

Moral Values as Highlighted in English Literature

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Let a man be an erudite scholar, a non Pareil bard of power or a doyen in a profession. If he does not provide a good example for people to copy or if he is not a man of exemplary character, he is nothing. “When money is last nothing is lost; When health is lost something is lost; When character is lost everything is lost.”

Most of us are familiar with this wise saying. Morality is the breath and finer spirit of human life.

Heaven and earth declare the glory of God. God directs our steps through nature.

Next to nature is literature that lights our path. Science enriches and literature enlivens our life. The head of the family enriches and the heart of the family enlivens our domestic life. To lead a moral life we should observe Nature and read literature.

In his prologue to the canturbury Tales Geoffery Chaucer the father of English poetry gives us the pen portrait of a poor but an ideal parson the embodiment of morality.

We serve men whereas the priests serve God. Chaucer’s parson was rich with holy thoughts. He preached Christ’s gospel sincerely. He was benign and diligent. He was very patient even in adversity.

He was not greedy. He was satisfied with the little he had. Wide was his parish and the house of his parishioners were far away. The parson visited the parishes rain or shine. He gave a noble example to his ‘sheep’. He practised first and then preached the gospel.

If the priests go wrong what will be the plight of the parishioners. Hence Chaucer asks, “If gold rusts what shall iron do”. “Desire is like fire. It needs both feeding and watching”. Money also needs both feeding and watching. If we are careless money will ruin us. That is why Lord Francis bacon says, “The virtue of adversity is fortitude of mind. The virtue of prosperity is temperance”. If we are not temperate money will ruin us.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s ‘Pardoners Tale’ is a typical example. There were three rioters. They saw a heap of a treasure in a cave. When they were poor they were alive. When they attempted to share it among themselves they fall a prey to it. This shows that greed for wealth is a curse.

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The Holy writ says, “He that increases knowledge increases sorrow”. Christopher Marlowe’s play Dr. Faustus proves this fact. Dr. Faustus reads all books written under the sun through and through. Not satisfied with this he becomes a necromancer. He turns to necromancy. (the practise of claiming to communicate with the dead in order to probe into future. He signs a dead of contract with Satan. According to it he leads a life of sinful pleasure for 24 years and at last sells his soul to the devil. Immoral Faustus is taken by force to hell. Immoral ways lead to damnation.

Poet Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queen speaks elaborately about virtue that triumphs at last.

The whole world acknowledges the fact that love conquers all and the greatest gift is love. St.Paul says, ‘And now abide faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest is love.

Love suffers long and is kind. Love does not envy, love does not parade itself; love does not behave rudely’. Love does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks not evil, does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never fails. (1.Cor. 13:4-7)

Immortal Shakespeare says in one of his sonnets, “Love is not love when it alters when it alteration finds. Love must be constant.

The hour comes for King Lear to bequeath several portions of his kingdom to his three daughters. His first two daughter are hollow women. They flatter their father and win his favour. Cordelia the third daughter in sincere to the core. But she does not flatter her royal father. Hence King Lear bequeath nothing to her Duke of Burgundy and the king of France have come to woo Cordelia. As Cordelia gets nothing from her father Duke of Burgundy does not want to woo her.

But the wise king of France refers to Cordelia as the real dowry. He says, “Love is not love it is mingled with regards that stand aloof from the entire point. This means that wealth alone is not the criterion to woo a virgin.

The king of France loves Cordelia not for the portion of the kingdom but for her virtue. Hence, he says “Fairest Cordelia, that are most rich, being poor.

Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon be it lawful

I take up what is cast away”

Wisdom knows that a chaste damsel is more precious than rubies. A virtuous woman in a crown to her husband. Morality is honoured with a prestigious award. Immoral Macbeth cannot avoid nemesis. He murders King Duncan while he is steeped in innocent sleep. Hence Macbeth does not have the wink of sleep. The innocent sleep.., the death of each day’s life; Sore labour’s bath, Balm to hurt mind.....

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An unwise man swerves from the path of morality. Hasty Othello loves his wife too well but not wisely. Hence he smothers, his beloved wife as chaste as the unsunned snow, and kills himself. Morality gives satisfaction. It is not necessary that one should be very rich. Wicked villain Iago says in the play Othello. "Poor and content is rich and rich enough. Literature shows that a man who leads a contented life is the richest man.

Shakespeare in his play 'As you like it' speaks about Duke senior who lives in banishment in the Forest of Arden. He says, "Are not these woods more free from peril than the envious court? He finds solace in the power of nature. He further says, "And this our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermon in stone and good in everything. I would not change it".

Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Morality in the price of peace of mind. Better is a little with the fear of the lord than great treasure with trouble.

There lived a miller near the river called Dee. He was very happy and had no worry about anything. He remained busy from morning to night in his work of grinding grains for making flour. Even the king was envious of the miller's happiness. So he wished to exchange his own heart with that of the miller. The miller's mealy cap was more lovable than the gold crown of a king. Shakespeare says 'uneasy lies the head that wears the crown' (king Hendry IV)

Poet H. W. Long Fellow in his poem 'The village blacksmith' speaks about a blacksmith working hard under an elm tree. His body is wet with honest sweat. Every morning sees some work and every evening sees it done. He had a good repose. The blacksmith is honest and upright. He had a sound sleep – 'the sore labour's bath, a balm to hurt mind. Peace of mind in the gift of morality.

Alexander pope was fed up with the Hum Drum existence in London. To lead a peaceful life he left London and stayed at Twitthinham. In his poem 'Ode on solitude' he speaks about a man who leads a peaceful life.

"Happy the man, whose wish and care a few paternal acres bound, content to breathe in his native air in his own ground.

Whose herd with milk, whose fields with bread, whose flocks supply him with attire; whose trees in summer yield him shade, in winter fire.

Blest, who can unconcern'dly find hours, days and years slide soft away in health of body, peace of mind, quiet by day, sound sleep by night; study and ease together mixed, sweet recreation, and innocence, which most does please with meditation".

The heaven and earth declare the glory of God. Besides this they teach us morals. John Milton's paradise lost vindicates the ways of God to men. He strikes the contrast between the good and the bad.



John Dryden says that music can raise or quell any passion. The trumpet's loud clangour excites us to arms with shrill notes of anger". The lullaby sung by a mother is capable of crooning the child to sleep. The spirit of God departed from Saul the king of the Israelites and a distressing spirit from God troubled him. Whenever the spirit from God was upon Saul, David took up a harp a stringed instrument and played it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed. The distressing spirit would depart from him.

Nature is capable of leading the humans on the path of morality. William Wordsworth stresses this fact. He is known as the nature poet. 'He lived in the mighty world of eye and ear. He was brought up alike by beauty and fear'.

William Wordsworth says, "One impulse from the vernal wood would teach you more of man of moral evil and of good than all the sages can". He also says, "The smallest flower that blows can give thoughts that lie too deep for tears". He says that nature not only teaches morals but also cures maladies. Wordsworth poem titled 'resolution and independence' speaks well of an old leach gatherer who hopes against hope and works hard even in the evening of his life.

Samuel. T. Coleridge in his poem 'the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner' defines the real prayer in the line given below 'He prays best who loves best all things both great and small'.

Alfred Lord Tennyson in his representative poems 'Ulysses' stresses the adventurous spirit and the patriotic fervour' of the English. We have heard of king Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Tennyson says that the Holy Grail that was used by Jesus Christ was missing. It was believed that the Holy Grail would be visible only to the eyes of a pure hearted man. Sir. Galahad was one of the Knights of King Arthur. Lord Tennyson writes,

"Sir. Galahad's heart was pure and his hands were clean.
His strength was equal
To the strength of ten men.
This is applicable to any upright man.
The scripture says, "Blessed are the pure in heart;
For they shall see God". We would like to say
Blessed Galahad was pure in heart.
Hence he alone could see the Holy Grail.

At the age of twenty when I (G. Maria Joseph Xavier) was the student of B.Sc (Maths) I longed to take to writing rhymes and quatrains. It was like a novice attempting to strum a stringed musical instrument. Encouraged by my broadminded professors I started writing short

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verses. In all humility I would like to say that I cannot reach the height attained even by the minor English and American poets. But there is no harm in aspiring to touch the fingers of Thomas Gray (1716-1771), William Collins (1721-1759), John Clare, William Cowper or James Lowell.

My strenuous effort has enabled me to bring out three sets of my poems adorned by the forewords of eminent English professors. A few poems have been published in the magazines brought out in many arts colleges and many international journals.

With the kind permission of our honourable vice chancellor Dr. Krishnan and Dr. S. Chelliah, the H. O.D of English I would like to present before you two short poems of mine that highlight moral values.

Poem: 1. My sole prayer

Where the lawyers in their long robes
Are sauntering in the streets in towns and cities
With no clients to salute them for justice;
Where the physicians with hungry looks
And hollow stomachs are sitting still
In their silent clinics unfrequented
By the patients, the minions of maladies;
Where the police stations are turned
Into poultry farms to please the meat eaters
And the destructive deadly armaments
In the armoury lie idle and unlifted;
Where graveyard silence prevails
Within the dilapidated walls of the gaols
As no trace of prisoners are seen in the cells;
Where the tillers, the artisans, artist and vates
Are honoured and encouraged
Into that land of promise
Eternal father let this world awake.

Poem: 2 The race of a stream

Behold a silver stream
Drawing from the top of a green hill
The lucid sheet of water- the grace of God.
She flown on a fertile plain

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Feeding all plants and tree
Both tall and short, big and small.
She drenches the roots of the bushes of brambles
And beds of tender grasses.

She quenches the thirst of the good and the bad;
The birds and beasts alike.
She neither stops nor denies her succour to any.
She envies none nor does she abhors
Even those that make her dirty
She does not wait to listen to the lips
That praise her solemn race.

She purls on the beds of pebbles and sand
Singing the glory of God
TILL SHE MINGLES WITH THE SEA.

To conclude let me quote Psalm no 1 that draws a striking contrast between the upright and the wicked

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.

HE SHALL BE LIKE A TREE PLANTED BY THE BROOKS OF WATER, THAT BRINGS FORTH ITS FRUIT IN HIS SEASON, WHOSE LEAF ALSO SHALL NOT WITHER; AND WHAT EVER HE DOES SHALL PROSPER.

THE WICKED ARE NOT SO, BUT ARE LIKE THE CHAFF WHICH THE WIND DRIVES AWAY. THEREFORE THE SINNERS SHALL NOT STAND IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE RIGHTEOUS. FOR THE LORD KNOWS THE WAY OF THE UPRIGHT, BUT THE WAY OF THE WICKED SHALL PERISH.
