

**Empathy in Literature:
Deconstruction of Narrative Empathy in Josip Novakovich's *April Fool's Day***

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Abstract

The paper deals with the phenomenon of empathy as a means used by writers, especially in character formation and establishing the relationship with the reader. Firstly, the concept of empathy is considered from a psychological point of view (definitions and types), and the term narrative empathy is introduced. Then follows the analysis of techniques that Josip Novakovich uses to establish narrative empathy between the narrator and the reader regarding his character Ivan Dolinar from the novel *April Fool's Day*. The author uses explicit and implicit presentation of emotional cues to transfer emotions to the reader. Also, within the text, a two-way line of forming empathy is suggested: the reader is targeted both by the narrator's side towards the character and by the relationship of the main character with other characters in the novel. The question of empathetic and ethical aspects of a literary text is also raised, as well as the place of narrative empathy in establishing a link between empathy and altruism in general.

Keywords: *psychology, empathy, narrative empathy, Josip Novakovich, "April Fool's Day", altruism.*

1. Introduction: theoretical perspectives

Empathy, as a rather flexible and multidetermined phenomenon can be defined in various ways, depending on philosophical, religious, psychological or some other scientific viewpoints. It is undoubtedly an important part of human existence and experience. Fritz Breithaupt claims that empathy has become one

of important themes of cognitive sciences, as well as of evolutionary psychology and human ethology¹ (2009: 5-8). Today, psychologists distinguish between two levels of empathy: cognitive empathy, that is the ability to understand another person's perspective, and emotional empathy, the ability to feel another person's emotions. Cognitive empathy helps us see the world through the eyes of other people and understand their emotions, while emotional empathy goes a step further from imagining what other people feel, it offers a possibility to really feel what other people are experiencing.² Sara Hodges and Michael Meyers explain the difference between two types of empathy:

Whereas greater emotional empathy is associated with more intense emotions, greater cognitive empathy (often called *empathic accuracy*) entails having more complete and accurate knowledge about the contents of another person's mind, including how that person feels. (2007: 297)

In their research of the psychology of empathy, Sara Konrath and Delphine Grynberg find a strong connection between empathy and our interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, stating positive and negative correlates of empathy. They come to conclusion that the importance of being aware of the limits of empathy can help us to better regulate it: mitigate its disadvantages and enhance its benefits (2013: 106-107). One of the most influential psychologists in the field, Michael L. Hoffman makes a strong link between empathy development and moral principles, which comes from his own understanding of empathy:

¹ Breithaupt regards the term empathy in the broadest sense, as *Einfühlung* (literally "feeling into") or "slipping into another's skin," p. 5.

² Some psychologists use terms cognitive and affective empathy, see Davies, Mark H. (1983). "Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, pp. 113-126.

To me, empathy is a spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible. It can be fragile, but it has, arguably, endured throughout evolutionary times and may continue as long as humans exist. (2001: 3)

His own definition of empathy is “an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own” (2001: 4). In his opinion, empathy encompasses feelings of concern and compassion towards other people and this is of crucial interest for developing justice principle. Empathy is directly linked with our moral reasoning, it activates moral principles and should positively contribute to our moral thinking and acting, which consequently leads to altruism and building of a better society.

The aim of empathy should not only be to understand and feel another person’s emotions, but also to consider possible ways of contribution to the solving of issues, and to take concrete actions to help, making bonds and developing meaningful relationships. In this sense, some researchers suggest the term *compassionate empathy*, the kind of empathy which motivates us to take action, offer support and help.³

Since empathy is responsible for our understanding of other people’s emotions, it is difficult to imagine writers without a strong feeling of empathy for their characters. Psychology is strongly connected to literature through creativity and imagination, and characters in fiction result from writers’ experience, their interest for other people, their life and fate and consequently, writers’ empathy for their characters. On the other side, there are readers, who should, by reading, form an emotional connection with the characters, too. John Stansfield and Louise Bunce suggest that a life-time experience of

³ For more information on this type of empathy see P. Gilbert (2009): *The Compassionate Mind: A New Approach to Life Challenges*, London: Constable and Robinson Ltd.

reading fiction and the extent to which the reader is 'transported' into the world of fiction are associated with reader's empathy. They conclude that reading fiction relates differently to cognitive and affective empathy. Long-time exposure to fictional texts is associated with the characteristics of cognitive empathy, whereas short-time experience of reading, that is, immediate experience of being transported by a story is associated with affective empathy (2014: 18). Researchers who study the role of empathy in different levels of understanding literature start from the assumption that, if empathy helps understand real people's feelings, it also helps understand fictional characters. Some philosophers make a distinction between basic and deep understanding of literature. Exploring the role of the emotion in understanding literature, Jenefer Robinson treats theory of emotions as processes, which firstly consist of non-cognitive assessments which automatically induce physiological changes, leading to, what she calls *cognitive monitoring* of the situation (2005: 3). Basic understanding implies reader's construction of a situation model, based on facts stated in the text and simply implied relationships. The level of deep understanding relies on elaborations and interpretations of nonliteral meanings. Robinson claims, "our emotional responses are a vital part of *understanding* a narrative text" (122). She also supports Martha Nussbaum's argument that much of what is psychologically important and morally profound in a novel is learned through our emotional involvement with it (154). Same as Hoffman, Nussbaum argues that literature influences our moral philosophy playing an important role in expanding our empathy and developing our moral imagination:

When we have emotions of fear and pity toward the hero of a tragedy, we explore aspects of our own vulnerability in a safe and pleasing setting. (2001: 176)

Suzanne Keen, one of the most influential theorists in the field,

defines narrative empathy as “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition” (2013: 521). She considers human empathy as a precious quality of our social natures (2007: 8). In Keen’s words, empathy involves “mirroring what a person might be expected to feel in that condition or context”, that is, “we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others” (2006: 208). Since empathy is often involved in the engagement between readers of narratives and characters, Keen speaks of “empathetic narrative techniques”, which have the potential to foster or hinder our empathy with literary characters.⁴ Writers use different narrative devices, particular modes of narration or characterization to encourage empathetic effects. Keen establishes a connection between the author and the reader, claiming that narrative empathy can be situated in both authors and readers. The writer's empathy can rely on fictional worldmaking and character creation and it may influence the author's choice of narrative techniques in order to evoke an empathetic response by the reader. On the other hand, the reader's empathy may not necessarily match the author's strategic narrative empathizing. Individual readers respond variously to narrative texts, depending on their identities, situations, experiences, and temperaments (2006: 524). Keen concludes that there is no narrative technique which has yet been proven to facilitate the readers’ empathy, and argues that narrative techniques work alongside many other variables, leaving many topics for further investigation (2006: 527).

2. Narrative Empathy in the Novel *April Fool's Day*

In a literary work, empathy is manifested in a kind of involvement of the reader in the presented fictional world, while at the

⁴ The theory of empathetic narrative techniques is, besides authorial strategies for empathy, and the empathy-altruism hypothesis one of the three main elements of Keen’s theory. For more about empathetic narrative techniques see Keen, 2006, pp. 215-220; 2007, pp. 92-99.

same time being excluded from the reading situation. If empathy is established, it means that other characters' emotions are transferred to the reader, who can identify with them. When reading short stories by Josip Novakovich, and especially his novel *April Fool's Day*, the reader meets a whole variety of characters, whose existence and destiny cannot leave the reader intact from feeling empathy for them.⁵ The unnamed girl from the short story "Spleen", told in the first person, Mira from "Ribs", Marko and Branko from the imaginary town Nizograd in the short story "Neighbours", Haris from "Hail", are all in their own way victims of the war in former Yugoslavia, regardless of their nationality, age or religion.⁶ The different portraits of human tragedy and devastated country are told through compassion, dark humour and a deep feeling for humanity in general. The same atmosphere is present in Novakovich's portrayal of Ivan Dolinar, the main character of his novel *April Fool's Day*, which the author himself calls "an obituary to Yugoslavia", so Ivan is a dead country personified.⁷ It is a *Bildungsroman* which starts with the birth of Ivan in 1948 and ends about fifty years later with his death, precisely, his afterlife, where he, as a ghost, wanders through his native town. The narrator follows his hero from his childhood spent in Nizograd, an imaginary Croatian town in ex-Yugoslavia, where he was already as a boy different from his peers and misunderstood by his environment. Ivan was in trouble all the time, from his childhood, when he stole

⁵ Of course, with the presumption that the empathetic emotions which readers experience are highly individual, depending on their empathetic level.

⁶ These are short stories from Novakovich's collection (2005): *Infidelites. Stories of War and Lust*. New York: Harper Perennial. The same themes are present also in his essay collection from 2012, *Shopping for a Better Country*, Westland: Dzanc Book.

⁷ Josip Novakovich on writing *April Fool's Day* in Josip Novakovich (2010): *April Fool's Day*, New York: Harper Perennial, p. 12.

flags from the town square for Republic Day in order to bring them to school, through his unsuccessful studying to become a doctor when he was caught after a prank misfire and convicted to four years of prison on the Naked Island, a notorious place for political prisoners. In the prison he received a visit by Marshal Tito and Indira Gandhi, who gave him her fan for a present. After getting out of prison, Ivan became an eternal student of philosophy. The next thirty years of his life were marked by ups and downs, starting with the beginning of the falling apart of the country and his recruitment in the Yugoslav army, where he had to fight his fellow Croatians. Ivan went through all the horrors of war and after being captured by different armies, somehow managed to return to his hometown. He marries, becomes a father, experiences passions of adultery and in the end, dies, but at the same time he stays alive. He cannot move, but can see everything around him. After his burial, Ivan gets out of his grave and wanders through the streets of Nizograd like a ghost. The whole of his life Ivan was making plans for his future, but they never came true. Also, as he studied philosophy, he unsuccessfully looked for the meaning in life, trying to find something important and essential, to be 'special'. He became a prisoner of the political system, which he always obeyed. The absurdity of his life in which he is constantly driven by uncontrollable forces comes to a climax after his death, when he finally feels free from all earthly burdens and enjoys life in his harmonious afterlife. The life of Ivan Dolinar, which is full of misunderstandings and unfortunate events, coincidences and absurdities, represents a real human tragedy. The novel is permeated with themes of identity, senselessness of war and political systems, bureaucracy, arbitrary nature of fate, fragility of the human condition, but the narrative is far from tragic: Novakovich's witty style, dark humour and irony and overall his empathy and compassion for the human fate make the novel touching and the readers empathetic to his (anti)hero.

How does the author achieve empathy by the reader? Among

numerous narrative techniques, one of the techniques of achieving narrative empathy is the first person narration.⁸ The author uses it in “Spleen”, where the story is told from the point of a view of a woman who experienced sexual assault, whereas in “Snow powder” the narrative is told from a child’s perspective, where a boy, angry with his teacher and classmates, joins the enemy ambush and blows his school up, unaware of his deadly actions. In *April Fool’s Day*, the author uses third person narration and tells us from the opening paragraph what kind of a hero we can expect.⁹ The day of Ivan’s birth is an indication of his fate and the choice of name explains his future obsession with being significant:

Ivan Dolinar was born on the first of April in 1948. Since his parents did not want him to go through life as a Fool’s Day joke, they registered his birthday as the second of April, in the Nizograd Birth registry in Croatia. His surly father gave the baby the first name that popped into his head – the most common name in the region and, for that matter, Europe. (2012: 1)

So, from the very beginning the reader is aware that Ivan was predetermined to be unlucky and insignificant, unimportant. The narrator explains: “From early on, Ivan wanted to distinguish himself, as though he knew that he suffered a handicap” (2). The omniscient narrator shows understanding for Ivan’s strange behaviour, for

⁸ For more on narrative strategies and techniques see Mihaela Culea and Andreia-Irina Suci (2014): *Introduction to Literary Interpretation. From Theory to Practice. Narrative Strategies, Discourse Presentations and Tropes*, Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre Publishing House.

⁹ “You can tell us outright what your fictional characters are like and what they do.” Extract from ‘Revealing Characters’, Josip Novakovich – Fiction Writer’s Workshop,
<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/course/view.php?id=1256>

example, when he tortured his younger brother pulling his ears and nose and bopping him on the head, the narrator explains:

There was nothing more melodious to him than the boy's crying. Ivan was not vicious – he merely treated his brother as a temporary musical instrument, an organ, on which he was learning to control the keys, and after all, isn't music all about the beauties of control and order? (3)

In this narrative situation the narrator uses the internal psychological point of view, where the narration starts from his point of view and then slips within the consciousness of the character, in this case Ivan, and tells the reader about the character's evaluations and feelings.¹⁰ From this evaluation, the reader learns that Ivan is not fully aware of his actions.

The presentation of characters' emotional states is directly relevant to experiences of narrative empathy. The author uses explicit and implicit presentation of emotional cues to transfer emotions to the reader. The narrator usually describes the scenes in which Ivan participates, and by his actions and dialogue portrays his character. Novakovich considers the scene as an advantage in describing a character, because it has a versatile approach, the character is in motion, the reader can hear the character's voice and diction, appearance, action and dialogue, the whole person, who is in conjunction with what is seen and experienced.¹¹ This implicit

¹⁰ Psychological viewpoint is concerned with "the question of who is presented as the observer of the events of a narrative, whether the narrator or a participating character" and can be divided into internal and external, depending on the presenter. Richard Fowler (1996): *Linguistic Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 169-170.

¹¹ Novakovich suggests combining techniques in describing the character. The scene is convenient because "the reader is immediately with you, experiencing, visualizing a scene." The best way is to combine different

presentation of emotions is left to the reader to identify them and process.

On the other hand, the narrator sometimes explicitly communicates Ivan's emotions. In his student days, Ivan was attracted to his colleague Selma, and after he repeatedly could not find courage to kiss her, "he'd walk home swearing at his lack of strength, at his self-consciousness." (28) The other time, when he made some progress and she did not reject him, he was overwhelmed with emotions: "He had a sensation of being in control over the tempestuous sea of senses, for the first time ever." (41) Throughout the whole novel Ivan shows insecurity and contradictory feelings. He liked to think of himself as a solitary man who was self-sufficient, but at the same time he looked for company everywhere. The narrator explains:

In his free time, he occasionally felt so sociable, that he organized soccer games with his school colleagues. True, his moods quickly swung to the other extreme, so that after organizing a game he'd be the one not to show up. (63)

After all the misfortunes that befell him, Ivan continued to live an empty and dull married life until he got involved with the police chief's wife. He was happy for a while, he was "barely fifty, but felt as though he was twenty." (150) The happiness was rather short and, learning about his wife and Ivan, the police chief kicked him out of the house:

Electricity flooded Ivan's brain, triggering all sorts of lights, thoughts, sensations, and emotions. primarily of panic, shame, humiliation and pain: everything that mortals can feel, Ivan

approaches, such as habit, summary, appearance or scene, because multiple perspectives will easier get reader involved in the narrative. J. Novakovich, Start Writing Fiction, Extracts used in "Revealing Characters" in Fiction Writer's Workshop.

felt, except perhaps gratitude. (152)

The narrator concludes that from that moment, Ivan suffered from a grave illness: chronic shame. At the same time, he is not judgemental, he never moralizes or shows the attitude that Ivan is doing or thinking wrongly. He felt sympathy for him, because, overall, Ivan simply did not have the ability to fit into his environment, either socially or politically, to be one of the pack, protected by the society. From the beginning he was an outsider and remained so till the end.

After Ivan suffered a stroke, death horrified him, but the idea of getting healthy again alarmed him too: "He wished he'd never have to move again and yet to live, to be neither dead nor alive." (155). During his whole life, Ivan had problems with decision making, he was insecure of his feelings and actions, and it remains so until his death: he does not know whether he would like to live or to be dead. The author finds a solution for Ivan: at the same time, he is dead and remains alive, and, to make it even more grotesque, it seems that he is getting a sort of cult following. In the end, when he is buried and considered dead, Ivan suddenly has no fear of life anymore, he feels free from all obligations, obeying rules and in his death can finally live a meaningful life.

The "I" form narration, which is in fact as fictional as the narration in the third person, makes a kind of illusion of reality, the reader is more connected to the character and develops no misbelief about what the character talks about in a diary, memoir or autobiography. The omniscient narrator in *April Fool's Day* follows his (anti)hero in his footsteps, but occasionally the third person narration smoothly slips into the "I" form, so the reader gets a better insight into the character's thoughts and inner states. At the same time, the reader can develop empathy for Ivan's character, who is primarily unable to rule his life, but is driven by the fate he cannot influence. After he has passed an important exam at the faculty of medicine, Ivan gains self-confidence:

Ivan strode out of the school jauntily. I will be an assistant to

the new students next year, to all the haughty young men who will be scared of corpses, and they will lean on me lest they faint. He felt everything was possible. He could become a brain surgeon. He could assimilate in Serbia, and he could leave Novi sad, He could join the KGB, the CIA, both. And he could become an alcoholic. He was absolutely free. (48)

From these thoughts the reader can feel the weight of the burden that Ivan is bearing, also his indecision, which drives him to extremes. His obsession with his career, the feeling of being unaccepted by his environment, longing for importance in a political position, the complete inability to have his own will are mirrored in this one situation, which for him seems to be a moment of great satisfaction and self-esteem. The reader can feel Ivan's emotions, even though he himself is not aware of them.

At his own funeral, lying paralysed in a coffin, Ivan is still insecure, now about his situation, which is brought to absurdity: he doubts if he is dead or alive:

Even if his hysterical paralysis were over, he could not scream for help – anyway, nobody could hear him.

Maybe I am dead. Maybe I've been dead for a long time. I thought it before and did not really believe it. And now how could I believe anymore that I am alive? Maybe the dead go on, never fully believing they are dead. Maybe death is a state of total scepticism. Maybe I will spend my whole eternity hesitating between the two doubted poles, death and life, two versions of one illusion. (184)

Ivan's aspirations and desires were always in conflict with his achievements, as well as with his social surroundings and his life struggle was not over even when he was considered dead by the

whole community. His insecurity disappears only when he becomes a ghost and finally has an advantage over other people, he can see everything, and at the same time be invisible. He has survived his own funeral and as a ghost achieves a harmony with his surroundings.

Novakovich's style is always on the verge between comedy and tragedy, his irony and dark humour contribute to the diminishing of a tragic fate of his hero, who in essence presents the downfall of a whole country, which will never recover. As the narrator empathizes with Ivan, as uncontrollable forces pull him through his life, the reader feels the same. The line of narrative empathy goes not only in the direction narrator - character - reader, that is, empathy towards the character, but there is also a line where the character himself shows empathy towards other people. When Ivan was at the train station, he needed to go to the restroom, but had only a large banknote. The woman there did not let him in as she did not have the money to give him back. He had to buy a newspaper to get change. First they quarrelled, but later he felt regret and sorrow:

They shouted before he yielded and bought a sports newspaper. In the dimly lit toilets he analysed the chess diagrams on the back page. The stench of industrial soaps and nitrogen filled his nostrils. On the way out he felt ashamed – how can you be rude to somebody who's desperate enough to clean bathrooms? (26)

In this paragraph, the empathetic nature of Ivan's character is obvious, although there are not many moments in the novel where he explicitly shows empathy towards other people, mainly due to his inability to manage his own life.

Conclusions

Although empathy is a matter to many academic disciplines, developmental and social psychologists have elaborated on it in the most detail so far, establishing various types of empathy. Empirical

investigations have proved the human ability to empathize with other human beings, where the personal level of experience plays an important role in empathetic behaviour. Empathy can be achieved through reading literature. For writers, creating an impressive and convincing literary text is impossible without empathy. Narrative empathy is defined as "the psychological process whereby recipients of narrative texts grasp and vicariously experience what they perceive are characters' 'mental states'" (Keen, 2013: 523). Writers believe in the power of narrative empathy to change the minds and lives of readers, so they use different empathetic narrative techniques in order to provoke an empathetic response.

In his novel *April Fool's Day*, Josip Novakovich uses different narrative techniques to tell the story of the life and death of Ivan Dolinar, who actually personifies ex-Yugoslavia, a war-torn country in the Balkans, which falls apart and can exist only in the minds of their citizens. The parallel is drawn with Ivan Dolinar who dies, but is not dead and like a ghost wanders around until he is forgotten, same as the country he used to live in. Novakovich uses multiple narrative techniques in evoking empathy for his (anti)hero by the reader, who, like a picaro, wanders from an episode to another, driven by an inexorable fate. He uses narrative situations, putting his character in the focus of attention, sometimes the narration changes to the "I" form, and achieves character identification (although it is not a narrative technique, as it depends mostly on the reader and his response, occurring in the reader's mind and not in the text). The author's personal experience and his engagement in the text contribute to the reader's response and involvement and hence transfer of Ivan's emotions. By individualizing one destiny, a parallel is drawn with the collapse of the entire state.

When naming or preferring different narrative empathetic techniques one should take into account the whole range of techniques that contribute to the empathetic effect, otherwise these analyses remain at the level of impressionistic endeavors. It is still the task of

the scholars to further investigate literature limitations: to which extent narrative empathy can reach the empathy of the reader and influence our habits, viewpoints and improve our morality, encourage altruism and consequently induce social progress.

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