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Author(s): Barrie Paskins

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# On Being Moved by Anna Karenina and *Anna Karenina*

BARRIE PASKINS

Colin Radford raises the interesting question of how we can be moved by the fate of fictional characters.<sup>1</sup> My mother having recently arrived from the United States by air, I fall into a day-dream: the plane crashes killing my mother and all the passengers. You come in to find me in tears. What has upset me so? The death of my mother and her fellow travellers? But how stupid. It has not happened: she is alive and well and here she comes. It is absurd to weep over counterfactuals when the facts merit no tears. And yet we do (some of us) weep over the nasty fate of Anna Karenina, uncomforted by the fact of her non-existence and with no wish to be in logic repentant. Radford considers six responses to the problem, finds them wanting, and concludes that pity for Anna 'involves us in inconsistency and so incoherence'.

Michael Weston claims that Radford pays insufficient attention to 'the fact that our responses to characters in fiction are responses to works of art'. I find his argument somewhat obscure but it seems to be this. To establish the incoherence of our being moved by Anna's fate, Radford must show that we respond in the ways under discussion only if we 'believe' in the 'factual or probable' existence of the object of our emotion. But our being moved by fictional characters could be evidence that such emotion does not involve existential belief. And the ways in which literature can illuminate our lives, together with the connections that there are between our art-directed feelings and our feelings towards real people show that we are (or can be) moved by works of art in ways that involve no existential belief and hence no inconsistency.

This argument seems to me inadequate for a reason that can be located conveniently by a glance at a puzzle of Augustine's. How can a good man take pleasure in tragedy? To take pleasure in the pain of others is depraved; we take pleasure in tragedy and the pain of others is central to it; so we are taking pleasure in the suffering of others. This is not an impressive argument. My pleasure is at *Anna Karenina*, a novel which does not experience pain; the suffering is Anna Karenina's, and I take no pleasure in it. Weston fails to state or solve Radford's problem because he overlooks its specific-

<sup>1</sup> C. Radford and M. Weston, 'How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 49 (1975), 67–93.

ness. The question is not: how can we be moved by *Anna Karenina*? but: how can we be moved by Anna Karenina? No doubt some works of art move us and illuminate our lives in ways that do not involve Radford's problem—architecture and much music spring to mind. Even *Anna Karenina* evokes some unproblematic emotions, e.g. pleasure at the flow of its narrative, awe at its construction and complexity. But we *pity* Anna and one might think that the most important feelings induced in us by such works as *Anna* were the emotions we feel towards such characters as Anna. These are emotions we naturally call by the same names as emotions we feel towards real people. A successful challenge to Radford's assumption that the feelings he is concerned with have existential import would need to show that we can make sense of a species of (say) pity which is devoid of existential import. I shall not attempt this (probably hopeless) task.

What is Radford's problem? It is not the possibility of saying that Anna suffers a miserable fate that puzzles him: there is no more puzzle about that than about the attribution of beauty or intelligence to Anna. Nor is he raising the question of how pity of mine can be directed to a person for whom my pity cannot and never could find expression in action. Nor is the problem that of how real people and fictional characters can be in the same situation. His difficulty is this. Often when I pity someone, there is someone whom I pity (extensional pity). Sometimes when I pity someone, it is not the case that there is someone whom I pity (intensional pity). Some cases of intensional pity present no special problem. Suppose you tell me a story about your non-existent sister. Taken in, I both feel pity for her and send her a letter. There is no more puzzle about the pity than about the post. But Anna poses a special problem because we know that she does not exist, which rules out the possibility that this pity would have been extensional but for the false assumption, belief, etc.

In defence of the (coherence of) the tears we shed for Anna, I want to assume for a moment something about what is involved in going to a Hollywood movie for a nice cry. I take it—provisionally—that it is part of the point of such an outing that the real world is essentially different from the world of the film in that it would be quite improper to have a nice cry over the glossy heroine's fate if there were in fact real people in the same sort of bind as the girl on the screen. Now: what if anything would be odd about having a nice cry over the fate of Anna Karenina? There are two possible types of answer. One is that the oddity of a nice cry over Anna's fate is the same sort of thing as the oddity of splitting our sides laughing over her fate—it is the wrong reaction. But this sort of answer is not to my purpose, and what matters is that another is possible. It would be inappropriate (*ex hypothesi*) to have a nice cry over any real person *but it would not be improper to have the attitudes we in fact have to Anna even if there are (were/will be) real people in the same sort of bind as she is in*. There is a sense in which it just so happens that Anna does not exist. Anna is a fictional

## Discussion

character and fictional characters necessarily do not exist. But Anna is not an essentially fictional character: you do not have to bear in mind the fact that she is a fictional character to understand the way she moves us (viz. to pity). But on my working hypothesis you do have to remember that the glossy heroine is a fictional character to grasp the way she moves (some of) us (viz. to the tears known as a nice cry). The glossy heroine's non-existence is no mere accident—it carries logical consequences about what one may and may not feel. She is essentially fictional.

I have no wish to insist on my assumption about the weepie. I am content to allow that every variety of fiction in fact evokes emotions which would not be rendered inappropriate by the existence of real people in the relevant sort of situation. All I require is the distinction in principle between essentially and inessentially fictional characters. With this, Radford can be answered.

Pity, if that is the right word, for an essentially fictional character involves incoherence: for such pity is necessarily unspecifiable. If it could be specified then a proper object of it could be picked out. The only objects of it that can be suggested are improper since it would be inappropriate to have the emotion in question to anything (any thing). Hence such 'pity' involves incoherence though not inconsistency. If all fictional characters were essentially fictional, Radford would be right about the incoherence of our emotions towards Anna Karenina and probably *Anna Karenina*. However, what is unsettling about Radford's argument is not the suggestion that our feelings towards essentially fictional characters are incoherent; nor even the somewhat more disturbing possibility that characters we take for inessentially fictional are in fact of the other sort and the object of incoherent emotion.<sup>2</sup> Its sting is in the claim that pity for all fictional characters is necessarily incoherent. But it is open to us to reject this claim on a rather simple ground, namely: our pity towards the inessentially fictional is, or can without forcing be construed as, pity for those people if any who are in the same bind as the character in the fiction.

This possibility is neglected by Radford and Weston. I want to dispose of one objection to it. Consider Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. At least three views are possible of the buckets of tears we weep for them: we weep for the real Antony and Cleopatra, or for those people if any who are in essentially the situation of Shakespeare's characters, or for two splendid creatures who are very lifelike but—alas—never could have existed. On the

<sup>2</sup> A question to anyone disposed both to assert that works of art are important in the education of the emotions and to deny that our emotions towards fictional characters are directed towards those real people, if any, who are in essentially the same situation: what part is played in emotional development by the discovery that one has been lavishing one's pity, affection, delight, etc., on characters which are essentially unreal, artificial, merely contrived?

third interpretation the characters amount to an implicit criticism of the real world, which is felt to be poorer for their non-existence. It might be suggested that one is faced with incoherence here: the non-existence of the characters is presupposed and then emotions (e.g. pity) presupposing existence are directed towards them. The example is not an isolated one. An incoherence involving all characters that move us and whose non-existence is an object of regret, relief, etc., is as unsettling as Radford's paradox if not so general. The worry is increased if we reflect on the familiar and not obviously foolish feeling that our emotions towards fictional characters have order and coherence whereas our emotions towards real people are inescapably disordered and incoherent.

Two replies which are not sufficient. One might try proposing that the criticism of the world implicit in *Antony and Cleopatra* is a sense that the world is poorer *if* it contains no such creatures; that the sense of order-only-in-art is a feeling about the possibilities of coherence *so far as our experience goes*. Or one might argue that our pity is directed to one set of characteristics of the characters, our regret to another. But these remedies, even if they solve the logical problem, would seem to be an evasion. They limit unduly and arbitrarily the possibilities of our response to art and the world.

But there is a solution. We do not *just* feel that the world is poorer for lack of a Cleopatra: we first feel pity, wonder, admiration, horror, affection, etc., for those if any who are like Cleopatra and in her situation and then, on the assumption that there are none such, regret the lack. This involves no inconsistency or incoherence. Similarly with the sense of order-only-in-art.

*University of London King's College*