Moral Struggles in American Literature

Throughout history, people have wanted to know what is right. Religion, philosophy, and role models have all been moral guides to different people over the centuries. Despite the fact that sometimes these guides have flown in the face of each other or have caused more harm than good, humanity still comes back to them when they do not know what to do. Holy Wars have been fought, killing all who do not believe in a certain god, philosophies have opposed one another making it almost impossible for there to be a right one, and role models have fallen from grace, making the public have to find someone new to idolize. In the world there seems to be no sure fire moral compass and while many never doubt that they are in the moral right there have been people who face life altering moral crises.

America was made by people that rebelled against old ways of thinking, but in doing this they had to find new ways of thinking and believing for themselves. The moral struggles this change incurred lasted far into the country’s future. The theme of moral struggle soon found its way into American literature. Writers found they could voice their own struggles in what they wrote and maybe help others through the same problems, or at least bring these problems to public attention. Theme may be obvious in a work of literature or it may be a challenge to understand what an author is trying to say, but in any case the idea of moral struggles is almost universally understood. In novels, short stories and even essays the reader can recognize some of his own moral dilemmas in what is presented through the piece. Many times a certain writing philosophy can aid or impede how easily understood the theme of the work is. Coupled with a genre and philosophy, the way the author writes the piece and what elements are emphasized is also essential to revealing theme. Using different genres, philosophies, and rhetorical devices,
authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ernest Hemingway, and Joseph Heller highlighted the theme of moral struggles in their works.

Born into a family of ministers, Ralph Waldo Emerson had his future career decided for him by tradition. The problem was that this is not what he wanted to do and as pointed out in “his life was a series of attempts to establish his own identity against this background of expectation” (Beers, 203). In school Emerson studied philosophy and began to question his interest in Unitarian ministry. After the death of his wife Emerson resigned from the ministry and went to Europe with a “growing disbelief in some of the central doctrines of his religion” (Beers, 204). When he returned from Europe his beliefs had been transformed and he set about sharing his new way of thinking. Emerson had adopted what is now known as the philosophy of Transcendentalism. He had not lost his belief in God, but in the way that people confined Him to a church and did not let spirituality into their lives as wholly as they should. As stated in Major Writers of America, “His own experience had taught him that religion was far less to do with the understanding than with an affected fervent heart” (Major Writers of America, 246). The core of his belief was that all men are part of God and part of a universal whole. He believed that men could have religion for themselves and not rely on a church to communicate with God, seeing as every man has God in himself. With these ideas as his platform he began lecturing around the country, even at Harvard, where he had attended. It was when he was invited there to speak to a group of divinity students that, through the message of his address, he managed to be banned from Harvard for three decades.

In his Divinity School Address, Emerson uses repetition to support his theme of moral struggles. Though reworded, he uses the same ideas to point out his belief that man is part of God. Early on he states that, “If man is at heart just, then in so far is he God” (Emerson, 68).
Man has the capacity to be good and do as God would to the people around him. He later adds that, “Man is the wonderworker” (Emerson, 78). Harvard officials heard this sentiment as a “denial of the divinity of Jesus” (Beers, 204) and could not believe the slander against their moral principles. The idea that man can be as great and powerful as God was controversial, but Emerson did not mind and was very certain in his new way of thinking. The repetition of the idea in his speech highlights how important this doctrine was to him as well as his disconcern for others opinions of his belief.

To further the outrage of officials at the University, Emerson also repeated the idea that the church was an outdated and harmful institution, keeping man from a personal relationship with God. The church put itself in an important place in society, proclaiming that everyone who wanted to be Christian had to follow their doctrines. Emerson pointed out that their control was becoming outdated. He states, “It is time that this ill-suppressed murmur of all thoughtful men against the famine of our churches…should be heard through the sleep of indolence, and over the din of routine” (Emerson, 75). Men needed to turn away from their current moral compass and take responsibility for their own religion. They had to get out of the provided routine and have God in their lives all the time, not just on designated days in designated ways. In this way, Emerson challenged his listeners to, “dare to love God without mediator or veil” (Emerson, 79). Despite the current moral idea of having a priest or minister be a person’s connection to God, Emerson wanted for everyone to openly claim their religion and make it an integral part of their being. Emerson believed strongly in this new morality and all though many disagreed with him he was not afraid to share his ideas. He repeats his controversial ideas in his Divinity School Address to make sure those listening would understand his view on religion and where man stands in relation to God.
Decades after Emerson and his new view on morality, Ernest Hemingway came along confronting a new set of moral dilemmas. After being wounded in World War I, Hemingway wound up in Paris and began a writing career. Early on he was, “acclaimed as a spokesman for the Lost Generation-the young who had been disillusioned and cast adrift” (Kirszen and Mandell, 412). Despite his contemptuous portrayal of women and his seemingly simple writing style, many people found they could connect to the problems and attitudes he was writing, making him, if not well liked, often read. One of Hemingway’s hallmarks was writing situations that seem unimportant and simple, but giving things an underlying meaning or highlighting a certain issue, “He makes readers feel as if they are unseen auditors at some closet drama, or silent observers at intimate moments in the lives of characters struggling with important, although often private, issues” (May, 488). By allowing his readers to watch his characters’ lives, even when discussing moral struggles, it brings to the fore front the sense that every person faces similar issues and must find a solution that they can live with. Existentialism is a philosophy that focuses on freedom and how man uses his freedom. There is no human nature, only what man chooses to do with his life and how he faces the consequences of those decisions. In many of Hemingway’s works he plays on that idea of facing the consequences of a moral decision and how the individual has to face them alone.

“Hills like White Elephants” is a classic Hemingway short story. Reading it for the first and even the second time, it can seem pointless. A man and a woman in a bar waiting for a train and having meaningless conversation; those are the basics of the story. However, that was Hemingway’s style and there is much more to be found than what lies on the surface. The setting itself reveals much of the moral dilemma the female character is actually going through, seeing that it is, “the symbolic backdrop for the tale” (May, 488). The first lines of the story
describe, “The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees” and it later states, “on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro” (Kirszner and Mandell, 412). The dry, lifeless side of the tracks represents how she thinks her life will be if she has her baby. Her life with this man will end and the carefree lifestyle she has lead will no longer be possible. If she does get the abortion, however, her life can stay the lush dream that it had been before she got pregnant. She knows she must make a choice between the two and she does not have the moral conscious to be sure she can handle the consequences of either choice. A more moral person may have thought of the side with the trees representing life and the baby, but in her mind the child would ruin everything and she sees that as a painful consequence. Hemingway uses the placement of the station between these two extremes to emphasize the choices people must make between right and wrong, but uses the girl’s interpretation of her environment to highlight her moral struggle.

The train station itself and its position between two major Spanish cities is another example of Hemingway’s use of setting to analyze moral struggles. The story explains that, “the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid” (Kirszner and Mandell, 413). The couple’s time together has been spent doing nothing but traveling from city to city, drinking, and sleeping together. Those activities in and of themselves are not the most moral actions in the world. It can be said that, “Theirs has been a peripatetic, rootless life, as barren in some ways as the countryside in which they now find themselves” (May, 488). Hemingway uses a place outside of a city to have his characters discuss their moral struggle so that, at least the girl, can be aware of the consequences of their current lifestyle. She wants to have the man love her, but she is not sure if he still does and thus does not know whether to give into his wish for an abortion, seeing as it would degrade her
morality even more. A revealing setting and the use of existentialism help Hemingway to build his theme of moral struggle, despite what may seem a pointless session of dialogue.

Joseph Heller was no stranger to the subject of war and the moral desolation and absurdity involved. In 1942 Heller enlisted in the U.S Air Force. Much like the main character, Yossarian in *Catch 22*, “he was sent to Corsica, Italy; he flew sixty combat missions as a wing bombardier” (McMahon, 125). Heller rose up in the ranks, reaching first lieutenant, giving him a wider perspective of the attitudes and motives behind those men in charge. The fact that he actually lived through the events he writes about gives the novel a sense of truth, despite the absolute insanity that the characters portray. After he was discharged in 1945 he attended University and earned a bachelor’s degree in English. *Catch 22* was his first major novel and received conflicting reviews, the main critic in both positive and negative opinions being the absurdity used to convey social and moral beliefs. One negative review proclaimed, “*Catch 22* is immoral because it follows a fashion of spitting indiscriminately at business and the professions, at respectability, at ideals, at all visible tokens of superiority” (McMahon, 127). Yes, it does this, but considering Heller’s chosen philosophy for the novel, it makes sense. Absurdism is the idea that nothing makes sense in the universe and it is useless for man to try and create order; all forms of order are useless and detract from the individuals place in the universe. (Mifflin, 6) Heller points out the faults in social institutions such as government, military, and religion, by highlighting their ridiculous and unchecked sway on the population; government officials only care about promoting themselves, the military does not care if the individual lives or dies, and religion is not fair to everyone. The novel uses, “wild, often madhouse humor”, but the novel is also, “exceedingly complex in both meaning and form” (Rollyson, 571). Absurdism can be viewed as life is a joke and so pointless, but much like
existentialism, it calls people to look at their lives and their choices and to live in a way that they can find meaning in, not what outside morals and institutions tell them to care about.

Structure is immensely useful in *Catch 22* to help the reader recognize the moral struggles of Yossarian and the other men in his camp. For almost all forty two of the novels chapters a character’s name acts as the title. One character however, gets several chapter titles to himself. Milo Minderbender is the mess hall officer and trades heavily in the black market. He is very business oriented and has no problem having questionable morals if it gets him what he wants. When faced with Yossarian not wanting to be sent off with some random girl he replies, “I don’t blame you. But these eight year old virgins are really only thirty two. And they’re not really half Spanish but only one-third Estonian” (Heller, 233). Milo will say anything, no matter how nonsensical, to get somebody to do something they do not want to, but he sees as necessary. His moral perversion and the absurd ways he flaunts it only get more and more outrageous in his next two chapters. He manages to begin selling provisions to the Germans and charges the officers and enlisted men their whole pay to eat in his mess hall. Yossarian, and the reader, realize early on that, “Milo feels no guilt when his dishonesty harms the men in the unit, and he bears on loyalty to his country; he only cares about profit” (McMahon, 126). It is obvious that Heller uses Milo to represent the institution of commerce and his recurring place in chapter titles mirrors the pervasiveness of corrupt business in society. The fact that the men in the camp, and thus people in society, let him control their morals and deter them from calling him out on his wrongdoings is profound enough to earn three chapters.

Many of Captain John Yossarian’s comments and actions are ridiculous but there are examples of him truly having a moral struggle that are set up to make the reader ask the same questions. One of the best examples of this is a long set of questions he thinks of as he wanders
the streets of Rome at night and is faced with the wretchedness of society. He asks nobody in particular, “How many happy endings were unhappy endings? How many honest men were liars, brave men cowards, loyal men traitors, how many sainted men were corrupt, how many people in positions of trust had sold their souls to blackguards for petty cash, how many had never had souls” (Heller, 412)? Every question he asks illuminates another failure in human society, another absurd and often ignored fault in humanity. In the universe there is pain, suffering, unfairness, and death. There is not a definitive reason for these things and “Catch 22, accordingly, points out the discrepancy between our myths and our realities and suggests that we should do better to stop creating rational systems and to start living in tune with an irrational universe” (McMahon, 128). Yossarian may be one of the only ‘good’ people in the novel, but that does not mean that he has well defined morals. He struggles to understand the world and why the institutions he is meant to trust are bent on his demise in the war. Heller uses Yossarian’s list of questions to almost directly point out the inconsistencies of accepted morals and conventional ideas to the readers.

In all three of the century spanning afore mentioned works, morality and the struggle to find it has been a central theme. Emerson, Hemingway, and Heller all used different situations, philosophies, and rhetorical devices to make their readers look at a moral struggle in a new light, or even for the first time. Emerson wanted men to see God in themselves, Hemingway expected people to make a choice and deal with its consequences, and Heller wanted people to see the fault in the society set up by faceless institutions. The readers of these works may have had to analyze the clues that lead to the theme, but in the end they would be rewarded with a different perspective. Works of literature need a theme and moral struggles is something that man will be
interested in for a long time to come, if their hunt for right and wrong in the past is any indication.
Works Cited


