

## **Metaphors of Personal Identification: Self-implication in Literary Reading**

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To investigators of reader response, the suggestion that literary reading is self-implicating is perhaps overly familiar. However, it is important to distinguish among several forms of self-implication, and, given the centrality of feeling in a person's sense of self, it is useful to begin these distinctions in relation to the origins of readers' felt involvement in the reading experience (Miall and Kuiken 2002):

1. Readers' *preferences and values* may be implicated in *evaluative feelings* toward the text as a whole (e.g., the overall pleasure or satisfaction of reading a poem or short story). Evaluative feelings emerge early within the reading event, with gradual adjustment throughout (Davis and Andringa 1995).
2. Readers' *generic, narrative, and stylistic discriminations* may be implicated in *aesthetic feelings*, that is, the interest and intrigue (Miall and Kuiken 1994) prompted by formal components of a text (e.g., being struck by an apt metaphor or intrigued by an ironic description).
3. Readers' *interpersonal judgments* may be implicated within *narrative feelings* evoked in response to the setting, characters, and events in the imagined world of the text (e.g., sympathy with portrayed suffering or empathy with a character's motives).
4. Readers' *openness to change in their attitudes and beliefs* may be implicated in the *self-modifying feelings* that restructure their understanding of the text and, simultaneously, their sense of themselves. Readers commonly *recognize* settings,

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characters, or events as familiar (e.g., a story event is reminiscent of something they have directly experienced or of something they have read before). But, at times, they also find themselves participating in an unconventional flow of feelings through which they *realize* something that they have not previously experienced—or at least that they have not experienced in the form provided by the text.

Self-modifying feelings emerge within the generativity of aesthetic experience, a notion that is already offered in Kant's portrayal of aesthetic "reflection." Reflection is generative, first, in that it is a search for concepts to subsume particulars presented in the aesthetic object. As Kant (1951: 15) argued in his third *Critique*: "Judgment in general is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal...be given, the judgment which subsumes the particular under it...is *determinant*. But if only the particular be given for which the universal has to be found, the judgment is merely *reflective*." Second, reflection is generative in that its activity produces aesthetic feeling, that is, the "lively" satisfaction found in the "play" of the imagination and the understanding when "animated" by mutual agreement" (Kant 1951: 54). Third, reflection is generative in that, as emphasized in Lyotard's (1994) reading of Kant, the irregular pulse of aesthetic feeling supports and guides the temporal flow of experience: "We linger over the contemplation of the beautiful because this contemplation strengthens and reproduces itself..." (Kant 1951: 58).

Within the generative reflection characteristic of aesthetic experience may be found self-modifying feelings. Within that context, the search for concepts that potentially subsume narrative particulars will sometimes involve self-relevant concepts.

The aesthetic feelings that mark accord between imagination and understanding will sometimes mark poignantly self-relevant moments. And, the generativity of aesthetic reflection may at times challenge the reader's sense of self within a succession of decentering and recentering—or self-modifying—moments.

These theoretical possibilities have usually been discussed independently of direct examination of the experience of literary readers. The challenge is to determine whether self-modifying feelings—and their enduring consequences—can be identified within the reported experience of actual readers.

### **The Figurative Form of Self-implication: Readers' Similes**

To this end, consider one type of self-implication, involving the explicit articulation of affective resonance between personal memories and the aesthetic object. Resonance in this sense is regularly evident in readers' comments on their reading experience. One person provided the following example while reading *The Wrong House*, a short story by Katherine Mansfield, which we have employed in several of our empirical studies (e.g., Miall and Kuiken 1994). The study in which she participated involved a modified self-probed retrospection technique, and she marked and commented on Mansfield's description of a story setting in which “the houses opposite looked as though they had been cut out with a pair of ugly steel scissors and pasted on to the grey paper sky”:

I could actually see the street and the houses. So there was great imagery there...it reminded me of the street that I lived on when I was young. We lived in a small town in southern Alberta...and the houses looked like that; they looked like they had been cut out with ugly steel scissors.

As this example affirms, the personal memories evoked during reading often capture similarities between aspects of a personal memory and aspects of the world of the text. In this case, the comparison is explicit (“the houses looked like that”), which suggests that

this reader's expression can be understood on the model of a simile (A is *like* B; my experience of the street in my home town is *like* the narrator's experience of the street in the story). In fact, the reader's simile is the primary evidence of self-implication in this commentary. Also suggestive is that the similarities captured in the simile include the feeling tone of the memory and textual description. The affective connotations of dwellings "cut out with ugly steel scissors," the intimations of isolation and separation, are attributed both to the memory and to the story setting. As implied by the reader's simile, memory and story are symmetrical partners in a comparison ("A is like B" is equivalent in meaning to "B is like A").

### **The Figurative Form of Self-implication: Readers' Metaphors**

Readers of *The Wrong House* sometimes report a contrasting form of self-implication. In the following example, the reader was commenting on Mansfield's description of a moment in which the protagonist, Mrs Bean, realizes that men on a funeral coach are disembarking and approaching her door: "'No!,' she groaned. But yes, the blow fell, and for the moment it struck her down. She gasped, a great cold shiver went through her, and stayed in her hands and knees." Our reader comments:

it just makes you realize that...your own mortality is something that can make you unable to think clearly...[W]hile you think you still are alive and well and able to take care of yourself and help others, somebody else has decided that you can't. And then [at times like this] you don't think that it's their problem, [but instead] that you somehow have been mistaken all this time and that it's time for you to give in and end everything, whether you're ready to or not...[A] passage like this makes you realize that some day, perhaps something like that will happen to you and scare the hell out of you because you know how close it could be for you.

This reader's style is suggestive, especially her use of the pronoun "you" to speak inclusively but still personally (e.g., "it just makes you realize"). While spelling out what

Mrs Bean is like in this scene (e.g., she was “unable to think clearly,” she is realizing that “it’s time...to give in”), this reader is also implicitly referring to herself as a person of the same kind. This reader implicitly refers to herself in her description of Mrs Bean. She is entertaining the possibility that she is the same kind of person as Mrs Bean.<sup>1</sup>

Although similarity is somehow at stake, this reader is not simply comparing Mrs Bean and herself. Instead, she identifies Mrs Bean and herself as members of the same inclusive class. Comparison in this form is asymmetrical, that is, “A is B” is not equivalent in meaning to “B is A.” To say, as this reader seems to do, that, “I am Mrs Bean” is not equivalent to saying that “Mrs Bean is me.” Such asymmetry affirms that, rather than comparison through simile, this reader is engaged in a metaphor of personal identification (Cohen 1999).

The significance of metaphors of personal identification can be articulated according to Glucksberg and Keysar’s (1990) interactive theory of metaphor. In that view, the reader’s metaphoric identification of herself with Mrs Bean creates an ad hoc class exemplified by Mrs Bean but also including herself. This metaphoric self-reference implicitly endows the reader with attributes of the ad hoc class exemplified by Mrs Bean (e.g., those who are “unable to think clearly,” who realize that “it’s time...to give in,” and so on) within the constraints imposed by the reader’s own self-understanding (e.g., that she is not old like Mrs Bean). It also opens the way for modifying feelings by prompting her to consider whether she possesses the previously unarticulated attributes of individuals in this class. Examination of the concluding passage in our reader’s reflections substantiates this possibility: she is made to “realize” that “something like that

will happen to [her] and scare the hell out of [her] because [she will] know how close it could be.”

### **General Comments on the Figurative Forms of Self-implication**

Taken out of context, it is difficult to imagine how the preceding forms of self-implication function within the over-all reading experience. In a previous phenomenological study (Kuiken, Miall, & Sikora, submitted; see also Sikora, Kuiken, & Miall, 1998), we reported results from a phenomenological study of responses to Coleridge’s poem, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In that study, designed to identify different types of reading experience, one type, which we have called *expressive enactment*, was marked by (1) the emergence of aesthetic feelings, as well as explicit descriptions of feelings in response to situations and events in the poem; (2) active and iterative modification of an emergent affective theme; and (3) blurred boundaries between self and other. Our initial impression of these blurred boundaries was limited to our observation that readers’ used the pronoun “you” to speak inclusively but still personally. We now suggest that they were creating the ad hoc classes characteristic of metaphors of personal identification, and we can present some recently gathered evidence substantiating this possibility.

### **Study I**

In a laboratory session, 60 English Students read *The Wrong House* by Katherine Mansfield. The story was presented segment by segment on computer screen, and readers were queried on four occasions about what they found striking or evocative in what they had just read. They were interrupted at three selected points in the story and queried again

after finishing it. On each of these four occasions, their comments on what was striking or evocative were tape recorded, and they completed a brief, 9-item Reading Experience Questionnaire, which asked them to rate several aspects of their reactions to the story.

Our analysis of readers' recorded commentaries was phenomenological. We comparatively examined them for different forms of self-implication, identifying each as, in our phrase (Kuiken & Miall, 2001), a 'constituent.' Then we (1) created matrices reflective of the profiles of constituents found in each commentary; (2) used cluster analysis to group commentaries according to the similarities in their profiles of constituents; and (3) systematically examine each cluster to ascertain their distinctive attributes. Let me first review the eight constituents that we identified.

**Identification:** The reader recognizes similarities between herself and a story character. There may be acknowledgement of shared experiences, familiar circumstances, comparable personal characteristics, or similar motives or activities.

**Empathy:** The reader has a sense of understanding a character based on the recognition of similar feelings. Empathy is a type of identification but it specifically refers to shared feeling.

**Sympathy:** The reader expresses compassion for the character, i.e., regret, concern or sadness about the character's predicament.

**Metaphors of Personal Identification:** The reader uses the personal pronoun 'you' to express a sense of shared experience with the character—and perhaps other people as well. The pronoun refers both to the reader and the character but not to either alone.

**Personal Affinity:** Personal affinity is a vaguely felt engagement—as though there is more to that engagement than can be readily and explicitly stated. The reader indicates that any elaboration she is capable of providing at the moment does not fully capture this felt engagement.

**Felt enlivenment:** The reader focuses on feelings that have been evoked by reflection on some aspect of the story, e.g., a circumstance, a character, or a descriptive passage.

**Empathic enlivenment:** The reader focuses on feelings specifically evoked by reflection on feelings shared with the story character. This constituent reflects the conjunction of empathy and felt enlivenment.

**Sensory enlivenment:** The reader reflects on a vivid sensory impression of a portion of the text as though that portion of the text has virtually "come to life" and become part of the reader's own experience.

**Evaluative feelings:** The reader expresses either a positive or negative evaluation or judgement of a character or of that character's actions.

#### LRQ Cluster Comparisons:

1. Identification with metaphors of personal identification *without* personal affinity cluster > all other clusters except the no self-implication cluster on story driven reading ( $p < .001$ ).
2. Empathy with metaphors of personal identification *with* personal affinity cluster > no self-implication cluster on empathic reading ( $p < .041$ ) and on the insight orientation scale ( $p < .048$ ).

## Study II

THEME RE-ARTICULATION (ESPECIALLY ON COMMENTARY 2, WHICH TENDED TO MARK THE EMOTIONALLY PIVOTAL “CENTER” OF THE STORY)

We were able to identify affective themes—and variations in those themes—across the three commentaries. For example, in response to Mansfield’s description of the story setting in which “the houses opposite looked as though they had been cut out with a pair of ugly steel scissors and pasted on to the grey paper sky,” the reader quoted earlier commented that “There’s a feeling of being old and of...being unkempt and abandoned”. In her next commentary, this time in response to Mansfield’s description of Mrs. Bean’s stunned reaction to the men on the funeral coach approaching her door, the reader goes beyond unkempt houses to describe another form of decrepitude—with more explicit self-reference: “And it just makes you realise that...your own mortality is something that can make you be unable to think clearly”.

REQ items reflective SELF-PERCEPTUAL DEPTH, suggested by factor analysis and prior research:

- a. feeling resonance;
- b. sensitivity to feelings usually ignored; and
- c. broadened personal perspective (personal memory and anticipated personal future)

## REGRESSION MODEL

Based especially on the two (replicated) clusters in which metaphors of personal identification were common, we selected two constituents that might interact to generate self-modifying feelings during reading: metaphors of personal identification and personal affinity. Recall the pattern: (1) metaphors of personal identification without personal affinity were associated with story-driven reading; (2) metaphors of personal identification with personal affinity were associated with empathic and insight oriented reading on the LRQ. Perhaps neither of these forms of self-implication alone is sufficient to generate the active and iterative modification of an emergent affective theme through which the reader's sense of self is modified and deepened. Perhaps instead they interact to achieve this effect. For that reason we set up the regression models to include personal affinity, metaphors of personal identification, and their interaction.

## Results:

1. There was a main effect for personal affinity in the prediction of theme re-articulation: theme re-articulation occurred most frequently among those readers who reported personal affinity with a character during reading.
2. In addition, there was a main effect for metaphors of personal identification in the prediction of reported self-perceptual depth: those

who used metaphors of personal identification were more likely to report shifts in self-perception during their reading experience.

These results suggest that personal affinity and metaphors of personal identification provide different contributions to self-modifying feelings during reading. First, personal affinity, the sense that something “more” about a character needs to be said, may prompt iterative re-articulation of an affective theme. Second, metaphors of personal identification may modify that rearticulated theme in a manner that simultaneously modifies the reader’s sense of self. In other words, within the context of a sense that something “more” about the character needs to be said, metaphors of personal identification provide expressions that deepen self-perception.

## **Conclusions**

We suggest that whether personal memories are explicitly and comparatively considered, as in personal similes, or implicitly and enactively evoked, as in metaphors of personal identification, may determine the generative potential of reading. Our evidence suggests that:

- Personal affinity and metaphors of personal identification may be the self-modifying components of the reading style described as expressive enactment.
- Although only some readers engage literary texts in this way, those who do allow literary texts not only to enter but also to change their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Bullough's account of this implicit reference to self in colour attributions is inferential. In our example, implicit reference to self in the generalizing pronoun "you" is a conventional understanding of that linguistic expression.