope’s *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, which hinges on the absence overseas of a crucial witness, could not take place in a world without telephones. (173)

But plots can still hinge on communication failures even in a world supplied with telephones, as Murdoch’s *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* shows. Major technological innovations which significantly affected everyday life, like the railways and the telegraph, were, in any event, a common feature of the nineteenth century, and did not prevent the ‘traditional novel of character’ from flourishing. The same impulse to write truthfully but enjoyably about the world still animates novelists. Jane Gardham, echoing many of her nineteenth-century predecessors, believes ‘that the most important thing about [fiction] is to entertain, but … “entertaining” [is] a much more fluid, healthier and wiser than the novel with a purpose, the novel that sets out to instruct’ (16): compare this with Hardy: ‘novels which most conduce to moral profit are likely to be among those written without a moral purpose’ (Allott 98), or Hawthorne: ‘when romances do really teach anything, … it is usually through a far more subtle process than the ostensible one’ (Allott 93). That fiction is still believed to contain moral values is clear from the publication of such books as Colin McGinn’s *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (1997). McGinn observes that ‘our moral understanding and the story form seem fitted for one another’ (174). He claims
that it is ‘so obvious that I am almost embarrassed to state’ that ‘reading novels (or watching plays and films, or reading poetry and short stories) … is … for most people … the primary way in which they acquire ethical attitudes, especially in contemporary culture’ (174-5). D.J. Taylor, in spite of his belief that morality has been eroded in the post-war world, in a discussion of novels which criticise imperialism (in itself a moral activity) says that ‘it is easy … to talk of the subversion of agreeable but unsustainable myths, but equally easy to argue that the truly agreeable myth of the post-war era is that of the wicked colonial oppressor’ (56); a myth which has become widely adopted in the morality of the post-colonial world. Moral values have not disappeared: they have merely shifted their emphasis.

Twentieth-century novelists’ nostalgia for an earlier age of greatness is described by Salman Rushdie as ‘culturally endemic golden-ageism; that recurring, bilious nostalgia for a literary past that at the time didn’t seem much better than the present does now’ (‘In Defense’ 49). David Lodge points out that ‘the English Victorian novel … is represented by the work of perhaps a dozen novelists, out of the thousand or more who actually wrote novels in this period’ (‘The Novel Now’ 11). Often the differences in our lives from theirs are emphasised and the homogeneity of experience within their time is assumed: Margaret Anne Doody has noted how ‘untidiness on the part of the zeitgeist distresses world-pictures involved in some critical claims’ (3); we might contemplate an entity we call ‘the nineteenth century novel’, but find on examining examples that they deviate in important ways from the norm. Taylor admits that ‘one talks confidently about “the novelist”. In fact there are only novelists’ (xxiv), but still makes large claims such as ‘the great Victorian
fictional beings seem to bestride their world; its concerns are theirs; they invariably dominate it’ (174).

Reasons given for the changes in the novel, by writers and critics, include historical events, such as the world wars and the break-up of the European empires; the erosion of the unquestioned status of organised religions in western societies; psychological sophistication which makes writers (and readers) unprecedentedly self-conscious; the rapid pace of technological change and scientific discovery in this century; political and social changes attributable to these factors, as well as socialism and other movements – feminism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism; and linguistic and aesthetic theories which, along with the development of psychology, have made unself-conscious writing increasingly difficult. These factors, however, have differing effects on the practice of individual writers. As Gasiorek says

postmodernism is so often invoked as a cultural dominant that a diverse range of literary forms come to be seen in a homogeneous fashion as part of a general ‘crisis of representation’ … To read authors who engage in quite different ways with the epistemological and aesthetic difficulties entailed by representation as though they are all participating in the same pursuit is to ‘flatten out’ the post-war period in a way that can only contribute to the very dehistoricization that critics of postmodernism lament. (vi)

The three authors included in my study have certainly ‘engaged in quite different ways’ with the problems of writing in this period, and they have also defined their difficulties differently.

Doris Lessing regards the two world wars as ‘the two influences in my life – these wars. The older I get, the more I realize just what an influence they have been’ (Thomson 179). She suspects that they have left a ‘pattern of disaster’ (Forde 218) in her mind which exerts a powerful but unconscious force on her creative work, citing a story which had occurred to her in which
the simplest task becomes virtually impossible because of obstacles her mind would throw up in the path of her character. Stories of this type, however, are not new. A narrative that does not contain some sort of struggle against unusual odds, some kind of testing of the mettle of its protagonist, would be, indeed, out of the ordinary. Whilst the wars undoubtedly influenced her, the pattern in her mind may have been there without them, as it has occurred in the minds of storytellers from the time of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* onwards.

In her Afterword to *The Story of an African Farm* she describes the novel as ‘that hybrid, the mixture of journalism and the *Zeitgeist* and autobiography that comes out of a part of the human consciousness which is always trying to understand itself, to come into the light’ (163). But in spite of her opinion, quoted above, that ‘all those old novels’ were ‘a statement of faith in man himself’ she does not admire them unreservedly. ‘*Wuthering Heights* is an appalling novel … but it doesn’t really matter’ (Thorpe 98); she admires George Eliot enormously, but there is ‘a kind of womanly certitude … something too cushioned in her judgments’ (Bigsby, ‘Need to Tell Stories’ 71); and ‘*Anna Karenina*. What a marvelous book! … is a story about nothing, about a local society, a very local, temporary set of social circumstances’. She goes on,

in fact, a good deal of Victorian fiction can be classified like that … These tragedies are mini-tragedies because they derive from fairly arbitrary social conditions; they are not rooted in any human nature. … We now live with our heads in the middle of exploding galaxies and thinking about quasars and quarks and black holes and alternative universes and so on, so that you cannot any more get comfort from old moral certainties because something new is happening. All our standards of values have been turned upside down. (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 72)

To condemn Tolstoy to obsolescence because society has changed, and the problems his characters faced no longer exist, is an extraordinary statement for
The novel deals in such particularities – as Williams says, ‘a particular apprehension of a relation between individuals and society’ (279). Historiography or journalism can show the big picture, but the novel can show the consequences of wars, laws, social attitudes, moral creeds, at the personal level. As Updike says, ‘a writer’s witness, surely, is of value in its circumstantiality’ (‘Why Write’ 3). If authors believed that individuals no longer mattered – as E.L. Doctorow says he was beginning to feel, ‘that the story of any given individual … may not be able to sustain an implication for the collective fate’ (240) – then the novel would very quickly die. And of course Lessing knows this, at the level at which she actually creates her fiction, rather than that at which she expounds her beliefs in essays and interviews. Another odd aspect of her statement is the notion that nineteenth-century society was not rooted in human nature. All human societies are necessarily expressions of human nature, and the behaviour of individuals is a result of their various human natures reacting to their circumstances. All of Lessing’s characters – Martha Quest, Anna Wulf, Jane Somers, Ambien II, Mara – are individuals struggling in the world as it is, on a personal level, without understanding the causes of their troubles, however much their creator purports to know. And if they matter at all, they matter because they are unique individuals (which is what they have in common with real people), not because they are especially representative and belong to a society more quintessential than that portrayed in nineteenth century fiction. This is an example of the type of illogical thinking that mars Lessing’s novels. She has certainly experimented with new forms to suit the ethical problems she has discovered for herself, but a little more rational analysis of exorbitant claims like these
may have prevented her work from exhibiting determinism, didacticism and what Jeanette King calls ‘a potentially authoritarian dimension’ (92).

Murdoch is more modest than Lessing about the claims of modern novelists to have improved on the nineteenth century tradition. She writes in ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’,

Many reasons might be given for the particular qualities of the nineteenth-century novel: reasons which might connect it with particular, now-vanished historical and social conditions… Whereas society in the nineteenth century was either a reassuring place where one lived, or else an exciting, rewarding, interesting place where one struggled, society today tends to appear, by contrast, as menacing, puzzling, uncontrollable, or else confining, and boring. (272, 279)

This is a fair description, perhaps, of the impression given by reading some of the fiction of the respective periods, but for many of the females of the nineteenth century with any kind of material security, society could hardly have seemed more ‘confining and boring’: a recurrent theme in Jane Austen is the infinite patience the female characters need to get through their days, with little scope for action beyond a walk to the drapers, and the Victorian era was hardly an improvement in this respect. And for Dickens’ characters, society is often not reassuring; it can seem very ‘menacing, puzzling and uncontrollable’. They did not have the particular menace of the nuclear holocaust in view, but they might have found the prospect of the workhouse or death in childbirth similarly upsetting. The bizarre juxtaposition, in the developed societies of the twentieth century, of increasing material security and improvements in medical science, especially in the fifties and sixties, with the threat of complete destruction of human society posed by the cold war, may have resulted in the postmodern fragmentation of modern literature, but that may also indicate, paradoxically, a greater feeling of security. Philip Stevick pointed out in 1973
that ‘new fiction … elevates play to the very centre of the complex of apparent motives that animate the work’ (215). The kind of playfulness of a novel like *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is not a symptom of insecurity, but its opposite, in spite of its serious underlying myth. Murdoch fights against and to some extent sloughs off what Dipple calls entrapment ‘by the theories and preoccupation of a milieu which encourages self-concentration from both writer and reader’ (4), but she still regrets she cannot write in the same way as the novelists of the past whom she admires so much. She notes that the modern novelist ‘would find it difficult to write as they did without an element of pastiche’, that the typical writer of the twentieth century ‘won’t … describe his characters from the outside; he will describe them from consciousness, or if he suddenly describes them from the outside, this will be an obvious literary device’ (Magee 535) (which, incidentally, also applies to some of Austen’s fiction, especially *Persuasion*). Nevertheless, her preoccupation with aiming for what she suspects is impossible, but believes is a moral imperative for the novelist – the high standards of the novel as it was written in the nineteenth century – has, by turning her attention away from what she might have achieved if she rethought the form on her own terms, restricted her development as an artist. James Wood comments that it is ‘frustrating … to see a novelist so well-equipped artistically, skidding about on this hard philosophical ice’ (‘Iris Murdoch’ 184).

Naipaul was brought up on Dickens and other classic English novelists, making what sense he could of an alien society in his Trinidad home. In later life, however, he has claimed to find the novelists of the nineteenth century less interesting than essayists of the period like Hazlitt and Charles Lamb, who
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‘would have had their gifts diluted or corrupted by the novel form as it existed in their time’, and who, ‘novelistic as they are in the pleasures they offer, found their own forms’. Of novelists like Trollope and Thackeray, great as they are as observers of society, he feels ‘the need for narrative and plot sat on [their] shoulders like a burden’. He insists, echoing Tolstoy, that ‘every serious writer has to be original’, and ‘the other man’s forms served the other man’s thoughts’ (‘On Being a Writer’). He may, however, be projecting his own difficulties with what he sees as the conventional novel form onto these writers. Trollope did not regard plot highly, but he was quite happy to use it as ‘the vehicle’ for ‘a picture of common life enlivened by humour and sweetened by pathos’ (Allott 247), and in any event, he, as well as his major contemporaries, did adapt the novel to his own devices. The major novelists of the nineteenth century may have much in common, but they are also each unique in the uses they made of the form as it existed at their time. Consider the vast differences between *Wuthering Heights*, *Middlemarch*, *The Way We Live Now*, and *Oliver Twist*. All these novels are of their time, but they describe quite different worlds, and reveal great differences in sensibility, while still falling solidly within the definition of ‘the novel’. Naipaul feels the inadequacy of the current form to his content because his experience is further from the mainstream of the tradition than that of someone like Murdoch; and although his deployment of the form, which is of its very nature protean anyway, worked brilliantly with little overt experimentation in *A House for Mr Biswas*, since then his most successful works, like *In a Free State* and *The Enigma of Arrival*, have moved beyond the conventional novel form, if considered as a chronological narrative unified by characters and plot. He says,
You might go on endlessly writing ‘creative’ novels, if you believed that the framework of an ordered society exists, so that after a disturbance there is calm, and all crises fall back into that great underlying calm. But that no longer exists for most people. (Rowe-Evans 36)

It is one of Naipaul’s strengths as a writer that he does not participate in this illusion of security, and because he has been forced to define his own individual problems with the form, rather than identifying a set of general standards, he has developed a series of ethical strategies uniquely suited to his personal needs.

One reason for the obvious differences in novels written since the second world war is that we know more about the natural world, and about the human mind, and about what human beings are capable of under extreme circumstances: Gasiorek says of the immediate post-war period, ‘the horrors of the war seemed to outstrip the literary imagination’ (2). There are, also, standards of decorum which have vanished, so that there is now, it seems, nothing that cannot be written about. Miriam Allott claimed in her introduction to Novelists on the Novel (1959) that ‘nineteenth-century social conventions are partly responsible for hindering the development of the English novelist’s understanding of his moral responsibilities as an artist’ (33); but Taylor points out that the post-Chatterley trial relaxation gave writers a hitherto unthought-of degree of freedom, but it also presented them with an obligation – to find an appropriate language in which descriptions of sexual activity could be conveyed. With very few exceptions this obligation has been ignored, and the freedom to write about sex in whatever way you choose is generally agreed to have been an aesthetic disaster. (233)

On the other hand, in the case of a nineteenth-century character such as Becky Sharp, her charm ‘is all done by hints and allusions, a code of occlusion which
demands the reader’s participation and has the effect of increasing, rather than diminishing, Becky’s appeal’ (221). Naipaul has remarked that

if I were an English person trying to be a writer, I wouldn’t know how to start. I don’t see how you can write about England without falling into parody, without competing with what you’ve read, without wishing to show that you know it too – class, sex, and so on. (Hussein 155)

Besides feeling compelled to mention the previously unmentionable, writers are constrained by advances in psychological knowledge. Not only do the popular versions of Freudian theories make it impossible to portray the kind of uncomplicated affection between family members which is common in Austen and Dickens, but new discoveries about the physical nature of the human brain and its role in the perception of reality were becoming widely known in the post-war period. Raymond Williams wrote in 1961,

the new facts about perception make it impossible for us to assume that there is any reality experienced by man into which man’s own observations and interpretations do not enter. Thus the assumptions of naïve realism – seeing things as they really are, quite apart from our reactions to them – become impossible. (20)

Gasiorek finds in his study of post-war British fiction that ‘attention to language’s constitutive role, the doubleness inherent in fictional representation, and the impossibility of unmediated access to the real, are everywhere apparent’ (19). Framed narratives, magical realism and metafiction have become common. These techniques are, of course, not new to the twentieth century. The classic example is Tristram Shandy, but there is a great deal of self-consciousness in Tom Jones, and English writers in the nineteenth century did not shed this tendency entirely, however much they professed realism as their aim. The narrative framework of many of the great novels is deliberately put on view, and first-person novels, which carry within themselves the seeds of indeterminacy, were common in the nineteenth century. On the whole,
however, as Taylor points out, ‘Victorian displays of self-consciousness were never allowed to penetrate the carapace of personality’ (292).

The stability usually assumed to be characteristic of Victorian England was as much of an illusion, and recognized as such, as it is in any western society today. Peter Keating observes

> That there are relatively few complete or harmonious families to be found in Victorian fiction is not a repudiation of the importance attached to the idea. The broken family units – widows and sons, widowers and daughters, guardians and wards, aunts and nephews, lonely and endangered orphans – all serve to emphasise the precariousness of the social fabric and point forward to the stable unity that only marriage and children can convincingly represent. It often reads like the impossible dream it was. (161)

Happy endings do not obscure what Williams called ‘the intensity of the central experience’ of ‘those lonely exposed figures’ (68): as Peter Brooks says, ‘if at the end of a narrative we can suspend time in a moment when past and present hold together in a metaphor … that moment does not abolish the movement, the slidings, the mistakes, and partial recognitions of the middle’ (92). Keating believes that ‘the omniscience of the novelist, and therefore the characteristically Victorian form of realism, was only possible because the existence was assumed of a higher form of omniscience’ (160). And it may be true that, for many Victorians, their religious belief meant that death held fewer terrors, and a virtuous, long-suffering character in Dickens, like Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*, who goes uncomplaining to his death is confidently assumed by Dickens’ implied reader to be spending eternity among the celestial hosts, while no such fate would be predicted for Jenkin Riderhood in Murdoch’s *The Book and the Brotherhood* when he is killed by a stray bullet in a duel in which he had no part. But even this difference may be over-emphasised. Doody remarks that ‘some twentieth-century novels of repute
have been written – and read – by theists and Scripture readers’ (3), and Charles Taylor, in an analysis of Murdoch’s moral philosophy, notes that ‘even the grossest superstitions survive in advanced societies, and these were on the other hand always condemned by minorities’ (25). Furthermore, as D.J. Taylor notes, ‘novels about religious doubt were a staple of the Victorian best-seller lists’ (169).

John Fowles, in his ‘Notes on an Unfinished Novel’, refers to Robbe-Grillet’s question, ‘Why bother to write in a form whose great masters cannot be surpassed?’

The fallacy of one of his conclusions – we must discover a new form to write in if the novel is to survive – is obvious. It reduces the purpose of the novel to the discovery of new forms: whereas its other purposes – to entertain, to satirize, to describe new sensibilities, to record life, to improve life, and so on – are clearly just as viable and important. But his obsessive pleading for new form places a kind of stress on every passage one writes today. To what extent am I being a coward by writing inside the old tradition? To what extent am I being panicked into avant-gardism? (139-140)

The novel is a flexible form and for each talented writer it is capacious and adaptable enough to suit a multitude of purposes. Rushdie asserts that ‘there is no crisis in the art of the novel’, and following an enumeration of some recent innovations in this ‘hybrid form’, concludes, ‘the novel can welcome these developments without feeling threatened. There’s room for all of us in here’ (‘In Defense’ 50). It may certainly be said that novels of a particular period share characteristics, but, as Sontag says, ‘seen from the outside, that is, historically, stylistic decisions can always be correlated with some historical development…. But this approach, however sound and valuable, of necessity sees matters grossly’ (32). Historical context is important, but it is only one of the factors that affect the choices authors need to make about form and content.
in their fiction. To ignore it altogether would be foolish, but simply to believe, like Murdoch, that nineteenth century writers are intrinsically greater, or like Lessing that they are intrinsically more trivial, than contemporary writers, can result in the failure of a writer to examine critically the nature of their own personal artistic impulses and circumstances; a process which is crucial to the success of their work in both ethical and aesthetic terms.