

**Discordant minds, discordant souls: A cognitive and emotive  
reappraisal of conflicting views on literariness**

Michael Burke

University of Amsterdam

This talk, taken from a formative chapter of my Ph.D. thesis, aims to offer an insight into ongoing developments regarding the much-eschewed topic of ‘literariness’. This concept will be viewed in the light of recent developments regarding the notions of emotion and cognition. These studies, conducted by psychologists, linguists and literary scholars, sometimes working in collaboration, appear to put forward relatively sound evidence arguing a case that literature does indeed appear to be a ‘special’ kind of discourse. What I intend to do in the next half-hour is to present some central tenets of this ongoing research, and conduct a brief contrastive analysis of my own, in support of some of its facets. This, of course, goes against the views of prominent literary theorists like Eagleton, Fish and many others who would claim that literary reading can be subsumed within a general theory of discourse processing; in effect, that the text on toilet paper packaging is every bit as literary as *Anna Karenina*. The generally accepted notion that literature is a mere category of discourse processing is a position that is becoming increasingly untenable, in the light of recent developments in the fields of cognition and emotion.

**Recent development from psychologists working with literary and linguistics scholars**

Throughout the nineteen nineties Keith Oatley, a psychologist, has written extensively on how literary insights into the world of emotions can be combined with psychological theory. One of the first of these publications providing enlightening results for both cognitive science and literary criticism is the book *Best Laid Schemes* published in 1992. The book itself is structured around ten classic pieces of literature in which the emotions are explored. His investigations lead him to the conclusion that by reflecting on episodes

of emotions in novels, readers may extend their sympathies, because they are, in effect, reading about their own situation. He goes on to add, that it is the author him, or herself, who invites us to partake in this self-reflection.

Scheff is another scholar who has written on the concept of experiencing emotions in literature. He states that “when we cry over the fate of Romeo and Juliet, we are reliving our own personal experiences of overwhelming loss, but under new and less severe conditions. The experience of vicarious loss, in a properly designed drama is sufficiently distressful to reawaken the old distress. It is also sufficiently vicarious, however, so that the emotion does not feel overwhelming” (1979:13). So what Scheff is basically saying is that we black-out highly emotive events in the real world that are too distressful to be dealt with immediately, and banish them to a dark, distant corner of our minds. And it is fiction, that is one of the arts media, through which we allow those emotions, prompted by cues in the narrative, to be experienced at, what Scheff refers to as, a safe ‘aesthetic distance’.

Two further scholars also working in this area are Miall and Kuiken. In a recent paper entitled ‘What is literariness?’ they put to one side claims that literature is a matter of social convention, based on issues like education, politics, society and publishing norms. Instead, they concentrate on an often-eschewed area involving the capabilities of the literary reader, and the constructive role of emotion within the reading process. In order to substantiate their claims they set up an empirical study. Their observations were made at three different levels. The first of these involved linguistic foregrounding, and the second, the reader’s capability to recognise that foregrounding. But as one knows, in these post-formalist days, linguistic devices alone cannot determine what can, or cannot, be deemed literary. The third level that they considered, thus, involved reader’s commentaries on passages in the text that they found ‘emotionally striking’, and further, how those text fragments had ‘blurred the boundaries between narration and reader’. Miall and Kuiken claim that this ‘blurring of boundaries’ leads the reader to become emotionally implicated in the existential concerns embodied in those passages. These kinaesthetic and mnemonic experiences, involving concepts such as empathy, self-

reflection and autobiographical projection, they term 'enactment'. For Miall and Kuiken then, it is the combination of a) the linguistic form, b) the capability of the reader to recognise that form and, most importantly, c) the emotive repercussions that such discourse has on the reader, that may go toward constituting a concept of what might allow one to refer to as 'literary'.

With this in mind, I will now explore certain aspects of their claims. A major difference in the nature of our mutual investigations is that their findings are empirically based while mine, at this stage, are purely theoretical. The texts I have selected, one newspaper discourse, and one literary, are both essentially 'emotive' in style. In the case of the newspaper example some may argue that this goes against its essential 'informative' nature. Both texts in question concern a death of an individual, one fictive, one factual. The real world example is taken from an article in the British publication the *Daily Express* from 1 September 1998, and concerns the anniversary of the death of the Princess of Wales a year earlier. (People may remember that, at the time, this was a highly emotive subject, and, as such, would seem apt for this investigation). The fictional example is taken from Carson McCullers' novel *The Member of the Wedding* published in 1946, and concerns the death of a young male character. With regard to the 'Diana' news story, there were many reports from different locations in almost all the newspapers that day. The following article, written by Greg Swift, is taken from the death scene in Paris and is entitled 'Silent vigil as the candles flicker'.

### **An example of newspaper discourse**

*Shadows flitted across the mourners as they waited, bathed in the lights of flickering candles. And as a cool breeze swept gently across the Seine they huddled closer together – not, it seemed, from any need for warmth but for the strength they appeared to draw from the physical contact with each other. For most of those gathered in Paris around the Flame of Liberty monument, the anniversary of Diana's death had been the focal point of their year. Yet when the exact moment came at 12.30am there was an inescapable sense of helplessness swamping the event. It was clear that, when confronted with the enormity*

*of their devotion, they had little idea how to react. Those standing closest to the flowers, cards and candles looked embarrassed, lost. And then a young man broke into an impromptu hymn to the Princess. It made for a bizarre spectacle – people of all ages and races entranced by a stranger’s lyrical tribute to a woman few of them, if any, really knew. Once the hymn – sung in a strange English-French hybrid – was over, the rapt crowd turned its attention back to its shrine. And the young singer slipped quietly away into the night.*

The opening lines of this text appear to be full of poetic diction, with examples, such as, ‘a cool breeze swept gently’ and ‘bathed in the lights’, and the word ‘shadows’, which is positioned as the subject of the opening sentence, relegating the arguably real subject, the mourners, to object position. But the most obvious formal poetic trait in this short piece is the many instances of parallelism, one of the supposed hallmarks of foregrounding, and for some literary scholars, by default, that of literary language. There are, for example, the prepositional verb phrases ‘flitted across’ and ‘swept across’, and the subject plus past tense verb combinations ‘they waited’ and ‘they huddled’, and further, the adverbial clauses ‘as a cool breeze swept’ and ‘as they waited’, not to mention the alliterative pairing of ‘flitted’ and ‘flickering’. So formally, or linguistically, a case can perhaps be made arguing that this is an instance of literature. However, I believe this to be highly implausible, because when one takes a more cognitive approach into consideration, and especially in this case a more emotive aspect of cognition, this piece becomes just as informative, just as mundane, just as ‘unpoetic’ as any typical newspaper story might be. The main reason for this is that there are quite simply too many exterior, real-world factors influencing reception. One major example is that readers of this article are no doubt aware of what it is about, since they are more than likely to have seen images of the story on a television news programme a day earlier. The information regarding the event itself is, thus, already known, it refers to a real person and real events in the real world, which means that text processing will be heavily influenced by socio-attitudinal factors.

### **An example of literary discourse:**

In direct opposition to the 'datedness', 'familiarity' and 'factuality' of newspaper discourse, an event in a fictional world is usually unknown to the reader until he or she is actually faced with it. It is thus, quite often, an immediate 'confrontational' situation that juxtaposes the literary reader with the fictional event.

The prose example employed in this analysis is taken from the novel *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers published in 1946. The main theme of the story concerns the notion of 'spiritual isolation' in the life of the young protagonist Frankie Addams, a 12 year-old girl. Set in the Southern states of the US in the early 1940s, much of the action takes place in the kitchen where the motherless tomboy, Frankie, spends much of her time in the company of Berenice, the black servant, and John Henry West, Frankie's 6 year-old cousin. Frankie believes herself to be an outsider. It is for this reason she hopes to join her elder brother, who is a soldier, and his wife to be, to become a kind of 'member' of their matrimonial circle (hence, the title of the book). The novel is essentially a *Bildungsroman* split up into three distinct parts. The book maps out Frankie's development, which is indicated overtly by the 'iconic' evolution of her name, which starts off as being 'Frankie Addams' in the first section, stressing the tomboy in her. In the second section she becomes F. Jasmine Addams. The highlighting of her second initial J in Jasmine is to bring her psychologically closer to her brother who is called Jarvis, and his bride to be, called Janice. In the third section of the book the protagonist has become the 'mature' Frances Addams. This is her real name. So, in this third section Frances' transformation from child to young adult becomes completed.

The main focus of this analysis will be on this third section of the book, which is itself essentially divided into two parts. The first of these two sections is about the actual wedding and its effects on the main character. This is a period in which Frankie is still evolving as a person. But there are subtle clues in the text that her transformation to young adulthood is about to take place and that her childhood, which, one might argue, is

physically embodied in the text in the guise of John Henry West, her six-year old cousin, is to be left behind forever. McCullers brings this about by dropping subtle hints, in this section of the text, as to what unimaginable occurrences might possibly take place in the following section.

Among the references regarding Francis Addams in this part of the novel are:

- “Francis wanted the whole world to die’ (pp.168 & 169).
- And “She mortally despised him (referring to John Henry) dressed in his best white suit, now stained with strawberry ice-cream” (pp. 168).  
And (a few pages later) Berenice, the servant, adds:
- “I can feel in the atmosphere a storm is brewing” (pp. 171).
- ‘Don’t be so blue, this is not doomsday” (pp. 173).

Furthermore, this part of the text includes such vivid descriptions as: “They passed the red empty crossroads with deep red gulches on either side, and rotten grey shacks set in the lonesome cotton fields”, and “They were entering the town and a change came. The sky lowered and turned a purple grey against which the trees were a poison green” (both, pp.174).

Although all of these text fragments, when extrapolated from the book itself, may appear to be a clear indication that something rather ominous is going to happen later in the novel, one should not forget that they have been highlighted here out of context. Hence, in reality, these pieces appear embedded in quite ‘ordinary’ plot-advancing discourse. In the course of the initial reading-process the experienced reader may perhaps notice these signals in the text, but, presumably, not to an extent that they will override the general tone that the novel has set out from the beginning.

The second, and final, section of the third part is just six pages long and brings the novel to a close. In this section, Frances, who is now no longer twelve, but thirteen, seems set to make her long awaited, long desired, transition from childhood to young adulthood. The setting is familiar, with Frances and Berenice chatting in the kitchen as they so often have

done earlier in the novel. But then we read that Frances is to move away with her father, and that she has a new best friend; a girl her own age. We also learn that Berenice is to leave their employ and marry. At this stage one presumes that Frances' young cousin John Henry is out somewhere being his usual mischievous self. But one becomes confused for a moment when the narrator tells us, quite out of the blue that "The kitchen, done over and almost modern, had nothing that would bring back the memory of John Henry West" (p. 185). This piece, in such a 'normal' context, is awkward for the reader, and this feeling is strengthened by the unorthodox way by which the boy is referred to ... using the formal, full name. Upon reading further, one learns that "there were times that Frances felt his presence there, solemn, and hovering and ghost-grey (p.185). Again, this statement is found situated amid quite general plot advancing discourse. It is at this point that the reader knows that something must have happened to John Henry, but will be confused by the way in which the book firstly presents allusions to an event, and now reactions to an event, without, as far as the reader is concerned, any event actually having taken place.

The piece then continues for several pages in a positive, upbeat mode telling of Frances' hopes, dreams and desires for her future, now that she has a new best friend. This is the first 'real' positive section of the whole book and it occurs just a few pages from the story's conclusion. In it we witness Frances' true transition from isolation in childhood to full membership of the adult world. The reader may, at this juncture, experience a pleasurable sensation induced by the notion of character empathy, and, as the boundaries become blurred between narration and reader, as Miall and Kuiken have suggested, a transposition may take place, as real-life disappointment becomes eased by the successful nature of the events in the life of the fictional character. The adolescent plight of the long-suffering Frances, a condition recognizable to us all through past personal experience, has finally been brought to a close. However, it is almost immediately afterwards, with the novel just two pages from closure and the reader in a state of satisfaction, that one is confronted with the following abrupt message: "John Henry had meningitis, and after ten days he was dead" (p. 188).

It is during this process of being deliberately manipulated from one extreme emotive state to another that the reader will experience an infusion of mixed emotions. The effects of this are prompted by a combination of literary and cognitive elements: the brevity of the actual statement, the plainness of the language employed, the fragmentation of the preceding narrative events, the withholding of information from the reader that the characters obviously already have, the shock and surprise at the death of the fictional child. This 'manipulative' emotive effect is unlikely to exist in newspaper discourse, no matter how linguistically 'poetic' that discourse is structured, owing to the earlier-mentioned reasons pertaining to the 'datedness', 'familiarity' and 'factuality' of this type of discourse situation. Perhaps then, this could be a characteristic of literariness, and one that some of the aforementioned psychologists, and literary scholars, might hope that subjects taking part in an empirical study could be capable of recognizing. The suggestion, thus, seems clear: in literary discourse the linguistic form is but a trigger to a second, more important, cognitive stage involving the domain of emotional evaluation. And it is this emotive aspect of literary reception that might be able to determine which texts can - and which texts cannot, and indeed never can be, considered literary.

I would like to conclude this talk by saying that it should be self-evident that this presentation has been, to a certain extent, superficial with several points being left underdeveloped, and, that, unlike the scholars working in this field of literary-emotion, I have, as yet, no empirical finding upon which I might rest my theoretical intuitions. I hope, however, that the relatively innovative nature of my topic might allow me to be forgiven for these failings. It has been my aim, in this paper, to put forward formative ideas against the notion that instances of literature are unrecognizable. In rejecting the literary pretensions of real-world newspaper discourse, and showing how 'real' literature might be pin-pointed via the concept of emotion, I hope to have indirectly subverted the claims of some scholars that all texts can be subsumed in a general theory of discourse processing.

There are many questions, of great interest to stylisticians, that are still left unanswered regarding literature, and the interpretive value that emotions, that are generated in the



reader, via prompts in the text, might have on the reading process as a whole. Some of these questions are:

- How do people react to traumatic events in the real world compared to how they react to representations of such events in a fictional world?
- Is literary emotion subordinate to real world emotion?
- What role do memory, empathy and identification play in the processing of fictional worlds and, by default, in their reception?
- What role does time-span play in the level of the emotion felt?
- Might the fact that a reader mentally constructs a character, breathing life into it, as it were, intensify the emotive involvement?
- Why might a fictional event be more emotive than a real-world event when it would seem obvious that the closer to reality the more intense the emotions should be?
- Is it, perhaps, the case that the more removed we are from the actual event, the easier it is for us to show our emotions (a kind of emotive displacement)?
- Might it indeed be human nature to grieve indirectly?

The only thing that can, perhaps, be said with any conviction at this moment in time is that in this particular area of research the number of questions still far outweigh the number of answers, which in both the short term, and the long term, is most definitely good news for the scholar active in the field of literary-linguistics.