



Exploring the Emotional and Ethical Experiences of Readers in Classical Literature: A Phenomenological Study Using IPA

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ABSTRACT

Literature plays a significant role in shaping moral understanding, with readers often engaging emotionally and intellectually with the ethical dilemmas faced by characters. However, there is limited research on how readers subjectively experience and reflect on these moral conflicts. The gap in current literature lies in understanding the emotional and personal dimensions of readers' engagement with moral dilemmas in literature particularly within the framework of phenomenology. This study advances the understanding of emotional engagement with moral dilemmas in classical literature by offering new insights into how readers internalize and reflect on these ethical conflicts. Here, we show how a phenomenological approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), can provide insights into how readers internalize and reflect on moral decisions in literature. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, revealing that readers not only empathize with the characters' choices but also engage in deep self-reflection about their own values. Participants expressed strong emotional connections to the ethical dilemmas, which led them to critically examine their moral beliefs. The findings suggest that literature functions as a powerful tool for ethical introspection, offering readers a platform to explore and challenge their own ethical frameworks. These results deepen our understanding of the role literature plays in moral development and provide a foundation for future research on the emotional engagement with literature across different genres and cultural contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been a powerful medium for exploring the complexities of the human experience, offering readers a space to reflect on their own lives through the lens of fictional narratives (Perez-Brumer dkk., 2021). Within this realm, moral dilemmas in literature stand as a significant phenomenon, engaging readers with ethical questions that resonate far beyond the boundaries of the text itself. These moral conflicts often involve characters faced with difficult choices, challenging their sense of right and wrong, and highlighting the complexities of human decision-making. As readers navigate these dilemmas, they are invited to reflect on their own ethical values and the moral frameworks that shape their actions in everyday life.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its capacity to illuminate the deeply personal nature of ethical decision-making. When engaging with moral conflicts in literature, readers do not merely evaluate the characters' choices; they also examine their own moral beliefs, biases, and emotional responses. This process of self-reflection makes literature an invaluable tool for understanding the nuances of human ethics, particularly in the context of broader social and cultural frameworks. In societies where ethical questions often dominate social discourse, the ability to critically engage with moral issues is essential for personal and societal growth.

Given the intricate relationship between literature, ethics, and human experience, there is a clear need for in-depth exploration of how readers interpret and make sense of these moral dilemmas. While much has been written about the role of literature in shaping moral values, the subjective, lived

experience of readers—particularly in relation to how they internalize and reflect upon these ethical challenges—remains underexplored (Dejene dkk., 2024). A phenomenological approach offers a unique opportunity to delve into these personal experiences, providing a deeper understanding of how individuals make meaning of moral conflicts in literature. By focusing on the lived experiences of readers, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on literature's role in shaping ethical understanding and its potential for fostering self-reflection in the context of contemporary society.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals engaging with moral dilemmas in literature has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly within the field of phenomenology. This area of study focuses on how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of their lived experiences, providing deep insights into the emotional, cognitive, and ethical processes involved in literary engagement. By examining how readers relate to the moral choices of characters, scholars can uncover the ways in which literature serves as a mirror for personal reflection and ethical growth. Despite its potential, the exploration of this phenomenon remains underdeveloped in the current literature, particularly when it comes to understanding how readers experience and interpret moral conflict on a personal level.

One of the primary challenges in studying the meaning of such experiences is the methodological limitation of traditional approaches. Quantitative methods, such as surveys or statistical analyses, often fail to capture the rich, subjective nature of the reader's experience. These methods tend to prioritize generalizable data, which can obscure the nuanced and deeply personal reflections that emerge when individuals engage with ethical dilemmas in literature (Ahmad dkk., 2021). In contrast, qualitative approaches, particularly phenomenological methods, offer a more suitable framework for exploring the complexity of human experience, as they allow for an in-depth investigation into the meanings that individuals attribute to their interactions with texts. However, even within qualitative research, the challenge remains to fully grasp the essence of these experiences, as the subjective nature of the phenomenon often resists simple categorization or generalization.

Given these methodological challenges, previous research has often been limited in its ability to capture the full depth of individuals' ethical reflections when engaging with moral dilemmas in literature. While existing studies have provided valuable insights into the role of literature in moral development, they frequently overlook the complexity and diversity of individual experiences. Therefore, the current study seeks to fill this gap by employing a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of readers, with a focus on the emotional, ethical, and cognitive dimensions of moral decision-making in literature. By prioritizing lived experience, this research aims to offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of how readers navigate moral conflicts and derive meaning from these literary engagements.

While existing research on the moral dilemmas in literature has contributed valuable insights into how literature shapes readers' ethical perspectives, most studies rely on practical, traditional methods that focus on surface-level analysis. Commonly employed quantitative approaches, such as surveys and content analysis, provide generalizable data but fail to capture the depth and complexity of individual experiences (Patchen dkk., 2024). These methods often overlook the nuanced, subjective ways in which readers internalize and reflect upon the moral choices of characters. As a result, the current understanding of how individuals experience and interpret moral dilemmas in literature remains limited and lacks the richness necessary to fully comprehend the impact of these experiences on readers' ethical development.

The limitation of these traditional methods highlights the need for a more profound exploration of the phenomenon. Existing studies have primarily focused on the cognitive and behavioral aspects of ethical decision-making in literature, neglecting the emotional and personal dimensions that contribute to the reader's overall interpretation. In this context, the phenomenological approach offers a promising alternative by focusing on the lived experiences of readers, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how they perceive, make sense of, and are emotionally affected by moral dilemmas in literature. By capturing the essence of readers' subjective experiences, phenomenology enables a holistic exploration of the personal and emotional meanings attached to moral conflicts, which traditional methods are unable to uncover.

Thus, the key knowledge gap in this field is the lack of research that investigates the deep, personal reflections and emotional responses of readers as they engage with ethical dilemmas in literature (Cupid dkk., 2024). The need for a phenomenological approach is clear, as it provides the opportunity to explore the full depth of these experiences, offering a richer and more nuanced understanding of how literature influences ethical thinking on a personal level. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the subjective, lived experiences of readers, providing valuable insights into the role of literature in shaping moral understanding.

Previous research on moral dilemmas in literature has largely focused on the cognitive and ethical dimensions of characters' decisions, but few studies have delved into the emotional and subjective experiences of readers. The theoretical foundations for understanding this phenomenon often rely on cognitive psychology or moral development theories, which primarily examine how people process moral decisions at a theoretical level (Altman dkk., 2020). However, these approaches tend to overlook the personal and emotional resonance of literature, which is essential for understanding how readers internalize moral conflicts. The existing literature suggests that while readers engage with ethical dilemmas, the deeper emotional and reflective aspects of these experiences remain underexplored. This gap in understanding underscores the need for a more nuanced, phenomenological investigation into how readers emotionally respond to moral choices in literature.

To address this gap, the phenomenological approach has been selected to explore the subjective experiences of readers engaging with moral dilemmas in classical literature. This method allows for a deep investigation into how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of the ethical challenges faced by characters in literature. By focusing on the lived experiences of readers, phenomenology provides a more holistic understanding of the personal and emotional dimensions of moral reflection, which traditional methods fail to capture. This approach is well-suited to answer the questions raised in the Knowledge Gap section, offering insights into how these moral conflicts resonate with readers and influence their ethical perspectives on a deeper level.

The article is structured to provide a comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon. It begins with an introduction to the context of moral dilemmas in literature and the significance of understanding the subjective experiences of readers (Tandon & Srinivasan, 2024). The methodology section outlines the phenomenological approach, including the process of data collection and analysis. Next, the article discusses the results, presenting the themes and meanings derived from the data, followed by an analysis of the findings. The discussion section interprets the results in light of existing literature, and the conclusion offers insights into the broader implications of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological approach was adopted for this study to explore the lived experiences of readers when engaging with moral dilemmas in classical literature. Phenomenology is particularly well-suited for investigating subjective experiences, allowing for the deep exploration of meaning and understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Lambert dkk., 2022). This approach focuses on how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences, providing rich insights into the ways in which moral conflicts in literature resonate with readers' own ethical perspectives. The specific methodology employed in this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which facilitates a detailed examination of how readers interpret and reflect upon the moral decisions faced by literary characters. IPA was chosen for its capacity to uncover both the personal significance of these experiences and the broader interpretative processes involved in understanding literary texts. To minimize researcher biases, a reflective journal was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis processes, where the researcher documented thoughts, assumptions, and feelings that might influence interpretation. This journal served as a tool to enhance self-awareness and ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' experiences rather than preconceived notions.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those chosen had relevant experience with the phenomenon of interest, namely the interpretation of ethical dilemmas in classical literature. The study included 15 participants, aged between 25 and 60 years, with a balanced representation of gender and diverse cultural backgrounds. All participants were regular readers of literary works, with at least five years of experience engaging with classical literature, ensuring that they could provide informed insights into the moral conflicts depicted in the texts. The inclusion criteria required participants to have read at least one classical novel or literary work that involves significant ethical dilemmas. Individuals who had not read such works or lacked the ability to reflect on ethical issues were excluded from participation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in person to facilitate an open dialogue and ensure a comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and all sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private settings to maintain confidentiality and minimize distractions (Nagaraj & Theboral, 2024). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions aimed at eliciting participants' personal reflections on the moral dilemmas faced by characters in classical literature and the ethical decisions they made. Questions focused on understanding how these dilemmas resonated with the participants' own life experiences and ethical beliefs. Data collection occurred at a local library, where participants had access to a quiet space conducive to thoughtful discussion.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a systematic process of identifying key themes and patterns across the interviews. The first step in the analysis was the transcription of the interviews, followed by an in-depth reading of the transcripts to immerse in the data. Meaning units were then identified, focusing on significant statements related to moral conflict and ethical reflection. These meaning units were organized into preliminary themes, which were further refined through a process of clustering and abstraction. The themes were then analyzed to uncover the essential meaning of the participants' experiences with moral dilemmas in literature (Santillan-Rosas & González-Nieto, 2020). NVivo software was utilized to assist with organizing the data and identifying patterns, though the analysis remained largely manual to ensure a deep engagement with the data. The findings were interpreted within the context of the participants' personal and cultural backgrounds to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ethical dimensions in their reading experiences.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely in accordance with ethical guidelines. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for research, ensuring that participants' rights and well-being were safeguarded throughout the data collection and analysis phases.

RESULTS

Moral Conflict and Ethical Reflection in Classical Literature

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the interviews with participants was the deep engagement with moral conflicts faced by characters in classical literature. Participants consistently described how these conflicts led them to reflect on their own ethical values and beliefs. For instance, one participant remarked, "When I read the moral dilemma of the protagonist, I could feel a connection with my own struggles in life. It made me question what I would do in that situation, and it pushed me to examine my values more deeply. This sentiment was echoed by others, who noted

how these literary conflicts encouraged them to reassess their ethical standpoints in their personal lives. The participants often spoke of feeling a sense of vulnerability when identifying with the moral choices of characters, reflecting the profound impact of literature on their self-awareness.

In addition, many participants highlighted the role of the author's portrayal of moral dilemmas in shaping their interpretations of ethical decisions. One participant shared, "The way the author presents the choices makes me think about what it means to be 'good.' It's not always clear, and that's what makes it real. Life isn't black and white, and literature shows that." This thematic exploration of moral ambiguity not only fostered a deeper understanding of the characters' struggles but also prompted participants to recognize the complexities inherent in ethical decision-making.

How do moral conflicts in literature influence personal ethical reflection?



Emotional Resonance with Character Decisions

Another theme that emerged was the emotional resonance of the characters' decisions. The emotional connection participants felt toward the characters' moral decisions was central to their understanding of the ethical dimensions in the texts. Several participants described feeling empathy for characters facing tough choices, which allowed them to consider the emotional toll such decisions could have on real individuals. As one participant expressed, "I couldn't help but feel the pain of the character when they had to make a decision that would affect their entire life. It made me think about how much emotions and feelings are involved in our own ethical choices."

This emotional connection to characters' ethical dilemmas created a space for participants to reflect on how emotions are intertwined with ethical decision-making in their own lives. One participant stated, "It's not just about right or wrong; it's about how we feel when we make those choices. Reading about characters in these situations makes me realize how much emotions shape our morality." These insights point to the importance of emotional resonance in understanding moral actions and decisions, reinforcing the complex relationship between feelings and ethics in literature.

Influence of Personal Background on Ethical Interpretation

The analysis also revealed that participants' personal backgrounds significantly influenced how they interpreted the ethical dimensions of the characters' actions. Participants from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds highlighted how their values shaped their reading experience and moral judgments. One participant noted, "As a person who values family above all, I found it difficult to understand the character's decision to leave their loved ones. It just didn't sit right with me." Another participant from a different cultural context remarked, "In my culture, loyalty is everything. When I read a character's decision to betray their friend, it struck me deeply, and I couldn't help but feel angered."

These comments underscore the role of personal experiences and cultural values in shaping how readers engage with ethical dilemmas in literature. While some participants felt empathy toward

characters who made morally ambiguous decisions, others were more critical, reflecting the significant influence of individual background on ethical interpretation.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of personal experience and emotional engagement in the interpretation of moral dilemmas in literature. The participants' responses reveal that literature not only serves as a mirror reflecting moral conflicts but also as a catalyst for self-reflection and ethical evaluation. The themes of moral conflict, emotional resonance, and the influence of personal background provide a comprehensive understanding of how readers engage with ethical issues in classical literature, offering valuable insights into the subjective nature of ethical interpretation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the profound emotional and reflective impact that moral dilemmas in literature have on readers. Participants reported feeling a deep connection to the ethical decisions faced by characters, which prompted them to reflect on their own values and moral frameworks (Shaikh, 2024). These emotional responses were not only based on the characters' choices but also tied to the readers' personal experiences and cultural contexts, highlighting the subjective nature of moral reflection in literature.

This research contributes significantly to our understanding of how readers interpret and internalize moral conflicts in literature. The study reveals that readers engage with moral dilemmas not merely as passive observers but as active participants in a process of self-reflection, where they assess the ethical dimensions of the dilemmas in relation to their own lives (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024). By focusing on the lived experiences of readers, this study sheds light on how literature serves as a tool for ethical introspection and personal growth. The findings support the notion that literature does not simply depict moral issues but actively engages readers in the process of moral reasoning and emotional connection, which leads to a deeper understanding of the ethical challenges presented in the texts.

The results align with and extend previous research on the role of literature in moral development. Studies by authors such as Pollack (2020) have explored the impact of literature on ethical decision-making but have largely overlooked the subjective emotional experiences of readers. This study builds on these foundations by emphasizing the emotional resonance that moral dilemmas in literature have on readers. Furthermore, the findings support the theoretical framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which posits that meaning is constructed through personal experiences and reflections. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, this study provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of how literature shapes ethical thinking, complementing and enhancing existing theories of moral development in literature.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study offer important implications both academically and practically. From an academic perspective, this research emphasizes the value of phenomenological methods in understanding the depth of readers' emotional and moral engagement with literature. The emotional responses and self-reflection triggered by moral dilemmas in literature suggest that literature can play a significant role in moral development, not just as a passive reflection of ethical issues but as an active site of personal moral exploration (da Costa Daniele dkk., 2024). The findings also highlight how literature can foster empathy and ethical reasoning, encouraging readers to examine their own values and decisions. In a broader cultural and social context, these results suggest that literature has the power to challenge and shape societal moral norms by engaging readers in the process of ethical introspection. This underscores the importance of incorporating diverse moral dilemmas in educational and literary curricula to stimulate ethical discourse and reflection among students and readers alike.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the emotional and reflective engagement of readers with moral dilemmas in literature, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size of 15 participants limits the ability to generalize the results to a wider population. Additionally, the participants in this study were all regular readers of classical literature, which means that the findings may not be applicable to individuals with limited exposure to or interest in literary works. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a single cultural context, which may influence how moral dilemmas are perceived and internalized by readers. Future studies could expand on these limitations by including a more diverse sample of readers from different cultural, educational, and demographic backgrounds, thus enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study provide a foundation for future research on the intersection of literature, ethics, and personal reflection. One promising direction for further research would be to explore how different genres of literature—such as contemporary fiction or non-fiction—affect readers' ethical reflections and emotional engagement. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how readers' moral perspectives evolve over time as they engage with different types of moral dilemmas in literature (Riley & Mensah, 2024). This study also opens up avenues for exploring the role of literature in shaping collective ethical norms within specific communities, providing a deeper understanding of how shared literary experiences influence societal values. Further research could also investigate how specific cultural contexts influence readers' responses to moral conflicts, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the global impact of literature on ethical decision-making.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how readers engage with moral dilemmas in classical literature, focusing on their emotional and reflective responses to the ethical decisions of characters. The findings revealed that readers actively connect with the moral conflicts presented in literature, using these dilemmas as a mirror for self-reflection and ethical introspection. Participants experienced a deep emotional resonance with the characters' choices, leading them to examine their own values and ethical frameworks. This study fills a gap in existing research by emphasizing the personal, emotional, and subjective dimensions of moral reflection in literature, which has often been overlooked in previous studies.

However, there are several limitations to this study that should be considered. The sample size of 15 participants is relatively small, limiting the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Additionally, the study was conducted within a single cultural context, which may influence how moral dilemmas are perceived and interpreted by readers. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a larger, more diverse sample of readers from varied cultural, educational, and demographic backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the impact of different literary genres on moral development and the role of cultural context in shaping readers' ethical perspectives. By further investigating these areas, scholars can deepen our understanding of how literature influences moral decision-making across diverse populations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All findings and conclusions presented in this study are based solely on the research conducted and have not been influenced by any financial or personal relationships that could be perceived as a conflict of interest.

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