

Guest Editor's Introduction

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SPECIAL ISSUE: NARRATIVE EMOTIONS AND THE SHAPING(S) OF IDENTITY

Guest Editor's Introduction

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After two days of fruitful discussions in an international workshop on narrative, emotions, and identity at the University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain, in October 2012, participants were convinced of the need to further explore the connections between these issues across the multiple forms of contemporary narrative. Though much has been written about narrative identity, this collection of essays privileges its possibilities from the perspective of theories of emotions. The following articles refer both to the ways in which emotions are represented in narratives, as well as how these representations assume a reader's emotional competence, dwelling on the numerous ways in which narrative empathy is enhanced. Through close readings of different contemporary narratives, this special issue illustrates the advantages of narrative in the portrayal of emotions:

Emotions are, unlike language, non-linear, imprecise, unstructured and diffuse. Therefore language is an inadequate medium to represent emotions, and “telling,” that is, putting a simple label on an emotional state, is less engaging than “showing” by a wide register of narrative means available to fiction. (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 95)

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In this context, the critical work included in this issue shows how investigating the representation of emotions in literary works requires an engagement with multiple aspects, which include:

the author's intention, the reception by the reader guided by his/her perceptions and assumptions, and the literary work's emotional structure—i.e., signals and markers that refer to emotional conditions and govern the reader's attitude towards the text. (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2012, p. 131)

The essays reveal the ways in which fiction and empathy are intrinsically linked. One might even argue that narrative fiction can exist only when it triggers, controls, and manages the readers' empathy. George Butte describes this capacity as "intersubjectivity": "the web of partially interpenetrating consciousness that exists ... when a self perceives the gestures, either of body or word, of another consciousness, and ... perceives in those gestures an awareness of his or her own" (Butte, 2004, p. 28). Intersubjectivity is thus one of the key concepts that helps explain the emotional as well as the ethical dimension of contemporary narratives. In this respect, both Mark Freeman (2014) and Lucy Burke (2014) refer to the notion of the Other as inherent in the construction of one's identity.

Mark Freeman (2014) provides a theoretical background for understanding narrative work in identity, in the self-to-be, mainly by showing how identity transcends one's self to move on to the Other. Freeman wonders how a culture like our own, with its emphasis on instant experiences and disregard for memory, will be able to deal with issues of identity. Drawing on the work of thinkers such as Martin Buber, Charles Taylor, Emmanuel Levinas, Iris Murdoch, and Paul Ricoeur, Freeman examines the interrelationship between narrative, ethics, and the development of identity and, in so doing, proposes to underscore the priority of the Other in fashioning and re-fashioning the self. Freeman explores these new ways of emotional life, new ways of life examination, of self-inspection: "The process of identity formation is frequently one ... of looking inward, and trying to discern who and what one is, in the eyes of others as well as in one's own inner depths" (p. 16). Specifically, he refers to the double triad of narrative identity: (1) spheres of temporality—remembering, acting and imagining; and (2) spheres of otherness—to other people, to the non-human world, to moral and ethical goods.

To center the discussion and provide examples in dialogue, the issue focuses on two specific narrative genres: illness narratives and young adult fiction. The proliferation of these two genres, as well as the emotional and critical nature of both illness and adolescence, makes these texts a fertile ground for negotiating the interplay between narrative emotions and identity. While identity is often reconfigured both personally and socially during illness, adolescence is defined by identity development and constant change, a period when “one tries to find one’s place in what may feel like a shifting, unstable world” (Freeman, 2014, p. 16).

Specifically, Lucy Burke (2014) bases her analysis of filial narratives about Alzheimer’s disease on the concept of intersubjectivity. Burke explores the emotional, memorial, and ethical difficulties that attend the production of these narratives, showing the disruptive effects of fractured memory and dementia, and how these effects act not only upon those suffering from this degenerative disease, but also upon their relatives, who try to come to terms with this experience through narrative. By analysing narratives on Alzheimer’s, Burke rightly explains the role that intersubjectivity and recognition play in the shaping of one’s identity, as the narrators take on the story of another’s dementia into their own. As Hughes, Louw, and Sabat explain,

The idea is that narrative ... suggests the notion of our minds in some way reaching out into the community in order to provide the basis for an enduring sense of self. The idea of a narrative... provides something public, something outside the head, even if connected to what might be occurring within, which can be shared and provide continuity beyond the necessity for the individual to be constantly self-conscious. (Quoted in Burke, 2014, p. 36)

Narrative identity is thus sustained by others when one’s own capacity to do so diminishes. In this way, disability narratives display a myriad of ways which rightly reflect our relational identities.

Most of the narratives discussed in the issue are those written for young people, on the assumption that those narratives can shape their ideas, values, beliefs, and emotions. Writers, parents, and educators believe that emotional identification with those narratives help in the process of identity construction. It is therefore important to consider the role of emotions in those narratives, as we reflect on the connection between the articulation of emotions in fiction and the real experience of

them. As Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2014) points out in her essay, although some of these young adult novels have been already discussed by scholars and critics, “the impact of the depiction of emotions on the readers’ apprehension has been hardly investigated” (p. 65); thus, it is interesting to see how adolescents can be moved, changed, influenced by the representation of events in narrative. Through the analysis of children’s and adolescents’ emotional competence and theory of mind, we come to understand how cognitive narratology opens up fertile grounds of exploration in contemporary narrative critical practice.

Rocio G. Davis (2014) explores these boundaries in her analysis of two dystopian young adult novels, Lauren Oliver’s *Delirium* (2011) and Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993). Davis argues that, through the frame of a traditional coming-of-age novel, these texts trace the ways the erasure of emotions mark a kind of dystopian future society projected by contemporary writers. She discusses the implications of this societal configuration and how they are envisioned to dialogue with today’s adolescents. These texts, Davis argues, can be read as a response to today’s mass media’s predominantly bleak vision of the world. This analysis is concerned with ethical visions as it is argued how dystopian novels “serve as cultural critiques and models as to what might happen if we pursue some of our present courses ... as they encourage teens to be more thoughtful about politics and society and their place in it” (pp. 50-51).

Furthermore, as Maria Nikolajeva (2014) and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2014) convincingly explain, youth literature can also play a significant role in helping the young develop emotional competence and the theory of mind they need to articulate their experience, so that they become mature agents. Kümmerling-Meibauer focuses on the scope of young readers’ mind reading power, pointing out how reading fiction enhances empathy, since “mind reading is characterized by cognitive, social, and emotional requirements” (p. 68). Drawing on recent research in cognitive psychology and neurobiology, she analyses the role of two narratives in the development of empathy in young readers: Eric Kästner’s *Emil and the Detectives* (1929) and *Looking for JJ* (2004), by Anne Cassidy. These works challenge the reader by nuanced descriptions of emotional states; thus, Kümmerling-Meibauer provides a close reading of both novels that examines the competencies required to understand the book, and how these connect to different levels of empathy.

Maria Nikolajeva (2014) further analyses the concept of empathy in young adult fiction, basing her study on recent studies in cognitive

literary criticism, which have provided scholars of literature with new and stimulating approaches to literary texts, and neuroscientists with new insights about human emotions, empathy, and memory through evidence from fiction. What have so far been largely neglected, Nikolajeva argues, are the implications of cognitive criticism for the study of literature targeting a young audience, whose theory of mind and empathic skills are not yet fully developed. Through her analysis of Teri Terry's *Slated* (2012), the author addresses a series of interesting issues: How is a young fictional character's consciousness represented by an author whose cognitive and affective skills are ostensibly superior? How do texts instruct their young readers to employ theory of mind in order to assess both the young protagonist's emotions and his or her understanding of other characters' emotions (higher-order mind-reading)? And, finally, how can fiction support young people's development of their theory of mind?

Patrick Hogan (2014) discusses the intersection of narrative and ethics through the analysis of a graphic novel that deals with violence and young adults. *Kashmir Pending* (2007) purports to represent an authentic testimony regarding the Kashmir insurgency; however, this representation seems to distort the true cause of violence in Kashmir, making it problematic and inauthentic. Kashmiri militants are recruited as adolescents, and the responsibility for ending the conflict is placed entirely in the hands of the militants. This visual narrative appears to be directed to Kashmiri readers, although Hogan argues that it is really aimed at a non-Kashmir liberal readership. Through the analysis of narrative strategies such as the rhetorical audience, conversion narrative, or the exile-and-return pattern, as well as the use of illustrations in relation to the real audience's emotions, Hogan reveals the ideological implications of the novel, showing how this testimony's authenticity is not unproblematic. He displays an interesting analysis of the emotional influence of comic narrative on an adolescent and Western audience, thus impinging on the ethical dimension of literature. As such, this issue closes with references to the overarching theme of narrative and ethics, as we intend to highlight how the moral dimension of narratives dwells in their capacity to make the reader rethink assumptions, beliefs, and commonly held perceptions.

What we might learn after working on the intersections of narrative, emotions, and identity has to do with the old notion of reaching out to Others. It is by the priority of the Other (Freeman), the intersubjectivity in Alzheimer's narratives (Burke), as well as the mindreading and empathy

developed by adolescent readers (Hogan, Davis, Kümmerling-Meibauer, and Nikolajeva) that we might finally come to deal with the highly emotional re/shapings of our identities today.

This publication is part of an interdisciplinary research project, “Emotional Culture and Identity,” based at the University of Navarra and directed by Professor Ana M. González. Through the analysis of emotions in various cultural and social manifestations, this project aims to clarify the emotional regime of late-modern societies, as opposed to early modern ones, in order to uncover how this emotional regime impinges upon contemporary lifestyles and definitions of identity. Since the relational dimension of emotions is expressed in various instances—thoughts, sentiments, actions which often inchoate a narrative structure—it makes sense to approach cultural analysis through a variety of narratives (see Baena, 2012). Due to the emotions it generates, narrative remains a deeply cognitive enterprise, precisely because it touches our emotions in ways which move us to reflection. It does not only provide us with knowledge of the world, but also with the cognitive and emotional resources we need to articulate our sense of ourselves and of the world in which we live. Reflection on accomplished narrative works enriches our capacity to engage critically with our own often stereotyped ways of approaching experience. We hope this collection of essays further contributes to this intellectual endeavour.

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