

# 11 Empathy, Sensibility, and the Novelist's Imagination

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## 11.1 Introduction

In his introduction to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the author Neil Gaiman writes that '[F]iction gives us empathy: it puts us inside the minds of other people, gives us the gift of seeing the world through their eyes. Fiction is a lie that tells us true things' (2016: 182). This remark might initially strike us as obviously correct. We can't all turn a phrase like Gaiman does, but we can nod our heads in sage agreement. Surely, if empathy consists in something like imaginatively inhabiting the perspective of another person, it is true that fiction is specially placed to inspire that condition in its readers. And surely, even if the fiction features only imaginary persons and events, we can learn or re-learn important things from it. Gaiman further implies that fiction's educative power is at least partly due to its power to 'gift' empathy, and that also sounds right enough. Gaiman himself does not specify which 'true things' fiction tells us. But one category of truths we might immediately point to, because they seem so naturally connected to the sort of perspective-taking he has in mind, are those concerning what other people's experiences of the world are like. Literary fiction is particularly celebrated for making a tremendous range of these truths available to readers; page by page, it is claimed, we discover what it is like to move through the world as the gentleman lawyer Newland Archer, or the SS-officer Max Aue, or Madame Bovary.<sup>1</sup> These sorts of revelations may not exhaust the stock of knowledge specially available through fiction's gift of empathy, but they at least seem like central examples of what we might hope to learn if we read with care.

In this chapter, I will weigh a challenge to the attractive notion that fiction-supported empathy affords wide-ranging knowledge of what others' experiences are like. There is a long history of thinking that 'seeing the world through others' eyes' often requires the empathizer to undergo an imaginative shift in character or in what I will call sensibility. If that is right, then fiction's truth-telling power will substantially depend upon whether it enables or supports its readers to effect such a shift. However,

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some recent work on empathy and imagination encourages the conclusion that no such imaginative shift is possible, with or without the aid of fiction.<sup>2</sup> According to this skeptical line of thought, we are rigidly restricted to our own sensibilities even in our wildest flights of imagination and so have so imaginative access to what experiences colored by foreign sensibilities are like. In the light of this challenge, I will consider these questions: Is it true that we cannot imaginatively apprehend the world through the lens of a foreign sensibility? And if so, exactly how much trouble would that spell for Gaiman's idea that fiction teaches through empathy?

In Section 11.2, I motivate the view that fiction's ability to teach us about others' experiences hinges largely upon its ability to enable or support readers' imaginative sensibility shifts. In Section 11.3, I elaborate the challenge, and I consider a recent attempt to defend the possibility of empathy across differences in sensibility. This attempt does not fully dissolve the skeptical challenge, but it does help to bring it into sharper focus. Finally, in Section 11.4, I look to the acclaimed novelist Zadie Smith's reflections on her experiences as a virtuoso reader and writer of fiction for help assessing the force of the challenge. I extract two different proposals from her work. The first proposal defuses the worry that an inability to empathize across differences in sensibility will necessarily leave us in the epistemic lurch. According to this proposal, one of fiction's special powers is actually to reveal to us that other people are less different at the level of sensibility than we suppose. According to the second proposal, though, that is not the whole story: by working on our patterns of attention, fiction can indeed also help us to 'see through' sensibilities that are *in some sense* not our own. Given the plausibility of these proposals, I draw a moderate conclusion. Our imaginative capacities are not entirely unconstrained by our sensibilities, but fiction can still help us to learn about a wide range of human experiences, including the experiences of people whose sensibilities substantially diverge from our own.

## 11.2 'Exchanging persons and characters': the appeal of the *Sensibility Shift Thesis*

Gaiman claims that fiction 'tells truths' by 'giv[ing] us empathy'. In this section, I will first more precisely identify the truths whose availability we will be interested in. Then, I will elucidate the appeal of the thought that fiction educates by inducing or supporting imaginative sensibility shifts.

Fiction can teach us all sorts of things. One can learn a lot about whale anatomy and also a lot about how to craft arresting prose from *Moby Dick*. But we are only concerned with those putative lessons from

fiction that might plausibly be intimately tied to empathy; that is, to the condition of imaginatively inhabiting another's perspective.<sup>3</sup> Here, I will limit myself to the question of what fiction can teach us about an important subset of others' experiences of the world, namely experiences that centrally involve emotion.

Emotions are complex states comprising diverse phenomenological, motivational, attentional, and physiological elements. Fear, for instance, typically involves the experience of certain sensations (like that characteristic prickling at the back of one's neck), the urge to flee, the disposition to form escape plans, and the particularly intense monitoring of the object of one's fear. Crucially, emotions also involve evaluative construal.<sup>4</sup> When we are afraid of a dog, we see it as having properties that make it dangerous, and thus as warranting our fear responses. We register the dog as the fit object of our nervous attention and of our desire to cower in virtue of features like the size of its jaws and the sharpness of its teeth.

Human experience of the world is thoroughly shot through with emotional evaluative construal, and when authors reach for examples of experiences fiction can teach us about, they tend to select emotional experiences. Richard Rorty, for instance, claims that novels are the principal means by which we come to grips with the whole range of human experience, including 'what it is like to be a cradle Catholic losing his faith, a redneck fundamentalist taking Jesus into her heart, a victim of Pinochet coping with the disappearance of her children' (2001: 249). So, the vindication of Gaiman's claims for fiction does seem to hang largely on whether or to what extent fiction provides access to the contents of others' emotional experiences.

In the passage above, Rorty focuses on what fiction can teach us about emotional experiences had by real people. We will likewise be concerned with what fiction can teach us about, for instance, what fleeing slavery would have been like for the real-world analogs of Harriet Beecher Stowe's heroine Eliza. Metaphysical qualms might tempt some theorists to insist that fiction can *only* teach us about real people's experiences on the grounds that fictional characters do not really have experiences at all. However, I will assume that we can appropriately speak of characters' experiences.<sup>5</sup> I will further assume that if fiction can teach us about real people's experiences, it will do so indirectly by teaching us about fictional characters' experiences that partially or fully mirror them.

It is widely thought that we learn what an experience is like—or, at least, we fully grasp what an experience is like—only if the contents of that experience somehow come to be presented to us in a first-personal mode.<sup>6</sup> One way of securing that presentation is to go out and have experiences. If I want to learn what it is like to look down from a hot air balloon, I can book myself a flight at the next aeronautics festival.

We could stop there and say that this is, in fact, the only way of securing the relevant presentation, but in that case, reading fiction would be placed to teach us just one pedestrian 'what it's like' truth: what it is like to read fiction. I will accept, in line with the philosophical orthodoxy, that learning what an experience is like does require that the contents of that experience be presented to us in a first-personal mode. But we are interested in the possibility that fiction can help us to secure this sort of presentation via an alternate route, namely the imaginative first-personal simulation of others' emotional experiences of the world.

What sort of work might that simulation involve? Here is one possible answer: we must imaginatively shift factors that are relevant to the situation others find themselves in. So, if we want to simulate Emma Bovary's experience of Provincial French life as unbearably stultifying, we should imagine (for instance) that *we* live near Rouen, that *we* are married to a country doctor, and that *we* are in debt. If we were content with that answer, we could precisify Gaiman's assertion that fiction 'tells truths' by 'giv[ing] us empathy' accordingly, like so: fiction invites or enables us to imaginatively shift our circumstances to match those of the characters we read about and thereby enables us to grasp the contents of their emotional experiences 'from the inside'.

However, there is a long tradition of thinking that grasping others' experiences must at least sometimes involve more than a mere imaginative shift of circumstances. The idea that we need a more ambitious form of imaginative perspective taking goes back at least to the early modern moralist Adam Smith, who wrote:

But though sympathy is very properly said to arise from an imaginary change of situations with the person principally concerned, yet ... [w]hen I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession, should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die: but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters.

(1982 [1759]: VII.iii.1.4)

Following Adam Smith, it is now common to distinguish between two forms of imaginative engagement with others' perspectives, one that involves imaginative character shifting, and one that does not. So, for instance, Robert Gordon distinguishes between 'imaginatively projecting into the person's...situation' and 'imagin[ing] being not just in that person's situation but *that person* in that person's situation' (1995: 740), where the latter entails 'moving away from one's own real-life character' (1995: 735). Antti Kaupinnen similarly suggests that '[e]mpathy is self-focused when I imagine being myself in your situation,

and as a result have a feeling suited for your situation rather than mine ... Empathy is other-focused when I imagine being in your situation *as you*—with your goals, beliefs, and character— and feel the way you do’ (2014: 101).<sup>7</sup>

Those who echo Adam Smith’s distinction tend to treat the latter form of empathy as epistemically important, required for simulating others’ perspectives in ‘many, if not most’ cases (Coplan 2011, 10).<sup>8</sup> But why think that an imaginative shift in character is often (or always) necessary? The possibility of imaginative character shifting presents itself as a solution to a persistent worry about imaginative perspective taking in general, namely, that our imaginative efforts will be ‘necessarily distorting’ of others’ experiences (Sherman 1998: 89), a kind of ‘glorified projection’ in which we only secure a ‘fragment, or ‘reduplication’, of ourselves’ (Maibom 2014: 12).<sup>9</sup> This worry, in turn, naturally emerges out of some well-entrenched and widely shared ideas about human psychology.

We commonly believe that people vary significantly from each other in terms of character, and we further accept that differences in character are often best explained as differences in how people characteristically emotionally respond to the world. We think of romantics and cynics, milquetoasts and mensches, snobs and unpretentious types as deeply and crucially unlike in sensibility.

The concept of ‘sensibility’ I will deploy, which I take to reflect the commonsense notion, is that of a world orientation that ultimately manifests in one’s patterns of emotional evaluative construal.<sup>10</sup> A sensibility shapes how the world looks to one in two respects. First, a sensibility governs one’s patterns of attention: a really timorous person is always on the lookout for features of the world that could be construed as threatening. Her mind effortlessly fixes on shifting shadows, sharp edges, and glinting teeth—things that a braver soul might typically not even notice. And second, a sensibility governs which evaluative construals are triggered or invited by the lower-level properties or features one notices.<sup>11</sup> An inveterate thrill-seeker and a timorous type might both concentrate on gaps in a chasm-spanning rope bridge, but for the former, those will characteristically show up as enticingly risky, whereas for the latter, the same gaps will instead look simply terrifying. The timorous person’s sense of the enticing is strictly attuned to familiar comforts, and rope bridges fall well outside of that category.

People with contrasting or substantially divergent sensibilities will characteristically evaluatively construe the same situation in very different ways. And while they may be similarly capable of finding things wonderful, or engaging, or wearisome, their respective senses of *which* things have these qualities will likewise diverge. Because different sensibilities afford different emotional experiences of the world, the attractive thought that human sensibilities are profoundly and

pervasively diverse naturally generates this worry: if we fail to accommodate differences in character, and more particularly differences in sensibility, as part of our imaginative perspective-taking efforts, we will end up with seriously and systematically distorted representations of others' emotional experience. And the more distorted our representations are, the weaker our corresponding claims to what-its-like knowledge must be.

I will use 's-empathy' to pick out the activity this worry frames as critically important, that of imaginatively adopting or otherwise accommodating another's differing sensibility as part of our perspective-taking efforts. Let us say that one s-empathizes just insofar as one actually succeeds in imaginatively simulating that other's sensibility in a first-personal mode, such that one imaginatively evaluatively construes the world (or some part of it) in the same way that that other does or would do. We can describe a person's s-empathizing as more or less complete depending upon their degree of success in imaginatively accommodating the other's sensibility.

Each of these three claims seems appealing: s-empathy is often important for accurately first-personally simulating other people's emotional experience; we can only rightly claim to have what-its-like knowledge insofar as our first personal simulations of those experiences are accurate; fiction is an especially powerful means of learning about what the whole range of other people's emotional experiences are like. If we agree with this bundle of claims, it makes sense to suppose that fiction has a special relationship with s-empathy.

Gregory Currie, for one, adopts something quite like that stance. He writes that fiction 'encourages' us to empathize, where that means imaginatively adopting the 'relevant beliefs, desires and values' of the character whose situation we are considering, and adds that '[i]f our imagining goes well, it will tell us something about ... what it would be like to experience' that situation *as that character* (1995: 256). For Currie, something is wrong with either us or the fiction when this imaginative shift doesn't happen: our reading is 'dull' and 'lifeless' (1995: 256). We could take inspiration from Currie and insist that fiction always supports s-empathy with one or more of a fiction's characters and that successful fiction reading always involves learning some what-it's-like truths through s-empathy. That claim seems too totalizing, though. Arguably, some fictions accomplish their aesthetic aims in part by pushing the possibility of empathy away. We can reconcile the apparent diversity of human sensibility with the thought about fiction's educative power via this more moderate thesis instead:

*Sensibility Shift Thesis:* Some fictions can help us to s-empathize, and thus to learn what the emotional experiences of people with different sensibilities than our own are like.

### 11.3 A skeptical challenge

The *Sensibility Shift Thesis* can only be true if s-empathy is possible. Few people would object to the claim that we can imaginatively take on at least some circumstances that are not our own. I can readily imagine having long flowing locks, and I can form some idea about what it would be like to experience the world from underneath a more luxuriant head of hair. But can I really s-empathize, imaginatively picturing the world from, say, a much more hot-headed or optimistic perspective than my own?

That is a considerably more controversial matter. Laurie Paul, for one, contends that we do not have first-personal imaginative access to the experiences of others, including our future selves, in cases where those experiences are phenomenologically colored by attachments, cares, and ‘core personal preferences’ that we do not share (2014: 90 ff). And Justin D’Arms expresses doubts that seem to squarely target the possibility of s-empathy:

Consider an attempt to simulate the reaction of a person whom you know to have a very different sensibility from your own. He is easily offended, let’s suppose, and seldom amused, while you are thick-skinned and quick to laugh. You may be able to predict his dour reactions to something that would have amused you. But can you simulate them, and so become empathically irritated at something you are naturally inclined to find quite funny, and not at all offensive? It seems to me highly doubtful that you can.<sup>12</sup>

(2000: 1492)

D’Arms’s reported seeming is troubling, given the epistemic importance we have provisionally assigned to s-empathy, but in order to know just *how* troubling, we ought to try to fill out this rather bare report. Why think that s-empathy is beyond us, whether inside or outside of the context of fiction reading?

One way of conceiving of the putative problem with imaginative sensibility shifting would be to think of it as just an instance of the more general problem of imagining experiences that you have not yet had. At least since the early modern period, the imagination has been thought of as a (re)combinative faculty. Working exclusively with a stock of representations or ideas supplied by one’s own experience, the imagination manipulates and recombines those materials to furnish novel complex representations. Some pessimists about imagination’s powers think that some experiences are *too* novel to be effectively simulated through the imaginative remixing of our own experiences. For example, they hold that one cannot imagine the taste of a durian fruit if one has never tasted durian before because one’s experiential stock is too impoverished for

the imagination to satisfactorily accomplish its Frankenstein-like work.<sup>13</sup> Along the same lines, we might think that we cannot effectively imaginatively simulate the emotional experience of a timorous person if we are ourselves brave just because we have not yet had something sufficiently similar to the experience of being reduced to a quivering mess at the sight of shadows.

If our capacity for s-empathy stands or falls with our capacity to imagine experiences like that of tasting durian fruit, then skepticism about s-empathy may be misplaced. In recent work, Amy Kind persuasively argues that broad pessimism about our ability to imaginatively grasp what new experiences would be like underestimates what we can achieve through what she calls 'imaginative scaffolding' (2020, *passim*). According to Kind, our powers of imagination recombination are quite extensive. We can develop a good picture of what some novel fruit taste will be like by imaginatively drawing together and tweaking different mental representations borrowed from our own experience (a hint of a strawberry's tartness, a helping of a banana's sweetness, and so on). Even if the resulting representation isn't perfect, it still affords a substantial understanding of that un-encountered tasting. And the same, she thinks, will go for more exotic experiences like climbing Everest or falling in love.

Julia Langkau seconds Kind's optimism about 'scaffolding' and applies it to the problem of empathizing with people whose 'characterizations' are different from ours (where 'characterizations' includes 'dispositions to experience emotions', which I take to be very similar if not identical to sensibilities) (2021: 262). Langkau illustrates how we can use scaffolding to simulate someone else's emotional experience with an example from sports fandom: if I want to simulate another's love of hockey, which I don't myself care for, I can use my experience of loving the summer Olympics to help in that operation. As I understand it, the imaginative work meant to be involved here is a kind of quilting. I take my own experience of sport-oriented love, detach it from the summer Olympics, and imaginatively 'stitch' it to a representation of hockey. The simulation of your experience will bear the marks of my effort; it is not as though the seams will be invisible. But, the thought goes, I can, in this way, compose a passable simulation of your emotional experience. In my terms, I will have succeeded in s-empathizing.

Should we accept that there is no *special* barrier to s-empathizing? Should we agree that imaginatively assembling an accurate approximation of your hockey-loving experience is of a piece with imaginatively piecing together a novel fruit tasting experience and equally liable to furnish what-its-like knowledge?

We should affirm that I could *in some respects* come to a better grip on your love of hockey through the sort of imaginative recombination Langkau envisions. But my selective manipulation and amalgamation of



experiences reflective of my own sensibility, however creative, does seem ill-suited to provide knowledge of one important dimension of your emotional experience. To bring the point into view, let me further flesh out Langkau's own example in such a way that we are clearly dealing with an attempt to bridge a difference in sensibility.

Suppose you are a thoroughly pugnacious person, someone whose heart leaps at the sight of a fight. You delight in hockey. And it's not that you love it for no reason. It shows up for you as being the most delightful and admirable sport in virtue of its being especially aggressive and violent. All that shoving and slamming into the boards looks wonderfully tough to you—and that display of virile combativeness is what makes something a *real* sport rather than a mere amusement. I, by contrast, am a meek aesthete who delights in Olympic rhythmic gymnastics. It shows up for me as the most admirable sport in virtue of the grace and delicacy of its athletes. The precise movement of the gymnasts' limbs strikes me as exceptionally elegant. And for me, elegant refinement is what makes something a *real* sport rather than a childish game.

Now, suppose I attempt to simulate your emotional experience via imaginative scaffolding by bringing together a representation of hockey with my own experience of sporting enthusiasm. How accurate and robust can the resulting simulation be?

My imaginative scaffolding can undoubtedly afford an appreciation of some aspects of what your experience is like. For one thing, I might vividly recall the feeling of adrenaline, the light and giddy sensation in my chest, that I experience when I watch my preferred sport and grasp that you also experience sensations *like that* when you watch hockey. But the sensational elements of your experience do not exhaust your emotional experience of loving hockey. Emotions involve evaluative construals. Plausibly, part of your emotional experience is seeing hockey *as* worthy of delighted enthusiasm, *as the ne plus ultra* of sport. If I am not able to picture the sport as calling out such devotion, there is a sense in which my grip on your enthusiasm will be incomplete. Even if I have a solid impression of which sensations will figure in your enthusiasm, I won't 'get' your emotion; we can say that it will look unfounded or unintelligible.

The problem is that my available experience of loving sport does not look like the sort of thing that could be imaginatively stripped of its usual object, then paired with my mental representation of hockey to form a coherent imaginative evaluative construal of hockey as worthy of enthusiasm. We don't see typically see things as *brutely* funny, or awful, or loveable. Rather, we apprehend things as having particular evaluative properties in virtue of their other, lower-level properties (even if we cannot fully articulate this relation to ourselves).<sup>14</sup> My emotional construal of rhythmic gymnastics as admirable, for instance, is a construal of it as admirable *because* characterized by the elegant movement of delicate bodies. In order to picture hockey as admirable, I will have to be able

to picture it as having at least some lower-level properties in virtue of which the evaluative property of admirability obtains.

But how can imaginatively combining a representation of hockey with my own sport-loving experiences help me to picture hockey as admirable in virtue of the properties it actually has? The stock of sport-loving experiences I can draw from is thoroughly imbued with my own meek sensibility. All I have are experiences of sport as *admirable in virtue of its featuring the elegant movement of delicate bodies*. If I try to combine one of those experiences with a representation of hockey, the result will not be a picture, in my mind's eye, of hockey as admirable. These two elements resist being so conjoined because the elegant movement of delicate bodies just isn't a feature of hockey. Hockey does have other features that I know are important to your construal of it as admirable, including the aforementioned shoving and slamming. Still, since my available experience of sport as admirable is wholly oriented around delicacy, it is hard to see how drawing on *that* experience will allow me to picture shoving and slamming as features that ground sporting admirability.

I could, perhaps, come to picture hockey as delightful in my mind's eye by imaginatively shifting some of its lower-level features. I could imagine, for instance, that hockey players occasionally pause to artfully wave a ribbon, and in that case, my mental representation of hockey will be more fit to imaginatively draw together with my own experiences of sporting enthusiasm. But in that case, the imaginative picture I arrive at will quite dramatically fail to mirror your emotional apprehension of hockey as loveable. After all, ribbon-waving would absolutely *ruin* hockey's appeal for you.

As it turns out, the problem we face in simulating the emotional experience of a person with different sports sensibilities is not basically the same as that of imaginatively cobbling together a new fruit-tasting experience out of other fruit-tasting experiences, because in the former case, but not the latter, the elements that we are meant to imaginatively draw together are in tension and so resist amalgamation into a single coherent evaluative apprehension. Our scaffolding efforts do not seem poised to get us closer to an imaginative emotional apprehension of the sport that mirrors the other's apprehension of the sport as admirable.

Plausibly, the difficulty generalizes. The problem is not about sports fandom in particular but will arise in its sharpest form whenever the other's emotional evaluative outlook is contrary to one's own. Furthermore, whenever our sensibilities are to some degree divergent, it will recur in a correspondingly weakened form. Therefore, even if imaginative scaffolding is a satisfactory solution to the general problem of coming to know what novel experiences would be like, it does not seem to be similarly well-equipped to solve the problem of rendering other people's emotional experiences intelligible to us, in cases where those others' sensibilities are unlike our own.

One might, at this point, object: even if we grant that seeing hockey as admirable is part of the experience of loving hockey, we have not yet earned the conclusion that failing to imaginatively picture hockey as admirable seriously weakens my claim to know what your loving hockey is like. Haven't I been too quick to assume that knowing what it's like isn't *primarily* about getting acquainted with the sensational aspects of the other's emotional experience? This challenge raises questions about how we should determine which elements of an experience are most important to what it is like. Perhaps the conditions for counting as knowing what some experience is like are at least partly interest relative. If what we were mostly interested in were indeed the quality of others' sensations, then it might seem unduly obstinate to insist that vividly representing the sensation of an adrenaline rush and correctly grasping that your feeling is *like that* doesn't amount to a really solid grip on your experience of loving hockey. But as a matter of fact, it seems quite clear that we are not typically primarily interested in the purely sensational aspects of others' emotional experience, at least not when we think about what we hope to learn from fiction. As Gaiman intimates, we are typically more concerned with the world-directed aspects of experience. When we hope to learn what it's like to be Madame Bovary at a ball, we hope to first-personally access not her shivers and tickles but rather how the party's glitz shows up for her.

Imagination's scaffolding powers are not unlimited. The more divergent our sensibilities, the less my imaginative recombination of experiences reflective of my own sensibility will allow me to imaginatively picture the world in the same emotional evaluative light that you do. Consequently, we seem to be faced with a real problem for the possibility of s-empathy. If s-empathy is not possible, then the *Sensibility Shift Thesis*, which suggests that fiction aids in s-empathizing, must also be abandoned. We have already explored the reasons for thinking that fiction's power to teach us about the whole variety of human experience hinges upon that thesis. To defend fiction's power, then, we would need to argue either that s-empathy is somehow possible despite the admitted limitations of imaginative scaffolding or that the *Sensibility Shift Thesis* is less crucial for fiction's power than it seems. Happily, we can find resources for both responses in Zadie Smith's reflections on fiction.

#### 11.4 The novelist's imagination: fiction and s-empathy

If we want to know what fiction can do, it makes sense to consult expert consumers and producers of fiction. Accordingly, I will turn to Zadie Smith's essay 'In Defense of Fiction: Fascinated to Presume'. In this piece, Zadie Smith is interested in what kinds of perspective-taking the crafting and consumption of fiction might enable. Her explorations point

to two distinct but complementary defenses of fiction's broad power to teach us about others' emotional experiences.

#### 11.4.1 *Griefs like my own*

Zadie Smith writes of contemporary literary culture that has been swept by the attitude 'Only those who are like us are like us. Only those who are like us can understand us—or should even try'. But, she thinks this is a bad mantra. And at least part of the reason this is a bad mantra is given in response to a question she poses herself: 'What do I have in common with Olive Kitteridge, a salty old white woman who has spent her entire life in Maine? And yet, as it turns out, her griefs are like my own. Not all of them ... But some of Olive's grief weighed like mine' (2019).<sup>14</sup> Fiction may, in fact, be revelatory of commonality: 'I am fascinated to presume, as a reader, that many types of people, strange to me in life, might be revealed, through the intimate space of fiction, to have griefs not unlike my own. And so I read' (*Ibid.*).

Zadie Smith seems to suggest here that the true diversity of our sensibilities is less impressive than we might have thought. Perhaps our attention to other sorts of differences between us gets in the way of discovering just how similar our sensibilities are. Faced with the task of, say, imaginatively first-personally simulating the perspective of a Medieval peasant, more tentative, stumbling empathizers might find their imaginative efforts thrown off by things *other than* an actual difference in sensibility, things like differences of language or expression, or of daily habit and work. What distinguishes a skilled empathizer, Zadie Smith might tell us, is not what we assumed. It is not the ability to imaginatively 'see through' a foreign sensibility. Rather, it is the ability to clear away those factors that might prevent us from recognizing that another's sensibility is relevantly like our own, so that we can freely deploy our own sensibility in the service of a fuller simulation of the other's experience.

Zadie Smith further proposes that fiction helps us to empathize in this latter, more adept way by creating 'intimate space'. It seems poised to do so in two ways. First, fiction can draw attention away from the sorts of things that would otherwise prevent us from registering and imaginatively exploiting commonalities of sensibility. Even apparently shallow differences, such as differences in skin color, have been shown to inhibit empathy and/or proto-empathetic responses in laboratory settings.<sup>15</sup> Fiction authors can reduce the salience of these distinctions for their readers, sometimes through strategies as simple as selective omission.<sup>16</sup> Second, fiction can create intimacy through omniscient narration that cuts through ignorance or doubt about the precise quality of characters' feelings. Other's minds are especially transparent to us in fiction, and this transparency can help combat the anti-empathetic presumption

that the other's heart, borne by a person with whom I share few identity markers, must really be nothing like my own.<sup>17</sup>

This way of thinking about fiction's powers is appealing for several reasons. For one thing, it aligns nicely both with some authors' deliberate efforts to produce work that has universal resonance and with readers' tendencies to celebrate fictions' exploration of 'the human experience'.<sup>18</sup> For another, it is attractively conciliatory. It offers us a way of admitting that our sensibilities constrain our imaginative capacities without entirely surrendering the original Adam Smithean thought that it is both possible and important to imaginatively 'exchange persons and characters'. We can say that fiction facilitates the imaginative exchange of various features that are relevant to *who we are* (such as identity markers like gender, race, or national origin), which could be characterized as a sort of exchange of persons, even if we cannot imaginatively shift our sensibilities.

At least when it comes to some novels particularly renowned for inspiring empathy, the idea that fiction does its work by both appealing to and revealing sensibilities shared between readers and characters is plausible. Consider, for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is widely regarded as having contributed to the abolition movement in part by generating empathy for its enslaved characters. A portion of the novel's contemporary white readers may have antecedently found it very difficult to imagine being an enslaved Black person, given the virtually omnipresent social pressure to regard Black people as utterly Other, dissimilar not just in appearance and social standing but in thought and feeling too. But Stowe invites readers into the emotional perspectives of Eliza and Tom with a narration that clearly, even *explicitly*, encourages the reader to recognize how their sensibilities align with those characters'. She describes Eliza's escape from slavery like so:

Her husband's suffering and dangers, and the danger of her child, all blended in her mind, with a confused and stunning sense of the risk she was running, in leaving the only home she had ever known, and cutting loose from the protection of a friend whom she loved and revered ... If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader ... how fast could *you* walk?

(1879: 64–65)

This narration pushes aside the sorts of differences that might normally impede antebellum readers' empathy with a real-world counterpart of Eliza and directly (critics might say: ham-handedly) highlights the ways in which Eliza's emotional apprehensions reflect normal human attachments and dispositions that Stowe's readers might readily identify as just like their own. Like them, Eliza is a devoted and compassionate

family member who is disposed to register the violent rupture of her social ties as terrifying.

When fiction directs readers' attention in this way, we can expect two sorts of epistemic gain. First, the fiction reveals to readers that the characters (and, by extension, the real people whom those characters faithfully represent) are in an important respect *like them*.<sup>19</sup> And second, once readers recognize that their sensibilities align with the characters', they can then rely on their own sensibilities to help imaginatively elaborate their representation of the characters' experience.<sup>20</sup>

We could simply give up the *Sensibility Shift Thesis* and its attendant headaches and affirm fiction's educative power by endorsing this thesis in its place:

*Common Sensibility Thesis:* Fictions help us to learn what the emotional experiences of other people are like by revealing to us that those others' sensibilities are actually like our own.

Swapping in the *Common Sensibility Thesis* is not costless, though. It gives us reason to be optimistic about empathetic learning via fiction only insofar as we relinquish the well-entrenched and initially attractive thought that people really do have very different sensibilities. The relinquishment is made more bearable by the fact that Zadie Smith does obliquely offer up an error theory for that thought: we may wrongly ascribe an alien sensibility to people, assuming that their griefs can't weigh the same because we get confused or carried away by our awareness of other sorts of difference between us. But still, part of the magic of fiction was supposed to be that it can whisk us off to very different psychological vantage points. The *Common Sensibility Thesis* is plausible, but it is at least mildly disappointing for a concealed homogeneity of sensibility to be the *only* thing that saves Gaiman's picture of fiction's powers.

#### 11.4.2 *A lot of contradictory voices*

Another part of Zadie Smith's essay contains the seeds of a different defense of fiction's power. At one point, Smith describes her relation to the characters that populate her work. She writes: 'I've always been aware ... of having a lot of contradictory voices knocking around my head ... I found myself feeling with these imaginary strangers: feeling with them, for them, alongside them and through them' (2019). Zadie Smith finds *something* right in Whitman's famous claim to contain multitudes. He, and she, are somehow multi-vocal. And she doesn't take this to be a uniquely writerly trait, either, although she implies that this condition is most acute in novelists. She claims: 'Our social and personal lives are a process of continuous fictionalization, as we internalize the

other-we-are-not, dramatize them, imagine them, speak for and through them' (*Ibid.*). One idea consonant with her remarks is that others are internalized in the sense that we know them. We can anticipate what they will say next because they are familiar. But it seems to me that that sort of internalization does not exhaust the extent of the polyvocality she claims. Perhaps I risk leaning too heavily on something as evidentially fragile as a choice of adverbs here, but the assertion that we speak 'through' others suggests a more intimate relation than that of mere third-personal familiarity with these 'contradictory' voices.

We have been assuming that we each have one native sensibility or, alternatively, one native (coherent) set of sensibilities. But perhaps that was a mistake, or at least not the whole story. Even if we have one sensibility that dominates our everyday processing and decision-making, almost all of us can and do occasionally slip into alternate or even contradictory patterns of evaluative apprehension. In the right conditions, a brave person may find herself registering the world in ways much more characteristic of a tremulous person. If I've just recently been menaced by a stranger, creaks and rustles will show up for me as much more significant than they would if I were navigating the world via my usual bold outlook. And in the presence of old friends, I sometimes find myself registering opportunities for mirth in a lighthearted spirit, not at all aligned with my characteristic solemnity. The world seems to reorganize itself around the imperatives of playfulness rather than productivity.<sup>21</sup> These alternative patterns of evaluative construal may be only fleetingly or rarely manifested, but they otherwise share the features I earlier attributed to sensibilities: the temporarily mirthful person is, for the time being, disposed to notice different things and also to apprehend the world as having particular evaluative features in virtue of its nonevaluative and/or lower-level evaluative features.

There is a sense in which I am 'not myself' when I apprehend things in such uncharacteristic lights. An episode of mirthfulness does not mean that one is no longer a solemn person. It just means that something has triggered the suspension of one's 'home' sensibility and the activation of other ways of apprehending that one might not have even realized were possible for one. A sensibility is not the kind of thing that one can suspend through a direct act of will, as anyone who has tried to simply will themselves to be a happier sort of person will know. But one's recent experience, one's company, one's health, one's satiety— all of these things and more can cause one to temporarily become 'not oneself'. I propose that fiction is one more of those things that can nudge one into a state of being 'not oneself'.

We already observed, in our discussion of the *Common Sensibility Thesis*, that fiction can shape what is salient to readers. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shifts its antebellum readers' focus off of what makes Eliza unlike them and directs it toward the sensibilities Eliza shares with them. In

addition to directing us to commonalities of sensibility, fiction can also manipulate our attention in ways that temporarily nudge us away from our home sensibilities. Consider, for instance, Flaubert's description of the ball that Emma attends in *Madame Bovary*. Emma has a keen and enthusiastic eye for luxury, and Flaubert's prose lavishly catalogs the small refinements that are so intoxicating for her. No nuance of color or texture goes unremarked as he piles up the details:

Emma, on entering, felt herself wrapped round by the warm air, a blending of the perfume of flowers and of the fine linen, of the fumes of the viands, and the odour of the truffles. The silver dish covers reflected the lighted wax candles in the candelabra, the cut crystal covered with light steam reflected from one to the other pale rays ... The powdered sugar even seemed to her whiter and finer than elsewhere.

(1901: 52–54)

A person largely unconcerned with luxury might not, in her actual life, feel enthralled by such an event. She might, like Emma's husband Charles, find a good bowl of onion soup more appealing on balance. But Flaubert at least forces the reader to notice in the way that Emma notices (or, rather, the prose does the noticing for us). Even the most simple, unfussy reader will be moved to incorporate these details in her picturing of the ball. And this shift in one's attention takes one at least part of the way to seeing the imagined ball through the lens of Emma's romantic, epicurean sensibility.

I say that it takes one at least part of the way because sharing the pattern of attention characteristic of a person with a different sensibility does not yet amount to mirroring their evaluative apprehension. Here, we need to distinguish between two sorts of characters. On the one hand, we have a person of generally simple sensibilities who nevertheless has a more sybaritic 'voice' (in Zadie Smith's terms) knocking about somewhere inside her. And on the other, we have a person who does not have a single voluptuary bone in her body: luxuries could never show up as anything other than utterly distasteful to her. For the former type of person, the redirection of attention to the novel effects can be enough to induce a shift in one's emotional apprehension of the imagined objects' evaluative properties. She would not normally notice the particular glinting of candelabra, and if she were asked to imagine a ball on her own, this sort of detail would not feature. Still, Flaubert's careful presentation of those details may trigger a shift to a more Bovary-like evaluative apprehension, such that the imagined twinkle of the crystal shows up in her mind's eye as entralling. In that case, our reader will have s-empathized with Emma's experience. By contrast, a person of the latter type may be compelled by Flaubert's narration to attend to these



same details but will nevertheless lack the wherewithal to register the imagined twinkling as anything other than a lucent manifestation of folly. This latter person will consequently fail to first-personally grasp a core element of Emma's party experience.

In Section 11.3, we considered D'Arms's claim that a jolly, thick-skinned person cannot simulate a dour person's irritation at a joke they find quite funny. If we take on board the above development of Zadie Smith's point about multi-vocality, how should that impact how we receive D'Arms's claim?

We should continue to affirm that efforts to scaffold an imaginative recreation of a dour person's irritation out of materials sourced from one's own thick-skinned sensibility will not capture a key aspect of the dour person's emotional evaluative experience. Nothing in Zadie Smith's insight gives us grounds to revise this claim: the emotional responses characteristic of a thick-skinned sensibility (including delight at offense and, perhaps, irritation at those who insist on being aggrieved) cannot simply be imaginatively stripped of their original objects, and recombined with a new object to yield an imaginative apprehension of the joke as irritating.

However, we should *not* accept that just because one has a jolly sensibility, one cannot hope to imaginatively recreate the dour person's emotional apprehension of the joke. If one is an exceptionally single-minded sort of person who is strictly limited to just one pattern of evaluative apprehension, then it is true that no amount of effort and no amount of nudging will shift one away from that sensibility, and one will not really grasp how things look to the dour person. That sort of person is the opposite of a novelist, with her 'many contradictory voices'. Of course, one can possess the meta-trait of emotional evaluative invariance to various degrees. Many of us are more like 'anti-novelists' with regard to some evaluative domains. Still, some people *are* jolly but nevertheless do have within them alternative emotional strains. If D'Arms's jolly person is that sort of character, then with the right sort of conditions and assistance, they could be nudged into evaluatively apprehending the joke in the same light as the dour person. I have suggested that fiction can perform this sort of nudging by influencing what features of the scene or object that we are imagining are most salient to us. I have not argued that this is the only way that fiction activates alternative patterns of evaluative apprehension (indeed, it may well not be).<sup>22</sup> But it is at least one important way, and it certainly helps to account for our grasp of what Emma Bovary's experience is like.

Interestingly, if this is right, then one's capacity to receive fiction's gift of empathy is not just a function of whether one is imaginative, in the sense of being able to readily assemble representations in novel combinations. Being a teachable reader is also a matter of being a relatively un-rigid person, one with other 'voices' that can readily be drawn out.

We have been interested in the thesis that fictions help us to learn what the emotional experiences of people with different sensibilities are like because those fictions help us to s-empathize, to imaginatively adopt or otherwise accommodate those others' divergent sensibilities in our first-personal recreation of their experience. In highlighting fiction's ability to exploit our own 'multi-vocality', Zadie Smith's second insight provides new grounds for an endorsement of this *Sensibility Shift Thesis*. The endorsement is qualified in two respects. First, if one takes the view that fiction activates readers' alternative patterns of evaluative apprehension, it is not quite right to say that in reading fiction, we come to know what another's emotional experience is like by *imaginatively* adopting their sensibility. When we read, we actually adopt patterns of evaluative apprehension that are different from our 'home' sensibility. The objects of apprehension (the candelabra! the truffles!) are imagined, but the relevant evaluative patterns are ones that we are really, albeit temporarily, deploying. Second, the insight allows us to affirm the thesis only if we understand 'different sensibilities' in a particular way. Someone who has different sensibilities, in that their 'home' emotional evaluative outlook is different from ours, may yet be someone whose emotional perspective we can hope to satisfactorily grasp, but only insofar as their characteristic way of apprehending is mirrored by one of our alternate available patterns of evaluative apprehension.

### 11.5 Conclusion

Earlier, I worried that there was something rather disappointing about the prospect of replacing the *Sensibility Shift Thesis* with the *Common Sensibility Thesis*, even though the *Common Sensibility Thesis* does account well for some of fiction's power to teach us what others' experiences are like. In offering the above vindication of *Sensibility Shift Thesis* as a complement to the *Common Sensibility Thesis*, have we really reduced the cause for disappointment? After all, I have admitted that fiction is not quite in the position to take us beyond ourselves that we might have hoped. As the case of the sports fans illustrated, imaginatively combining the emotional responses characteristic of my sensibility with novel intentional objects does not seem poised to yield a first-personal grasp of how the world looks to a person with an opposed sensibility.

At the same time, however, the sting of that outcome should be considerably alleviated by Zadie Smith's recognition that there is generally more to each of us than we might have thought. We are not bound to meet with just the same familiar 'fragment or reduplication of ourselves' whenever we imaginatively engage with fictional characters' perspectives, precisely because and insofar as our capacities for evaluative apprehension are not exhausted by our native sensibility. Fiction can

help us to uncover dormant or hidden patterns of emotional evaluative apprehension that take us by surprise. A generally puritanical reader who nevertheless finds herself registering the ball's glitz as enticing learns not just something about what it is like to be Emma Bovary but also something about herself. She is not so single-minded or pure of thought as she might have previously believed; she has within herself the potential to be dazzled by fancy things. That lesson about herself may be unwelcome, but it is still an epistemically significant discovery. So, in the end, we have uncovered yet another sense in which Gaiman is right to claim that fiction teaches us truths through the gift of empathy.

## Notes

- 1 These examples are from (in order) Wilson (1983: 492); Szanto (2020: 800), and Rorty (2001: 246.)
- 2 See, e.g. D'Arms (2000), Spelman (1988), and Paul (2014), who in turn draws inspiration from Nagel (1974).
- 3 In characterizing empathy as imaginative, I follow e.g. Sherman (1998), Deigh (1995), and Coplan (2004).
- 4 Here I partially echo Roberts, who characterizes emotions as 'concern-based construals' (2003: 64, *passim*). See Bailey (2022) for a more extended presentation of the relationship between evaluative construal and an emotion's other elements.
- 5 The idea that fictional characters do have experiences (and perspectives and characters) is widely shared; see e.g. Ravenscroft (2017), Harold (2000), and Currie (1995).
- 6 See e.g. Jackson (1982), Nagel (1974), Lewis (1990), and Paul (2014).
- 7 Echoes of the original Smithean distinction also appear in e.g. Mackenzie (2006), Goldie (2011), Darwall (1998), and Szanto (2020). Note that Adam Smith himself writes of exchanging 'persons and characters'. That conjunction invites us to wonder: does he think that there are two distinct things (persons, characters) whose imaginative exchange is part of 'entering into the other's grief'? Here, though, I will restrict my focus to character shifts.
- 8 See also e.g. Gordon (1995: 735) and Sherman (1998: 110).
- 9 Roughly the same worry is voiced in Gallagher and Gallagher (2020) and Goldie (2011).
- 10 'Sensibility' has broader and narrower senses. We can refer to a person's global sensibility, singular, where that sensibility encompasses their whole emotional evaluative outlook, or we can speak of sensibilities more particularly concerned with various domains.
- 11 Compare D'Arms (2000). D'Arms defines a sensibility as 'a disposition to experience particular kinds of emotional reactions in response to particular sorts of cues' (2000: 1490). My characterization differs from D'Arms's in its emphasis on both attention and evaluative construal, but I nevertheless believe that D'Arms has the same phenomenon in view. Stueber similarly describes different 'schemes' for perceiving and emotionally reacting (2006: 208).
- 12 Goldie (2011) also holds that the project of 'consciously and intentionally shifting your perspective in order to imagine *being* the other person', where this involves 'traits of character and of personality', is doomed to

fail (302). I will not address Goldie's argument for the pessimistic conclusion here, though, since it hangs on an idiosyncratic view about the significance of self-consciousness.

- 13 The example is from Paul (2014).
- 14 Weatherston (2004) discusses the relevance of the in-virtue-of relation for imagination and also claims that for some properties (including evaluative properties), if we are to imagine them as instantiated, we must imagine them as instantiated in virtue of the instantiation of other, lower-level properties.
- 15 See e.g. Avenanti et al. (2010) and Neumann et al. (2013).
- 16 See e.g. Colson Whitehead's 2011 *Zone One*, in which the protagonist's race is revealed only obliquely, late in the novel.
- 17 Nussbaum (2001) goes further, claiming that the mind of another is *only* 'transparent' in fiction (328).
- 18 It is telling that one of the most popular literary anthologies for postsecondary education is simply entitled '*Literature: The Human experience*' (Abcarian et al. 2019).
- 19 Of course, if characters are *inaccurately* presented as faithfully representing real persons' perspectives, readers may end up epistemically worse off. This is the core of one criticism made of Stowe's book; see, most notably, Baldwin (1994). For more admiring philosophical reflections on Stowe's novel, see Driver (2008) and Scarry (1998).
- 20 Of course, a shared sensibility may not be *sufficient* for grasping what the other's emotional experience is like, particularly in cases where the others' circumstances are highly traumatic and/or radically different from any the reader has encountered.
- 21 See Lugones (1987).
- 22 Camp (2017) discusses a number of different ways in which fictions condition emotional responses, such that readers' responses to fictional events and characters diverge from their normal responses. Camp takes her observations to threaten the idea of a stable 'real self', but I think we can acknowledge fiction's power to shape our emotional responses without abandoning the idea that people do have sensibilities.

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