

SCIENCE FICTION IS GOOD FOR YOU TOO:
A REPLY TO MARTHA NUSSBAUM'S THEORY OF LITERARY
ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In this study I examine the arguments made by Martha Nussbaum in *Poetic Justice* in defence of a positive role for literary engagement in the process of moral and political judgement formation. Nussbaum argues that novel reading offers a unique chance to engage our empathy in morally beneficial ways, because it stands as a kind of practice run for appropriate moral judgement through the adoption of an emotionally engaged yet critically distant “Judicious Spectator” stance when reading. I examine her account of the activity and purported benefits of reading and argue that her use of the Judicious Spectator concept is incompatible with her claims about the structure of novels and the experience of reading. I suggest examining an alternative set of fictions, namely the genre of science fiction and in particular Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a means to assess whether Nussbaum’s account plausibly captures the moral value of reading fiction. I argue that even a charitable reading of Nussbaum’s Judicious Spectator concept cannot explain the central thought experiment at the heart of Le Guin’s novel, as it invites readers to contemplate a re-evaluation of their own self-identities or foundational assumptions, allowing them to abandon beliefs and understandings that have perhaps unwittingly coloured their previous moral reasoning without undergoing the scrutiny of justificatory rigour. This resulting type of re-evaluation is, I argue, primarily self-reflective in nature and not externally directed to programmatic outcomes like the possible interpretations of the novel available to Nussbaum. This good, which I label ‘appropriate doubt’, is defended as a general feature of certain kinds of novel reading, and as worthy of moral attention. I conclude that this shows Nussbaum’s account of engagement with fiction to be at best, incomplete.

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ABBREVIATIONS

LHoD *The Left Hand of Darkness*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

What role, if any, does fiction have in moral development? Could it be necessary for the development of sound moral capacities? It would be quite an overreach to claim that reading fiction is a necessary step in any person's adequate moral development, especially given the relatively recent development of widespread literacy among the general populace (still very much an incomplete project), coupled with the exceedingly narrow timeframe of the ascendancy of long-form literature as the popular medium of choice (before the advent of cinema and television overtook it in the modern west). To be blunt, the very idea smacks of literary elitism, a position one would only think tenable if it were coupled with a belief in the widespread (and historically, near universal) failure of the human race to reach a bare minimum standard of proficiency in ethical reasoning. Despite this substantial qualification however, there is, as many readers can attest, a pervasive, persuasive, and long-standing intuition that engagement with fiction and moral reasoning are somehow connected. Our connection to literary characters elicits what feels like genuine and heartfelt emotional reactions, and our imaginative connection to fictional places and plots opens up new avenues of thought and possibility that seem to have direct applicability to the concrete social and political life in which we collectively engage, as direct analogies or as more metaphorical similarity. These powerful, yet historically ill-defined, notions surrounding the connection between our imaginative capacities of make-believe and the foundational questions of ethics and epistemology in the history of philosophy are some of the

longest running philosophical debates in the western tradition, stretching back as far as Plato's declaration that poets are corruptors of the public realm and not welcome in his ideal state.¹

Despite this historically grounded interest in the connection between fiction and politics, engagement with the broad topic of fiction in the modern analytic context has focused mainly on questions of the nature of fictional entities and related ontological disagreements, or has been bracketed off in the aesthetic tradition, far away from the question originally posed by Plato about the consequences for social and political life of fictional uptake. Of the literature that does address the Platonic question of whether or not fictions are morally useful or harmful, much of the modern discussion has focused on an understanding of our engagement with fiction as primarily emotional in nature, contrasting this with the paradigm of rational deliberation to be found in idealized moral problem-solving scenarios and therefore dismissing or at least diminishing the potential value of fiction for the study of ethics.

More recently, however, some philosophers have attempted to defend engagement with fiction as activating exactly the right kinds of emotional responses that are essential for sound moral judgements. Most prominent and vociferous among these contemporary defenders within the analytic tradition is Martha Nussbaum, who argues that novel reading offers us a unique chance to engage our empathy in morally significant (and if we choose our literature well, beneficial) ways. Her argument is both a defence of the usefulness of appropriate emotional responses to proper ethical reasoning, and a claim that at least some kinds of novel reading can provide us with precisely the kind of practice in critical judgement that is required for good moral reasoning. Central to this argument is Nussbaum's discussion of how we can conceptualize emotional engagement that is still suitably distant from our own personal concerns

¹ Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992), 607.

so as to fulfill another strong intuition we have about sound moral judgements, namely, that they be appropriately agent neutral or objective.

My own interest in the subject was spurred by encountering Nussbaum's work on this subject. I was initially quite taken with Nussbaum's view, as it seemed to me to provide a much needed practical discussion of examples and consequences to arguments defending a cognitive picture of the emotions and the related position that they therefore belonged in any plausible story of what human rational thought and judgement consisted in. Nussbaum's contention that engagement with fiction carried (along with its aesthetic dimension) specific moral and political implications was bracing in its directness, and offered up a modern counter to Plato's distrust.

There are of course objections to her view, specifically aimed at what appears to be a lacuna in her argument between her robust defence of a role for the emotions in rational judgement and a somewhat narrow (perhaps even simplistic) discussion of the practical implications of our engagement with fictions. In short, it appears as though Nussbaum's own imagination failed her when it came to working out just how broad or varied an impact fiction might have on a person and their judgment formation.

I had conceived of this project initially as a way of augmenting her account with additional resources that I thought she lacked in order to deal adequately with a much broader range of literature than her initial focus on a specific set of realist novels, and more in line with her general claims on behalf of the activity of reading and the structure of novels and the narrative forms of fiction. My initial intent was therefore to offer a revised account of the activity of reading following Nussbaum's view; one that was less causally direct than her own picture, in order to deal with cases of fiction that appeared to me to be overflowing with morally and politically significant ideas and also, in their form and structure, invitations to a uniquely

valuable kind of experience of engagement. In the best novels of science fiction I saw not only subtly articulated moral quandaries and solutions illuminated in compelling ways, but also a genre-specific method of engagement that buttresses Nussbaum's defence of cognitively sophisticated emotions as valuable perceptions with a role to play in practical moral judgement.

All of this is to say, I was very sympathetic to Nussbaum's stated aims and initial motivations in *Poetic Justice*. But the more I read and puzzled over how Nussbaum's view fit together, the more convinced I became that her account had at its heart a problematic conception of the activity of reading that stymied the forcefulness of her own defence of the value of fiction in moral deliberation. This led to the critical analysis of her account contained in this paper, and ultimately to the conclusion that her conception of the activity of readers was implausible and internally inconsistent.

In this study I examine in detail the arguments made by Nussbaum in defence of a positive role for literary engagement in the process of moral and political judgement formation. In Section 2.1, I outline the main tenets of Nussbaum's view, which I name for ease of reference, the "Emotional Engagement View." These are: first, the claim that engagement with narrative fiction is of particular moral worth, due in part to its detailed depiction of fully realized conceptions of how one should live. Second, that reading is pleasurable and this feature of literary engagement is itself a moral feature, as a relationship akin to friendship with the characters in novels is appropriate and perhaps essential for proper judgement. Third, the related claim that readers bring a general evaluative framework to bear on the worlds they encounter in fiction through their emotional responses, one that recognizes in very general terms what is harmful or helpful to the flourishing of human life. Nussbaum holds that the formal structural features of novels invite (and perhaps demand) certain types of reader response that align with

this facet of reader response. Finally, and centrally, Nussbaum claims that novel reading is ethically and politically valuable because it stands as a kind of practice run for appropriate moral judgement. It does this because reading fiction is relevantly similar to a standard of appropriate practical judgement she calls the “Judicious Spectator.” The Judicious Spectator position is an artificial construction that outlines an appropriate standard of objectivity, one that removes self-interested emotional attachments while still allowing the right kinds of emotions to play their essential role in proper judgement. Nussbaum borrows the heart of this concept from Adam Smith’s “Impartial Spectator”, but, as will be noted below, her view diverges from Smith’s in several important respects.

In Section 2.1.1, I retrace Nussbaum’s defence of a role for the emotions in rational judgement from two historic objections: the objection that the emotions are false perceptual data, and the objection that the emotions are inappropriately personal and therefore ineligible for inclusion in a rational standard of judgement. I conclude that Nussbaum offers us persuasive reasons to reject these dismissals, and that her inclusion of emotional perception in rational judgement at this most basic level is warranted.

In Sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.3, I examine Nussbaum’s specific conception of the Judicious Spectator as an appropriate and objective standard of practical judgement that includes emotional responses. I conclude that Nussbaum’s use of the Judicious Spectator concept is imprecisely deployed in her defence of literary engagement. Specifically, Nussbaum is unclear about whether she means to adopt the Judicious Spectator as a normative ideal or standard for what appropriate uptake of fiction is like, or whether she means to argue that the Judicious Spectator stands as an apt and useful descriptive analogy for what reading fiction is like. I argue that in either instance,

Nussbaum risks undermining the coherence of her related claims about the nature of reading and the structure of novels.

In Chapter three I take up in detail the consequences of understanding the Judicious Spectator as either a normative ideal or a descriptive claim. I examine the plausibility and consequences of three categories of objection to Nussbaum's Judicious Spectator understood normatively, concluding that Nussbaum cannot adopt Adam Smith's normative standard version of the Judicious Spectator without falling into inconsistency regarding her other claims about literary engagement. In Section 3.1.1, I discuss the objection that Nussbaum conflates two types of imaginative engagement in the concept of 'Fancy' within the Judicious Spectator position. I conclude that she cannot derive the specific liberal theoretical commitments she desires as end products of the Judicious Spectator procedure from this amalgamation of distinct imaginative projects. In Section 3.1.2, I consider the objections that the Judicious Spectator position is by its own father's admission perhaps impossible to adopt, concluding that if understood as a success term, the Judicious Spectator appears circular. Further, I conclude that Nussbaum's implied theory of textual impact (i.e. her suggestion that the novel constructs certain responses in the reader and further the impact a text has on a reader derives from the text and not from work done by the reader) precludes understanding the Judicious Spectator as an ideal standard of readerly activity. In Section 3.1.3, I examine the objection that the Judicious Spectator lacks the conceptual mechanics to make it a plausible normative standard. This counter argument posits that the Judicious Spectator, understood normatively, gives agents no mechanism to adjudicate between contesting claims of reasonableness regarding appropriate sentiment without falling back on prior social consensus. This is an unpalatable conclusion for Nussbaum, as she wishes to defend novel reading as potentially convention-breaking in its outcome. In Section 3.1.4, I

evaluate the implications for Nussbaum's view understood as a normative standard of readerly activity, concluding that the Judicious Spectator cannot be read as such in a logically consistent and persuasive way.

In the back half of Chapter three I turn to the other alternative interpretation of the Judicious Spectator on Nussbaum's view, that of a descriptive claim about the activity of reading. In Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, I survey critical objections to Nussbaum's interpretations of specific novels as examples of the operation of the Judicious Spectator, concluding that although Nussbaum's readings are implausible in their definitiveness, she could coherently abandon her view of textual impact and avoid these criticisms while maintaining a coherent conception of the Judicious Spectator as analogous to the activity of reading. Similarly, in Sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.4, I survey objections to Nussbaum's empirical claims made on behalf of the structure of the novel and the consequences of an Aristotelian conception of cognitive emotional perceptions and the normative standard of human suffering and flourishing. I conclude again that Nussbaum cannot hold both a consistent view of the Judicious Spectator as descriptively analogous to the activity of reading, and her previously articulated empirical claims. However, this does not show by itself that the Judicious Spectator is an incorrect or implausible description of readers' activity.

In order to assess this matter, in Chapter four I suggest examining an alternative set of fictions, namely the genre of science fiction and in particular Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a means to assess whether the Judicious Spectator, understood descriptively, does in fact plausibly capture the moral value of reading fiction. I argue that science fiction has some unique features as a genre that recommend it to the project of defending novel reading as of moral value. In order to fully explicate these features, I scrutinize Le Guin's novel as a test case. In Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, I survey the critical response to *The Left Hand of*

Darkness in order to counter possible arguments for dismissal of this case of engagement with literature as irregular or perverse relative to the standard activity of novel reading. I conclude that although this work, and science fiction as a genre, have particular characteristics, they do not run counter to the ordinary operation of readerly activity. Further, some of those genre features recommend science fiction as structurally inclined towards the aim of understanding engagement with fiction as morally valuable.

In Section 4.3.3, I argue that even a charitable reading of Nussbaum's Judicious Spectator concept, while potentially capturing some socially and politically relevant opportunities for engagement, cannot explain the central thought experiment at the heart of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I argue that Le Guin's novel invites its readers to contemplate a reevaluation of their own self-identities or foundational assumptions, allowing them to abandon beliefs and understandings that have perhaps unwittingly coloured their previous moral reasoning without undergoing the scrutiny of justificatory rigour. This resulting type of appropriate doubt is, I argue, primarily self-reflective in nature and not externally directed to programmatic outcomes like the possible interpretations of the novel available under the Judicious Spectator. This good, which I label 'appropriate doubt', is defended as a general feature of certain kinds of novel reading and as worthy of moral attention in Section 4.3.4. I conclude that this shows Nussbaum's account of engagement with fiction to be at best, incomplete.

In Chapter five I conclude my examination of this topic with some suggestions of avenues of further research and argumentation. I propose that Paul Ricoeur's understanding of self-identity as self-interpretation provides a potential avenue of exploration for more complete descriptive accounts of the phenomenology of engagement with literary works. I also suggest that the justificatory project of defending a constructivist grounding for moral obligation of the

sort Christine Korsgaard has defended may hold some interesting parallels to an understanding of readerly activity that takes into account the possibility of appropriate doubt.

I conclude by surveying the arguments presented against Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View, arguing that I have shown the normative reading of her view to be inconsistent and the descriptive reading to be implausible as a definitive account. I do not think I have disproven Nussbaum's claim that the emotions play an important role in appropriate moral and political judgment. Further, I do not claim to have shown that a descriptive understanding of the Judicious Spectator is incoherent, only that it is an incomplete description of the moral good of literary engagement.

CHAPTER TWO

In this chapter I will outline Martha Nussbaum's 'practice run' account of the moral value of reading fiction. I will show how Nussbaum responds to the standard objections for including the emotions in rational moral judgment and endorse her general claim that the emotions have an important role to play in moral judgment. I will then turn to Nussbaum's account of which emotions are part of reliable moral judgment, focussing on her use of the concept of the Judicious Spectator. I will advance two competing plausible interpretations of Nussbaum's Judicious Spectator, with textual evidence, and will utilize these interpretations in subsequent chapters to argue that she has not identified the single moral value of reading fiction.

2.1 Nussbaum's View

According to Nussbaum, the moral value of fiction is found in recognizing that novel reading is a kind of practice ground for training our sentiments. She agrees with theorists who point out that our uptake of fictional works appears often to be driven (and sustained) by a strong element of emotional engagement we have with fictional works and their characters, but disagrees that such emotional reactions are problematic (even citing the "disconcerting" power of our emotional responses as a positive feature of novels).² In her view, appropriate emotional evaluation is in fact necessary for good moral judgment, and imaginative engagement with works of fiction (especially readers' ties to characters) stand as paradigmatic cases of the appropriate

² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), 5.

place for our sympathetic imagination to be exercised. For Nussbaum, the form of the novel is itself of a special kind. That is, novels can uniquely express certain kinds of moral outlooks (or as she puts it, answers to the question ‘how should I live?’), positions, she argues, that cannot be adequately summarized or translated into other forms of prose writing.³ Accordingly, she claims that we cannot have fully explored the possibilities found in alternative ethical outlooks unless we have engaged with novels. In *Poetic Justice* she argues that we engage with fiction centrally through emotional engagement with the characters, attaching to their plight as we might to a friend’s.⁴ Novels, she argues, both embody and generate the activity of ‘Fancy’ (of seeing one thing as another, or of imagining non-existent possibilities).⁵ Nussbaum also contends that readers assess the particular conditions depicted in novels with reference to certain very general norms of human flourishing that are ‘built into’ their compassionate responses, carrying judgments of “what is serious damage to a life and what is not.”⁶ Nussbaum’s view is that we cannot help but bring such interpretations to bear on our engagement with the world presented in the fictional work, that they are embedded in our emotional reactions to an unfolding plot.⁷ Such responses are not just part of reader’s emotional reactions in her account, they are built into the very structure of the novel. As she says, “the novel constructs a paradigm of a style of ethical reasoning that is context-specific without being relativistic, in which we get potentially universalizable concrete prescriptions by bringing a general idea of human flourishing to bear on a concrete situation, which we are invited to enter through the imagination.”⁸

³ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 45, 22-29.

⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 5, 35.

⁵ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 4.

⁶ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 7. It is worth noting that this appears to be a descriptive claim on Nussbaum’s account, not a normative ideal, although she never clarifies satisfactorily.

⁷ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 8.

⁸ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 8.

Nussbaum makes two strong claims about readers' experience; first, she claims that it provides insights that should play a role in the formation of an acceptable moral and political theory. We should, if we are paying close attention, be able to see what has gone right (or wrong) in the specific case the novel presents us and be able to apply such judgments, in more general terms, to our understanding of very broad principles of social interaction and conduct. We do this, Nussbaum argues, through our capacity for Fancy. This concept is for Nussbaum both the imaginative leap we make into other worlds or perspectives when immersed in a novel, and also the imaginative leap we make from the particular cases of morally significant actions depicted in said novels to more generalizable ethical principles. So, for example, readers of *Hard Times* are invited (through their emotional investment in the characters of that novel) to notice lives that are quite particular and rich, and also quite different from their own. The worn-down working class factory man Stephen Blackpool or the miserably married Louisa Gradgrind are vividly depicted in the novel and, Nussbaum argues, we are drawn by our attachment to them to wonder about their lives and their tragic situations (in the case of Stephen, being unable to choose his life path, having no access to the legal system and no recourse to improve his working or home conditions; for Louisa, being trapped in an awful marriage and having no emotional or moral resources to deal with adult life due to her strict utilitarian upbringing). Further, Nussbaum claims that the reader's interest and emotional responses to these particular circumstances leads naturally (perhaps inevitably) to a kind of metaphorical imaginative leap, where readers consider the broader social or political climates that inform these specific character depictions. Attentive readers thus make the connection between their sympathy for Stephen and Louisa (or their feeling that these characters have been unjustly treated) and the larger social forces that lead to their individual tragic outcomes. Secondly, she claims that readers develop moral capacities

without which citizens will be unable to practice the normative conclusions of such moral or political theories (which have themselves been influenced by insights gained through reading).⁹ More plainly, Nussbaum thinks that fiction acts as a kind of practice for our ability to properly assess specific instances where general moral duties or principles might apply, to pick out what is salient about these cases and further, to apply this skill to both evaluating and applying general moral principles in a non-relativistic manner. Using *Hard Times* again as an example, readers practice their critical judgment when they determine that Stephen Blackpool is indeed unjustly denied by his society's rigid class structure the kind of self-determination that makes up a good life. Similarly, readers, in their particular sympathy for Louisa Gradgrind, are practising picking out not just a tragic individual life due to a deformed childhood, but what (in general terms) has made it tragic (that her father's rigorous application of utilitarian principles in childhood has left her without any emotional resources to navigate or even understand her adult life). Attentive readers, according to Nussbaum, will have practiced a particular skill in reading novels, that of attending to the specifics of individual lives with great attention and simultaneously of noting what about that particular life is morally pressing as it relates to our general moral principles (as opposed to accidental or morally irrelevant).

Novels also clearly have the capacity to give pleasure and Nussbaum contends that this fact about them is not independent of their moral operations or usefulness, since the very focused attention that entices us to continue reading is "itself a moral feature."¹⁰ Having written extensively on the value of keen awareness and attention to particularity as an essential moral task, I infer that she means that the close attention we pay to novels while immersed in them is itself a useful practice of another sort, that of paying close attention to the circumstances. This is

⁹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 12.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 35.

juxtaposed with the alternative possibility of following a more general application of predetermined set of rules in moral decision-making.¹¹ Nussbaum's central claim in her defense of the ethical and political value of novels is that novel reading is a good practice run, as it invites us to take up the position of the Judicious Spectator, that is, one who is emotionally engaged in the situation at hand, but suitably distant enough to retain a claim to objectivity (i.e. free of self-regarding emotional engagement).¹² This is important because it satisfies a key intuition we have about fair moral judgments (that they be generalizable beyond one's own interests) while still allowing our emotional responses to play an important role in coming to the correct conclusion. As will be shown below, the persuasiveness of Nussbaum's view depends upon her claims about the Judicious Spectator position, so it is worth examining in detail what work this position is doing in her account.

According to Nussbaum, if engagement with fiction is to be defended as morally beneficial, it must do so by appeal to the objectivity of our judgments. A question remains, however, about what should count as appropriately objective. For Nussbaum, the answer to this question is found in the concept of the Judicious Spectator position. Before detailing the contours of this view, it will be helpful to consider the kinds of objections most commonly articulated against the emotions that Nussbaum takes herself to be answering by appealing to the Judicious Spectator. I will briefly outline the standard objections to inclusion of the emotions in rational judgment and show that Nussbaum provides sound responses to these objections. I conclude that Nussbaum has made a case for the inclusion of emotions in moral judgment.

¹¹ See for example: Martha C. Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible: Literature and the Moral Imagination" in *Love's Knowledge: Essay's on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 261-285.

¹² Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 72-78.

2.1.1 A Role for the Emotions

Nussbaum defends a role for the emotions in rational deliberation and judgment from two categories of objection. The first claims that the emotions are unstable, in two disparate ways. The crude version portrays the emotions as a sort of blind force within us, not responsive to judgments or reasons. On this view the emotions are the opposite of rationality (and therefore dismissed from a proper account of objectivity).¹³ A related objection (which Nussbaum attributes to Plato and his Stoic descendants) is the more nuanced charge that emotions are not the opposite of judgments, but rather much like judgments, only false. They are false because they show us that other people and events not under the purview of our will, or reason, matter. They show us to be vulnerable, incomplete without other humans, not fully self-sufficient.¹⁴ On this view, emotions are judgment-like, but nonetheless fail to promote the detached self-sufficiency that the Stoics regarded as true and valuable. Thus, the Stoic claim that the emotions are cognitive in that they are a kind of perception of value, but false in that they value what should not be valued.

The second set of objections can be generally categorized as worries about emotions lacking suitable distance from our own interests. Our emotional reactions are too personal to count in objective judgments, this view contends, as they focus on a person's actual ties and attachments and therefore cannot be a part of rationality due to their inherent self-centeredness. The claim here is that personal emotional ties are not responsive to our duty to count each person as of equal moral weight.¹⁵ There is a further worry about the particularity of emotional responses, namely that emotions are too concerned with particular cases or events and not

¹³ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 55-56.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 56-58.

¹⁵ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 58-59.

focused enough on larger social units or periods of time, and so miss what really matters in our social and political lives.¹⁶

Nussbaum counters these objections in a systematic and thoroughgoing section of argumentation in *Poetic Justice*, persuasively arguing that our emotions regularly seem to have definite objects (and further, they seem very responsive to beliefs about these objects).¹⁷ For example, if one is angry with a friend for a perceived slight and she explains her actions, that anger usually dissipates. If our emotions were blind forces contrary to reasonable judgment, these kinds of (quite regular) cases would seem bizarre to us, so the first objection cannot be true. Further, Nussbaum argues, we may rightly ask of the Stoic objection why their proposed self-sufficiency is ideal. If we are not prepared to give up what we might call our social duties such as beneficence, the virtue of helping others when we are able, our social justice obligations etc., then the self-sufficiency proponents owe us a motivating account for such moral obligations. But as Nussbaum rightly notes, such accounts are difficult to motivate plausibly without reference to empathy, pity, or concern for others of any kind.¹⁸ Nussbaum argues here that the problem for self-sufficiency viewpoints like those of the Stoics is that our moral intuitions tell us that we have at least some of these social obligations (obligations which she claims no major ethical thinker is prepared to dismiss entirely), and yet without reference to our emotions, there appears to be no mechanism to connect the suffering of others with our moral duties to them. The claim made here is that advocates of the self-sufficiency view owe us an explanation for how we might get to the appropriate appraisal of such situations without the emotions, since they do seem to give us fairly reliable access. Nussbaum's view is that we must take seriously the idea that

¹⁶ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 59-60.

¹⁷ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 61-62.

¹⁸ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 64-66.

events outside of one's control, like bad luck, can be of significant moral importance. (Think of the bad luck of losing a child to disease for example). We do this, she thinks, through our belief-directed emotional responses to these situations such as pity or compassion.¹⁹ She argues that many so-called detached rationality theories do not hold this view of forces beyond one's control, instead arguing for a normative conception of self-sufficiency that is impervious to such emotions that we normally think of as flowing from recognizing the fact of circumstantial vulnerability inherent to human life. However, Nussbaum argues that this view of moral virtue as free from emotional encumbrances struggles to give reasons that would motivate beneficent action, since external goods outside one's own will are irrelevant on such a view, and caring about the luck of others appears to be the most common and reliable connection between ourselves and beneficent actions. Her view is that without appropriate emotional responses, we have difficulty getting to balanced practical judgments.²⁰ Nussbaum has convincingly argued here that the emotions cannot be plausibly barred from the table of moral judgment. She makes a compelling case that they have an important role to play in such judgment.

2.1.2 The Judicious Spectator

Having established a foothold for our emotional responses, Nussbaum narrows her gaze to the Judicious Spectator position to help her settle the question of which emotions are reliable enough to be included in rational ethical decision making.²¹ Adam Smith's idealized "Impartial Spectator" is her candidate for a trustworthy filtering device. As Smith outlines it, the Spectator is an explicitly normative 'paradigm of public rationality', an artificially constructed model used to outline the proper moral and rational point of view. The Judicious Spectator's role is to

¹⁹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 65-66.

²⁰ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 66-69.

²¹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 72.

imagine vividly what it is like to be the people whose predicaments she is surveying, and to sympathetically identify with their situation. However the Spectator must also maintain a position of assessment external to the situation, in order to determine “the degree of compassion it is rational to have for the person.”²² It does this, Smith argues, by ensuring that we have only those sentiments, imaginations and thoughts that count as a part of a rational worldview.²³ Because such an observer will not have emotional reactions and thoughts that relate to his or her own happiness, well-being, or safety, they will be ‘without bias’ and able to survey the scene with a valuable kind of detachment.²⁴ The advantage of such detachment is that it is not lacking in feeling (as opposed, one presumes, to some other potential candidates for objectivity).

It seems as though Nussbaum is helping herself to an unexplained set of cognitive rational norms if she thinks that this proviso of ‘no self-interested emotions’ is enough for objectivity. There are easily imaginable cases where one’s own safety or well being is clearly not on the line but we still have emotional attachments that appear morally problematic. For example, a judge might have a feeling of contempt for a defendant before them because they played shortstop for a baseball team that was a bitter rival of the judge’s favourite. If this contempt inculcates a lack of what we might deem ‘appropriate’ sympathy for the shortstop’s plight, then it appears to conflict with our everyday intuitions about objectivity. However, it is not clear that the Judicious Spectator position, as Nussbaum relays it, reliably filters out this kind of emotional reaction.

In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum fails to explain what norms of rationality are functioning in the concept of idealized spectatorship, but takes up the issue of which emotions are reliable

²² Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 73.

²³ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 73.

²⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 73.

enough to be included in rational judgments in *Love's Knowledge*.²⁵ There she outlines Smith's claim that some kinds of bodily 'passions' should be excluded from the judicious spectator's position (such as hunger, sexual desire, and romantic love) as a way of examining what norms of rationality are at work in his account. According to Nussbaum, Smith excludes passion and appetite because he thinks we cannot enter into them from a position of friendly concern.²⁶ In the case of hunger, we can feel sympathy for those suffering it, but we can't take on the hunger itself, since it is based on a physical condition that we are not in.²⁷ Therefore, hunger is not (in itself) a moral response according to Smith. Similarly with romantic love, he argues we cannot enter into it from the position of the judicious spectator because it is "disproportioned to the value of the object."²⁸ Love is based on a strong response to what Smith argues are morally irrelevant particularities, and therefore retains a colouring of arbitrariness.²⁹ Smith's examples serve as a kind of limit-setting on what he claims is rationally appropriate attachment, enough proximity to the emotion to understand it, but not so much as to undermine the possibility of impartially and moral equality between persons.

What justifies these pronouncements of moral irrelevance and unusable particularity in the case of hunger or love is, Nussbaum contends, a view of a standard of rationality that is tied up with the notion of sociability at the core of what it means to be human. As she says, for Smith, "what a concerned friend or a reader cannot respond to out of friendly concern... is somehow

²⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Steerforth's Arm: Love and the Moral Point of View" in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 335-364.

²⁶ Nussbaum, "Steerforth's Arm", 340-342.

²⁷ Nussbaum, "Steerforth's Arm", 340.

²⁸ Nussbaum quoting Smith in: Nussbaum, "Steerforth's Arm", 342.

²⁹ Nussbaum, "Steerforth's Arm", 342.

morally suspect.”³⁰ This view thus postulates the ideal of proper or rational judgment as a kind of golden mean between the poles of overcommitted emotional particularity (which is lacking in appropriate distance) and unemotional calculation (which misses the essential perceptual data of emotional responses that make us human), while pointing out the peculiarity of a standard of proper judgment that did not include initial assumptions about the value of other humans.

Since Smith argues that the Judicious Spectator’s responses are themselves constitutive of what is morally appropriate, Nussbaum rightly asks what justifies this view (“what is the moral significance of the spectatorial stance?”).³¹ Smith’s answer, she thinks, would be that morality essentially involves thinking of oneself as merely one among other persons, bound by this equality, but also sympathy and friendship to those others.³² This view does reduce in some sense to a claim about what it is like to be human. Further, Smith argues that these essential emotional ties provide a motivating reason, when we see them as an essential feature of humanity we are obligated to look around to “see and think of all that we can see” (that is, they require of us a kind of concentration or attention to the people we are interacting with), and also that they require social conversation (i.e. the giving and receiving of reasons).³³ So for Smith at least, the Judicious Spectator position stands as a normative ideal, the viewpoint to strive for when we make practical moral judgments. And it is justified in part by an appeal to a standard of rationality that takes as essential a view of humans as irreducibly social.

This stressing of our sociability also helps explain the reliance on literary examples to flesh out the Judicious Spectator. On this view we can see that such activities are among the ways we constitute ourselves as moral reasoners (since as we read, we naturally assume the viewpoint of

³⁰ Nussbaum, “Steerforth’s Arm”, 341.

³¹ Nussbaum, “Steerforth’s Arm”, 345.

³² Nussbaum, “Steerforth’s Arm”, 345.

³³ Nussbaum, “Steerforth’s Arm”, 345.

affectionate sociability that Smith claims is essential to good judgment). We ask ourselves when we enter into plots why the characters do what they do, and Nussbaum insists, we are put off when nothing but arbitrary answers are forthcoming.³⁴ The reliance on literary examples can be seen as a natural outcome of a concern to incorporate within this account of proper judgment the idea that the views of others matter.³⁵

The question of what conception of the emotions is operating on this view is not answered by a mere appeal to their inclusion, and Nussbaum emphasizes that she agrees with Smith's assessment of the emotions as at least partly cognitive. Further, she argues that they are part of correct perception (i.e. it is an inaccurate picture of what is happening before us if we omit our emotional responses).³⁶ As she says, "appropriate emotions are useful in showing us what we might do, and also morally valuable in their own right, as recognitions of the character of the situation before us."³⁷ So for both thinkers, our emotions are based on belief and reasoning; they are a part of an appropriate or correct set of perceptual faculties. They are "a part of the equipment with which we register what is happening".³⁸

2.1.3 Analysis

The obvious question to be asked is 'what makes an emotional response appropriate?' On Nussbaum's account, this is the task put to the Judicious Spectator. To be a trustworthy emotional response the emotion in question must be informed by a "true view of what is going

³⁴ Nussbaum, "Steerforth's Arm", 346.

³⁵ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 70. Nussbaum also argues that the novel, in its very form, "emphasizes the mutual interdependence of persons, showing the world as one in which we are all implicated in one another's good and ill...", a view that Smith appears to have shared and one that would make a great deal of sense given his emphasis on the social construction of proper judgement.

³⁶ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 74.

³⁷ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 74.

³⁸ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 74.

on.”³⁹ This includes the facts of the case, an appropriate assessment of their significance to the actors in the situation being contemplated, and a rational assessment of whether the first-person responses of the actors in question are distorted (how they might be so distorted Nussbaum does not specify, but presumably by one’s own self-interested emotional reactions and beliefs, since the Judicious Spectator position is meant to specifically avoid the “portion of the emotion that derives from our personal interest in our own well-being.”)⁴⁰ The tool of the Judicious Spectator, according to Nussbaum, is “aimed above all at filtering out” our emotional responses that are self-focused.⁴¹

Whether we are to take Nussbaum’s use of the Judicious Spectator concept as a descriptive claim about the activity of reading (i.e. this is what it is like to read) or as a normative claim about what successful ethical reading looks like (i.e. this is what happens when reading is done properly) is not made clear in *Poetic Justice*. At certain points she makes seemingly descriptive claims about our engagement with literature, for example that “readership is, in effect, an artificial construction of judicious spectatorship, leading us in a pleasing natural way into the attitude that befits the good citizen and judge.”⁴² Nussbaum argues that some facts about our position as readers, and some facts about the structure of the novel as a type of work, make this clear. Novels, she contends, are necessarily focused on individuals, and so structurally predisposed to draw readers’ attention to the interplay between the very concrete particularity of character’s lives and the general norms of our emotional responses, and yet we are suitably distanced from them by our belief that they are not real.⁴³

³⁹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 74.

⁴⁰ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 74.

⁴¹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 74.

⁴² Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 75.

⁴³ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 8-9.

Nussbaum also includes a caveat in her claim about the structure of novels that indicates she thinks of the Judicious Spectator as a description of reading, not a standard to reach. She notes that we might be presented with a distorted or even harmful view of a situation by a fictional work. Novels can both get the facts of the matter wrong and can “misrepresent the importance of various types of suffering or harm, leading us to think them either graver or lighter than they really are.”⁴⁴ Tellingly, her solution to this worry is not an appeal to the Judicious Spectator position as an arbiter of correct emotional engagement, but rather a suggestion that we exercise caution in our selection of reading materials and “read in dialogue with others”. Thus the view presented by any particular novel is unequivocally non-normative but subject to prior claims of rightness, although Nussbaum does not specify which standards we ought to appeal to in order to test if it measures up, other than to point to an unexplicated notion of “critical judgment”.⁴⁵ Smith’s answer would seem to appeal to the standards of what the Judicious Spectator would see as correct, committed as he is to an enlightenment version of public rationality, but Nussbaum is unclear about whether she is prepared to follow him there.

However, Nussbaum also makes reference to the Judicious Spectator as an explicitly normative concept on several occasions. Most notably, she points to the Judicious Spectator as her answer to the question of which emotional responses are appropriate to include in proper judgments.⁴⁶ Smith is clear that his conception of the Spectator is an ideal, a norm of public rationality that could serve as a filtering device for improper emotional responses, and Nussbaum appears to employ the concept similarly in many portions of *Poetic Justice*. For example, in discussing the aforementioned worry of learning harmful lessons from some works of fiction,

⁴⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 75.

⁴⁵ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 76.

⁴⁶ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 74-75.

Nussbaum confusingly advocates for canonical pruning initially, while in the very next paragraph endorses Smith's view that "the formal structures implicit in the experience of literary readership give us a kind of guidance that is indispensable to any further inquiry—including a critical inquiry about the literary work itself."⁴⁷ She further claims that readers need not agree with the politics of a novel "in all ways" in order to find political value in the experience of it.⁴⁸ Thus the Judicious Spectator appears to be an expressly normative standard, and a reader might fail to live up the standard while engaged in the activity (despite Nussbaum's insistence that the very structure of the novel invites the proper kind of judgment). We can see this is the case both in Nussbaum's initial discussion of her three literary examples in *Poetic Justice* and in her response to critics of her readings of these works.⁴⁹ For Nussbaum there appears to be a correct interpretation of a novel, and if the Judicious Spectator was only a description of the experience of novel reading it would be difficult to make sense of these claims.

The consequences of this apparent equivocation appear to me to indicate a real trouble for her account. Remember my initial characterization of Nussbaum's account as offering up two strong claims about reading: that it provides insight that should play a role in forming our theoretical ethical commitments, and that it develops important competencies, acting as a kind of practice run for forming appropriate moral judgments. If her use of the Judicious Spectator position is descriptive, then it appears as though Nussbaum can only make the second of her strong claims about reading stick. On this reading, the Judicious Spectator is an account of what the facts are like in the experience of reading, and Nussbaum can argue that we really do attend to novels in just the way that Smith thought we should attend to moral problems, so reading is a

⁴⁷ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 76.

⁴⁸ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 77.

⁴⁹ This facet of Nussbaum's view will be taken up in detail in the next chapter.

good kind of practice run for developing our general moral capacities of empathy and critical distance. Of course she might be wrong about this descriptive claim, and persuasive arguments or examples that show our experience of reading to be notably different from Nussbaum's account will be significant problems for her attempt to include literature on the 'necessary for correct moral judgment' list.

If, however, Nussbaum is making a normative claim when appealing to the Judicious Spectator, then she retains a plausible answer to the question of how we might adjudicate between appropriate and inappropriate emotional responses in our moral judgments. The Judicious Spectator as Smith conceived of it was a normative ideal of rational judgment and if used as a similar success term on Nussbaum's account it allows her to explain how reading novels can give us those insights indispensable to proper formation of our moral and political theories. It also appears to provide her with a normative standard of judgment to appeal to in making her claims about correct (or incorrect) literary interpretations. The quite specific moral lessons Nussbaum is keen to extract from *Hard Times*, *Maurice*, and *Native Son* make more argumentative sense if we think of the Judicious Spectator as embodying the ideal measure of public rationality. Readers who severely misread the 'true view of the facts' of human suffering, or are invited to deny the moral equality between people of different races or genders by a literary work, are simply failing to live up to the standard. However, on this interpretation Nussbaum appears to be vulnerable to counter-arguments surrounding the plausibility (and/or coherence) of the Judicious Spectator as an appropriate measure of moral objectivity. Further, her conclusion that we should prune our reading lists to avoid illiberal authorial viewpoints appears bizarre and unfounded if we understand the Judicious Spectator normatively.

In summary, the value of fiction on Nussbaum's account is characterized as a practice ground for training appropriate sentiments, where the faculty of the sympathetic imagination gets its full content through the reading of novels with the adoption of the Judicious Spectator position. I will refer to this view henceforth as Nussbaum's 'Emotional Engagement View'. I have noted very briefly that Nussbaum appears to equivocate in her use of the Judicious Spectator concept while outlining her defense of the value of literature for moral and political reasoning. This lack of clarity provides two separate possible interpretations of her claim, one that emphasizes a descriptive claim about what reading is like, and one that emphasizes a version of appropriate norms for moral judgment. It should be clear that these differing interpretations of Nussbaum's use of the Judicious Spectator position are mutually incompatible. In Chapter 3 I will examine in detail the case made by critics against Nussbaum's account, first considering objections to her normative version of the Judicious Spectator and then evaluating the plausibility of her descriptive version in turn.

CHAPTER THREE

In the previous chapter, I outlined Nussbaum's arguments for her Emotional Engagement View of reading, and pointed out that her account, while persuasive in carving out a role for the emotions in proper judgment, is ambiguous in several important respects. More specifically, she is unclear about when she is making descriptive claims about the nature of reading, empirical claims about the structure and form of novels and novel reading, or normative claims about what appropriate uptake of novels looks like. This lack of clarity in Nussbaum's defense of literature invites two possible interpretations of her use of the Judicious Spectator concept, a descriptive understanding and a normative success understanding. In the first half of this chapter I will consider in detail criticisms of Nussbaum's account that understand her as articulating a normative conception of the Judicious Spectator, and the related understanding of idealized reader-text interaction and imaginative capacity that align with this conception. I take up the possibility of the Judicious Spectator as a descriptive claim in the latter half of this chapter. Several thinkers raise worries about whether Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View of reading provides a framework appropriate for moral deliberation, and whether her own arguments in favour of the view are internally consistent. I will consider each objection in turn, making note where argumentative lines appear to converge or diverge. Since Nussbaum does not differentiate between these possible readings herself, several critical analyses direct their doubts at a hybrid proposal of sorts. I have tried in the first four sections of this chapter to focus on the arguments that raise doubts about the viability of understanding the Judicious Spectator as a

normative standard, but there are consequences for her other claims, some of which I will not discuss until I address a descriptive understanding of the Judicious Spectator in the later half of this chapter. Some criticisms, such as Simon Stow's worry about the impossibility of actually adopting the Judicious Spectator viewpoint can be read as applying to both normative and descriptive claims.

3.1 The Judicious Spectator as Normative Claim

I have organized the normative-claim objections under three overarching problems: 1) The Problem of Consistency 2) The Problem of Possibility, and 3) The Problem of Plausibility. In section four I will discuss what I take the consequences of these objections to be for Nussbaum's account. I conclude that her project cannot be coherently understood as articulating a normative ideal for readers to live up to without abandoning both her conception of the novel and her specific moral and political conclusions. Given that Nussbaum's overarching aim is precisely to arrive at these conclusions, it appears clear that the Judicious Spectator as employed by Nussbaum cannot be defended as offering a coherent normative standard for readers.

3.1.1 The Problem of Consistency

In his paper "Fancy Justice: Martha Nussbaum on the Political Value of the Novel", Nickolas Pappas raises concerns about the coherence of Nussbaum's use of imagination as a concept in her explanation of the Emotional Engagement View. The sympathetic imagination aroused by our novel reading is tasked with multitudinous and disparate functions by Nussbaum, from a whetstone for more keen perception about the individual lives of characters unlike ourselves (and their analogous relationship with the real world in properly attuned judicial rulings),⁵⁰ all the way to inculcation of general liberal principles of tolerance and justice played

⁵⁰ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 99-118.

out in the political realm.⁵¹ While we might well need a kind of sympathetic imaginative leap in both instances, Pappas raises doubts about whether they are actually the same capacity that Nussbaum identifies as flourishing in her *Judicious Spectator*.⁵² Judges, whatever social policy concerns they might factor into their decisions, must always start with particular cases and particular persons (what Pappas dubs the ‘practical side’ of sympathy). These cases do seem (at least potentially) relevantly like the empathetic practice we might get from novels.⁵³

However, Pappas questions whether this attention to particularity might be counter-productive in cases of generalized theoretical commitments to equality or justice. As he notes, “the imagination’s preference for concrete detail often makes for quite un-Rawlsian results.”⁵⁴ He argues that the job of a properly attuned political imagination at the level of theoretical commitment is precisely to not pay attention to the details of particular individuals, and instead to neglect the particularly stirring cases in favour of more equitable solutions (ones that specifically do not pick out individuals in their concrete detail but apply to broad swaths of the public).⁵⁵

⁵¹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 11.

⁵² Nickolas Pappas, “Fancy Justice: Martha Nussbaum on the Political Value of the Novel,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 78 (1997), 284-86.

⁵³ Pappas, 285-85.

⁵⁴ Pappas, 286.

⁵⁵ Pappas, 286-87. The problem with the concrete or practical imagination is that attention the particular harms done to individuals (like in the sexual harassment case considered in *Poetic Justice*) can obscure more general patterns of behaviour modification that cannot be brought out easily by attending more closely to the details of any one case of such discrimination. For example, First Nations people who might avoid calling the police for fear of potential discrimination, thereby removing a social safety net most unthinkingly enjoy. Pappas, drawing on the work of Henry Louis Gates, persuasively argues that this kind of malevolent social influence requires a different sort of “imaginative effort” to see than attention to the particularity of any individual case, and that concentration on the particular cases actually hinders our ability to engage in the appropriate kinds of abstract imaginings that are necessary to see the larger issue and to legislate appropriately.

Further, Pappas points to an apparent difference between the practical and theoretical uses of these imaginative capacities, as the possibilities for such imagination within any given theory commitment surely cannot reduce to psychological facts about the person applying the theory (else who was applying the theory would significantly alter its outputs). Conversely, “the problem with insufficiently imaginative theories is just that they leave no room for emotionally perceptive policy-makers to act on what they observe”.⁵⁶ His point is that we might well prefer a more imaginative theory of measuring social outcomes (over the coarse utilitarianism described by Dickens in *Hard Times* for example), but that is a structural feature of the theory, not dependent on the subtlety with which it is applied in any particular case.⁵⁷ So even if our capacities for the kind of practical imagination of stepping into another’s life or world are indeed enlarged by novel reading, it isn’t clear at all how that leads us to adopt better theoretical moral commitments. We are after all, presumably not building our own moral theories from scratch every time we read a new book. Further, Pappas argues that Nussbaum owes us an explanation of how we even get to the more abstract and theoretical form of interpersonal empathy from these concrete cases.⁵⁸ The claim that both kinds of empathy require a kind of ‘imaginative leap’ is not enough to show that they are the same capacity.

Pappas’s objections can be understood in part as scepticism about the link between our imaginative engagement with fiction and the concrete social and political consequences enumerated by Nussbaum. Nussbaum emphasizes that this imaginative leap, conditioned as it is

⁵⁶ Pappas, 285.

⁵⁷ Clearly this objection is one that carries weight on either reading of Nussbaum’s *Judicious Spectator*, since to interpret the Emotional Engagement View as a descriptive claim about what the reading experience is like does not diminish Pappas’ point that the excellent and subtle application of any particular theory does not alter its structural characteristics. If there is no column in your theory that counts a phenomenon you think valuable, you cannot arrive at the proper sum of it, no matter how carefully you count.

⁵⁸ Pappas, 292.

by the structure of the novel, does not merely lead to some rather definite political attitudes, but to political practice, which appears to follow from this structuring of the imaginative engagement. At her most definitive, she makes claims about our growth as readers leading not only to more subtle understandings of individual cases, but better theoretical commitments as well.⁵⁹ This implies that we should also be revising our guiding moral and political theories in light of new capacities gained, that a kind of reflective equilibrium between our pre-existing commitments and our newfound attention to the structured concrete imaginings of the *Judicious Spectator* should emerge. While this might sound intuitively plausible, Pappas' critique shows us the conceptual difficulties with this strong claim. The kind of theoretical abstraction necessary to form subtle and imaginative theories is distinct from a practical attention to individual detail.

This criticism has consequences for understanding Nussbaum's use of the *Judicious Spectator* position as a normative success term, in that it challenges the coherence of the *Judicious Spectator* as an objective standard for judgment. Pappas does not dispute that reading may indeed give us some kind of practice-run for a type of imaginative empathy. His objection is that the kind of concrete focus championed by Nussbaum as a hallmark of engagement with literature appears to be quite a different sort of imagining than that of imagining people in the abstract. His allusion to Rawls is apt here, and points to one of the unexamined tensions in Nussbaum's account; she wishes to defend the novel as a causally significant tool of moral improvement and also to derive very Rawlsian moral and political outcomes (namely a modern liberal viewpoint). Of course, Rawls famously argued that the imaginative leap necessary to see our way through to his principles of justice was precisely opposite to this sort of concrete

⁵⁹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 3, 45, 51-52. In fact, Nussbaum's introduction of her project includes on pg. 3 the hope that the insights gained from reading novels will lead to better social policy and better social theory.

particularity. In his view, the way to fruitfully imagine our way to liberal conclusions such as the Difference Principle was to remove all one's individual detail, to think about individuals without any of their 'concrete particularity'.⁶⁰ Pappas argues that Nussbaum not only conflates these two very different kinds of imaginings under the umbrella of 'Fancy', but further wishes to derive the consequences of the theoretical imagination from the process of exercising the practical or concrete imagination.

3.1.2 The Problem of Possibility

Simon Stow raises the question of the possibility of actually adopting the Judicious Spectator perspective. Though the Judicious Spectator plays a central role in Nussbaum's account of readerly activity and she explicates her view of the concept in some detail,⁶¹ Stow objects that she never answers Adam Smith's caveat that adopting such a position "is perhaps impossible".⁶² Stow's concern is a more general issue he has with what he sees as the easy path taken in such discussions,⁶³ where a theorist notes the potential difficulty in their proposed imaginative exercise without seriously considering said difficulties, as if noticing the problem were a sufficient answer to it. Stow's charge of impossibility is a doubt that readers can in any robust way actually imagine vividly how it feels to be in someone else's shoes while maintaining their objective detachment. He grants that Nussbaum might well appeal to her concept of 'Fancy' as precisely the capacity that both enables readers to adopt the Judicious Spectator stance and is also enhanced by reading, but this brings with it other problems, noticeably a certain degree of circularity. If, in order to become good at this kind of imaginative perspective taking, we need

⁶⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 118-138.

⁶¹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 72-78.

⁶² Simon Stow, *Republic of Readers: The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 50.

⁶³ He also cites Rawls and his Original Position, as another similar example of this fallacy.

simply to read, all is well. But if we need ‘Fancy’, already sufficiently developed, in order to read from the Judicious Spectator position, how do we get more of it by reading?⁶⁴

If we understand Nussbaum’s Judicious Spectator as a success term this line of defense appears untenable on both sides of the equation. If the necessary capacity (Fancy) that allows readers to take up the Judicious Spectator position must already be possessed in order to adopt the position that gives us appropriate practice in objective judgment, then Nussbaum’s view appears to violate the general consensus among moral thinkers surrounding the principle of practical freedom (that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’). Further, if the Judicious Spectator position is understood normatively, then it seems strange to claim that our capacity for Fancy will be enhanced by adopting it while reading, since presumably to succeed at making correct practical judgments will already entail being sufficiently proficient at the appropriate types of relevant imagination.⁶⁵

Stow does think that there may be a non-circular path available to such an account, but worries that Nussbaum makes it harder than necessary with her ‘supply-side’ theory of the novel which seems ask much more of the Judicious Spectator position than Smith originally intended.⁶⁶ By ‘supply-side’ theory of literary uptake, he means “a theory that suggests that the impact a text has on a reader derives from the *text itself* and not the reader, and that furthermore texts have a

⁶⁴ Stow, *Republic of Readers*, 50.

⁶⁵ Of course this objection raised by Stow can also be applied to a descriptive reading of the Judicious Spectator concept. We might productively think of the difference in force of the objection as the difference between claiming the impossibility or the implausibility of a view. If Nussbaum is advancing an account of what it is like to read, then Stow’s objection can be understood as a worry that such difficult imaginative perspective shifting seems unlikely to be what it is really like, whereas I read his objection to a normative conception of the Judicious Spectator as a much stronger claim of internal incoherence of the use of Fancy. Given the general consensus among ethicists around the principle of practical freedom this appears to me a larger problem. I take up Stow’s objection again below with a descriptive interpretation of the Judicious Spectator.

⁶⁶ Stow, *Republic of Readers*, 51-52.

definite and ultimately discernible meaning, one that allows us to describe certain readings as correct and others as incorrect.”⁶⁷ Jonathan Rose has dubbed this the ‘receptive fallacy’ (i.e. the attempt to find the message that a work transmits to its audience by examining the text instead of the audience who engages with it),⁶⁸ and it is problematic for Nussbaum because it appears to commit her to a ‘correct vs. incorrect’ framework for literary criticism. In fact, in her defense of her theory of textual impact she often implies that alternative readings are mistakes.⁶⁹ This is contentious in part because of the overwhelming possibilities for textual interpretation,⁷⁰ but it also seems like a deeply illiberal view of readers, since to fail to agree with Nussbaum’s ‘correct’ reading of a text appears to be a deficiency on the part of the reader instead of an alternative view.⁷¹ Stow notes the irony that one of Nussbaum’s stated goals in *Poetic Justice* is to force rational-choice economic models to accommodate differently situated persons, but “her own approach to texts is predicated upon the assumption that even such differently situated persons will come to an agreement on the meaning of a text.”⁷²

⁶⁷ Stow, *Republic of Readers*, 4.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 4.

⁶⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly: A defence of Ethical Criticism” *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 22 no. 2 (1998), 353.

⁷⁰ Rhonda Anderson, “Truth, Fiction and the Value of Literature” (paper presented at Philosophy in the Community, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, December 8, 2010). For example, Rhonda Anderson notes that authors often play with the conventions of the genre they write in as a way to deliberately alienate readers from characters for their own ends, and that focus on our emotional engagement with protagonists as grounds for criticism obscures this important feature.

⁷¹ Simon Stow, “Reading Our Way to Democracy? Literature and Public Ethics,” *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 30 (2006), 414. As Stow notes, “The ‘supply-side’ theory of the text is, however, not only *methodologically* problematic, in the context of liberal-democracy it also seems to be *politically* problematic. For, implicit in the claim that texts have clear meanings that they transmit to their readers is the assumption that a failure to see the text in the prescribed way arises from a deficiency on the part of the reader. This is, perhaps, no way to conduct our business in a liberal-democracy.”

⁷² Stow, *Republic of Readers*, 58.

Though not strictly a normative reading of the Judicious Spectator, this underlying theory of textual impact employed by Nussbaum does contain the other kernel of prescriptive thought in her account, namely the view that novels have a particular meaning (which is to say, a reader could be mistaken about the morally significant theme of a novel). Leaving aside for the moment the implausibility of this claim as a fact about texts, it also serves to undercut an understanding of the Judicious Spectator as a normative standard. Nussbaum's 'supply-side' view of textual impact (made clear in her discussion of her literary examples as well as her more general remarks on novels)⁷³ leaves little room for the Judicious Spectator to operate as a standard of critical judgment, since the very portrayal of certain themes appears sufficient to force the reader to take them up. If Dickens writes about the terrible conditions of Nineteenth-century working class life, then readers apparently must come to see this through the specific viewpoint of class analysis. Thus she claims that the moral good of reading needs a careful selection of appropriate novels, and that we need to practice co-duction (i.e. the conversational comparison with other readers that ideally occurs in concert with our reading) in order to get the full measure of positive effect.⁷⁴ Presumably these caveats on our reading practice serve as limits on the potential of bad literature to steer us to the wrong ethical conclusions, but this makes little sense if the Judicious Spectator functions as a standard for correct procedure in making such judgments. If the correct interpretation of any given novel is whatever the Judicious Spectator would identify, including instances of critical judgments about those very themes themselves, then the need to prune the canon of aesthetically pleasing but morally suspect novels seems wholly unnecessary. Given that

⁷³ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 2, 7, 19.

⁷⁴ Stow, *Republic of Readers*, 53. Though, as noted by Stow and others, much like Rawls and his reflective equilibrium arguments in *A Theory of Justice*, Nussbaum's own conclusions never seem seriously in doubt in her description of this process. That she never seriously considers any other interpretations of her exemplar novels in discussing co-duction strongly suggests that for Nussbaum novels have correct interpretations.

Nussbaum does not think this is the case, it is hard to maintain a view of the Judicious Spectator as a normative standard.⁷⁵

Of course, we may fail at achieving any ideal standard of judgment, and we can read Nussbaum's textual overdeterminism and her request for readers to practice 'co-duction' as antidotes to worries about potentially morally pernicious or harmful learning from literature in instances where readers fail to live up to the Judicious Spectator's standards. Here again though, what appears to Nussbaum as a mutually reinforcing view of spectatorship and textual impact undermines an understanding of the Judicious Spectator as a normative standard to be achieved, since instances of failure prompt canon pruning and not appeals to the rational standards of judgment found within the Judicious Spectator. If the Judicious Spectator is a standard of correct judgment (or even a standard of correct procedure for judgment), then surely instances of failure to note the shortcomings of a novel's themes by readers should prompt Nussbaum to show us what resources were available to them in the Judicious Spectator position that they failed to apply.⁷⁶ It is worth remembering that the Judicious Spectator position is initially marshalled by

⁷⁵ Much like the Pappas objection discussed above, there is a real tension between understanding the Judicious Spectator as 'getting it right' and the surrounding claims that Nussbaum makes about what novel reading is like.

⁷⁶ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 75-78. This discussion in *Poetic Justice* is hard to decipher. Nussbaum, when initially discussing cases where novels might lead readers astray, argues that this possibility should lead us to prune our list of appropriate novels (and to check our judgments with others through co-duction), which indicates a view of the Judicious Spectator as a description of what it is like to read. However, in the very next paragraph she argues that "critical inquiry about the literary work itself" is not only possible, but in fact essential, to the Judicious Spectator position, and that we need not "think the politics of a novel correct in all ways to find the experience [of reading] itself politically valuable". This suggests that Nussbaum does think of the Judicious Spectator as an evaluative mechanism. In the subsequent sections of this chapter I examine the Judicious Spectator as a descriptive claim about readership and this view of textual impact in more detail. For now, it is enough to note that these two commitments of Nussbaum's appear to be incompatible if we understand the Judicious Spectator as a standard of correct judgement.

Nussbaum as a way of explaining which sorts of emotional reactions we could safely include in rational deliberation and judgment.⁷⁷

Thus what looks initially like deployment of a theory of textual impact meant to buttress the concept of the Judicious Spectator appears to undercut any understanding of the Judicious Spectator as an idealized standard for judgment. Nussbaum is free to abandon her theory of direct textual impact (and there are reasons aside from incompatibility do so, taken up in more detail below), but then she is then left without an account of how one arrives at her strong claims about the specific political outcomes of novel reading.

3.1.3 Problem of Plausibility

Even if moved by Stow's scepticism to abandon her theory of textual impact so as to preserve the Judicious Spectator as an idealized reader, Nussbaum faces criticism of the concept on other grounds. For example, David Bromwich argues that Nussbaum's ultimate moral and political aims are poorly served by an appeal to Smith's concept. Bromwich maintains that Smith's Judicious Spectator relies on a kind of social and moral consensus that Nussbaum cannot avail herself of as a modern liberal who recognizes value pluralism as at least a social reality (if not a social good). According to Bromwich, Smith's version of the appropriate sympathy for the plight of others found in the Judicious Spectator is impersonal and unspontaneous in its exercise, as "the whole artifice of spectatorship depends on an assurance – widely shared among the educated class of Scotland in 1759 – that the common sense of society is just."⁷⁸ Of course, no such consensus exists today, and so Nussbaum is left without a foundational assumption that anchors the claim to objectivity that is central to her use of the concept. Bromwich argues that

⁷⁷ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 78-86.

⁷⁸ David Bromwich, "Rat Poison," Review of *Poetic Justice*, by Martha C. Nussbaum, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 18, no. 20 (17, October, 1996), 14.

Smith's conflation of justice with a kind of 'writ-large propriety' confines the third-person perspective one takes in the Judicious Spectator position to a "projection of the first person's idea of socialised [sic] good sense", which seems an unlikely candidate for the kind of convention-breaking imaginative leaps of moral thinking that Nussbaum alludes to in her literary examples (and advocates for in her review of contemporary judicial decisions).⁷⁹

If we take the Judicious Spectator as a normative standard, this objection is best understood as a critique of the plausibility of the Judicious Spectator as an adequate ideal. The heart of Bromwich's criticism is the claim that the Judicious Spectator position does not provide adequate tools to do the work that Nussbaum wishes readers to be doing (or at least simulating), namely forming emotionally sensitive and sympathetic rational judgments. It would amount to a rejection of Nussbaum's grounding notion that removing self-interested emotions is enough to gain appropriate objectivity in making moral judgments. The kinds of normative evaluations of the 'true view of the facts' presented by a literary work that Nussbaum wants perceptive readers to be able to make, Bromwich suggests, cannot be made merely by appealing to a lack of personal or vested interest in the game. We are in need of more conceptual resources than a mere absence of personal favouritism. There is a lacuna in her argument between the Judicious Spectator as a conceptual framework that allows emotions to play a role in proper judgment, and her claims that the Judicious Spectator can give us the perspective (and the tools) to see that our prior theoretical commitments or socially constructed common-sense ought to be revised.

At the very least, Bromwich presents a challenge to the adequacy of the Judicious Spectator as a normative concept for adjudicating between contesting claims to proper judgment. Since the Judicious Spectator does not provide readers a method for deciding between possible

⁷⁹ Bromwich, 13-15.

practical judgments, Bromwich concludes that it is not much help when faced with incompatible or competing judgments. In such cases the person attempting to read as a Judicious Spectator is left without resources to make clear which instances of sympathy are warranted and which are not, other than an appeal to either Enlightenment Reason, or to previously held standards of propriety. Nussbaum cannot defend the former without giving up a great deal of modern liberal pluralism, and her emphasis on the irreducibility of personal experience to a common measure when discussing utilitarian rational-choice models suggests that she is unwilling to do so. The latter alternative also appears unpalatable for Nussbaum, given that her exemplar novels are all supposed to show us specifically that the prevailing social wisdom portrayed within each is worthy of criticism and revision. She might be tempted to fall back on prior claims of enhanced capacities for sympathetic imagining garnered through reading, but as has been articulated above by Pappas, such appeals carry conceptual problems of their own.

Bromwich, like the other critics discussed above, is prepared to grant to Nussbaum the plausibility of her general aim of tying our engagement with literature to our capacity for judgment (or is at least sympathetic to her project). However, he shows that appeal to Smith's theory of spectatorship presents a poor model for readerly activity, especially given Nussbaum's rather ambitious goals of defending a particular set of moral truths as growing out of this activity; truths that often appear to break the habitual forms of thought common to common-sense judgments.

3.1.4 Analysis

These three critiques of Nussbaum's project present significant obstacles to understanding the Judicious Spectator as an ideal reader. Both Pappas and Stow draw attention to the tension between Nussbaum's view of reading, her claims about the structure of novels (both

remarkably deterministic), and understanding the Judicious Spectator as a success term. Such a view of textual impact seems to preclude understanding the Judicious Spectator as an idealized reader capable of adjudicating the merits of the literary work itself, since it leaves little room for the reader to do much work on or with the text in question. While Stow is right to charge her with a kind of illiberalism regarding divergent readers and their likely varied interpretations, the real problem for Nussbaum is not that she is an inconsistent liberal, but rather that her claims about the structure of novels and our imaginative engagement with them won't produce specific liberal political commitments (even if we take her advice and restrict our reading list to explicitly activist novels). It seems clear that if we do understand the Judicious Spectator as a normative concept, this overdeterminism precludes understanding the Judicious Spectator as an ideal judge of the novels themselves. This in turn calls into question what connection Nussbaum sees between reading and moral judgment, weakening her case for a strong parallel between the two activities. Either she must give up her view of textual impact, or give up the Smithian version of the Judicious Spectator as a normative ideal.

The claim made by Pappas that Nussbaum has conflated two different kinds of imaginative abilities under the heading of Fancy also rests on a similar tension between the liberal policy outcomes that Nussbaum wants to attain and the theorized procedure of acquiring them, and Bromwich's suggestion that Nussbaum is ill-served by borrowing the Judicious Spectator points to a similar conclusion from a different angle. For Smith, the Judicious Spectator stands as a moral yardstick, a normative ideal to measure the degree to which our judgments meet the proper standards of objectivity while still maintaining a focus on our obligations as inherently social creatures. Bromwich points out that this is because Smith is unencumbered by the notions of modern liberal pluralism, and so appeals to codes of social

civility can unproblematically stand in for rational norms on his account. Nussbaum is not so unencumbered, and Bromwich appropriately wonders why she would choose Smith's view when much more subtle and nuanced accounts of emotions and reason are available within the philosophical canon. Bromwich suggests James and Sartre in particular, but his suggestion is more important for its correct critical note than as a serious alternative proposal.⁸⁰

Somewhat ironically, while stridently carving out a place for our emotional responses within a rational-obligation model of moral problem solving, Nussbaum leaves little room for those agents and their appropriate emotional responses to be significantly altered by the experience of responses to fiction, which further inhibits a reading of the Judicious Spectator as an idealized reasoner. A common objection among her critics is the charge that she fails to give any examples, even in her hypothetical ideal cases, of readers who have had their world-views significantly altered by engagement with narrative fictions.⁸¹ If we read her use of the Judicious Spectator position as a normative standard, then readers meeting the standard should be helped to see the lives of others in ways previously unavailable on the basis of mere social theory, and this new position should push attentive readers to see the error of their (presumably previously narrow) view of compassion for others much different from themselves. That she can only point to instances of novels that confirm her already existing theoretical commitments is a noteworthy shortcoming of Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View as it is presented in *Poetic Justice*. The discussion of ideal success cases in *Poetic Justice* centre exclusively on including emotional responses (governed by the rational appraisal of the Judicious Spectator position) as 'reasons for' theoretical commitments previously held. It is a rather mechanistic view of readers as well as

⁸⁰ Bromwich, 15.

⁸¹ See for example: David Gorman, "Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life (Review)," *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 21, no. 1 (April, 1997), 198. Stow, *Republic...*, 44-54., Bromwich, 13-15.

texts, and one that doesn't do justice, I will argue in the next chapter, to the immersive possibilities for fictional engagement.

To summarize, I have outlined several substantial objections to Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View, focussing on the ways in which these arguments impact a potential reading of Nussbaum's use of the Judicious Spectator position as a normative standard. I take these criticisms to pose a substantial obstacle to such an understanding, and have argued that in order to make the Judicious Spectator a coherent normative standard, Nussbaum would need to abandon both her theory of textual impact and her specific theoretical conclusions. Even if she were to do this (which would undermine the stated reason for her overarching project), the reliance on unexplained norms of rationality in the Judicious Spectator position makes it an implausible candidate for either ideal reader activity or as a candidate standard of practical judgment. There is still the option that Nussbaum means her explanation of the Judicious Spectator to be a descriptive claim about what it is like to attend to fictional works. I take up this possibility in the second half of this chapter.

3.2 The Judicious Spectator as Descriptive Claim

In the previous sections of this chapter I examined several objections levelled at the Emotional Engagement View, and concluded both that an understanding of the Judicious Spectator as a normative standard is incompatible with Nussbaum's other commitments, and that it is implausible as an ideal standard of appropriate readerly activity. However, as explained in Chapter 2, it is possible that Nussbaum intends to use Smith's concept not as a normative ideal, but rather as a useful descriptive outline of the activity of reading and its parallels to appropriate procedures of judgment. This means that arguments showing the implausibility or incoherence of understanding Nussbaum's account as prescriptive do not defeat the Emotional Engagement

View entirely. I will outline the criticisms aimed at a descriptive interpretation of Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View below. As previously stated, these objections are often aimed at a combination of claims made by Nussbaum, some seemingly descriptive, some normative.

Several of the strongest objections to her view appear to me to overlap across the distinction between descriptive and normative versions of Nussbaum's view. My aim in this section is to focus on problems for Nussbaum's view as understood as a description of what our reading experience is like. I have grouped these objections into two categories of criticism: The first I have labeled 'Interpretation Objections'. These are objections to the readings Nussbaum gives her case studies, and/or objections to the claims she makes on the basis of these readings. The second I have grouped together as 'Empirical Claims Objections'. Several critics express doubts about the empirical claims made by Nussbaum about the effects of novel reading, or about the activity of reading.

I conclude that although Nussbaum can avoid the sting of some of the textual interpretation counter-examples (as she is not committed to these particular novels or readings by necessity), related objections to the plausibility of her 'supply-side' view of the meaning of works and worries about self-defeating appeals to the aesthetic properties of fiction as morally significant are not so easily dismissed. These objections focus primarily on the plausibility and consistency of assorted political claims that Nussbaum makes regarding her view of the Judicious Spectator. I will argue that although these critiques show Nussbaum's account to be problematic as presently articulated, they do not alone show us conclusively that an account of the Judicious Spectator position as a descriptive claim about the moral value of reading is untenable. However, in Chapter four, I will argue that Nussbaum's view, even modified to address these objections, cannot account for an important facet of moral value found in literary engagement.

3.2.1 Literary Interpretation Objections

The criticisms of Nussbaum's readings of her exemplar novels' themes and intents can be delineated into two categories: disagreement with the specific claims she is making regards certain novels, and more general worries about the work these interpretations appear to be shouldering on her account. I will address each in turn. At the heart of these disagreements with Nussbaum's interpretive claims is a more general objection that her example novels are both cherry-picked for specific, sometimes overhanded, political messaging (often to their detriment as literary works), and that her use of these works is self-defeating for her own political commitments.⁸²

Paulette Kidder has argued that although Nussbaum's reading of her principal example novel, *Hard Times*, as a 'deep attack' on utilitarianism mirrors Dickens' broader position on that theory, she "systematically omits" essential Biblical references and themes that anchor his view and give it much of its power.⁸³ She grants that all literary interpretations must leave possible readings out, but argues that the Christian symbolism in *Hard Times* is so pervasive and integral to the major themes of the novel that to omit it entirely is to miss something essential about the book.⁸⁴

This sentiment is echoed by Nickolas Pappas who argues that *Hard Times* is a strange choice of novel for Nussbaum since, "its political agenda derives from a source other than the

⁸² See: Gorman, 198. Richard Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism", *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 21, no. 1 (1997), 16-17. Richard Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two" *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 22, no. 2 (1998), 398-399. Pappas, 289.

⁸³ Paulette Kidder, "Martha Nussbaum on Dickens's *Hard Times*" *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 33, no. 2. (2009), 417.

⁸⁴ Kidder, 424-425. Kidder speculates that the omission has to do with Nussbaum's commitment to a liberal overlapping consensus view like that of John Rawls, where religious arguments are not the kind of reasons that could be shared by all and so are omitted from public debate.

representation of characters”, namely a Christian mythology.⁸⁵ Pappas points out that it is problematic to use *Hard Times* as a keystone novel for her account because it is precisely Dickens’ attachment to individuals that makes him hostile to any broader political analysis.⁸⁶ Nussbaum argues that we are compelled to reconsider social and institutional arrangements by our faculty of Fancy when engaged with the plight of the individual characters portrayed, but Pappas suggests that *Hard Times* is a novel hostile to this kind of reconsideration, which is why Dickens never arrived at any of the broad social policy prescriptions (and even expressed disdain for social reorganization such as unionization) that Nussbaum thinks flow naturally from the novel.⁸⁷

Richard Posner disagrees with nearly all of her interpretive claims, submitting that it is only in virtue of several well-documented artistic deficiencies that one can draw the lessons Nussbaum does from the three novels (*Hard Times*, *Maurice*, *Native Son*) she considers in *Poetic Justice*.⁸⁸ He finds her defense of *Native Son* and *Maurice* as exemplary works of literature unimaginable, arguing that it is only because their political messages cohere with her own that they get mention, placing her esteem of these novels well outside conventional critical evaluation of their merits.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Pappas, 290.

⁸⁶ Pappas, 290-92.

⁸⁷ Pappas also thinks that *Hard Times* as a novel is not indicative of the general features of the genre for this reason, and problematically so for Nussbaum, as she is left with a paradigm novel which is either hostile to her overarching political goals, or typical of novels in its suspicion of generalizable norms of conduct.

⁸⁸ Posner, “Against”, 11.

⁸⁹ Posner, “Against ... Part Two”, 398-399. Posner, “Against”, 7. Posner also notes that the moral content of literary works may well agree with our current political commitments, but that does not seem to recommend them to us, citing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as an example of a work that “has not survived as literature...even though its author’s opposition to slavery now commands universal assent.”

The general point being articulated among these critics is that Nussbaum's example novels, and the obvious lessons she thinks waiting within them, appear cherry picked. If the *Judicious Spectator* is indeed an apt description of the parallel between the activity of reading and that of moral deliberation then, Posner argues, it seems odd to have chosen only novels that explicitly (and rather ham-fistedly) reiterate Nussbaum's own political convictions, as this undercuts the plausibility of the general parallel found in the form. In a similar vein, Pappas's claim that *Hard Times* is a strange choice as an exemplar novel rests on more conventional interpretations of the themes of that work that emphasize Dickens' attachment to individuals in opposition to larger social or political movements. Thus Nussbaum appears left with an unpalatable dichotomy, a paradigm novel that is either hostile to her specific political goals, or a paradigm novel that is typical of all novels in resisting the alleged natural progression from empathy for characters to larger social reorganization.

3.2.2 Analysis

It appears to me that objections to Nussbaum's particular interpretation of *Hard Times* and her other example novels can be granted, or contested, without rebutting the more foundational claims made about the *Judicious Spectator* as a descriptive claim, though not without cost. Nussbaum may concede that there are more apt readings of *Hard Times* than her own, or stake a claim to her own view as capturing the uniquely political perspective that is also present alongside other themes, since any particular counter-example from an individual novel will not undercut the underlying account of the activity of sympathetic imagination as such, or the value of emotional perception to proper judgment. This is not to say these objectors are mistaken in their view that Nussbaum has misread or contorted Dickens, or misunderstood the aesthetic valuation of certain novels, only that it appears that she could grant these objections without

altering her more basic (and general) claims about what it is like to gain imaginative skill and why that is morally and socially valuable. If, for example, she capitulated to Posner's assertion that all three of her example novels contained aesthetic defects and she should choose other examples, Nussbaum could do so and still maintain that readers do actually engage with fictions primarily through non-self-interested emotional attachment to characters, and that this is morally valuable as a kind of practice run for proper judgment. It might be argued that the problems with her literary interpretations undercut the plausibility of her overall project, since Nussbaum presumably sees these novels as exemplifying what is reasonable about her depiction of reading, and does in fact wish to argue for a liberal, enlightenment view of human flourishing, not just any potential output from novel reading.

As I have argued above, Nussbaum does appear to endorse what Stow labels a 'supply-side' view of textual impact (that novels have a particular meaning and that novels induce contemplation of that meaning in their readers), and the objections raised above are clearly connected to this problem.⁹⁰ However, if we understand the Judicious Spectator as a descriptive claim about what novel reading is like, Nussbaum's assertions about the general form of imaginative engagement with literature and her claim that this engagement mirrors the practice of proper judgment could conceivably be divorced from her insistence on her political theory commitments as following from the themes present in the novels we read. In the section below I take up this suggestion as it relates to her claim that readers bring a general conception of human flourishing and suffering to bear upon the works they encounter.

⁹⁰ Recall that earlier in chapter three I argued that this 'supply-side theory of meaning transferal was incompatible with a normative conception of the Judicious Spectator.

3.2.3 Empirical Claims Objections

Nussbaum makes several interrelated claims about the way in which meanings and messages in literature are transmitted, about the structure of novels, and about the natural responses of readers to them.⁹¹ Specifically, she claims that novels give readers pleasure, and this fact about them is not independent of their moral operations or usefulness, since the very focused attention that entices us to continue reading is “itself a moral feature.”⁹² Readers, for their part, assess the particular conditions depicted in novels with reference to “certain very general norms of human flourishing that are built into” their compassionate responses, which are highly cognitive and evaluative emotions on Nussbaum's account (and include Aristotelian judgments about luck, goodness and harm, and blameworthiness).⁹³ Further, readers’ interests and emotional responses to these fictional depictions lead naturally (perhaps inevitably) to a kind of metaphorical imaginative leap, where readers consider the broader social or political climates that inform the specific characterizations of individual lives or circumstances.⁹⁴ Finally, the activity of reading, “develops moral capacities without which citizens will be unable to instantiate the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however excellent.” These theoretical commitments will themselves have been influenced by our insights gained through reading if we are attentive and perceptive readers.⁹⁵

Several critics have taken issue with Nussbaum’s claim that novels engender these capacities. Pappas points out that Nussbaum has made a very strong claim in *Poetic Justice* (and elsewhere) about the link between novels and their positive social effects. Her initial claim is that

⁹¹ See Chapter two, pg. 2-5 for a more detailed discussion.

⁹² Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 35.

⁹³ Nussbaum, “Exactly”, 325.

⁹⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 7.

⁹⁵ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 12.

the sympathetic imagination receives its full content only through reading novels⁹⁶ (although she vacillates in response to critics on this point).⁹⁷ Critics have responded to this strong claim with the charge of instrumental use of art. As Pappas notes, the general problem with arguments for the social efficacy of artworks is that such accounts need to maintain at least some recognition of the aesthetic status of the art in question or else those works are “forced to compete with non-art over the turf of effectiveness.”⁹⁸ If the good of novel reading is solely its social consciousness-raising effects, then what reason do we have to prefer novels over other means that engender the same effect with greater efficiency? Nussbaum asserts that the efficacy of novel reading stems from its status as art, in particular the pleasure we garner in reading novels, a (perhaps) unique kind of apprehension of the situations and characters that Nussbaum repeatedly likens to friendship.⁹⁹

Pappas notes that if characters are good company (and analogous to friendships) because we read for pleasure, they have use to us. But, he asks, surely appreciation of others for their own sake (the kind of sympathetic imagination that is needed for real world interactions) is a different sort of appreciation than the selfish utility of the pleasure we receive from their company?¹⁰⁰ Pappas argues that Nussbaum makes this less plausible by attaching the relevant aesthetic pleasure to literary characters.¹⁰¹ She appears to have an internal inconsistency between the moral ideals we are attempting to cultivate with our novel reading (that of treating people as ends in themselves) and a kind of solipsistic (or at the very least supremely lopsided) friendship

⁹⁶ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 66, 72-74.

⁹⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Exactly”, 346.

⁹⁸ Pappas, 281.

⁹⁹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 31, 35, 42.

¹⁰⁰ Pappas, 294.

¹⁰¹ Pappas, 294.

predicated on our entertainment in the company of singular or outlandish characters who are supposed to bring us there.¹⁰²

Nussbaum's second claim, that the structure of the novel or the necessary responses of readers to novels contain moral improvements waiting to be shaped into particular political commitments, draws criticism from Posner, who argues that if this were true in any generalizable sense, Nussbaum could have chosen much finer works of literature as examples without having to worry about the political content of their central themes.¹⁰³ If, the very structure of novels tended to induce liberal political analysis and social action in readers, then where is the need to read books whose overt, and Posner claims, clumsy themes are these specific liberal commitments? Surely better quality books will take us to the same place if it really is the structure of the novel that leads to such conclusions. Relatedly, Piercey is prepared to entertain Nussbaum's idea that our imaginative practice (exercised through reading) may well teach perceptual awareness and give us practice at looking for deeper meanings, but is sceptical about her assumption that such interpretations will always be positive, as cases of unreliable narrators and other literary devices might cause us to view others as always hiding the truth from us.¹⁰⁴ A more extreme version of this objection is presented by Posner (and discussed by Stow),¹⁰⁵ who proposes the idea of an *empathetic torturer* (citing the historical example of the well-cultured Germans who went on to become Nazis) to suggest that we might learn quite unsavoury things from becoming more perceptive about the lives of others.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Pappas, 294.

¹⁰³ Posner, "Against", 16.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Piercey, "Paul Ricoeur on the Ethical Significance of Reading" *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 54, no. 3 (2010), 280. See in particular, footnote 20.

¹⁰⁵ Stow, *Republic of Readers*, 48-49.

¹⁰⁶ Posner, "Against", 4-5.

Finally, Pappas' objection (raised earlier in section 3.1.1) that Nussbaum conflates two different types of imagination (the practical or concrete and the theoretical or abstract) seems germane to her empirical claim that reader's emotional responses to novels lead naturally to a kind of imaginative leap where readers consider the broader social or political ramifications of specific stories. Conversely, Pappas argues that attention to any particular harm can obscure more general and non-descript social patterns or behaviours, since they are not as susceptible to keen awareness regarding individual details but rather require a kind of abstract thinking that contemplates the 'individual in general'.¹⁰⁷

3.2.4 Analysis

Considering these objections collected together, we can see that the force of each relies to some degree on the incompatibility of Nussbaum's empirical claims about the structure of novels and the nature of reading with her desire to derive particular liberal political principles from this practice. Much like the "Literary Interpretation Objections" it appears as though a general worry shared by several theorists finds its footing in the idea that Nussbaum's 'supply-side' theory of textual impact is implausible. Recall that Stow, who articulates this idea most clearly, is sceptical that identifying a work's themes or its author's intent can reliably predict a work's impact on a reader. He argues that there is no indication in *Poetic Justice* (or elsewhere) that Nussbaum has seriously considered the individuation of readers' experience as a potential complication to her strong interpretive claims.¹⁰⁸ I have argued previously that Stow is correct in this assertion, and that Nussbaum's commitment to a narrow and pessimistic view of reader's capacity to assess the authorial intent or presented themes of a work stands in tension with understanding the relationship of reader to text as relevantly like the Judicious Spectator.

¹⁰⁷ Pappas, 285-292.

¹⁰⁸ Stow, *Republic of Readers*, 52, 55.

Posner's objection that portrayal of certain themes is not enough to force the reader to endorse them is aimed at Nussbaum's focus on particular moral and political knowledge to be gleaned from her exemplar novels, but that does not mean that he (or the other critics discussed) are prepared to dismiss entirely the idea that novels may engender in their readers 'expansion of horizons', 'increased capacities of perception' or 'changes in perspective'.¹⁰⁹ Clearly readers must be invited or enticed into engaging in all of these activities, so the disagreement with Nussbaum is not over whether there is any form of connection between texts and altered readers,¹¹⁰ but rather a doubt that neither the degree of specificity nor the direct causal connection claimed by Nussbaum is plausible. In "Exactly and Responsibly" Nussbaum accuses Posner of failing to attend to the subtlety of her view. She claims to be making the broader point that our attentive reading of such works will always include our general concerns, "about time and death, about pain and the transcendence of pain, and so on— all the material of the 'how one should live' question as I have conceived of it",¹¹¹ not that ethical criticism means deriving a specific moral lesson from each work. Nussbaum is attempting to make a distinction between having a moral interest in the work and extracting a moral from it. This could be a good counter to worries about misreadings and also a possible answer to the objection of cherry picking. However, Nussbaum fails to counter the complaints of Stow, Piercey, and others who fairly ask for examples of works or interpretations that are not recapitulations of liberal theorizing as she provides no counter-examples of works where her reading is anything other than the extraction of a political moral with which she is already in agreement. Nussbaum appears to have room for such a distinction to be made on her account, but can fairly be asked to supply the details of it.

¹⁰⁹ Posner, "Against", 9, 19. Piercey, 281. Pappas, 284-286.

¹¹⁰ Stow, *Republic of Readers*, 56.

¹¹¹ Nussbaum, "Exactly", 358.

In this sense, there may indeed be room on her view for defending the general claim about broad judgments regarding human suffering or flourishing being a part of the background conditions that readers start with in assessing a literary work. We might well agree with her that attentive readers, when following the plot of a story, can and do make evaluative judgments about whether some action is harmful or helpful to that character (perhaps even about whether some unhappy end was tragedy or justice).¹¹² But without further justificatory argumentation these judgements do not warrant the strong claims Nussbaum makes about political egalitarianism, claims that appear to ride on the back of this foundational description about what it is like to engage with fictions.¹¹³ This is the ground of Piercey and Posner's scepticism about positive outcomes of increased perceptual awareness.

If we grant that readers can and do bring background evaluative judgments to fictional works, that surely doesn't get us all the way to modern liberalism by itself. We won't come to specific interpretative agreements based on this characteristic alone, and thus her problematic reliance on a 'supply-side' view of message transferal remains problematic. Nussbaum half-heartedly concedes this point in her discussion of 'co-duction' as a necessary step in the reading experience in order to get the moral goods she has promised, but devotes no time to explaining how discussion with others mitigates this over-extension.¹¹⁴ If various readings of a work are plausible between readers in private, why should this multiplicity disappear in conversation?

¹¹² I take the relatively strong consensus surrounding the puzzle of imaginative resistance to give some credence to this claim understood at a very general level. See: Tamar Szabo Gendler, "Imaginative Resistance Revisited," *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretense, Possibility, and Fiction* ed. Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 149-74.

¹¹³ Conversely some of her critics make equally implausible claims in the opposite direction. Posner's own claim that we misread works when we evaluate them with any moral standards whatever must surely overstep. The basic categorizations of fictions into genres, comedy or tragedy for example, appear to rely heavily on this kind of background set of judgements held by readers.

¹¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 76.

Often discussion with others who disagree ends without one party persuading the other, or even having claim to ‘ought to have persuaded’ the other (had they been fully reasonable or some such condition).

Nussbaum also appears unconvinced that such consensus will coalesce, which is why she recommends pruning the canon of illiberal works. But this suggestion itself seems somewhat incongruous with her prior claims about the structure of readers’ imaginations. If our engagement with novels has the tendencies she describes, then such a restriction on what we read will deprive the attentive reader of the kind of practice Nussbaum herself describes, of evaluating the works themselves from the appropriate distance of the Judicious Spectator position.¹¹⁵

As I have argued above, an amended version of Nussbaum’s account that abandons this supply-side view of textual impact is compatible with maintaining a descriptive version of the Judicious Spectator as a description of readerly activity. Doing so would appear to mitigate many of the most vociferous criticisms of her view. We can see in these counter-arguments a tendency to run together Nussbaum’s claim about readers having content-laden compassionate responses (i.e. that readers bring to their engagement general normative judgments about what is harmful to a life), and her claims about the desirability or even inevitability of particular liberal and egalitarian commitments as an end product of our encountering them in fiction. Aside from the incoherence this creates, it is also surely an implausible view (for all of the above enumerated reasons). The bare fact of the multiple interpretations of most works should encourage Nussbaum to give up this view. Further, the Judicious Spectator position does not appear to necessitate this view of textual impact. Nussbaum could certainly argue that regardless of one’s commitments to any particular theory of textual impact, the Judicious Spectator stands as an apt analogy (or

¹¹⁵ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 75-77.

‘artificial construction’ in her terminology) of the experience of engaged reading, and that attention to this similarity will show us the moral value available in the activity of reading fiction.

The question left unanswered then, is whether the Judicious Spectator is indeed an apt description of attentive reading. Although Nussbaum’s own interest centres on the realist novels of the late 19th Century,¹¹⁶ her general claims about the structure of the novel and the structure of reader engagement with fiction cast a broader net. Her own protestations to the contrary, Nussbaum’s broad claims about the structure of novels as a form of literary work, and her claims about the parallels between attentive reading and the Judicious Spectator sanction an examination of other works beyond her own chosen examples to test the plausibility and accuracy of her claims. I take up a science fiction novel in the next chapter in order to work through these questions. Because some general qualities of the genre of science fiction are particularly apropos given Nussbaum’s stated project, I endeavour to show that even a generous interpretation of Nussbaum’s Emotional Engagement View leaves us with an incomplete picture of what is morally salient about literature.

¹¹⁶ Nussbaum, “Exactly”, 346. Indeed, Nussbaum claims that her account of fictional engagement was only meant to pertain to her list of “pre-selected works”, and was never intended as a general account of literary engagement. It is difficult to make any sense of this claim, given the prevalence of general statements about the structure of novels, the structure of reading experience, and the role of the emotions in judgement are in *Poetic Justice*. To disregard her general claims and confine remarks only to what she says specifically of her three example novels would be to disregard three-quarters of the contents of the book.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the previous chapter, I outlined the objections to both a normative and a descriptive understanding of the Judicious Spectator position in Nussbaum's view. I concluded that a normative interpretation appeared incoherent given Nussbaum's other views about the structure of the novel and the structure of readers' experience. In the latter half of chapter three I examined the most substantive objections to a descriptive understanding of the Judicious Spectator concept within Nussbaum's account as articulated in *Poetic Justice*. I concluded that these objections, though strong grounds to abandon certain portions of Nussbaum's account, were not decisive, as Nussbaum need not retain her view of textual impact or her commitment to deriving specific political outcomes from literature in order to advance a descriptive view of readerly activity. More precisely, critics of her view did not scrutinize in any depth Nussbaum's general defense of the Judicious Spectator as both an accurate depiction of reading and as relevantly similar to moral judgment formation in any depth. In this chapter I will argue that the Judicious Spectator, focused as it is on filtering out self-regarding emotions as a standard for objectivity, cannot account for moral value found in reading that is primarily connected to moral reassessment and re-evaluation. I call this the moral good of 'appropriate doubt', arguing that good literature allows readers the opportunity to re-examine and evaluate personal, moral, and social views that they may not have thought through rigorously, or may even been unaware of holding. To make this case, I turn to the genre of science fiction and a case study of Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I argue that Le Guin's novel provides us with a concrete example of engagement with fiction that is, or can be, morally valuable, primarily through the self-reflection

it provokes. Further, I argue that this good appears unavailable if we understand the Judicious Spectator as a descriptive claim about what it is like to read. I attempt a charitable reading of this novel through Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View and show that, although she can account for certain kinds of morally valuable learning, her view cannot capture the moral value of the central conceit of the book. I therefore conclude that this shows her Emotional Engagement View to be an incomplete account of the possibilities for moral improvement through engagement with literature.

4.1 An Alternative Proposal

In the next section I will define what I take to be the central characteristics of the genre of science fiction, noting in particular the features of the genre that make it uniquely suited to the project Nussbaum outlines for herself at the beginning of *Poetic Justice*. In brief, I will argue that science fiction typically poses an opportunity for a special kind of moral development, the development of rationally appropriate appraisal and reflection on the concepts and presumptions of everyday experience. I will then examine in some detail the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin, in an attempt to make the case that it is particularly well suited to stand both as a paradigmatic case of science fiction at its best and as the kind of narrative work we should most want consider if we are to take Nussbaum's initial goals seriously. Addressing the critical response to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (or *LHoD*), I will argue that the novel cannot be dismissed as unworthy of serious literary consideration. Further, as this secondary literature shows, the central theme of the novel is exactly the sort of examination of a broad social problem through fictional engagement in which Nussbaum is interested. Finally, I will argue that although her Emotional Engagement View is meant to explain how readers effectively expand their moral reasoning capacities through their engagement with literature, Nussbaum is unable to account for

novels that are not primarily driven by emotional engagement with protagonists. I conclude with a discussion of the value of detailed and immersive hypotheticals (such as the *LHoD*) for our capacity to make appropriate moral judgments, arguing that Nussbaum's focus on avoiding self-regarding emotional ties as a measure of objectivity is too narrow and misses instances where what we are being asked to critically reflect on by the fictional work is not an otherwise unrecognized moral truth, but rather the presumptions that we bring to the text and which deserve our critical reflection. Nussbaum might well have an account that plausibly describes some limited set of novels, but she cannot account for the kind of self-reflective good that immersive reading offers, the ability to examine and recast (or even abandon) views the reader may not have even been aware of holding. My claim is that fiction opens up the possibility for self-reflective growth, and that Nussbaum's focus on moral lessons external to the reader excludes this moral good.

4.2 The Case for Science Fiction

The science fiction genre, as critic Carl Freedman notes, is a nebulous one, with no entirely agreed upon parameters or definitions.¹¹⁷ This can be attributed in part to the relative youth of the genre (or at least of its being taken seriously as a genre), although over the past thirty years or so, an emerging critical literature has given us the beginnings of proper delineation. In particular, the work of critics such as Freedman and Darko Suvin, and writers such as Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin, has given outline to what I take to be the essential features of the genre. Suvin defines science fiction as a genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework of an alternative empirical world. It is, he claims, "the only meta-empirical genre

¹¹⁷ Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*. (London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 13.

which is not at the same time metaphysical”.¹¹⁸ By ‘estrangement’, Suvin aims to pinpoint a representation that allows recognition by the reader while simultaneously making it appear unfamiliar, a detachment from the expectation of normal occurrence.¹¹⁹ What differentiates science fiction from other ‘estranging’ genres like myth, fantasy or folk tale, is the role of cognition, which Suvin sees as the rational or critical augmentation of imagination as a way to understand our own reality. This imagination is specifically of a cognitive variety, as science fiction demands a logical and philosophic consistency. Science fiction sees the norms of any period, especially its own, as a merely temporary realization of possibly limitless empirical contingencies and therefore open to cognitive examination and rigour in ways that myth and fantasy are not.¹²⁰

Russ suggests a similar conception when she characterizes the dominant indicative tension of science fiction as a “has not happened”. This includes events that might happen (science fiction), events that will not happen (science fiction-fantasy), events that have not happened yet (dystopias), and events that have not happened in the past (parallel-world stories).¹²¹ Suvin also argues that science fiction is not biased either for or against the characters described and, as such, is still very much tied to the notion of the centrality of people to ethics in that, as a genre, the moral significance of characters is found in their actions, not their role or placement in the story.¹²² Le Guin is keen to emphasize this aspect of the genre (arguing that it really only becomes a mature genre of literature when the centrality of character is acknowledged over

¹¹⁸ Darko Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” *College English* vol. 34, No. 3 (Dec., 1972), 375-378.

¹¹⁹ Suvin, 374.

¹²⁰ Suvin, 375.

¹²¹ Joanna Russ, *To Write like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 20.

¹²² Suvin, 378.

fetishization of technologies).¹²³ However, somewhat contrary to this view, Russ argues that, “science fiction’s emphasis is always on phenomena – to the point where reviewers and critics can commonly use such phrases as ‘the idea as hero’,” and further that “the protagonists of science fiction are always collective, never individual persons (although individuals often appear as exemplary or representative figures).”¹²⁴

While the estranging use of the boundaries of scientific knowledge is central to science fiction, it is no less true that even in the cases to which Russ alludes, these collective protagonists are still protagonists in the essentially emploted way typical of other genres. In fact, they seem particularly concerned with the relation of persons to others, in that they remain science fiction narratives to the extent that they are exactly attempts at bringing to the fore (through estrangement) some specific contingency in what we take to be settled or immutable fact for closer examination. Freedman notes that, “the science-fictional world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes.”¹²⁵

This feature of science fiction is specifically found in its otherness from our current world. Because science fiction novels present the reader with empirical descriptions of the world in which the story takes place that are both new and explicitly at one remove, the principles of ethics, science, politics, ontology and history are all presented in a manner that allows and invites critical evaluation, both for internal consistency (in an attempt to make it believable, even when strictly speaking, impossible) and also relative to the reader’s own situation. Pamela J. Annas

¹²³ Ursula K. Le Guin, “Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown,” *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1979), 101-120.

¹²⁴ Russ, 5-6.

¹²⁵ Freedman, xvi.

notes that science fiction is implicitly non-ethnocentric and dialectical in its vision of society: “non-ethnocentric in that a fundamental premise of the genre is that things-as-they-are should be questioned rather than merely accepted and described; dialectical in that alternate paradigms are played off against any given reality.”¹²⁶ She concludes that the genre is structurally inclined towards revolutionary literature. Josh Lukin has argued that even reactionary affirmations of traditional social roles in science fiction novels participate in the deconstruction of their own positions because they must (explicitly or tacitly) acknowledge the existence of non-traditional roles when setting their world stages.¹²⁷ Further, books such as Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* or Joanna Russ’ *The Two of Them* specifically raise radical questions of gender identity, sex roles, and sexual stereotypes by postulating a sharp departure from our world and our current norms and conventions, requesting through the text that the reader give up the comfortable assumptions of their embedded social situation and through imagination examine a different possibility.¹²⁸

All of these features recommend the genre to Nussbaum’s project, which is explicitly an attempt to defend engagement with fiction as intimately connected to our capacities for moral problem solving, and to draw attention to the parallels between our ‘literary imagination’ and our ‘public imagination’.¹²⁹ Russ describes the common patterns of science fiction as ‘the dislocated protagonist’ and ‘the dislocated reader’, “that is, the protagonist who finds himself in a strange

¹²⁶ Pamela J. Annas, “New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 5, no. 2 (July 1978), 144.

¹²⁷ Josh Lukin, “The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction (Review),” *MLN* vol. 117, No. 5 (December, 2002), 1140.

¹²⁸ These are obviously only two examples from a vast array of possible works. Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* stands as another prime example of a radical departure, in his case asking a very Wittgensteinian question about what the limits of sensible communication might be between radically different types of consciousness. The point here is only to note that the best of science fiction as a genre is chock full of this tendency across a host of philosophically important topics.

¹²⁹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 3.

place or a strange world *at the beginning of the story* with no knowledge of how he got there,” or in the latter case, “the story begins *as if it were a naturalistic story*, and the reader must find his own way through the strange world”.¹³⁰ These seem to me to be particularly appropriate modes of narrative structuring for a philosophical theory, such as Nussbaum’s, that is focused on the importance of the reader-protagonist dynamic. John Pennington has argued that science fiction is “by nature more writerly than readerly (to use Barthes’s terminology) because readers must activate the fictional worlds” more intently or fully than in realistic fictions.¹³¹ This suggests another feature of science fiction that should appeal to Nussbaum, who argues that attention to complex, detailed imaginings is part of the moral good of reading.

Science fiction is, if nothing else, consumed with the use and expansion of the figure of the alien (or outsider) as a way to understand the human experience and our grounding value judgments. This makes it a particularly fruitful genre for encountering narrative models that take up, often explicitly and critically, many important philosophical questions concerning human suffering and flourishing, and often propose solutions to moral problems that are novel and challenging. As a genre it is unique in its invitation to readers, both in its request for active reader participation as co-builders of the worlds explored and in its possibilities for self-reflection. These two characteristics are of course related. What we might call the excess work of immersion in science fiction novels that Pennington alludes to naturally opens up more possibilities for critical self-reflection, since to some extent there is more of the reader within the story. To the extent that we activate and populate the strange worlds we encounter in science fiction, we open up our own assumptions for critical reflection as well, since the invitation of

¹³⁰ Russ, 20.

¹³¹ John Pennington, “Exorcising Gender: Resisting Readers in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*”. *Extrapolation*, Vol. 41, no. 4 (2000), 357.

science fiction is always prefaced on the understanding of the contingency of the hypotheticals under examination.

For a theorist such as Nussbaum who is keen to show the moral value of readers' engagement with literary works, specifically arguing for a strong connection between vivid fictional depictions of other lives and an enlarged capacity to make proper value judgments,¹³² science fiction seems uniquely appropriate to her project as a modern genre (particularly so because she prioritizes the 'structural features' of novels as a contributor to this process). As noted,¹³³ Nussbaum does not see a need to defend her view of engagement as appropriate to any other novels other than her own example cases. I have argued above that this is an untenable position for her view, given the numerous claims she makes about the morally significant structure of the novel as a type of literary work, and about the general normative appraisals that are "built into [readers] compassionate response" to novels.¹³⁴ In science fiction, we find a genre that appears to me to be particularly congruous in its general form and structure to Nussbaum's initial outline of the value of fiction. Of course Nussbaum does not take up any example of science fiction as example cases when outlining her view. However, given her broad claims on behalf of the structure of the novel and the general character of the reading experience, I contend that her view ought to be able to accommodate exemplary science fiction novels if the Emotional Engagement View is an accurate depiction of readerly activity. It would be a strange theory indeed if the basic structure of the readers' imaginative capacities and the general claims about appropriate kinds of objective judgment found in reading (both justified as broadly appropriate) only applied to a handful of explicitly liberal realist novels.

¹³² Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 5-7, 8-11.

¹³³ See chapter three, footnote 67.

¹³⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 7, 8, 78.

4.3 Novel Case Study: *The Left Hand of Darkness*

With this outline of science fiction's parameters in hand and some reasons to suppose that Nussbaum's account both should be able to adequately explain science fiction, and might well be buttressed by some features of the genre, we can turn to a more thorough examination of what I claim is a novel paradigmatic of the genre. Le Guin's novel is an excellent example of how a fictional work can productively challenge existing categories of understanding. Further, I will argue that the ethical significance of her work cannot be fully accounted for on Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View, as it is primarily a text that asks us to engage in a thoroughgoing thought experiment that imagines seemingly immutable categories of identity (namely, sex and/or gender) as contingent.¹³⁵ Unlike the realist novels of Dickens that Nussbaum champions, the *LHoD* is a novel with morally valuable insight that is not accessed primarily through a reader relationship of sympathy for, or judgment of, the protagonist. If we are to understand Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View as a descriptive claim about what readerly activity is like, the *LHoD* stands as a counter example to her narrow conception of those possibilities, suggesting at least that her view is incomplete.

Le Guin's novel is, like many good narratives, polysemous enough that even brief summary threatens to oversimplify the complexity and ambiguity of its themes and ideas.¹³⁶

With this caveat in mind, the plot of the novel can be summarized as a new world discovery tale of sorts. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the report of Genly Ai, an envoy of the Ekumen (a

¹³⁵ And not one that easily allows for any specific normative judgements to be read from it, nor one that is essentially driven by an emotional relationship with any of its characters.

¹³⁶ Christine Cornell, "The Interpretive Journey in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*," *Extrapolation* Vol. 42, no. 4 (2001), 317. Cornell asserts that, perhaps uniquely for a text that has garnered such universal recognition as a paragon of its genre, critical responses to *LHoD* remain incredibly diverse, with "no agreement on central themes or even the basic trajectory of the plot." A diverse set of rigorously defended interpretations abound, including disagreement about who the protagonist of the novel really is.

political and spiritual intergalactic United-Nations of sorts) recounting his mission to the distant planet of Winter (Gethen in the native tongue). Genly is sent to invite the citizens of Gethen to join the Ekumen, but encounters a series of political and cultural misunderstandings and is frustrated and alienated by the Gethenian social structure of *shifgrethor* (a complicated social system or concept of honour or personal prestige that governs interpersonal relations on Gethen),¹³⁷ as well as by the androgynous nature of the people and the unrelenting harshness of the planet's ice age climate. Political intrigue precipitates his travel from the old-world feudal kingdom of Karhide to the neighbouring nation of Orgoreyn (an early-modern-like bureaucratic totalitarian society), and later his imprisonment there. Genly is rescued from this captivity by the exiled former prime minister to the King of Karhide, Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (the other major narrative voice in the book), a Gethenian who supports joining the Ekumen, and the two of them embark upon a perilous journey north across a glacier (the Gobrin ice fields) in an attempt to return to Karhide. They succeed, and come finally to know and care for each other during their journey, though Estraven is later killed, or perhaps commits suicide, in the attempt to return Genly to the capital of Karhide to fulfill his mission. Genly does eventually fulfill his mission and calls down his ship from the planet's orbit, breaking a promise he has made to Estraven that he would not do so until his name was cleared by the King of Karhide. When Genly's compatriots arrive they appear alien to him, as he has become used to humans without fixed gender. The story concludes with Genly, his official task complete but feeling incomplete,

¹³⁷ *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 14. Genly's own explanation of the term appears early in the book, but it belies his frustration and ignorance of the alien peoples he is visiting more so than offering up an authoritative definition. His own growth through the arc of the plot gives him a much more complete understanding by the end of the book, though no fully fleshed out definition is ever provided. Genly's definition is, "prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilizations of Gethen."

trekking to the ancestral home of his now-deceased friend Estraven to give his journals (some of which serve as alternating chapters within the book's narrative arc) to his family.

Central to the movement of the plot is the thought experiment posed by Le Guin in this world: imagine a human existence without fixed genders. The citizens of Gethen are human in seemingly all other respects, save for their sexual physiology, where they are best described as sequential hermaphrodites. Instead of our continuous sexuality, they have a cyclical oestrus period of two to five days (called *kemmer*) in which their gender and sexual characteristics manifest as determined by hormonal negotiation with an interested sex partner,¹³⁸ but not in predetermined ways vis a vis a particular gender (and without their conscious choice).¹³⁹ If they become pregnant, hormonal activity continues and they remain 'female' for the gestation and lactation periods of reproduction, but return to their androgynous state soon after, and without establishing a physiological habit. Thus Gethenians can be father to some children and mother to others. The remaining time, Gethenians are completely androgynous, latent but physiologically completely inactive (this phase is named *somer*).

This difference in gender and sexuality found on Gethen is the cause of much of Genly's early misunderstanding and his anxiety and frustration in attempting to complete his mission, as the entirety of social relations and custom, the whole foundation of this civilization, is set upon different footings. In the latter stages of the novel, his growing acceptance of Gethenians as they really are allows him both a personal relationship of meaning with Estraven and the ability to

¹³⁸ *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 90. The third person chapter seven that describes Gethenian physiology notes that it appears as though it needs to be a reciprocal pheromonal arrangement. "Gender, and potency, are not attained in isolation." This is significant only in that it appears to remove the possibility of unwanted sex for Gethenians, which of course also has rather profound social and political consequences.

¹³⁹ *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 91. Le Guin includes a caveat for modernity in this description, noting that in the some parts of Gethen artificial hormone therapy is used to establish a preferred sexuality.

navigate the social and political landscape effectively enough to complete his initial task, although it is not at all clear that either he or Estraven ever really come to understand each other completely. There remain even at the end of the book significant misunderstandings between them about what constitutes right or appropriate behaviour and action.

4.3.1 Critical Response

The secondary critical literature on *The Left Hand of Darkness* is thoroughgoing and thoroughly interesting, though somewhat off topic for present purposes. In this section I will confine my discussion to a small sample of the critical response in order to buttress two of my claims: that the work is a significant contribution to modern American literature that cannot be ignored as unworthy of attention by virtue of its genre, and that the novel's claim to literary importance and value largely rests upon the central conceit of the novel. In short, the novel cannot be dismissed and its most valuable feature is its invitation to readers to engage in a detailed thought experiment about the contingency of their concept of gender. In subsequent sections I will argue that the moral worth of this project sets out for readers of the novel is difficult (perhaps impossible) to capture on the Emotional Engagement View of reading. For the present moment let me expand upon my two claims for the book.

Le Guin's novel was critically acclaimed at the time of its publication, winning both the Hugo and Nebula awards for best science fiction of the year in 1970, and has remained a consistent science fiction top seller. Harold Bloom, in the introduction to the 1987 critical anthology about the novel he edited, claims that Le Guin, "more than Tolkien, has raised fantasy into high literature for our time."¹⁴⁰ Lewis Call hailed it as "a postmodern masterpiece" in "both

¹⁴⁰ Harold Bloom, *Ursula Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 10.

form and content”.¹⁴¹ Justine Larbalestier called it a classic of science fiction, noting it is, “one of the most written-about texts in science fiction scholarship,”¹⁴² while Thomas D. Claerson declared that a clear retrospective of the era shows that Le Guin (along with Cord-wainer Smith, and Robert Silverburg), “opened the potential of science fiction more widely than any of their contemporaries.”¹⁴³ Arthur B. Evans and R.D. Mullen’s extensive 1996 survey of North American university courses on science fiction showed it to be the most widely assigned novel,¹⁴⁴ while Tim Tillack notes in his essay discussing the critical reception *LHoD* has received that it is, “one of the most read texts in the feminist science fiction canon, if not science fiction as a whole.”¹⁴⁵

The vast majority of critical response focuses on the thought experiment central to the book, namely imagining what human societies might look like without the social force of continuous binary sexuality. Le Guin offers us a concise summary in her own critical analysis. “The subject of my experiment, then, was something like this: Because of our lifelong social conditioning, it is hard for us to see clearly what, besides purely physiological form and function, truly differentiates men and women. ... I eliminated gender, to find out what was left.”¹⁴⁶ Claerson claims that, “Le Guin goes far beyond the matter of sexual roles in order to explore the very nature of the society that would result from this biological arrangement. In short, with

¹⁴¹ Lewis Call “Postmodern Anarchism in the novels of Ursula K. Le Guin” *SubStance* #113, Vol. 36, no. 2, (2007), 91.

¹⁴² Justine Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 101.

¹⁴³ Thomas D. Claerson, *Understanding Contemporary American Science Fiction: The Formative Period (1926-1970)* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 261.

¹⁴⁴ Evans and Mullen, 524.

¹⁴⁵ Tim Tillack, “The Critical Reception of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*,” *The Knowledge Eater*, last modified October 2, 2011, <http://goo.gl/uZX086>

¹⁴⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, “Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 9.

Gethen as an alternate model, Le Guin makes the reader ask questions about human society.”¹⁴⁷ Lewis Call argues that passages from the perspective of the Gethenians produce “a radical effect of cognitive estrangement” for the reader. That the Gethenians have a socially ubiquitous (though mild) heterophobia,¹⁴⁸ Call thinks, “performs a vital function for Le Guin’s real-world audience, by undermining certainty and challenging the very concept of the normal.”¹⁴⁹ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. notes that, “the process of transient gender-manifestation over which conscious will has little control makes fluid one of the stable elements of Genly’s understandings of humanoid beings — including himself”, which initially causes him great anxiety.¹⁵⁰ He argues that Le Guin’s use of the concept of *kemmer* is more fulsome than merely showcasing this anxiety, as Le Guin constructs Gethenian culture around dialectical principles that seem natural for beings whose gender and reproductive identities are not fixed. As he observes, “Kemmer is thus also a heuristic device, posed to inspire real human people to think about their own gender qualities, and to imagine how much gender influences every aspect of culture and consciousness.”¹⁵¹

Though not all critical response is so positive, discussion of the book is invariably centred around Le Guin’s gender thought experiment in one form or another, with critics often underscoring in their interpretive disagreement the powerful pull of critical thought and self-reflection that the novel invites in its readers through its narrative structure and central conceit.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Claerson, 260.

¹⁴⁸ *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 64. See Genly’s overheard conversation on pg. 64 for an example of discussions of perversion and normalcy among Gethenians.

¹⁴⁹ Call, 92, 94.

¹⁵⁰ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 43.

¹⁵¹ Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 43.

¹⁵² Barbara Brown, “*The Left Hand of Darkness* Androgyny, Future, Present, Past”, *Extrapolation*, Vol. 21, no. 3 (1980), 227-35.

In particular, discussions of Le Guin's use of common gendered pronouns by her protagonist allow critics to explore Le Guin's nuanced and subtle use of linguistic assumptions brought to bear by the reader in engaging with the text. Nora Barry and Mary Prescott argue that in using Genly's mislabelling pronouns (Genly refers to Gethenians incorrectly as either 'he' or 'she'), Le Guin coaxes readers to see both the extent to which this society is truly other than their own and also underscores "the theme of Genly's bias," destabilizing the narrator's true-view of the world.¹⁵³ They claim that Genly's own reported distain for and confusion about Gethenian 'feminine characteristics', coupled with his attempt to chronicle accurately the world he interacts with on behalf of the Ekumen, "sets a trap for readers who have naturally established their own assumptions about gender in reaction to Genly's," which then "expands reader's awareness of their own preconceptions and liberates Genly from the burden of having to explain the facts of Gethenian sexuality throughout the story". This allows him (and the reader through him) to focus on his expanding conception of this normally concrete pillar of self-identity.¹⁵⁴ John Pennington

Wendy Gay Pearson, "Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/ies and the Legacy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Gwyneth Jone's Aleutians Talk Back", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 37, no. 2, (2007), 182-96.

Sarah LeFanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

Jewell Parker Rhodes, "Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Androgyny and the Feminist Utopia." *Women and Utopia* ed. Marleen Barr and Nicholas D. Smith (New York: UP of America, 1983), 108-20.

Lamb, Patricia Frazer and Diana L. Veith. "Again, *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Androgyny or Homophobia?" *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantasy Literature* ed. Donald Palumbo (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 221-31.

Pamela J. Annas, "New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 5, No. 2 (July, 1978), 143-56.

Martin Bickman, "Le Guin's the Left Hand of Darkness: Form and Content," *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 4, no. 1 (March, 1977), 42-47.

¹⁵³ Nora Barry and Mary Prescott, "Beyond Words: The Impact of Rhythm as Narrative Technique in *The Left Hand of Darkness*", *Extrapolation*, Vol. 33, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 156.

¹⁵⁴ Barry and Prescott, 157-59.

argues that although phrases such as ‘the king was pregnant’¹⁵⁵ might provoke an initial chuckle, “the phrase is a central metaphor for the reading strategy the reader is asked to perform.”¹⁵⁶ In the novel, both masculinity and femininity are insecure positions, and “...consequently, the reader’s individual response becomes an integral component to the novel’s theme, a response that will be filtered through gender as the reader attempts to deconstruct gender differences.”¹⁵⁷ Further, because Le Guin reverses the typical science fiction conceit of the anthropologist-as-hero, the genderless (or polygendered) are the norm on Winter and Genly is the alien, a fact he feels keenly much of the first half of the book. This forces the reader to follow along as the alien other, instead of from the position of normal or universal.¹⁵⁸

The novel is also disorienting in its shifting narration and perspective (with no less than five different narrative voices interspersed with Genly’s own unreliable authorial voice). Call describes this structure of the novel as “relentlessly experimental and fragmented” and lacking a narrative centre. The two main storytelling viewpoints (Genly’s and Estraven’s) are interrupted by a host of other narrative points of view and formats, which Call finds, “disorienting, destabilizing...and also remarkably satisfying.”¹⁵⁹ Cornell acknowledges that the book “can be a frustrating experience for a first-time reader”, but this narrative pattern can be seen as an attempt by Genly (ostensibly the curator of the book) to reproduce “an experience for the reader that is an approximation of his own experiences.”¹⁶⁰ Cornell’s posit is that Genly is himself a reader of the culture and people before him (as anthropologists are), and his own ‘textual gaps’ are at first filled by his prior experiences and conceptual frameworks in much the same way that readers’

¹⁵⁵ *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 100.

¹⁵⁶ Pennington, 352.

¹⁵⁷ Pennington, 353.

¹⁵⁸ Pennington, 355-356.

¹⁵⁹ Call, 91.

¹⁶⁰ Cornell, 322-323.

confusion is likely to be digested. However, she argues that in the latter third of the novel, Genly comes to recognize that his previous ‘reading’ of his own linguistic categories and gender preconceptions onto the world of Gethen is his real roadblock, and substantially alters his approach, a process that is mirrored in more subtle ways by Estraven in the chapters he narrates. This alteration of views is implicitly asked of the reader as well.¹⁶¹

4.3.2 Analysis

Though much more has been written on the novel, this sample of criticism is representative of the larger whole in two important respects. Firstly, I take it to show a deep and continuing engagement with the novel as valued modern American literature. The nuanced and variegated interpretive approaches offered up as critical response (and critics admiration for the richness of the novel’s interpretive possibilities) show the work to be full of potential for readers interested in fictions that invite the kind of critical reflection on moral and political concerns that Nussbaum’s view purports to champion as worthwhile. I examined the critical secondary literature to establish that Le Guin’s novel is not dismissible as some intentionally perverse counter-example, contrary to the normal operation of reader’s engagement with novels. I take the above discussions to be such evidence. Critical analysis of the work does focus on the gender thought experiment Le Guin poses, but not to the exclusion of the development of character, plot, and other structural features consistent with the novel as a literary type. In fact, most critical analyses engage *The Left Hand of Darkness* under the general view that what makes the novel noteworthy is precisely that it is both an excellent science fiction puzzle and an excellent example of literary subtlety, depth and perception. Whatever one might think of the merits of the *LHoD*, it is not out of the ordinary with respect to the above-mentioned features of novels in

¹⁶¹ Cornell, 319-322.

general, and as argued above, it stands as a paradigmatic instance of the science fiction novel. Le Guin's use of cognitive estrangement, a dislocated protagonist, an alternate empirical world and critical attention to "the difference that such difference makes", are not accidental features of her novel, they are the backbone of her fictional unrolling of a detailed thought experiment.

Secondly, I mean to establish that although *The Left Hand of Darkness* shares these characteristics common to novels in general, unlike *Hard Times*, it is not so easily distilled into prescriptive moral exhortations, or even into a relationship of friendship or attention with the protagonist. As the secondary literature makes clear, the focus of the novel is the unfolding of a plot within a world that is both quite familiar in its modern human characteristics and simultaneously jarring and alien in its difference. More to the point, the critical analysis also notes the deliberate difficulty readers have in finding what we might call comfortable footing in the novel. Genly begins his narration with an exhortation not to believe his account as accurate, and then proves himself to be true to his word immediately with his pronoun misuse and inappropriate cultural overlay of fixed gender approximations for the Gethenians he encounters. The first several chapters alternate between Genly's angry confusion, unexplained Gethenian myth, Estraven's (initially) mysterious and perplexing mode of address even in private thought to himself, and third-person scientific descriptive language that also subtly calls into question the reader's gendered assumptions with an expectation bait-and-switch. The reader's attention does not (perhaps cannot) focus on attachment to particular characters in the mode of a friend-like relationship because, unlike a realist novel, the setting is not a fixed background, free to be ignored while we follow the characters through the plot. When background assumptions of social organization are explicitly contingent, a good deal of effort is required of the reader to determine where she is looking and what she is seeing. Common markers of social interaction are not easily

digested or assumed and so readers are not free to ignore the background conditions of the world and concentrate on the movement of the plot as they would in the Dickens' or Henry James' novels that Nussbaum often uses as her examples. Further, the characters do not occupy the foreground in such a definitive way. For even if they are detailed and well-drawn and therefore demand from the reader recognition as individuals, they also stand, in virtue of their contingent empirical settings, as metaphorical exemplars of the ideas under examination (as Russ rightly notes).

One way to summarize this feature of the novel is to note the extent to which rereading the first several chapters of *LHoD* after completing the novel (and thus being familiar in much more detail with the proposed outcomes of Le Guin's thought experiment and in a position to evaluate the consistency and plausibility of said outcomes) gives an entirely new perspective to the events and persons described in a way that realist novels may not. In *Hard Times*, we might return to the introduction of a character such as Mr. Gradgrind and note the foreshadowing of his eventual rejection of utilitarian education in the kindness he exhibits to his children (being at odds with his supposed anti-emotional hyper-rationalist commitments), but our basic understanding of the significance and character of any social interaction is not up for re-evaluation. No rereading of *Hard Times* offers up the possibility that Bounderby's cruelty is actually kindness, for example. In contrast, after fully immersing herself in the thought experiment of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a reader returning to the opening third of the book will find that much of what appears to be (and is taken by Genly to be) coldness or even betrayal evinced by Estraven is understandable in radically different terms.¹⁶²

¹⁶² It might reasonably be claimed that other genres, such as mystery novels, also share this feature of pushing reassessment of 'known truths' within the story when re-examined by the reader. I would contest that what makes science fiction works rare in this respect is that these

I should note that in discussing these qualities of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (and by extension the genre as a whole), I do not mean to say that the characters are inconsequential to the novel. I take science fiction to have some unique characteristics as a genre, and have argued above that many of these should be seen as recommending the genre to Nussbaum's project. However, I take it to be clear that in form and operation, the general characteristics of novels hold for science fiction novels. Genly and Estraven (and many other Gethenians) are vividly portrayed and their actions drive the plot in prototypical ways. As well as being the embodiment of the central thought experiment, their complex portrayals allow the reader to contemplate a variety of other significant (and more traditional) themes such as the value of promises, the difficulty and grace of fidelity in the face of tragedy, and the struggle of the human being in and against a harsh and indifferent environment. Nussbaum's initial recommendation for novels over other forms of writing is that, "literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences,"¹⁶³ and I think it should be clear that by any reasonable measure Le Guin's novel does exactly that.

We do come to know Genly and Estraven over the course of the plot, and may even care deeply about one or both of them by the end of the novel. In so far as Nussbaum offers us up a plausible account of the kind of aesthetic pleasures available to readers of other novels, I think it

sorts of altered reading perspectives are not obfuscated or hidden by the author in the text. They only come to the fore in virtue of a radical change in perspective undergone by the reader. Reimagining Genly and Estraven's relationship is not a matter of perceptively finding the clues that were sprinkled through the first several chapters. The evidence, so to speak, is front and centre the entire time. What is remarkable about these early encounters is not noticing a slyly included clue of true motive cleverly hidden, but rather how obvious and upfront in presentation the social relationship is. Further, this change is not the result of a radical shift due to movement of the plot. The hero does not reveal himself to have been a villain all along. What changes significantly from first to second reading are the assumptions, presuppositions, and understanding of the role of gender in the attentive reader.

¹⁶³ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 5.

entirely possible to describe reader response to *The Left Hand of Darkness* in such terms. This relationship of ‘friendship’, as Nussbaum describes it, may well exist in relation to this novel, and even offer up an explanation for how readers access the above mentioned subsidiary questions illuminated by the novel. My contention is that it fails to capture the central moral significance of this work. Whether we care deeply for Genly or Estraven and see them as friends worthy of our sympathy or judge each (or both of them) to be unworthy of such sympathy for any number of reasons is, I argue, largely irrelevant to question of whether *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a noteworthy novel from the perspective of ethical criticism and analysis. In order to explicate this claim more fully, and to show what Nussbaum’s view of reading can and cannot account for, I offer an interpretation of the *LHoD* under Nussbaum’s Emotional Engagement View below. I will argue that even a generous reading of the novel from the perspective of the Judicious Spectator cannot capture the importance of Le Guin’s detailed thought experiment.

4.3.3 The Left Hand of Darkness on the Emotional Engagement View

It is worthwhile returning to the basic outline of Nussbaum’s account here in order to be clear about what kinds of interpretive claims are available to her. Recall that the essential features of Nussbaum’s view are fourfold: First, that reading is morally valuable because there are some possibilities that we cannot see if we only engage with theoretical or non-fiction works. These specific goods of narrative fiction include an emphasis on the complexity of the lives of individuals, a stressing of the internal lives of others as like one’s own in worth, and the idea of incommensurability when evaluating goods and harms across disparate circumstances. Second, reading is pleasurable and that pleasure is itself a moral feature of fiction, as our relationship of care (likened to friendship) with characters drives us to continue reading and stands as an appropriate relationship distance for proper judgment. Third, readers cannot help but bring a

general evaluative framework to bear on the worlds they encounter in fiction, one that recognizes in very general terms what is harmful or good in a human life. Finally, that reading allows a perspective that is at once deeply emotionally engaged and yet critically distant. This perspective is akin to Smith's Judicious Spectator position, which gives us an appropriate standard of objectivity that removes self-interested emotional attachments while still allowing the right kinds of emotions to play their essential role in proper judgment. Since reading is so like adopting the perspective of the Judicious Spectator, we can gain valuable practice in adopting an appropriate standard of objectivity necessary for sound moral judgments by reading. I take these essential features of Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View to be potentially independent of her account of textual impact. Given these features, what should we make of the resources available to Nussbaum to explain the moral significance of reading *The Left Hand of Darkness*?

Nussbaum might argue that her view does indeed capture the morally salient aspects of the novel. Readers can empathize deeply with Genly's struggles in an alien cultural landscape, and yet remain critically distant enough (as Judicious Spectators) to disapprove of his early overt sexism. Readers could thus move through the plot with Genly enjoying his growing awareness that he had been mistaken to attempt to fit Gethenians into his own cultural assumptions and had thus failed to treat them as 'ends-in-themselves'.¹⁶⁴ They might even make the leap Nussbaum thinks natural from the particular case of Genly to some broad social principle of cultural tolerance. Such readers might rejoice at the bond of friendship and loyalty that grows between Genly and Estraven and weep at the latter's death, coming to a further judgment of

¹⁶⁴ More pessimistic readers might judge Genly more harshly, noting that even at his most sympathetic and open (in the back third of the book) Genly displays a shallow and androcentric view of women (made clear in his inability to describe them to Estraven during their ice journey). This also seems compatible with Nussbaum's account as an instance of critical judgement correctly noting the protagonist's shortcomings from the position of the Judicious Spectator.

condemnation at the kind of tragedies wrought by an honour-bound society such as Karhide's. They might judge Genly harshly for breaking his promise to Estraven and calling his ship down before Estraven's public honour was restored, or they might conclude that Genly made the right choice of valuing the good of many over the prestige of one, despite feeling like a betrayer of his word and his friend. They might even conclude that Genly's mistake of impatience and anxiety when confronted with the sexually alien in the beginning of the novel shows us that human flourishing includes social space that is welcoming to sexual diversity. These sorts of moral lessons seem to be available on Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View.

Clearly there is room for a Nussbaumean reading of the *LHOD*, and one that picks out some potentially salient features of the text. If Smith's Spectator is not just enlightenment civility as Bromwich alleges, but rather, as Nussbaum claims, a standard of objectivity founded on a basic sense we all have of the general forms of human flourishing or harm and an appropriate description of the role of the emotions in judgment, then taking up the Judicious Spectator position in reading the *LHOD* will be of moral benefit as a practice run. Genly as protagonist comes to see his own patriarchal and gender-normative views as misguided prejudice and readers are in a position to evaluate this character growth. We can see the harm Genly does out of ignorance (to himself, the just and liberal cause of a galactic UN, and to his friend Estraven, who must endanger himself several times as a result of Genly's ignorance), and conclude that this is a general sort of harm that might be avoided with appropriate social reformation. We can be moved empathetically by the growing relationship of love and friendship between Genly and Estraven across their vast cultural and biological divide and make some further judgments about the goodness of this character growth, or the virtue of friendship so sketched, and as noted, one obvious way we might imagine the move through *Fancy* from the particular case of the novel to

more general accounts of human flourishing is the above-mentioned prescription for more tolerance of sexual diversity (a liberal outcome of which Nussbaum would surely approve).

4.3.4 Analysis

These possibilities are not insignificant and offer up some options for a type of ethical analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. They also offer Nussbaum some avenues to account for what other critics have thought important about the novel. Call, Clareson and Csicsery-Ronay all claim in various ways that the novel undermines reader's conception of normalcy and throws doubt upon present social organization, and Nussbaum might argue that her Emotional Engagement View captures the moral good as something like a political commitment to enlarged sympathy or tolerance for diverse gender norms and sexual orientations different from our own. However, I want to suggest that even a generous application of the Emotional Engagement View cannot account for the central conceit of the book, at least not with any depth or serious consideration. Further, the novel in its structure and content resists the externalized lessons that Nussbaum's theory seems inclined to draw.

For one thing, unlike the didactic novels of Dickens or Forster favoured by Nussbaum, no one is clearly downtrodden and in any need of our pity or sympathy simply in virtue of their social class or unfair circumstance in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and thus the possibility that our sympathy coupled with a general sense of what constitutes harm will lead us to a prescriptive proposal for social or political improvement seems much more in doubt. Taking the potential good of sexual tolerance for example, the Gethenians we meet are not oppressed by a version of homophobia, and even Genly remarks that the mild forms of heterophobia he witnesses or experiences are mostly noteworthy to him because they upset his internal vision of normalcy, not because he is oppressed by it. In fact, one of the persistent and alienating features for Genly (who

is our stand-in on this world, being the only fixed gender being) is that his usual ability to differentiate and perhaps segregate (socially and politically) women from men is lost.¹⁶⁵ Genly is himself, despite being in a position of forced vulnerability (being alone, unarmed, and utterly alien), not mistreated in virtue of his fixed gender. He is certainly socially adrift and alienated by his status as abnormal, but this is largely his doing. Genly's unwillingness (or inability) to discard his own preconceptions of 'normal' social relationships and power imbalances based on sex and gender categories is the primary cause of his hardship in the first third of the book.

Moreover, none of these potential lessons appear to capture what is truly attractive about the book. As several commentators note, the pull of the novel is not a particular attachment to any character's plight (and in fact there is some disagreement of who is even properly referred to as the protagonist of the story) so much as it is the unsettling (yet satisfying) confrontation the reader is invited to have with their own underlying assumptions and understanding of gender. Genly and Estravan are well drawn as characters in that they are three dimensional and believable, and we as readers do care for and about them, but the force of the novel's central ideas and themes are not carried by their personalities or particularities, nor by our attachment to them. One can be unwilling to invest in their personal struggles, or frustrated by and unsympathetic to one or the other or both, and still be deeply engaged with the novel. The movement of these characters through the plot is not of utmost significance to the book (and in fact, the plot itself, if understood strictly as what Genly does and what happens to him, is rather pedestrian).

¹⁶⁵ It would also be misplaced to condemn Genly for his homophobia, as he genuinely attempts from the very outset of his tale to accept Gethenians as they are. That he is unsuccessful initially is not obviously because he is narrow-minded, it is because he cannot really engage in reflection of the content of his own conceptual framework until he is more familiar with how it does not fit.

What Le Guin's novel does force us consider is what human civilization might look like without the social and political force of our gender relations constantly at play. The individual reader is pressed to think through how much of their social interaction and even consciousness of others is conditioned by potentially contingent categories of gender. Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View omits these kinds of moral considerations and potential benefits from reading fiction. Because there is little room on her view for readers to engage with novels in ways that are not principally tied to emotional engagement with protagonists, Nussbaum does not present us with much in the way of conceptual resources to account for such morally salient features of fictional works. Surely it is too strong to claim that all of the potentially valuable moral improvements found in fiction must be garnered through this particular emotional framework of protagonist friendship.

More importantly, Nussbaum's focus on the relationship of reader to protagonist leaves her Emotional Engagement View ill-equipped to countenance the extent to which our engagement with literature is really an engagement with our own self-identities, and not the external world (be it the fictional world of the novel, or the imaginative leap we take through Fancy to overlay relevant similarities onto our own depiction of the world). This leaves little room to explore what the potential consequences of good literature might be for our ability to accurately reflect upon ourselves, and to revise our self-conceptions, independent, in some sense, of whether we approve of the actions of another or not. In short the Emotional Engagement view omits what we might deem the potential for literature to pose to us through descriptively rich fictional worlds, compelling philosophical problems in more abstract terms. That science fiction is likely to present such moral conundrums and questions to readers in the form of immersive hypotheticals

more cognitive in nature instead of invitations of friendship and empathy does not lessen its potential moral benefit.

I noted earlier in Chapter four that a common complaint against Nussbaum was that she appeared to only be interested in works that confirmed her prior theoretical commitments. A related complaint is enunciated by Stow when he remarks that, “it is perhaps most telling, however, that Nussbaum never once gives an account of a book which has fundamentally altered her world vision.”¹⁶⁶ This is not surprising, I contend, given the direction of gaze in her theory. Nussbaum’s view of reading as akin to adopting the Judicious Spectator position suggests that she primarily sees the activity of imagination found with fictional works to be one of a specific sort of contrast and comparison (of the fictional world with the real world) that is outwardly focused. Such a narrow conception of the possibilities for our imaginative engagement preclude the rich potential found in science fictions like Le Guin’s that ask us to re-evaluate our basic assumptions about what is fixed and what is contingent in the human experience. It is a marked shortcoming of a view that purports to champion literature as a path to improved moral judgment that there appears to be no room for reading to be self-transformative. If the only moral transformation available to readers is the acquisition of emotionally compelling anecdotes to help apply existing theoretical commitments to public policy, we may doubt Nussbaum’s original claim that non-fictional treatises are inadequate to fully explore our ethical commitments. I think this is part explained by Nussbaum’s own claim that readers cannot help but bring a general evaluative framework to the novels they read about what is harmful or helpful to a human life. This claim does appear intuitively plausible, as I have argued above, but it should not preclude the possibility that engagement with fiction will alter the parameters of such evaluative

¹⁶⁶ Simon Stow, “Unbecoming Virulence: The Politics of the Ethical Criticism Debate,” *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 24 no. 1 (2000), 194.

frameworks themselves. Indeed, good science fiction such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* challenges readers to re-evaluate their own presuppositions about categories of human experience, such as the fluidity or fixedness of gender, which may play a foundational role in such evaluative judgments.

The objections to Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View discussed in chapter three suggested an incompatibility between her conception of the Judicious Spectator as a description of readerly activity and her view of textual impact, which many critics argued led to overly strong, implausible or unjustified claims about specific lessons or outcomes from reading certain novels. I have argued that, further to this worry, even if we separate the Judicious Spectator view from her theory of textual impact, we are left without the resources to understand invitations from fictional works that are not primarily emotional in nature and directed towards social and political outcomes. Fictions like *The Left Hand of Darkness* resist prescriptive comparisons between the world depicted and the world of the reader, instead asking readers to re-evaluate their own underlying assumptions, or to reflect upon the extent to which categories usually taken to be foundational building blocks to more specific political outcomes might themselves be worth further reflection. This appears to me to illuminate a problem with the plausibility of understanding the Judicious Spectator as an adequate description of what it is like to engage with fictional works. Further it misses an important potential moral good of engagement with fiction, that of personal reevaluation.

To summarize, by adopting a view of objectivity that is focused on eliminating self-regarding emotions and further the position that this view captures the moral significance of reading, Nussbaum leaves her Emotional Engagement View without the conceptual resources to acknowledge the possibility that some engagement with literature is primarily an act of self-

reflection, and not an exercise in comparison between the external social world of the text and the external social world of the reader.¹⁶⁷ Specifically, I have argued that science fictions like Le Guin's invite in their readers' critical revaluations and do not conclude with any particular moral precept or public policy change as an obvious outcome. The themes identified by critics such as Csicsery-Ronay, Call, Pennington, and Barry and Prescott as central to the novel are questions about the gender constructs we encounter in our societies and our very self-identities, their influence and pervasiveness, their contingency or fixedness, and the possibilities for active deconstruction of the basic pillars of one's own self-identity by encountering others who are radically different. Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View cannot account for this and this is a real shortcoming of her view.

In this chapter I have argued that Nussbaum's use of the Judicious Spectator concept as a description of what it is like to read, and the parallels readerly activity has with appropriate moral judgment, are at best incomplete. In order to buttress this claim, I examined the genre of science fiction, arguing that the essential features of the genre recommended science fiction novels to Nussbaum's project of defending literature as morally valuable. However, a detailed case study of a paradigmatic science fiction novel, Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, revealed that Nussbaum's description of the potential moral benefit of fictional engagement was incomplete. I attempted to outline a charitable interpretation of the *LHoD* on Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View, and concluded that though Nussbaum's description of what it is like to read could capture some morally salient features of the novel, it left no room for readers to engage with the central conceit of the novel, which is itself an invitation for re-evaluation and

¹⁶⁷ Another way to understand this objection is to say that Nussbaum cannot account for the possibility that the 'general norms of human flourishing' she thinks readers bring to bear in their engagement with novels might themselves be up for analysis and evaluation.

reflection on the readers' own self-identity. In the next chapter I outline several reasons we have to think that this kind of reflection is morally valuable.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1 The Value of Appropriate Doubt

In the previous chapter I argued that Nussbaum's Emotional Engagement View did not accurately capture the possibilities for engagement with fictional works. Of course this fact alone does not explain how those alternative possibilities for understanding readerly activity are morally significant. In this section I want to sketch in brief the view that reflection on one's own foundational beliefs about what is and is not contingent in human experience is itself morally valuable. I should note that these are not fully formed arguments rigorously defended from all potential objections. I intend this section primarily to be a suggestion of potential avenues of further research on the topic at hand, a roadmap of sorts for extending this line of inquiry. To that end, I will outline two different accounts of how we might understand the moral value of reading, Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity and Christine Korsgaard's contention that we have a moral obligation to pursue certain kinds of self-reflection.

Ricoeur has argued that our self-identities function in ways remarkably similar to the kind of literary engagement I have suggested in the previous chapter and that as a consequence our basic practical identities are open to expansion (or contraction) depending on our ability to engage with hypothetical alternatives of the sort Le Guin's novel offers.¹⁶⁸ Ricoeur's characterization of reading is that engagement with texts open up a dialectical relationship

¹⁶⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," *On Paul Ricoeur: narrative and interpretation*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 26-31.

between the ‘world of the text’ and the ‘world of the reader’.¹⁶⁹ He insists that what is up for grabs for readers is no less than their ‘horizons of possibility’, by which he means roughly that the new and previously unthought-of possible modes of being in the world that readers meet in fiction extend the options for understanding their own identities as alterable, perhaps in ways that did not seem possible previous to such encounters. Ricoeur suggest that we do not know ourselves immediately, but only indirectly, through our engagement with what he calls ‘the cultural signs’, which is his shorthand for the complicated interaction between readers and the forces of literary tradition and the symbolic markers and signposts found therein. For Ricoeur, the existential possibilities offered up in fictional narratives are concrete in the sense of outlining real alternatives, but such possible worlds are very much constituted by readers’ interpretative activity in concert with the text. As he says, “narrative mediation underlies this remarkable characteristic of self-knowledge-- that it is self-interpretation.”¹⁷⁰ Arguably our self-identity is morally significant in no small part because it appears to ground what we think of as possible kinds of social, political and moral behaviours available to us.

To take Le Guin’s novel again as an example, readers of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, if they have engaged fully with the thought experiment of the novel, will have not only read about characters to whom they have an emotional attachment, they will have expanded their own self-awareness. What might previously have been thought of as a fixed category of understanding

¹⁶⁹ It should be noted that in his description of this relationship of readers and texts, Ricoeur emphatically asserts the thickness of his conception of texts. Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative”, 26. “To speak of a world of the text is to stress the feature belonging to every literary work of opening before it a horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to live. A text is not something closed in upon itself, it is the projection of a new universe distinct from that in which we live. To appropriate a work through reading is to unfold the world horizon implicit in it which includes the actions, the characters and the events of the story told.”

¹⁷⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity,” *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 198.

(rigid gender roles) has been opened up for contemplation and questioning, both about reader's own self-understanding and also about their previously held convictions or beliefs that rely upon understanding others through the lens of rigid gender roles as a fact about the world.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the moral good of novel reading is unlikely to be as concretely prescriptive as Nussbaum's suggestion of a particular moral precept such as 'don't discriminate based on gender'. Ricoeur offers us up a more plausible alternative understanding of why this kind of literary engagement is valuable, one that recognizes the complex and active role reader's own interpretations play in any discoveries made within the text and also gives us some tools for understanding how literature might significantly alter engaged readers in morally significant ways. Piercey has argued that this very feature of Ricoeur's thought is of particular value for understanding the ethical dimension of engagement with literature, claiming that, "the most noticeable effect that narratives have on reality is to change those who read them; and they change readers by showing readers something, revealing something that may have gone unnoticed before the text was read."¹⁷¹

This view of our engagement with fiction as an invitation to compare and contrast literary works with one's own understood horizon of experience (or understanding of what is essential and what is contingent) also has considerable overlap with some other important theorizing about moral obligation stemming from an agent's self-understood identity. Notably, Christine Korsgaard's account of the sources of our moral obligations in her work, *The Sources of Normativity*, addresses this topic in some detail.¹⁷²

Korsgaard argues that it is a fact about human beings that they are reflective, self-

¹⁷¹ Piercey, 284.

¹⁷² Christine M Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 100-130.

conscious creatures. She takes this fact to show that it is impossible for humans to be and act in the world without “a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”¹⁷³ Since, through reflection, we are forced to act for reasons (being unable to act unreflectively on our desires), Korsgaard thinks that it is our practical identity (our self-conception as being *this* kind of a person rather than *that*, or belonging to *this* kind of community) that grounds our practical reasoning process. When we find ourselves thinking that we have an obligation not to do some particular thing, Korsgaard argues it is because doing that thing would violate our conception of ourselves, which is to say, it would damage our practical identity. When doing such actions would seem to us to be like a kind of death (a violation of the deep or essential characteristics of our practical identity), we find ourselves faced with unconditional obligations.¹⁷⁴

Korsgaard’s view of obligations as stemming from a person’s practical identity needs at a minimum for humans to be capable theoretical reasoners, that they be able to see that the consequences of doing or not doing some action interact with or impact on conceptual descriptions of ourselves as belonging to a certain class or type, or of being a creature with certain characteristics and not others. In particular, instances of conflicting obligations on Korsgaard’s account appear to require attempting to see what the potential outcomes of very different practical identities would be. For example, a person who identifies as a loving parent might feel a strong obligation to purchase the toys their child desires, while also identifying as a social justice advocate, and therefore feel a countermanding obligation to avoid purchasing environmentally destructive throwaway consumer goods from exploitative international toy companies. In order to resolve such a conflict, it seems plausible to suggest that what a person

¹⁷³ Korsgaard, 101.

¹⁷⁴ Korsgaard, 102.

does is to imagine both outcomes, (to purchase the toys or not) to ‘try them on’ so to speak, in order to evaluate the pull of each obligation.

I want to suggest that this explanation plausibly relies on moral reasoners using the same kinds of imaginative capacities that we use when engaged in alternative fictional worlds. In cases such as *The Left Hand of Darkness*, readers engagement with the central conceit of the novel is in some important respects a request by the fictional world to imagine the consequences of much more fluid gender and reproductive roles on the organization of cultures. This request has abstract or theoretical consequences for social organization of course, but, as has been noted by Nussbaum and others, the form of novels is one of personal address. The invitation to imagine the world as otherwise is, as Ricoeur suggests, very intimately tied up with our own self-understanding.

I want to make clear that I am not defending Korsgaard’s understanding of our moral obligations as necessarily correct. My suggestion is simply that if we do conceive of our moral obligations as stemming from a capacity to imagine our self-identities as quite different from their present state, and if we think, as Nussbaum, Stow, Ricoeur and many others do, that such imaginative capacities might be productively exercised, then we have good reasons to think of engagement with fiction as morally valuable. Understanding the value of fictional works as not merely the exercise or practising of appropriate moral sentiment, but as instances of ‘thinking through’ potential alternative practical identities provides a reason to think of such fictional engagement as retaining a moral value. In fact, contra Nussbaum’s intuition that realist novels provide the most appropriate fictional fodder for moral improvement, understanding this broader moral value of engagement with fiction may point to a specific sort of literature that has historically been marginalized by literary critics and scholars as ‘non-serious’ in nature (e.g., the

genre of science fiction).

5.2 Conclusions

It is worth re-examining the argument I have made, in order to be clear about the limits of its force. I began this study with a detailed account of Nussbaum's defense of literature as a morally valuable method of exercising or practising practical moral judgment formation in chapter two. Nussbaum makes several strong claims on behalf of literature, namely that it strengthens our capacity for fancy, allowing us to perceive the actions of others in more generous ways, that it acts as a kind of practice for practical judgment formation, that it shows us the appropriate place for our emotions in proper judgment, engaged, but not overwhelming our rational powers. Many of these claims are tied together in her discussion of the Judicious Spectator concept, a framework for understanding the appropriate measure of emotional engagement that is still congruent with a standard of objectivity that befits our intuitions about correct moral judgments. I have argued that although Nussbaum offers us persuasive reasons to include emotional perceptions in any complete account of rational judgment, her use of the Judicious Spectator concept as a description of appropriate rational judgment is unclear and possibly internally inconsistent. More specifically, I have argued that Nussbaum is unclear about whether she means to adopt the Judicious Spectator as a normative standard or whether she means to argue that the Judicious Spectator stands as an apt and useful descriptive analogy for what reading fiction is like. In either instance, she undermines the persuasiveness of her related claims about the nature of reading and the structure of novels.

In the third chapter, I undertook a thorough examination of the consequences of either proposed understanding of the Judicious Spectator (as a normative standard or as a descriptive claim). I concluded that Nussbaum could not consistently hold the Judicious Spectator as a

normative standard of judgment and maintain her other claims about the nature of literary engagement. Specifically, Nussbaum's own account of textual impact and her proposed practical consequences of reading do not square with understanding the adoption of Judicious Spectator perspective as an idealized judgment procedure. Further, I argued that the Judicious Spectator as outlined by Nussbaum lacked the conceptual mechanics to make it a plausible normative standard.

Having closed off that avenue, I proceeded to assess the plausibility of understanding Nussbaum's account as a description of the activity of reading, surveying the critical literature in order to evaluate the internal consistency of Nussbaum's claims. I concluded that although Nussbaum's literary interpretations are implausible in some respects, she might choose to abandon her view of textual impact to avoid such criticisms and still maintain a coherent descriptive picture of readerly activity. I argued that although Nussbaum would need to abandon many of her empirical claims about the structural features of novels and about readers' experiences in order to maintain a defense of the Judicious Spectator as the best description of the activity of engaging with fiction, the available criticisms of her account did not show that such a defense was inconsistent or untenable.

In Chapter four I turned to an alternative genre of popular fictional narrative, science fiction, to test the plausibility of the Judicious Spectator as an adequate description of the activity of reading. Using the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a test case, I argued that Nussbaum's account of the Judicious Spectator as a description of readerly activity fails to capture the complex possibilities for self-examination and immersive imaginative thought experiments that are present in fictional engagement. In particular, I argued that engagement with fictional worlds offer attentive readers the opportunity to reassess unexamined and potentially unjustified or

inconsistent beliefs and attitudes that play a role in their moral judgments of which they may not even be aware. I argue that this literary invitation to re-evaluate existing beliefs is morally significant and a generalizable feature of the reading experience. I conclude that this shows Nussbaum's account of engagement with fiction to be at best, incomplete.

I began this discussion in chapter one with a sympathetic nod to Nussbaum's stated project, and I want to suggest that the avenues of further research sketched above are congruent with her initial outline of a defense of the value of literature that takes seriously the idea of our emotions being essential to proper judgment. I have argued that Nussbaum's account of this value as contained in her Emotional Engagement View is untenable for a number of reasons summarized above, but I remain convinced that her initial intuition that our emotional responses to literature are genuine and morally significant is correct. What I want to suggest with the brief outlines provided of Korsgaard and Ricoeur is that these theorists might offer up more promising avenues in which to explore and describe this feature of engagement with narrative. I do not take my critical discussion of Nussbaum's view to be a conclusive dismissal of cognitively sophisticated emotions as valuable to sound moral judgment. I take this paper to have shown only that there are significant difficulties with Nussbaum's particular account of the Judicious Spectator Position as an adequate description of this connection. I take my argument to show that any explanation of the moral significance of engagement with literature needs to account for the full complexity of the relationship between the text in question and the self-conception of the reader who engages with it. I remain convinced that this is an attainable goal, and a worthwhile one at that.

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