

# A feeling for fiction: becoming what we behold

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## Abstract

Feelings during literary reading can be characterized at four levels. First, feelings such as enjoyment, pleasure, or the satisfaction of reading are reactions to an already interpreted text [Spiel 9 (1990) 277]. While providing an incentive to sustain reading, these feelings play no significant role in the distinctively literary aspects of text interpretation. Second, feelings such as empathy or sympathy with an author, narrator, or narrative figure are involved in the interpretive processes by which a representation of the fictional world is developed and engaged [Poetics 23 (1994) 125]. Although serving an important mimetic role within text comprehension, these feelings, too, do not derive from the distinctively literary aspects of reading. Third, feelings of fascination, interest, or intrigue are an initial moment in readers' response to the formal components of literary texts (narrative, stylistic, or generic). Although serving to capture and hold readers' attention [Poetics 22 (1994) 389], these aesthetic reactions only anticipate a fourth level of feeling that is the main focus of the present discussion: the modifying powers of feeling. We propose that aesthetic and narrative feelings interact to produce metaphors of personal identification that modify self-understanding. We also argue that the concept of catharsis (the conflict of tragic feelings identified by Aristotle) identifies one particular form of a more general pattern in which aesthetic and narrative feelings evoked during reading interact to modify the reader. We illustrate these interactions with examples from two studies of readers' responses to a Sean O'Faoláin short story.

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## 1. Overview

Poetry [is] a rationalized dream dealing ... to manifold Forms our own Feelings, that never perhaps were attached by us consciously to our own personal Selves. ... O there are Truths below the Surface in the subject of Sympathy, & how we *become* that which we understandly [sic] behold & hear, having, how

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much God perhaps only knows, created part even of the Form.— (Coleridge, *Notebooks*, II, 2086)

Feeling has been a focus for empirical studies of literary reading for over ten years. In that time, several different aspects of feeling have been studied and theoretically developed. Perhaps most notably, Cupchik (1994) and Kneepens and Zwaan (1994) have identified different types of feeling response, and Oatley (1999, 2002) has described reading as a form of simulation in which emotion is central. Our own research, begun by Miall (1988, 1989) and continuing in collaboration (Miall and Kuiken, 1994; 1999), has focused on how feeling functions within reading experience. We have asked whether feeling may guide the reader's interpretive activity, doing so at a level more fundamental than the cognitive aspects of reading about which more is known. One of our proposals is that some feeling processes are distinctive to literary reading, although this proposal is clearly contentious and far from being empirically well established. In the present paper we try to integrate several aspects of recent empirical work on the dynamics of feeling within the reading process. We describe how, through the self-modifying functions of feeling, we, in Coleridge's words, "*become* that which we understandly behold & hear."

Before turning to the literary issues, we should point out that psychological research on feeling and emotion has been far from decisive. Several fundamental issues—and we will mention only three—remain in dispute. First, the extent to which feelings are culturally determined is still debated, with social constructivist positions on the one hand (Harré, Averill) and pan-cultural positions on the other (Izard, Epstein). Second, controversy about the "primacy" of feeling over cognition remains unresolved (Zajonc, 1980). While Oatley and Johnson-Laird (1987) have argued against the primacy of feeling, evidence from neuroscience has offered some support (LeDoux, 1986). Third, while some scholars (Plutchik, Russell) continue with models of emotion in which valence and intensity are the primary variables underlying apparent emotional diversity, others (Griffiths, 1997) have argued that emotions are modular—that they function in emotion-specific ways rather than according to the principles of a unified system. It is not to be expected, then, that psychological research can offer straightforward guidance regarding the role of feeling in literary response. Indeed, the position may rather be the reverse: given the nuance and detail that literary response affords to the study of feeling, the conclusions that we eventually reach about feeling may point psychological investigators in new and more productive directions.

In the present paper, we will briefly review the different types of feeling that are, according to empirical research, involved during literary reading. Then we will outline our formulation of the processes that feeling initiates during literary reading, referring primarily to our own work on self-modifying feelings. Finally, we will integrate our model of self-modifying feelings with theories of metaphor and catharsis, providing an enriched account of the distinctive mode of affective response that literary texts invite from their readers.

## 2. The contributions of feeling to literary reading

Although the distinction between emotions and feelings remains unclear, we suggest that basic emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness are less likely to occur during reading than are the subtle and fugitive feelings that are not so readily named.<sup>1</sup> In literary response, such feelings can roughly be sorted into four domains: (1) *evaluative feelings* toward the text, such as the overall enjoyment, pleasure, or satisfaction of reading a short story; (2) *narrative feelings* toward specific aspects of the fictional event sequence, such as empathy with a character or resonance with the mood of a setting; (3) *aesthetic feelings* in response to the formal (generic, narrative, or stylistic) components of a text, such as being struck by an apt metaphor; and (4) *self-modifying feelings* that restructure the reader's understanding of the textual narrative and, simultaneously, the reader's sense of self. While there is no sharp demarcation between these four domains—a given reading moment may contain elements of more than one type of feeling—we propose that each feeling domain depends upon characteristically different structures and processes. We will argue that within the fourth domain, that of self-modifying feelings, we can locate what is distinctive to literary response. While self-modifying feelings draw upon feelings from the other domains, they nonetheless embody a distinctive process within which, we suggest, an existing feeling is decisively recontextualized. To prepare for discussion of that process, we will first clarify our conception of the other three feeling domains.

Readers often explicitly report *evaluative feelings* of enjoyment, pleasure, or satisfaction, and the pursuit of such feelings may even be the reader's primary goal. Evaluative feelings are not unique to reading, however, and may regularly be experienced while watching a movie or television drama. Hansson's (1990) study of readers of popular fiction is one of the clearest accounts of these feelings. While his research overthrows the common prejudice that such readers are passive, that they read for compensation, or that they are manipulated by their reading, he finds that "relaxation, rest, entertainment, and diversion" are their primary reasons for reading (p. 285). The feelings commonly expressed, as indicated by the ratings Hansson collected, are that books are entertaining, exciting, engaging, or amusing. No questioning of conventional views of life is reflected in these reactions: readers commonly say "they feel as though they had taken part in something they are already familiar with from the reading of other books" (p. 287); they do not feel after reading that they "have taken part in something new and different" or that they would like "to ponder over the book" (p. 288). Nor do the readers comment on aesthetic aspects of their reading. These comments indicate that evaluative feelings are not involved in text interpretation; their primary role is to sustain reading.

Because evaluative feelings concern the text as a whole, they often entail feelings about feelings. That is, enjoyment, pleasure, or satisfaction is a common response to

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions in this area have attained neither technical clarity nor theory-independent consensus. Nonetheless, it seems useful to regard (1) the term "affect" as inclusive, subsuming emotions, attitudes, and moods; (2) the term "emotion" as applicable to conspicuously discrete psychobiological states such as anger, sadness, and fear; and (3) the term "feeling" as the bodily sense of all experienced affect.

narrative feelings, aesthetic feelings, or even self-modifying feelings. For example, readers can take pleasure in the emergence of suspense within the progression of events in a mystery story. In fact, Brewer and his colleagues have found (e.g., Brewer and Lichtenstein, 1982) that readers judge narratives as “well-formed” only when they evoke and resolve feelings of suspense. Similarly, readers can take pleasure in the aesthetic feelings that arise from their engagement with formal (generic, narrative, or stylistic) features of literary texts, a pattern that defines a particular kind of aestheticism. Finally, readers can take satisfaction in the self-modifying feelings that are at work in tragic drama; indeed, such satisfaction can surpass in importance the disturbing feelings that are also initiated by that genre.

Evaluative feelings can be distinguished from *narrative feelings*, which have been usefully discussed by Kneepens and Zwaan (1994) as “fiction emotions.” Narrative feelings are prompted by events and characters in the imagined world of the text. Following Kneepens and Zwaan, it seems useful to subdivide narrative feelings into those that involve reactions to other characters (e.g., sympathy with a character) and those that are shared with other characters (e.g., empathy with a character). In either form, narrative feelings regularly mirror the text. When readers feel sympathy for a story character, for example, their feelings often reflect the attitudes expressed by a sympathetic narrator. Or, when empathizing in a lively manner with a character’s fear, feeling functions to mimetically represent that aspect of the narrative. Oatley similarly suggests that feeling plays a mimetic role; reading, in his term, is a “simulation”: “the central process is that the reader runs the actions of the character on his own planning processes, taking on the character’s goals, and experiencing emotions as these plans meet vicissitudes” (Oatley, 1994, p. 66).

To engage a scene in a text mimetically, such as imagining oneself in the position of a character, draws upon the same social skills that enable us to understand others and maintain an appropriate stance towards them. For that reason, narrative feelings generally unfold along conventional, pre-scripted lines. However, as Oatley points out, through fiction “our emotions may be transformed by having them deepened or understood better, and they may be extended towards people of kinds for whom we might previously have felt nothing” (Oatley, 2002, p. 43). So, in our discussion of modifying feelings, we will go beyond narrative feeling to examine the processes through which transformations of understanding may occur.

Narrative and evaluative feelings can both be distinguished from *aesthetic feelings*. Aesthetic feelings reflect heightened interest, what readers have in mind when they report that passages within a text are so striking that they capture and hold their attention. We have found that aesthetic feelings in this sense are prompted by the formal (generic, narrative, and stylistic) features of a text and that, in response to such foregrounded features, readers slow their reading and report greater uncertainty (Miall and Kuiken, 1994).<sup>2</sup> Since it is these moments that especially challenge the

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<sup>2</sup> Aesthetic feelings resemble what Kneepens and Zwaan (1994) call “artefact emotions,” which they attribute to “abstract and conceptually vague descriptions.” We give aesthetic feelings a more precise locus in the formal features of the text. Elsewhere we have developed this distinction and its empirical implications (Miall and Kuiken, 1999).

reader's existing framework for understanding, aesthetic feelings may motivate attempts to revise and reconstruct this interpretive framework (Miall and Kuiken, 1995a). Thus, aesthetic feelings may indicate more than appreciation of the formal aspects of a text; they may initiate changes in the reader's grasp of the text's meaning.

Evidence compatible with this proposal is provided in several studies by Cupchik and his colleagues. For example, Cupchik et al. (1998) looked at the role of emotion in response to short stories by James Joyce. After reading each of four story segments (totalling about 700 words) that were focused either on description or on the emotions of the main characters, readers answered questions about any emotions they experienced, and whether these were fresh or remembered. Early in the sequence of segments, remembered emotions were more frequent, whereas fresh emotions became more frequent later. If a text such as Joyce's prompts fresh emotions, however, we might begin to doubt whether it is sufficient to characterize literary reading simply as a mimetic experience. Oatley himself anticipates this possibility, remarking that fictional reading may enable the reader to reflect on an emotion: "then the reader may reach an insight, and build a new piece of his or her model of the self and its relations. In other words, some cognitive transformation may result" (Oatley, 2002, p. 54). Although aesthetic feelings, as we noted, may initiate such change, we now want to consider more broadly how self-modifying feelings shape the reading experience in ways that are distinctive to the literary domain.

### **3. The properties of modifying feelings**

We will give concreteness to our portrayal of self-modifying feelings using excerpts from readers' comments on their experience of a short story, "The Trout," by Sean O'Faoláin (O'Faoláin, 1980–1982). In this story, Julia, a 12-year old girl at her family's summer home, revisits the Dark Walk in her garden with her younger brother, where she soon finds a live trout trapped in a well, or small pool; after hearing improbable accounts of how it came to be there, and considering its predicament, she eventually goes out alone at night with a container, locates the trout in the dark, and releases it into a nearby river; she tells no one what she has done. Our procedures in this study were modeled on Larsen and Seilman's (1988) self-probed retrospection technique. While reading a printed copy of the story, 30 participants marked the passages that they found striking or evocative. After completing the story, they returned to each marked passage and commented at length on their experience of it. Their commentaries were tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis. In the following discussion, excerpts taken from these readers' commentaries are marked by the letter R (e.g., R208, R209).

The distinction between remembered emotions and fresh emotions offered by Cupchik et al. (1998) is evident as two contrasting modes of personal recollection while reading. In remembered emotions, readers report that they find a similarity between the world of the text and a comparably scripted situation in memory. They

*recognize* a setting as something familiar; a character's behaviour reminds them of something they have done; or a narrative event is reminiscent of a similar scene from another text. In a typical example, one participant [R209] commented as follows on the opening description of Julia and her brother running through the Dark Walk: "I particularly related that to myself and to my family; just the images that came back to me were very much of my own family and my brothers." This autobiographical comparison enabled the reader partially to reinstate feelings from an earlier time in life and use them to understand story characters and their actions. Remembered feelings, that is, the reinstatement of feelings across similar situations, provide what we have called narrative feelings.

In experiencing a fresh emotion, in contrast, readers *realize* something in a literary text that they have not previously experienced—or at least that they have not experienced in the form provided by the text. Another participant [R208] seems to have responded to the description of the Dark Walk with fresh emotion, his tone and choice of words suggesting a measure of surprise at his own response: "This brings into my mind the image of a train tunnel, which is hard to shake for the rest of the entire story. I feel it's a symbol of [a] train and departure, and growth and the development of the character herself." The participant repeatedly returned to the implications of this "symbol," offering an increasingly novel and intricate characterization of Julia's maturation. What processes enable the development of such a shift in characterization? A previous paper (Miall, 1989) outlined the properties of feeling that enable feeling to become a vehicle for shifts in understanding. In the following account of how feelings become self-modifying, we will extend that analysis.

### 3.1. *Feelings sometimes guide the crossing of conventional boundaries*

In general, the experience of feelings in one situation leads to the re-experiencing of those feelings in situations that are similar. This tendency to reinstate previously experienced feelings within similar settings has given rise to the notion of affective scripts (Tomkins, 1979). While it is commonplace that feelings are "generalized" across situations in which there are conventionally similar settings, characters, and actions (e.g., feelings about paying the waiter in the familiar restaurant script), the theory of affective scripts goes further: *conventionally different narrative elements may seem "the same" by virtue of the progression of feelings that are common to them.* In these cases, similarities in feeling may transcend conventionally (non-affectively) scripted boundaries—in ways that are often unique to the individual. For instance, the reason I might feel that taking a driving test is like an argument with a colleague is that I sense emergence of the same sequence of feelings within both settings: initially I am inclined to respect the other's expertise; my respect becomes suspicion as I sense that the other's challenges to my skills are contrived; and suspicion becomes resentment as I realize that I am being evaluated unjustly, on inappropriate grounds. The result is that the feelings and reactions that were present in the first situation, with my colleague, are progressively reinstated in a seemingly different one, with the driving examiner (although here they might seem rather "out of

place,” even to me). As Bower and Cohen (1982, p. 329) rather aptly point out, such boundary crossings can be the source of affective similes and metaphors: for me, a driving test “is” (or “is like”) an argument with a colleague—they somehow “feel” the same.

### 3.2. *Aesthetic feelings enhance feeling-guided boundary crossing*

During literary reading, we suggest, *aesthetic feeling* (*feeling struck, captured, held*) in response to foregrounding provides the reading experience with a diffusely heightened feeling tone, an affective context within which narrative feelings are more likely to guide the crossing of conventionally scripted boundaries (cf. Kuiken et al., in press, for an analogous account of dream formation). That is, in response to highly foregrounded text, feelings are more likely to elicit recollections that are not conventionally but, rather, affectively related to the text. For example, for one of our readers [R235], the richly figurative description of “the fish panting in his tiny prison” at first evoked a closely related image of an elephant confined in the city zoo. This initial image remains within a conventionally scripted scenario for the suffering of animals that are removed from their ecological niche to artificial confinements. However, the same reader went on to remark that the trout’s predicament was “like being in a wheelchair or something, you know; you . . . can’t move your limbs or do anything for yourself.” It is “just horrible,” she says, as if to underline how her response was prompted by feeling. This extension of feelings about the entrapped animal to the realm of human disabilities reflects the ease with which boundaries can be crossed when reading richly figurative literary text.

### 3.3. *Aesthetically enhanced boundary crossing enriches anticipatory reading*

Feeling-guided boundary crossing evokes personal memories and reflections in a manner that provides a framework for understanding subsequent narrative developments. In general, feeling exercises anticipatory effects by alerting us to the significance of an event that has begun to unfold. In an emotion such as fear, the anticipatory component is clear: fear mobilizes us to foresee and avoid imminent threat. But a less primal feeling such as nostalgia is also anticipatory: despite its apparently backward-looking stance, nostalgia unfolds within an experiential scenario in which we sense and then regret the irretrievable disappearance of something we still value. Thus, feeling, with its script-like qualities, leads us to act as if certain contingent events were anticipated—even if not explicitly expected—in the immediate or near future.

The anticipatory property of feeling enables readers to monitor their on going response to the text and to shape its significance as new events fall within the scope of the anticipation (or fail to do so). However, *during literary reading*, if, as we suggest, *aesthetic feeling* initiates a diffusely heightened feeling tone, *the anticipatory function of feeling will alert readers to the novel feeling connotations that emerge when narrative feelings cross conventionally scripted boundaries*. This function of feeling is manifest in three ways:

### 3.3.1. *Episode completion*

First, the reader is able to complete, in novel ways, an emerging conception of a particular narrative episode. For example, when reader R235 first read of Julia's discovery of the trout, her reversible simile relating the person "in a wheelchair" back to "the fish panting in his tiny prison" oriented her to the trout's dependency, its inability to do "anything" independently of Julia's intervention which she felt to be "just horrible." Within her reading of this story episode, recognition of the trout's dependency is exactly what story comprehension required, since Julia is the one who eventually responds to the trout's dependency. This aesthetically enhanced boundary crossing enables anticipation of an aspect of the trout's predicament that might not have been recognised otherwise.

### 3.3.2. *Narrative development*

Second, the reader is able to complete, in novel ways, developments across narrative episodes. For example, some time after her initial discovery, Julia returns to feed the trout, hungry and trapped in its pool. For reader R235, feelings associated in the *earlier* episode (see above) with entrapped animals (e.g., claustrophobic constriction) and human disabilities (e.g., immobilized dependency) now enabled her to comprehend why the trout would reject the worm that Julia was offering. Musing about sick (disabled?) animals, the reader suggests, "That would be the response of anybody who's in that position; they would just want to die; there's no freedom of movement—unbearable." This reader had remained alert throughout her reading to the affective implications of the trout's predicament. Now she is able to fill in the details of a subsequent episode according to her personifying characterization of the trout's despondent lack of interest.

### 3.3.3. *Theme articulation*

Third, the reader is able to anticipate the recurrence of themes across a series of separate narrative episodes, using freshly scripted affect as a template. For example, one reader [R234] commented on the highly foregrounded description of Julia and her brother running through the Dark Walk by suggesting that "this tunnel seems to be mixed with fear and comfort—kind of strange". Consistent with the boundary crossings we would expect in the context of aesthetic feeling, this reader wondered whether such running "is in a way a ritual . . . where something is not that enjoyable to do but you have to do it." Thus, the ambivalence associated with ritual is initially extended to this reader's conception of Julia's run through the Dark Walk: "fearing, yet [with] exhilaration at the same time." Moreover, and of particular relevance here, the ambivalence of Julia's ritual running becomes a thematic framework for understanding (1) a subsequent scene in the Dark Walk in which Julia resists childish fear in her "exhilarating" attempt to rescue the trout and (2) a domestic scene in which she resists her fascination with adult stories about the trout through proud "distrust" of those tales. This reader's movement from the figurative description of the Dark Walk to musings about ritual to comprehension of subsequent story episodes exemplifies the affective origins of thematic variations within reading experience.

### 3.4. *Aesthetically enhanced boundary crossing is self-implicating*

Because feeling is so central to our sense of ourselves, it is generally self-implicating. During literary reading, then, *when foregrounding accentuates aesthetic feeling and narrative feelings cross conventionally scripted boundaries, the readers' sense of self will sometimes be imaginatively challenged*. For example, one reader [R220] concluded that Julia exemplified aspects of herself when she was young: "I ended up, after the finishing of the reading, with admiration for the character, because I guess I felt a real kinship with her. She was a character, not unlike myself as a child. I would have liked to save that trout." This reader was gently surprised by the emergence of her admiration for Julia; it recalled a sometimes submerged "heroic" aspect of her younger self. Through such challenges and departures, literary reading has the capacity to alter the narratives we weave about who we are or wish to become.

In sum, although feeling during reading may be called into play mimetically, as remembered feeling, remembered feelings may evolve in new directions as reading proceeds. Remembered feeling, in other words, does not remain merely replicative; what began as remembered feeling may become fresh feeling. Either the original feeling is modified, or limitations of the original feeling are shown in such a way that a fresh feeling is created in its place. In several previous studies, we have provided evidence of the modifying power of feeling, in particular showing how aesthetic feelings, i.e., moments of defamiliarization in response to foregrounding, instigate an affectively guided search for alternative interpretations that, in turn, shape subsequent understanding (e.g., Miall, 1989; Miall and Kuiken, 1995a, 1999, 2001). We have suggested that this sequence, with its affective elaborations, anticipations, and confirmations, is experienced in a pulsing temporal pattern that, to use a musical analogy, has the structure of a fugue (Kuiken and Miall, 2000).

### 3.5. *Empirical evidence of self-modifying feelings*

The preceding should not be misread as suggesting that the modifying properties of feeling are uniformly present in reading experience. In fact, our observations suggest that, although aesthetic feelings may be evoked widely among any readers who are responsive to variations in linguistic form, self-modifying feelings are evident only among certain readers—and among them only some of the time. The aesthetic effects of foregrounding occur in relation to norms of language use outside of literature, and therefore any readers with general linguistic skills will respond to foregrounding by finding it striking, evocative, and interpretively challenging (Miall and Kuiken, 1994). In contrast, only some readers, perhaps those who become absorbed in experiential reading (Miall and Kuiken, 1995b) will develop a coherent and self-modifying understanding of the meaning of foregrounded passages.

So, to consider empirical evidence for the processes that we have proposed, it is necessary to examine investigations in which individual differences are paramount. To substantiate this point, we will rely on the results of a second study in which readers were asked to read O'Faoláin's "The Trout". Thirty participants were asked to think aloud while they read each of the 84 segments of this story successively

presented on a computer screen. Numerically aided phenomenological methods (Kuiken et al., 1989; Kuiken and Miall, 2001) were used to (1) comparatively examine these think aloud protocols, identifying and paraphrasing recurrent meaning expressions (called constituents); (2) create matrices reflective of the profiles of constituents found in each protocol; (3) create clusters of protocols according to the similarities in their profiles of constituents; and (4) systematically examine each cluster to ascertain their distinctive attributes. Our analysis revealed four clusters,<sup>3</sup> but we will concentrate here on one cluster of readers ( $n=9$ ) whose reading experience characteristically involved self-modifying feelings.

As we have reported previously (Kuiken and Miall, 1995, 2001), readers in this cluster described several different forms of feeling-guided boundary crossing. Only members of this cluster enlivened the trout through anthropomorphism, portraying its loneliness and later its fear, and only these readers attributed a mood to the Dark Walk, repeatedly affirming its “gothic” and “menacing” qualities. Also, readers in this cluster reported the anticipatory style of reading that we have associated with feeling-guided boundary crossings. Only these readers reported attempts to confirm and elaborate previous characterizations and to anticipate subsequent story developments. Such links between current and previous story elements are consistent with these readers’ readiness to revisit themes pertaining to Julia’s maturation and transformation. Whereas these results are consistent with the formulations offered above, closely re-reading the protocols in this cluster provided additional clues to the dynamics of self-modifying feelings. It is to that additional evidence that we turn now. In what follows, the letter P is used to mark excerpts from protocols in this cluster [e.g., P08, P40].

#### 4. Self-modifying feelings and metaphor generation

Aesthetic feeling, we have suggested, creates a diffusely heightened feeling tone. Within this context the properties of feeling we have outlined endow literary reading with a certain generative force: (1) affective scripts enable similarities in narrative feelings to transcend conventionally (non-affectively) scripted boundaries; (2) the anticipatory property of feeling guides the revelation of unexpected aspects of an unfolding narrative and the development of recurrent affective themes; (3) the self-referential aspects of feeling provide these novel narrative developments and thematic variations with larger implications for the self. Within this generative role, feeling may create unexpected challenges to the reader’s sense of self. Our analysis suggests that feeling acts in part by placing a specific instance within a class. This may be a familiar, already established class, in the case of a remembered feeling, or a created, ad hoc class, in the case of a fresh feeling. The functions of the latter, what we have called modifying feelings, can be usefully compared with the processes by which metaphors exert their generative effects. We can conceive of literary reading

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<sup>3</sup> For a more complete description of the methods and results of this study, see the full report by Kuiken and Miall (2001).

as a source of feeling-guided metaphors, providing, in particular, metaphors of personal identification (Cohen, 1999). We will now try to clarify that suggestion.

#### 4.1. *Modifying feelings and metaphor generation*

The description of the “Dark Walk” in the first paragraph of “The Trout” reads:

It is a laurel walk, very old, almost gone wild, a lofty midnight tunnel of smooth, sinewy branches. Underfoot the tough brown leaves are never dry enough to crackle: there is always a suggestion of damp and cool trickle.

The foregrounded features here, especially the words “smooth, sinewy,” and the verbal echo set up by “crackle” and “damp and cool trickle,” arouses aesthetic feeling in most of the readers we have studied, increasing the likelihood that narrative feelings cross conventionally scripted boundaries.

One reader [P40] in the cluster that manifested self-modifying feelings commented that it “sounds like a dream, or a nightmare of some sort,” and because Julia is said to visit it every time she comes to the garden, “it’s a lot like a dream where leaves are never drying up to crackle, where . . . the same thing happens over and over again.” Through the feeling it evokes, the Dark Walk becomes “like” a nightmare, although qualifying this observation with the word “like” suggests that an ad hoc category has probably been created, which involves some (but not all) of the attributes of the nightmare. If this is correct, then the generative power of the category allows the activation of a range of additional meanings.

For this reader, one possibility is that reading the passage about the Dark Walk reinstates the apprehensions about inexplicably repetitive events characteristic of a nightmare. Thus, within the reading moment, the emerging impression of the Dark Walk might seem to involve a transfer of those aspects of nightmares to that story setting. However, this makes the reader’s reflection seem like simple generalization, and the generative capacity of this emerging impression is not addressed. In fact, there seems to be a more complicated interaction underway between the meaning of the Dark Walk and the dreamer’s understanding of nightmares. First, compared to fear, for example, the repetitive nature of events *is not* a salient characteristic of our conventional understanding of nightmares. Instead, the repetition emphasized by this reader seems to come from the text, as an echo of the “never dry enough” and the “always a suggestion of damp and cool trickle.” Second, the fear that *is* a salient characteristic of nightmares is not straightforwardly a characteristic of Julia’s run through the Dark Walk; the description of her run in the story suggests a mitigating fascination with fear such that the Dark Walk is the “first place” that Julia sought out during her summer visits. More carefully considered, this reader’s experience of the Dark Walk seems like a more complicated confluence of the Dark Walk and nightmares.

This complexity may be compared to that ascribed to metaphor by Glucksberg and Keysar (1990). Objecting to the notions of transfer or generalization that drive comparison or similarity theories, they propose that a metaphor is better understood

as a case of class inclusion, as is suggested by familiar nominal metaphors such as “My job is a jail.” They point out that a noun can often be used to represent—through exemplification—a class of objects or situations that is temporarily understood to include both the metaphoric vehicle and topic. For example, in “My job is a jail”, jail exemplifies the class of confining, oppressive environments. Or, in “This housing project is a jail”, jail exemplifies the class of confinements for people who are in one way or another condemned. In each case, the metaphoric expression promotes the prototypic meaning of an ad hoc category.

They also point out that the ad hoc class has two types of structure. First, it is hierarchical, in the sense that a superordinate term such as food includes the subordinate category vegetable, which in turn includes subordinate categories such as broccoli. To say “My job is a jail” places the job at a subordinate position in the hierarchy. Second, it offers a horizontal structure: for example, where prototypes are well established, broccoli is more prototypic as a vegetable than tomato. The metaphor thus endows “My job” with some of the attributes of the ad hoc class of situations exemplified by “jail” but also including “my job”. Similarly, then, the reader’s identification of the Dark Walk as a nightmare nominates the Dark Walk as an instance of the ad hoc class exemplified by nightmare but also including the Dark Walk. It also configures the properties of this class horizontally (sinewy branches, cool trickle) as an ordered series of signs, determined by an interaction between the prototypical attributes of nightmares (e.g., their threatening and aversive nature) and the constraints imposed by those properties along which Dark Walks may vary (e.g., their enclosing and aversive nature).

The metaphoric creation of a class in which feelings (e.g., frightening, enclosing) or their cognates are exemplified by the metaphoric vehicle is not, of course, unique to the literary domain. What may be important to literary reading is when those ad hoc categories, allowing the interaction of vehicle and topic, reflect the crossing of relatively “distant” domains under the influence of aesthetic feelings. The distance of the Dark Walk-nightmare relation suggests an incompatibility with conventionally scripted similarities and ensures the novel construal of narrative feelings.

#### *4.2. Metaphors of personal identification*

Within the cluster of readers under discussion, modifying feelings are self-implicating and generate metaphors of a particular kind: metaphors of personal identification. Metaphors of personal identification (Cohen, 1999) implicitly create an ad hoc class that is exemplified by a figure from the text and also includes the reader, thereby transforming modifying feelings into self-modifying feelings. Self-modifying feelings in this form are enactive (Wilshire, 1982); the reader implicitly is taking on the embodied perspective of a figure in the text (“I am X”).

For reader [P40], this shift toward enactment becomes apparent in one of his next comments. In response to continuation of the story, which says that Julia would run through the Dark Walk, emerge laughing into the sun, and then “turn and consider the ordeal again”, this reader said: “It’s almost as if she’s playing a game. It’s almost like the image of a joust or something, where you’re going through a straight path

and then you turn and go back again.” Here, in the generalizing implications of the pronoun “you”, there seems a shift towards identification with the character’s experience; the “you” that creates a class including both Julia and the reader potentially implicates them both in the joust.<sup>4</sup>

For another reader [P02], a metaphor of personal identification emerges quite differently. At the first mention of Julia running into the Dark Walk, this reader says, “she must feel safe there or something if she’s running to it”, indicating an initial sympathy with the character (the story has made no mention of feelings so far). Then, in response to the very next segment describing Julia with “the memory of the sun behind her,” she remarked hesitantly, “That makes me think of, um, sort of that silly idea of running into a womb or something”. Her embarrassment over this suggestion (perhaps given its literal impossibility) seems to indicate a conflict of feelings. Yet a few moments later, at the description of Julia emerging into the sun, she develops this suggestion more assertively, remarking “I guess it goes back to the birth kind of idea. ‘Drinking in the sun’—yeah, it definitely sounds like she’s being reborn or—or reemerging into the world.” In her concluding comments on this episode, this reader also begins to use the “you” locution: “It was something you’d do with a little brother” (Julia’s younger brother follows her into the Dark Walk but is made more fearful by it); and, when Julia returns to her family to tell them what she was doing, the reader suggests this is boasting: “You know, you recount that you did it.” This reader implicitly has shifted towards identification with Julia; the “you” that creates a class including both Julia and the reader implicates them both in their capacity for boasting.

For both readers [P40] and [P02], then, we suggest that those aspects of the Dark Walk to which they were attentive evoked feelings, and that the feelings were instrumental in structuring metaphors that helped interpret Julia’s actions (the repetitive sense of a nightmare; the rebirth image of emerging from a womb) and that challenged their self-understanding. While readers do not always mention feelings explicitly (such novel feelings are characteristically hard to express), we suggest that feelings in the instances we have described created a fresh emotional balance, as will become clear in the following section.

## 5. Self-modifying feelings and catharsis

Since a literary text will usually evoke more than one feeling, or evoke opposed feelings, it will also be possible for one feeling to modify another. In this respect, a feeling ceases to have a self-evident, unambiguous quality; what is distinctive about modifying feelings is that a particular feeling is itself defamiliarized; the feeling no longer means what it had seemed to in our previous experiences of it.

In our readers of “The Trout,” this may be signalled by expressions of surprise. For example, when Julia is in the act of rescuing the trout at night, the trout seems

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<sup>4</sup> The potential importance of this enactive form of pronoun use was originally discussed by Sikora et al. (1998).

violent: “When the body lashed they were both mad with fright.” One reader [R228] commented on this phrase, “it was just a shock to find that, . . . as a reaction of the fish, that he’d be lashing so violently. . . . I guess it set up a, sort of a sense of apprehension in me.” This was a surprise to the reader, as she said, “compared to . . . the rest of the story”. Her opening response to the Dark Walk passage, for example, was “a nice image here, although it may be a bit on the common side”; she was reminded of the trees in Stanley Park at Vancouver; and she had earlier found some of Julia’s behavior irritating. But a few phrases after the surprise at the violence, the reader experienced another surprise. When Julia releases the trout into the river, “She hoped he was not dizzy.” “I loved this one”, the reader commented. “I immediately thought, will the fish get dizzy, which is perhaps a slightly strange thought . . . [T]hat this child would be thinking that she hopes the fish wasn’t dizzy, strikes me as such a nice innocent thought, and child-like.” Her tone in this description, suggests a corresponding sense of release in herself as reader, and pleasure in the childish thought that has followed so soon after the intimations of violence.

We suggest that this sequence of responses constitutes the modifying of a first feeling by a second, and that it can be considered a form of catharsis, although it lacks the more dramatic dimensions of traditional examples. But in this respect the standard accounts of catharsis have consistently overlooked an important feature of Aristotle’s somewhat enigmatic account of the tragic emotions. Apart from James Joyce, who pointed this out in *Portrait of the Artist*, commentators have paid little attention to the opposed nature of pity and fear. Joyce suggested that both terror and pity arrest the viewer, confronting us at the same time with the individual we pity and the “secret cause” of the terror; thus he construed the tragic emotion as static (Joyce, 1976: 205). In practice, however, as shown in the dramas of Sophocles that were Aristotle’s main examples, fear in the end appears to be modified by pity.

According to Belfiore (1992), Aristotle appears to have meant by catharsis the action of the emotions (of pity and fear) in the service of restoring order, that is, of bringing about the “proper state” of the audience. This should not be taken to mean the elimination of emotion, “all passion spent”, as many commentators assumed. As F. L. Lucas put it, catharsis appears to have meant balance: “the passions themselves are reduced to a healthy, balanced proportion” (Lucas, 1966: 39). But catharsis means more than this. It is said to act “allotropically”, separating the worse from the better: it modifies inappropriate emotions. In Belfiore’s summary, “This shock of tragic emotion opposes and counterbalances our shameless desires and beliefs” (Belfiore, 1992: 345). Both Belfiore (1992) and Nussbaum (1986), two important recent commentators, have seen hubris, or shamelessness, as the emotion that the Greek dramatists aimed to cure; thus pity and fear are administered as opposites, not because they are of especial value in themselves, but because they convert the aggressive and potentially dangerous effects of hubris to a more respectful, balanced stance towards the world. In Belfiore’s account, in tragic catharsis “the initial shock of extreme pity and fear passes off, along with the shameless emotions they have ‘mastered’” (p. 345).

Elsewhere, Aristotle attributed a similar function to music. In the *Politics* (1342a, 7–17) he describes the effects of religious music as purgative. Some listeners, influenced

by melodies “that excite the soul to mystic frenzy”, find restoration through them. But this experience also occurs in other forms: “Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted” (Aristotle, 1941: 1315). As this passage suggests, not only the emotions of pity and fear are amenable to catharsis: Aristotle seems to have envisaged this modifying process applying to any emotion. Fendt (1995), for instance, has applied it to understanding Shakespearean comedy, where he argues that the aim of comedy is catharsis of the emotions of desire and sympathy.

In terms of class inclusion, however, what appears to be taking place in a drama such as *Oedipus* is, that with the disaster of the play, hubris is relocated within the context of fear. The pride and prowess of Oedipus have, in the words of the Attendant, brought about “Calamity, death, ruin, tears, and shame, / All ills that there are names for” (Sophocles, 1947: 61). This radical manoeuvre, which literary texts are able to carry out for their audience, redefines the emotion of hubris in order to impose upon it the prototypic attributes of fear, thus transforming its familiar meaning (presumably a chastening experience for the ancient Greeks who watched this happen on stage). But fear in turn is then modified by its relocation within the context of pity in the final scene of the play. Most poignantly, this is witnessed in Oedipus’s appeal to Creon over his daughters: “Creon—If I could touch them once, and weep” (66).

A similar process can be observed in the tragic developments enacted in *King Lear*, where (roughly speaking) hubris predominates in the figure of Lear in Acts I and II, fear in the mad scenes of Acts III and most of IV, and finally pity in Act IV, scene vii, when Lear awakens from his madness and seeks forgiveness from the estranged Cordelia. If feeling considered as class inclusion instantiates a process similar to metaphor, then the apparent *reversal* of meaning we have described here can also be illustrated by metaphor: for example, as Glucksberg and Keysar (1990) point out, the metaphor “the surgeon was a butcher” reverses the customary attributes of surgeon by including the surgeon in the class of butchers. Thus, to contextualize fear within the class represented by the feeling of pity, radically qualifies our understanding of fear in plays such as *Oedipus* and *King Lear*, appearing to humanize it and to ameliorate the immoderate aspects of its power.

This radical qualification of one emotion by another in our rereading of catharsis suggests that Aristotle’s tragic catharsis is a special case of a more general process in literary reading and the other temporal arts (e.g., music). But in looking for examples of this process we should not limit ourselves only to those that are formally structured into the text itself, such as *Oedipus* or *King Lear*, where hubris, fear, and pity form explicit and distinctive episodes. The indeterminate nature of response to literature will often ensure that readers’ feelings vary as we compare readers, so that different, specific confrontations of one emotion with another will occur. In the case of the “Dark Walk,” for example, what was felt as nightmare for one reader, as we have seen, was experienced by another as a pleasurable reminder of the woods of Stanley Park, or as symbolizing rebirth for a third; so too, the subsequent feeling that confronts or modifies the first feeling may also be distinctive to that reader. But

the process will depend in part on how compelling are the emotional qualities of the text in question, and what personal concerns, memories, and experiences a reader brings to the text.

Most literary reading is less arresting than witnessing *Oedipus* or *King Lear*, yet narratives can unobtrusively implicate our own feelings as readers, leading us to moments of recognition or acknowledgement that signal change. We now examine more closely the cathartic process, as we have redefined it, in the moments of transition towards the end of the story, confining our examples to two of the protocols cited above.

For reader [P40], as we noted, the opening “Dalk Walk” passage “sounds like a dream, or a nightmare”, attended with some foreboding—a felt but unspecified threat. At the same time, Julia’s position as a maturing child is a recurring theme. When, midway through the story, Julia is shown considering the trout, the reader notes her preoccupation and suggests “She’s subconsciously thinking about herself, and she wants her freedom”. The reader also finds the description of the trout “very dreamlike”: “the light [is] shining off the silver belly, on the smooth stones and water, and the rest is all dark”. However, when Julia later goes to rescue the trout at night, the “nice little dreamworld” of daytime has become “more of a nightmare.” Here again we can see the structuring effect of the “nightmare” which, like a metaphor, organizes the reader’s feelings about Julia at this juncture. Within the space of five segments several characteristics of the nightmare are suggested, which we can see arrayed horizontally: “the idea of the breathing land. The land is alive. She seems to become aware that everything is alive”; and, most challenging, “‘Down to the maw of the tunnel’ sounds very foreboding.” This encounter arbitrates Julia’s growth, thus the reader also intimates the hierarchical structure of the nightmare metaphor, observing “she knows she has to stay inside and find the well in the dark”, but, more importantly (since the outcome is still in question), “maybe she’s outgrown her childhood”.

When Julia releases the trout, the reader notes both Julia’s hope that the trout would not be “dizzy” and several other images that seem childlike, yet Julia’s childhood nature has now been recontextualized by her ability to set aside her possessiveness about the trout: “She realized that he would die if she left him there, kept him trapped, so she’s let him [go], sacrificed her enjoyment for his life. She’s become more, uh, aware of other things around her.” In his response to the next sentence, where Julia is shown noticing her surroundings, the reader comments “suddenly she, she sees everything. It’s as if she sees the truth. The river, the moon, trees, mountains, what life is all about, I think.”

Earlier in the story, despite his awareness of the maturity theme, this reader had at times been impatient with Julia, seeing her, as he put it, “clinging onto her childhood in some ways”. Julia’s growth and the life or death of the trout was, in his words, perhaps only a part of the “cycle of life”. The outcome at this climactic point of the trout’s release, however, appears to exceed his expectations. If Julia looks around and “sees the truth”, it is for this reader as though Julia’s action brings her into alignment with a larger reality, beyond the egotism of the child made evident earlier. What she sees at that moment stands for the class of insights into “what life

is all about". The reader's comments imply that, like her regard for the trout itself, Julia's understanding has shifted from an instrumental, self-serving attitude towards the world around her to a more inclusive recognition that things have an end in themselves.

Thus in this phase, towards the end of the story, the reader acknowledges a shift in his feelings about the character, from a certain detached impatience to admiration. In a number of protocols readers' feelings about Julia are typically more complex at this point than during the opening segments of the story, and responsive to aspects that are incongruous with their earlier assessments of her character. A cathartic shift (in our sense) seems to occur at this point for a number of readers, as earlier feelings are recontextualized by other more inclusive feelings.

Finally, in construing Julia's maturation as a transition into responsibility, not only for her actions, but for her way of construing the world, reader [P40] also seems to realize that something is at stake in his own position. In his final comment after reading the story he remarks of Julia:

she's gained, she's made the first step towards maturity, although we can't, uh, you don't become mature overnight, that you, uh, it takes time, and you're not aware that you're becoming mature until many years down the road when you look back and, you can understand what was happening to you.

If the previous phase represented a shift in feeling, here the reader's reflections on the implications of this cathartic shift have come into focus. The thematic significance of the story has become superimposed upon the reader's own sense of self. As the repeated use of the generalized pronoun "you" indicates, which reemerges here prominently, the reader is enacting the implications of the story for his own understanding, merging the identities of Julia and himself in a single, although complex, perspective on the question of what the story might mean: "she's begun to understand what it means to be an adult", but "you don't become mature overnight." Thus a reconfiguration of feelings and beliefs has occurred for the reader by the end of the story. Although, given the nature and relative shortness of the story, this is neither a particularly dramatic nor a striking process, it is one in which readers seem to derive a degree of satisfaction, characteristic of aesthetic experience. The "you" form of response suggests, in other words, through metaphors of personal identification we make the stories we read our own, "becoming what we . . . behold and hear".

Reader [P02], as we might expect, had a rather different experience of the story. She too is a little irritated by Julia earlier in the story: she asks, "why don't you save the fish"; and "Can't you find out how the trout got there?" About halfway through the story she is still asking "I don't know why she doesn't save the fish if it bothers her." But then immediately after saying this she suddenly recollects her former idea of rebirth, and restating it, applies it to the trout: "it's the same idea and maybe she has to birth him"—an ad hoc metaphor of Julia as midwife, but one that also represents a recontextualization of her feelings both about the character of Julia and the trout up to this point. Now she sees Julia involved in some larger problem raised

by the trout, although she cannot see clearly what this is: “maybe she can’t get him out of his prison until she’s out of hers. I don’t know what prison she’s in.” When Julia goes to rescue the trout and feels him lashing about, she remarks, “He wants out, definitely wants out, like a baby kicking.” Julia’s rescue of the trout represents for this reader the birth of Julia into a new maturity. In her final comments after reading the story she remarks of Julia: “It’s almost like she has to, um—she has to almost birth herself into—out of childhood into adulthood by doing this own act, this very action on her own, um, with no one’s help, with no one’s stories to, uh, to guide her.” Following a sequence of different feelings about Julia, this last realization for the reader seems cathartic. In addition, like reader [P40] she has partly merged her own identity with that of Julia, which seems to have given the story the particular resonance that metaphors of personal identification allow: “you’ve reached that age where you don’t buy stories any more and you want to make them yourself . . . how something can just hold onto your mind that way.”

The mode of analysis reported here has revealed salient moments in the evolution of readers’ feelings—in the shifts and transitions they experienced on the way towards a provisional understanding of the text. Among that cluster of readers whose commentaries most clearly revealed modifying feelings, these moments usually involved feelings explicitly attributed to the central character, other figures in the story, and even the setting. Although explicit reference to personal feelings was not particularly common among these readers, their comments indicated that personal feelings were indirectly involved through metaphors of personal identification, a form of enactive reading that implicitly blends the fictional world with what readers know, believe, or feel about their own lives. Readers may have been indirectly locating the story within a complex of significant personal meanings when they (1) modified their conception of Julia, the trout, and the Dark Walk through boundary-crossing metaphors (e.g., involving rebirth or nightmares), (2) extended those metaphors across narrative episodes as part of the process of identifying recurrent affective themes, and (3) articulated those themes in a form of reflection in which the self and fictional characters seem to have merged. In these cases, the reader is, we suggest, confronting personal feelings and recontextualizing them in the light of the fresh feelings evoked during reading. In perhaps the most interesting and characteristic effects of literary reading, the temporal progression of this process may provide a type of catharsis that is shaped by the distinctive feelings a given reader brings to the narrative.

## **6. Conclusion**

One of the most striking features of the research we have reported here is the individuality of responses to the same short story. At the same time, the features of the story and its episodic rhythms regularly guide the flow of readers’ thoughts, reflections, and feelings. This orderliness-within-diversity presents a particular challenge to empirical research. We are likely to misrepresent it, for example, if we remain content with post-processing measures of reading, or if we limit information

about reading to questionnaires or rating scales. On the other hand, misrepresentation is also likely if we invite the reader to free-associate, using the text merely as a departure point. While no method should go untested in this difficult enterprise, the methods we have employed here, and the context in which we applied them, have two features worth emphasising.

First, our research procedures capture the temporally unfolding *experience* of a text rather than its consummating *interpretation*. Since our aim is to articulate the processes that distinctively characterize literary reading, we have selected procedures that enable close scrutiny of the moments in which these processes are keenly felt. Readers' commentaries while thinking-aloud and during self-probed retrospection provide the descriptive "thickness" necessary to uncover the oscillating influence of text and reader on reading experience. Second, the theoretical framework that guides our research has been developed to highlight the processes that now seem so salient in our readers' commentaries. Our proposals about the modifying processes of feeling, and our elaboration of these by reference to the theory of affective scripts, the class-inclusion theory of metaphor, and the theory of catharsis, provide a rich framework in which to understand readers' experience. They act, in this respect, as mini-theories generated by a larger conception of aesthetic response, as Graesser and his colleagues have advocated (Graesser et al., 1996). This larger conception integrates aspects of psychological and literary theory in ways that hopefully enrich both domains. While our aim in this paper has been to present empirical documentation of selected aspects of these proposals, it is clear that their validity will depend on further research with a diversity of texts and a range of methods beyond those we have used here—methods that cross disciplinary boundaries to uncover the nuances of readers' experience.

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