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Exploring Narratives' Powers of Emotional Persuasion through Character Involvement: A Working Heuristic
(Abstract)

Narratives change people's minds. This has been shown as early as forty-five years ago, but recently, the persuasive and emotional effects of narratives have received fresh attention, as well as emotions themselves. Both psychology and literature researchers have begun to investigate the particularities of the emotional functioning of narratives and how they persuade, i. e. influence attitudes through having readers experience emotions. Their research, combined with recent appraisal theories of vicarious (i. e. other-oriented) emotions, indicates that the emotional effects of a narrative can be hypothesized about by critics through analyzing the text itself, i. e. the textual situations that characters are placed in and how the contextualized readers may simulate and appraise these situations. These findings, however, have not yet been turned into a workable heuristic which would allow literary critics to analyse textual narratives for their emotional and persuasive effect. I set out to do so in this paper.

First, I summarize recent research conducted on and theories proposed for the emotional effect of character involvement in narratives. Especially noteworthy are Howard Sklar's *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction* and Claudia Hillebrandt's and Elisabeth Kampmann's volume *Sympathie und Literatur*, as well as Suzanne Keen's slightly older *Empathy and the Novel.* Hillebrandt's and Kampmann's definition of sympathy – feeling *for* someone when readers' and texts' value horizons match – informs the majority of contributions to the volume. While impressively illuminating the internal value horizons of texts as envisioned at their point of creation, this approach neither allows for nor aims at hypotheses on widespread emotional reader response or persuasion.

Sklar's approach incorporates an everyday understanding of ›sympathy‹, i. e. of feeling sorry or pity for someone. His study – forming a hypothesis through analysis, testing it empirically, and ensuring inter-coder-variability – is to be commended, I would argue, however, that sympathy covers only a small amount of the possible vicarious emotions a reader may feel while experiencing a narrative.

Keen, the only one to use empathy, not sympathy, in her title, doubts that reading narratives (in particular high-brow literature) directly leads to acts of altruism. In her study, she does not primarily develop a heuristic for hypothesizing on empirical reader response, but deconstructs researchers', readers' and writers' attitudes concerning narrative and empathy, and consequently proposes a heuristic for analyzing authorial strategies of empathy, which does not seem suitable for predicting contextualized reader response.

Thus I turn to empirical research on narrative emotional persuasion (Ch. 2). Scholars concerned have found that narratives are more likely than expository texts to lead to attitude changes, and they have linked the degree (quantity) of attitude change to the degree of *transportation* experienced by readers. Intending to expand their findings to include the quality of attitude change, I combine findings from appraisal theory of vicarious emotions with those of simulation theory,

developing *emotions of narrative response* (Ch. 3). These emotions, like other vicarious emotions, result from readers appraising situations that persons or characters are in. Situations are appraised along six appraisal dimensions: human/situational control, self/other responsibility, certain/uncertain, low/high attention, pleasantness/unpleasantness, low/high effort. Certain combinations and intensity of appraisal dimensions (›appraisal patterns‹) predict certain ›emotions‹, although emotions are not to be understood as coherent units or Platonic types, but as the unbounded grouping of affective and cognitive processes under socially constructed labels. The conditions for appraisal in texts are information sufficiency and valence.

I propose to operationalize the text-situated character-focused conditions of appraisal and the process of appraisal itself as follows: *(i) identify passages in the narrative that portray characters in situations pertinent to the* general goal *of avoiding unpleasantness/seeking out pleasantness – ›sympathy‹ (general valence); (ii) identify passages that portray characters in situations pertinent to* specific goals *– ›empathy‹ (specific valence); (iii) identify passages where* inferences *about a character may be drawn – ›identification‹ (information sufficiency).* Once these text passages or *textual situations* are identified, hypotheses on the likely emotional judgements along the appraisal dimensions are formed by analysing the *(iv) conflicts into which characters enter, their outcome, and what has caused that particular outcome.* It is here, I propose, that *emotional attitude change* or the emotional persuasiveness of narratives enters the picture through making characters (and readers) suffer – or not (Ch. 4).

I then sketch an analysis of Suzanne Collins' immensely successful ›dystopian‹ novel *The Hunger Games*, finding that, while emotional involvement is likely, the textual situations the novel presents at the end are likely to be appraised as positive and self-directed (resulting in *pride*) (Ch. 5). An empirical test using online reviews shows that the hypotheses' predictions turn out to be accurate (Ch. 6): Emotional persuasion, operationalized in this specific case as delivering a warning, is reported only by a tenth of readers reporting emotional reaction, whereas 75 % of them report successful character involvement. This indicates that the heuristic produces hypotheses with predictive power, allowing for greater differentiation for questions of qualitative reader persuasion. Research on the emotional persuasion of narratives is still in its infancy, but the heuristic developed here may provide a stepping stone towards developing and working on a greater range of questions with more predictive power.

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