

## Patterns of cognitive dissonance in readers' engagement with characters

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### Abstract

Leon Festinger's account of cognitive dissonance, published in 1957, has become one of the most successful theories in the history of social psychology. I argue that Festinger's framework—and the research it generated over the last sixty years—can shed light on key aspects of readers' engagement with literary characters. Literature can invite the audience to vicariously experience characters' dissonance through an empathetic mechanism, but it can also induce dissonant states in readers by encouraging them to take on attitudes and beliefs that are significantly different from their own. I suggest that there are two strategies—or patterns of reader-response—through which the audience can cope with the dissonance between their own worldview and the characters': attitude change and imaginative resistance. In the first, readers adjust their own beliefs and values according to what they have experienced and learned in adopting characters' perspectives. By contrast, in imaginative resistance readers' worldview prevents them from establishing an empathetic bond with characters. I integrate these hypotheses into a model that builds on theoretical as well as empirical insights into reader-response.

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### Keywords

Cognitive dissonance, reader-response, characters, empathy

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## 1. Introduction

Just before throwing himself from the window of his London apartment, Septimus Warren Smith—the shell-shocked co-protagonist of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*—has a moment of lucidity. His hallucinations and paranoid ramblings give way to an apparently sober, self-possessed state:

There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging-house window; the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. . . . He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. [Doctor] Holmes was at the door. "I'll give it you!" he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings. (164)

Septimus does not want to die, and yet he performs an action whose inevitable—and foreseeable—consequence is death. He does so while his imaginary arch-enemy, Doctor Holmes, is about to break into his apartment, serving as a living reminder of what Septimus calls "human nature": the repressive power of human institutions, but also the destiny of trauma and mental illness to which he has been condemned by fighting in the

First World War.<sup>1</sup> Yet Septimus's flight from the window is more than a flight from his existential condition, from "human nature" in its most brutal aspect, as symbolized by Holmes. Septimus's gesture is also the demonstration of a clash between the course of action he takes ("throwing himself out") and the mixture of beliefs and attitudes that would seem to disqualify such action ("He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot"). As narratologists have long argued, narrative thrives on conflict. David Herman lists conflict among his basic elements of narrative, labeling it *world disruption*: it consists in one or more "events introducing disequilibrium or noncanonical situations into [the storyworld]" (133). Conflict is one of the thematic elements that makes a story "tellable" or worth telling (see Baroni). At the same time, narrative requires the beliefs, desires, intentions of an anthropomorphic subject—a character.<sup>2</sup> When those two ingredients of narrativity are combined, when the conflict dwells *in* the subject, and specifically in the gap between acting and reflecting, wanting and not wanting, seeing and imagining, we have extremely fertile ground for storytelling. Some of the most famous scenes of world literature—from Don Quixote's mistaking windmills for giants to Hamlet's "To be or not to be" monologue—involve a clash between seemingly incompatible mental states.

What is perhaps less known is that such clash has a name in social psychology, and that it has been the object of one of the most successful theories in the history of this field: the theory—first advanced by Leon Festinger in 1957—of "cognitive dissonance." According to Festinger, cognitive dissonance refers to the psychological disequilibrium—with its attendant experience of discomfort—that derives from holding two mental states, one of which seems to be inconsistent with the other. Not wanting to die and wanting to throw oneself from a window are inconsistent drives. But the inconsistency can be considerably less dramatic, and still give rise to cognitive dissonance. In Festinger's own example: "If a person were standing in the rain and yet could see no evidence that he was getting wet, these two cognitions would be dissonant with one another because he knows from experience that getting wet follows from being out in the rain" (14).

Published in 1957, Festinger's book pre-dates many of the key texts of the so-called "cognitive revolution" (see Miller), and appears to be firmly grounded in the social-psychological research that was dominant in the 1950s. Yet Festinger's use of the adjective "cognitive" and of the term "cognitions," as in the passage just quoted, is suggestive. Even more strikingly, Festinger refers repeatedly to 'invisible' psychological states such as beliefs, desires, and dispositions, thus overthrowing the behaviorist bias towards observable behavior and anticipating the rise of cognitive psychology (with its critique of behaviorism). What Festinger does not share, of course, is the computational vocabulary and AI-inspired models that characterize mainstream cognitivism. His emphasis is not on mental processes per se but on "social behavior as the responses of a thinking organism continually acting to bring order into his world" (American Psychological Association 784), in the words of the "Distinguished Scientific Contribution" award presented to Festinger in 1959. In this sense, Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance and its in-

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<sup>1</sup> See the following passages in Woolf's novel: "So there was no excuse; nothing was whatever the matter [with Septimus], except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel" (99). "Human nature, in short, was on him—the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him" (101).

<sup>2</sup> Such representation of an anthropomorphic subject would correspond to Herman's (137–153) "what it's like" element of narrative, or to Monika Fludernik's "experientiality" (cf. Fludernik 30).

tellectual history can help us interrogate the meaning that the adjective “cognitive” has in phrases such as “cognitive literary studies” or “cognitive approaches to the humanities.” To what extent does this label imply a commitment to the cognitivist paradigm, perhaps in its more recent, neurocognitive version? Or could it be taken in the looser sense in which Festinger used the term in his influential study of cognitive dissonance?

Whatever the answer to these key questions, Festinger’s theory and the experimental research that it generated have considerable potential for theorizing narrative, and readers’ engagement with literary narrative in particular. In this article I seek to develop this potential by exploring readers’ strategies for dealing with cognitive dissonance in their relations to literary characters. Within the current landscape of cognitive approaches to narrative and literature, my account falls into what I have called the “processual” camp (Bernini and Caracciolo 16–19): the study, either speculative or empirical, of the psychological processes through which readers respond to literary narratives. Such “cognitive reception theory” (see Eder) is, in my view, the most promising avenue of inquiry for cognitive approaches to literature, as it involves a two-way dialogue with the cognitive sciences rather than the unidirectional importation of concepts and models from the sciences to the humanities.<sup>3</sup> But a two-way dialogue also means that hypotheses and speculations on reader-response have to be “accountable” in the eyes of psychologists: hence, the need for a closer integration between literary research and experimental methods, following in the footsteps of empirical literary scholars such as Bortolussi and Dixon, Miall, and Hakemulder. Although the present article is not based on an original empirical study, it is at least *consistent* with experimental research both on cognitive dissonance in real-world settings and on readers’ engagement with characters. The indirect empiricism that I practice here is a first step in the direction of a more empirically oriented reception theory, which deals with flesh-and-blood audiences rather than with ghostly “implied” and “model” readers.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, as the title of this article suggests, I am interested in *patterns* of reader-response, that is in the temporal and cognitive dynamics through which recipients of narrative deal with (and attempt to reduce) the dissonance that can be generated by their encounters with fictional characters.

I will be concerned with a set of questions that have attracted increasing attention in recent years—within literary studies (Keen), but also within psychological approaches to fiction (Hakemulder; Oatley 155–175)—because of their broad societal implications: how does reading literary texts, and particularly empathizing with characters, change readers’ socio-cultural beliefs and values? Can reading literature encourage prosocial (i.e., altruistic) behavior? Extensive research is needed before we can answer such questions satisfactorily. In the context of this article, I will limit myself to drawing attention to the complexity of these issues—the large number of factors involved and the non-linearity of the interaction between storyworlds and readers’ experiential background.<sup>5</sup> Between the two reader-response patterns that I label “attitude change” and “imaginative resistance” there is a vast grey area where dissonance is experienced vicariously, on behalf

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<sup>3</sup> The call for such two-way dialogue is a recurring motif in cognitive approaches to literature and narrative: see, e.g., Herman (*Story Logic* 299) and Sternberg (352).

<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, these labels come from Iser’s and Eco’s classical reader-response theories.

<sup>5</sup> In past work (Caracciolo, “Notes”) I introduced the term “experiential background” to refer to the sum of an individual’s past experiences, beliefs, and values that guide his or her interaction with reality. This term is interchangeable with phenomenological concepts such as “worldview” and “life world” (see Husserl; Schütz).

of the characters rather than in a first-person way: literary texts and fictional characters seem to enter readers' life worlds without producing any measurable change in readers' self-concept or beliefs.

Most of our transactions with fictional characters seem to occur in this no man's land. But this does not prove that such transactions are worthless, of course. It only indicates the need for more sophisticated tools to probe readers' engagement with storyworlds—tools that place a premium on reflection and dialogue as means of negotiating the reading experience. As Keen puts it, “readers themselves, especially those who discuss books and bring others into conversation about the implications of fiction, possess the power [of changing people's attitudes and behavior] that they so often attribute to novels” (167). It is not so much the reading of literary narrative in itself, but the activity of reflecting on and debating its significance that can leave a mark on readers' worldview. Interpretation thus becomes a third strategy for taming the dissonance that (as we'll see in the next section) may be produced in readers' interactions with literature. To put this point otherwise, the divide—and, potentially, the dissonance—between readers' real world and storyworlds can be reduced via literary interpretation and other practices of literary meaning-making (see Caracciolo, “Narrative, Meaning, Interpretation”). Even though this article focuses on character-oriented responses, attitude change and imaginative resistance, my own close readings of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*—the two case studies of the next sections—will demonstrate the relevance and inescapability of interpretation as a way of articulating the relevance of literature.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Focus on cognitive dissonance

The thrust of Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance is that human beings continuously strive towards the reduction of dissonance: whenever possible, they attempt to reduce the inconsistencies—local and global—that tend to arise while coping with the natural and (especially) socio-cultural world. In this sense, dissonance may be taken as an aspect of the fundamental “difference” that cognitive semiotician Barend van Heusden sees as the driving force behind specifically human forms of semiotic and cultural cognition: “[the] awareness of *absence*, or *difference* (in relation to the acquired patterns of behavior) . . . seems to be basic to human cognition: what we recognize is *not*, is *never* identical with the patterns used to recognize. We do not live in, and reality does not coincide with, our representations. Humans not only recognize and act according to a more or less stable patterns but they can also *not recognize* a pattern” (614–615). Recognizing the inconsistency of one's thought processes in the experience of dissonance is a reflective appraisal of that background of difference accompanying our engagement with the world. To go one step further, it may be speculated that art is one of the strategies that enable us to “tame”—i.e., reduce—the dissonance that is at the core of the human condition.<sup>7</sup> By representing dissonance, as Woolf does by narrating the predicament of Septimus Warren Smith, a fictional character, humans distance themselves from and assert their control over the dissonance that permeates their daily lives. We can therefore consider

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<sup>6</sup> See Jackson on the problematic status of literary interpretation in cognitive literary studies.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. again van Heusden, who draws a connection between meta-cognition (reflecting on one's cognitive faculties and skills) and art: as a “very basic form of dealing with difference [meta-cognition] lies at the basis of a number of cultural domains. The arts, religion, and philosophy are important forms of meta-cognition in modern and in contemporary culture” (621).

artistic practices, including narrative art, as controlled experiments in the creation and taming of dissonance. In the context of this article I will expand on this idea by proposing a few hypotheses on how dissonance is created—and tamed—by readers in their responses to literary characters. First of all, however, it is useful to look at how dissonance research evolved in the sixty years since the publication of Festinger's original study. Joel Cooper's 2007 book provides a helpful guide through this maze of mostly experimental research.

The major innovation in dissonance theory is that dissonance is no longer defined in terms of inconsistency between mental states. Cooper writes: "Inconsistency is still an important concept but more as a heuristic than as an accurate representation of the cognitions that arouse dissonance" (80). According to the model proposed by Cooper and Fazio in 1984, what defines dissonance is an evaluation of the aversive—that is, negative—consequences of an action that one is, nevertheless, choosing to carry out (see Cooper and Fazio). Septimus's suicide is a textbook example of this kind of evaluation. The upshot of this redefinition is that dissonance is firmly anchored to the realm of action and behavior: an "internal" conflict between two incompatible attitudes does not by itself create dissonance, but only the "acting out" of those attitudes in the public, intersubjective world. While this move makes cognitive dissonance theory more testable—and more consistent with experimental results—it also restricts the scope of the concept, so that Festinger's account may still seem more productive for our purposes. Other developments in dissonance research seem to lend themselves much better to theorizing dissonance in art and narrative. One of these developments is what Cooper calls "the emergence of the self in dissonance theory" (90). Starting with Elliot Aronson's work in the 1960s (see Aronson), a number of studies have shown that the self-concept (i.e., people's model and perception of themselves) plays a key role both in triggering cognitive dissonance and in suggesting strategies for coping with it. As Cooper puts it, "the self is a potential standard of judgment that we use to assess whether a behavioral consequence is aversive or not" (115). We will see in the next section that what psychologists call the "self-concept" is deeply implicated in people's responses to literary characters.

Another topic that has emerged in recent dissonance research is that of vicarious dissonance. To quote again Cooper: "Imagine . . . if dissonance also occurred when *other people* made choices or when others acted in a way that brought about an aversive event. If this happened, it would multiply the occasions in which we experienced, and needed to reduce, dissonance. Current research tells us that it does happen, at least under certain conditions" (117). Conceivably, vicarious dissonance could form the basis for readers' feeling dissonance in response to literary characters, such as Septimus, who are going through a dissonant experience—in this case, the most dissonant experience of all, since Septimus's dilemma involves choosing between life and death.

There is one phrase in the Woolf passage quoted above that seems to hint at this possibility of sharing dissonance with others. It is the question "Only human beings?"—a scrap of the character's consciousness whose brevity and elusiveness attracts the reader's attention, as if it concealed an important clue. What can Septimus mean? Is he asking whether there might be something—another life, a chance for transcendence—beyond the self-destructive act that he is about to perform? Or is it rather a cry of desperation, an expression of the inexorable finitude of the human condition? There is no clear-cut answer to these questions, no solid ground for interpreting Septimus's phrase; yet its very openness seems to involve the reader in the character's questioning—especially the

reader who, in the flow of reading Woolf's novel, has already had the chance to align his or her perspective with the character.<sup>8</sup> Molly Hite highlights the axiological openness—or undecidability—of *Mrs. Dalloway*: this novel, she writes, “defamiliarizes, not only for aesthetic purposes . . . but to open up spaces for ethical questioning without necessarily guiding readers to definitive conclusions” (250). In short, by asking “Only human beings?” Septimus invites readers to partake in his dissonant experience as a sign, a mark of their common belonging to humankind, while at the same time underdetermining the exact meaning of that belonging.

Woolf's phase is so effective and suggestive in its indeterminacy because it is used in a context where Septimus's mind is anything but indeterminate for the reader: Woolf gives us direct—or almost direct—access to Septimus's mental processes, his intention to throw himself from the window and his thinking that “life is good.”<sup>9</sup> As I pointed out in the introduction, narrative tends to foreground characters' beliefs, attitudes, and evaluations, since the particularity of such mental states contributes to a text's narrativity. It is in considering and to some extent sharing these “cognitions” that, for audiences of narrative, the vicarious experience of dissonance can turn into a full-fledged experience of dissonance. In order to understand this point, we need to make a detour through a body of research—partly psychological, partly philosophical and literary-theoretical—on readers' empathy for characters. This will be the topic of the next section.

### 3. Empathy for characters and attitude change: A thought experiment

In relating to fictional characters readers learn about worldviews and beliefs systems that can be significantly different from those that guide their everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Septimus suffers from rampant paranoia. He thinks he is “the Lord who had come to renew society . . . the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer” (27). He believes he can talk with Evans, his officer who died in the War. He is looking for an explanation for why “he could see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men” (74). All these thoughts and images will strike readers who do not have any first-hand experience of mental illness as rather outlandish. Of course, we are often exposed to similar ideas in daily life. But fiction provides a more or less safe haven for entertaining—and experimenting with—beliefs and values that we tend to dismiss in real life. This is the idea behind literary theorist Frank Hakemulder's claim that fiction is a moral laboratory, where “plausible implications of human conduct can be studied in a relatively controlled and safe way” (150). I would hypothesize that our “defenses” against other worldviews are higher in real life, because of our realization that there is so much more at stake—including, of course, other people's judgment of our words and actions. By contrast, in engaging with fictional characters we are more or less free to ‘try on’ other perspectives. In Keen's words: “the perception of fictionality releases novel-readers from the normal state of alert suspicion of others' motives that often acts as a barrier to empathy” (168).

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<sup>8</sup> The metaphor of the *alignment* between the audience and a character comes from Murray Smith.

<sup>9</sup> That literature can give readers direct access to characters' minds is a widely held view in narrative theory (see Cohn); for discussion in light of today's cognitive sciences, see Herman (“Introduction”) and Caracciolo (“Beyond Other Minds”).

<sup>10</sup> I have speculated about this point in discussing readers' engagement with two ‘strange’ narrators of contemporary fiction; see Caracciolo (“Two Child Narrators”).

This intuition about the sense of relative freedom that readers have while engaging with fictional worlds is supported by an empirical study conducted by Howard Sklar. This study sought to shed light on the temporal progression of readers' sympathy for the protagonist of Toni Cade Bambara's short story "The Hammer Man." As is well-known, sympathy is distinct from empathy because it involves feeling *for* another (pity, sadness, compassion) rather than feeling what another feels by simulating his or her mental states. Before reading the short story, Sklar asked his participants to take a test known as "Interpersonal Reactivity Index" or "IRI" (see Davis), aimed at measuring dispositional empathy and sympathy (that is, people's predisposition to empathize or sympathize with others). The participants' sympathy with the character was then assessed using their self-reports. Comparing the results of the IRI test with the findings of the reading task, Sklar found that there is no correlation between dispositional sympathy and the situational sympathy that arose during the reading experience:

the percentage of subjects who had high levels of sympathy on the IRI and also felt sympathy for Manny [the protagonist of "The Hammer Man"] (72 percent) was roughly the same as the percentage of those who had low levels of sympathy on the IRI but still felt sympathy for Manny (70 percent). This suggests that the tendency to sympathize with others in daily life, as measured by the IRI, was not the determining factor in generating sympathy for the character as presented along the narrative. (594)

Sklar's experiment can therefore be taken as *prima facie* evidence for the view that awareness of fictionality leads readers to experiment with forms of intersubjectivity they would tend to disfavor in daily life. The same, of course, applies to empathy, which is sometimes seen as one of the components of sympathy (see Gruen and Mendelsohn).

Over the past decade, a number of studies have argued that empathy plays a key role in audiences' relations with literary characters (Hakemulder; Coplan; Keen): in reading literature, audiences tend to engage—and imaginatively 'try on'—the perspective of the fictional character whose experience is foregrounded by the text. Philosopher Gregory Currie explains why such simulative activity might be beneficial: "To be critical of our own outlooks and to be willing to see advantages in the outlooks of others might be a useful thing. But to appreciate those advantages we might need to try on for size the perspectives from which they derive. Indeed, we might need to be willing to try on perspectives we don't initially find very attractive" (73). What is often overlooked, however, is that simulating characters' perspectives might also have a downside: it might induce states of cognitive dissonance in readers.

Philosophers such as Berys Gaut and Amy Coplan have conducted in-depth conceptual analyses of audiences' empathetic engagement with characters. According to Coplan (144), in empathy or mental simulation the "self-other differentiation" is always preserved: we take on the perspective of another human being (in this case, a fictional character) without giving up our own everyday perspective. As Gaut (208) puts it, empathy is an "aspectual" phenomenon: it involves adopting only some *aspects* of a character's perspective on the world, while keeping our own perspective in the background. But this backgrounded perspective is not, or not always, inert. Let's run a simple thought experiment. Suppose that a reader—let's call him Peter—is deeply prejudiced against the mentally ill. Suppose that Peter's prejudice plays an important role in his self-concept, perhaps because of an unpleasant encounter he has had with a mentally ill person while he was a child: Peter sees all mentally ill patients as aggressive and potentially dangerous. The real world offers abundant evidence that Peter is wrong, but prejudices are hard to

eradicate. Reading Woolf's novel and its presentation of the thought patterns of a mentally ill character, however, may give Peter food for thought. While Septimus's mind is clearly out of kilter, he doesn't seem to pose any threat to anyone but himself. This realization, together with the sense of relative freedom that goes with the fictionality of Woolf's story, may induce Peter to tentatively adopt Septimus's perspective: Peter may learn to see the world from the viewpoint of a young man who believes that trees are conscious and that love will save the world; he may even start to feel anger at the obtuseness of the two doctors who try to help Septimus, and shock at Septimus's throwing himself from the window. Yet this kind of perspective-taking is likely to clash with Peter's habitual prejudice against the mentally ill—it is likely to give rise to a state of cognitive dissonance.

Note that this state qualifies as dissonant on Festinger's original account, not on more recent social-psychological models. As we have seen in the previous section, such models focus on behavior and on the subject's evaluation of the possible negative consequences of an action. In adopting Septimus's perspective, Peter is not performing an action that may impact Peter's well-being or public identity. Indeed, engaging with fictional worlds—and with characters within these fictional worlds—can give us a reassuring sense of segregation from the realm of real-world action and behavior. It is precisely this sense that seems to encourage Peter to give up his defenses and put on hold his prejudice against the mentally ill. Thus, the absence of real-world consequences appears to be the condition for the dissonant state Peter experiences when he realizes that the backgrounded prejudice—which has such an important role in his self-concept—is inconsistent with his empathetic connection with Septimus: how is it possible to reconcile these two attitudes? In other words, how is it possible to reduce the cognitive dissonance?

The foregoing analysis has been highly speculative, and so will be my answers to these questions. I see readers' strategies for reducing cognitive dissonance in their engagement with characters as falling on a continuum between two poles, which I will call "attitude change" and "imaginative resistance." This is a continuum rather than a choice between two possibilities because both attitude change and imaginative resistance can be more or less intense, with weaker forms of attitude change approaching imaginative resistance (and vice versa). In the "grey area" between clear-cut instances of these strategies, the dissonance is felt only faintly and vicariously (i.e., on behalf of the characters) by readers, so that no distinct attempt is made to reduce it. In the remainder of this section I will deal with attitude change, turning to imaginative resistance in the next section.

One way to cope with cognitive dissonance is, of course, to change the background attitude (in Peter's case, a prejudice) that is causing trouble. There is some empirical evidence that reading literature, and specifically empathizing with characters, can lead to attitude change in some situations. In an experiment, Frank Hakemulder asked two groups of participants to read two texts about the condition of women in Algeria. One group read a narrative text—a chapter from Malika Mokeddem's novel *The Forbidden Woman*—focusing on the difficulties and challenges experienced by a young Algerian woman. Narrated by the woman herself, this text has the spatio-temporal particularity that is characteristic of narrative. By contrast, the other text was an excerpt from Jan Goodwin's essay *Price of Honor*, which examines the condition of Algerian women much more generally. Both texts can be read as denouncing the violation of women's rights in fundamentalist Islamic societies. Yet Hakemulder's study showed that reading the story had a stronger effect on the participants' attitude towards women's rights in Algeria than reading the essay. This is Hakemulder's explanation for this finding: "a narrative presentation causes



stronger effects on our beliefs about the emotions and thoughts of others (social perception) than a non-narrative presentation with approximately the same contents . . . . Both texts probably primed the same memory schemata, namely, knowledge concerning women in Islamic countries. But, it seems to take a text with a character personifying the issue to change subjects' beliefs" (107).

There is no reason to think that, in this particular study, the participants' belief change served to resolve a cognitively dissonant state. But there is no reason to think that this couldn't happen either: to return to our thought experiment, it is at least a theoretical possibility that empathizing with Septimus may lead Peter to overcome his own prejudice against mentally ill people. Typically, the changes that result from the experience of dissonance are subtle shifts rather than dramatic personality changes. Take, for example, a famous study in which Cohen asked a group of Yale students—all of them strongly critical of the New Haven police department—to write an essay *in favor* of the police: the students' attitude towards the police changed after the task, as a consequence of the cognitive dissonance between the position they had to take in the essay and their prior evaluations (see Cohen). However, Cooper points out that the students "did not come to believe that the police were the paragon of diplomacy and restraint— . . . they [just] were more understanding and positive to the police than they had been previously" (86).

Likewise, Peter's attitude towards the mentally ill may change only subtly—for example by inviting him to tone down, rather than put aside, his prejudice. The experience Peter has gained by empathizing with Septimus may enrich his understanding of the phenomenology of mental illness, which in turn may take the edge off his belief that all mentally ill people are violent. It is worth stressing here that attitude changes at this level may not necessarily lead to behavioral changes. Despite widespread claims about the ethical effects of reading literature (cf. Nussbaum 85–112), the jury is still out as to whether relating to Septimus's mental illness is likely to make Peter a better person. In her *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen (85–93) has reviewed the empirical evidence for the prosocial effects of reading literature, concluding that it is mostly mixed or inadequate. Even if Peter's attitude towards the mentally ill does change slightly to reduce the cognitive dissonance, it may not result in more altruistic behavior because of what I have described as the relative segregation of fictional storytelling practices. Still, we may speculate that cognitive dissonance is one of the driving forces behind readers' attitude changes in response to literary texts, and characters in particular. Such changes may affect both readers' beliefs (as in Hakemulder's experiment) and their self-concept and personality, as others empirical studies—some of them carried out by Hakemulder himself—suggest (Hakemulder 117–145; Oatley 160–162). More research is needed in this area, but it is conceivable that cognitive dissonance while reading literary fiction may have an impact on both readers' subjective perception of themselves (self-concept) and on their personality as measured through psychological tests.

#### 4. Imaginative resistance in *Time's Arrow*

I have hypothesized above that the perceived fictionality of storyworlds encourages readers to give up their defenses, making it easier for them to empathize (or sympathize) with fictional characters than with real people. In other words, the ontological barrier between the real and the fictional can act as a safety zone, encouraging readers to adopt experiential perspectives that they would be less likely to relate to in real intersubjectivity.

Yet we shouldn't exaggerate the gap between fictional worlds and the real world. Some fictional stories can ask the audience to engage with perspectives that are just too distant from—and incompatible with—readers' own worldview for them to resolve the cognitive dissonance by changing their attitude. This is the case of the second psychological phenomenon that I would like to examine here, which I call "imaginative resistance."

In the continuum of strategies through which readers cope with cognitive dissonance, imaginative resistance is exactly opposite to attitude change. This concept is at the center of a vigorous debate within analytic aesthetics—a debate that Kendall Walton has described as "a tangled nest of importantly distinct, but easily confused, puzzles" (137). In this context, however, we can stick to one of the most influential formulations of the puzzle, Tamar Szabó Gendler's: "Given that for the most part we have no trouble fictionally entertaining all sorts of far-fetched and implausible scenarios, what explains the impediments we seem to encounter when we are asked to imagine moral judgments sharply divergent from those we ordinarily make?" (55). Let us reframe Gendler's question in the terms of our own discussion. It may be argued that imagining a physically or logically impossible state of affairs causes cognitive dissonance, since it leads to a clash between the impossible scenario that we are entertaining and real-world knowledge about its impossibility. Take, for example, Martin Amis's 1991 novel *Time's Arrow*. In this novel time runs backwards; later events seem to *precede* earlier events, consequences are taken as causes by the narrator, as shown by this reverse description of a car accident:

There was my car, like a mad old hog caught in mid-spasm, its snout and tusks crushed and steaming. And I didn't feel too good myself as the police officer helped wedge me into its driving seat and tried to shut the warped front door. Thereafter I sat back and let Tod handle everything. He rammed his foot down on the brake and sent the car into a fizzing convulsion of rev and whinny. With a skilful lurch he gave the bent hydrant on the sidewalk a crunchy shouldercheck—and we were off, weaving at speed back up the street. Other cars screamed in to fill the sudden vacuum of our wake. (27–28)

In order to make sense of this passage readers have to reconstruct a hypothetical sequence in which Tod loses control of the car, hits a hydrant, brakes sharply, and is subsequently pulled from the wreckage by a police officer. To rearrange these events into their "correct" order the audience will have to rely on real-world knowledge and scripts (i.e., stereotypical action sequences) stored in their memory (see Gerrig 39–44).<sup>11</sup> This situation is complicated by the fact that the narrator seems to interpret the events he witnesses as if they unfolded in a forward order: the policeman is seen wedging him "into [the car's] driving seat," and Tom crashes the car into the hydrant with a "skilful lurch" (whereas, we imagine, there is nothing intentional—or skilful—about this act). Thus, the puzzlement that accompanies readers' engagement with this novel results from the cognitive dissonance between two interpretations: in the first, events are reconstructed on the basis of real-world scripts (and therefore seen as happening backward), whereas in the second readers try to follow the events according to the forward logic introduced by the narrator.<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, this shows that cognitive dissonance is a process

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<sup>11</sup> Together with "frames," "scripts" was one of the first cognitive-scientific concepts to make its way into narrative theory: see Gavins and Bernini and Caracciolo (43–47).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Seymour Chatman's statement: "Amis's backward/antonymic reporting is selective. . . . That means we must recognize one more system at work in the novel: not only the backward/antonymizing

that can involve many aspects of the reading experience, not just the audience's engagement with characters (which is the main focus of this article). Note, however, that despite the dissonance created by this double interpretation of narrative temporality readers do not have any difficulty in accepting *the fact* that events unfold in this way in the fictional world. For all its inventiveness, Amis's narrative technique asks readers to make the same imaginative leap that they make whenever they accept the possibility of a talking animal or dead narrator.<sup>13</sup>

Readers' imagination is not always this flexible, though. While we can easily imagine impossible or counterfactual states of affairs, we find it hard to take the stance of a character whose thoughts and behavior directly contradict our own ethical values and evaluations. In imagining that something might be the case in a fictional world, we seem to be relatively freer than in accepting a perspective on the world that we consider immoral: we always tend to *resist* immorality. Derek Matravers puts this point as follows: "let p be the proposition that people can be instantaneously transported from a spaceship to the surface of the earth and q be the proposition that there is nothing wrong with female infanticide. A reader can fictionally assent to the former, but cannot fictionally assent to the latter" (92). This phenomenon is (part of) what philosophers call "imaginative resistance." Let's exemplify this idea, again by using Amis's novel as a case study.

Those who are not familiar with the novel will probably have had difficulties in understanding the exact relationship between the character named Tod and the narrator in the passage quoted above. Indeed, another paradoxical state of affairs that *Time's Arrow* asks us to accept is that the narrator is an incorporeal entity—Chatman (38) calls him "Soul"—inhabiting Tod's body. In his own words, the narrator has "no access to [Tod's] thoughts—but [is] awash with his emotions" (15). This means that the narrator can feel Tod's bodily, emotional states, but he is in the dark with respect to the character's identity and past experiences (remember that the novel is told backwards, from Tod's death to his birth). As we read into the novel, we begin suspecting that Tod is trying to cover up a murky past, towards which the story is slowly, but inexorably, progressing. And it is only in the second half of the novel that we discover Tod's secret: he was one of the Nazi doctors who performed torturous medical experiments in the concentration camps during World War Two. This truth emerges in chapter 5, which is—remarkably—the only chapter where the narrator seems to be one with Tod: he always refers to Tod in the first person rather than in the third person, as he did in the car accident sequence. For instance, commenting on the operations of the gas chambers in Auschwitz, the narrator declares: "I or a doctor of equivalent rank was present at every stage in the sequence" (128).

This revelation about the protagonist's identity is likely to affect significantly the audience's engagement with him. In earlier chapters, the narrator served in many ways as a guide for the audience: he shared both their sense of puzzlement at the backward temporality of the storyworld and their curiosity about Tod's secret.<sup>14</sup> This may have encour-

orientation but also the *diegetically forward* orientation we bring over from other narratives we've read. These systems are always in tension in *Time's Arrow*" (46).

<sup>13</sup> Such physically or logically impossible stories are at the center of so-called "unnatural narratology." See Alber et al.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, this passage from *Time's Arrow*: "Tod's fear, when I stop and analyse it, really is frightening. And inexplicable. It has to do with his own mutilation. Who might commit it? How can he avert it? / Watch. We're getting younger. We are. We're getting stronger. We're even getting taller. I

aged readers to align their perspective with the narrator via narrative empathy. Yet in this chapter no such alignment is possible: the narrator's ethical stance conflicts with the audience, and the resulting cognitive dissonance can only be resolved by strongly rejecting his viewpoint. But there is another factor to consider—and here Amis's narrative technique takes on its full significance. It is not only that the narrator *approves* of the extermination camps; it is that his (mis)construal of the backward nature of narrative time leads him to see what happens in the gas chambers as the creation—rather than the cessation—of life. Consider the following passage:

What tells me that this [i.e., the mass extermination] is right? . . . Certainly not my aesthetic sense. I would never claim that Auschwitz-Birkenau-Monowitz was good to look at. Or to listen to, or to smell, or to taste, or to touch. . . . Not for its elegance did I come to love the evening sky, hellish red with the gathering souls. Creation is easy. Also ugly. Hier ist kein warum. Here there is no why. Here there is no when, no how, no where. Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire. (128)

The tragic misunderstanding reflected by the narrator's comments widens the divide between his ethical perspective and the reader's: in addition to being morally wrong, the narrator is *factually* wrong in his interpretation of the Holocaust. The dissonance between the audience's real-world knowledge and the narrator's words can only result in the rejection of the narrator's perspective. Thus, readers' imaginative resistance becomes another strategy for dealing with the cognitive dissonance. Why couldn't attitude change occur here? Simply put, because the historical knowledge and moral evaluations conflicting with the narrator's interpretation are too important, and entrenched in readers' worldview, to be overturned. Here we find an interesting exception to the idea of the relative segregation of fictional worlds: readers find it comparatively easy to accept a storyworld in which events unfold backward, but they find it hard to accept that what looks like the Holocaust might be construed as the creation—rather than the extermination—of a people. In the latter case, real-world values are brought to bear on the fictional world and the fictional character in particular, negating the possibility of attitude change.

## 5. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis shows how complex and multifaceted readers' interaction with fictional worlds can be. On the one hand, I have hypothesized that the perceived separateness of fiction can encourage the audience to experiment with experiential perspectives that are considerably different from their own. Such temporary adoption of a character's worldview and belief system through narrative empathy can even have a feedback effect on readers' beliefs and self-concept. On the other hand, it seems that past a certain point—that is, when the character's perspective becomes too alien and, especially, morally unacceptable—readers are not disposed to bracket their own values; the audience just breaks the empathetic bond with the character, resisting his or her perspective. While

don't quite recognize this world we're in. Everything is familiar but not at all reassuring. Far from it. This is a world of mistakes, of diametrical mistakes" (15). Both the narrator's questions about Tod's past and his puzzlement at the strangeness of the storyworld are likely to be shared by readers.

these claims are, as I have already pointed out, merely speculative, they could easily lend themselves to empirical testing.

More generally, the audience's transactions with fictional worlds appear to be poised between ontological segregation from reality, and openness to the experiential values and evaluations that guide our interaction with the real world. Just like attitude change shows that the perspectives readers temporarily adopt while relating to characters can have an impact on their beliefs, values, and self-concept, imaginative resistance suggests that readers' own values can, in some scenarios, discourage them from adopting fictional characters' perspectives. In the first case the "direction of flow" seems to go from storyworlds to readers' experiential background, since readers are influenced by their interaction with fictional characters. In the second case, the "direction of flow" goes in the opposite direction: readers' values prevent them from adopting a fictional perspective that they consider immoral or otherwise deviant (see Figure 1). This reveals the inherently evaluative or axiological nature of our encounters with fictional worlds and characters: despite the ontological divide between reality and fiction, readers' engagement with literary stories brings into play—and allows them to negotiate—real-world values (see Gibson 107–110).

It is because of this interplay of segregation and openness that cognitive dissonance may arise, guiding readers' responses to fiction and shaping the ways in which storyworlds can penetrate into readers' experiential background. In this article I have examined attitude change and imaginative resistance as alternative strategies for dealing with cognitive dissonance, but it should be clear that these strategies are at the opposite ends of a continuum (see again Figure 1): both of them can have different degrees of intensity, so that between clear-cut cases of either strategy there is a vast grey area where attitude changes are difficult to detect, and imaginative resistance weak and intermittent. Cognitive dissonance is perhaps less evident here, but it is—in my view—always in the background of readers' engagement with characters. This kind of dissonance is mostly vicarious rather than felt by readers in a first-person way: it is experienced by readers not in response to but *on behalf* of the characters. It could be speculated that literary narratives tend to keep dissonance in this grey area: they generate a friction between readers' and characters' worldview, but such friction is not so strong as to result in attitude change or in a rejection of the characters' attitudes. Most of our transactions with fictional characters seem to occur in this area, where the dissonance is created without being resolved. We've seen three examples of these patterns of cognitive dissonance: attitude change, in the thought experiment where relating to Woolf's Septimus led Peter to revise his prejudice against the mentally ill; vicarious dissonance, when readers experienced Septimus's dissonance as he is torn between wanting to commit suicide and liking life; and imaginative resistance, in our rejection of the point of view of the narrator/character of *Time's Arrow*.

As I argued at the beginning of this article, dissonance is a key ingredient of storytelling: narratives, and especially highly "tellable" narratives, thrive on conflicts among and within characters. To borrow Edmund Husserl's term (later applied to literature by Paul Ricoeur), literary storytelling can be seen as a long series of "imaginative variations" on cognitive dissonance and the many narrative trajectories it can give rise to. Further, although it would be impossible to explore this idea in full here, such variations can help readers come to terms with the dissonance—between seeing and imagining, having and desiring, being and not being—that accompanies their daily lives.

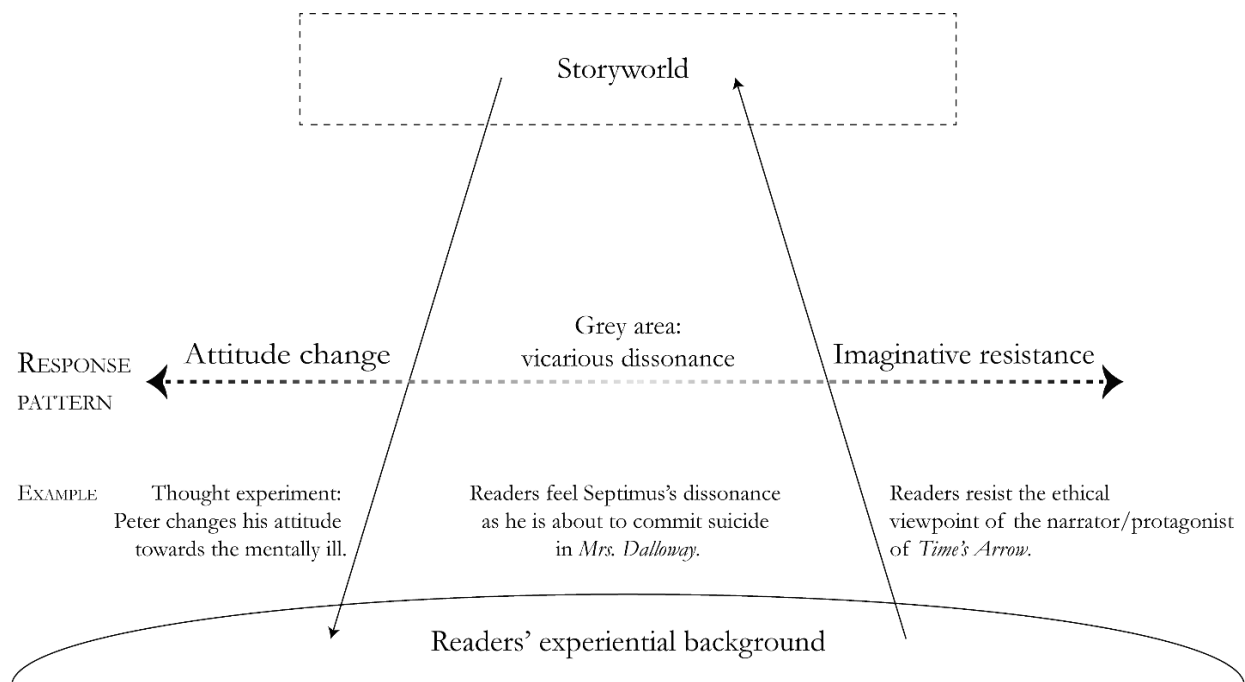


FIGURE 1 Patterns of cognitive dissonance in readers' engagement with characters

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