Audience Emotions and Literary Value

Abstract:

For Peter Lamarque, a novel’s literary value is a function of how well it rewards specifically literary reading strategies, such as identifying the theme of the novel. In contrast, readers’ emotional responses to novels play no “significant role” in specifically literary analysis. I argue that, on the contrary, readers’ empathic emotions for characters help them to see the events in the novel from the perspective of those characters, something that is crucial to understanding the novel’s theme. And how a novel induces readers to empathize emotionally with the implied author determines the theme of a novel even more directly.
1. Peter Lamarque on Literary Value

According to Peter Lamarque, literary value is a function of how well a literary work rewards specifically literary reading strategies. In contrast, readers’ emotional responses either to characters or to the implied author play no “significant role” in specifically literary analysis or appreciation.¹ In this paper I criticize this view. In my discussion I focus on literary narratives.

In Lamarque’s view, literary criticism is a cultural practice within the cultural institution of literature. It involves (1) a “heightened awareness of form and structure and the ‘design’ of the whole,”² (2) “explication” or the search for non-literal meanings, such as the identification of allusions and ambiguities and the spelling out of connotations, and (3) “elucidation,” exploring the “immediate subject” or ‘world’ of the work and “filling in the gaps,” in Wolfgang Iser’s term, by making explicit what is implicit. But these three aspects of criticism all exist in the service of (4) “thematic interpretation,”³ the working out of a theme that unifies the work, and “which involves identifying a perspective or vision or general reflection that informs the subject matter and moves beyond the immediate events portrayed.”⁴

According to Lamarque, “what is of interest in reading literary works is ... appreciating how a subject is structured so as to yield a satisfying and engaging perspective or vision.” Again, “[a]ny such unifying perspectives on the subject are elicited in interpretation through an effort to find connectedness and coherence across the constitutive elements of the work, from character and action to image and expression.”⁵ To use one of Lamarque’s examples, one might plausibly describe the unifying theme of Dickens’ novel, Our Mutual Friend, as “money corrupts.” But our literary interest in the novel is not simply in the theme, thus baldly stated. Rather, what makes the work “literary” is that it invites “an interest ... in how the theme is worked out in the particular work.”⁶

³ Ibid. 168
⁴ Ibid. 150
⁵ Ibid. 168
⁶ Ibid. 150. Lamarque is careful to note that he is not just talking about professional critics. Such critics are not distinct in kind from ordinary readers. They are simply “further along the path towards David Hume’s ‘true judges’.” Lamarque distinguishes “literary fiction” from “non-literary genre fiction” (264), which does not reward the kinds of activities that literary criticism requires: “the gains in quality of experience, lasting pleasure, and stimulation of the imagination are likely to be
In Lamarque’s view, literary criticism is a highly analytic, cerebral practice: “careful and prolonged study” is necessary in order to plumb the depths of a good literary narrative. But most readers of novels are also interested in having a valuable emotional experience of the narrative. Indeed, much has been written about how novels invite readers to empathize emotionally with characters and/or to sympathize with them, and, more generally, to get emotionally involved in the trajectory of the story. In other words, we are often invited both to share to some extent the emotions of characters, and/or to feel sympathy or compassion for them. For Lamarque, however, the value of such emotional experiences of a literary work is only a “contingent” value, not an intrinsic literary value.

Lamarque recognizes that “the very existence of works of art is dependent on the responses of humans to art” and that all “literary values are in that sense response-dependent values.” But he wants to draw a sharp distinction between responses or effects that are “directly related to a work’s intrinsic value,” and those that are mere contingent or instrumental effects. In general, he says, “a work reveals its [intrinsic] value by showing how well it rewards the kinds of reading procedures” outlined above, which he judges to be central to literary criticism. By contrast, “mere contingent or instrumental effects” such as “reminding me of my childhood, giving me the ability to pass an exam, or providing examples of psychoanalytic theory,” do not contribute to the specifically literary value of a work.

For Lamarque, readers’ emotional responses to characters and events are likewise merely contingent results of reading for some readers in some situations, and although he concedes that “empathetic and other emotional responses can heighten the pleasure a reader can get from a work (and thus its appreciation, broadly conceived), … and even that this might aid understanding of the work” he says that emotional or affective states do not play “a significant role in literary critical judgments of meaning or value” and should not if “literary

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7 Lamarque, The Philosophy of Literature, p.247.
8 Ibid. P. 264.
9 Ibid 269. It is misleading to say that the intrinsic value of a work of literature is relational, namely, it depends on how well it rewards readers who use certain kinds of reading procedures. What Lamarque seems to want to say is that some relational values of a literary work are significant literally and others are not.
10 Ibid 264.
11 Ibid 247.
criticism is to retain its focus on literature as art.”12 In particular, “empirical facts about the psychological states of actual people will not illuminate what is of value in individual works of literature.”13 Feeling affection for Emma in Jane Austen’s eponymous novel or amused contempt for the Eltons has no literary value; these are not “literary emotions.”

2. The Role of Readers’ Emotions in Literary Criticism. It seems to me that Lamarque fails to see how readers’ emotions can contribute to literary criticism as he himself describes it. On the one hand he ignores how readers’ emotions for particular characters can help us to see the events in the novel from the perspective of those characters, in a way that is crucial to understanding the theme of a novel. And on the other hand, he ignores how a novel can induce readers to share the emotional perspective of the [implied] author which determines the theme of a novel even more directly. In making these claims I am thinking primarily of the great realistic novels of the nineteenth century. I would not want to generalize my conclusions to modernist or postmodernist works, which typically problematize or even reject any role for emotions in criticism.14

Lamarque has several reasons for denying that emotional responses to literary works can contribute to literary criticism as he conceives it: Such responses “tend to be too reader-relative or culture-specific, they tend to rely too much on first-time reading rather than careful and prolonged study, and they can do little to furnish a sense of the artistic unity of a work.”15

First, it’s certainly true that different people respond differently to the same characters in the same novel. Sometimes our responses are simply idiosyncratic: I mark the hero as a blackguard because he has red hair and a handlebar moustache just like my nasty Uncle Ed, even though there is nothing in the novel to justify this verdict. But not all readers’ responses are “reader-relative” in this way. The author typically invites or solicits certain emotional responses, those which are appropriate to the characters and events in light of the overall structure and theme of the novel, and if we respond with appropriate emotions to particular characters or events,

13 Ibid.
14 Another preliminary caution: I am assuming that – contrary to the so-called paradox of fiction – I can indeed experience emotions for fictional characters, and that more specifically I can share the emotions of characters to some degree, even though empathic emotions, whether for actual or fictional agents, face the problem that my empathic emotion for you will not necessarily have the same intentional object as your emotion nor the same degree of intensity: I may be sad on your behalf or on behalf of Anna Karenina, without being sad about what you or she are sad about.
15 The Philosophy of Literature, 247.
this helps us to understand and appreciate both those characters and events and their role in the structure and theme of the novel as a whole. And when our interpretations differ, it is likely due in part to our differing assessments of the implied author and what responses he or she is inviting.\textsuperscript{16} It’s true that if we are not in the right cultural context we might not respond as the author intends, but that’s because background knowledge is necessary for any novel of any complexity. So even though we don’t all have exactly the same emotional reactions to the characters in a novel, our reactions are not irrelevant to the theme of the novel and its literary value. On the contrary: different interpretations are typically based on different emotional responses to key events and characters.\textsuperscript{17}

Secondly, there seems no good reason why emotional engagement with a novel should be confined to a first-time reading. Our affection for Emma develops as the story develops and it is reinforced by subsequent readings.\textsuperscript{18} In other cases our emotions towards a particular character may change as we reread and our interpretation of the novel revised as a result. But either way our emotional engagement with the novel in later readings can help us enrich our understanding of it. Lamarque claims that I first have to understand the embeddedness of a scene in its literary context before I can respond to it with appropriate emotions. But this ignores the fact that emotions are not just passive reactions to characters or events; they carry information about those characters and events. Hence emotional engagement with a novel should be preserved even if we also engage in “careful and prolonged study.” The two should not be mutually exclusive. We go back and forth in reading literature between emotionally responding to the content of the work and studying how those reactions affect our overall interpretation.\textsuperscript{19}

Third and most importantly, Lamarque distinguishes between “two radically different perspectives” on the characters in a novel, the internal perspective, i.e., “the perspective from

\textsuperscript{16} When we find ourselves refusing to respond emotionally as the author seems to intend, we may be rejecting the emotional perspective of the implied author in the novel. See my later comments on Dickens’ Little Nell.
\textsuperscript{17} See
\textsuperscript{18} One might object that there are emotions which have maximum effect only on a first reading, such as surprise at a turn in the plot or fear that the hero will not escape his predicament. This is one form of an objection which also arises with respect to rehearing a piece of music. I think the answer is that emotions function by responding fast and automatically and in a bodily way to their objects and that in the case of surprise and fear, they respond as if for the first time. However, to defend this point convincingly would take an elaborate argument for which I do not have space here.
\textsuperscript{19} For example, a reader’s mixture of contempt and amusement at the Veneerings in Our Mutual Friend can lead her to understand that the new and shiny appearance of the Veneerings and the things in their house hides the emptiness of their lives and values, and this information in turn informs our construal of the novel’s theme as (plausibly) centered on the corrosive effects of money.
within the fictional world, where they act as ordinary human agents,” and the external perspective, “the perspective of the real world, where they are bound up with linguistic forms and artifice” (197). He acknowledges that critics may be interested in characters qua human beings, but he thinks that if they are taking a genuinely literary interest in a narrative, they are also – and more fundamentally – interested in characters as “constructs, artifacts or devices in narrative” (196-7).

Characters are radically different from actual people because they have “an irreducible duality in their nature,” that, he thinks, reflects a broader bifurcation in criticism itself between an interest in the human worlds depicted and an interest in the rhetorical means of that depiction.”20 Fictional characters, unlike actual people, are “perspectival entities”: their nature is completely determined by their “identifying descriptions,” and those descriptions “embody points of view on them, both physical and evaluative.”21 Lamarque gives as an example Dicken’s introduction of the Veneerings in Our Mutual Friend.

Mr. and Mrs. Veneering were bran-new [sic] people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick-and-span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new … [A]ll things were in a state of high varnish and polish.22

Lamarque comments that “Dickens’s judgment of the Veneerings, which he invites us to share, indeed which we must share if we are to grasp the role of the characters in the novel, is part of the very identity of the characters. … The mocking tone, as it were, makes them the characters they are.” From the perspective internal to the world of the work, the Veneerings are human beings (of a somewhat grotesque sort!), but from the external perspective, Dickens’s mocking perspective, the Veneerings are situated along with various other characters as people “who see no value beyond monetary value” and who are contrasted with characters, such as John Harmon, Eugene Wrayburn, and Lizzie Hexam, who reject these attitudes. “The Veneerings are not just people in a world but elements in an artistic design.”23

20 The Philosophy of Literature, 197
22 Quoted in The Philosophy of Literature, 202-3
23 Ibid. p. 203.
Part of the reason why Lamarque thinks that emotional responses to characters are contingent and instrumental responses, not “literary” responses, is because they treat characters solely as human beings, not as constructs of words, whereas Lamarque is struck by “how remote from real people fictional characters can come to seem.” I would urge, however, that it is important to keep in mind while reading literary narratives that characters are not only elements in a plot and contributions to a theme, but also people although (usually) fictional people. Why is this important? Because the theme or vision or perspective of a novel would have no human appeal unless characters are viewed not just as elements in a plot or as contributions to a theme but simultaneously as real people. We can of course move back and forth between the internal and external perspective on a novel, and that is indeed what the best readers do, but even when we take the external perspective on the characters, and, for example, note the relative moral values assigned to the different characters in Emma, which is one of the major structural principles governing the novel, the interest and value of this structural principle would be hard to comprehend unless it was instantiated in actual (albeit fictional) human beings.

In contrast, consider a game of chess. Instead of focusing on the human chess players, let us focus on the chess pieces themselves. Like Jane Austen’s characters, they too also have relative values, and they can be anthropomorphized as sly and manipulative, as flamboyant and aggressive, and ultimately as triumphant or downtrodden. We may take pleasure in an elegantly executed set of chess moves or even a whole game, and we can even derive a “theme” from such a game, such as “He who braves much gains much” or, alternatively, “Caution is the best policy.” Or what about “A unified group of the relatively powerless can bring down a great king”? As Lamarque proposes for literature, the value of the game (again, seen as an interaction among the pieces, not as a battle between players) would lie in how the

25 In “Virtual People: Fictional Characters through the Frames of reality,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism Vol 67, 2009, pp. 73-82] Ira Newman argues, like me, that from the internal perspective fictional characters are indeed similar to actual people, but for him this is because both have “alternative future possibilities.” His main point in the article is that fictional characters can serve as “paradigms” or “shared examples” so that “explanatory patterns that [have] proven successful in understanding real-world people [can ] be projected onto domains of fictional literature that [have] realistic foundations with the aim of improving our understanding of fictional characters,” and at the same time “problem-solving practices used in realistic fictional contexts can be projected back onto real-world settings, for the enhancement of our understanding of real-world people.” This point is tangential to my concerns in this paper. In particular, Newman is not concerned with the role of emotion in understanding fictional characters.
26 Jane Austen’s Emma assigns the various characters to different moral levels, from Mr. Knightley (Grade: A) who always does the right thing for the right reasons, to Jane Fairfax, who gets perhaps a B+, since she lacks openness and deceives even her closest relations about her engagement to Frank Churchill, to Frank Churchill himself, who is clearly thoughtless and immature and unlikely ever to achieve the gravitas and sensitivity of Mr. Knightley (B?) down to Mr. and Mrs. Elton who are selfish, vain and unkind (C?) Nobody in Emma is really evil.
theme was worked out in detail and how it unified the game. Maybe the analogy has some merit, but the moral of this story from my point of view is that the travails of the king and queen in a chess game are not of deep interest to most people, because they have no psychology: they are not human beings, and we feel neither empathy nor sympathy for them.

Lamarque is quite right that if we treat literary characters as *nothing but* (fictional) human beings, then clearly our interest is not literary at all, but it does not follow that it is a literary mistake to treat characters as (in addition to being literary elements) human beings with human character traits and motivations. Indeed, if we do not treat them as human beings, the point of a novel will be lost and its theme will be nothing but an empty abstraction such as “Money corrupts.”

3. Sharing the Emotions of the Implied Author

So far I have argued that our emotional responses to characters qua human beings can be crucial to understanding a novel and its theme. But readers’ emotions also play a more direct role in uncovering the theme of a novel. It is the (implied) author who shapes the perspective of the work, and who issues the invitation to readers to take that perspective themselves. The structure of a good realist novel is determined by the authorial vision that the work embodies. Hence in order to understand and appreciate the novel and its structure, it is important to understand the author’s vision. And just as to ignore the emotional responses to the characters and events that the author invites or solicits, is to ignore an important source of information for understanding the characters and events, so to ignore emotionally empathic responses invited by the author or story-teller is also to ignore an important source of information about the implied author, the perspective from which the story is told and the vision or theme of the story.

Now, the perspective of a novel is not just a way of *thinking* about the events portrayed, but also a way of *feeling* about them. The perspective which unifies a novel is typically — at least in

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27 The idea of an *implied author* was first articulated by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1961). I am using the term as equivalent to “the author as he or she seems to be from the evidence of the text.” As will become clear, often in complex literary works different readers can interpret a text as having a different kind of implied author and this will affect their interpretations of the work.

28 Understanding the authorial perspective may sometimes be just a matter of cognitive empathy, described by Heidi Maibom as “not an emotion but an understanding of others.” Heidi Maibom, “Almost Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Empathy,” in Maibom ed, *Empathy and Morality* (OUP 2014), pp. 1-40. Cognitive empathy involves taking the perspective of others but it is distinct from affective empathy. Cognitive empathy, however, does not give us as much information as emotional or affective empathy, which encodes information in bodily changes, for example.
the great realist novels – an emotional perspective. And the perspective of the novel is the perspective that the novelist *seems to have*, i.e., it is the perspective of the implied author of the novel. Lamarque notes that in order to “grasp the [literary] role of the Veneerings, we must share Dickens’s “judgment” on them. But Dickens is not just inviting us to make *judgments*; he is inviting us to take an *emotional attitude* towards the Veneerings: he is both contemptuous and amused by them and he invites us to empathize with his feelings: to laugh along with him. And his attitude of mockery for the ignoble and sympathy for the virtuous defines the overall perspective of *Our Mutual Friend* and unifies the novel. Hence when Lamarque says that empathic responses “can do little to furnish a sense of the artistic unity of a work,” I would say that, on the contrary, empathizing with the implied author is absolutely central to “[furnishing] a sense of the artistic unity of a work.”

In works with a strong thematic unity we are constantly aware of the shaping emotional perspective of the implied author. Wayne Booth shows how in *Emma* Jane Austen performs the difficult task of getting her readers to empathize with a heroine who when “seen from the outside” would be an unpleasant person: unconscious of her vanity, constantly meddling unhelpfully in her friends’ and neighbor’s lives, “deficient both in generosity and in self-knowledge.” And although Emma’s faults are – or are presented as – “comic,” they “constantly threaten to produce serious harm.” Yet readers are clearly invited to empathize and to feel care and concern (sympathy) for her. As Booth points out, “the solution to the problem of maintaining sympathy despite almost crippling faults” was primarily to use free indirect discourse: the heroine herself functions as a kind of narrator, who “[reports] on her

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29 *The Philosophy of Literature*, 247
30 Booth does not use the term ‘empathy,’ but he clearly means that we are encouraged to take Emma’s perspective on events.
32 Alessandro Giovanelli has argued that sympathy for narrative characters “is not ‘an emotion’ such as compassion, but a “mechanism of engagement” that permits a wide range of emotional responses, “depending on the situation affecting their target,” such as “pity, happiness, anger, disappointment.” In the literature on sympathy and empathy, however, sympathy is treated as “an emotion” roughly equivalent to compassion. Giovanelli also claims that empathy is “the paradigm of a self-oriented response: roughly when empathizing with someone, I vicariously experience his or her mental states, in a sense as if they were mine.” But on the contrary: empathy is normally characterized as paradigmatically other-oriented: I feel some emotion or other on *your behalf*; I ‘resonate’ with your emotional experience.” Certainly, we both empathize (resonate with) Emma’s emotions and we sympathize (feel compassion) for her in her predicaments. See “In Sympathy with Narrative Characters,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol 67, 2009, pp. 83-95. For another example in which readers are encouraged to sympathize with a character partly by encouraging us to empathize with her emotional states, see Gregory Currie, “Anne Bronte and the Uses of Imagination,” in Matthew Kieran ed. *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, chapter 13, pp. 209-221. However, I do not mean to endorse Currie’s distinction between “impersonal simulation” and “imaginative projection into the situation of another” (empathy). Typically, even in so-called “impersonal” simulation by a narrator, there is an emotional point of view on the events in the narrative that readers are encouraged to adopt.
own experience” in the third person but nevertheless gives us the “inside view” that not only “provides, in the unimpeachable evidence of her own conscience, proof that she has many redeeming qualities that do not appear on the surface;” but also leads the reader to treat her as a friend, and hope for her good fortune, “quite independently of the qualities revealed.” It is not Emma’s perspective or “vision” that unifies the novel, however, but that of the implied author, who is “generous and wise” like Knightley, “as subtle and witty as Emma would like to think herself,” and “without being sentimental ... is in favor of tenderness.” It is this emotional perspective or vision that unifies the novel and that gives it its theme, and without accepting the novel’s invitation to share this emotional perspective, we won’t understand or appreciate either Emma or Emma.

Finally, note that it is through a literary device – free indirect discourse – that we are encouraged both to empathize and sympathize with the implied author of Emma as well as Emma herself. Obviously different novels employ different literary rhetorical strategies for establishing the emotional perspective of the implied author, but clearly the analysis of these strategies, whatever they may be, will be part of literary appreciation.

(3004 words, but this includes the title and sub-headings)

34 Ibid., p. 265
35 In Stendhal’s La Chartreuse de Parme, readers encounter multiple points of view on the hero, Fabrice del Dongo, from the perspective of different characters, but overall, I would argue, the emotional attitude of the implied author is close to that of the worldly, cynical but tender-hearted Count Mosca, who sees both the attractive and the foolish, naïve aspects of Fabrice, and who is in turn charmed by, jealous of, irritated with and finally compassionate towards him.
36 Audiences do not always adopt the emotional perspective of the implied author even when they recognize what perspective the author is trying to get us to adopt. Modern audiences since Oscar Wilde, for example, have been incapable of adopting ‘Dickens’s’ sentimental adoration of Little Nell. Unfortunately, there is no more space to pursue this interesting issue here.