

Grief and Belief

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In her searching essay on the nature of grief in its real-world and fiction-directed forms, Catherine Wilson addresses two long-standing problems in the proper characterization of our engagement with works of art: Do we respond with genuine emotions to what we take to be only fictional? And, Why are we often drawn to certain kinds of tragic and distressing fictions despite the negative emotions that they seem to elicit?

Wilson's answer to the latter question, we shall see, is that we value the emotions provoked by imagining fictional losses for the same reason we value grief over real ones, because such sadness serves as a concrete testimony or memorial to our attachment to those we care about. But before advancing that view, Wilson addresses the first question to defend the position that not only grief but emotions in general that are elicited by fictions can indeed be genuine.

Wilson's opponents are *irrealists* about fiction-directed emotions.¹ They argue that while genuine emotions can be provoked by a work of fiction—as when a novel about a devastating plague induces one to feel anxious about contracting the common cold—those directed at the fictional contents of a work (the individuals, events, states of affairs we imagine as existing as we follow the work) are not literally felt but only pretend or make-believe, despite often being accompanied by physiological and automatic processes characteristic of reality-directed emotions.² The contrary *realist* position, of course, is that genuine emotions can be felt for the contents of fictions: our emotional responses are outside of the scope of the operator 'it is fictional (pretend, make-believe) that ...', but are directed at what is within.

In defending the realist view, Wilson introduces two considerations based on the poetic form of the elegy: (1) we may respond emotionally to such a work without knowing—this being a convention of the genre—if the poem refers to an actual loss suffered by the actual poet or only an imagined loss (presumably suffered by a fictional speaker); and (2) even when we assume that one member of a pair of poetic laments refers to a real loss and the other does not—as in the conjunction of the lines by Meng Chiao and Arthur Crudrup—a comparable sadness in each case can be evoked. These observations suggest that whether the represented event is real or fictional can be immaterial to the successful elicitation of our sadness.

If I've identified the point of these cases correctly, they pose no challenge to irrealism. For the possibility of real fiction-directed emotions depends on whether one can have genuine emotions directed at what one *believes* to be only fictional, not what is in fact fictional. Irrealists about fiction-directed emotions hold only that genuine emotions *present* their

1 See Berys Gaut, 'Reasons, Emotions, and Fictions', in M. Kieran and D. Lopes (eds), *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2003), 15–34.

2 See Kendall Walton's précis of his influential view in 'Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime: On Being Moved by Fiction', in M. Hjort and S. Laver (eds), *Emotion and the Arts* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 37–49.

objects as real, not that they ultimately turn out to be correct in doing so. Thus, irrealists would hold that if we take an elegy to represent a genuine death, we may experience real sympathy for the speaker—assuming we identify him with the actual poet—and sadness over the loss of the real person, but not if we believe it represents only a fictional narrator or fictional loss.

Wilson's illustrations are more persuasive in showing how the phenomenological similarity of the real- and fiction-directed feelings of sadness stands as an intuitive roadblock to seeing only one of them as genuine. That similarity of feeling should not be surprising if, as many commentators posit, our imaginative experiences exploit capacities and dispositions that evolved primarily to evaluate aspects of the real world.

Although the complex debate between realists and irrealists about fiction-directed emotions is usually characterized as revolving around a theme in the philosophy of literature, it is more accurately construed as a disagreement in the philosophy of the emotions, that is, over the very concept of an emotion.³ Irrealists subscribe to the theory that emotions are constituted or underwritten by beliefs (or other truth-apt mental representations). Realists share that cognitive framework vis-à-vis emotions, but posit that many, if not all, emotions are *source-indifferent*, potentially constituted by or dependent on a variety of intentional states beyond just that of belief: these include memories, hopes, counterfactual imaginings, purposefully distorting perceptions, free imaginings, and, of course, the prescribed imaginings of fictional works of art.⁴

In any case, as Wilson recognizes, ascertaining whether quasi- or real emotions are implicated in our engagement with fictions does not identify the role of such affective states in those contexts. After all, the philosophical debate is over the distinction between genuine grief and quasi-grief, not between grief and some other ersatz emotion-like state deprived of the former's distressing feeling. We need to explain why we are drawn to experiences of art in which such negative feelings seem to be evoked, whatever psychological category they are attributed to.

There are many proposals for how to answer that question, most of which deny that there remains in our experience, all told, a negative valence to the emotions we feel for tragic fictions. Some posit that the pain caused by such fictions is compensated for in a net-positive gain in pleasure; others, that the negative emotions elicited by a fiction's contents are transformed, mollified, or otherwise eliminated via the work's artistic form.

Wilson contributes to, and deepens, a different kind of account: that which treats our motivation in engaging with tragic fictions as explained (although not exclusively) by their value or significance to us, where that value is not just a function of the pleasure they provide.

For such a value approach to succeed, it must show how the reward of engaging with a tragic representation is internally connected to the sorrow it can cause. If

3 John Deigh, 'Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions', *Ethics* 104 (1994), 824–54.

4 Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

the value is explained only by the many other facets of the work—for example, the ingredient of spectacle that Aristotle diminishes—then the value approach may be said to leave the paradox of our attraction to tragedy qua tragedy intact. The reward such a work holds for us is realized, in part, in and through the elicitation of sadness, not in spite of it.

Wilson proposes that ‘grief is valued by us as a memorial to attachment’ (89). By extension, the grief provoked by tragic literature, finely clarified, embodied, and expressed in ways we might not discover on our own, is valued by us as memorials to our bond with others, both individuals whom we’ve lost in real life and fictional characters whose loss we feel sadness over.

This compelling suggestion runs counter to the standard characterization of grief as possessing a wholly negative valence, as in itself counting against one’s well-being. It is thus often explained as the regrettable cost of our being able to have certain positive emotions, such as love, or as an evolutionary support for, or perhaps by-product of, the desire to stay close to those we care for or are cared for by.⁵ However, seeing grief as a mode of attesting to one’s attachment to another makes sense of how it is that one can hold on to grief, and decline to be relieved of it, in a manner that is non-pathological. Memoirs of grief accordingly often recount how their authors disclaim the desire of well-wishers that their grief be alleviated.⁶ It is unclear here if Wilson means our valuing of fiction-directed grief is to be understood only for instrumental reasons, for its enhancement of the value grief has for us when felt over real losses, or instead as valuable for intrinsic reasons, evincing attachment only to a given fictional character. In any case, this characterization of the value of fiction-directed grief satisfies the methodological demand that we learn why we value the experience of tragedy qua what makes it tragic.

However, let me suggest why the grief that one feels over the loss of a fictional character may not be identical in relevant respects—those that pertain to its value—to the grief one feels over the loss of a real individual, even if both instantiations of the emotion are genuine.

First, it should be noted that the affective state in which we respond to tragedies must contain some conflict, some inconsistency, in what we desire, feel, or value. Tragedies present a world that, in some senses, we wish, or imagine that we wish, were otherwise. We want a character to survive but it is true in the fiction that she does or will not. In this respect, our feelings of grief over the loss of a fictional character are analogous to our feelings for the loss of any actual person we care about.

However, the *disanalogy* emerges when we consider that one’s experience of a fictional representation of a tragic event has another dimension that is not usually part of one’s experience of tragedy in real life: one’s sadness over the death of the fictional character is bound up with happiness, pleasure, or at least satisfaction, in her death occurring.⁷

5 See John Archer, *The Nature of Grief: The Evolution and Psychology of Reactions to Loss* (London: Routledge, 1999).

6 As in Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Random House, 2007), and Joyce Carol Oates, *A Widow’s Story: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

7 Gregory Currie persuasively argues that this tension consists in a conflict between imagined and real desires. See his ‘Tragedy’, *Analysis* 70 (2010), 632–8.

As Hume writes, audiences of tragedy ‘never are so happy as when they employ tears, sobs, and cries to give vent to their sorrow.’⁸ By contrast, one’s sadness over the death of a friend is not typically internally related to a desire that the world be such that it contains the deaths of friends, even though we know our valuing of some things depends upon an awareness of their vulnerability.

Our sadness in response to a fictional loss is in direct conflict with our pleasure; they are aimed at the same object under different descriptions, one that refers to a character’s death from an internal perspective as an event that one imagines to be real; and one that refers to the death from an external perspective, as an element within the design of the work.⁹ By contrast, when faced with a real loss, our sadness is not necessarily paired with a conflicting desire: we may want the world to have been different, if not cosmically, then locally, so that the particular cause of the sadness would not have occurred.

Second, it should be noted that the source indifference that makes genuine emotions in response to only fictional entities possible may also allow emotions to be subject to different forms of correctness or fittingness, depending on the contexts and functions of their elicitation.¹⁰

Consider how different constraints may apply to whether a given emotion is justified or warranted as a response to an object according to whether that object belongs to the content of a belief or prescribed imagining. A reader of *Oliver Twist* who felt moral disgust for Fagin in response to the physical disgust elicitors—the greasy clothes and matted hair—that Dickens employs in his characterization would be responding in a way befitting the content of the imagining that the novel prescribes. However, moral disgust caused by one’s perception of a real person’s physical filthiness, however speciously rationalized, would not be justified.¹¹ A cloying depiction of a fictional character’s death in a film, accompanied by a melody in a minor key, might cause a viewer to feel the sadness he seeks in watching such tear jerkers. However, analogous ways of framing the fact of a person’s death in real life, although also likely to elicit sorrow, would not justify that emotion the way a genuine attachment to the individual, an awareness of her qualities as a person, and so on, could. The functions that the elicitation of the emotion is designed to serve, may make a difference in what reasons or causes we countenance as justifications for it.

Wilson recognizes that ‘our responses to fictional and imagined situations may be entirely different from the responses we would have to those situations if we were to find ourselves enmeshed in them’ (83). My suggestion is that this means that grief induced by fiction may not register the value for us that grief induced by a real-life event can. Thus, in ‘A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London’, Dylan Thomas resists the

8 David Hume, ‘Of Tragedy’, in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longman, Green, 1874–5), vol. 3, 258–65, at 258.

9 P. Lamarque and S. H. Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), ch. 6.

10 For a defense of this view, see Jonathan Gilmore, ‘Aptness of Emotions for Fictions and Imaginings’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 92 (2011), 468–89.

11 See S. Schnall, J. Haidt, et al., ‘Disgust as Embodied Moral Judgment’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34 (2008), 1096–1109.

elegiac mode's too-sure elicitation of sadness for the way it distorts the sentiment he thinks appropriate to such an event:

I shall not murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.

Grief over a loss that one reads about in a fictional work of art may be warranted according to the purposes of that engagement while yet failing to reflect the value of grief when felt over the loss of someone in the real world.

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