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Effects of Literature on Empathy and Self-Reflection: A Theoretical-Empirical Framework
(Abstract)

Various scholars have made claims about literature's potential to evoke empathy and self-reflection, which would eventually lead to more pro-social behavior. But is it indeed the case that a seemingly idle pass-time activity like literary reading can do all that? And if so, how can we explain such an influence? Would the effects be particular to unique literary text qualities or to other aspects that literary texts share with other genres (e. g., narrativity)? Empirical research is necessary to answer these questions. This article presents an overview of empirical studies investigating the relationship between reading and empathy, and reading and self-reflection. We reveal those questions in the research that are not addressed as of yet, and synthesize the available approaches to literary effects. Based on theory as well as empirical work, a multi-factor model of literary reading is constructed.

With regard to reading and empathy, the metaphor of the moral laboratory (cf. Hakemulder 2000) comes close to a concise summary of the research and theory. Being absorbed in a narrative can stimulate empathic imagination. Readers go along with the author/narrator in a (fictional) thought-experiment, imagining how it would be to be in the shoes of a particular character, with certain motives, under certain circumstances, meeting with certain events. That would explain why narrativity can result in a broadening of readers' consciousness, in particular so that it encompasses fellow human beings. Fictionality might stimulate readers to consider the narrative they read as a thought experiment, creating distance between them and the events, allowing them to experiment more freely with taking the position of a character different from themselves, also in moral respects. Literary features, like gaps and ambiguous characterization, may stimulate readers to make more mental inferences, thus training their theory of mind. However, apart from literature possibly being able to train basic cognitive ability, we have little indication for the importance of *literary* imagination over narrative or fictional imagination.

Regarding self-reflection, while there is no convincing evidence that literary texts are generally more thought-provoking than non-literary texts (either narrative or expository), there is tentative indication for a relation between reading literary texts and self-reflection. However, as was the case for the studies on empathy, there is a lack of systematic comparisons between literary narratives and non-literary narratives. There are some suggestions regarding the processes that can lead to self-reflection. Empirical and theoretical work indicates that the combination of experiencing narrative and aesthetic emotions tends to trigger self-reflection. Personal and reading experience may influence narrative and aesthetic emotions.

By proposing a multi-factor model of literary reading, we hope to give an impulse to current reader response research, which too often conflates narrativity, fictionality and literariness. The multi-factor model of literary reading contains (our simplified versions of) two theoretical positions within the field of reader response studies on underlying processes that lead to empathy and reflection: the idea of reading literature as a form of role-taking proposed by Oatley (e. g., 1994; 1999) and the idea of defamiliarization through deviating textual and narrative features proposed by Miall and Kuiken (1994; 1999). We argue that these positions

are in fact complementary. While the role-taking concept seems most adequate to explain empathic responses, the defamiliarization concept seems most adequate in explaining reflective responses. The discussion of these two theoretical explanations leads to the construction of a theoretical framework (and model) that offers useful suggestions which texts could be considered to have which effects on empathy and reflection.

In our multi-factor model of literary reading, an important addition to the previously mentioned theories is the concept »stillness«. We borrow this term from the Canadian author Yann Martel (2009), who suggests reading certain literary texts will help to stimulate self-contemplation (and appreciation for art), moments that are especially valuable in times that life seems to be racing by, and we are enveloped by work and a multitude of other activities. Other literary authors have proposed similar ideas. Stillness is related to, or overlaps with the more commonly used term »aesthetic distance«, an attitude of detachment, allowing for contemplation to take place (cf. Cupchik 2001). Stillness, we propose, allows a space in which slow thinking (Kahneman 2011) can take place. Stillness is not reflection itself, but a precondition for reflection. In our model, stillness is an empty space or time that is created as a result of reading processes: the slowing down of readers' perceptions of the fictional world, caused by defamiliarization. Our multi-factor model suggests that while role-taking can take place for all types of narratives, literary and fictional narratives may evoke the type of aesthetic distance (stillness) that leads to a suspension of judgment, adding to a stronger experience of role-taking and narrative empathy.

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