

Sympathy for the Devil: The Paradox of Emotional Response to Fiction

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During the last thirty years there has been a fruitful debate around the so-called paradox of fiction or the paradox of emotional response to fiction. That is, how can fictional situations move us even if we know they do not exist? When we read a novel, attend the theatre or when we watch a film at home we normally react emotionally if the stories these mediums present engage us in such a way that move us to tears, horror, indignation, annoyance, etc. However, we know that these stories and the characters within them are not real. Then, there is a problem, at least in philosophical terms. The problem arises when we look carefully at the notion of belief. We neither believe that the characters of the fictions are real, nor the stages where they act on, nor the circumstances we watch depicted. We know they are unreal, and yet they move us, sometimes softly and occasionally so strongly that they have a significant impact in our lives. The paradox of fiction lies upon these facts; the argumentation of this paradox centers on the contradiction between the unreality of the fictional situations and the reality of our beliefs within our emotional lives (according to cognitive approach to emotions). And in consequence contains four premises:

1. We believe in statements that are true and that support something exists.
2. In order to have an emotion we do have to believe in certain states of affairs.
3. We do not believe in the existence of the content of fictions (that is, the states of affairs purported by fictions).
4. Fictions move us.

These premises show us that there is a paradox when we are engaged emotionally with fictional situations. Many philosophers have tried to find out a solution in order to understand why and how this paradox happens. In this work I will explore many of the most important solutions offered to this paradox. However I will divide the paradox according to the central premises (the second and the third). According to the third premise we do not believe in the existence of the content of fictions, so in order to have an emotion we have to believe that something exists. I think one of the main problems regarding the paradox of fiction is that there is not a clear definition on what a fiction is and how we engage with them. So it is necessary to find a satisfactory definition of fictions in order to know what kind of mental relation we have towards them. Another problem, and the most important one, is related to the notion of belief concerning the definition of emotions (the second premise) and the impossibility of conceiving of getting emotionally engaged with fictional or imaginary entities we do not believe in. In this work I argue that, in order to get a satisfactory solution to the paradox of fiction, it is important to demonstrate that we can feel an emotion for fictional objects we imagine, and also, because I am concerned with narrative fictional works, that we have to understand the character's emotions in order to be capable to feel something towards them. I try to show that understanding other's emotions is a process like a Hermeneutic Circle. On the other hand I try to argue the only way we can feel any emotion towards the other, in this case the fictional character, is via sympathizing with her. If we can feel sympathy for her, then we can feel any emotion for her. I test my model in an analysis of a film. I analyze how a film can elicit the emotion of pity. By giving us prior information about the character, we can

imagine his situation with caring we can feel sympathy for him, and in consequence pity. However I do not argue on the moral dimension of the emotion of pity. I am only concerned with pity as an emotion we can feel towards anyone. Nevertheless, because of the theme of the film that will be analysed, I discuss briefly if we can feel pity for someone in imagination that might not act accordingly to our moral commitments.

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