The Simulated Self – Fiction Reading and Narrative Identity

‘How can I have a complete identity without a mirror?’ (William Golding, *Pincher Martin*)

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Abstract

How do participating in a work of fiction and imagining a fictional world intertwine with the reader’s life? I develop an account that explores the relation between fiction reading and the reader’s narrative identity. Starting with an investigation of Paul Ricoeur’s account of narrative identity and of Kendall Walton’s account of the nature of representations, I develop my own model of fiction reading. My account is based on two starting assumptions: first, that human beings are entangled in stories, and second, that emotions are complex and have a narrative structure. I argue that during the reading process, the fiction reader creates her own narratives which contain not only the story provided by the work of fiction, but also event sequences from their own experiential memories. I investigate the creation and the influence of self-conscious emotions which are generated during the reading process, especially when a reader identifies with a fictional character from within. I consider how and why these fiction-induced emotions can continue after the reading is finished, and how these emotions can motivate the reader to engage in self-reflection and to refigure her self-narrative. My account examines a new topic: the interactive influence of fiction reading and the fiction reader’s narrative identity.

Keywords Narrative identity · Philosophy of reading · Empathy · Personal identity · Hermeneutics · Self · Imagination

1 Introduction

What does it mean to read, and to engage with, a work of fiction? Building on Paul Ricoeur’s account of narrative identity and of Kendall Walton’s account of the nature of

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representations, I develop my own model of fiction reading. I argue that there is a mutual influence between the fiction reading process and the reader's lived self, as a consequence of the reader's reading-invoked emotions, which can lead the reader to refigure her self-narrative.

The reading experience often makes us readers feel absorbed in the fictional events, as if we were transported into a world apart from our daily lives. The deepest absorption occurs when we manage to empathize with fictional characters. Many readers value fiction reading in particular because it offers them the possibility of escaping from their usual troubles and imagining a different life, experienced through a fictional person in a story. In fiction, there are no constraints as to what can happen in the story, with the exception of those imposed by the work of fiction itself. We can slay a dragon to save a princess, gain intimate knowledge of the prostitutes of Montparnasse, or ride to the South Seas along an iron equator belt on a horse on roller-skates. We do not need to explain or justify what we imagine when we are engaged with a work of fiction. Compared to the risks we run in real life, the risks of reading fiction lie in different areas, and they appear to be less pressing. Whereas real life has to be continually negotiated with the world and society, imagining fiction needs only to be negotiated with our self, our hopes and fears and our moral values, and we can do that at our leisure. Reading can be emotion-provoking: uplifting and pleasant, or disturbing. Especially when we feel for a fictional character from within, reading can arouse strong feelings. We rave against repression together with *Jane Eyre*, bursting with outrage against her cousin who plays her nasty tricks and gets away with it. We feel the dagger in our heart when *Scarlett O'Hara* finally realizes that she loves *Rhett Butler*, and is rejected by him. We feel the desperation of not being able to clear ourselves from unjust suspicion with *Oliver Twist* who learns that his benefactor must take him to be a thief.

What exactly happens to us when we are deeply engaged with a work of fiction, and how does our reading experience relate to our real life, in the real world? We would not be able to experience emotions in the fictional world unless there was some connection between the two worlds, between what we perceive and feel in the fictional world and what we have experienced in the real world in the past, what made us who we are. This connection can only be brought about by us, by the reader herself. Our lived self is engaged with a work of fiction – we leave our daily concerns outside, but there is something of our self which we bring into the reading process. What is the relation between our own life story and the fictional story we enter? This question has not yet been fully explored, and in my account of fiction reading, I use a new approach to gain deeper insights into this issue.

There have already been endeavours to explore the connections between fiction reading and the reader's self,¹ but they have not made full use of the concept of narrative to illuminate the degree and the possible development of the reader's involvement with a work of fiction. My contribution to already existing accounts of fiction reading is the investigation of possible connections between the reader's narrative identity and the narratives which emerge during the reading process.

¹ See especially Goldie 2012, Keen 2010, Stroud 2008, Coplan 2004, Walsh 2003, Ricoeur 1992, Ricoeur 1991b, Ricoeur 1988, Iser 1972.

My account is based on the assumption that, as Wilhelm Schapp puts it, we human beings are always entangled in stories.² Stories put us into relationships with others, and these relationships can be the cause of emotions. This does not only happen during our daily lives, with real people, but also during fiction reading, with fictional people. The fiction reader tends to create different kinds of narrative which are more or less loosely based on the work of fiction. In these narratives, both the reader herself and the fictional character are somehow entangled in the story. I investigate the nature of these entanglements: how they can emerge, who is in the lead, how they are they driven, and what consequences they may have for the reader. Hence, narratives play an important part in my inquiry.

I argue that if a reader feels empathy with a fictional character, the reader typically does not get entangled only in one narrative, but in several narratives. In each of these narratives, there is a different kind of relationship between the reader and the fictional character she is interested in.

In my model of fiction reading with empathy, I categorize three different kinds of narrative that the reader can develop when she empathizes with a fictional character: the other-narrative, the self-in-other narrative, and the other-in-self-narrative. For each of these kinds of narrative, I explore how emotions can be evoked, how these emotions can develop, and how they can influence the reader's self and her self-narrative.

I propose that the generation of these narratives is monitored by a psychological mechanism that I call the 'doppelgänger function', which stems from the common human urge to engage in social comparison with other people.

1.1 Focus and Scope

The focus of my investigation is the mutual influence of the narratives that the reader can create during fiction reading and the reader's self-narrative. In particular, I explore the possible generation of emotions during the reading process. I do not intend to make general claims about how the reading process works for all readers and all texts. My account is a theoretical model, based on the frameworks provided by Ricoeur's account of narrative identity and Walton's account of fiction reading as a game of make-believe. Recent psychological research shows that empirical results of the long-term effects of fiction reading are scarce and do not cover a wide range of human activity. Hence, a theoretical model which provides possible explanations adds to the insights of current empirical findings.

Although I examine all levels of reader engagement during fiction reading, my special focus is on the development of narratives and emotions when a fiction reader feels empathy with a fictional character. It is a generally accepted view that fiction reading can elicit emotions, and socio-psychological research suggests that empathetic fiction reading is likely to generate strong emotions in the reader.³ I explore the ways in which a reader's empathy with a fictional character can initiate additional narratives and create a web of new emotions during and after the reading process.

Recent investigations of the influence of fiction reading on the reader tend to concentrate on one of three areas: first, on the instruments used in works of fiction

² 'Wir Menschen sind immer in Geschichten verstrickt.', Schapp 2012, 1.

³ See for instance Mar et al. 2011.

with the aim of influencing the reader, second, on the factors that lead to empathetic engagement with a fictional character, or third, on empirical research by cognitive scientists of reader reactions regarding empathy and ethics.

The first of these topics – which deals with what Paul Ricoeur calls the ‘seductive techniques of the author’ – is not part of my investigation.⁴ I examine the impact of fiction reading on the reader from the receiving side. Investigating the author’s intentions is not part of my project.

Regarding the second topic – the initial generation of empathetic engagement with a fictional character – I follow Suzanne Keen’s approach that ‘the very fictionality of novels predisposes the reader to empathize with characters’,⁵ and that it is ‘understood that readers’ cultural contexts and individual experiences influence the degree of their responsiveness to the emotional appeal of texts’.⁶ I do not propose to make a full study of the factors that can contribute to the creation of empathy with a fictional character; my focus is on the development of narratives and emotions once empathy has been established.

Regarding the third topic, empirical research, I have found valuable suggestions for the direction of my own investigations in recent studies. In particular, the results of socio-psychological experiments have confirmed my idea that the influence of fiction reading on the reader’s self-assessment is a topic that is worth exploring in connection with the concept of narrative identity. In Frank Hakemulder’s *The Moral Laboratory*, we find reports of empirical evidence that ‘character identification involves readers’ emotional experiences. ... Another indication of the involvement of readers’ self is that not having emotional experiences similar to those of a character hinders the development of empathy’.⁷ As Keith Oatley points out, experiments in cognitive science suggest that fiction reading can be understood as simulation, which may lead towards a better understanding of the consciousness of other persons ‘because areas of the brain activated by mental processes depicted in a story are those used for the very same mental processes in the day-to-day life of the reader’.⁸

The main focus of my own research is on two areas: first, the development of different kinds of narrative strands during fiction reading, and the resulting emotional engagement of the reader if, and when, empathy with a fictional character has been established, and second, the possible influence of the reader’s self-conscious emotions on her self-narrative after the reading process.

1.2 Narrative Identity

My model of fiction reading is based on Ricoeur’s account of personal identity. Ricoeur says that we weave the past events of our life, our current experiences and our expectations for the future into a self-narrative of which we are the co-authors

⁴ The position of the author is most poetically described by Roland Barthes: ‘It is not the reader’s “person” that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game.’ (Barthes, 1975, 4).

⁵ Keen 2010, 4.

⁶ Keen 2010, 170.

⁷ Hakemulder 2000, 72.

⁸ Oatley 2016, 622.

regarding its meaning.⁹ He claims that we always maintain a self-narrative, whether we are aware of this or not. His account differs from other accounts of narrative identity by introducing a hermeneutic approach to examining a person's self. He has a two-level view of personal identity: the objective (the *idem*) and the subjective (the *ipse*) are both necessary to represent a person, and these two views cannot be reduced to each other. The *idem* consists in the body and the character, the long-lasting aspects of a person by which she can be identified from the outside, whereas the *ipse* is a person's lived self that can take responsibility for her own decisions and actions. The *idem* and the *ipse* are linked on various levels: in language, in action, and in self-ascription. These links are incorporated in our self-narrative, which has two main functions: it works as a practical identity that helps us to deal with the conflicts in our interaction with the world and our social nexus, and it provides our life with a sense of unity.¹⁰

I shall argue that during fiction reading, we become entangled in fictional stories, and this entanglement can lead to mutual influences between the fictional narrative and the reader's self-narrative.

1.3 Make-believe and Fiction Reading

Walton claims that engaging with a work of fiction is analogous to a game of make-believe: the reader simulates the fictional story.¹¹ Such a game of make-believe involves two props: the work of fiction, which provides the rules for the generation of fictional truths, and the reader. The reader acts as a reflexive prop because she plays a role in this game herself, by simulating the story. Walton calls the engagement with the fictional world suggested by the work of fiction the 'authorized game' if it follows the rules of generation for fictional truths that are generally accepted for this kind of work.¹² The reader can deviate from the authorized game in two different ways: she can play a game that is not authorized, or she can play the authorized game, but have either imaginings in addition to the game, or fail to imagine some key propositions authorized by the game.

Walton says that it is fictional that we feel for fictional characters. We have the impression that we care about fictional characters, but it is only fictional that we do. We do, however, have real emotions that are triggered by fictionally caring. To clarify his view, he coins the term 'quasi-emotion'. A quasi-emotion contains all the elements of an emotion, except the cognitive element and the motivational element. Emotions generated by real-life situations are based on a belief that something is the case, which prompts not only a quasi-emotion but also certain motivations. Emotions generated by engagement with a work of fiction, on the other hand, are based on make-believe that something is the case, which prompts a quasi-emotion. Hence, the quasi-emotions generated by make-believe in fiction reading do not stimulate us to action, the feelings and sensations may have a different intensity, and their duration can be different.

⁹ Ricoeur 1992, 162.

¹⁰ See Ricoeur 1992, 140, and Atkins, 2008, 71.

¹¹ Walton 1990, 12.

¹² Walton 1990, 397.

As I shall show, however, Walton stops short at investigating the emotions triggered by fiction reading. I argue that successful participation in a work of fiction relies more heavily on the recall of the reader's experiential memories than Walton allows. As experiential memories are embedded in their own mini-stories, linked to past emotions, their recall often leads to imaginations that run alongside the authorized game, and to sequences of self-conscious emotions which persist after the reading process. These self-conscious emotions can lead to self-reflection and refiguration of the self-narrative. As Walton investigates only 'fictionally caring', he misses the subsequent self-conscious emotions and their consequences.

1.4 Emotions

My account is based on the assumption that fiction reading usually involves getting to know fictional people, therefore it is important to investigate the causes and effects of emotions in this context. I am following Goldie's view that when an emotional response carries on over a medium or long-term time range, the evolving emotional episode can expand into a complex narrative.¹³ Hence, whenever I use the term 'emotion', I am going to refer to a complete emotional episode.¹⁴ In a nutshell, I view an emotion as a characteristically complex process which cannot be fully explained without taking into consideration the complete context in which it occurs. An emotion is paradigmatically embedded in the unfolding narrative of a person's life. Thus, emotions play a big part in the refiguration of one's narrative identity. I hold that emotions are often long-lasting processes that are shaped by past and present emotional experiences as well as dispositions to think, act, and feel. The elements of such a long-lasting emotion are interwoven in a dynamic narrative which makes these elements intelligible by providing a context.

I shall argue that the interplay between fiction reading, emotions, and experiential memories can influence the development of the reader's narrative identity.

1.5 The Simulated Self

I hold that a fiction reader creates her own narratives by simulating the fictional story she is engaged with. I use the term 'simulate' here because the reader does not only imitate fictional actions and reactions in her imagination; she also needs to become active in using her own associations to re-create the story and fill the gaps in the narrative with the knowledge and the instruments that are available to her.

My theory of readers' narratives is a theoretical study regarding an empirical reader. It is important to differentiate this from an implied reader, or a specific reader: the empirical reader of my model is built on, and developed from, typical reader reactions observed in empirical testing.¹⁵ Although I have no explicit empirical material to strengthen my assumptions, I hold that they provide the best explanation for the effects

¹³ See Goldie 2000, 11.

¹⁴ There are different views about the duration of an emotion or an emotional episode, but this is just a terminological issue that makes no difference to my argument. There is a prevalent agreement among philosophers that emotions either are or occur as part of a broad, complex response. For a detailed discussion and a literature overview, see Price 2012, 58–60.

¹⁵ See for instance Hakemulder, 2000, chapter 2.

of fiction reading on the reader that have been observed in socio-psychological and cognitive research, and for their possible subsequent development.

For my account, I distinguish between four different kinds of beings that can be involved in reader engagement: the self (the reader's lived self in the real world), the other (the fictional character as understood by the reader), the self-in-other (the self empathizing with the other), and the other-in-self (the other influencing the way the self views herself). It is important to note that although I call them 'beings' they are not to be understood as distinct entities. Each of these four 'beings' represents a different aspect of the central person involved in the process: the reader herself. Any of them, or any combination of them, can feature as protagonists in the narratives the reader weaves during fiction reading with empathy. For a differentiated investigation of the reader's relations to fictional characters, I distinguish between three levels of reader engagement: appreciation, sympathy, and empathy. A reader can be involved on all these levels at the same time: as Amy Coplan puts it, 'Readers can have a wide range of psychological experiences during engagement with a single narrative. The reader is neither fixed nor immobile; he is neither forced to mirror exactly the characters' experiences nor forced to observe the characters' experiences from the outside'.¹⁶ Of the three levels of reader participation, I hold empathy to be especially interesting because it appears to be most likely to evoke strong and lasting emotions in the reader.

Corresponding to these beings, four kinds of narrative might become active during fiction reading: self-narrative, other-narrative, self-in-other-narrative, and other-in-self-narrative. I hold that self-narrative is largely suspended during fiction reading. Basically, I agree here with Mar et al. who use the notion of a planning processor to explain how we act in the real world, and who say regarding fiction: 'In reading a piece of fiction one withdraws from one's immediate world, and uses this same planning processor to empathise and identify with fictional characters, suspending one's own goals, plans, and actions.'¹⁷ We relinquish our selves and enter the story of a fictional character, the other-narrative.

1.6 Other-narrative

The other-narrative is the story of the fictional character as set up in the work of fiction and understood by the reader. My assumption is that almost every work of fiction contains a fictional other.

As many philosophers have successfully argued,¹⁸ the story contained in a work of fiction needs the reception by a reader to be fully configured. Ricoeur says 'To follow a story is to actualize it by reading it'.¹⁹ Each reader creates her own version of the plot and of the fictional others involved, adding her own knowledge and experience of the world while missing meanings and associations in the text which are foreign to her. The reading process involves a struggle between the reader and the text, resulting in what Ricoeur describes as the 'three dialectics of reading':²⁰ first, the reader defends her own

¹⁶ Coplan 2004, 148/149.

¹⁷ Mar et al. 2011, 824. Their notion of a planning processor would fit seamlessly into Ricoeur's model of narrative identity; he would see it as part of mimesis₃, the plotting part of narrative identity, see Ricoeur 1984.

¹⁸ See for instance Iser 1972., Barthes 1975, Ingarden 1975.

¹⁹ Ricoeur 1984, 77.

²⁰ Ricoeur 1985, 168.

expectations against the deceptive strategies used in the text; second, the reader tries to configure the implied but unwritten parts of the text; third, the reader sets the cultural paradigms she is familiar with against those she finds in the text, which can either confirm or challenge them. As a result of these activities, the reader develops her own narrative of the fictional other during the reading process.

Does the reader need to feel sympathy for a fictional other to be able to create the other-narrative? It seems plausible that we need to have a minimal feeling of human companionship with a fictional other to be motivated to follow her story. Sympathy would include an interest that the fictional other should flourish, but I hold that we can be motivated to engage with a fictional story without wanting the fictional characters to get what they want. Even if a fictional other is objectionable, we might enjoy following their story. An example for this is Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley.²¹ He murders in cold blood to achieve his goals, and we as readers do not wish him to lead a happy life as a consequence. But his tortured personality is so gripping that we are motivated to construct his other-narrative until the end of the story.

Hence, two variants of the other-narrative can be distinguished: the other-narrative with only appreciation and the other-narrative with additional sympathy.

1.7 Self-in-other-narrative

When a reader empathizes with a fictional other, she feels for the fictional other from the inside. She enters the fictional story and the fictional world – up to a point. Ricoeur says that 'reading itself already is a way of living in the fictitious universe of the work; in this sense we can already say that stories are told but also lived *in the imaginary mode*'.²² What exactly does this 'way of living' in the imaginary mode entail? Some of the limitations the reader encounters while imagining the fictional other from within are straightforward. First of all, the reader cannot act in the fictional world (although in cliff-hanger scenes, for instance, the reader might imitate the action of the fictional other by grabbing the table or clenching her fist). Second, and following from this, the reader cannot suffer any real-life consequences from what happens in the fictional world. The climber in the story may fall to his death; although we suffered inside him until he died, we continue to live. In spite of this divergence, some things happen in parallel during the reading process: the fictional climber is released from his life, and we are also released from the fictional climber's life. The other-narrative of the fictional climber comes to an end simultaneously with our self-in-other-narrative. If the story continues after this, we see the deceased climber from the outside.

This is an indication that there can be many switches between the other-narrative and the self-in-other-narrative. To understand how this develops, and in which respect these two narratives mirror each other, we need to get back to the point where empathy is generated. The first step towards empathy is typically that the reader takes an interest in the fictional other because the fictional other's main fears and / or desires are similar to her own. She can proceed to imagine the fictional other from inside if she is able to identify the shape of the fictional other's conflict as something she knows from her own life. As Susan Feagin points out, empathy only arises if the structure of our emotions –

²¹ Highsmith 2007.

²² Ricoeur 1991b, 432.

evoked by the kind of conflict the fictional other goes through – is similar to the structure of emotions the fictional other feels.²³ It is not important here that the fictional other is often different from us in many ways: we can feel empathy with Pincher Martin although he is a young naval lieutenant about to drown in the Atlantic Sea during the Second World War,²⁴ even if we are philosophers in the twenty-first century, sitting in a safe conference room. What draws us into him is our common terror of near-drowning and existential annihilation.

If we feel empathy with a fictional other, our imagination has already started to integrate us into the fictional story in a meaningful way: we let the part of our self that is affected by the conflict participate in the narrative to such an extent that we can build a story of our own. This story is about us, because we are the principal character in our own life, but transported into different conditions. In this imagined narrative, we perform the actions of the fictional other, and we take over the events of the fictional narrative into our own self-in-other-narrative. Our motivation to carry on with the self-in-other-narrative can emerge on different levels. Cognitive scientists often use the term ‘possible selves’²⁵ to explain how a reader can feel gratified by comparing one of her desired possible selves with an important positive aspect of the fictional character’s attributes.²⁶ In my view, the main motivation to continue with the self-in-other-narrative is our desire to experience the resolution of the conflict presented by the work of fiction, and to savour the experience as deeply as possible. There are many lacunae in our self-in-other-narrative; they appear in all the places where the fictional other’s story is incompatible with anything we ever experienced. Pincher Martin, for instance, is insanely jealous of his colleague because his colleague won the love of the girl he himself lost. If we have never been in a similar situation, this aspect is not part of our self-in-other-narrative; it is, however, an on-going part of the other-narrative to which we switch back for the time being. Lacunae like this do not, however, detract from the poignancy of our self-in-other-narrative; on the contrary, the focus on a single conflict enhances our interest in it. We allow ourselves to be carried into a world which is different from our own, and in which things are done in a different way. This is what Ricoeur calls the appropriation of the text by the reader.²⁷

The self-in-other-narrative can only be rich and satisfactory as long as our empathy with the fictional other continues, fleshed out by our own experiential memories. If – during the reading process – our empathy turns into sympathy or appreciation, the self-in-other-narrative we have been building is suspended. Are there any necessary or sufficient conditions that must be fulfilled to keep our self-in-other-narrative active?

Let us recall Ricoeur’s model of narrative identity: a narrative identity is a necessary mediator between the actions of a person as an embodied subject in the world on the one hand, and her ethics on the other hand. The self-narrative gives a person a sense of unity that she needs in order to maintain her self-esteem during her interactions with the

²³ Feagin 2012, 161.

²⁴ Golding 1956.

²⁵ Markus / Nurius 1986, 954.

²⁶ See Martínez, 2018, 123/4 and 148.

²⁷ Ricoeur 1991a, 95.

physical world and her social nexus. Any significant conflict with the given outside world triggers a revaluation of a person's self-narrative, integrating past events and future expectations, with a special emphasis on her experiential memories.²⁸ So the necessary condition for refiguration of our self-narrative is that we encounter a conflict in our relations to the external world.

I argue that a similar process occurs in a self-in-other-narrative. Here, the conflict does not arise from the real world, but from a fictional one. We (as the reader) adopt the fictional other's conflict as our own. In order to simulate the fictional other's feelings as richly as possible, we fill the gaps of the story with our own experiential memories.

Empirical research supports that this is what readers typically do. As David S. Miall and Don Kuiken show, '*conventionally different narrative elements may seem 'the same' by virtue of the progression of feelings that are common to them*'.²⁹ In their studies of readers' responses, they found that figurative fiction arouses the readers' feelings and prompts them to 'cross boundaries', moving from the fictional situation of the fictional character to other situations of their own life experience which are affectively related to it. When this happens, Miall and Kuiken observed, readers recollect personal memories and the feelings connected to them, thus enriching and extending their perception of the fictional story. While this observation does not prove a merging of the self and the fictional character during empathy, it does indicate that the fiction reader's emotionally charged memories play an important part in the reader's reception in the story, and in the narrative the reader creates during the reading process.

Ricoeur says that imagining a fictional other from within is like going through imaginative variations of one's own life, and that one needs the 'anchor' of the body to the world in order to recall embodied experiences.³⁰ The phenomenological part of our memories supplies our imaginings with depth and richness. Without the help of embodied experiences, our imaginative variations would not be convincing because they would lack an important aspect of real life: the irreducible link between the body and the self.

In Ricoeur's view, identifying with a fictional character can lead us to catharsis, the cleansing of our emotions. Thus released from emotional baggage, we are able to see the relevant situation under new aspects, and to consider moral standards that were previously hidden from us. For Ricoeur, catharsis opens the way towards clarification, examination and learning.³¹

In my view, Ricoeur is right about the importance of embodied experiences during the reading process, but he has missed an important aspect of reading-induced emotions: they do not stop with the completion of catharsis. Memories of embodied experiences generate stories of their own. When we as fiction readers start to recall our experiential memories during the configuration of our self-in-other-narrative, the story we are engaged with starts to deviate from the story presented in the text. Recollected memories are usually not restricted to single flashes, but to event schemata; they are embedded in small stories of their own. During the integration of these memories into the self-in-other-narrative, these connected stories find their own place

²⁸ Here, Ricoeur's account of narrative identity matches the cognitivist notion of possible selves: the projection of our future self, in its various possible story strands, is part of our narrative identity.

²⁹ Miall and Kuiken, 2002, 226.

³⁰ Ricoeur 1992, 150.

³¹ Ricoeur 1988, 176.

in the story, subtly moving the focus of the story away from the fictional other and in the direction of the reader's self. We still simulate the conflict of the fictional other, but at the same time we simulate a past conflict of our own in a different presentation. If we are primarily moved by our recollections at this point, we are not only simulating a fictional other's emotion. We are then also feeling a real emotion, and our own self (in a simulated environment) is the focus of this emotion. A part of our self is now embedded in the fictional other, making the fictional other precious to us in two ways: we care for our own self in the fictional other's guise, and we care for our own self in a particularly controlled and intense way. The emotions we experience here can persist after the reading process, leading to self-reflection. Ricoeur's notion of catharsis, however, does not allow for these self-directed emotions and their possible consequences. Hence, he cannot give a plausible explanation of how self-reflection after fiction reading is motivated.

Temporarily living in the fictional world, we are not in danger of having the contingencies of real world events spoil our concentration, and we are also free of the inhibitions that limit the enjoyment of our emotions in the social context of the real world. If we should find that our empathy for the fictional other was misplaced, we can withdraw our self with no damage done. We care for the fictional other, being interested in her well-being (through our self-involvement), but we are not committed to care for the fictional other forever. Reading Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, for instance, we may feel empathy with Pamela in the beginning because she manages to preserve her sense of self-respect in spite of the pressure she is put under, and we may rave with her against the vanities and presumptions of Mr. B.³² When Mr. B. later proposes marriage to her, however, it turns out that Pamela has always loved him. Seeing her now revealed as one of the worst hypocrites in literature, we might withdraw my empathy and slip out of her fictional other. Our relationship with Pamela is then over, and there is no harm done, except for a slight disappointment that the story continues in such an unappealing way. As this example illustrates, the possibility of experiencing a deep emotion without having to fear unpleasant consequences is one of the reasons why experiencing a self-in-other-narrative is so attractive to the reader.³³

Sliding into a self-in-other-narrative is one case of what can happen when we recall experiential memories during fiction reading with empathy. The other case is the configuration of an other-in-self-narrative.

1.8 Other-in-self-narrative

The other-in-self-narrative can develop during reading with empathy when a fictional other starts to act in a way that does not follow the ethical norms which have governed our own actions in the real world, either in a positive or a negative way. If the fictional other reacts differently in a fictional conflict than we expected, she can do this in four different ways. First, the fictional other can fail to conform to our desired self. In this case we can simply withdraw our empathy, as shown in the last section. Second, the

³² Richardson 2003.

³³ Experiencing emotions during fiction reading can, of course, have side effects which are unpleasant to the reader. Children may have nightmares after getting excited by horror stories, or grown-ups may be miserable for days after reading Beckett's *Molloy*. But the reader usually does not expect that before starting out on the reading experience, so this does not influence her motivation to read fiction.

fictional other can develop into a self we are afraid of becoming.³⁴ Third, the fictional other can exceed any plans we ever had for our own self. Fourth, the fictional other can act differently than we did in a similar situation that we have recalled, and the conflict is important to us. In cases two, three and four we receive unfamiliar information, which we need to process. Several things will typically happen now: we start to think differently about the fictional other, we wonder why we acted – or would act – differently, and we begin to speculate whether we should think differently about ourselves, or whether we should change the way we lead our life.

On the one hand, dealing with the unexpected information changes our expectations of how the fictional story is going to continue (thus influencing the other-narrative). This aspect is part of what Ricoeur calls the reader's response to the implied author's strategy of persuasion.³⁵ On the other hand, the fictional conflict also changes the role that our recalled experiential memories have in the ongoing self-in-other-narrative. The usual function of these memories during empathy is to strengthen our simulation of the fictional other's situation, but when we no longer feel in the driving seat of the story, they become subject to increased scrutiny and re-evaluation. We no longer see ourselves as the only possible role model for our own lives. This will typically lead us to try out the unfamiliar actions of the fictional other in our imagination, albeit tentatively, and thus, the other-in-self-narrative develops.

In John Steinbeck's novel *The Winter of Our Discontent*, for example, we would probably have expected Ethan Hawley to overcome his resentment and find a way of changing his life in a morally acceptable way. Then, when we learn that he has betrayed his boss to the authorities, leading to the man's deportation, we would expect Ethan to encounter a major difficulty. We may even anticipate him to perish in some way, because he has betrayed himself and his own values, which seems unforgivable in the moral framework of the novel. On the other hand, we empathize with him, feeling his existential loneliness in the midst of his family and his home town, and we may wonder what would happen if we ever gave in to an impulse to do something bad like Ethan: 'What I had done and planned to do was undertaken with full knowledge that it was foreign to me'.³⁶

It is possible that our moral judgment of the fictional other's action is different from our moral judgment of our own remembered actions in similar situations. If this is the case, we are forced into reflection about the simulated conflict. As this usually happens unexpectedly during the reading process, we cannot plan this in a structured way. Instead, the fictional other seems to enter our own experiential memories, performing counterfactual actions in our own past life. Depending on our moral judgment, the fictional other can then slip into the role of either a dangerous devil or a wonderful role model. We watch him 'taking over' our life in an imaginary mode. Thus, we can imagine and evaluate possible outcomes of actions which we would judge to be either immoral or beyond our power in real life.

Because it is unexpected, and because it interrupts the reading process, the other-in-self-narrative is usually put on hold deliberately by the reader as soon as she becomes aware of this, to be evaluated in a more organized and differently structured way after the reading process.

³⁴ See Martínez 2018, 149, for a definition of undesired possible selves.

³⁵ Ricoeur 1988, 168.

³⁶ Steinbeck 2001, 187.

1.9 The doppelgänger-function

The monitoring between the different kinds of narrative that the reader can create when empathizing with a fictional other is performed by what I call the doppelgänger function. My hypothesis is that the doppelgänger function is a general human capability that works as a monitor, constantly switched on, alerted to find relations between the reader and the fictional other. I am positing this as an argument for the best explanation for the possible changes of a reader's engagement with a fictional narrative and a fictional character.

The doppelgänger function makes the reader, as it were, look into a mirror while imagining the other-narrative, swinging either into the direction of the self-in-other-narrative or in the direction of the other-in-self-narrative. As I showed in the description of the self-in-other-narrative and the other-in-self-narrative, there are attributes they have in common: both are induced by the integration of the reader's experiential memories into the simulation of the fictional other's situation, and both are motivated by a judgmental comparison of the fictional other's behaviour in the fictional story and one's own behaviour in a similar situation as represented by the recalled memory, or in a projection of a possible future self. In the self-in-other-narrative, an imaginative variation of our self hijacks the fictional story, whereas in the other-in-self-narrative, an imaginative variation of the fictional other hijacks our recalled sense of self.

The search for similarities between the fictional other and the reader appears to be a fundamental feature of fiction reading with empathy. This does not seem surprising because it is an integral part of personal development, starting in early childhood, that a person learns to see herself as distinct from others, and to compare herself to others. As a person's position in her social nexus is important for her self-esteem, a part of her is trained to keep on scanning her environment for other persons to relate herself to, although she may not be conscious of this.³⁷

Social psychologists have been investigating the question of how and why people perform social comparisons. Recent research has shown that people often compare themselves to others spontaneously and unintentionally, and that this occurs on a regular basis because it is an efficient way of gaining self-knowledge.³⁸

During the reading process, the reader's spontaneous social comparison – in my terms, the doppelgänger function – is directed towards fictional others, in particular towards the ones the reader empathizes with. I call this procedure the doppelgänger function of narrative generation because it becomes stronger and more effective whenever it discovers a large overlap between the fictional other's attributes and the reader's own. The doppelgänger function works as a monitor, constantly switched on, alerted to find relations between the reader and the fictional other. On a meta-level, it navigates our attention, influencing the direction of our imagination.

³⁷ Corcoran et al. 2011, 122/23.

³⁸ Corcoran and Mussweiler, 2010, 79 and Taylor 1981, 195.

The doppelgänger function.

The minimal likeness we need to discover to empathize with a fictional other is a similarity in a disposition or character trait that is important to us; at the maximum stage, we would find out that the narrative is really about ourselves. As soon as we have acknowledged that a fictional other is our ‘doppelgänger’ in an important respect, we watch her actions critically: does she come up to our expectations? This question becomes almost as important to us as if it was a question about ourselves. We draw on our experiential memories to simulate the fictional other in a more life-like way. As the situation we remember will never be exactly the same as the situation in the fictional story, we have to take new parameters into consideration when we build our self-in-other-narrative and integrate the elements of our memory-story. The first story we typically switch to from the other-narrative is the self-in-other-narrative: How would we have acted, endowed with both the characteristics of the fictional other and our own knowledge of life?

As soon as the fictional other, although so much like us in many respects, behaves in a way that we judge to be morally superior or inferior to what we think our own behaviour would have been, our focus shifts. Suppose we could have been as good / as bad as our doppelgänger – how would this have influenced our life? At this point, our narrative changes from a self-in-other-narrative to an other-in-self-narrative, and we let ourselves be led through the story by the fictional other.

These narratives can be suspended at any time, to be taken up and changed whenever our engagement with the fictional other changes. The doppelgänger-function leads the focus of our imagination towards one of these narratives at a time.

The following diagram summarizes the relation between the reader's self and the fictional other during empathic fiction reading:

Empathy with a fictional other.

1.10 Beyond the reading process

Regarding the influence of fiction reading after the reading process, two questions seem important. First: does fiction reading typically lead to conscious and voluntary self-reflection? Second: is reading-induced self-reflection always good for us? The first question needs to be investigated empirically, which is out of scope for my work. Current empirical research has not so far shown reliable long-term results³⁹; short term evaluations, however, point in the direction that self-conscious emotions often lead to self-reflection.⁴⁰

In the context of fiction-reading, I understand self-conscious real-life emotions to be emotions whose focus is the reader's lived self. Self-conscious emotions come into being because we are aware of other people's reactions to us. Our self-conscious emotions are based on our own judgment of our self, evaluating our situation, our actions and our feelings as either failing to reach a given goal, or exceeding it.⁴¹ The goals that serve as guidelines for such a judgment can be derived from, and motivated

³⁹ See Djikic and Oatley, 2014, 499.

⁴⁰ For a literature overview of typical empirical tests, see in particular Tracy / Robins (ed.) 2007.

⁴¹ Lewis, 2018, 2.

by, either the practiced rules of our social nexus, or our own internalised value system.⁴² Self-conscious emotions like guilt, shame, embarrassment or pride are related to our self-esteem. As Kristjánsson has argued, self-esteem is not necessarily global, but it can also be ‘domain-specific’,⁴³ concerning only certain aspects of the self. When the aspects of our self on which we want to build our self-esteem suddenly appear to diverge from the aspects we defined in our self-narrative, the practical identity we rely on in daily life can get out of balance.

The duration of an emotional experience is largely dependent on the type of emotion, in various ways. For instance, a self-directed emotional experience is likely to have more facets and a more intricate structure than an other-directed emotional experience because it has more and richer material to feed upon. A negative emotional experience typically has a stronger impact than a positive emotional experience; empirical evidence has shown that the focus of a negative emotion is usually narrower, and thus deeper, than that of a positive emotion, provided that these emotions have the same intensity.⁴⁴

Some of articles on empirical psychological research suggest that readers who enjoy being ‘transported’ into a fictional story tend to be influenced by the preferences of protagonists whom they like, without being aware of this.⁴⁵ In other tests readers who were given either narrative or expository texts were asked to mark in the text where a memory occurred, and evaluate the impact of these memories afterwards. Statistics showed that the readers engaged with a narrative text tended to have more memories that involved them in the fictional text, as an actor or as an observer, than the readers of an expository text. These experiments are based on the readers’ self-assessment immediately after the reading process.

The results of these empirical tests strengthen my conviction that it is worthwhile to investigate the relation between fiction reading and the reader’s self after the reading process in more detail. However, it remains an open question whether the short-term results gained in this way can be extrapolated into the long term, and the studies themselves state that there is no reliable basis for such an extrapolation. For that reason, I am going to set the question aside for the purposes of this discussion. I cannot make the empirical claim that the reader’s self-conscious emotions can persist after the reading process and hence, can lead to a refiguration of the reader’s self-narrative. However, fictional narratives do have qualities that can cause us to become entangled with them, and develop ongoing chains of emotions, starting with empathy with a fictional character and leading on to self-conscious emotions.

Psychological research has shown that self-conscious emotions like shame, guilt, embarrassment or pride have a particularly high influence on people’s motivation to change their lives, or their life story, much higher than non-self-conscious emotions like fear, disgust, joy or sadness.⁴⁶ Self-conscious emotions can be distinguished from non-self-conscious emotions as being secondary in the sense that they involve an appraisal of how a situation affects the self.

⁴² Kristjánsson 2010, 127.

⁴³ Kristjánsson 2010, 112.

⁴⁴ This line of thought is supported by many studies, for recent results see Fredrickson and Branigan, 2005 and Barclay and Kiefer, 2014.

⁴⁵ Green and Dill, 2013, 1.

⁴⁶ Lickel et al. 2014.

The influence of self-conscious emotions on a tendency for subsequent self-reflection is widely corroborated by empirical research. As Tracy and Robins point out, self-conscious emotions ‘require self-awareness and self-representation’.⁴⁷ Self-reflection has already started when these emotions occur, and it does not stop with their emergence. Test results have shown that people tend to experience self-conscious emotions when they become aware that they have not lived up to their own standards in some way. For a literature overview of typical empirical tests, see in particular Tracy & Robins 2007. During these empirical tests, the participants are confronted with real or fictional cases in which people have reason to feel self-conscious emotions, and they are required to imagine themselves in these situations.

Can the detailed findings of these studies, as far as they go, be extended to self-conscious emotions which are evoked during ‘private’ fiction reading? I hold that in general, they can. There is, however, one significant difference between reading for an empirical test and reading on one’s own. This concerns the difference between self-oriented and other-oriented emotions.⁴⁸ Shame is usually regarded as an other-oriented emotion, because it concerns our moral standing within our society. If fiction reading induces us to feel shame, we are often in a situation where we empathize with a character(f) who is in a type of shameful situation which we know from our own lives. This should, I think, enable us to treat even such an unpleasant emotion as self-oriented, because in company of the character(f) we are able to think about it without feeling threatened. There are no real-life others whose disdain we need to fear if we imagine ourselves to be in the shameful situation of a character(f). If we write about this in a test report, however, the real world looks over our shoulder. Hence, I hold that the impact of self-conscious emotions on the reader’s self may be different in ‘private’ reading, compared to test study reading.

The second important question in this context is whether reading-induced self-conscious emotions can force us to recognize discrepancies between the way a conflict was resolved in a fictional story on the one hand, and the way we have dealt with such conflicts in the past, or the way our desired possible self would deal with such a conflict, on the other hand. If this works successfully, in the ideal case, we feel the need to either change our goals, or the way we interpret our past life, or both. These self-conscious emotions differ in intensity: The emotions caused by the self-in-other-narrative are typically the strongest because they involve the most intense recalls of one’s own emotion-laden memories during the reading process. But does self-reflection necessarily lead to a more stable self-narrative, and thus, to an improved unity of self?

In Ricoeur’s view, the emotions evoked by fiction reading are released and purged in catharsis, catharsis leads to learning, and learning leads to self-reflection. I argue that this explanation is both too simple and too optimistic. As I showed in the previous section, fiction-induced emotions can generate strong self-conscious emotions that are often complex and long-lasting. They do not, however, inevitably lead us towards a realistic evaluation of the discrepancies between a new way of solving a conflict and our current way of solving such conflicts. If our self-narrative does not realistically reflect our role in life and society, identifying with a fictional character may even lead

⁴⁷ Tracy and Robins, 2004, 105.

⁴⁸ Fessler 2007, 187.

us to strengthen our unrealistic self-narrative. As Michael S. Brady says, ‘subjects often seek for reasons that confirm, rather than disconfirm, their initial emotional construals’, making themselves ‘susceptible to a ‘confirmatory bias’.⁴⁹

In such a case, conflicts with our social nexus are likely to grow, and our self-narrative may become increasingly unstable. Even a small bias in our self-narrative can lead us to identify with a fictional character who is not similar to a realistic view of ourselves, but to the protagonist of our self-narrative. We might – like Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*⁵⁰ – persist in identifying with romantic heroines, vainly expecting our life to be dominated by romantic encounters. In this case, we would blame the non-fulfilment of our expectations on the bad behaviour of our social nexus, not on our unrealistic self-narrative. In such a case, self-reflection would not improve our self-narrative. Ricoeur’s account does not cover this case, but it is important because it explains how fiction readers can remain blind to their self-delusions in spite of self-reflection.

Goldie identifies four fictionalizing tendencies that can jeopardize a person’s self-narrative: first, that we plot our lives, second, that we find agency in the world where it is not, third, that we desire narrative closure, and fourth, that we impose genre on our life.⁵¹ In the case of *Madame Bovary*, the tendency to impose genre on one’s life leads to her ruin. If our self-narrative is not based on facts, Goldie argues, it cannot create a sense of self because it does not refer to us.⁵² I agree with Goldie that in extreme cases, these fictionalizing tendencies can hinder the refiguration of a self-narrative into one that stands the test of daily life, even if reading-induced self-reflection occurs.

Summing up, in my view self-reflection that is induced by fiction reading can lead to refiguration of self-narrative, thus increasing a person’s unity of self, if the self-narrative is already functioning well as a practical identity. If, however, the self-narrative is already severely biased, self-reflection induced by fiction reading is not likely to improve the quality of the self-narrative.

1.11 Conclusion

In the previous sections, I investigated possible answers to my initial questions: What does it mean to read, and to engage with, a work of fiction? How can fiction reading induce emotions? What are the influences of fiction reading on the reader’s self-narrative, and on her self?

I used three building blocks to construct my own account of fiction reading: 1) Ricoeur’s account of narrative identity, 2) Walton’s account of fiction reading as a game of make-believe, and 3) the concept of emotions as intentional, structured, and narrative.

In order to explore the links between the fiction reader’s emotions when she engages with a fictional other, and the influence of her reading on the way she perceives her

⁴⁹ Brady 2013, 162.

⁵⁰ Flaubert 2003.

⁵¹ Goldie 2012, 171–173.

⁵² Goldie 2012, 127.

own life story, I distinguish between three possible levels of participation in fiction reading, and I define three types narrative that the reader can generate on these levels: the other-narrative during appreciative and sympathetic fiction reading, and the self-in-other- and the other-in-self-narrative during empathetic fiction reading. The switch between these narratives is brought about by what I call the doppelgänger function, an internal monitor which keeps looking for resemblances between the self and the fictional other. Identifying with a fictional other can trigger a chain of strong emotions in the fiction reader, many of them self-conscious, and they can persevere after the reading process. If they persevere, they can lead to self-reflection which may cause a refiguration of the self-narrative.

My account augments Ricoeur's model of narrative identity on two counts. His notion of catharsis does not do justice to the complex structure of emotions that the reader experiences, and can thus not give a full explanation for post-reading reflection and self-refiguration. I show how the reader builds and develops her other-narrative of the work of fiction by calling up her own experiential memories, which can lead to the generation of self-conscious emotions that persist after the reading process. Second, I hold that Ricoeur's account of self-reflection is too optimistic. In my view, self-reflection after fiction reading can have positive or negative effects; it can lead a realistic self-narrative towards more unity, but – in cases of self-delusion – it can also make a biased self-narrative even more unrealistic.

In contrast to Walton, I hold that fiction reading can trigger real life emotions in the reader which persist, and continue, outside the reading process. Walton only investigates the emotions within the reader's engagement with a work of fiction, and thus underestimates the influence of the reader's experiential memories which are called up automatically during the reading process. I hold that the stories in which these memories are embedded become part of the narrative for the reader, and that they contribute to the generation of self-conscious emotions. These emotions often enable self-reflection and refiguration of the self-narrative.

In this way, my account sheds additional light on the influences of fiction reading on the reader's self-narrative, and on the unity of her self.

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