

EMOTION IN NARRATIVE UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETATION

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1 Introduction

In this paper, I appraise Jenefer Robinson's account of how and in what ways emotion and literature interact, as this is developed in her book 'Deeper than Reason'.¹ Robinson argues for a specific framework for understanding human emotion—that it is a three-part process of affective appraisal, physiological change, and cognitive monitoring—every aspect of which “feeds back on the other aspects”.² She further claims that this entire process must be experienced by readers of realistic fiction if they are to plausibly understand fictional characters, to fill in narrative gaps, and to gather data for critical interpretations of realistic fiction. While I agree with Robinson that the emotional engagement of readers is fundamental to their understanding of many works of literature, I suggest that the degree to which emotional responses, as she defines them, aids in understanding literary works remains an open question. In this paper I point out some reasons why I think that this is the case. Factors such as variability in emotional intelligence and the power that emotional bias can exert on readers' responses form part of my considerations.

¹ Robinson 2009, pp. 105-135.

² Ibid., p. 85.

I believe that the questions I raise are worth pursuing, not only because they can lead to a deeper understanding of Robinson's book, but also because important values are at stake. As a whole, 'Deeper than Reason' opens doors for readers, arguing for expansive access to great literature through their emotional responses. But if readers must respond to certain great literary works in accordance with particular emotional patterns in order to properly value them, as Robinson argues, then readers who do not respond in these ways are excluded from the possibility of valuing these works. But we may have good reasons to resist this conclusion. As Robinson admits, "little [work] has been done on the role of emotion in understanding narrative".³ But, as I note below, some of the work which *has* been conducted, including intriguing findings on the ways in which observers with severe emotional deficits are able to accurately interpret the emotions and actions of others, provides a credible basis for asserting that much of this story is still to be told. Thus, though Robinson's theory purports to be inclusive, it may in fact exclude groups without good reason.

2 Robinson's theory of emotional response

Robinson's central argument for the role of emotion in readers's experiences of literature is that, to understand realistic novels like those written by the likes of Leo Tolstoy and Henry James or other great literary works like the sonnets and plays of William Shakespeare, we must experience them emotionally. Emotional involvement can focus our attention on important details of a story's plot, characters, setting, and points of view in ways that no other means of perception can, revealing nuances in character and plot that are otherwise inaccessible to us. Robinson notes that her theory does not hold for all fiction, excepting, for example, many post-

³ Ibid., p. 101.

modern and genre works. Her detailed studies of emotion are restricted to great works of literature.⁴

For Robinson, emotional involvement with the events and characters in a novel has several consequences. We feel compassion for the imaginary characters of literature such that their interests and fate affect us personally. We respond to them as if they are real people in our lives—or even as if we were those characters ourselves. These attachments trigger involuntary affective appraisals—gut-level reactions—regarding the characters well-being. And these appraisals, in turn, trigger physiological and autonomic responses in our bodies. All of this reinforces and focuses our attention on the characters and events in a novel and may even elicit action tendencies—states of physical readiness to take actions in the real world, even though our responses are to the characters and events of a fictional world.⁵

It is important to note that Robinson's theory requires there to be a physiological change in the body of the reader for the reader to be considered to be responding emotionally to a text. She cites William James, who claims that it is physiological change “that puts the ‘emotionality’ into emotion”.⁶ Robinson holds that only through an emotional response, as defined in this way, can a reader properly understand a literary work. The understanding she refers to is not solely emotional, such as the happiness or sadness that a reader might feel at appropriate moments. Rather, the understanding she has in mind is also cognitive. An emotionally unengaged reader cannot properly fill in narrative gaps in a novel by Henry James or Leo Tolstoy and so cannot build a cognitively accurate account of its events:

When we respond emotionally to a text, our attention is alerted to important information

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

about character and plot that is not explicitly asserted in the text.⁷

The parts of the story that are left unsaid are, in other words, narrative gaps that the reader must bridge. The psychological subtleties of characters can also be seen as narrative gaps that only emotional engagement can uncover. For example, in 'Anna Karenina', Vronsky's horse racing accident is horrifying, but appears differently when the reader realises that his affair with Anna might be responsible for his fall. While the text does not explicitly make this connection, the emotionally responsive reader might feel nervous as Vronsky competes in such a trying and dangerous sport while preoccupied by news of Anna's pregnancy. It is Robinson's point that by being emotionally engaged readers we shall be able to connect the dots between Vronsky and Anna's relationship and Vronsky's fall. We should, as emotionally responsive readers, understand that Vronsky's fall was not by chance, but rather, caused precisely by his distress over his relationship with Anna.

Cognitive monitoring, the third element of emotional response to literature that Robinson posits, aids the reader in curtailing the misunderstandings and action tendencies evoked by his or her initial affective appraisals and physiological responses. It reminds the reader that she is reading fiction and not responding to real-life events. It also provides "crucial data for an interpretation of the book as a whole" as the reader reflects on whether a novel did a good job of eliciting her emotional responses.⁸

Robinson holds that authors of great realistic novels rely upon readers's tendencies to draw upon their emotional experiences of characters to fill in narrative gaps. We understand that Tolstoy's Anna finds it difficult to openly follow through on her relationship with Vronsky because we experience, along with Anna, the emotional effort required to overcome an unfeeling spouse who has

⁷ Ibid., p. 120.

⁸ Ibid., p. 116.

control over her finances. Tolstoy relies on readers to simply *understand* that this is so by triggering their own emotions and connecting the dots.

3 Objections

Much of Robinson's work on narrative is based on theories of psychologists and philosophers who posit cognitive faculties as responsible for narrative understanding. An important way in which Robinson's work extends, and in some cases challenges, their theories is by arguing that direct emotional responses to literature, in addition to cognitive responses, are essential to achieving a plausible understanding of those fictional narratives.⁹ This is what I specifically wish to expand upon and even challenge in Robinson's theory: her contention that a reader must experience a physiologically emotional response to a literary work in order to properly understand its narrative.

Low Emotional Quotient (EQ) and Literary Understanding

Robinson raises the scenario of people with low emotional intelligence attempting to understand a novel and concludes that, just as these people miss the significance of real-life relationships and events, so they will in fiction.¹⁰ The ways in which low or damaged emotional intelligence has been shown in research to interfere with understanding other people and making good judgments suggests to Robinson that,

cognition is not enough for understanding other people and that emotional understanding is crucial. If this is right, then it seems reasonable to

⁹ Ibid., pp. 122-123.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 129.

think that it is also crucial to understanding the ‘people’ who populate well-crafted realistic novels.¹¹

Robinson’s argument as a whole, however, would benefit from further discussion of this issue. How might she respond, for example, to research on psychopathy that investigates the ways that people with this severe emotional deficit may have a potentially enhanced—rather than impoverished—ability to understand the emotional cues of others, despite the fact that they do not experience many emotional responses themselves?¹²

In a 2014 article, researchers discuss this finding and explore how this indicates that recognising emotions cognitively—and experiencing them emotionally—“may be distinct processes, where one can be intact without the other”.¹³ In a separate study of lexical decision tasks, Amanda Lorenz and Joseph Newman found good evidence to support the hypothesis that psychopathic individuals are able to appraise affective language as accurately as non-psychopaths. The authors termed this phenomenon the ‘emotional paradox’ to indicate the difficulty of understanding how psychopathic individuals are able to understand emotional cues without feeling the emotion themselves.¹⁴ Lorenz and Newman’s research has been supported in a more recent article from 2018, in which researchers found that individuals with psychopathy are able to accurately classify the valences of affective language as well as non-psychopathic individuals *so long as they had ample time*.¹⁵

Consider the role of emotional responses in understanding literature in light of this finding. The so-called ‘emotional paradox’, or the duality between recognising and experiencing emotion that

¹¹ Ibid., p. 130.

¹² This phenomenon has been noted by Book et al (2007), who describe it as a “special intelligence”, p. 532.

¹³ Sandvik et al 2014, p. 585.

¹⁴ Lorenz & Newman 2002, p. 91.

¹⁵ Vitale et al 2018.

some attribute to psychopathy, indicates that it may be possible to understand the emotional dimension of a work of literature without actually experiencing the physiological response. It may be possible to ‘get’ what is funny about Henry James’s *Strether* and what is sad about Tolstoy’s *Anna* without the affective appraisal and autonomic response that characterise emotions for Robinson.

Psychopathy is an extreme case, but it still resides within the wide spectrum of human emotional response. More common along this spectrum is the emotionally normal reader who is simply not emotionally involved with a novel to the degree that he or she responds to it physiologically. It is plausible to argue that all readers—whatever their emotional capacities—may have access to non-emotional cognitive tools for understanding narrative.

Some recent research has even suggested that one function of sleep, the REM dream phase in particular, is to consolidate memories and process their emotional tone—as Van der Helm and Walker put it, “we sleep *to forget* the emotional tone, yet *sleep to remember* the tagged memory of that experience”.¹⁶ If there is a parallel between the content of dreams and narrative in literature, then this finding could suggest that our memory and thereby understanding narratives in literature succeeds by suppressing emotional responses to it.

The problem of emotional bias

Richard Gerrig, a psychologist known for his investigations into reader responses to fiction, is one of Robinson’s sources of empirical evidence for demonstrating the role of emotion in narrative understanding. Gerrig theorises that readers use a “core of automatic responses” to understand narratives.¹⁷ They automatically engage their working memories as they read in order to construct causal networks which allocate attention and situate events within the

¹⁶ Van der Helm & Walker 2012, p. 781.

¹⁷ Robinson 2009, p. 121, quoting Gerrig 1993, p. 48.

context of the whole work.¹⁸ Through this process, they commit important events to memory while discarding those of less importance. Some aspects of understanding a work, Gerrig holds, are “under the strategic control of the reader”, but the “core of automatic processes” is not.¹⁹ As Robinson notes, the automatic processes Gerrig describes are largely logical or cognitive, though he also identifies ‘participatory responses’ that arise in readers. These are non-inferential responses, some of which involve emotion.²⁰

In his experimental studies, Gerrig found that readers’ “expressions of hope and preferences have measurable consequences for the memory representations constructed in the course of experiencing a narrative world”.²¹ If readers did not prefer an outcome, they were less likely to remember that it *did* happen and what the outcome of it was; their participatory responses as readers resulted in a measurable effect on memory.²² In other words, when narrative events run counter to readers’s preferences, those events are less likely to be accurately captured and stored in their memories in such a way that they could be used to understand later developments. They may escape the notice of the reader altogether, or they may be recast in a more favorable light and thus misconstrued.

Bias poses a significant problem for any theory of narrative understanding that emphasises the role of emotion because many literary works present characters and events that challenge our expectations and our preferences for real world outcomes.

In my own experience, an author whose works present situations contrary to commonly held real-world preferences is Fyodor Dostoyevsky. His portrait of the Underground Man in ‘Notes from the Underground’ exemplifies a narrative development

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 121, quoting Gerrig 1993, p. 76.

¹⁹ Ibid., quoting Gerrig 1993, p. 69.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 120.

²¹ Ibid., p. 122.

²² Ibid., p. 123.

apparently so painful to some readers that it is frequently misunderstood.²³ Readers have come away from 'Notes' thinking that the Underground Man should have simply relaxed and gotten along better with his old school mates. A reader may prefer that the protagonist's feelings toward Liza, the young prostitute, are genuine to such a degree that they forget the protagonist was merely playing a deceptive game all along. Considering this type of response through the lens of Gerrig's findings, it is reasonable to suggest that these readers are perhaps actively suppressing (or never forming) their memory of the actions of a protagonist who is so thoroughly disaffected. These readers, then, may miss the work's depth and psychological significance, or even thoroughly misunderstand its narrative, confabulating, for example, alternative endings that align better with their own preferences and understandings.

Bias is built into emotion, in part, because emotion necessarily elicits action tendencies, which can be difficult to reverse—or even to be aware of—to a degree that I believe Robinson never fully explores. Although, as Robinson notes, readers employ cognitive monitoring to moderate action tendencies provoked by emotional responses to fictional characters and worlds, most of us are unable to quiet our physiological responses at will. When we wake up from a nightmare the emotions we felt during the dream remain with us. Difficulty shaking off a bad emotion is a common experience even when the emotion seems irrational.

This same phenomenon can be found among readers who become so immersed in stories that they feel as if fictional characters are real and become unable to control their emotional responses to them through cognitive monitoring. This problem is the inverse of the paradox of fiction (the apparent contradiction of fictional events inspiring real-life emotions), which Robinson explicitly discusses as a potential objection to her theory. She rebuts this objection, in part, with reference to research that shows there is no clear line between

²³ Dostoevsky 1993/1864.

the real and the fictional in our emotional responses. Indeed, I believe this underscores my point. Readers who are deeply emotionally involved with a novel can construe fictional worlds as real; they can retain their emotional attachment to characters over time, and some never lose the sense of the characters and the events of a work. Such a deep sense of the reality of a world can block a full recognition that it is a fictional world. This in itself can interfere with forming a plausible understanding of a work, if for no other reason than that it is, in itself, a key misapprehension of the context of that work. This leads to another potential objection to Robinson's theory, which she raises as an objection to her theory only to rebut, that readers can have inappropriate emotional responses to fictional worlds.²⁴

Inappropriate emotional responses

Robinson acknowledges that works such as 'Anna Karenina' admit a range of valid interpretations. And she agrees that some interpretations that are based upon readers's emotional responses are simply not credible. Readers can easily ignore too large a portion of the text or may suffer from a 'lack of awareness' while reading. Or it may be that "idiosyncratic personal interests forbid or prevent" readers from enlarging their "emotional horizons by sympathetically engaging with people who are different from them in significant ways".²⁵ In other words, sometimes readers can just get it wrong, even when they are emotionally engaged.

Robinson's point is well taken. The fact that there can be exceptions to a rule—in this case, the rule that readers need to respond with appropriate emotions to a work in order to understand it—does not mean that there is no rule. However, it remains fruitful to press the point further. Robinson casts reader error as incidental and largely correctable. I am not so sure this is the case. It can

²⁴ Robinson 2009, p. 141.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

credibly be argued that the ubiquity and persistence of idiosyncratic emotional response is a central feature, not a rare anomaly, of emotions.

Interpretation

Robinson distinguishes between “*experiencing* the work, *reflecting* on our experiences of it as they occur, and *interpreting* it by reflecting on and reporting our experiences of the work after finishing it, by summing it up as a whole”.²⁶ Only after a reader has finished a book can he judge his reflections and experiences of “the work by offering an *interpretation* of the work as a whole”.²⁷ Interpretation is part of—and an extended reflection on—the readers’s emotional responses to a novel as a whole, including its characters and narrative, in order to determine what provoked their emotion and whether this particular provocation was justified. It is, Robinson holds, an extension of the emotional process because it includes as important data the readers’s emotional response to the work.

But, as noted above, emotional responses, while indeed providing readers with important data about a work, can also interfere with their ability to accurately notice and remember narrative detail important to the understanding of the work. For the sake of argument, let us assume that a reader follows Robinson’s prescriptions and sets about interpreting a novel by drawing upon his or her basic working understanding of its historical context, genre, the plain meaning of its language, and a wealth of personal emotional responses to it, including extended reflections. Thus equipped, the reader must figure out what it was in the story that provoked his or her emotional responses and whether they were justified. Especially considering that readers’s physiological ‘participatory responses’ can become an obstacle to their correct

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

understanding, I am sceptical that most readers's interpretations will prove sound. In my view, the most plausible part of this hypothetical reader's interpretation is their search for the provocations and justifications for their emotional responses. In this case, their interpretation is reliable insofar as it is, in fact, cognitive. Robinson situates cognitive appraisal as part of readers's emotional responses. Clearly, however, readers also have access to cognitive appraisal that are separate from emotion.

4 Conclusion

In this paper I have questioned Jenefer Robinson's description of the degree to which emotional response—as she has defined it—contributes to readers's understanding of works of great literature. I have suggested that her theory strikes me as suggesting a too-narrow gate-keeping that might unnecessarily exclude some readers from benefiting from these works. I have argued that this exclusion may be premature, as research salient to this point is still evolving.

I have objected to Robinson's extension of—and challenge to—earlier theories that narrative understanding is largely based on cognitive assessment, pointing out that cognition that does not include a physiologically emotional response may be adequate for narrative understanding, while emotional responses may introduce bias into readers's narrative understanding. I largely base this objection on ideas illuminated by Richard Gerrig's research.

Robinson covers important ground in this work, pulling together a large body of research and thinking by philosophers, psychologists, and others to present readers with an enriched means for approaching great literary works. My objections to some narrow— but I believe important—aspects of her work are meant not as a rejection of her ideas—but as an expansion.

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