Aporia vol. 26 no. 1–2016

The Value of an Emotional Engagement with Literature

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It is undeniable that a wide array of literature has the tendency to evoke emotions in its careful readers, for better or for worse. What many have questioned, however, is the value of an emotional experience caused by fiction. Whether positive, negative, or neutral emotions rise out of a textual experience, philosophers continue to cast doubt on whether such involvement is rational, healthy, or at all valuable since the emotions at play are not conjured from actual lived experiences. On the surface, this distance seen between emotions arising from literature and their pragmatic application to real life can be overlooked. For this reason, we will explore this question regarding the value of emotional engagement with fiction by considering other philosophers' discussions, mainly those of Berys Gaut and Jenefer Robinson. I also wish to explore what I consider to be a prime example of a piece of literature that demonstrates not only the value, but essential nature of holding an actively emotional mind-set when reading some, if not all, works of fiction. The American poet

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and writer, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* will serve as a suitable illustration for demonstrating emotional reading's value and necessity. I aim to reveal two main reasons that an emotional reading of fiction is significant. Emotional readings of fiction offer beneficial psychological effects and readers would miss out in terms of attaining a complete understanding of a work without an emotional engagement. Readers would not only miss out in terms of opportunities for self-growth or social understanding, but also in terms of understanding points in the narrative that an author may be trying to highlight.

Since the aim is to better understand what the implications of emotions are in literature, it is important to clarify what types of emotions are being talked about. In *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, Gaut dedicates chapter nine to the role of emotion in literature. The chapter titled "The Importance of Emotional Realism" lends a useful explanation of what emotion means in a broad sense as well as an outline of the differences between the camps of emotional realism and emotional irrealism when discussing the value of emotions in literature or art more generally. Gaut defines an emotion as a state that is uncharacteristically felt, a state that has intentional objects and a phenomenology (Gaut 204). Gaut then makes mention of what he takes to be the three main characteristic aspects to an emotion: the affective, the cognitive-evaluative, and the motivational (Gaut 204). In terms of the affective dimension, emotion should be taken as an affective response to an object, such as a fictional work for example. To that end, Robinson also reveals a similar understanding of emotion when stating: "When human beings have an emotional response to something in the (internal or external) environment, they make an affective appraisal that picks that thing out as significant to me (given my wants, goals, and interests) and requiring attention" (114). Further, Gaut goes on to clarify that emotions must be understood as distinct states from moods due to moods lacking intentional objects. So while I can be angry or aggravated about nothing in particular, thereby resulting in an unpleasant mood, I must have an intended object for my anger or aggravation when responding emotionally. Further, according to the cognitive-evaluative characteristic of emotions, an emotion has an intentional object, which has incorporated into it an evaluation of that object (Gaut 204). For example, when I am angry with someone

it is likely because I feel that the person has wronged me in some way or another (Gaut 204). And addressing the final characteristic, emotional states can motivate action in a direct fashion, whereas with moods it becomes difficult to identify what about the mood, or what component stirred an active response (Gaut 204). While anger may cause me to retaliate, perhaps by starting up a fight with someone, becoming upset about someone's situation may cause me to reach out to an individual or a cause. After teasing out the main characteristics involved in emotion, Gaut notes that all three characteristics do not need to be simultaneously present for an emotion to exist. As an example, he refers to an instance where individuals may be angry with someone else, but not thinking about the person they are angry with or about the feeling of anger for long spans of time during which the person angering them is not physically present or mentioned (Gaut 204). My affective response to the object of my anger, the person having wronged me, may continue to exist without my responding to it presently or being motivated to take any action since it is not currently on my mind.

Moving to the conversation between emotional realists and irrealists, it becomes evident that the conversation brings light to the debated value of fictions. The question asked by both these stances is, is it possible to feel real emotions towards events and situations known to be fictional, and if so, how? (Gaut 208). When distinguishing the two camps and their approach to answering this question, the emotional realists are seen as holding the view that individuals have real emotional experiences when engaging with literature, while irrealists hold that these things that feel like actual emotional experiences are, in reality, fictional or simulated emotions that one feels towards the imagined events (Gaut 207). The simulated emotions that irrealists refer to are sometimes referred to as pseudo-emotions or quasi-emotions in order to draw contrast between them and what irrealists consider to be real emotions. An often pointed to example of what emotional irrealists are talking about comes from Kendall Walton's "Fearing Fictions," in which he offers an example of Charles, a horror film spectator, who experiences fear of the green slime that appears in the film (Walton 1). Charles is experiencing quasi-fear as a result of realizing that the slime only threatens him fictionally, thereby making it fictional that his supposed fear is caused by

a belief that the slime poses any real danger, and hence that he fears the slime (Gaut 209). As demonstrated by Walton's example, since emotional irrealists draw such a contrast between "regular" emotions and the emotions that come about via an engagement with several art forms, in our case literary experience, it is the emotional realist view that lends a stronger hand in explaining why emotional engagement with fiction is valuable and an enhancement to the reader's experience. This is primarily because emotional realists are talking about real, genuine emotions that arise when reading fiction rather than a sub-category of emotions that are coloured as being of false nature, like quasi or pseudo-emotions. Actually feeling an emotion rather than imagining feeling one carries with it greater weight and greater issues—one of which is certainly the issue of responsibility insofar as I am deemed more responsible for what I feel than for what I merely imagine to be feeling. If I imagine enjoying torturing a kitten, on the realist account, I cannot disavow the implications this makes on my character, while an irrealist can argue that I am not really feeling joy, but imagining it (Gaut 217). An irrealist therefore relieves such responsibility of character by arguing that such imaginings are representative of only a possible character rather than the current, real character.

With this more thorough understanding of the components involved in the conversation between emotional realists and irrealists, we can move on to the first point I wish to argue in defence of the value of an emotional reading of fiction, namely, that an emotional engagement with literature offers beneficial psychological effects, whether the emotions are positive or negative. One benefit of such an experience is the ability to test out various possible situations in our minds, hypothetically, without having to deal with subsequent, real life consequences. As Gaut puts it:

> An advantage of [engaging with works of fiction] on the realists' view is that emotions can be felt towards merely imagined objects and events, so that one does not have to undergo the sometimes painful or brutal events that would be necessary if one were to experience these emotions by actually living through the events. (207)

It is quite evident that individuals would prefer navigating their emotions revolving around, say, ending an unhealthy friendship in this way or that through a fictional reading of a character before actually deploying such tactics in their own friendships, in their own lives. We learn of the tragic outcomes that can come about when there is a lack of communication, lack of trust, and so on through Hamlet's perils rather than our own, and it's often preferred that a lesson is taught that way. To the same end, emotional engagement with fiction can lead to crucial instrumental utilization of one's imagination. Gaut asks us to consider an example:

> Suppose that I am contemplating a change of career, and wonder whether to become an investment banker. As part of my imaginings, I imagine my character changing in various ways. In order to discover whether I should change career, I ask myself how I now actually feel about this imagined scenario—does it fill me with joy or trepidation? Here it is essential to my imaginative project that I take what I now feel towards imagined events as a banker as revelatory of a character I would possess, but do not currently have. So we take our actual feelings in such cases as ones that are not so easily disavowed, as opposed to imagined feelings, that may represent only a possible character I could possess. And what characteristics it is possible for me to possess may indeed reveal something about my actual character, but they are still distinct from it. (206)

We study literature as preparation for potential application or withdrawal of an emotion or action in our real lives, and this seems to be especially important. The ability to imagine in such a way as shown in Gaut's investment banker hypothetical is a significant way of mapping out our lives and coming to make decisions. Many times I personally have had to imagine what it would be like to live in one place or another, and how that may potentially affect my overall happiness, before coming to an eventual decision about where to live. This skill can be sharpened through our emotional engagement with fiction as we are mapping out outcomes for characters while at

the same time constantly relating their fictional scenarios to our own lives and to our own feelings.

Another beneficial psychological effect of being able to play out hypothetical situations in our minds during emotional moments with fictional works is the greater understanding of people and ourselves derived via understanding literary characters. As we familiarize ourselves with the different types of personalities that we are inevitably introduced to through the characters in fictional works, we learn more about our own personality traits and about ourselves generally. Robinson reveals a similar thought process when she notes that part of the social value of reading novels is derived from the expanding list of those with whom we can sympathize. We discover that even those people are human beings like us, and when we are emotionally engaged with a novel, we find our own wants and interests at stake, just as the wants and interests of the characters are at stake (Robinson 110–17). Similarly to how understanding real people requires emotional involvement, it is impossible to fully understand a literary work without some level of emotional involvement with the story, the characters, and their predicaments in the respective work (Robinson 126). Taking an emotionally indifferent or neutral stance while maintaining a cognitive recognition of the characters' states is not enough. Put shortly, comprehending the characters' situation as difficult and painful is not the same as feeling it to be so (Robinson 128). As it turns out,

> An emotionless understanding of a character would presumably be one in which the words are literally understood, the plot is grasped and we can tell roughly why the characters behave as they do, but we do not care what happens in the story . . . because I do not sense my interests to be at stake in one way or other, hence I do not get emotional. (Robinson 133)

Looking to Plath, we can find *The Bell Jar* to be a fruitful example especially because it has the unique twist of being a fiction novel that is semi-autobiographical. The main character and narrator, Esther, has feelings and experiences that tend to resemble if not absolutely parallel Plath's own life experiences. The story focuses on a young woman Esther Greenwood who begins experiencing deep depression

during a summer internship in New York City. Her state of mental illness worsens over time and she goes on to make several suicide attempts. In the midst of one of these attempts at her life, Esther offers the following thoughts:

> I thought it would be easy, lying in the tub and seeing the redness flower from my wrists, flush after flush through the clear water, till I sank to sleep under a surface gaudy as poppies.
>
> But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenceless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at. (Plath 147)

At this point in the novel, Esther's suicide attempt occurred shortly after she decided to stop seeing the therapist who her mother had been requiring her to visit, which was wrongfully interpreted by her mother as a sign of wilful recovery. This stream of consciousness along with the stream presented in the midst of Esther's other suicide attempts exemplify the essentialness of feeling compassion for fictional characters in order to have a fuller picture of what a novel's author intended. This demonstrates what a take away of personality traits that apply to real people might look like, which can better position us in the future to be sympathetic, helpful, or simply aware of how individuals may be feeling given their situations. I, myself, cannot read the above passage unemotionally, for if one were to truly put oneself in Esther's shoes, in this exact moment, it would stir up a great deal of sadness and pain that Esther has yet again felt so hopeless that suicide was what she considered to be the best possible remedy to alleviating her pain. Then connecting such an experience to real people's decisions to commit or attempt suicide deepens the sadness experienced by an emotional reader. Whether Esther's experience is personally relatable or only generally, the effect remains. I may be able to reflect on my own friends who are experiencing such troubles and take Esther's descriptions of her state as hints of what my friends might be sensitive to hearing or how they might want to be treated. Such an understanding, especially when relevant to

one's own life, cannot be arrived at without compassion, and hence an emotional reading of literature. To that end, an educated Plath reader assumingly knows that she did eventually commit suicide in real life, thereby causing an emotional reader to feel for both Esther and Plath herself. Contextualizing Esther's struggle in light of Plath's struggle with depression allows for a more elaborate understanding of real people who experience depression.

The significance of being able to understand or sympathize with a variety of people is manifold. This expansion of understanding can allow us to be more tolerant, helpful, compassionate and so forth. In a case where I might have considered a student who is not producing the best work to be disgraceful or shameful, after having read a work of fiction, I might be able to compare a student like this to one I have read about, whose work is not the best it could be due to family issues, social issues, or perhaps depression. In essence, emotional readers of fiction can develop positive characteristics and better position themselves to build relationships and feel closer to others due to understanding derived from literature.

Robinson's argument is that understanding characters in novels, especially realistic ones such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, is like understanding real people, which requires emotional understanding and not merely a dispassionate grasp of their character and motives (106). To support her argument, Robinson introduces Lawrence Blum's account of compassion—dwelling on the condition of others—which is an important element for emotional readings of fiction as well as for real life (Robinson 110). If we do not show a sense of compassion for the characters we are reading about, perhaps taking on their viewpoint, then it becomes difficult to see how any other emotions during the reading process would follow. Blum emphasizes the importance of involving oneself in another person's condition via an imaginative dwelling, an active regard for his good, and emotional responses of a certain degree of intensity for this aforementioned reason (Robinson 110). The work of imaginatively taking the other person's viewpoint, and involving oneself in the other person's vision of the world, also involves having care and concern for that person as a fellow human being, thereby expanding the variety of personalities with which we can empathize (Robinson 111). Blum's account of compassion offers a backdrop for Robinson's

argument that understanding literary characters is highly relevant to understanding real people.

We've now discussed how an emotional reading of fiction can offer positive psychological effects, like sharpening our ability to navigate imagined situations and instrumentally taking advantage of this skill. Additionally, emotional readers expand their ability to sympathize with a wider array of personalities derived from understanding and becoming emotionally concerned with literary characters. This understanding of literary characters obviously also contributes to our wholesale ability to gain a complete understanding of a work with a sensible interpretation.

As mentioned in my evaluation of Plath's passage about the attempt at suicide, we would miss out on a more complete understanding of a literary work if we abstained ourselves from emotional involvement, both because we would not be feeling for the characters as we would for real people and also because we are missing the author's intention to evoke certain emotions. In line with Robinson's view, I find this to be especially the case with realistic novels. While Robinson points to the often-used example of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, I will continue to point to *The Bell Jar*, which comes to my mind more naturally.

> Especially in reading the great realist novels of the Western tradition, our emotion can lend us to discover subtleties that tend to be occasions when the author is aiming to impress upon us facts or events that are important to the novel, to establish character, to mark significant developments in the plot, to drive home the theme or moral of the story, or—as often happens—all three. (Robinson 107–8)

Robinson supports this point with our weeping for Anna Karenina when she tries to bring toys to her son for his birthday since she was forced to leave him. Upon arrival for the gift delivery, she has no time to actually deliver the gifts because she is rushed away by a household servant. She is thus forced to carry back with her the parcel of toys she had chosen so sadly and with so much love the day before (Robinson 108). In this point of the novel, the reader's sympathy and compassion are themselves a way of understanding Anna and her situation. An examination of the sources of our

emotional responses to Anna reveal important facts about Anna and her situations described in the novel that might otherwise be merely glanced at or entirely disregarded (Robinson 109). A particular passage of interest is given in a later chapter of Plath's novel when Esther depicts her life:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked.
>
> One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantine and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath 77)

This serves as a clear example of when authors try to press points of the novel that are important for the readers to grasp if they are to ever come close to a complete understanding of a work. In this case, Plath's passage establishes the heart of Esther's struggles lying in her unsureness about the future and also the larger, recurring theme of uncertainty. Plath's extended metaphor about a fig tree is a representation of the branching out of life and all the potential paths that Esther can imagine herself taking up, but cannot because of her crippling indecision and unsureness. While reading this passage, the readers must first set themselves up in such a way that they picture

Plath's fig tree in their heads, unpacking the similes, personifications, and types of lifestyles being portrayed, and connecting with the emotional state of the character.

Some level of emotional reading must be maintained actively and consistently in order to allow for a valuable, fuller understanding of a literary work. Without an actual effort to put oneself in Esther's shoes, and attempt to feel as she does, aesthetic appreciation becomes lessened or entirely absent in the reader. We would deny ourselves a deeper understanding of this type of person who we may encounter in our real lives as well as a complete understanding of what the author was trying to bring across in this point of the novel. The takeaway is an open telling about how daunted and small an individual can feel in the face of all of life's decisions and paths. There is no key in the back of each work that lists relevant themes, explanations of metaphors, or other literary devices. It must be the readers who explore such elements that are not spelled out, but only hinted at. Accordingly, emotional engagement with fiction can be a valuable strength in understanding literature.

Keeping this in mind, it is still important to note that while emotions can at times be essential for interpretation and understanding, there are other times when emotions direct our attention away from a work and may not even be consistently required to understand it. For example, you can probably think of an instance where you have seen someone leave a movie theater in tears in response to a sad film or perhaps from great fear in response to a horror film. The reasoning behind such examples of averting one's attention away from a work is complex. Individuals may decide to leave the theater purely because they are overwhelmed with an uncomfortable emotion, and perhaps they do not want to experience such emotions publicly. There might even be happenings in the film which conjure up relevant personal experiences that direct one's attention away from the work almost entirely. Similar responses to artwork can be demonstrated across various platforms. Despite our awareness that emotional responses can in specific cases or times in our lives distract us from the actual artwork, it is important to note that these are exceptions to the norm. To that end, it is, if anything, a testament to the effectiveness of the artwork if it is initially able to

prompt an emotional reaction, even if that reaction later results in the aversion of one's attention away from the artwork.

Furthermore, emotion is not the only ingredient necessary for understanding literature. You have to understand the meanings of the words in a literary work before you can get off the ground at all. You also have to understand the conventions of the game, including the characteristic literary patterns, and you should maybe know something about literary history, and so on (Robinson 118). Nonetheless, it seems true through the above discussion that reading literature emotionally is its very own form of valuable interpretation. This approach to reading fictional literature emotionally is beneficial in two respects. First, it offers positive psychological effects such as enhancing the skill of testing out hypothetical situations in our minds before taking action and allowing us to derive a greater understanding of people via the wide range of personalities we are introduced to through literary characters. Second, emotional readers are able to fill in gaps and understand a literary work more fully since they are more inclined to pick up on points about the narrative that an author may be trying to highlight. Therefore, an emotional reading of fictional literary works is a valuable and at times essential form of engagement.

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