

The Concept of Analogizing and Fictional Character as a Source of the Reader's Fantasies

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of "analogizing" introduced in Simon Lesser's theory and applies it to understanding how a fictional character may become the source of developing the reader's fantasies. It argues that although Lesser employs the concept of analogizing to explicate different unconscious processes taking place in reading fictional works, the concept can fit into a broader understanding of the reader's imaginative processing and stresses that the reader's imaginative identification with the fictional character is an important part of her literary experience.

Keywords: Analogizing, fictional character, imaginative participation, stimulating fantasies.

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Introduction

The study of the reader's response to the literary work, her dynamic involvement in literary communication and her creative processing seems to be the prevailing tendency in literary theory and also attracts the attention of other disciplines. The problem of the reader's imaginative participation in the events of the fictional world is an important field of inquiry for literary theory, analytic aesthetics and also for psychology. It is worthwhile to note that the point of departure for understanding the pleasures of fantasizing in reading may serve Sigmund Freud's work "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" written in 1908 (Freud 1908). Simon Lesser was one those notable literary theorists, who tried to further expand Freud's idea expressed in the above indicated essay. However, as Berry Burgum rightly observes, Lesser's work is not determined by psychological considerations, rather "by prevalent literary practice, the material, the form, the style of fiction and so on" (Burgum, 1959, pp. 186-187).

This paper discusses how Lesser elaborates Freud's aforementioned theory and applies it to understanding the problem of the reader's imaginative activities in reading. Drawing on Lesser' concept of "analogizing", this paper argues that a fictional character may become an important source of stimulating the reader's fantasies and an important part of her literary experience.

The Concept of Analogizing in Simon Lesser's Theory

In Simon Lesser's work "The Fiction and Unconscious" the notion of analogizing refers to the way how the readers' participation and involvement in the events taking place in the fictional world may stimulate their fantasies and inspire them to create the stories of their own.

Using Sigmund Freud's idea expressed in the work "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" (Freud 1953-74 [1908]), Lesser further develops the theory in which he gives a description of different unconscious processes taking place in reading fictional works.

Freud's aforementioned essay is concerned with the study of fantasies and daydreaming as imaginative activities. According to him, although both fantasizing and daydreaming are absolutely normal human behavior, they are required to be concealed since unsatisfied wishes so closely interconnected with erotic desires, which are motivating forces of these imaginative activities, are socially unacceptable (Freud, pp. 144-145). It was only in the

power of creative writers to express their daydreams without feeling guilty and remorseful. The aesthetic nature of literary works, as Freud believed, allowed to disguise and sublimate the daydreams and let both authors and readers enjoy the pleasures of fantasizing (Freud, p. 152).

As it was indicated above, Lesser further develops these ideas and applies them to understanding several types of unconscious processes which take place in the course of the readers' response to the fictional works, focusing on the 'active' forms of such processes. He names three unconscious processes which can be distinguished in response to fiction and cautions that none of them occurs in isolation, rather "in admixture with one another and with conscious psychic operations" (Lesser, p. 197). The first process, as he sees it, is ultimately concerned with understanding and perception and is a "part of our "spectator" reaction to fiction" (Ibid.). He states that the writers may unconsciously weave into their fictional works the things, which would arouse, directly or indirectly, the readers' anxiety, however, this process will vary from reader to reader since people differ widely in their ability to respond to anxiety (Ibid., p.198). As for the second and third kinds of unconscious response to fictional works, according to Lesser, they constitute a kind of psychological activity and they are the "forms of fictional response in which we are actors and not merely spectators" (Ibid., p. 200). He states: "In the first of these "active" forms of response we unconsciously participate in the stories we read; in the second, we compose the stories structured upon the ones we read (or upon parts of them) which gives us opportunity to relive or alter our actual experience or act out dramas revolving around our wishes and fears. The last-mentioned kind of response, the creation of stories parallel to the ones we read in which we play a part, I call analogizing" (Ibid.). Thus, as he sees it, the unconscious participation and analogizing "may be said to comprise our "action" to fiction" (Ibid.) and we are "almost never conscious of becoming involved in the fiction we read. We maintain the illusion that we are simply watching a story unfolding itself" (Ibid., pp. 200-201). As it is clear from the above stated, Lesser believes that the reader's psychological activity consists, on the one hand, in taking part in the fictional story during reading, and, on the other, composing the stories of her own, analogous to the ones within which she played her part.

The Satisfactions of Reading Fiction and the Reader's Unconscious Motivation in Lesser's Account

Before giving the above characterization to the three types of unconscious processes occurring during reading, Lesser names the reasons why narrative art enables us gain satisfactions

of various kind. He starts from mentioning in passing that in certain past periods, the reading of fiction was considered as a kind of indulgence which “betrayed a weakness of will” (Ibid., 4) and was considered as non-serious form of reading. Although he admits that such attacks are now less frequent today, the tendency to belittle the value of fiction reading “remains very much alive” (Ibid.)¹. I do not know exactly to what extent the idea that fiction reading is less important than other “serious forms of reading” retains any serious consideration in contemporary scholarly contexts, however, empirical investigations reveal that readers are likely to start reading novels, among other reasons, to entertain themselves, to find themselves in the world of fiction and to stimulate their fantasies. For example, in his article, Anders Pettersson presents the investigation carried out by Michael Charlton and his associates concerning the question what kinds of satisfaction readers may seek in literature, based on the extensive investigation of German novel readers - 1025 interviewees (Pettersson, 2008, p. 61). According to this empirical investigation, “to entertain yourself” occupies 75.2 %; “to learn something about people” - 57.9 % and “to be transported into another world - 51.1 %. As for another investigation, carried by H.W.J. Miesen, among several main reasons of reading literature were named - “to stimulate one’s imagination”; “to entertain oneself”; “to have clear view how to live” (Ibid., p. 62).

There is not sufficient room here to enter into further discussion about various considerations of the reasons as to why the readers engage themselves in reading fiction. Lesser himself, addresses this problem in question from the perspective of the reader’s unconscious motivation. He points out that unconsciously the readers, in reading fiction, satisfy those needs, which they could not secure in real life, relieve their anxieties and assuage their guilt (Ibid., p. 39). And he names a variety of reasons why readers, even without acknowledging it, seek reading the fiction, such as for example, to get the emotions non-existent in our life at this moment; to find a particular attitude, which would confirm some position which we adopted; or to replace the emotional stance with which we are dissatisfied, or even seek satisfaction associated with form, etc. (Ibid., p. 45). However, all these motivations, as Lesser points out, in most cases remain unidentified. “Most of the needs we seek to satisfy through reading fiction are not only unidentified but vague and unspecific in their very nature. They may make themselves known to us only in the form of quite indeterminate tensions, pressures or feelings of anxiety. Like physical hunger, they may be imperious and yet readily appeased by many types nutriment” (Ibid., p. 44). Thus, without knowing exact reasons why she may engage herself in reading, the reader secures

various kinds of satisfactions – Lesser notes that it is possible for fiction to give us pleasure and satisfaction even when it deals with events and problems which might arouse painful reactions (Ibid., p. 9). Lesser believes that fiction “transports us to a realm more comprehensible and coherent, more passionate and more plastic, and at the same time more compatible with our ideals, than the world of our daily routine, thus providing a kind of experience which is qualitatively superior to that which we can ordinarily obtain from life” (Ibid., p. 39) and “like the use of intoxicants, reading represents a temporary withdrawal from the harsh, real world” (Ibid., p. 53).

Imaginative Analogizing with the Fictional Character as an Important Part of The Reader’s Response to Fictional Works

Lesser’s work, as it was indicated above, is centered on the understanding of the types of unconscious processes which take place in the course of the readers’ response. Hence, it does not specifically focus on the problem of analogizing with the fictional character, however, Lesser emphatically states that “fiction... provides us with images of our emotional problems expressed in an idiom of characters and events” (62) and that analogizing nearly always takes place on the basis of the action – “the predicaments and relationships of the characters (Ibid., p. 70). The question why analogizing with a fictional character may form an important part of our literary experience requires answering many other questions, among them, a simple one like – “what place do fictional characters occupy in the story world”? This question tends to be too broad to be discussed within the limited space of an article, however, it is worthwhile to mention that the foci of interest about the entity of a fictional character and its role has been significantly variable. In literary theory, before the rise of formalist criticism, characters had been treated in terms of their individual and psychological essences like real people; within structuralism they had been considered as textual constructs with only functional roles; in structuralist narratology they had been discussed as abstract constructs “living” in the story and mediated through the text; some literary theorists and linguists believed that linguistics was the very discipline which could offer an opening key for understanding characters. Suzanne Keen so rightly notes: “When it comes to character, narrative theory has been long at odds with ordinary experiences of fiction reading. Characters, says the formalist and poststructuralist theorist, are nonhuman words masses, existents, actants, narrative-men, nobodies, or the products of semes traversing proper names.

¹ Such belittlement of the value of reading fiction is explained by Lesser by the fear of fantasy activity. He contends that this fear has two sources –

1) the wishful nature of fantasy; and 2) ambiguity of confusing fiction and reality, fiction and truth (Lesser 1957, 6).

Yet readers persist in regarding characters as more human than "substantial hypothetical beings," more like friends than E. M. Forster's species *Homo Fictus* allows. This tendency shows every time regular readers talk about fictional characters, and there's really nothing that narrative theory can do to stop it" (Keen 2011, p. 295). Indeed, those theorists, who consider that characters are only nodes in the verbal structure (Culler, 1975), or paradigms of traits (Chatman, p. 1980), those who maintain that characters are just actants and can be subjected to linguistic methods of semic analysis (see, for example, Fowler 1978), cannot cancel the fact that understanding the fictional character for an ordinary reader becomes a part of her literary experience and in this experience it is not excluded that as Jennefer Robinsons states, "understanding character is relevantly like understanding real people" (Robinson, 2005, p. 126).

Lesser, in the aforementioned theory, does not engage himself in discussing how literary theory of his time or other disciplines treat the fictional character. Rather, he acknowledges its particular importance in the works of fiction, stating that even non-human protagonists, such as for example, the whale in Moby Dick's, "are invested with some measure of personal significance... they are projections of some aspect of the hero's psyche" (pp. 61-62). He rejects the view that writers may take more interest in settings than characters. Lesser quotes Edwin Muir's words: "When we think of Thackeray's characters we think of them in the costume and the background of their time; their clothes, the houses they live in, and the fashions they observe, are part of their reality; they exist in their period as in a suddenly fixed world" (Muir, 1929, p. 66). Criticizing this view, Lesser states: "we find it quite natural, I should say, to re-costume Miss Sharp in this year's fashion and transplant her New-York – and, despite Thackeray's lamented reticence, which he knew so well how to circumvent, we tend to see her at times with no clothes at all. We are far too fascinated by the young lady to let her remain and inert and purely decorative part of a period montage" (Lesser, 1957, p. 69). And as already indicated, he most emphatically declares that it is the predicaments and relationships of characters that readers are most likely to analogize in reading. Lesser believes that in reading we understand what fictional characters may experience, share their emotions and feelings, and thus, identify ourselves with them. He states: "Unconsciously we come to understand very well why Hamlet cannot execute the task laid upon him by the Ghost of his father: he himself is full of guilt because he harbors the same dark desires on which Claudius has acted. And through our identification with Hamlet we ourselves, in reading or viewing the play, vicariously re-experience the same desires and guilt and purge ourselves of them" (Ibid., pp. 109-110). Further, in analyzing Dostoevsky's heroes in *Idiot*, Lesser argues that

the gratification we get from identifying with them is the result of assuring ourselves that we are not like these characters – "we secure gratification by repudiating it simultaneously" (Ibid., p. 110). Thus, readers may experience satisfaction in identifying themselves with fictional characters not only when they sympathize them, but also when they feel superior to them in many respects and experience pride that they "are not like them" – "since we are not identified with characters, nothing prevents us from laughing at them – from feeling scorn or some other emotion in which there is an element, sometimes a large element of hostility. The emphasis on their weakness puts us in a good psychological position to entertain such feelings, for it causes our own weaknesses to sit more lightly upon us", Argues Lesser (Ibid., p. 277).

It is clear from the above presented that Lesser's focus rests on describing the active forms of unconscious processes occurring within the reader's response to the fictional works – her participation in the fictional events and her analogizing. However, his understanding of the concept of analogizing can fit into a much broad understanding of the reader's imaginative processing. Martha Nussbaum argues that the reader's activity consists not only in a friendly participation in the adventures of the concrete characters, but also in an attempt "to see the novel as a paradigm of something that might happen in his or her own life" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 48). Lesser does not explicate in his theory how the readers inspired by the encounter with a fictional character may develop various types of experiential knowledge, however, it will be useful whenever this problem is raised.

Conclusion

I have introduced Simon Lesser's theory in which he develops Sigmund Freud's idea about the fantasies and daydreaming as imaginative activities and applies it to understanding the process how the participation in the fictional events may produce the rise of the reader's fantasies. I have argued: Lesser's concept of analogizing can apply well to understanding how fictional characters can stimulate the reader's fantasies so that she can involve herself in the participation in the fictional events with them, identify herself with them and apply the experience to her own life situation. Thus, imaginative analogizing is only a small, but at the same time an important part of the reader's literary experience and it can be used as a part of understanding the overall picture of the reader's response to fictional works.

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