

Folks, I hope you find this useful. Inequity and deservingness are two of the main things that keep readers reading. Please feel free to copy and share this document. Just be sure to follow the Creative Commons 3.0 license restrictions on usage. Click the link in the footer to read. Sincerely, John Brown, March, 2009.

How Inequity Evokes Reader Interest

By John Brown

It's odd that so many of us should seek to feel dissonance, stress, anxiety, or even anguish. But these affects are precisely what invest a large percentage of readers in the refined stories represented by novels, movies, and shorts. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the ultimate biological and psychological reasons for this response or to compare the correlation between this discomfort and other story affects (like curiosity, mirth, wonder, wish-fulfillment, and insight) with reader interest. Instead, I shall briefly explain the source of this discomfort and the emotional response it evokes in readers. I will then examine how this affect works in "Bohemians" by George Saunders.

Equilibrium and Discomfort

Evoking emotion in the reader is one of the primary functions of refined stories. It's no coincidence that we often label genres by the salient emotion evoked (horror, comedy, tragedy, thriller, tear-jerker, suspense, romance). And of all the emotions evoked, one seems to play a ubiquitous, if not dominant, role--a discomfort about what characters do and what happens to them.

This discomfort lies at the heart of sympathy, suspense, and rooting. It affects likeability and identification. It's what leads us to hope and fear for the characters we meet. And it's based on an intuitive sense of equity. Lawyers and fiction writers have more in common than the ability to tell tall tales--they both present and seek to resolve disruptions to the equilibrium between rewards and what people deserve.

I'm not talking about an explicit code of ethics. I'm talking about our innate tendency to judge whether people or characters are deserving of the bad or good things that happen to them. When we judge someone as undeserving of something agreeable or disagreeable, it creates, like foregrounding, a discomfort in us. We become interested in seeing this inequity and discomfort resolved.

When a character experiences, or is in jeopardy of experiencing, an undeserved ill, readers feel sympathy. If another character is the cause of the undeserved ill, he or she may become the object of a reader's resentment and antipathy. But this only happens when the reader judges them negatively for their motives or traits.

Both suspense and rooting are manifestations of sympathy. Suspense occurs when a reader combines sympathy with an apprehension that something will or won't happen. Rooting occurs when a reader combines suspense with an earnest wish that the character obtain a specific goal. The goal isn't just any goal, but one that would in some way correct the disequilibrium.

As long as there's an imbalance, readers will feel discomfort. The interest generated by this affect revolves around them wanting to see the imbalance corrected, and although that correction may take the form of punishment or revenge, it may also simply be the elimination of a threat either by force or change of heart.

How we Determine Deservingness

The question then is how we determine who deserves happiness. The answer is we use our individual value systems. Hence, a text may evoke sympathy and rooting for a character in one reader, while it evokes antipathy for and rooting against that very same character in another reader.

Each reader will judge a character by the motivations for and effects of their actions, words, and thoughts. Schneider suggests that third-party evaluations by narrators and characters in the text also influence this judgment. However, Schneider admits that such third-party evaluations will have their effect "only if the reader does not respond with dislike or suspicion to the character uttering the comment" (Schneider, 6-7). Whatever the nature of the cues from the text, the point is that it is the reader's value system that determines whether a character is deserving of reward or punishment.

The variability in reader reactions suggests that any definition of story should consider what a story does to the reader. Bal, for example, defines the relationship between the elements of a story as the aspiration of the actors to achieve "something agreeable or favorable, or the evasion of something disagreeable or unfavorable." Translating this to emotional states, he says, "The verbs to wish and to fear indicate this teleological relation and are, therefore, used as abstractions of the intentional connections between elements" (Bal, 26). But the meaning for the reader will depend entirely upon whether or not the character is found deserving of the things he or she seeks.

Although differences will exist between the value systems various readers bring to a story, focusing on the differences sometimes overstates the variability. Readers probably have more values in common than they don't. But even if the differences are large, we can, independent of the specifics of each reader's moral code, still describe the general principle each reader uses to make this judgment. I find Smith's framework useful. He suggests that "the sentiment which most immediately and directly prompts us to reward, is gratitude; that which most immediately and directly prompts us to punish, is resentment" (Smith, II.I.4). So when the motivation and effects of a character's behavior are something that normally would produce gratitude in a reader,

that reader expects the character to be rewarded in proportion to that gratitude. Conversely, if the same behavior is something that produces resentment, the reader will expect something adverse.

Using Categories to Judge Characters

While we will judge a character on individual acts, we don't have to follow a character for a great length of time before we make our judgments. Readers can "understand a fictional situation quickly and effortlessly if it resembles a stereotypical social scene or 'script' (Schneider, 5). In fact, the reader's first response to a character is the act of "trying to assimilate the character to some well-known category" (Schneider, 8). This mental model of a character possesses "a number of well-defined features from which expectations, hypotheses, and inferences as well as explanations concerning that character's behavior can be generated" (Schneider, 8). Having these expectations means as soon as readers begin to categorize a character, they infer motives, traits, and effects, which in turn means they begin making moral judgments. Hence, a reader can be presented with a depiction of a small child being beaten and immediately side against those performing the act--the category for child doesn't normally carry expectations of behavior that would deserve such punishment.

Cues for categorization can be explicit noun phrases that describe professions, social roles, or personality types, or they can be inferred: "Even less direct descriptions can trigger social categorization, if the reader finds that a character's traits match with those of a personality theory or social stereotype already available" (Schneider, 9). The point is that from the moment a character appears, the reader begins this process of categorization, and the categories tend to have judgments pre-attached.

It's important to note that this judgment is not fixed and may change as a reader works through the narrative. After encountering motives, thoughts, and actions that work against type, a reader will begin to decategorize a character. With additional information the disequilibrium may shift in the opposite way and modify or flip a reader's sympathy or antipathy.

Factors that Intensify the Discomfort

Before moving to the analysis, I want to mention a few factors that intensify the discomfort.

Presenting the Eliciting Conditions

Readers understand emotionally significant situations not by using some formal cognitive process but by mapping the situation in the story to their own concrete, prototypical situations. These situations or scripts can be described by using the phrase "what you feel like when [supply the scenario]." For example, Hogan uses the following as one prototype for sorrow: "what you feel like when someone you love dies and express through weeping" (Hogan, 86). Note that the script includes concrete features of eliciting conditions and response.

However, both elements of the emotional script are not equally important in affecting the reader. A story is more likely to evoke sympathy or empathy in the reader when it focuses on the eliciting conditions instead of the depiction of the emotion. Hogan suggests that "insofar as prototypical narrative involves a sustained, empathic appeal to readers or listeners, it almost necessarily involves a particular emphasis on eliciting conditions, themselves understood, once

again, as the conclusions of implicit narratives. We may, of course, feel badly for a character who is weeping. But our response is given depth and intensity only through an understanding of what has led to this expression of sorrow" (Hogan, 88). Smith stating this more succinctly says, "Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it" (Smith, I.I.10).

Identification

Some have suggested that "identification" is necessary for a reader to feel sympathy. But, like Schneider, I believe that sympathy "does not require readers to share, or want to share, any number of traits with the character, nor does it require them to give up the position of the observer." All sympathy requires is that the reader "feel for the character because he or she [the reader] can imagine a situation and its possible outcomes, anticipate what this must mean for the character, and evaluate this outcome as desirable or undesirable" (Schneider, 5). However, I also believe that sharing traits can help a reader anticipate what situations and outcomes may mean for a character. For example, a man who has always had a full head of hair may vaguely perceive the inequity a bald character may be experiencing in a given situation. However, a bald reader would have personal experience that would not only magnify the inequity but also the associated discomfort.

Likeability

It is possible to dislike a character yet still feel they are not deserving of a certain punishment. Conversely, we may like a character and still feel they are not deserving of a particular reward. What we seek is an intuitive balance between merit and reward, demerit and punishment. However, likeability and deservingness are not totally unrelated. The values that govern likeability also affect deservingness. So increasing likeability will also tend to increase a character's deserving good.

Suspense Structure

Suspense describes an apprehension about what is going to happen. As stated by Zillmann, our definition of tragedy involves "the display of grave misfortunes that befall good, admired, and beloved protagonists who are considered utterly undeserving of their deplored fate" (Sargent, 1). The existence or possibility of such misfortune is what sustains a reader's discomfort. The more apprehension, the more discomfort a reader feels, and, therefore, the more the reader is interested in the resolution. However, evoking suspense depends on a number of conditions besides the presence of sympathy.

Brewer (for fiction) and Knobloch (for non-fiction) have established that suspense in the reader depends on the structure of a text. Summarizing their findings, if the central problem can be broken down into these elements: initiating event, unfolding, complication, climax, and outcome, then suspense requires:

1. The initiating event precedes the outcome.
2. The outcome occurs late in the text.
3. The initiating event is, for the reader, significant to the character's happiness.

The initiating event establishes the disequilibrium and a question in the reader's mind--will the imbalance be corrected or avoided? The middle material complicates the situation without resolving the uncertainty. The outcome then answers the question originally raised. If the outcome and initiating events are flipped, the structure tends to produce curiosity more than suspense.

How Inequity Functions in "Bohemians"

To clarify the principles discussed above, I will examine how inequity functions in George Saunder's "Bohemians." My analysis will consist of my response to the text. Later, I hope to validate the model with various groups of actual readers. If the model is confirmed, the proof will not be in the fact that we all read the story in the same way, but that we respond using the same principles.

"Bohemians" is a first-person story about a boy's relationship with two women in his neighborhood and how he switches his sympathies because of what he learns about them. The two women are Mrs. Poltoi and Mrs. Hopanlitski. The structure of inequity in this story follows this outline.

1. Introduce characters and inequity
 - a. Poltoi and Hopanlitski categorized.
 - b. Poltoi rudely throws narrator's ball into the quarry.
2. Build inequity
 - a. Introduce Eddie, a mentally retarded boy.
 - b. Poltoi is cruel to Eddie and gets him sent to prison with terrible results.
3. Punishment meted out
 - a. Narrator's gang turns against Poltoi, smashing her basement windows and performing other acts of vandalism.
 - b. Hopanlitski's charity reaffirmed.
4. Reverse inequity
 - a. Narrator is forced to live with Poltoi.
 - b. Poltoi demonstrates great kindness and reveals legitimate motive for her reaction to Eddie.
 - c. Narrator learns that Hopanlitski is a liar.
 - d. Antipathy flips.
5. Harmony extended

1. Introduce characters and inequity

In the first two paragraphs Saunders paints Poltoi. He uses these labels: "widow," "Bohemian," "polite," "stout," "bitter," and "claustrophobic." He relays idiosyncratic behaviors like staring at your mouth when you eat and saying outrageous, yet funny things about America and the Catholic church. Then at the end of the second paragraph the narrator says, "When our ball rolled onto her property, she seized it and waddled into her back yard and pitched it into the quarry."

I do not feel suspense at this point, nor am I rooting for some character to achieve a goal, but I do feel discomfort about what just happened. The text has evoked resentment in me for Poltoi.

Because of the particular details, Poltoi is an individual, but she doesn't resist all categorization. I quickly mapped her to the mean, odd neighbor lady type.

In the next seven paragraphs Saunders paints Hopanlitski. He uses these labels: "thin," and "joyful." She makes pipe-cleaner animals, and when the narrator casts her a plastic Lafayette, she says "she'd keep it forever on her sill." She doesn't keep that promise, but gives it away to an unfortunate girl named Raccoon who has awful parents, bags under her eyes, and "spinal curvature from spending so much time slumped over with misery" (75). When Raccoon wishes to get hit by a car so she can come back as a real raccoon and give the neighborhood bullies rabies, Hopanlitski says, "Never wish harm on yourself or others. You are a lovely child."

Raccoon corrects her. "Raccoon, you mean. A lovely raccoon."

Hopanlitski replies, "A lovely child of God."

The narrator then relates Hopanlitski's past where she was tortured and her babies killed. The narrator says she saw them as wonderful gifts, like shooting stars, and she "did not now begrudge God for taking them." Finally, the narrator sums up the difference between the two women by saying, "Her grace made us hate Mrs. Poltoi all the more...What was being crammed in with a bunch of your cousins compared to having your kids killed? (75).

Indeed, comparing Hopanlitski to Poltoi only sharpens the inequity and discomfort at her small act with the ball. The narrator provides enough particular detail to make Hopanlitski an individual, but she clearly falls into the wonderful, generous woman type.

Again, it's important to note that the text has not evoked suspense or rooting. In fact, these affects will play only a small role in this story. What drives my interest in this story is the discomfort of the story's inequities and the humor and odd details the narrator provides.

2. Build inequity

In the next section, Saunders builds the discomfort of inequity. He brings on Eddie, a mentally retarded boy. After painting him, like the others, in an idiosyncratic way, he then shows the narrator, Raccoon, and Art (another friend) teasing Eddie. Eddie is going to have a birthday party and figures he can collect money from Poltoi for his pudding dumplings (75).

Eddie asks Poltoi to contribute. She refuses. He tries to get in her house because, the narrator says, he figures that's how you get contributions. Poltoi pushes him back and he falls down the front steps "ringing the iron banister with his massive head." When he staggers off, his head bleeding, she says, "Learn to leave people be!" (75).

When Eddie's father shows up, Poltoi's reply is: "Someone so unresponse, keep him indoors."

"Never has Eddie presented a danger to anyone," Eddie, Sr., said.

"I know my rights," she said. "Next time, I call police."

Eddie does return, she calls the cops, they rough Eddy up, and he's sent to the Anston Center for Youth for three months. It's a hole, a place where kids were sent "who'd only ever been praised for the level of beatings they gave and received and their willingness to carve themselves up" (76). Eddie returns looking so bad "even the Kletzes didn't joke about how bad he looked" (76).

The story evoked suspense as I feared what might happen to Eddy. But the suspense was resolved in a matter of ten paragraphs. However, just because the suspense is resolved doesn't mean my interest has dropped. It has, in fact, increased. The interest the narrator provides has remained constant, but the resentment I had for Poltoi in the beginning has grown into antipathy. My discomfort has grown.

3. *Punishment meted out*

When Eddy returns and the kids in the neighborhood see what's happened to him, they turn on Poltoi; they "cut through Poltoi's hose, bashed out her basement windows with ball-peens, pushed her little shopping cart over the edge of the quarry and watched it end-over-end into the former Slag Ravine" (76).

It's interesting that the vandalism didn't relieve my discomfort. But this emphasizes that it's not reward and punishment that we seek, but an elimination of the possibility of the inequity. Poltoi's been punished, but that hasn't removed the threat of my discomfort at the situation.

The kids go to Hopanlitski's. She brings out cookies and urges forgiveness. "It wasn't Poltoi's fault her heart was small, she tells the kids, "She, Mrs. H., had seen a great number of things, and seeing so many things had enlarged her heart" (77). Then she tells them of a frightening episode from her past where bombed-out charred bodies had crawled along the street, begging for mercy. One had grabbed her by the ankle, and she recognized it as a friend of her father's.

This presentation, like the first foil, only serves to heighten the sense of Poltoi's mean-spiritedness and the discomfort of her.

4. *Reverse inequity*

The story then turns--the narrator is forced to stay with Poltoi while his parents are out of town. This raises some suspense, but again, the suspense is resolved in 5 paragraphs. The main affect is what happens to my sympathy in a very brief exchange.

The narrator is dreading the stay, not only because he doesn't like Poltoi, but because he "was a night panicker and occasional bed-wetter. I'd wake drenched and panting. Had they told her?" (78). He wets the bed, but then something very interesting happens. Poltoi reacts with kindness and humor: "'Ach, well,' she said.'Who don't? This also used to be me. Pee pee pee. I used to dream of a fish who cursed me" (78).

This new action contradicts everything that has gone before. She changes the sheets "gently, with no petulance" and when he's finally in bed explains why she reacted to Eddie the way she did. "I had a bad time in the past with a big stupid boy. You don't gotta know. But I did like I did that day for good reason. I was scared at him, due to something what happened for real to me" (78).

Then she tells him to explain to the others because he has "a good brain." And the narrator feels gratitude at her trust and confidence in him.

The narrator then presents a number of scenes in which Poltoi is exactly the type of woman we had ascribed to Hopanlitski. At this point the discomfort is resolved--the threat of Poltoi's inequity has been completely removed because it's clear that Poltoi had never disturbed the balance in the first place.

The text also flips our sympathy for Hopanlitski. It accomplishes this not by showing us anything that Hopanlitski does that would earn our disapproval, but by Poltoi, the narrator's parents, and the narrator telling us she's a liar. Earlier in the text the parents had acted oddly with Hopanlitski, but we only find out why at this point. It may be that she's not a liar, but I trust those making the judgment. Instead of being the object of all the inequities she described to the narrator, she's now just a kook. My sympathy turns to something between resentment (for the unjust things she said about Poltoi) and pity.

5. Harmony extended

After his stay with Poltoi, the narrator "told the other kids what I knew, and in time they came to believe it, even the Kletzes. And, once we believe it, we couldn't imagine we hadn't seen it all along" (79).

The inequity between Poltoi and the children of the neighborhood and the resulting discomfort have been totally eliminated. This marks the end of the story.

Saunders's story is not driven by explicit threats, suspense, or rooting. A dissonance is created, intensified, and then removed. Of course, there were other draws present, but it was the simple raising and resolution of a sense of inequity in the reader that forms the structure.

Conclusion

When we talk about sympathy, suspense, and rooting, we are talking about inequity. Hogan asserts that "narrative is intimately bound up with emotion...Any coherent sequence of events might constitute a story. But the stories that engage us, the stories we celebrate and repeat--'paradigm stories'--are precisely stories that move us, most often by portraying emotions or emotionally consequential events" (Hogan, 5). Emotionally consequential events are those that in some way affect happiness, but we do not automatically care about and become invested in the struggles of all characters equally. We focus on those that engage our sense of inequity.

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