



Received: 01 July 2019
Accepted: 25 October 2019
First Published: 12 November 2019

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LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mimetic and synthetic views of characters: How readers process “people” in fiction

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Abstract: This article examines recent theories of fictional characters, and raises the issue of how far characters can be understood with reference to human intersubjectivity. On the one hand, empirical research based on theories of rhetorical narrative ethics shows that phenomena such as sympathy and empathy are very relevant for the ways readers describe their imaginative connection with fictional characters. On the other hand, traditional narratology emphasizes that readers also engage with fiction as an artefact. This article focuses on the similarities and differences in these two conceptions of what engagement with fictional characters is, and asks how much of what readers get out of fiction depends on what is portrayed, and how much is the product of their enactment of form. Building on some yet unpublished results of an empirical testing conducted earlier by Sklar, as well as narratological and cognitive analyses of the concept of character, we examine our respective theoretical intuitions and set out a cognitive-rhetorical position that we both share. In that process we also clarify the ways in which cognitive literary studies can speak to the larger purpose of reading.

Subjects: Literature; Interdisciplinary Literary Studies; Literary/Critical Theory; Science Fiction

Keywords: character; empirical study of literature; enactive cognition; rhetorical narratology; intellectual disability; sympathy; empathy; Daniel Keyes

1. Introduction

As teachers of literature frequently remind their students, fictional characters are not real people. In this article, we examine this familiar tension between the ways that readers process fictional

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

As teachers of literature frequently remind their students, fictional characters are not real people. This tension between the artifice of fiction and the ways that readers process fictional characters is at the heart of this article, in which we examine the results and methodological implications of an empirical study of readers' sympathy and empathy. The study, conducted by Sklar, showed that adolescent Finnish readers felt sympathy for the intellectually disabled protagonist in Daniel Keyes's novel *Flowers for Algernon*. Our discussion of these results shows that in order to understand how readers imagine fictional characters we need to draw on both empirical and theoretical research.

characters and the artifice of fiction. As a focus for that examination, we look at the results and methodological implications of empirical testing, conducted by Sklar, on readers' sympathy and empathy. These unpublished results showed that adolescent Finnish readers felt sympathy for the intellectually disabled protagonist in Daniel Keyes's novel *Flowers for Algernon*. In this article, we look at some of the results from that study, focusing particularly on the ways that readers described their impressions of the character's "personhood" and fictionality. These impressions were complicated further by the fact that, in this particular case, the character's life experience is presumably far removed from the readers' own. Yet, even framing the issue in terms of empathy and sympathy seems to presuppose that readers are responding to actual people. Who are these "people" that inhabit works of fiction? And what can testing readers' responses to them tell us about the role of literature in the real world?

Here, we attempt to address these questions by examining the theoretical assumptions each of us hold concerning the concept of fictional character. On the one hand, empirical studies such as this (see also Sklar, 2013a) are based on theories of rhetorical narrative ethics, and show that phenomena such as sympathy and empathy are very relevant for the way readers describe their imaginative connection with fictional characters. On the other hand, Polvinen (2017) has argued that cognitive literary studies should not take such descriptions at face value, but should instead think in terms of readers enacting the fiction as an artefact.¹ We stage this negotiation between data from Sklar's study on the one hand and the traditional theories of characters within narratology on the other, in order to examine the types of responses and ethical reflection that reading fiction invites. In this way, the final aim is to clarify the ways in which cognitive literary studies can speak to the larger purpose of reading.

2. Responding to a fictional character: the case of Charlie Gordon

When we read fiction, we sometimes are given intimate access to the thoughts and feelings of characters in ways that would be impossible in our ordinary interactions with others. In fact, authors often attempt to represent characters whose minds are significantly different from their own, and in some cases different from those of most people. One particularly striking example of this feature of fiction is Daniel Keyes's 1966 novel *Flowers for Algernon*, a highly speculative study of a particular kind of mind. The novel is comprised of short journal entries, or "progress reports," that the intellectually disabled narrator, Charlie Gordon, has been asked to write. The purpose of these reports is to record the results of an experimental neurological operation that, if successful, will make him highly intelligent. Charlie indeed develops a prodigious intellectual capacity, but not before we are introduced to the character's considerable cognitive limitations. In his first entry, for instance, Charlie eagerly tells us, "I hope they use me because Miss Kinnian says maybe they can make me smart. I want to be smart" (Keyes, 1994, p. 1). It is significant that Charlie identifies himself, at least in this context, in terms of his *incapacity*. This is reinforced by Charlie's description of the scientists' instructions, as well as the school that he attends: "I tolld dr Strauss and pefesser Nemur I cant rite good but he says it dont matter he says I shud rite just like I talk and like I rite compushishens in Miss Kinnians class at the beekmin collidge center for retarded adults where I go to lern 3 times a week on my time off" (p. 1). Having framed the narrative directly around Charlie's cognitive difference, Keyes then provides a series of entries in which the protagonist describes the mistreatment to which his coworkers subject him—mistreatment that Charlie, in his naivety, mistakes for friendship. Eventually, as Charlie's intelligence increases, his "friends" abandon him, and he is left with the capacity to understand his situation, but without the emotional intelligence to navigate relations with those, like his teacher, who actually do care about him. In this sense, the novel presents a somewhat dystopian outcome for Charlie, in that it critiques the scientific arrogance that led to this extreme experiment, while also tacitly lamenting his eventual return to intellectual disability at the end of the novel.

Sklar (2013b, 2015), in analyzing the novel as a representation of intellectual disability, identifies a number of features that are significant for the ways that minds different from societal norms are understood by readers. Keyes's device of having Charlie narrate his own

thoughts in written notes solicited by the scientists, while considerably less self-revealing than an “interior monologue” (see Cohn, 1978, p. 182), nevertheless provides elements of stream of consciousness, in that Charlie, in relating the events that occur in the novel, occasionally records thoughts that randomly occur to him. As a result, Keyes provides a detailed portrait of a particular character’s mind (see Sklar, 2013b, p. 49). This mind, in the early phases of the novel, reflects a certain type of thinking that (stereo)typically tends to be associated with people with intellectual disabilities (Halliwell, 2004; Marchbanks, 2006; Sklar, 2013b, 2015). In addition, the novel’s representation² of Charlie’s mental development implies an underlying suggestion of consciousness that readers are presumed to extrapolate, intuit, and/or apply to their mental and emotional realization of the character as a rounded individual (Sklar, 2013b, pp. 49–50). Despite the detailed and sympathetic portrait of intellectual disability that Keyes has rendered, the pitiable quality of Charlie’s disability (Sklar, 2013b, pp. 56–57), and the “dystopian” quality of his regression from hyper-intelligence to disability towards the end of the novel (pp. 55–59), raise questions about what kind of an enactment readers are asked to perform with this novel, and what kinds of ideas about intellectual disability they walk away with.

For all of these reasons, “Charlie Gordon” provides a rich test case with which to examine readers’ responses to fictional characters, both theoretically and empirically. In *Flowers for Algernon*, readers are prompted to enact Charlie’s thoughts and experiences; they are persuaded to sympathize with his aspirations and struggles; and they are invited to imagine his life as an intellectually disabled man. In addition, the straightforward style of his narration makes the narrative accessible to a wide variety of readers, beginning in mid-adolescence. In light of this accessibility, how do actual readers respond to a character like Charlie Gordon? In the sections that follow, we will examine the responses of adolescents who participated in testing conducted by Sklar, in order to analyze some of the ways that readers actually think and feel about the character. We will then consider what these responses suggest about the ways readers generally conceptualize characters in fiction.

3. Testing readers’ responses to Charlie Gordon

3.1. Participants

The previous section outlined Charlie’s characterization, and hypothesized about some of the features in the novel that might shape readers’ responses to him. Some of these hypotheses were tested by Sklar in a study involving approximately 200 readers between the ages of 14 and 18. The testing was conducted in two upper secondary and two lower secondary schools in the Helsinki region of Finland. The majority of the respondents were Finnish native speakers, although roughly half of the participants were students in English-language programs. For this reason, students in English-language programs—slightly more than half of the respondents—read an excerpt from the novel in the original English and responded in English, while the remaining participants read an excerpt in Finnish from a published translation by Pekkanen (Keyes, 1985) and wrote their answers in Finnish. For the purposes of the present discussion, we will focus primarily on the ideas expressed by those who responded to the original text in English.³

3.2. Tests

The study involved three tests in all: a pretest, the reading test proper, and a post-test. With the exception of a control group, participants were given a pretest consisting of a standard, although sometimes challenged (see Polvinen, 2017), measure of empathy and sympathy, Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; see Davis, 1983), in order to determine respondents’ predispositions towards feeling sympathy and empathy for others in their everyday lives. In addition, following the reading test, participants were given a post-test in which they reported their experiences with, and knowledge of, people with intellectual disabilities, their feelings towards such individuals, and their prior exposure to fictional works (novels, films, etc.) that included characters of this type. This post-test aimed to determine, especially, whether or not prior experience with and/or knowledge of people with intellectual disabilities affected their responses towards the protagonist in *Flowers*.

The reading test itself instructed participants to read Charlie's "progress reports" 1–4 and 6—in other words, five of the first six chapters in the novel (roughly eight pages in total, in both English and Finnish). The first four "reports" provide a considerable amount of detail about Charlie's way of thinking, his aspirations, his fears, and his relationships with others. The sixth chapter describes an incident in which he is misled by his friends but does not realize that they are mistreating him. Following the reading of the selected text, participants responded to seven questions, the aim of which was to determine, among other things, (a) if readers identified the narrator-protagonist as intellectually disabled, (b) what this identification means to individual readers, (c) how they feel towards this particular intellectually disabled character, and (d) whether or not the fictional status of the character influenced their responses to him. The questions included the following:

- (1) How would you describe the person telling the story?
- (2) Is there anything particular that you believe makes him unusual? Why?
- (3) According to the narrator, how do others think or feel about him? Give examples.
- (4) According to the narrator, how do others treat him? Give examples.
- (5) Do you think that the way that he is treated by others is fair? Explain your answer.
- (6) Based on what you have read, what do you feel about the person who is telling the story? Why?
- (7) Does the fact that this is a fictional story affect the way that you think or feel about the person telling the story? Why/why not?

3.3. Methods

The methodology for the testing was patterned after a prior study of reader sympathy conducted by Sklar (2013a). In that earlier study, participants were also administered the IRI as a pretest, before reading short stories in which they were hypothesized to feel sympathy for characters who either initially appeared "unsympathetic," or about whom less flattering details were revealed later in the narrative. The aim in administering the IRI as a pretest was to determine if readers' predisposition to feel sympathy in their everyday lives, as measured by the IRI, affected their inclination to feel sympathy towards the characters.

Also in that study, as in the present one, the distinction between sympathy and empathy was defined according to the prevailing usage in the field of social psychology. Empathy is understood here as involving the apprehension of the emotional or cognitive experience of another—"an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own" (Myrsky, 2003, p. 10). On the other hand, sympathy involves feeling *for* the experience of another. More specifically, Sklar (2013a, pp. 26–36) defined sympathy as involving four components:

- (1) The awareness of the suffering of another as "something to be alleviated" (Wispé, 1986, p. 318).
- (2) Frequently, the judgment that the suffering of another is undeserved or unfair.
- (3) Negative, unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings on behalf of the sufferer ("sympathetic distress": see Hoffman, 2000, pp. 95).
- (4) The desire to help, even if that inclination is not acted on.

Since all of the responses provided by participants were in the form of open-ended answers, Sklar developed a list of possible responses that might be scored as "sympathy," including, among others, "I feel sympathy for him," "I feel compassion for him," "I feel sorry for him," and so forth. Similarly, participants' identification of Charlie as intellectually disabled was determined by a variety of responses, such as "simple," "dependent like a child," "mentally retarded," "intellectually disabled," "learning disabled," and other terms. From the participant responses, the four research assistants who scored the tests were instructed to determine whether or not

respondents had expressed sympathy for the character, and whether or not they had identified him as intellectually disabled. These responses were coded for reliability by two of the research assistants.

3.4. Results and discussion

The combination of the first two questions—“How would you describe the person telling the story?” and “Is there anything particular that you believe makes him unusual?”—resulted in 85.7% of the participants identifying Charlie as intellectually disabled. From this, it can be surmised that Charlie’s intellectual disability is quite easy to identify in the selected text, and that the text foregrounds certain features that readers associate with intellectual disability. In addition—and critical, it seems, to readers’ feelings towards the character—59.2% identified his treatment by others as “unfair,” and another 23.7% gave mixed responses, indicating that they identified some degree of unfairness.

It is perhaps unsurprising, in light of this assessment of his treatment by others, that 59.1% of respondents claimed to feel some degree of sympathy for Charlie.⁴ This is particularly noteworthy, since no other emotional response, including empathy, occurred with significant frequency, despite the alleged role of first-person narratives in generating this response.⁵ Thus, there can be little doubt that a significant number of readers feel *for* (sympathize with) Charlie’s situation, even if they are unable to feel *with* (empathize with) him. Based on cross-table and chi² tests that were run between a combination of questions #1 and #2 (identifying his intellectual disability) and question #6 (on their sympathy for him), it was determined that readers’ sympathy for the character did not seem to depend on the awareness of Charlie’s disability, but appeared in responses from both those who did identify that feature and those who did not [$p = 0.136$]. A similar result was found both for those respondents who had prior experience with people with intellectual disabilities, and for those who did not [$p = 0.161$]. These findings may suggest that, if readers are supplied with enough textual evidence to identify the suffering of another, they are able to feel sympathy, whether or not it is connected to that character’s intellectual disability and/or readers’ prior contact with this population.

Based on an ANOVA test that was run between the IRI and the reading test, however, those who scored highly on the IRI sympathy scale were significantly more likely to report feeling sympathy for Charlie [$F(1, 165) = 7.13, p = 0.008$]. In addition, an ANOVA test was run between question #5, regarding Charlie’s unfair treatment, and readers’ sympathy for the character, and these were also found to be significantly related [$F(3, 163), p = 0.006$]. The results of these two ANOVA tests suggest that people who view themselves as sympathetic in their everyday lives (as measured by the IRI sympathy scale), as well as those who are sensitized to the unfair treatment of others, are more likely to feel sympathy for Charlie than other readers.

At the same time, though, the fact that large percentages of readers identified Charlie’s intellectual disability and/or felt sympathy for him masks considerable variation in the *substance* of those responses. For example, as noted earlier, responses that were categorized as “intellectual disability” included a broad range of terms—some very clinical or medical (“mental disability,” “disabled,” “lower IQ”), some more colloquial but socially acceptable (“not clever,” “not good at problem solving”), and others quite derogatory, whether intended or not (“retarded,” “stupid,” “dumb”). Two excerpts from the answers to question #1 will help to illustrate the nuances of meaning that can be lost by grouping the responses under the heading of “intellectual disability”.⁶

[210062, age 15]: “The person is a mentally disabled man who works in a bakery. He is 32 years old. He seems like a very nice and honest man who tries to please the people who are being nice to him.”

[13062, age 16]: “He is special, a little bit dumb and definitely unhappy. His words suggest that he is a hard worker, because he believes that he needs to work in order to achieve something.”

While the two responses highlight similar aspects of his disability and experience, there is a different tone between the two. The first respondent appears to accept Charlie on his own terms (“He seems like a very nice and honest man”), with the disability forming only one feature of his identity; the second, on the other hand, seems to emphasize information provided by the text as evidence of his difference. Indeed, the second respondent seems more attuned to the evidence provided by the character’s words than to any larger conception of his “personhood.”

We find a similar range in participants’ feelings towards the character. Again, while the category “sympathy” has been used to reflect a variety of descriptive terms used by readers, there are shades of difference between these terms that reveal significant distinctions between respondents’ answers. These fine differences, as well as the degree to which readers seemed actively aware of the fictional status of the object of their feelings, can be illustrated by another comparison between two responses to question #6:

[210062, age 15]: “I feel very sorry for him as he is not treated nicely. Although he is mentally challenged he seems to be very lovable and sympathetic.”

[24232, age 15]: “I think the narrator is pretty naïve, which earns him sympathy from me. He doesn’t understand when people joke about him or use him as a personal clown.”

While in the first response the participant relates the experience as though s/he were describing an actual person, the second is more analytical: their sympathy is based on an overt evaluation of the unfair way in which the character is treated by others, especially in light of his naïveté. More significantly, perhaps, in their reference to the narrator, the second participant seems especially aware of the fictive frame of which Charlie is a part.

The anticipation that readers might divide along similar lines—between those who regarded the character as though he were a person, and those for whom the fictionality of the narrative more overtly affected their experience of the story—led Sklar to include the final question in his survey, asking participants whether they had been affected by Charlie’s fictional status. A significant majority of participants (63.5%) claimed that the fact of the character’s fictionality did not affect their experiences because they felt that the narrative itself was realistic, while a minority (21.8%) felt that the fictional status of the character played a role in their responses (14.7% had no opinion). In between these two poles, readers expressed a range of responses that emphasize or deemphasize the novel’s status as a fiction. This variety raises two important questions: How “real” is Charlie to these readers, and how might these responses to Keyes’s narrative help us understand the ways that readers conceptualize and respond to fictional characters?

4. Theorizing fictional characters

Despite its speculative features, *Flowers for Algernon* is primarily a realistic work of fiction. In this sense, it invites readers to approach its characters as though they are human, and to use the full palette of emotional and ethical sensibilities in response to them—a view that is echoed in literary theory. For narratologist Uri Margolin (2007, p. 66), for example, “‘character’ designates any entity, individual or collective—normally human or human-like—introduced in a work of narrative fiction.” This definition directly points to the crux of our discussion, firstly by describing characters as “normally human or human-like,” and secondly by immediately limiting the phenomenon to fictional texts. Our discussion in the following pages takes up these two elements of character, and by interlacing theoretical issues with participants’ responses to question #7 about fictionality in Sklar’s questionnaire, we aim to hone in on why character is such a conundrum for cognitive literary scholars.

Often, the way fictional characters are conceptualized follows a division between what could be called *mimetic* and *structuralist* theories of literature. The first of these sees character as human-like, as non-actual yet recognizably individual persons. The second tradition, on the other hand, takes character strictly as a textual object and a literary artefact. According to such a division,

cognitive studies of literary characters tend to fall under the mimetic branch—either because they follow the modal logic of possible people in possible worlds (see e.g. Carroll, 1990; Walton, 1990), or because they focus on the ways that readers build on folk-psychological knowledge about human experience and behavior (see e.g. Oatley, 2011; Sanford & Emmott, 2012). The narratological tradition, on the other hand, with its roots in structuralism and rhetoric, could be said to draw on the assumptions of the second branch, and to take character as an artistic construct fulfilling some function (e.g. protagonist, helper, antagonist, etc.) in the text as a whole (see e.g. Greimas, 1987; Genette, 1980).

We want to lend support to attempts made to blend these two traditions by building on a cognitive-rhetorical theory of literary characters. Within rhetorical narratology, James Phelan (1989, 2007) has long argued for the presence of three different aspects to fictional texts: the *mimetic*, the *thematic* and the *synthetic*. These aspects also form for Phelan the components of character, allowing characters to be a) life-like, b) representative of the central idea of the fiction, and c) to function as parts of the artefact constructed by the author. On the basis of Phelan's components, Varis (2019) has recently argued for a cognitive-enactive theory that underlines the multifaceted nature of characters through an analogy to Frankenstein's Monster: they are both alive and not, both human and not. Our "fictional cousins," Varis (2019, p. 83) argues, are "dynamic constructions that constantly negotiate mimetic humanity and unavoidable artificiality as well as elusive, inferred lives and multimodal, repeatable bodies." It is thus not necessary to decide between taking characters as "skillfully crafted plot mechanisms or as startlingly relatable mock-humans because they are, by definition, both" (Varis, 2019, p. 74, see also Schneider, 2001). In the remaining portion of this article, we consider how readers' engagement with characters might be conceptualized, if we define fictional characters in this rhetorically and cognitively inflected way.

However, much of the theoretical discussion on characters, as well as individual readers' verbalized responses to them, still follow the traditional parlance of describing characters as either human (focusing on the mimetic) or as textual and functional (focusing on the synthetic and thematic). A brief examination of the substance of further responses to Sklar's questionnaire may shed some light on the qualities that readers expect in identifying a character as "real," as well as some of the features of the narrative that elicited comments about the constructed nature of Charlie as a character. The sampling of answers below is taken from a single class of 17- and 18-year-olds in an English-language school in Helsinki, in which most students were native speakers of Finnish.

4.1. Mimetic approaches to characters

The final question Sklar asked about Charlie in *Flowers for Algernon* was: "Does the fact that this is a fictional story affect the way that you think or feel about the person telling the story? Why/why not?" While the responses given should not be taken as monolithic positions held by individual readers, many of them express a clear mimetic alignment between the reader's sympathy with Charlie and that character's relation to reality. A clear example of this can be found in the following response:

"It [the fact that it is fiction] does not [affect me], even though I know it is fiction I still imagine him living in the real world since retardation is a mental handicap many people do, in reality as well, live with. People are treated unfairly in real life too." [11092, age 17]

This response draws on real-life knowledge to validate the authenticity of the content of the narrative. It relies on the similarity between the narrative and real life in understanding the work's meaning, and suggests that during reading the character is imagined as part of reality. It also carries the idea that one might find such a character in real life—something that other responses focused on as well:

“No it does not [affect me] because this story can well be a real life example of someone, so this can really happen. So whether it is a fictional or a nonfictional story it does not matter since the feelings and emotions would still be the same to the person if this happens and same for me too.” [13102, age 17]

“Even though this is a fictional story, it evokes a lot of emotions and makes me feel a lot of empathy towards the main character. This story very possibly [might] be true for some people to a certain degree, especially because the story is told in a very realistic manner.” [13092, age 17]

Both of these responses seem to imply that, at least in this narrative, fiction provides examples of general truths about life in the Aristotelian sense (see Nussbaum, 1990), even when the story is not related directly to real-world events. The second response notes the fact that the story is narrated (“is told”), but stays focused on its realism and generalizability.

Since the text used in this testing involves a character with disabilities, many responses also focused on Charlie specifically as a representative of a group of real-life individuals:

“Fiction or not, the situation depicted in this story is one that happens more often than it should also in real life. People with developmental disabilities are treated badly, because of the stigma that comes with having something unusual or ‘wrong’ with the mind. While Charlie may not exist, he represents the under-represented, so my feelings don’t change, as they would just transfer to a larger group of people.” [11082, age 17]

This response also points to similarities between the fiction and real life, and even suggests the notion that readers might “transfer” their “feelings” to the larger, real-life group that the character represents.⁷ Implicit in this response, again, is the realistic nature of the narrative.

Other responses conceived of Charlie as existing in a space that some theorists (Harvey, 1965; Yanal, 1999) have described as “parallel” to the real world. As readers, we cannot affect the fictional world, even when our experience of that world is similar or parallel to our own:

“Yes. Because a fictional character is impossible to help, you have to just stand there and observe, keep on reading. You feel bad, because you cannot help the character.” [13062, age 17]

Yanal (1999, p. 123), as an aesthetic philosopher, attempts to explain the so-called “paradox of fiction”—the seeming irrationality of responding emotionally to characters that we know to be fictional—by suggesting that such responses are “richly generated,” to the extent that “what we have is real pity that must be kept to oneself, real anger that is forever ineffectual, real love that is never to be returned.” Similarly, this response emphasizes what we are *unable* to do or affect, because the character is fictional. Like Yanal’s hypothetical reader whose “real pity” is thwarted by the fact that it “must be kept to oneself,” this reader clearly finds the differences between the fictional and real worlds frustrating, in that they *wish* that they could “help the character,” because the inability to do so makes them “feel bad.” In other words, they never lose sight of the fact that it is a work of fiction, but are not actively focusing on that aspect of the experience.

An important variant of the inactivity response appears when the text is not compared to real-world events, but to nonfiction texts:

“It doesn’t affect my thoughts too much, as a true story that would be written down would look the same on paper. Also, there probably is someone in the world with a similar story to his.” [11102, age 18]

This response also emphasizes the realism of the work, but specifically by noting the similarities between fictional texts and nonfictional texts. And as with fictional stories, we are unable to

intervene in nonfictional narratives, either (see Sklar, 2013a, pp. 9–22). Of course, this reader seems unaware of the fact that the storyline depends on medical speculation, and that both the surgery described in it and the full arc of Charlie’s story are impossible. It is difficult to say, though, whether this is due to the fact that the participants only read a short excerpt from the novel, which offers only a relatively minimal “degree of departure” (see Ryan, 1980; see also Christiansen in this Special Issue) from real life, or, as noted earlier, it results from Keyes’s consistent emphasis on the consciousness of the protagonist.

Some readers recognize that what they know about the character is limited by what has been included in the extract:

“Not particularly because the extract is the only thing I know about him. It is as such irrelevant whether he is real. In reality I might fear for the outcome of his operation more.” [11112, age 18]

Here, the respondent’s inclination to attribute particular qualities to the character—and especially the character’s mind—is bound by what the text provides, and that fictionality affects what they bring to the text from their own experiences. Within cognitive literary studies Marco Caracciolo (2014) emphasizes such cognitive construction of characters, and notes that while many elements in relating to characters and real people are the same, “the originating experience—the character’s—is created by readers in the interaction with the text” (Caracciolo, 2014, p. 117). This tension between real-world experience and responses to fictional characters becomes more visible in the responses to Charlie that we quote in our next section.

4.2. Thematic and synthetic approaches to characters

In *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film* the psychologist and media scholar Ed S. Tan (1996, p. 2) notes that cinematic audiences “know full well that what they are seeing is a fictional world created by means of an artefact.” The theoretical views he goes on to develop in the book about the emotions experienced by such audiences take that awareness of artificiality as a given, and assume that viewers have emotions both about the fictional world and about the fiction as an artefact. The narratologists James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz (2012), for their part, combine Phelan’s three components of character (mimetic, thematic and synthetic) with the various audiences posited in the rhetorical model of narrative communication: “Our interest in the mimetic component is a function of our participation in the narrative audience, which takes the events in a fiction as history and the characters as real people,” they argue, whereas “our interest in the synthetic component is a function of our participation in the authorial audience, which seeks to discern the underlying constructive purpose of the story as a whole” (Phelan & Rabinowitz, 2012, p. 115). Readers drawn to the thematic component, on the other hand, combine the other two (p. 115). Both Tan’s and Phelan and Rabinowitz’s framings of readerly interests offer explanations for the differences that readers—including the respondents in Sklar’s questionnaire and the two authors of this article—have in their own reading experiences (and subsequent theoretical leanings).

The data provided in Sklar’s study reveals the assumptions—largely mimetic—that most of these readers had when encountering Charlie in *Flowers for Algernon*. Furthermore, the minority of participants who focused on the unreality of Keyes’s storyworld also report a sense that their connection to the character is, indeed, affected by that unreality:

“It [the fictionality of the work] does [make a difference to how I think or feel], because I [know] the operation of making a person smarter is not possible.” [13072, age 17]

In this instance, the respondent is clearly conscious of the counterfactuality of the narrative, although it is less clear whether that awareness leads them to read it specifically within the genre frame of speculative fiction, or exactly how that speculative frame would affect their

emotional connection to the character. In any case, this response focuses on Charlie's story as a construction, even if it does not explicitly speak of issues such as genre conventions and rhetorical techniques, which would be the purview of the "fully" synthetic perspective (see Phelan, 1989, p. 14).

Some of the responses explicitly aware of fictionality also adopt the vocabulary of cognitive-emotional distance (see Kuijpers et al., 2017, p. 41–42), as is the case in our final example:

"Yes. Fiction is a creation of the author, therefore it is easy to distance yourself from the character. The work exists to explore ideas, such as in this case the morals of taking advantage of a mentally disabled person." [11132, age 18]

Here, the reader emphasizes the fictionality of the narrative, as well as its supposed function as a thought experiment "exploring" a particular ethical issue—what Herman (2003) calls "a tool for thinking." In this sense, characters in fiction exist primarily to activate a particular type of thinking in readers, rather than as individuals to sympathize or empathize with.

Thus, while many of these responses do offer support for the idea that readers encounter characters as people, rather than non-personified textual constructs, some of them also show awareness of Charlie as a *fictional* being. Those few who do so, also adopted the vocabulary of thought experiments and distance, following the rationalist intuition that disbelief in the character's existence lessens readers' connection to them. However, it is important to distinguish between the suggestion that readers *actually* believe in the "reality" of characters, and the continuum of "active" belief in which readers retain some awareness of its fictionality (Yanal, 1999, pp. 104–105; Sklar, 2013a, pp. 14–15). On the other hand, our ability to maintain such a seemingly contradictory engagement with fictions is, others have argued (e.g. Landy, 2012; Polvinen, 2012; Schaeffer 2010), only made conceptually feasible by letting go of the idea that emotional engagement requires some form of belief—or suspension of disbelief—in the fiction.⁸

It should also be kept in mind that empirical studies always run the risk of guiding the participants' reactions in questionnaires, even when studies are conducted as carefully and openly as possible. In our particular case, it is possible that the lack of focus by respondents on the synthetic is due to the fictionality question having been presented after a series of mimesis-oriented questions that emphasize Charlie as a person telling his own story and that ask the participants to comment on the ontological fiction/nonfiction distinction, rather than on the form of the construction *per se*. But even if the questions do not direct readers towards particular types of responses, the fact remains that respondents are likely to fall back in their answers on vocabulary and conceptual structures they have adopted through long years of discussing reading experiences with parents, in schools and in reading groups (e.g. Fialho, Zyngier, & Miall, 2011; Fialho in this Special Issue). That language is itself often tied to particular metaphorical structures of anthropomorphism, naturalization and belief that may obstruct other, more synthetic and structure-oriented reactions (Polvinen, 2017; see also Christiansen in this Special Issue). In order to eventually get around this tendency in readers' approaches to fiction, cognitive literary theory can play a role in making sure that the conceptualizations on which our literary education is based include both the mimetic and the thematic and synthetic aspects of characters, and that all readers, whether scholars or not, have a rich vocabulary for describing their reactions.

Whether readers do or do not experience characters through belief structures, and how their emotional attachment to those characters is constructed in either case, is an issue that also has consequences for how we envision the cognitive benefits of literature. In what follows, we turn to look at the debates around the purpose of fiction, and around the role of cognitive literary studies in making those benefits visible.

5. Fictional characters and the purpose of cognitive literary studies

In the contemporary discussion around the role of literature in society, one argument most often made is that reading literary fiction increases (or at least correlates with) the ability for empathy and sympathy (see e.g. Hakemulder, 2000; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017; for critiques, see Keen, 2007, pp. 84–95; Kuzmičová, Mangen, Støle, & Begnum, 2017; Samur, Tops, & Koole, 2018). Others (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015; Nussbaum, 1990; Sklar, 2013a, 2015) suggest that our emotional engagement with characters enables us to reflect on the ethical consequences of our perceptions of, and interactions with, people in our everyday lives. Such arguments build on mimetic theories to the extent that characters have features that draw on our experience of real people, making the bridge from emotions felt for fictional characters to the emotions felt for real individuals a short one. The structuralist-semiotic theories, on the other hand, might be seen to run the risk of increasing that distance, and thereby cutting literature off from the rest of the world and from any possible benefits to the reading public.

However, rather than posing the question in a binary, *either* human-like *or* synthetic opposition, the two authors of this article together prefer to argue for the more nuanced position suggested by Phelan, and to identify in characters the mimetic, thematic and synthetic components. By doing so, and thinking of characters as walking, talking, human-shaped constructions or feeling fabrications, we find that, far from losing the conduit between literature and the world, a multidimensional view of fictional characters allows for a wide range of possible engagements. As long as life-likeness is seen as the only or even the most attractive quality of fiction, discussions on the purpose of literature will also be trapped in a discourse where the only way for literature to have an effect in the world is to present its readers with “more world” by increasing the number of human individuals that we have the opportunity to meet (see Phelan, 1989, p. 14). Thus, a continued emphasis on the mimetic qualities of characters may, in fact, make fiction seem inadequate as a vehicle for representation, since fictional individuals will never attain the ontological status of real people, however deeply we experience them.

Even if fiction is not seen to be speaking directly of the world, it could be understood to offer a different perceptual angle on the real minds we meet. By providing access to fictional minds in a way that is not possible in reality (Cohn, 1999), literature also informs our sense of humanity. The possible benefits of fiction to empathy and sympathy could be seen to reside not in the characters themselves, but in readers’ cognitive action in imagining those characters. Many scholars have in the past taken such action as a form of simulation, where the experiences of characters are processed in an off-line fashion in readers’ minds (see e.g. Currie, 1997; Oatley, 1999). From our perspective, though, such a view easily leads to regarding the emotions generated by reading as some form of “quasi-emotion,” a term used by Walton to describe the “physiological-psychological state” produced by fictional situations, as distinct from the “genuine” emotions that we experience in real life (1990, 196). With partial support in the responses presented above, we argue instead that “readerly engagements” (Phelan, 2007, p. 3) span the full spectrum of real emotions—they just involve different saliences than engagement directed towards the real world would.

Further support for this view of engaged readerly action can be found in the framework of enactive cognition (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). According to enactive cognition, all interaction of a living being with its environment is a form of cognition, where autonomous agents “actively generate and maintain their identities, and thereby enact or bring forth their own cognitive domains” (Colombetti & Thompson, 2008, p. 55). That “bringing forth” of a cognitive domain remains central to actions such as movement (towards a more beneficial environment), perception (of potential benefits and hazards) and self-reflection (or the ability to perceive oneself in a particular place, state and situation). Some of the literary applications of the central ideas of enactive cognition focus on the ways in which readers can be said to be vicariously living with the actions of the characters within the fictional world (imagining emotions, sensations and bodily movement; see e.g. Caracciolo, 2014; Fialho in this Special Issue), and that in itself may well hold the kinds of ethical benefits that studies on readerly empathy have identified.

However, fiction may, in fact, also offer us a very different kind of cognitive-emotional benefit—one that depends on our engagement with the literary artefact as a whole, and with the fictional characters specifically as fictions. The enactive (or more widely, 4E cognitive) theories of literature have described readerly processing by combining two reader models: one the embodied, mimetically-oriented reader, the other the plot-oriented reader envisioned by Wolfgang Iser, whose focus is on the structures of storytelling present in the text (Kukkonen, 2014). Here, as with Phelan and Rabinowitz’s rhetorical model, the idea is that readers take various perspectives while reading, and thus building a character also involves several aspects. Firstly, there is the “Principle of Minimal Departure” (Ryan, 1980) whereby the fictional human differs from the reader’s experience of real-world persons only when this is expressly signaled by the text. Secondly, the reader’s imaginative action takes place in interaction with the textual elements that engage in such signaling. Thus, characters are generated by a complex combination of textual guidance and real-life experience—always keeping in mind that real-life experience itself should also include our experience of character types, genre conventions, and story arcs (Mikkonen, 2014).

Rather than presenting windows to reality, then, fictions offer us a quite different cognitive ecology (see Hutchins, 1995) in which to imagine. In that ecology our everyday cognitive skills, including actions such as reading characters’ minds (Zunshine, 2006), are certainly in use, but they are engaging with an environment that also presents other affordances (see Gibson, 1979) than those offered to us by reality. For example, Terence Cave (2016) suggests that like the precise language of a poem redescribes reality in a way that cannot be paraphrased, the “cognitively enriched fiction offers a mode of intelligence—at once kinesic and reflective—not available to other kinds of discourse” (p. 132; see also Tangerås and Skjerdingsstad in this Special Issue). The reading of fiction is an activity, Cave argues, that allows readers to be mimetically and synthetically engaged with the bodies and minds of characters, as well as with the structures of the written artefact. Karin Kukkonen (2019) has termed the interaction between the text and our reading minds as “designed sensory flow,” which is enacted as spaces, events, meanings and characters. The enactive position, therefore, emphasizes first of all fiction’s artefactuality in tandem with its world-likeness, and secondly the idea that fictions offer us a very particular kind of dynamic sensory environment. Part of that environment is designed to engage our knowledge of persons, but since the interface between us and the sensory flow is specifically not reality, that knowledge is always affected by our understanding of how the interface itself works (Polvinen, 2016).

Several years ago, narratologist David Herman (2011) argued against the idea of narrative fiction having an exceptional ability to portray minds, and that, instead, what it does is engage our minds in the same processes, with the same kind of accuracy, as everyday mind-reading. The enactive view described above follows instead the conclusions of Kukkonen and Skov Nielsen (2018), who—from their respective cognitive and narratological positions—suggest that reading fiction is, indeed, exceptional. The literary artefact with which our mind-reading abilities interact affords forms of engagement (e.g. undisputed access to a character’s mind through internal focalization) that are different from our everyday interactions with people. While in the case of a first-person narrative such as Keyes’s the connection with the fictional mind is more similar to everyday storytelling, and the mimetic focus in the responses discussed above reflects that fact, narrative fiction retains an exceptional potential for engaging our minds in the guided imagining, rather than the direct perception, of characters. Such imagining may also have the consequence of increasing our awareness of the task that fiction sets for its readers: to go through the seemingly contradictory mental process of engaging with fictional characters as fictional characters. While it is the task of empirical studies to reveal the extent to which such “self-modifying reading” happens (Fialho in this Special Issue; see also Koek, Janssen, Hakemulder, & Rijlaarsdam, 2019), continued theoretical work is also needed to sharpen the conceptual structure on which the empirical work is based. It is here that the expertise of cognitive literary studies can help to clarify the purpose of fiction.

6. Conclusion

In this article, our aim has been to see whether the different scholarly traditions on how readers interact with characters—one emphasizing the mimetic and the other the synthetic—might find common ground in cognitive literary studies. On the one hand, an analysis of the detail and variety

of responses from readers to the character of Charlie gave firmer foundation for the kind of theorizing that often restates the theorist's preconceived ideas and individual experiences about how fiction works. On the other hand, that analysis also put theoretical pressure on the expressions used both by respondents and theorists about how we read, and showed that some of the concepts behind such expressions—such as “belief,” or indeed “character”—might be rethought to be more compatible with our current knowledge of cognitive processing.

Furthermore, we have tried to see how readerly engagements with fictional characters work as a prism through which we can better understand what is at stake in debates around the purpose of literature. While it may seem that promoting the idea of literature as an enacted artefact, rather than as a mirror of reality, strips us of useful tools in the debates around the value of fiction, that problem does not arise if we first of all step away from the idea that what fiction offers its readers is most of all more reality. Instead, if we start our work by promoting literature as enactive imagining that offers its readers cognitive benefits tied to its form in addition to its content, the artefactuality of fictional characters no longer appears as an obstacle, but instead as part of the exceptionality of fictional narratives that makes them valuable to us in the first place.

Acknowledgements

We wish to extend our thanks to Marguerite Beattie, Keshia Dsilva, Antero Salminen and Anna Asiala for their assistance in processing and interpreting data.

Funding

Research for this article was supported by NOS-HS Grant “The Place of the Cognitive in Literary Studies” (327086). The grant also covered the expenses for open access publication.

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Correction

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Citation information

Cite this article as: Mimetic and synthetic views of characters: How readers process “people” in fiction, Merja Polvinen & Howard Sklar, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2019), 6: 1687257.

Notes

1. “Enactment” is here understood as a cognitive process whereby the world perceived by an individual is brought forth in an interaction wherein the individual is understood to actively explore their environment rather than just passively receive stimuli from it (Caracciolo, 2014; Varela et al., 1991).
2. In the present discussion, the term “representation” is used to refer to the written narrative, as distinct from how readers might process it through their attributions and enactments of the character's consciousness.
3. A later comparison between the original and the Finnish translation raised a number of questions about the differences between the two texts, and whether or not it was even possible to combine the data from the Finnish responses with that from the English responses. This will be investigated further at a later date.

4. See Sklar (2013a, p. 28, 35) for a discussion of how readers' sympathy for a character can be affected by their judgment that the character's situation is “unfair.”
5. See Keen (2007, pp. 96–99) for a discussion of theories that have speculated on the role of “narrative situation” in reader response.
6. Note that simple mistakes in spelling have been silently corrected for fluency.
7. Currie (1990, p. 188) calls this theory the “transfer strategy,” which he rejects on the grounds that there may not be a group in all real-life situations to which we can transfer the emotions that we experience while reading.
8. Such a position is also indicated already in Tan's work on cinema, and while he there (1996, p. 154) explicitly veers away from studying the details of what kind of a cognitive model would make it possible for character-related and artefact-related emotions to coexist, later work by Tan et al. (2017) sees the solution in layers of conscious attention.

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