

ABSTRACT

Literature, Self and Society:

The Ontological Dilemma in

Wuthering Heights,

Tender Is the Night

and Myal

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The study of human behaviour, over time, has involved the idea that every individual needs to form significant relationships with others. He who is unable to do this, and, consequently, seems unable to fit into the group or society in which he finds himself, by reason of his birth, is often afflicted by a sense of the meaninglessness of existence.

This paper examines the idea that literature is one way of dealing with this kind of existential problem (the ontological dilemma). It is suggested that the problems of real life may be explored through the fictional characters which are created by the literary imagination. Through these literary characters, therefore, literature contributes to the development of the individual, whether reader or writer, and ultimately to society.

This view takes into account the work of various psychologists, particularly R. D. Laing's theory of the Self divided as a consequence of disturbed family relationships, and Karen Horney's theory of 'drives' to achieve power or love as a means of compensating for early emotional deprivation.

These novels are examined in the light of the foregoing ideas. Although it may be said that all or most aspects of the ontological dilemma are visible in all the novels, the method employed here has been to focus chiefly on one aspect in each, usually the most interesting from a literary point of view.

Changes in psychological thought have in this way been identified, from the earlier concept that 'love conquers all' to the more modern idea that the development of emotional health is a necessary prerequisite to successful relationships with others and integration into society. However, since literature as literature is judged by aesthetic rather than by purely psychological concepts, it does not necessarily follow that the novel which seems to suggest some solution to the ontological dilemma is the best one. Each is an admirable work of literature, and each contributes something to our understanding of the relationship between the individual and society.