

# Shifting Perspectives: Readers' Feelings and Literary Response

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## Abstract

Empirical studies of readers' responses to narrative have typically been concerned with the influence of story factors such as those modeled in story grammars or discourse analysis. Such models have shown the influence of propositional complexity, narrative structure, and various aspects of plot. However, in a recent paper (Miall and Kuiken, 1994a), we argued that the findings from non-literary texts could not readily be generalized to the reading of literary stories, since the narratives studied tend to lack the multi-leveled complexity of literary stories. Literary texts contain distinctive features, such as foregrounding, that appeal to the predilections of individual readers and demonstrably influence their response.

Thus, reading processes are likely to vary from one reader to another more significantly than the cognitive models suggest. In this paper we discuss a range of story features that appear to influence the creation of perspective during literary reading, and examine their relationship with individual differences in readers' responses. We suggest that the interpretive process involves a phasic sequence, initiated by defamiliarizing story features that require the reader to go beyond the schema that initially guided comprehension. Evidence from our studies shows that during such a phasic cycle, readers' feelings shape response to the unfolding narrative by facilitating shifts in perspective and then in interpretation.

## Shifting perspectives: Readers' feelings and literary response

### 1. Perspective: Cognitive and Emotional Models

"It is only a novel," exclaims the young lady, in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, when asked what she is reading. It is only, says Austen, "some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour

are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (Ch. V). The richness of narrative and its cultural significance call for an equivalent complexity in our attempts to understand not only how narratives are constructed, but also the role they play in our lives. Here, the concept of perspective is an important one. Already much discussed, particularly since the work of Stanzel (1984), the concept of perspective provides us with a way of bringing order to some of the many questions we wish to explore.

We propose that Austen's young lady experiences a range of feelings as she reads, and that this may prove to be her principle reason for reading the novel. Her response when challenged, which in Austen's account is either pretended indifference or shame, suggests that her reading is self-involving: some special interest or desire is implicated that she is unwilling to have suspected. We are left to wonder what personal perspective she is subtly protecting.

Thus, among other things, an account of narrative response will focus on how readers' feelings and emotions shape their personal perspectives. Our proposal will distinguish several aspects of feeling and several forms of perspective during reading. First, consider some of the ways in which perspective has been discussed and empirically examined at both the local and global levels of text structure. At the local level, where influences on perspective are exerted sentence by sentence or even word by word, three local variations in perspective have been studied: spatio-temporal, experiential, and aesthetic. Each can be assessed objectively (e.g., by identifying shifts from one visuo-spatial perspective to another) so that its influence on readers can be studied using measures such as reading times or reader ratings. On the other hand, at the global level, perspective may be affected by textual features beyond the sentence, including episodes or other complex structures identified in the text. For example, a succession of improbable perspective shifts may prompt the reader to represent the author's more comprehensive perspective. Such global factors have less frequently been the object of empirical study, and at this level of analysis literary texts pose especially challenging difficulties. We will discuss the influences on perspective that can be examined at the local level; then, in the last section of this paper, we mention one attempt to examine response at the global level.

At the local level, spatio-temporal perspective plays a central role. Delimited in terms of a character's, a narrator's, or even an author's stance toward fictive time and space, this seems analogous to the use of camera position in film. The point of view given is either that of a character within the story or of an external observer. Correspondingly, shifts in point of view are manifest either as changes in a particular figure's visuo-spatial point of view, or as changes between internal (e.g., character) and external (e.g., narrator) perspectives (cf. Stanzel, 1984, p. 66). Such shifts increase the work required of the reader, who must correspondingly adjust her situation model in spatial and temporal terms. Such adjustments challenge the reader's schema, which must be particularized anew from the propositions available in the text and the inferences that can be drawn from them. Since this process occurs on-line, one measure of the reconstructive activity required of the reader has been reading time. There is evidence that longer reading times occur when there are shifts in visuo-spatial point of view (Zwaan, Magliano, and Graesser, 1995), including shifts between internal and external viewpoints (Millis, 1995).

However, variations in perspective can also be understood more broadly. In Rimmon-Kenan's (1983) account, where perspective (following Genette) is referred to as "focalization," point of view is broadened beyond space-time perception to include

variations in a characters' conceptions of and beliefs about fictive situations (cf. Bal, 1985, pp. 100 ff.). By this account, a character's feelings and attitudes also imply a particular perspective (pp. 77-82) and could be analyzed with some objectivity as formal aspects of a given narrative (although a full analysis of these aspects would extend beyond the local level). In our judgment, Rimmon-Kenan's discussion opens the possibility that a change in a character's affective stance within a fictive situation can be regarded as a shift in perspective, too. As with visuo-spatial point of view, a shift in a character's feelings or attitudes, such as the revelation of previously undisclosed emotions, may challenge readers to re-construct their representations of that character's feelings or attitudes. Since this, too, occurs on-line, it will complicate reading and increase reading time, as evidence by Cupchik and Laszlo (1994) suggests. For readers who respond empathically to this type of perspective change, distinctions between character and reader feelings begin to blur. Nonetheless, such feelings are manifest as different perspectives within the text, rather than occurring in response to the text. They contrast, for example, with feelings of sympathy in response to a character's distress, as well as with feelings of suspense in response to plot uncertainties (cf. Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1983).

However, broadened in this way, perspective variations of another kind become salient in literary texts. In particular, feelings manifest in the text include those embodied by stylistic devices, which we would argue are distinguishing features of literary narratives. We propose that stylistic devices, which are deviations from non-literary language forms (cf. van Peer, 1986), embody subtle shifts in feeling. For example, a metaphoric description of a story setting presents a different "felt sense" of that fictive place; an alliterative expression provides a particular "feeling for" the current textual referent, etc. In our studies (Miall & Kuiken, 1994b), we have provided evidence that such stylistically induced feeling shifts require readers to reconstruct their understanding of the narrative in a way that prolongs reading time. Although the feelings evoked by stylistic devices are less frequently attributed to a story character and more often attributed to the narrator, these stylistic variations nonetheless "focalize" feelings and constitute a type of perspective shift. And, for readers who respond affectively to these stylistic devices, distinctions between reader and (usually) narrator feelings may blur, although these feelings are embodied by the text and not simply affective responses to it. For example, the feelings embodied in a metaphoric description contrast with mere enjoyment of its aptness, as well as with simple satisfaction in having understood it. By maintaining these distinctions, feeling focalization in response to stylistic devices may be seen as a type of perspectival adjustment distinctive to literary reading.

We can conceive of perspective, then, as a compound of at least three narrative elements, each amenable in some degree to objective analysis. The first element consists of the spatio-temporal point of view, including internal vs. external perspective. The second is focalization of the feeling experience of a character or characters. The third element is focalization of the feelings and attitudes embodied in stylistic devices that are a distinctive feature of literary texts. Feelings are directly implicated in the last two of these components, although quite differently. In the focalization of a character's feeling experience, readers are responding to an aspect of narrative content, in particular, the feeling experiences of a character (cf. the model of reflective reading outlined by Cupchik, 1995). In focalization of feelings in response to stylistic devices, readers are responding to more distinctly aesthetic qualities embodied in the text (and the related feelings are A-emotions in the terminology of Kneepkens and Zwaan, 1995).

It is aesthetic focalization, we argue, that cognitive models of reading have not

adequately conceived or studied. Theories of text comprehension devised for expository prose or simple (often experimenter-generated) stories, often fail to consider the importance of shifts in reader perspective occurring in response to stylistic devices (e.g., Kintsch, 1988). For the study of literary reading, then, we propose a central question that takes us beyond spatio-temporal point of view and beyond the focalization of character feeling experience. We want to understand how a reader arrives at a felt perspective, often a personal one, that inheres in a literary text's expressively rich aesthetic components.

Our own empirical studies represent an attempt to address this question, and in the next part of the paper we will demonstrate that the aesthetic components of perspective construction contributes to the reading process independently of spatio-temporal point of view and focalization of character feelings.

## **2. Story features and perspective differences between readers**

Unless a narrative segment is ambiguous or indeterminate, indicators of all three perspective components can be identified. Here are the first four segments of a short story we have employed in several studies, "The Trout," by Sean O'Faolain.

1. One of the first places Julia always ran to when they arrived in G--- was The Dark Walk. 2. It is a laurel walk, very old, almost gone wild, a lofty midnight tunnel of smooth, sinewy branches. 3. Underfoot the tough brown leaves are never dry enough to crackle: there is always a suggestion of damp and cool trickle.

4. She raced right into it.

The spatio-temporal perspective established is external, and the narrator's point of view is pervasive. In the second and third segments, which elaborate the nature of The Dark Walk, the indications of perception given in "Underfoot" and "a suggestion" appear to be from the point of view of an omniscient observer. This observer's temporal perspective changes, however, in segment 4. There is a shift from a broadly historical perspective (e.g., "always ran" "are never", "is always") to one that refers to Julia's present activities (e.g., "She ran right into it").

Also, feeling focalization is uniformly missing. These segments lack description that refers to Julia's feelings, attitudes, or motives. Descriptions of the Dark Walk convey what any visitor would experience; they are not given as an indication of Julia's feelings toward the Dark Walk or of the motives for her interest in it. Only inferences from her running and racing (segments 1 and 4) even hint at the enthusiasm that will become focal in subsequent passages.

Other features of segments 2 and 3 serve to create aesthetic perspective. This is the array of stylistic features, such as the metaphor of "lofty midnight tunnel," the alliteration of "smooth, sinewy," the consonance of "damp and cool trickle." We suggest that those features focalize aesthetic feeling. Consistent with this notion, we have found that the concentration of such foregrounded features has three significant correlates in the responses of the readers we have studied: it seems striking, it evokes uncertainty, and it arouses feeling (Miall and Kuiken, 1994b).

Aesthetic focalization of feeling complicates any decision a reader might make about

perspective. In response to foregrounding, readers consistently find the passage striking or evocative, sense the presence of feelings (however vague), and reflect longer as they engage the openness of the meaning possibilities there. However, their interpretive adjustments in response to foregrounding are anything but consistent from reader to reader. Examining actual responses to these segments reveals a wide range of interpretive adjustments, including adjustments in spatio-temporal perspective and in character feeling focalization. Here are just a few of the comments that readers made to segment 3, when asked to think aloud about their thoughts and feelings while reading this story.

Reader 16 elaborated the external perspective on the setting: "you can feel how . . . how it's cold there. But not freezing cold, just cool. Nice and dark and lonely, but not alone." Note the use of the impersonal "you," corresponding to the omniscient perspective we identified from the linguistic features of the sentence. Reader 35 elaborated the setting in a slightly more personal way: "The fact that the tough dry leaves are never dry enough to crackle makes . . . me imagine a . . . a musty smell." The personal meaning of the setting for reader 17 was more specific: it evokes a personal memory. "Reminds me of a place you go when you're young just with your friends or just to get away. Reminds me of my backyard." Yet another reader, no. 24, appeared ready to interpret the meaning of the Dark Walk from Julia's perspective: "It seems a place of calm for this girl to go. She seems anxious to get to this area."

The first point to note, in the examples we have cited, is the presence of feeling. Two of the responses are explicitly coloured by feeling, as shown by the phrases "Nice and dark and lonely" and "seems anxious." Feeling may also be implicit in the other two, in the "musty smell," or in the reader's memory of her backyard. Regardless of its clarity or locus, feeling consistently is present in response to foregrounding. When asked to rate the segments of this story for feeling, foregrounded passages like these received significantly higher ratings. Also, foregrounded passages were consistently found more striking or evocative, which we interpret as evidence of aesthetic feeling focalization.

Second, it is clear that these readers respond to these moments of aesthetic feeling in their own ways. (In a think-aloud study, of course, reading is slowed considerably, enabling readers to elaborate their sense of the implications of a given segment. However, we assume that the different and interestingly complex perspectives revealed here are also likely to occur during normal reading.) Thus, the acts of focalization vary, often quite markedly, from one reader to another. Although the narrative invites empathy with a central character, the reader may remain distant; or, conversely, a reader might identify closely with a main character, although only an external perspective is offered. Thus, when shifts in interpretation occur in response to foregrounding, the narrative does not predetermine the nature of the adjustment in the reader's perspective. Aesthetic feeling opens rather than closes the possibilities for shifts in spatio-temporal or feeling experience perspectives. This is a critical point to consider in accounting for narrative perspective.

We have obtained evidence that foregrounding and aesthetic feeling contribute to reader perspective independently of spatio-temporal and experiential perspective components. As mentioned earlier, the influence of various features of narrative has often been measured by reading times, on the assumption that certain features place greater demands on the readers' resources. In a recent study, we were able to assess the relative influence of a range of local perspective features on sixty readers of "The Trout" (the story discussed above), from whom we also collected measures of individual

differences, using the Literary Response Questionnaire, or LRQ (Miall & Kuiken, 1995), and the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire, or MPQ (Tellegen, 1982).

For this study, we adopted the discourse measures of Zwaan, et al. (1995), which enable individual segments of a story to be coded for propositional features (new arguments and argument overlap) and for discontinuities in time, space, and causation. We also created an additional measure, experiential perspective: a four-point scale marking the degree to which a given segment indicates an internal or external perspective on the main character, or no perspective on that character; the internal perspective divides into cognitions, on the one hand, or emotions and motives on the other (see Table 1). Our view was that the more the narrative invites the reader to experience the internal thoughts or feelings of the main character, the greater the amount of processing required of the reader (cf. Cupchik & Laszlo, 1994, p. 304, who found that segments which provided "insight into the characters' experiences" were read more slowly). For readers who identified with the main character in particular, the perspective measure should show a positive correlation with reading speed. We also measured the amount of foregrounding present in each segment, as well as segment position and number of syllables per segment.

**TABLE 1.** Perspective on the Main Character. Scale for scoring narrative segments, 1 to 4.

1. No mention of character
2. Character's actions or appearance are described, but as though from an external, observer perspective. This includes indirect discourse and most direct discourse (where an observer perspective is assumed).
3. Character's cognitions: perceptions, thoughts, etc., where unmarked or only mildly marked by feeling; direct discourse if this seems to invite the reader's involvement in character's perspective.
4. Feelings of character, where these appear to raise motivational issues for character; motives and emotions; most passages of free indirect discourse; direct discourse only if it clearly invites the reader to share character's emotions or motives.

First, regression analyses were carried out on the reading factors described above, with mean reading times as the dependent variable. Both standard regression and robust regression (Andrew's Sine) were used; in robust regression the effect of outliers in the data is minimized. In the standard regression analysis, the number of syllables per segment and the number of new arguments both contributed to the prediction of reading time. These may be regarded as separate indices of sentential and propositional complexity (see Table 2). Also, readers were influenced by segment position: they tended to speed up as they approached the end of the story. More important, independently of those factors, foregrounding also substantially contributed to prediction of reading time. The robust regression analyses reflected the preceding relations, as well as indicating the independent contributions of argument overlap, causal discontinuities, and experiential perspective.

**TABLE 2.** Multiple Regression Analyses of Story Factors for "The Trout" with Mean Reading Times (standard model, and robust regression analysis)

robust df 82 partial corr.	simple corr.	standard partial corr.	
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segment position -.712**	.083	-.421**	
syllables 946**	.882**	.826**	.
foregrounding 660**	.630**	.358**	.
new arguments 311**	.582**	.206*	.
argument overlap 476**	.059	.179	.
time	.197*	.119	.099
space	.147	-.016	-.083
cause 364**	.253*	.169	.
perspective 353**	.202*	.124	.
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*p < .05 ** p < .01 (one tailed)			

Our analysis points to an important conclusion. While the reader must construct -- and sometimes reconstruct -- a situation model that is mediated by the arguments within each segment, and by relationships in time, space, and cause, this will be constructed by the reader whether the text is literary or not. What is notable here is that foregrounding, which is distinctive to literary texts, appears to exert a strong influence independently of these more general factors. This may indicate that a situation model limited to these factors is insufficient for understanding readers' reactions to this story. Readers in this study turned to foregrounding (and perhaps experiential perspective) for additional guidance during construction of their understandings.

Thus there are several sources of perspective in a literary story, including foregrounding and focalization of character feelings, as well as the discourse features employed by Zwaan et al. (1995). Moreover, individual readers may vary in how they utilize these various factors. To examine the role of individual differences, we also compared readers' scores on the LRQ and the MPQ with the same set of influences on reading speed. Regression analyses were carried out for each reader, with individual reading times as the dependent variable. The partial correlations for each factor were then transformed to z-scores and correlated with questionnaire scores. While the results are not particularly clear cut, they show that, even when considering reading speed only, individual differences were apparent. For example, those most responsive to foregrounding scored low on Alienation and low on Traditionalism, a hint that foregrounding may be more engaging for readers who are secure socially but also independent thinkers. Although such findings are suggestive, further interpretation would be speculative: clearly more research must be done to examine the influences and predispositions at the individual level that shape readers' perspectives.

### 3. Towards a phasic model of literary response

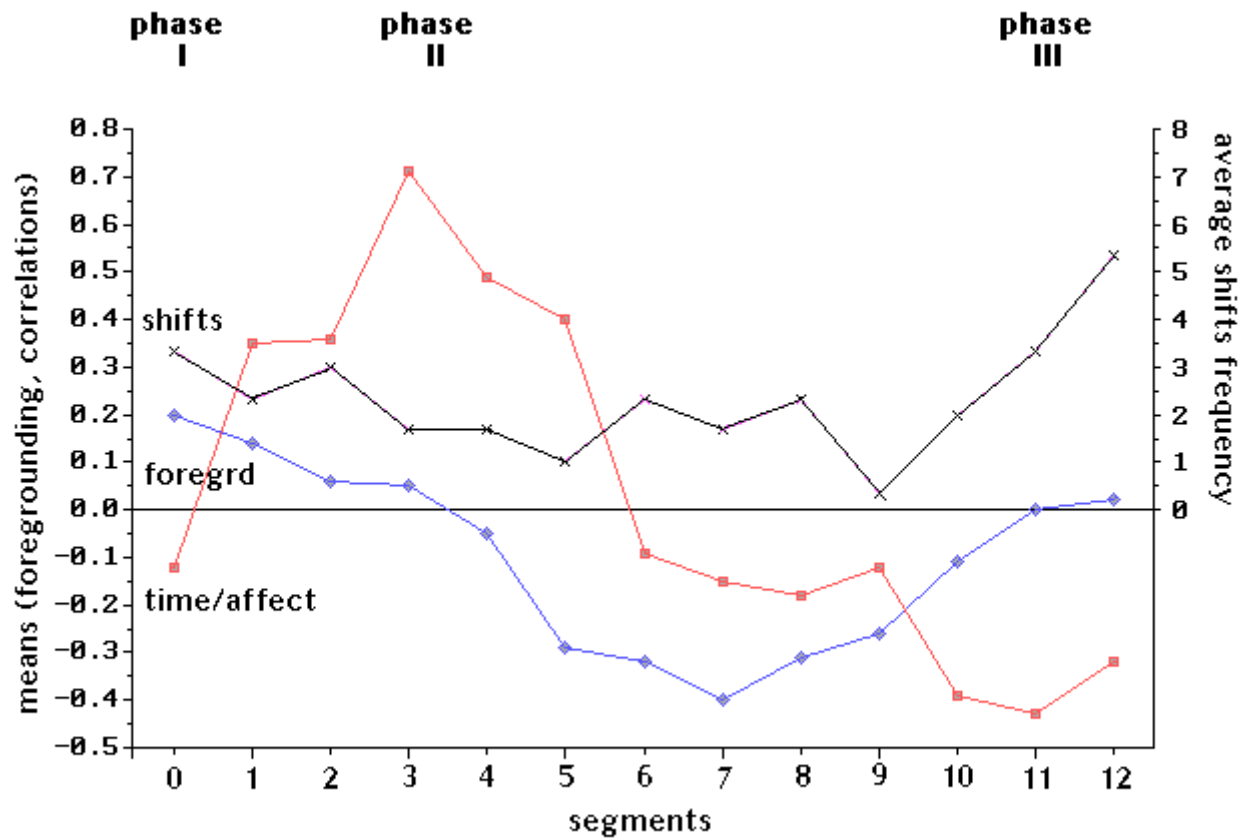
If when reading a given segment readers are influenced by feeling in response to foregrounding or experiential perspective, what effect does this have on the course of

reading? Our studies of this question have served to take us beyond the model of local perspective effects, toward a complex, phasic structure of response in which feeling plays a central role.

How might feeling evoke perspective? In De Sousa's (1987) account, an emotion sets the salience of the cognitive field; that is, it selects which objects will become the focus of attention. A comparable notion is captured by Frijda's (1988) law of Closure, which describes the "control precedence" of emotion, its regulation for the time being of motor and cognitive activity. Both of these accounts involve perspective-setting operations, which we can examine in a range of everyday situations as well as during reading. More distinctive to literary response is the process most often termed defamiliarization (other terms used include Brecht's "estrangement," or Cupchik's (1996) "disorientation"): here, we will suggest, focalization of aesthetic feelings plays an important role in bringing about changes in the reader's current perspective. At its most powerful, the context in which a reader usually experiences a feeling will be challenged and modified. Our analysis of literary reading thus calls for an understanding of the transformations in feeling that readers may experience.

Some initiating event appears to arouse feeling in the reader and cause longer reading times (e.g., focalization of aesthetic feelings in response to stylistic devices). We surmise that the reader experiences uncertainty at such a moment, and turns to feeling in order to locate an alternative source of meaning. We have found effects that can be traced across a number of succeeding segments. Some effects are apparent within two or three segments of the most highly foregrounded one; others occur at a distance of six or seven segments. The clearest marker we have for this phasic process comes from short-term correlations (measured across six segments) between reading times and affect ratings, which fluctuate in a rather consistent way between negative and positive (cf. Dijkstra et al, 1995, p. 147: affect and reading speed have a variable relation, dependent on the locus in the story). A positive correlation indicates that when reading time is long, more intense feeling is occurring in response to an experience of defamiliarization, since such peaks in positive correlation tend to occur three segments after a highly foregrounded passage. They are followed at a lag of several further segments by an increase in shifts in story understanding (shown by data derived from a parallel study on story reminders). Some of these features are shown in Figure 1.

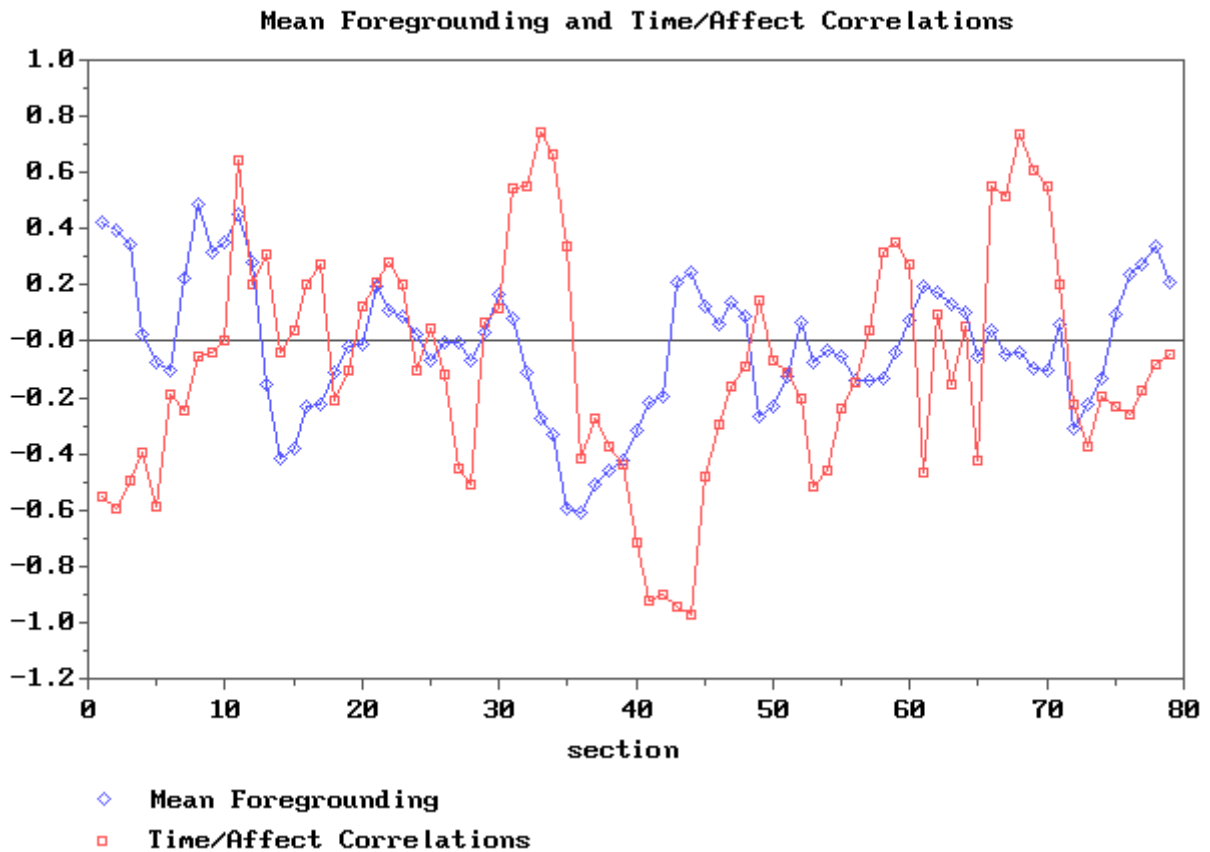




**Figure 1.** Story phases: indicators derived from mean story and reading data for twelve segments

These data suggest a three-phase structure in response. First is the encounter with a defamiliarizing story event or feature (e.g., a stylistic device), which arouses feeling. A second phase ensues during which feeling directs a search for a context for the local meaning of the story, which has been unsettled. In the third phase a shift in the reader's general story understanding takes place, and what had been defamiliarized is now contextualized. Such a sequence is likely to recur several times during response to a literary text. In the story which was the focus of our study, a cycle of this kind appears to have taken place at least three times, as a graph of the correlations of reading times and affect ratings shows (see Figure 2).

## TROUT STUDY



**Figure 2.** Six-segment correlations of reading times and affect ratings for "The Trout"

A literary narrative thus appears to be made up of a series of episodes, in which the reader's perspective is repeatedly disrupted and reshaped, especially in response to stylistic devices. In this process, it is the feelings available to the reader during the defamiliarizing moment that guide the search for a new perspective.

The concept of phases in narrative has been described before, although with rather different implications. Kneepkens and Zwaan (1995, pp. 135-6), for instance, note the possibility that when the reader "encounters abstract or vague descriptions" in a story, she will experience a decline in empathic emotions until a new episode is reached; in this way reception may be cyclical. In his book, *Reading for the Plot* (1984), Peter Brooks elaborates a Freudian model of plot to explain what he terms repetition with variation, or the basic "pulsation" of narrative text (p. 102). His figure for this is taken from a squiggle made by Balzac at the end of his first novel, which was turned into the emblem of a snake by the novel's first printers. This in turn might remind us that Coleridge described the reader's journey through a literary text as like a snake: "at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward" (1817/1983, ii.11).

Our contribution to this model, apart from providing some empirical confirmation for it, is to identify the key role of feeling in reshaping the reader's perspective during reading. If feeling is self-referential, as we have previously suggested (Miall, 1989; cf. Frijda's [1988] Law of Concern), literary narrative may be an important instrument in the elaboration and evolution of our feelings. Through the new perspectives it opens up, we

contemplate other possible selves, and learn whether to accept or reject them. But if we are to understand better how literary reading creates perspective, and what its implications are for individual readers, other more imaginative and well-designed empirical studies will be needed.

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