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MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT NOVEL

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Abstract. This study examines how moral philosophy and aesthetic experience intersect in eighteenth-century novels. Enlightenment literature stressed reason, ethics, and emotional sensibility, often blending philosophical ideas with narrative art. Focusing on works by Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Laurence Sterne, the research investigates how narrative structures, character portrayal, and stylistic devices allow readers to engage both ethically and aesthetically. Using textual and historical analysis, the study shows that Enlightenment novels not only entertain but also promote moral understanding and aesthetic appreciation.

Key words: Enlightenment novel, ethics, aesthetics, sensibility, Richardson, Fielding, Sterne.

INTRODUCTION

The Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, encouraged the belief that humans could improve morally and intellectually through reflection, learning, and rational thought. Novels from this period provided a platform to explore virtue, vice, and social responsibility. Unlike earlier stories, these works combined artistic narrative with moral guidance, presenting readers with layered ethical situations. Authors such as Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne explored philosophical questions related to human nature, freedom, and moral outcomes. Their works demonstrate how literature served to guide both the mind and of readers during the eighteenth century.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

Scholars have analyzed the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of Enlightenment novels extensively. Ian Watt (1957) emphasized the novel's role in representing individual experience and social observation. Mar Poovey (1988) highlighted Richardson's epistolary style for fostering empathy and ethical reflection. Claudia Johnson (1988) studied how narrative techniques and stylistic elements reflected social and moral norms. This research applies a textual-historical and analytical method, examining three key novels:

1. Samuel Richardson's Pamela (1740) -explores moral growth of the protagonist through tests of virtue.





2. Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) -analyzes the combination of humor, social critique, and ethical reflection.

3. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) - examines narrative experimentation and its effect on moral and aesthetic perception. The methodology involves close reading, analysis of narrative techniques and style, character study, and historical contextualization, showing how form influences both moral understanding and aesthetic experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Moral Instruction Through Narrative

In *Pamela*, Richardson demonstrates the Enlightenment ideal of moral education. The repeated ethical challenges faced by the protagonist allow readers to consider questions of right and wrong. The epistolary form creates intimacy, letting readers experience moral dilemmas alongside the character.

2. Humor as Ethical Insight

Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* balances comic situations with ethical reflection. Humor emphasizes human weaknesses and social inequality without weakening moral lessons. Fielding combines entertainment with ethical contemplation, showing how literature can instruct while amusing.

3. Narrative Innovation and Aesthetic Engagement

Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* experiments with digressive narrative forms, inviting readers to actively interpret the story. Its playful and unconventional style enhances aesthetic appreciation while also prompting ethical reflection. Sterne shows that moral understanding comes not only from content but from engagement with the act of reading.

4. Integration of Ethics and Aesthetics

Across these novels, narrative structure, character actions, and stylistic choices work together to foster both moral awareness and aesthetic enjoyment. Reading becomes a practice in empathy, judgment, and appreciation of form, reflecting the Enlightenment idea of literature as a tool for intellectual and moral development.

CONCLUSION

Enlightenment novels highlight the link between moral philosophy and aesthetic experience. Writers like Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne crafted narratives that prompt ethical reflection while providing literary pleasure. These works show that aesthetic enjoyment and moral insight are intertwined, allowing literature to shape understanding of human behavior, ethical responsibility, and social norms. The Enlightenment novel thus functions as a medium for both intellectual and emotional education.

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