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Short Assignment 5

PHIL2054, Emotion in the Arts

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Robinson denies that having emotions requires the acquisitions of beliefs for two reasons. Robinson points out that emotions requiring the acquisition of beliefs leads to the paradox of fiction. If the acquisition of belief was a requirement for emotion, then when we feel emotion for fictional characters, we would have to believe in their existence. Since this is not the case, it would seem that the acquisition of belief is not necessary for emotion. The second (and much more expounded upon) reason is that the emotions we experience when reading a novel do not seem to come from the eventual acquisition of beliefs at the end. According to Robinson, the emotional experience occurs during the reading of the novel, before the acquisition of beliefs.

Robinson also cites the arguments of several other philosophers sharing her ideas. The best argument used by Robinson is Patricia Greenspan’s argument that we can feel two emotions simultaneously that arise from conflicting beliefs. The example is that I can feel happy that my friend won an award, and simultaneously sad because I did not win the award myself. The associated beliefs are that it is a good thing that my friend won the award, and that it is a bad thing that my friend won the award. These two beliefs are contradictory, and therefore belief is not a necessary condition for emotion. This argument is the best of the ones cited by Robinson because most readers are likely to have been in a situation such as the example, and agree with the conclusions drawn from it.

Alice Munro’s “Monsieur les Deux Chapeaux” is a short story with parts that potentially validate Robinson’s view. The short story tells us of a man named Colin and his socially awkward brother Ross. There are several moments during the story that help us to understand the story as a whole through the evocation of emotion. One such moment, early in the story, is the sentence “Ross was not retarded.” (pg. 57). Up until this point, Ross’s behavior may have indicated that he was in fact retarded. While we may have initially been sympathetic towards Ross’s character, that sympathy dissolves when we realize Ross is merely eccentric. This helps us understand the story as a whole because it helps refocus our attention on Colin, the main character of the story. Another such moment is when Colin asks Eddy about the validity of Nancy’s claims that Ross’s engine is too large for his car. “’Somebody was saying to me that the engine was too big to be put in there,’ Colin said. ‘This person said it would break the universal and the drive shaft would go and the car would somersault. Now, I don’t know enough about cars. Is that true?’” (pg. 75). In this moment, we realize that Colin is willing to actively protect Ross’s well-being. Up until this point, Colin has deflected critical remarks of Ross, but never had to go out of his way to make sure Ross will be alright. This adds to the question of why Colin is so insistent on looking out for his brother, even though Ross is clearly capable of taking care of himself. We feel sympathy, confusion, and admiration for Colin’s actions, because we do not yet know why he protects Ross so actively. In the two examples described here, we have emotions during the course of the short story, although we do not come to our actual beliefs about Colin until the end of the story, when we have all the information. This would seem to validate Robinson’s theory.

Robinson’s view of emotion is not very plausible. Robinson focuses on our eventual, final beliefs about the characters and situations in a novel when analyzing the relationship between belief and emotion. She ignores the beliefs we have about the characters during the reading of the story. Initially, I feel sympathetic towards Ross because I believe that he is retarded. Before finishing the short story, I feel confused because I do not yet understand Colin’s actions. While it may be true that we learn emotionally from reading a novel, this does not mean that belief is not a component of my emotion. Every emotion I experience while reading a novel is associated with a belief I have about the work of fiction at that time. My emotional response changes as the novel progresses, because I arrive at new beliefs. The process of reading is emotionally educational because it is through the process of reading that I acquire my succession of beliefs about the characters.

Also, the belief that leads to emotion does not necessarily need to be the belief in the existence of the object of my emotion. I can have the belief that Colin’s character deserves admiration, without believing that Colin actually exists. Belief can therefore be a necessary condition for emotion without running into the paradox of fiction.