

THE ETERNAL CONFLICT OF FLESH AND SPIRIT: A STUDY OF MORAL CONCERNS OF MODERN NOVEL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AJ CRONIN

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Abstract:

Depravity and degradation of man is conspicuous by its presence all around us. It is causing great loss to the values of life highlighted in all ethical and theological books. Very few modern novelists have tried to uplift man from this morass of depravity. Life is not merely physical pleasure; life is not merely money. Writers like A. J. Cronin have tried to awaken man from his sleep and thus emphasized an important function of literature which is not merely entertainment, but also instruction. The paper discusses the prescription of do's and don'ts in human life. The novels of A. J. Cronin reflect the conflict of the flesh and the spirit that human beings face.

Keywords: *Salvation, tentacles of science, inner voice, right and wrong, do's and don'ts, pleasure and pain, values, moral law, take for granted.*

Introduction:

Man in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation, strides of physical culture, practice of sports has not added an inch to his moral stature.¹

Wither, wither is shame fled from Human breasts?

Is that, whichever was a cause of life, now placed beneath the barest circumstances?²

My friend, blood shaking my heart. The awful daring of a moment's surrender which an age of prudence can never retract. By this and this only, we have existed.³

The Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her. The homely nurse doth all she can to make her foster child the inmate man, forget the glories he has known⁴

Serene will be our days and bright. And happy will our nature be, when love is an unerring light, and Joy its own security.⁵

The Bad fable has a moral while the good fable is moral⁶

What am I? Or from whence? For that I am, I know because I think; bat whence I came or how this frame of mine began to be? What other being can disclose to me? I move, I see, I speak, I discourse and know. Though now I am, I wasn't so.⁷

All these citations reflect, to a great extent, the psyche of 20th and 21st centuries. The risqué Nineties had brought about a complete transition in every sphere of life. The gripping tentacles of science had swallowed the essential basic faith of man in himself, God and religion. Man could not strike a balance between the faith that he had and the professed rationality of science. Man felt bewildered and rootless. The discord between his faith in religion and his awe of science shocked the very moral foundation of his life and beliefs and all this was reflected in literature particularly in novels.

In modern times there was an enthusiastic quest for salvation. The need to re-establish the basic values of life was felt and the primary want of the responsible artist remained to find “*meaning and values*”. From the past, he sought solutions for problems that could keep him away from the obsession with sex, which crumbled his morals. A novelist is a combination of triple mental processes of scientific discovery, philosophic understanding and artistic expression. Novels create stories and characters to

illustrate the truths and convey them clearly, effectively and artistically. *Conrad* called society evil because society is responsible for corrupting man to a great extent. He spelt out how man in his testing time was tempted to follow unethical or immoral paths. Marvell called society rude. The sensitive soul of man had to undergo an affliction, the confusion and the perplexity in the chaotic surrounding; so it was necessary that man should listen to his *inner voice*.

Two novelists, incidentally both doctors i.e. Somerset Maugham and Cronin, revealed the difference between things as they were and the things as they appeared. They, however, did not categorically point out the Do's and Dont's of life. They left it to the readers to decide for themselves. Graham Green presented the struggle between duty and principles and worldly desires. He portrayed the utter degradation of human soul and its redemption by the resurrection of traditional values.

Archibald Joseph Cronin mirrored the eternal conflict between the flesh and the spirit through his novels *The Citadel*, *Hatter's Castle*, *The Keys of the Kingdom*. His characters have had to suffer the consequences of their sins. For them, death is not the end of all pains; as we find in Graham Green's writings. According to Cronin, values once lost could be recovered only through sincere suffering, surrender and repentance. Cronin discusses the questions of right and wrong, problems of vices and virtues of dos and don'ts of life. He is in search of meaningful existence which cannot be achieved in isolation as man is a social animal. Man's existence, if destructive, is meaningless. It is necessary to retain a moral code of conduct. All artists have to follow the commands of morality. If literature is a source of entertainment, it is also a source of instruction and teaching. Aristotle opined that,

That man is good who sees the truth himself. Good too is he who hearkens to himself, nor willing to ponder wisdom, is not worth a straw.⁸

No human being came to the world with the notions of *dos and don'ts*, *right and wrong* already planted in his mind but these prohibitive notions which are both recuperative and reformatory are inculcated in man. This inculcation does not simply emerge from parental authority but from a higher social force. General Laws laid down explicitly by society, target the welfare of society and they may be called *moral laws*. Life is a pattern of moral codes, not of gig lamps. Human beings need to be controlled by a sense of morality. Moral virtue is a confirmed disposition to act rightly although this exercise is accompanied by pains and pleasure both as emphasized in *Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics* and *Archie Bahm's Why Be Moral?*. Man is said to indulge in a disgraceful act to avoid pain. "Pleasure has a way of making us do what is disgraceful; pain deters us from doing what is right and fine."⁹

So the basic moral law is applicable to all human beings who are rational, who are capable of thought and reasoning. "Even Gods, angels or even devils (if they exist) are bound by law as well."¹⁰

One should be moral because one is known to desire the best for himself. Moral principles are designed as ways of behaviour most conducive to attaining the best. Confusions and conflicts however, arise in human mind. Man wonders why he should act in a certain way and not otherwise. Doubt compels one to reflect and reflection leads to introspection. Reflection and introspection led to positive confirmation.

Man is known to doubtful by nature. "Whether it always pays to act morally?"; "Whether it is a rational to do the moral thing?" etc.

Man feels confused and at times man feels depressed as captured by Milton's *When I Consider How my Light is Spent* (Commonly referred to as "On his Blindness") and Milton's *Lycidas*.

"Does God exact labour, light dined"

"Alas! What boots it with incessant care,

To tend the homely slighted shepherds trade,

And strictly meditate the thankless muse?"

The answer comes from within (1) "They also serve who stand and wait" (2) "Fame is the plant that grows not on mortal soil. Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise (The last infirmity of Noble

mind).” Mind once again asks,

Should one be moral only if a reward is promised at the end? Unless we have a guarantee that in some way perhaps in the long run, perhaps in the after-life, it will pay us to do what is morally required, why should we not rather do what appears to be in our interests.¹¹

These questions cannot be answered justifiably because one cannot sieve through the sands of time. The future is enveloped in the womb of time. The concept of afterlife has various interpretations. Religious teachings enumerate the need to live a life with morals but can we equate religion to morality? Philosophers have stated that morality pertains to the conduct of human affairs and human relations while religion pertains to the relationship between human beings and a transcendent reality. Both are closely related. It is religion which symbolises the relationship between human beings and the divine power. It brings man in touch with the infinite and the almighty.

It is the *Indian thought* that places a great emphasis on the natural moral law of *Karma*- action or deed. The Indian religious belief is that one is rewarded or punished according to one's actions. One's own actions are the deciding factor of his fate in the afterlife or life after the death of the physical body. One cannot be freed from the consequences of evil deeds. The concept of *Nishkam Karma*. i.e. action performed without expecting results promotes the need to be selfless in one's action. It re-emphasizes the concept that one must do one's duty without any desire for the fruits and by not expecting a reward. The teachings of Nishkam Karma sustain the cosmic moral order. This is the most significant achievement of Indian moral and religious thought.

A.J. Cronin was a Christian and so it becomes imperative to discuss and analyse the principles of Christianity which has instructions in the form of the Ten Commandments given by God. The Ten Commandments play a significant role in designing the Christian way of Life. The Ten Commandments are said to guide the Christian moral life in a thematic, systematic and consistent manner. But there is a difference between philosophical ethics and Christian ethics.

All ethics pose the same questions:

What is the good? What values and goals should be pursued? What attitudes and disposition should characterize the person? What acts are right? What acts are wrong?¹²

According to Adler, the moral law is neither a convenience, nor a convention. It is not imposed that we may achieve happiness for ourselves or others

The moral law comes out of the infinite depths and heights. There is a voice in us that speaks in us out of the ultimate reality of thing. It is not subject to us, but we are subject to it, and to it we must bend our pride.... But there is also a lower nature in such and this we must subjugate to that higher nature.¹³

In the entire universe and also within man, there is a constant conflict between- the good and the evil. The war between the good and the bad is continuous. It is the duty of every man to ensure those good triumphs victorious; because in the universe, it is man who holds the balance between the good and the evil.

“Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong” said Wordsworth in his “*Ode to Duty*”. Moral acts are an illustration of the universal law. It is the *absolute law*. As man and universe are related; literature and morality are related. The man of literature perceives that in the larger world outside there is a moral order that operates very effectively despite the erosion of religious faith. Literature has the twin function of delight and instruction. *Art for Art's sake* is nullification of the real nature and motive of literature. Morality does not appear with a formal title. It simply penetrates and blends itself with art as completely as life itself. A poet is moralist in spite of himself. (*Baudelaire*) so Chesterton rightly said, “The Fable has a moral while the good fable is moral.”

Great writers create, reveal and exhaust. They present the problems of life and solve it from their specific point of view. Richardson and Bunyan took up the crusade of moralising through their novels.

Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* is a story of fierce struggle between the spirit and flesh and the final triumph of the spirit. Defoe has presented *Robinson Crusoe* as a symbol of the lives of thousands of hard labouring Englishmen. It is a fact that poetic justice is not always found in real life, but for a virtuous person there is a promise of reward.

Virtue is its own reward in the peace that ensues, and vice carries, with the consequential disturbed conscience, its own punishment.¹⁴

Jane Austen's Novels are imbued indirectly in morality. Dickens wrote *Nicholas Nickleby* to expose monstrous neglect of education in England. *Bleak House* exposed delay in law and *Oliver Twist* exposed the abuses of the workhouse system. *Cronin* is called England's new Dickens as he was deeply stirred by the disintegrating and disappearing values of society in which he lived. We find that internationally best-selling novels examine moral conflict between the individual and the society. Besides Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, George Eliot, Hardy etc. also used fiction as an instrument for perpetuation of moral values. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* was written "in instinctive recoil against the representation of life in false lights."

In 20th century, the question of morality became most pertinent

The two basic themes of modern literature have been those of isolation and relationship within a decaying moral order.¹⁵

20th century society has become spiritually morally and ethically barren. Rapid economic and social changes gave rise to moral perplexities and nourished the already sprouting feeling of faithlessness and crudity. A writer like prolific E.M. Forster was disgusted and stopped writing. The loss of faith was caused by science and technology for common man, it became difficult to equate the rationality of science with the inexplicability of faith in the never-seen God. These conflicting and non-conciliatory forces created spiritual problems.

The pervasive feeling was that material gain must be balanced against a perceptible spiritual loss and it was the spiritual loss that received attention.¹⁶

Could the lost faith be instilled again? Was it irretrievable? Hope is the spice of life. Hope is the staff against despairing thoughts. So writers did not lose hope and continued to make efforts for the rejuvenation, retention and survival of moral values and *Cronin* was one them. Cronin was born on 18th July, 1896 in Scotland. He served as a surgeon in the First World War. Later he became a general practitioner in New South Wales. After retirement in 1930 he decided to become a writer and soon reached the dazzling height of fame. He died of Bronchitis on 9th January, 1981 in Switzerland.

Cronin was not an innovator but a traditionalist. His taste was Catholic. His favourite authors were Stevenson, Scott and Conrad on the romantic side; Balzac, Maupassant and Flaubert on the realistic side; Bennett, Sinclair Lewis and Somerset Maugham on the technical straightforward side. *He said that there was hope for mankind as far as it did not forget God for that creates a self-destructive feeling.* He believes in the guiding light and it widens his moral vision, has made him more tolerant and receptive towards all religions. The one thought that permeates through all his novels is that man cannot live without God. He says,

There is no substitute for God. Though we may not fully recognize it. We exist in the divine essence. The image of God is found in all mankind.¹⁷

His *Hatter's Castle* (1931) is a soul-stirring novel of pride and greed and their terrible consequences: It is story of James Brodie who is a tyrant husband and father, who controls his home with a ruthless hand. He is only a hatter but is convinced that he has had a noble birth. His daughters either runaway or commit suicide, his son elopes with father's mistress, ailing wife dies and he is left alone with all his pride shattered. Pride has its retributions. He is like Satan who had unconquerable pride. In Cronin's novels, no immorality, wickedness, or injustice goes unpunished.

James Brodie is more than mere tyrant, he is a pathological case, controlled by delusions of

grandeur and later by the demon of drink.¹⁸

His speech to his own mother is culpable:

Are you a sow to eat like that, woman?

Remember your pretty manners, you old faggot?

Wife is worthy only because she saves money on servants. She is not allowed to sit in his presence. He subdues all independent spirits. Emotion of mercy is foreign to him.

The Stars look Down (1935) presents the theme of struggle between capital and labour. Its plot has some resemblance with Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* and contests father's sense of morality with son's. Father remains unbothered about the safety of the miners while the son does everything to make mine safe. Son Arthur considers war murder. Questions raised are "*Do wars have moral foundation? "Is success and morality negatively linked?"*" Cronin suggests that the path of truth is full of thorns yet the courageous are ready to tread the path where angels fear to tread in spite of realising that the world is selfish.

The terrible thought struck David that each man in this fast hurrying streaming office was living for his own interest, for his own satisfaction, for his own welfare, for himself. Each man was conscious only of himself and the lives of other men stood only as adjuncts of his own existence- they did not matter, it was he who mattered... He would sacrifice the lives and happiness of other men, Cheat and swindle, exterminate and annihilate for the sake of his own welfare, his own interest, for the sake of himself.¹⁹

The Citadel (?) is a very famous novel portraying the conflict of Mammon and morality as well as marital discord. It is the story of Dr. Mason who is very idealistic and pursues his career honestly. He meets Christine Barlow, a school teacher, and marries her. His work on pulmonary diseases is appreciated and he is given a job in London where he finds bureaucratic stupidity and inertia. He resigns and comes to mining town, takes up the dying practice of Dr. Fog and develops love for money, begins to earn quick money and drifts apart from his wife. He becomes conscienceless but is awakened by the shock of the death of a shoe-maker on the operation table of an incompetent surgeon. He is appalled at his own transformation, has an emotional reconciliation with his wife who dies in an accident. In the end he begins to live a humble life. Cronin thus presents how medical society is devoured by a competitive society and how spiritual depravity destroys marital heaven. Money should not mean more to a doctor than the ethical practice of it. Some people may argue that doctors are also human beings and need money and comforts and other luxuries of life as others do but we should remember that money mindedness and business like attitude are vices in a doctor. The Hippocratic oath that every doctor takes before starting his career should be kept at any cost. So the story of Andrew Mason's materialistic success and spiritual failure forms the essence of the book. It also shows his journey from morality to immorality and his return to the fold of virtue.

As far as marriage is concerned Cronin suggests that before marriage there is emotional insecurity and after marriage things are taken for granted and that is the root cause of marital discord. Couples love, squabble and make up with refreshing realism. Both spiritual and physical supports are needed to uphold the arch of marriage, to sustain relationship. Husband and wife are complementary. The sanctity of marriage must be preserved. The path of righteousness is difficult to tread. The message through Andrew Mason is "I keep telling myself never to take anything for granted."²⁰

Cronin has cut through the romanticism that surrounds medical profession and has exposed the potentialities of charlatans and dishonesty inherent in a system whereby a large number of people depend for economic security on the real or fancied sufferings of others. Cronin has removed the veil of sanctity often draped round profession but he must remember that it is not the profession that is to be black listed but particular men who practise it. The fact still remains that, "Poverty makes man more mean than noble."

In the *keys to the kingdoms (1942)*, he attacks religious intolerance and the false standards set between God and Man.

Certainly Dr. Cronin is attacking the worldliness and bigotry and over-organization and the

claim of man-made standards or establishments to stand between man and his God. But the breadth of attack is against the deadly evil of Intolerance and Greed and arrogant complacency wherever they may be; in Church, class, nation, in you and me. And he is telling us the sure values without which there can be no real brotherliness' growth in loneliness and question from the soil of humility to true spiritual power.²¹

Cronin asks,

Isn't it time for the churches of the world to cease hating one another and unite? The world is one living breathing body, dependent for its health on the billions of cells which comprise it and each tiny cell is the heart of man.²²

To the assertive accusation that

“He was not a Catholic... not even a Christian.”

The question put is,

How do you define a Christian? One who goes to Church once a week and lies, slanders, cheats his fellow men six days? Dr. Tulloch died helping others like Christ himself.²³

“No one can ever be lost if he is sincere according to his own light.”

In father Chisholm, Cronin has created a fighter against wealthy prelates who lived in luxury and neglected their flocks. He fought for the enlightenment of his parishioners. He fought for souls in the brothels of Barcelona. He fought ignorance, poverty, disease and even bandits. We can say that one who fights the battles of life impatiently and selflessly is a true moral person.

In *Three Loves* (1932), the question is raised and answered.

What was the object of life? Where was its beauty?

The Answer is:

Were it not based on the formula of honesty and virtue and the satisfaction of doing the right thing?

The concept of morality cannot be skin-deep. It is deeply related to man's inner being. In *Green Years*, *Shannon's way*, *Adventures in Two Words*, 1952, the same justification for moral life is enunciated with the verdict that

Mankind has sacrificed the spirit for the flesh, has become sapped of virtue, dreading any prospect not insulated by ease, by the smug protection that can be bought with gold.²⁴

These lines are reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's lines

We can not

Kindle when we will, the fire

which in the heart resides,

the spirit blows and is still in mystery our soul abides.²⁵

It is not in worlds markets bought of sold.²⁶

So in an era of fear and restlessness when man, ringed by hostile forces, feels isolated in a dark loneliness, family is his main, his ultimate hope for self-preservation, for maintaining human dignity and the decencies of life. God is the only motivating power. God cannot be proved like a mathematical equation nor can his existence be demonstrated like a problem in a book of Euclid. Cronin says

Obviously an infinite being cannot be rationalized in finite terms- our human capacity is utterly incapable of wholly understanding him. God is that firm rock on which the entire universe rests Faith in him is essential to save humanity.

The reason why Cronin placed morality above all is the fact that he believes that it is only by being moral, by being good which is what all the religions teach that man can hope to grow closer to the realm of the Almighty. He believes in the creed of beauty and simplicity: to live decent, to love one's neighbour, to be covetous of his goods, to be tolerant, charitable and humble to recollect always that life, as we know it, is but a fragment of reality. We are reminded of what T.S., Eliot said, in their *Waste Land*:

Son of Man, You cannot say, or guess, for you know only, A heap of broken images....

Morality is the core of all his major and minor novels. He wants to create a morally conscious society and a conscientious world. Freedom is not bad but uncontrolled freedom leads us to annihilation similarly as absolute power leads us to exterminate others. Prohibitions are not impediments to enjoyment. They are social laws. Man obeys them, grudges them, respects them and finally accepts them.

Conclusion:

Thus, all the novels of Cronin mirror the quest of the spirit and try to solve the moral problems of our times. All his novels have moral design. He probes deep into the eternal and everlasting problem and comes up with solutions which evince his strong conviction in the moral order of the day. We can conclude that Cronin's concept of morality was humane, benign and universal but multifarious in its shade and degree. Cronin was not just a popular writer but a writer with a mission. *If modern man heeds his advice*, the world will be a happier place to live in. No doubt the path of righteousness is not smooth but determined practice moulds a man.

Jam non consilio bonus more or products ut non tantum recte faceie possim, sed
nise recte facere non possim.

I am no longer good through deliberate intent, but by long habit have reached a point where
I am not only able to do right but am unable to do anything but what is right.²⁷

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