

How Did The Influential Twentieth-century Literary Critic F. O. Matthiessen Characterize The Writing

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F. O. Matthiessen, one of the most eminent literary critics and scholars of the twentieth century, significantly shaped the landscape of American literary criticism and academic thought. His insights into American literature and his approach to analyzing literary works have left a lasting legacy. Central to his critical perspective was a nuanced understanding of writing—its themes, moral dimensions, cultural significance, and aesthetic qualities. This article explores how F. O. Matthiessen characterized writing, emphasizing his critical principles, thematic concerns, and his influence on the interpretation of American literature.

F. O. Matthiessen's Background and Critical Approach

Academic and Literary Foundations

F. O. Matthiessen was a distinguished scholar and critic, best known for his comprehensive works on American literature, particularly *American Renaissance* (1941). His academic background at Harvard and his deep engagement with American history and culture informed his literary criticism. Matthiessen believed that literature was a mirror of societal values and moral struggles, emphasizing the importance of moral and spiritual dimensions in writing.

Historical and Cultural Context

Living through significant moments of American history—including the Great Depression and World War II—shaped Matthiessen's approach. He viewed literature as a vital force in shaping national identity and moral consciousness. His critical approach often intertwined historical understanding with literary analysis, emphasizing that good writing reflects the moral and cultural currents of its time.

Core Principles in Matthiessen's Characterization of Writing

F. O. Matthiessen's critique of writing was rooted in several core principles that distinguished his approach from other critics. Understanding these principles provides insight into how he characterized the art and purpose of writing.

1. Moral and Ethical Dimensions

Matthiessen believed that great writing embodies moral insight and ethical concerns. For him, literature was not merely entertainment but a vehicle for moral reflection and social critique.

- Writing as a moral act.
- Literature's role in fostering moral growth.
- The importance of honesty, integrity, and moral courage in authorship.

2. Artistic Authenticity and Integrity

He emphasized the importance of authenticity in writing—authors must be true to their vision and voice.

- Genuine expression over superficial trends.
- The significance of an author's moral and intellectual honesty.
- The integration of personal conviction with artistic craft.

3. The Search for Universal Truths

Matthiessen valued literature that seeks to uncover universal human truths, transcending individual or cultural peculiarities.

- The exploration of fundamental human experiences.
- Literature's role in connecting diverse audiences through shared truths.
- The importance of depth and insight over mere stylistic flourish.

4. The Role of the Writer as a Moral and Cultural Voice

He viewed writers as vital participants in societal discourse, responsible for reflecting and shaping cultural values.

- Writers should be aware of their societal influence.
- The obligation to address moral and social issues.
- Literature as a form of social responsibility.

How F. O. Matthiessen Characterized the Writing of

American Literary Figures

Matthiessen's critical work often focused on defining the qualities that distinguished significant American writers and their contributions. His characterizations reveal his view of what makes writing meaningful and enduring.

1. Emphasis on Moral and Spiritual Quest

Many of the American writers he admired, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, shared a common thread: their pursuit of moral and spiritual truths.

- Their writing reflected a quest for moral clarity.
- They often addressed themes of individualism, morality, and transcendence.
- Their works embodied a moral integrity that Matthiessen found essential.

2. The Significance of Cultural and Historical Context

Matthiessen believed that understanding a writer's historical and cultural environment was crucial to appreciating their work.

- Writers' works are products of their time but also transcend it.
- Literature as a dialogue between the individual and society.
- The importance of contextual analysis in literary critique.

3. The Role of Literary Innovation

He appreciated writers who pushed boundaries and innovated stylistically or thematically.

- The American Renaissance writers' use of new forms and themes.
- The importance of originality and daring in writing.
- Innovation as a reflection of moral and cultural evolution.

Key Themes in Matthiessen's Characterization of Writing

Throughout his critical career, F. O. Matthiessen identified several recurring themes that he associated with exemplary writing.

1. The Search for Moral and Spiritual Meaning

A central theme in his critique is the writer's commitment to exploring deeper moral and spiritual

questions.

- Literature as a moral compass.
- The role of the writer in moral education.
- Works that challenge readers to reflect on their values.

2. Artistic Integrity and Authenticity

Matthiessen championed writers who maintained integrity and authenticity in their craft.

- Genuine voice over superficiality.
- The importance of personal conviction.
- Avoidance of commercial or superficial trends at the expense of truth.

3. Engagement with American Identity

He believed writing should grapple with the complexities of American identity, history, and culture.

- Celebrating American individuality and diversity.
- Addressing social injustices through literature.
- Literature as a reflection and critique of national values.

4. The Role of Literature in Moral and Cultural Progress

Matthiessen saw writing as a catalyst for social change and moral progress.

- Literature's capacity to inspire moral reform.
- Writers as agents of cultural transformation.
- The enduring power of literature to influence society.

Influence of Matthiessen's Critical View on American Literature

F. O. Matthiessen's characterization of writing has had a profound impact on American literary studies, shaping perceptions of what constitutes enduring literature.

Encouraging Moral and Ethical Criticism

His emphasis on morality encouraged critics and readers to evaluate literature based on its ethical implications.

Promoting Cultural and Historical Contextualization

His approach reinforced the importance of understanding literature within its cultural and historical framework.

Valuing Authenticity and Innovation

He inspired appreciation for works that are both genuine and innovative, fostering a tradition of bold, morally engaged writing.

Conclusion

F. O. Matthiessen characterized writing as a moral, authentic, and culturally engaged act capable of revealing universal truths and shaping societal values. His critical perspective emphasized that literature should reflect the moral struggles and spiritual quests of individuals while participating actively in cultural progress. His insights continue to influence literary criticism, encouraging a view of literature as a vital moral enterprise that bridges personal authenticity with social responsibility. Understanding how Matthiessen characterized writing enriches our appreciation of American literature's moral and cultural dimensions and highlights the enduring importance of integrity, authenticity, and moral inquiry in literary art.

Frequently Asked Questions

How did F. O. Matthiessen describe the role of moral values in literary writing?

F. O. Matthiessen emphasized that literature should serve as a moral and spiritual guide, believing that great writing reflects the ethical struggles and aspirations of humanity.

What was F. O. Matthiessen's perspective on the importance of cultural context in writing?

Matthiessen argued that understanding the cultural and historical background of a work is crucial for fully appreciating its significance, as it influences the themes and messages conveyed by the author.

According to F. O. Matthiessen, what distinguishes 'great' writing from mediocre works?

He believed that great writing is characterized by its moral seriousness, depth of insight, and ability to evoke universal human experiences, setting it apart from superficial or purely entertainment-focused literature.

How did F. O. Matthiessen view the relationship between the individual writer and society?

Matthiessen viewed the writer as a moral agent whose work should engage with societal issues, reflecting personal integrity while contributing to the collective moral and cultural growth.

In what way did F. O. Matthiessen's characterization influence contemporary literary criticism?

His emphasis on moral and cultural dimensions of writing helped shift literary criticism towards a more holistic approach that considers ethical, historical, and social contexts in evaluating literature.

Additional Resources

How Did The Influential Twentieth-century Literary Critic F. O. Matthiessen Characterize The Writing

F. O. Matthiessen (1902-1950) remains one of the most significant figures in American literary criticism of the twentieth century. His approach to literature, marked by a compelling combination of moral seriousness, interdisciplinary breadth, and a deep engagement with American culture, has left an indelible mark on how scholars and readers understand the nature of literary writing. This article explores how F. O. Matthiessen characterized writing—particularly American writing—and examines the core themes, critical methods, and philosophical underpinnings that defined his approach.

Understanding F. O. Matthiessen's Critical Framework

Before delving into specific characterizations of writing, it is essential to contextualize Matthiessen's broader critical outlook. A scholar rooted in the tradition of moral and cultural criticism, Matthiessen believed that literature was a vital moral force, capable of shaping and reflecting the spiritual and ethical fabric of society. His critical philosophy was informed by a conviction that great writing was inherently intertwined with the moral struggles and cultural aspirations of its time.

Core Principles of Matthiessen's Critical Approach:

- Literature as a moral enterprise
- The importance of American cultural identity
- The integration of history, philosophy, and art in literary analysis
- An emphasis on the spiritual and transcendental aspects of writing

These principles underpinned his characterization of what constituted "good" or "significant" writing, shaping his evaluations and classifications of American authors and their works.

How Did F. O. Matthiessen Characterize Writing?

Matthiessen's characterization of writing is best understood through the lens of his major works, especially *American Renaissance* (1941), which offers a comprehensive view of nineteenth-century American literature, and *The Achievement of Henry Adams* (1933), which exemplifies his moral-critical approach. These works reveal the qualities he esteemed in writing and his view of its role within American culture.

1. Writing as a Reflection of Moral and Spiritual Values

At the heart of Matthiessen's characterization is the idea that profound writing embodies moral and spiritual struggles. For him, literature is not merely aesthetic entertainment but a mirror of a society's deepest ethical aspirations and conflicts.

Key Aspects:

- Literature as moral inquiry: Writers explore fundamental questions about human existence, morality, and spirituality.
- The pursuit of transcendence: Great writing seeks to elevate the human spirit, offering visions of moral clarity amid chaos.
- Engagement with moral dilemmas: Writers do not shy away from addressing societal injustices or personal conflicts but interrogate them profoundly.

Example: In his analysis of Emerson and Whitman, Matthiessen emphasizes their capacity to articulate a spiritual democracy, asserting that their writing seeks to affirm moral unity amid fragmentation.

2. The American Spirit and Its Literary Expression

Matthiessen was particularly invested in defining what made American writing distinctive. He characterized American literature as an expression of the nation's unique spiritual and cultural identity, shaped by its frontier history, democratic ideals, and quest for self-realization.

Features of American Writing According to Matthiessen:

- A sense of spiritual quest: American writers often depict journeys—physical, intellectual, or moral—that symbolize the nation's ongoing search for meaning.
- An emphasis on individualism intertwined with social responsibility: Writers celebrate personal freedom but also grapple with collective obligations.
- The tension between nature and culture: American writers frequently explore the relationship between the natural landscape and human development.

Example: In *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen highlights writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman, portraying their works as embodying the American spirit of self-reliance, moral introspection, and transcendental aspiration.

3. Writing as a Product of Historical and Cultural Contexts

Matthiessen believed that literature should be understood within its historical moment. He viewed writers as responding to the social, political, and philosophical currents of their time, and their works as expressions of those currents.

Implications:

- Critical reading involves contextual analysis: Understanding the writer's environment illuminates their themes.
- Literature as a dialogue with history: Writers participate in ongoing cultural debates and moral struggles.
- Recognition of evolution: Literary characterizations shift over time, reflecting changing societal values.

Example: His study of Henry Adams emphasizes how Adams's writing grapples with the rise of modernity, technological change, and the decline of traditional religious beliefs.

4. The Artistic and Formal Dimensions of Writing

While emphasizing moral and spiritual qualities, Matthiessen also valued the aesthetic and formal aspects of literature. He believed that the best writers master their craft to serve their moral vision, blending artistic excellence with philosophical depth.

Features He Valued:

- Artistic craftsmanship: Precision, originality, and mastery of form are vital.
- Stylistic integrity: Language should serve the moral and spiritual aims of the work.
- Innovation and experimentation: Writers who push stylistic boundaries can better express complex moral and spiritual truths.

Example: He appreciated Melville's complex symbolism and Whitman's free verse as innovative forms that reflected their quest for authentic expression.

Critical Methods and Thematic Emphases in Matthiessen's Characterization of Writing

Matthiessen's approach was interdisciplinary, integrating literary analysis with moral philosophy, history, and cultural studies. His characterization of writing is thus holistic, emphasizing the interconnectedness of form, content, and moral purpose.

Historical and Cultural Contextualization

He believed that understanding a writer's historical environment was essential to grasping the significance of their work. This approach led him to analyze the social, political, and religious currents influencing American writers.

Focus on Moral and Spiritual Dimensions

Matthiessen's critical lens was fundamentally moral. He sought to identify works that embodied a moral vision or spiritual aspiration—qualities he regarded as hallmarks of enduring literature.

Celebration of American Transcendentalism and Romanticism

Particularly in American Renaissance, he characterizes the writing of Emerson, Whitman, and Hawthorne as embodying the American potential for moral and spiritual renewal through individual insight and moral imagination.

Recognition of Artistic Mastery and Innovation

He valued writers' craftsmanship and their willingness to experiment with form, considering these qualities as vital to the moral impact of their work.

Criticisms and Limitations of Matthiessen's Characterization

Despite his influence, some critics have pointed out that Matthiessen's emphasis on morality and spiritual uplift sometimes led to idealization or omissions.

Critics argue:

- An overemphasis on transcendental and moral qualities risks marginalizing more pragmatic or socially conscious writers.
- His interpretive framework can impose a moral narrative that oversimplifies complex works.
- The American-centric focus might neglect broader global influences on American writing.

However, these criticisms do not diminish his contribution to understanding how writers articulate and embody moral and spiritual aspirations.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Matthiessen's Characterization of Writing

F. O. Matthiessen's characterization of writing as a moral, spiritual, and cultural enterprise has profoundly shaped American literary criticism. His view that literature is a mirror and a catalyst for moral and spiritual growth continues to influence how critics and readers approach American texts. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of form, content, and moral purpose, Matthiessen elevated the study of literature from mere aesthetic analysis to a pursuit of understanding the moral fabric of society.

His recognition of American writers' unique capacity for spiritual exploration and moral inquiry remains a central touchstone for critics engaged with the nation's literary heritage. While subsequent critics have challenged some aspects of his approach, the core idea that great writing embodies a moral and spiritual quest persists as a defining feature of his critical legacy.

In sum, F. O. Matthiessen characterized writing as a moral, spiritual, and cultural act—an act of moral inquiry, national self-definition, and artistic mastery that continues to inspire and challenge readers and scholars alike.

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