Feelings in Literary Reading: Five Paradoxes

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1. Introduction

Well, my feelings changed a lot during this passage. At first, I was thinking of times when I get really frustrated and cry and scream. I feel like something else, some kind of spirit is possessing me. It sort of reminded me of that kind of feeling. And, I guess, it’s sort of like a feeling of death, like something must be happening beyond the world that is just unexplainable. And the way that she was yelling, “Free! Free!” reminded me of just a desire to get away sometimes and escape from the world. (A209)¹

This is one reader’s response to the climactic episode of Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour.” At this point the protagonist believes her husband has been killed, and she is overwhelmed quite unexpectedly by the realization that she is now free. Almost all the readers we have studied, encountering the story for the first time, are surprised by this turn of events; quite are few are shocked by it. The degree of feeling shown by this particular reader, then, is not unusual, although her response is more detailed and expressive than many.

In the study of reading that enabled us to elicit this response, we presented readers with the Chopin story in four sections, and asked readers to stop after each

¹ Comments from readers of Chopin’s story are drawn from two empirical studies. In one (to be described below), readers are identified by an ID in curved brackets. In the second, readers chose two passages on which to make written comments; these are identified by an ID in square brackets. Passages from the story are identified by paragraph number, thus: #13 (see Appendix).
section in order to think aloud about their responses. Readers’ commentaries were
tape-recorded and later transcribed. Our readers were recruited from senior courses in
English at the University of Alberta. This reader is reflecting on her experience of the
story after the third section (which ended: “‘Free! Body and soul free!’ she kept
whispering”).

The story by Chopin is often anthologized and has been praised for the
feminist implications of its critique of conventional marriage, daring for its time (it
was first published in 1894). This is not what most of our readers saw in the story,
however, although many realized that the marriage in the story was being called into
question. Whether any of our readers would have gone on to formulate an
understanding of the story consistent with the feminist perspective we will never
know. Notably, however, readers tended to figure out what the story meant to them as
they went along; even the few who began with a preliminary thesis after reading the
first section were usually obliged to change their minds while reading the third
section, and certainly by the time they read the last sentence of the story; and,
typically, it was the reader’s feelings occurring while she read that tended to shape her
understanding.

This brief account of how readers responded to Chopin’s story contrasts with
the widely current view that readers bring meaning to the literary texts they read.
According to Stephen Mailloux (1982), for example, “literary texts and their
meanings are never prior to the employment of interpretive conventions; they are
always its results. Texts do not cause interpretations, interpretations constitute texts”
(p. 197). For the reader cited above, on the other hand, the succession of feelings that
she reports appears to play the major role in constituting the text, beginning with her
comment “my feelings changed a lot during this passage.” The feelings, in turn,
appear to be driven by her immediate engagement with the details of the text. While feeling may be driven by convention (some of our readers were clearly influenced by their feelings for the sanctity of marriage), I suggest that feeling also provides a forum for questioning or transcending convention. Feeling provides an important, partly text-driven source for literary understanding. Insofar as feeling drives interpretation, then, the text itself plays a significant role in shaping the meaning it comes to have for a given reader.

That feeling during reading plays a key role in representation has recently been pointed out by Keith Opdahl (2002, p. 23). Feeling, however, is a vehicle for more than the content of a text: it has distinctive properties that are responsible for the perspective-setting, the shifts or reversals, the surprises that occur during reading, the “affective shifting and sliding,” as Susan Feagin termed it (1996, p. 74). These properties give feeling a role quite distinct from the cognitive schemas that also help sustain reading (e.g., Stockwell, 2002), a role that I will describe in what follows in terms of a series of paradoxes. Overall, feeling appears to enable a reader to “frame” a particular meaning, to register it for the time being as a possible component of the story, and to draw if necessary on the reader’s prior experience when a feeling matches an occurrence or an issue from the reader’s memory.

Some of the paradoxes can be detected at work in the reader’s commentary I cited above. In temporal terms, feeling can either situate us within a moment of time (“I was thinking of times when”) or outside time, which the reader may be evoking in her desire to “escape from the world.” Feeling can also act as an inhibition to action (“I get really frustrated”) or an incentive to action (“a desire to get away”). Inherently paradoxical, also – or so it has generally been regarded – is the reader’s capacity to experience real feelings for fictional characters or their situations, as the reader here
appears to do. Another paradox of literary reading is the experience of pleasure while reading of negative events (loss, suffering, death). Although this is not directly apparent from the reader’s third commentary, her enjoyment of the story is shown by one of her concluding comments: “I feel that this is a very powerful story.” I consider each of these paradoxes in more detail below.

The topic of feeling in literary response has been the occasion for a small but growing volume of research papers and books, and among these several of the paradoxes of feeling have been considered, with empathy receiving the most attention. In her recent outline of feelings in fiction, for example, Nussbaum (2001, p. 272) considers empathy, but also draws attention to three other possible realms of feeling: feelings for the the sense of life created by the implied author; a renewed feeling for one’s own possibilities in response to fiction; and delight at coming to understand. Other taxonomies of the feelings that reading elicits have also mentioned empathy (e.g., Kneepens and Zwaan, 1994), alongside evaluative feelings, or the aesthetic feelings of response to literary form (Miall and Kuiken, 2002). A topic less often considered has been the processes of literary reading that may be distinctively embodied by feeling (Miall, 1989); these include the anticipatory role of feelings, especially their capacity to guide the unfolding of response to aesthetic form (Miall, 1995), and the power of successive feelings to modify the understanding of the self (Kuiken, Miall, & Sikora, 2004). But perhaps the most frequent topic of discussion has been empathy in response to fiction (Keen, in press), an issue that I consider below. Another important scheme is Sternberg’s (1978) account of the temporal dynamics of narrative, based on three cardinal narrative feelings: suspense, curiosity, and surprise.
No doubt there is much still to be explored in relation to this array of feelings in literary response, especially the question of how feeling relates to cognitive modes of understanding (given the recent emergence of cognitive poetics), that is, to what extent feeling takes control of the reading process, or complements the cognitive processes of reading, or perhaps only supplements cognition as an after-effect. No doubt empirical study could show feeling functioning in all three roles, depending on the context and on the reader.

A second question we have raised before (Miall and Kuiken, 1999, 2002) is whether literariness can be identified with some specific feeling processes in the reader, given that feeling plays many of the roles we have mentioned in ordinary life as well – we have empathy for real people; we experience suspense about how, for example, a political crisis will unfold; and we discover our own possibilities in circumstances other than the reading of fiction. In one critical tradition, that of Hindu poetics, it has been held that a unique aesthetic emotion, the *rasa*, is the aim of literary experience (see Oatley, 2004, p 107; Reddy, 2001, p. 57). How far this concept can find an equivalent in western poetic theory or empirical study is not yet clear. To what extent the paradoxes of feeling I will discuss provide a distinctive *literary* mode of response is a question I defer until later.

In this paper, then, I will present five dimensions of feeling that appear to be significant for literary response, especially as they offer avenues for developing responses that are probably distinct from cognitive processes. What distinguishes them is what I will term, rather loosely speaking, their paradoxical nature, a feature that has already motivated considerable discussion of the first three dimensions as I will point out. Thus an important theme of the discussion will be the extent to which feeling provides the matrix for a switch of perspective, not unlike the familiar gestalt
pictures of the young woman/old crone, or the vase/two faces in profile. In addition to analysing its implications, I will show the dynamics of each dimension by referring to passages from the Chopin story, “The Story of an Hour”; I also consider additional readers’ responses to the story in order to demonstrate ways in which readers appear to be aware of some of the dimensions I outline.

2. Five paradoxes of feeling

2.1 Feeling real feelings for fictional characters

This is undoubtedly one of the most frequently discussed issues raised by response to fiction or drama. How can I, knowing that the characters before me on the stage or described in the novel I am reading are purely imaginary, experience feelings for them, such as joy or fear, or a sadness so intense that I may actually weep. The debate goes back to the eighteenth century. Most prominently, Dr. Johnson asserted that when watching a play we are never deceived into believing the reality of what we see; in contrast, Erasmus Darwin compared seeing a play to being immersed in a dream, when the “comparative power” is suspended. This was followed by Coleridge’s more nuanced claim, that literary reading calls for “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (Coleridge, 1983, II, 6; cf. Burwick, 1988). While it is Coleridge’s phrase that has become the most frequently cited, it is not clear that is has always been well understood, nor is it clear whether it points towards an answer to the problem, except that included in Coleridge’s will is the role of feeling. Among the scholars I discuss below (mainly those collected in Mette and Hort, 1997), questions of belief range from a Darwinian to a Johnsonian attitude.
In their discussion of the issue Livingstone and Mele (1997) consider Gregory Currie’s supposition that we respond to fiction as if someone (the fictional author) were telling the story as fact. The emotions of the work provide evidence that the fictional author experienced them; the reader is capable of experiencing the same emotion, except that his state is one of “make-belief” (162-3). This seems to reinstate Coleridge’s suspension of disbelief. Their own proposal is that reader’s feelings depend on two assessments: the reader’s assessment of the coherence of the truth presented in the fictional world; and pragmatic aspects, that the feelings evoked by circumstances in the real world would apply in the fictional world (168-173). This seems to imply that readers make a prior cognitive assessment of truth and correspondence. But, as we have seen in some of our empirical studies, readers often experience feelings almost at once in response to a fiction, before such judgements have any evidence on which to unfold.

Levinson (1997) also suggests that we imagine or make-believe in fictional characters in order to have emotions about them (25). Emotions toward fiction lack both belief and the motivational consequences of ordinary emotions, so such emotion is not literally an ordinary emotion (26). He continues: “to classify our emotions for fictions as imaginary is to say that they are ones we imagine ourselves to be having, on the basis of experiences, contributory to emotion, that we are actually having” (27). Levinson also proposes that the object of emotion is a surrogate object we are reminded of, such as the work itself or its parts, or (the shadow-object proposal) real individuals (22-3). This approach, however, is dismissed by Susan Feagin (1997) as not literary: “Explanations of art emotions in terms of beliefs, desires, or even ideas that a reader already has is a formula for philistinism” (60). Yet it is the basis of another of Currie’s (1997) proposals: that an answer to the problem of why we have a
feeling of caring towards fictional characters should also account for real situations where we feel others’ emotions, i.e., that empathy towards fictional characters should be amenable to the same explanation as towards real people (57).

Oatley and Gholamain (1997) propose identification as one of the core components of reading fiction. We wish to become in part a character in the story, or wish to be elsewhere, to be a hero, etc. (268). Thus we simulate a character’s plans and goals with resultant emotions (269). Carroll (1997), on the other hand, argues that identification with characters is inadequate as a general account of emotion in response to fiction (206); yet his account seems ambiguous. In his consideration of the paradox of feeling emotions while reading fiction, he notes that emotions do not always require beliefs; they may involve thoughts, or a pattern of attention: a thought can be held unasserted, yet raise emotions (209). As a result “we may have emotional responses to fictions concerning situations, persons, objects, and things that do not exist. For we can imagine or suppose that they exist, and entertaining unasserted the propositional content of the relevant thoughts can figure in the etiology of an emotional state” (210). But to “imagine or suppose” seems to take us once again towards the willing suspension of disbelief, Coleridge’s phrase for “supposing.”

While these discussions are informative, they make clear that a convincing explanation of the paradox of empathy is not yet at hand. Nor will I attempt to offer one here. The Chopin story enables us to review several conditions in which empathy seems to be called for. Near the beginning of the story we find successively what we could term situational and reflective empathy. In #3 we can readily understand the situation of Louise Mallard, hearing of the death of her husband, hence her response “She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment.” It is not surprising that some readers already feel empathy for the character although we know little about her but
her situation. Recognizing a typical impetus to grief, it is as if readers understand how they too could find themselves in that situation and project their own feelings onto the character. In the next paragraph the point of view shifts to that of Louise at the point where her internal state is described in the last clause: “a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.” A reader feeling empathy here is directly reflecting the feelings of the character. Feelings for characters also occur in other forms than empathy: for instance, rather than feel the grief that is attributed to Louise in #3 a reader may feel sympathy or compassion; and the last sentence (#23) with its ironic twist seems to call for compassion, although not all readers we have studied experience that.

Whether the feelings readers experience for fictional characters are similar to, or the same as, those they experience for real people, literary texts can use feelings to switch perspective in a way that seems less common in ordinary experience. Here, for instance, is the report of one reader responding to the unexpected shift she finds in #11:

The combination of tension and sorrow is quickly contradicted when, in passage eleven, the threat of a heart attack turns to the realization of freedom, “free, free, free.” I found this to be quite shocking as it unexpectedly changed my emotions of the previous occurrences of the story. [18] At this moment the empathy for the character appears to have vanished, but it provides a potentially salutary experience for the reader, who now finds that the assumptions embedded in her feelings of empathy (as it would appear) were mistaken. A more positive example was reported in an earlier paper (Miall, 1990), where again a reader acknowledged being caught out in a feeling towards a character which seemed inappropriate (the reader says that the current phrase “makes me feel a bit insecure . . .
about laughing”). In this way, because feelings for a character, especially empathy, are rather readily evoked, a literary text can situate such a feeling in an unexpected light, calling it into question either tangentially by showing its inadequacy, or by reversing it – possibly an informative experience for the reader.

The feelings discussed in this section, especially empathy, are perhaps the most widely discussed of those that inflect literary response, even though their status, i.e., how they relate to the “real” feelings of ordinary life, remains to be established. But one partial explanation of the readiness with which feelings are evoked by a text may lie in the evolutionary domain. In terms of responses that facilitate survival, it clearly pays to endow with animation what appear to be living entities, and to assess what feelings they may have. Thus we have developed a high sensitivity to the physiognomy of animate entities to the extent that facial or bodily stances emit signals of emotion, i.e., given an identifiable movement we project back from this the emotion state that would motivate it, which then allows us to predict what the organism (if that is what it is) may do next. In the ancestral environment to endow with emotion what later turns out to be a waving bush clearly offers better odds for survival, as Tooby and Cosmides (1990) put it: “Because the costs and benefits of false alarms, misses, hits, and correct rejections are often unequal, the decision rules may still treat as true situations that are unlikely to be true” (p. 411, n. 7). Given the salience of emotions to survival in the environmental and social domains, our readiness to perceive feelings in the literary context is perhaps less surprising: although what we perceive is no more than words on a page, we bring to bear the same “just in case” strategy, which, in this particular case, then allows us not only to elude feelings but also, given the complexities of the narrative context, to refine and educate them.
2.2 Anomalous suspense and other repeat feelings

The experience of suspense during reading normally involves possible plot events that we have been led to anticipate (does she agree to go to bed with him; does the murderer escape unseen; does the volcano erupt before the village is evacuated). When we reread a story we already know the outcome of all the plot events, thus suspense, which appears to depend on ignorance of such outcomes, should not recur. Yet it does. Richard Gerrig (1993), who has made the closest empirical study of it, has termed this anomalous suspense. For instance, even though the participants in his studies well knew that Charles Lindbergh was the first pilot to successfully cross the Atlantic, providing them with a story in which the facts were called into question led them to measurable delays in endorsing a statement about Lindbergh’s success compared with other readers for whom no such questions were raised.

This is odd. But suspense is not the only feeling that can be reexperienced. So too can other significant feelings, which occur in us again when we reread a text. For instance, we experience again the desire of the man, perhaps even more poignantly, although we know that the woman decides not to come to his bed. We experience again the sense of surprise and liberation of Chopin’s character saying "free, free, free!", although we know this is implicated in shortening the time she has yet to live; and we feel again “the coursing blood [that] warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.” Clearly, our knowledge of the outcome of the story and of the details yet to come influences our response, yet in central respects the feelings we experienced at the first reading seem insulated from this knowledge; only the secondary consequences or more remote implicatures of the feelings may have
changed. One of our Chopin readers, recognizing that she had read the story some time before, commented on the reference to the trees and the scent of rain (#5), “It all sounds very refreshing; it doesn’t sound at all depressing. So there’s an interesting tension created and I’m intrigued by that. Especially on reading this once I already know what the conclusion is” (A257).

Feelings, like tension or suspense, appear to be anticipatory, projecting possible future states of our being (Miall, 1995); such anticipations, encapsulated by the feeling, replay as we re-experience the feeling, regardless of the knowledge we have acquired elsewhere that would influence their outcome. In this respect we can regard such feelings in the literary domain as cognitively impenetrable: they are immune to information that we might expect to change or forestall them, a feature that Frijda (1988) referred to as the Law of Closure. Keats describes this second-reading power of feeling in his sonnet, “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again”:

once again, the fierce dispute

Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay

Must I burn through

The “burn through” of feelings indicates that we take on once again the implications of a feeling, the agenda it presents in this context for understanding or action.

In accounting for the experience of suspense Gerrig argued that it involves a schematic expectancy that outweighs or suppresses the specific (or veridical) information that we possess about what happened (174). In this respect he is proposing a type/token distinction (172), which provides a basis for considering more widely the function of repeat feelings. In the Chopin story, one of the most powerful moments occurs as Louise envisages her future, #19: “Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days
that would be her own.” During a second reading the feeling of time to come at this moment again seems pervasive: it holds out a value that we recognize independently of its context. Louise’s specific experience of it is the token through which as readers we experience the meaning and plenitude of all such future hopes, i.e., the type, a value that is not cancelled by our knowing that Louise will shortly be dead.

Specifically, as we have noted elsewhere (Miall & Kuiken, 2002), in the literary context such an example of feeling creates an ad hoc class, what we are referring to here as the type. In hierarchical terms (to adapt Glucksberg and Keysar’s (1990) account of metaphor) the feeling in most general terms proposes joy in prospect of future days of liberation and self-determination, with Louise’s specific anticipations nominated as a specific instance of the class. In horizontal terms, the profusion of days is the central, prototypic feature; whether the days are summer or spring or other sorts is incidental. The power of the feeling lies in this structured ad hoc class, which carries a conviction for the sympathetic reader whether encountered during a first or subsequent reading (and in interpretive terms, invites that initial move of generalization that, for example, facilitates inferences about Louise’s marital status).

2.3 Finding pleasure in negative feelings

Literary texts, perhaps for most of their length, deal with feelings of discomfort, anxiety, dismay, loss, and other negative states. Chopin’s story is no exception, with the initial reaction of the protagonist to the news of her husband’s death and her own death at the end of the story. Clearly, one of the significant enigmas of literary reading is why we willingly turn to texts containing negative feelings and even appear to find pleasure in them. The classic example, of course, is presented by tragedy: why, we must ask, do we subject ourselves to the spectacle of the fall and destruction of an Antigone or an Othello?
Several explanations of this phenomenon have been offered. For example, Nussbaum (2001) locates her account in the cognitive yield of the tragic spectacle: we take pleasure in the negative emotions of tragedy because we come to understand something, and coming to understand is always a pleasure. A painful novel, she argues, “shows us the truth of our situation” (p. 244). Understanding, however, can never be entirely adequate in the case of tragedy: a non-human force, whether the gods, or fate, or blind chance, profoundly influences the course of events, making it clear to us that the protagonist is not in control of events and that understanding them necessarily remains elusive. As Gloucester puts it in *King Lear*, in one of his moments of despair, “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods – / They kill us for their sport” (IV, I, 36-7). Thus, while a degree of immediate causal understanding is possible (of Antigone’s obduracy, or the role of Iago’s malevolence), tragedy seems designed overall to warn rather than enlighten, to suggest that we think we know more about managing our predicaments than we really do. Even in a story as short as that of Chopin, while the immediate cause of events is clear (including Louise’s weak heart), the tragic outcome of her sudden death leaves us balked as readers, taking pleasure in the ironic twist of misunderstanding among the survivors, but wondering how such things can happen. One reader quite explicitly captured the paradox in her final comment: “I really liked the ending of this story. It was totally unexpected. . . . In a way it seems too sad to be enjoyable” (A242). Another said: “The ending of the story kind of gives you the feeling of you’re happy but you’re sad at the same time” (A243).

In a recent paper Hogan (2004) provides an indirect context for understanding the pleasure in negative feelings. His principle theme is the loneliness of human consciousness. He points out that literature not only treats loneliness as a theme, but
that literature also interacts with the reader’s loneliness. More specifically, “one of the primary functions of literature – along with a range of related cultural practices, prominently including religion – is to defend against or ‘manage’ loneliness” (138). Through fiction or drama we become intimate, for the duration of the literary experience, with a group of others, sharing not only their lives but, often, their inner thoughts and feelings, giving us the illusion of breaching the barriers of our own loneliness. In this respect, literary reading allows us to recognize and live with the negative feelings in others – an experience relatively uncommon in daily life – and, more importantly, to experience their vicissitudes, consequences, and modifications, in intimate contact with a set of fictional characters. In one respect this is an argument (once again) for the role of empathy. But it has a wider implication. Literature assuages “existential loneliness,” as Hogan puts it (139), a central part of which, it can be assumed, is the experience of a range of negative feelings; it is characteristic of such feelings that they are generally socially unacceptable and remain confined to our individual consciousness. As I discussed in an earlier study (Miall, 1995), studies of daydreams have shown that they predominantly deal with negative construals of the self (mistakes, humiliations), states of disease, injury, or death, or unpleasant social situations. This points to the need for processing of such negative experiences. Reading literary texts, I argued, provides a context similar to the daydream, but possibly a more productive and demanding one, given the unfamiliar perspectives within which negative feelings may be presented.

The pleasure of literary reading may thus centrally implicate the re-experiencing of negative feelings from ordinary life, but within a context in which they can be developed, contextualized, and brought into relation with other feelings. As Nesse and Lloyd (1992) have pointed out, there may be adaptive value in
attending to negative feelings that otherwise are likely to be repressed in the familiar social settings for self-expression. This points to an everyday therapeutic role for literary reading, in which the experience of negative feelings in a pleasurable context serves to lighten the allostatic load (the degree of dysregulation in the physiological system, involving blood pressure, the immune system, etc.; Ryff and Singer, 2003). In other words, under ideal conditions, literary reading has beneficial effects for our physical as well as our mental well-being.

2.4 Feelings as inhibition or incentive to action

Feelings, insofar as these are distinguished from emotions (e.g., Damasio, 2003), appear to unfold in bodily experience and processes of thought, hence they appear to be a disincentive to action. Emotions, in contrast, as the derivation of the word suggests (from French, mouvoir) generally seem to indicate action. As Damasio puts it, “emotions are actions or movements, many of them public, visible to others as they occur in the face, in the voice, in specific behaviors” (28). Feeling seems to consists of, or to call for, reflection. In literary response we see this in a local way in the response to foregrounding (Miall and Kuiken, 1994a), where as readers respond to a passage that they find striking stylistically, the pace of reading is slowed; readers often appear to savour the shape and sound of a sentence at such moments, perhaps giving time to allow the feeling to register. On a larger scale feeling may instill a state of inaction that is important in the light of the immediate situation. A fictional example is provided by Chopin’s story. Louise is sitting in her room after the first storm of grief is over, #4: “pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.” As the context goes on to make clear, her inaction here is a necessary prelude to the new feeling that will begin to manifest itself shortly, #9: “There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it,
fearfully.” This can be contrasted to the emotion she goes on to experience, the sense of freedom of the years to come that then impels action, #13: “she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.”

While this seems consistent with Damasio’s distinction of emotions from feelings, it is also incomplete. Some emotions instill inaction: Louise’s “storm of grief” (#3) evidently precipitates her long moment of inaction in the chair in her room. On the other hand, the feelings that Louise experiences for the spring day outside her window seem implicated in the forthcoming sense of freedom, since this reaches “toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air” (#9).

To leave emotion on one side, it seems too constricting to confine feeling to states of inaction. The agency of feeling as a prompt to action or inaction seems to depend upon local circumstances, which means, specifically, the current condition of the reader. This could mean something as simple as, during reading, coming across an account of a letter being mailed, which reminds the reader of her feelings about an unfinished letter, prompting her to get up, complete it, and put it out for the mail. In this context, it is worth recalling one of the principle findings of Seilman and Larsen (1989), who asked readers of two texts (a literary and a non-literary text) to make marginal marks when they were reminded of something they had experienced. They found that twice as many actor-perspective remindings were elicited by the literary text as with the non-literary text (which was more likely to evoke what they termed “receiver remindings,” that is, things read or heard about). It seems quite possible that when such actor-perspective remindings occur to us, the feelings may involve unfinished concerns that call for action (either immediately or as soon as feasible). It seems unduly limiting to assume that literary reading must be confined to a purely aesthetic experience, excluding any interest of the self (as Kant, or the New Critical
approach proposed). The active participation of the reader in response to feelings instilled by the story is apparent in several responses to the Chopin story: one, having just read the opening passage on the death of the husband, said: “When I realized that someone was dead in this part and that someone is about to get told, it sort of called back memories, passings of people I’ve known. And I sort of had to prepare myself for this. I knew that one of the characters was going to have this outburst of grief” (A242). Another, later in the story, commented: “The description of her freedom is so incredibly vivid. It makes you want to feel that kind of freedom yourself as well” (A255).

Perhaps the most significant role of feeling in this context, however, is the possibility of one feeling confronting another during reading. A particularly striking example, which we have analysed in more detail elsewhere (Miall and Kuiken, 2002) is that of catharsis. Here the initial feeling of hubris or pride (propelling the actions of the protagonist, in a play such as Oedipus Rex) gives way at the tragic crisis to the feeling of fear, a process that includes hubris in the domain of fear and radically qualifies its meaning as well as its capacity to impel action. From the audience’s point of view, as Nussbaum (1986) has suggested, watching the play for its original Greek audience was an education in the dangers of their besetting sin, hubris. In this case the propensity for action of a first feeling (hubris) is modified by a second (fear).

On a smaller scale this can be observed in responses we have studied to literary stories such as Chopin’s text. For instance, one reader (A228) was reminded of his own family position in contrast to Louise’s sudden access of freedom, observing late on in the story (#16): “It’s odd. I’ve said that a lot, but this woman’s constant use of the word free, free, free. Free from her husband, and then, well, I guess that kind of resonates with me. Family obligations.” Yet, as he considers
Louise’s celebration of her forthcoming freedom, his feelings shift dramatically, having seen the implications for marriage: “I find it just very off-putting. I guess just because I’m a guy and I don’t think about such matters. But, still. It’s weird to just be so drawn in and then to be put back by a movement of thought, ideas that’s clearly in the writing.” The implications for action in his earlier comments on the story, contemplating liberation from his “family obligations,” are suddenly thwarted when he realizes the underlying basis of Louise’s claim to freedom. However we might regard this reader’s understanding of the story, this moment represents a real shift in his potentials for action, realized at that moment through a confrontation of feelings.

2.5 Feelings as timeless or as temporally marked

In ordinary daily life it seems obvious that feelings, like thoughts or sensations, are subject to decay, change, or extinction within a limited time. As Damasio (2003) points out, feelings can change internally quite rapidly – within a few hundred milliseconds (p. 118). Temporal aspects of the Chopin story struck several of our readers (and not only on account of its title!). One, mentioning #9, “There was something coming to her,” commented on the time-bound sensation it gave her, that she might be “just going about my day and there’s just this nagging sense of something, being either not wrong or right or something. It’s just that sense of I need to be remembering or thinking of something that’s kind of there but it isn’t expressed” (A261). Another seemed irritated with Louise for dying so suddenly at the end of the story: “I’m not that emotional,” but “If he’s died once, he’ll die again. And you might as well get your life to yourself after all” (A265).

It seems probable, however, that one of the distinguishing features of literary reading is its ability not only to foreground feeling but to prolong our experience of it. This comment parallels the well-known remark of Shklovsky that “The technique of
art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (1917/1965, p. 12) – a remark that is pertinent here, given Shklovsky’s reference elsewhere to the role of feeling in response to literary devices (p. 9). In this way, literature gives feeling power to develop more pervasively, and to deepen its implications for the reader through prolonged consciousness of its presence in a revivified temporal framework.

Stronger feelings, on the other hand, seem to have another power, that of representing the timeless. Such a moment seems central to Chopin’s protagonist, #18: “she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window” – her sense of the timelessness of her future expressing itself in a reference to the drink that makes one immortal. One reader of Chopin, referring to #8, mentioned her feeling of “something about just looking out the window absolutely being suspending [sic] in that moment” (A261). Such moments seem most evident in feelings occurring during a sublime experience. For example, Helen Maria Williams (1798) at the Rhine Falls in Switzerland, after referring to “emotions too strong to be sustained,” contemplates “a scene on which, while we meditate, we can take no account of time! its narrow limits seem too confined for the expanded spirit” (I, 63). Coleridge (1957-2002), speaking directly to the issue, asserts that “intense passions have faith in their own eternity” (Vol. II, 2168).

While this phenomenon, of experiencing feelings as though they were timeless, speaks to the control precedence of emotion accounted for by Fridja’s (1988) Law of Closure, the issue may be a qualitative one in addition to the degree of intensity of a given feeling. It seems possible that when evoked strongly a feeling presents itself as outside time, as an atemporal experience. In neuropsychological terms this may signal a role for the amygdala, in contrast to the hippocampus where
we know that emotions are time-dated when they are recalled. The implications for the self can be profound, as Fridja’s Law suggests, but most indicative, the feeling instantiates a perspective on the meaning of the self that seems inescapable and totalizing, whether for good or ill. For Williams, celebrating her renewed sense of self at the Rhine Falls, the moment “will form an epocha in my short span.” In contrast, for one of our readers (C12) commenting on a passage in Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” where the Mariner is in a state of suspension in the middle of the poem, said “this passage reminds me of the times when it seems everything in the world was against me, that I had nothing to look forward to.” In other words, he was led to construe his whole life in the light of a negative experience of wrongness outside time. The atemporality of feeling, when sufficiently powerful, thus demonstrates our ability to experience altered states of consciousness in which the meaning of the self is radically modified, in which all that we are becomes translated into the terms of the new, comprehensive state that the feeling signifies.

3. Discussion

In addition to the intrinsic interest of the five parodoxes I have outlined, and their potential significance for a better understanding of feeling in literary response, their role as vehicles for managing the shifts and ambiguities of a story such as Chopin’s can readily be seen. In the summary below I reproduce the main features of feeling already attributed to the story, whether by direct reference to a story passage or by reference to a reader’s response:

#1, news of a death: reader action in preparing for grief

#3, storm of grief: induces inaction

-- switch from situational to reflective empathy for Louise
#4, Louise haunted by exhaustion, waiting: inaction

#8, suspension: timeless moment

#9, Freedom reaching her through the air: impending action

#9, something coming: time

#11, reader shock at change in perspective at “free”

#13, action: Louise welcomes sense of freedom

#16, reader’s prior feeling modified (obligation to family); another: active wish to participate in such freedom

#18, elixir: timeless sense of freedom

#19, token / type of free days to come, resistant to rereading

#23, compassion at unexpected death; pleasure at tragic outcome (fate?); sad and happy

This listing makes apparent how often feeling can act as a pivotal reference for a change in perspective or understanding. The comparison of #4 and #13 shows Chopin describing a feeling-induced state of inaction that is a necessary preparation for the pervasive feeling of freedom that will supersede it. This sequence of feelings guides the reader in attributing meaning to the protagonist’s responses. We have found that for some readers the transition to the second active feeling of freedom is either unwelcome or incredible. One reader, for instance, remarked “I found this to be quite shocking.” For another of our readers, as I mentioned above, the realization that the freedom claimed by Louise was problematic for him occurred later at #16, while another reader at the same point expressed a wish to participate in such freedom.

Perhaps a striking feature of the story for all readers is its foregrounding of temporality, again through feeling. While the timescale of the story is signalled by its title, the feelings experienced while Louise waits alone in her room clearly evoke a
sense of the passage of time; in contrast, the feeling of joy, the “elixir” that Louise experiences, will last through “all sorts of days,” underscoring its timelessness; a joy that “has faith in its own eternity.” Finally, the sudden twist at the end in which Louise dies, offers its own distinctive pleasure like other tragic denouments, including the realization that those left standing have radically misunderstood the meaning of Louise’s death. But this local irony is perhaps overshadowed by the larger irony that the strength of Louise’s hopes that make her seem for a moment “like a goddess of Victory” should be so vulnerable to mere accident, a realization that obliges not a weakening of that central, timeless feeling of joy, but its radical recontextualization.

As this brief summary suggests, critical moments in the story are essentially managed by pivotal switches in the meaning of feelings inherent to the story, or by the feelings that story passages call up in readers. This is to propose a view of feelings that, as I pointed out in the introduction, lays out an alternative pathway for understanding and charting readers’ responses. Such switches in meaning suggest a more dramatic role for feelings, arguing that we navigate a literary text through the shifting perspectives that feelings provide. In this respect we might regard a feeling during reading as an avatar. Feeling is an agent that we adopt (or it adopts us) in the role of a putative experiencer (in the first phase of the feeling process during reading), which, given the intimate relation of feeling to self-concept issues, enables us to experience specific subject positions in the form of characters, situations, settings, language devices, and the like. The term *avatar* was given its contemporary currency by Neal Stephenson’s novel *Snow Crash*, where it represents an icon standing in for human presence in the virtual reality world of the *Metaverse*. In literary reading the reflective empathic response to a fictional character provides the clearest example: here we adopt the feelings and perspective of a fictional character in order to
experience that character’s world. The avatar of feeling is experiential and responsive, but it cannot interact directly with the fictional world. We might consider aesthetic disinterest an attribute of the role of feelings as avatars in literary reading. For this reason we can call the feelings in question first order feelings: because feeling is an internal event, in itself it changes nothing outside the self. But it may provide the reader with opportunities to identify and implement an external change (driven by second order feelings), that is, to engage with a real experience in order to understand something or to act on the basis of a new perspective. The reader we cited above, who was led to contemplate his family obligations while reading Chopin, and then said “I find it just very off-putting,” seems to have taken a step outside the story. At such a moment the avatar drops out or is put on hold, while the feeling evoked by the story becomes a premise in a real-world issue for the reader. This is another major switch accomplished by feelings: from first order (intrinsic to the text) to second order (extrinsic to the text), where on the basis of a feeling evoked by the text we reconnect to the world around us in order to consider the implications of the feeling for the real self.

This has been an argument for the importance of feelings in literary reading, a discussion that continues investigations begun more than fifteen years ago when it seemed more urgent that it does now to assert the identity of feelings as distinct from cognitive processes (Miall, 1989; Miall and Kuiken, 1994b). But much research still remains, given that the new discipline of cognitive poetics emphasizes interpretive analysis to the neglect, once again, of feelings (Miall, in press). It seems probable that feelings are the most reliable processes of human psychology – which is not to say that feelings are always transparent and that we necessarily understand what our feelings mean. But the evolutionary context in which feelings evolved seem likely to
have given us accurate readouts of our immediate relationships to ourselves (the self concept), the social environment of other people, and the natural environment around us. Given that their primary role is to enhance the survival and instrumental capacities of the self, feelings are neither arbitrary nor inaccurate in the meanings to which they conduct us. Studying literary reading is, beyond all other venues for feeling, the royal road to understanding the complexities of feeling, the interactions they have with other psychological processes, and what our feelings may mean for the fate of the self.
References


Appendix. Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour.”

Paragraph numbers have been provided.

1. Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

2. It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

3. She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

4. There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

5. She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

6. There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

7. She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

8. She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

9. There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

10. Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will--as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.
11. When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

12. She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

13. She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

14. There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

15. And yet she had loved him--sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

16. "Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

17. Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg, open the door--you will make yourself ill. What are you doing Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

18. "Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

19. Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

20. She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

21. Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.
22. But Richards was too late.

23. When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease--of joy that kills.