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A good, a bad, and an evil character: Who renders a novel most enjoyable?[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The choice, or invention, of protagonists is an important part of the poetics and aesthetics of narratives and dramas. Aristotle stipulated that, for the purposes of engaging the readers or onlookers, protagonists should neither be excessively good nor excessively bad, leaving room for much variation in the middle-ground (Aristotle, 1961). A theoretical model of the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception (Menninghaus et al., 2017) supports the conclusion that aesthetically preferred choices of characters may not be equally distributed between the poles of saints and villains, but show a bias towards the latter. We experimentally tested this assumption by presenting an identical excerpt from a novel by José Saramago to participants, while exclusively inserting a few words of background information which cast the protagonist's distant past either in a morally good, bad, or evil light. Compared to the good character version, the bad character version indeed had an enhancing effect on scales for "suspenseful," "captivating," and "entertaining," and no adverse effect on any of the seven other aesthetically evaluative dimensions. Fully supporting Aristotle's thumb rule, none of these enhancing effects of character Badness on aesthetic perception/evaluation compared to the good character condition extended to the evil character version. Moreover, moral evilness of the protagonist had an adverse effect on sympathy, though not on empathy. In contrast, the good and the bad character versions were rated equally not only on empathy, but also on sympathy scales.

1. Introduction

1.1. The theoretical framework of the present study

Writers of speeches and literary artworks strive to capture and maintain attention, elicit intense emotional involvement, provide inherent processing pleasure, and leave behind a lasting impact on their readers' memory. The many recipes provided by rhetoric and poetics can largely be related to these four goals of the arts (cf. Lausberg, 1998; Quintilian, 1953). At the same time, recent

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MS, VW, and WM conceptualized and designed the study. MS and VW prepared and conducted the experiment. VW analysed the data and all authors interpreted the data. MS wrote the first draft and all authors revised and edited the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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psychological research suggests quite generally that a distinctly strong grip on attention and emotion as well as a privileged access to and storage in memory may be better served by negative than by positive emotions: “Bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001; see also Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999; Frijda, 1988; Larsen & Prizmic, 2008; Musch & Klauer, 2003; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Vaish, Grossmann & Woodward, 2008).

This negativity bias of our attentional, emotional, memory, and action response dispositions is typically explained in evolutionary terms: If our ancestors failed to swiftly respond to a threat, they may not have had a second chance; however, if they missed a positive opportunity, they would still have had another chance. Of course, in positive psychology, the formula “bad is stronger than good” only amounts to a sober diagnosis of an unfortunate, although evolutionary adaptive negativity bias of our emotion system; it is not meant to be a clever recipe for strongly enjoyable artworks.

Yet, as highlighted by Menninghaus et al. (2017), many novels and dramas that are obviously enjoyed by many readers are, in fact, about failing marriages, unhappy love, adultery, betrayed friendship, and the like. Moreover, we apparently enjoy immoral actions of characters in various entertainment contexts, such as video games (e.g., Anderson & Dill, 2000; Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Shafer, 2009; see also McGraw & Warren, 2010) and written narratives (Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Recent TV series such as *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, and *House of Cards* show a particularly pronounced focus on morally bad figures (Bernardelli, 2016; Croci, Monegato & Pasolini, 2016; Garcia, 2016; Salgado & Van Tourhout, 2018; Vaage, 2016).

Against this background, and adopting the formula “Bad is stronger than good” as a guiding assumption, the present study tested experimentally whether or not a protagonist with a morally “bad” past is indeed associated with more intense enjoyment when compared to one with a morally “good” past. In order to test a potentially non-linear dynamics of the hypothetical preference for badness in accord with inverted u-shape phenomena stipulated and reported in empirical aesthetics (Berlyne, 1971, 1974), we also created an “evil” character version. For all conditions, we presented our study participants with the initial pages of José Saramago’s novel *Blindness* (1995). The experimental modification was limited to the insertion of a few words which refer in a very abstract fashion to good, bad, and evil deeds the three characters had respectively committed many years ago.

Cognitive framing studies have shown that the top-down cognitive classification of something as an artwork or media product rather than a part of ordinary reality provides some *psychological distance*, thereby rendering bad characters, bad deeds, and even feelings of disgust and anger more readily compatible with enjoyment (for the concept of cognitive framing, see Abelson, 1981; Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; for the concept of psychological distance, see Trope & Liberman, 2010; Trope, Liberman & Wakslak, 2007; for articles on the distancing effects of cognitive art framings, see Altmann, Bohrn, Lubrich, Menninghaus & Jacobs, 2014; Bullough, 1912; Cupchik, 2002; Wagner et al., 2015; Wagner, Menninghaus, Hanich & Jacobsen, 2014; Zwaan, 1994). However, cognitive psychological distancing alone would reduce absolute levels of attention and affective involvement rather than elevate them to higher levels. Such distancing therefore cannot by itself explain the positive aesthetic enjoyment apparently associated with bad protagonists and morally bad behaviour. Similarly, moral disengagement (Breithaupt, 2016; Fast & Van Reet, 2018; Keen, 2007)—which might be associated with the more general psychological distancing resulting from a cognitive fiction (non-reality) framing—can by itself only support moral indifference regarding good and bad acts. Such indifference might suffice to explain the *absence of adverse effects* of moral badness on the enjoyment of fictional narratives; however, the *positive* dimensions and sources of enjoyment that become possible in the absence of standard morality checks require additional psychological mechanisms.

The present study is neither about the potential evolutionary underpinnings of our fascination for perpetrators and evil deeds, nor is it about differences in the enjoyment of negative emotional content that depend on an ontological classification as ordinary reality vs. fictional artworks. Rather, we took the findings of cognitive framing-studies on the latter issue for granted and exclusively investigated the following questions: How do graded differences in negative emotional content affect the processing of a literary narrative *within a fictional frame*? More specifically, *to what degree* can negative emotional responses go far beyond merely being somewhat contained by the cognitive art framing and instead end up being positively conducive to aesthetic enjoyment?

A theoretical model of the aesthetic enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception (Menninghaus et al., 2017) guided our efforts. The model stipulates that emotions that include both positive and negative emotional ingredients can be instrumental for integrating the power of negative emotions into an overall positive enjoyment. More specifically, the model discussed feelings of being moved and suspense as two preeminent cases that conform to this assumption (for details and empirical evidence regarding being moved, see Hanich, Wagner, Shah, Jacobsen & Menninghaus, 2014; Menninghaus et al., 2015, 2019). Feelings of suspense include, in dynamically fluctuating proportions, both fearful and hopeful anticipations regarding the upcoming events and the final outcome of a narrative trajectory (Madrigal & Bee, 2005; Moulard, Kroff & Folse, 2012; Zillmann, 1996). Moreover, they are often explicitly cited as reasons for aesthetic liking (Carroll, 1996a, 1996b; Knoop, Wagner, Jacobsen & Menninghaus, 2016)—that is, a narrative may be enjoyed *because* it takes its readers through a suspenseful trajectory that also includes feelings of fear. Hence if, everything else being equal, a bad character renders a narrative more suspenseful than a good character does, this could be understood to imply that the bad character is instrumental for pushing a key reward dimension of reading narratives to higher levels. Suspense was therefore a particularly important response dimension in our query for aesthetic benefits of character badness in narratives.

1.2. The present study

In a case study we experimentally tested whether adding negative vs. positive character information to the beginning of José Saramago’s novel *Blindness* (1995) would lead to differences in readers’ cognitive and affective processing as well as their aesthetic evaluation of the passage. In the novel, a man driving a car suddenly becomes blind while waiting at a red traffic light, and the passage we selected for our study subsequently portrays how it feels to move through the world immediately after losing one’s sight and how the driver’s wife deals with the completely unexpected predicament of becoming her husband’s caretaker. Throughout the original

passage presented, readers are not given any explicit information about the private or professional past of the protagonists. As the focus is all on the sudden blinding and the subsequent efforts to bring the blinded driver home, we expected readers to perceive the predicament of the two protagonists quite generally with high levels of empathy regardless of potential version differences.

For our study, we slightly shortened the passage by leaving out several references to passers-by. Our experimental modifications consisted in adding—spread across the excerpt—four short insertions that cast a morally “good,” “bad,” or “evil” light on the character dependant on what he had done in his past professional life (for all details, see Supplemental Information Table S1). Compared to the total length of the original excerpt (2380 words), the word count for the four insertions was marginal (a total of 57, 62, and 64 words for the three versions, respectively). In the “good” variant, the man was a doctor who had worked for a while in a hospital in Africa and had saved many patients; in the “bad” variant, he had previously served in an Egyptian secret service prison and was involved in procedures of torture. In a third (“evil”) variant, the character was identified as a former doctor who had killed prisoners in a concentration camp during World War II.

Regarding the verbal proxies (“good” vs. “bad” vs. “evil”) chosen to designate the three text versions, we’d like to emphasize that these labels were not used in our instruction at all and hence did not prime the way participants perceived the text versions. To be sure, a doctor participating in torture commits crimes against humanity and could therefore also be considered as a morally “evil” person. Still, only the Nazi doctor was portrayed as violating the Hippocratic oath (i.e., to save and preserve lives) to the most abominable degree (i.e., by intentionally killing persons). We therefore expected that the respective effects of these pieces of character information on moral evaluation and sympathy would differ. In order to avoid contrasting a “good” character against two grades of an “evil” character, we preferred to speak of a “good,” a “bad,” and an “evil” character (again, without giving any such summarizing label to the three characters in the textual modifications distinguishing them).

Our topical triad of the good, the bad and the evil departs from the triad of “good,” “bad,” and “ambiguous” which guided a comparable previous study (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012) in two regards. First, in our case, “bad” is not the most negative label, but “evil;” this was designed to enable us to observe the potential turnaround of character badness from an aesthetic virtue into a vice at extreme levels. Second, we are doubtful that “ambiguous” is indeed—as suggested by Krakowiak and Oliver (2012)—a well-fitting label for the character of persons who do both good and bad things. Essentially, according to common wisdom, most humans do both good and bad things. They occasionally lie, fail to help other people in need, are not always and not for each person reliable, etc., even if they are generally responsible and well-behaving. This, however, does not suffice to label them “ambiguous.” As a semiotic category, ambiguity is defined by entailing conflicting meaning dimensions, or giving room to very different interpretations, of the *same* word, the *same* act, or the *same* stance towards a particular conflict. This crucial feature of identical reference is not given in the text versions produced by Krakowiak and Oliver (2012). Persons who just do bad things in some regards and good things in others and on other occasions can well be said to have a mixed moral record (as most humans) but they are not necessarily “ambiguous,” let alone fully “ambivalent” characters in any stricter meaning. This was a second reason why we did not adopt this label for the purposes of our study.

According to Zillmann (2000), readers tend to form favourable attitudes towards morally good characters and to share their emotional states through an empathetic process. Several empirical studies have confirmed the notion that morally good characters enjoy affective empathy on the part of readers; however, these studies did not collect directly comparable data for morally bad characters (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Johnson, 2012; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014). Going beyond this limitation, the above-mentioned study by Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) did allow for a direct comparison. Results showed a dispositional bias towards morally good vs. bad and morally ambiguous characters, and this bias was predictive of both cognitive and affective components of enjoying the narratives. However, the self-produced narratives used by Krakowiak and Oliver show strong and numerous differences regarding both narrative content and verbal material on top of the experimental variable of CharacterGoodness vs. Badness. Therefore, the results obtained may also reflect some or all of the many other differences in textual variables.

In contrast, the participants in our study read the same excerpt from a narrative written by an acknowledged author, with the only change being the short pieces of biographical information that we inserted at four points in the excerpt. To be sure, bad acts reported *in actu* are likely to impress readers more profoundly than references to a person’s past decades earlier. However, our design has the advantage that the experimental modification leaves the actual event that makes up the foreground of the narrative episode completely unchanged. As a result, the expectable version differences were likely to be far more subtle, but also far more selectively attributable to our very well-defined and quantitatively very limited experimental modification.

Moreover, in contrast to Krakowiak and Oliver’s study (2012), the excerpt we used leaves it completely open how the narrative will conclude. This design feature implies that the potential positive effect of a morally bad character trait on aesthetic evaluation is *not* dependant on, or even a mere function of, being (re)evaluated in light of the final outcome. Rather, it is evaluated as an integral part of an unfinished and open-ended reading process and hence reflects what a reading trajectory is for most of the time before it finally comes to a conclusion.

1.3. Targeted dimensions of readers’ responses and hypotheses

The ratings we collected are all well-established in research on reading narratives. They comprise two types of ratings: *text-focused* and *reader (person) state-focused* ratings. Because our study was primarily interested in the effect of our experimental manipulation on the aesthetic evaluation of the three text versions, text-focused ratings were of preeminent interest. Only with regard to the key dimension of narrative suspense (cf. Anz, 1998; Berlyne, 1960; Carroll, 1996, 1996ab; Fill, 2007; Knoop et al., 2016; Lehne & Koelsch, 2015; Löker, 1976; Madrigal & Bee, 2005; Zillmann, 1980) did we ask participants both how “suspenseful” they found the narrative (text-focus) and how much they actually felt themselves as going through a state of suspense (reader state-focus). All other ratings were

collected either with a primary focus on evaluating the text (see Table 1) or on reporting the subjective state experienced (see Tables S2 and S3).

In addition to “suspenseful,” text-focused evaluations included ratings for how “captivating” (*fesselnd*), “carrying one away” (*mitreißend*) (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018; Jacobs, 2015) readers perceived the text versions to be. Importantly, all these rating items are not just descriptive of a particular property of the respective texts, but also imply an aesthetically evaluative dimension in that high ratings typically reflect a superb power and hence an artistic achievement on the part of the stimulus, i.e., its particular power to hold us captive, carry us away, interest us, etc.. (Note that the ratings for the text’s power to “captivate” readers and “carry them away” should not be conflated with measures of the person states of captivation for which we did not collect ratings.)

As the sudden blinding strikes both the protagonist and the reader without any forewarning, and in very unusual circumstances, we also collected ratings for how “surprising” readers perceived the text versions to be (for research on surprise, see Cheung et al., 2019; Hoeken & Van Vliet, 2000; Silvia, 2009). On a similar vein, a sudden and completely unexpected blinding without any apparent cause and prior warning is likely to trigger a cognitive interest into how and for what underlying reason it could possibly come about. We therefore also collected ratings for how “interesting” readers perceived the text versions (for this category in aesthetics, see Fayn, Silvia, Dejonckheere, Verdonck & Kuppens, 2019; Silvia, 2010). Given our anticipation of relatively high text-focused ratings for “suspenseful,” “captivating,” “surprising,” and “interesting”—even independently of version—, we decided to use “boring” as a control item. Ratings on this item should show low levels, if our assumptions regarding the other dimensions were to hold true.

Mishaps and also intentional maltreatments of characters are integral parts of many narratives and almost mandatory in comedies (if only within certain limits). Considering the potential of misfortunes and bad behaviour for light-hearted entertainment, we decided to also collect ratings for how “entertaining” the passage was perceived to be. We expected a version effect for “entertaining” along the lines of the following reasoning: a good character who is suddenly struck blind has little, if any, potential for being entertaining, whereas this might not apply—at least not to the same degree—to a bad or even evil character. At the same time, Saramago’s narrative is clearly not primarily aimed at effects of entertainment; we therefore expected the overall levels of ratings to be lower for “entertaining” than for “suspenseful,” “captivating,” and “carrying away.”

Theoretical poetics (for a brief discussion, see Menninghaus et al., 2017) and recent studies in media psychology (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Woolley, 2010) also entail provisions for *morally evaluative* paths from negative emotional content to positive appreciation by means of interpreting negative events as being “morally valuable” or “meaningful” in some ways. For our three versions of Saramago’s narrative, the construct of “poetic” or “narrative justice” (McGregor, 2018) might be specifically relevant. Readers might morally embrace the being struck blind of the protagonist as a just punishment for his past deeds in the bad and evil variants of the narrative. In contrast, a good character’s becoming blind cannot be morally embraced on these grounds. For this reason, we saw chances that the bad and the evil character versions of the narrative might score higher than the good character version on a scale for “morally valuable.”

To render the picture more complete, we also collected three aesthetically evaluative ratings of a very general nature that place a primary focus on the formal making of the text versions: namely, how “beautiful,” “well-made,” and “aesthetically valuable” they were perceived to be. As neither the series of events depicted nor the imagery nor other stylistic features differed across the three experimental versions of Saramago’s text, we did not expect any significant version effects for these measures.

As to reader state-measures, we collected data on how our experimental modification may affect aspects of the readerly engagement that play a great role in recent empirical research on reading processes altogether, particularly, sympathy, empathy, and perspective taking (cf. Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014) as well as transportation with its facets of emotional involvement, imagination, and attention (cf. Green & Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2008; for all details regarding the items that we used, see the Section 2.3 Measures). Because texts that are rated as highly suspenseful as well as strong in their power to “captivate” readers and “carry them away” should almost by definition also strongly bind the readers’ attention, we expected potential enhancing effects of character badness on the text-focused ratings for “suspenseful,” “captivating,” and “carrying away” to go along with higher ratings for readerly states-focused measures of “attention.”

Readers’ affective dispositions towards protagonists are frequently measured using scales for sympathy and empathy. Unfortunately, the constructs of sympathy and empathy are often confounded in psychological research (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Pinotti &

Table 1
Text-focused ratings.

Evaluation items	Bad		Evil		Good	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
suspenseful	5.51	(1.10)	4.83	(1.92)	4.86	(1.72)
captivating	5.55	(1.26)	4.90	(1.92)	4.75	(1.71)
carrying_away	4.98	(1.48)	4.90	(1.89)	4.75	(1.59)
interesting	5.47	(1.16)	5.27	(1.75)	5.07	(1.52)
boring	2.16	(1.46)	2.15	(1.62)	2.52	(1.64)
entertaining	4.94	(1.27)	3.65	(1.72)	3.66	(1.68)
surprising	5.22	(1.56)	5.02	(1.59)	5.07	(1.62)
well_made	5.18	(1.30)	5.13	(1.67)	4.73	(1.45)
aesthetically_valuable	4.14	(1.46)	4.08	(1.90)	3.98	(1.78)
beautiful	3.61	(1.44)	3.25	(1.59)	3.39	(1.81)
morally_valuable	3.76	(1.45)	3.73	(2.01)	3.34	(1.57)

Salgado, 2019). Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) have argued that only sympathy, and not empathy, implies a moral evaluation of actions and characters—i.e., of whether or not another person morally deserves the situational predicament he/she finds himself/herself in. Studies by Coplan (2011) and Eisenberg (2010) support this understanding, and so does a neuropsychological study (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). If this reasoning applies to our test case, the morally good vs. bad/evil character information added in our experimental modifications should reduce sympathy, but not empathy, for the bad and evil characters compared to the good one.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We used mailing lists and social media channels to recruit participants for our online study. Five hundred thirty-three individuals visited the starting page of the online questionnaire, and 246 actually began to fill out the questionnaire. Of these, 196 completed it (110 in a first wave, 86 in a second wave). We excluded (a) 13 participants who showed an unrealistically high reading speed (for details see the subsection 2.5.1 Data Preprocessing below); (b) 40 participants who made errors in responding to the control questions; (c) 17 participants who reported that they had read the novel or seen the film, and (d) one participant who reported a language other than German as their native language. The final sample thus consisted of 141 participants. The mean age of the final sample was 39.9 years ($SD = 17.8$, $min = 18$, $max = 79$), with 100 women (71%) and 41 men (29%). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (44, 49, and 48 for the GoodCharacter, BadCharacter, and EvilCharacter condition, respectively).

There were no significant differences between the three groups regarding the person-related variables, with two exceptions: First, self-reported reading times for non-fiction literature was significantly higher for the EvilCharacter condition than for the BadCharacter condition and the GoodCharacter condition, 9.9 h ($SD = 11.0$) vs 5.2 h ($SD = 7.0$) and 5.7 h ($SD = 6.8$), respectively, $F(2, 138) = 4.38$, $MSE = 73.2$, $p = .014$. Second, the mean age was significantly lower for participants assigned to the GoodCharacter condition compared to participants assigned to the BadCharacter condition, with the mean age of readers of the EvilCharacter condition being in-between, 36.4 ($SD = 18.3$) vs. 44.5 ($SD = 17.6$) vs. 38.7 ($SD = 17.0$), $F(2, 136) = 2.62$, $MSE = 310.7$, $p = .077$.

All experimental procedures were ethically approved by the Ethics Council of the Max Planck Society and were undertaken with the written informed consent of each participant.

2.2. Stimuli

All relevant information has already been provided in the Introduction.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Aesthetic and moral evaluation

We assessed how readers aesthetically evaluate the three versions of the narrative using the items that were theoretically discussed in the introduction: “suspenseful,” “captivating,” “carrying one away,” “interesting,” “boring” “gripping,” “entertaining,” “riveting,” “surprising,” “beautiful,” “well-made,” and “aesthetically valuable.” Ratings for “morally valuable” targeted the processing dimension of moral evaluation. All items were rated on 7-point scales ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very beautiful / suspenseful / etc.*

2.3.2. Person states

Empathy, perspective taking, and sympathy. We measured these constructs with items adopted from Busselle and Bilanzic (2009; see Supplemental Information Table S2 for the items that were used). These items as well as the transportation and felt suspense items (see below) were rated on 7-point scales ranging from 1 = *does not at all apply* to 7 = *does strongly apply*. The overall Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index was 0.85 (“meritorious”), and the parallel analysis suggested that three factors should be extracted. A factor analysis yielded three factors that are interpretable as Empathy, Sympathy, and Perspective Taking (see Supplemental Information Table S2). We then calculated Cronbach’s alpha for each scale and dropped items that decreased Cronbach’s alpha. Finally, three scale scores were created by averaging the ratings for the items (reversing some items), with higher values indicating higher Empathy ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.33$), higher Sympathy ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.47$), and higher Perspective Taking ($\alpha = .66$, $M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.33$), respectively.

Transportation and felt suspense. Transportation was measured using 12 items from the German version of the Transportation scale by Appel & Richter, 2010; Green and Brock (2000; see Supplemental Information Table S3 for the items that were used). To measure subjectively felt suspense, we adapted three items from a questionnaire designed to measure reading experiences (Appel, Koch, Schreier & Groeben, 2002, scale 6). The overall KMO index was 0.87 (“meritorious”), and the parallel analysis suggested that four factors be extracted. A factor analysis yielded four factors that are interpretable as Felt Suspense, Imagination, Emotional Involvement, and Attention (see Supplemental Information Table S3). Again, we calculated Cronbach’s alpha and dropped the items that decreased it. Four scale scores were created by averaging the ratings for the items (reversing some items), with higher values indicating higher Felt Suspense ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.67$), higher Imagery ($\alpha = .78$, $M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.20$), higher Emotional Involvement ($\alpha = .70$, $M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.38$), and higher Attention ($\alpha = .52$, $M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.32$), respectively.

2.3.3. Person-related questionnaires and tests

Author recognition test. We employed a German version (Hai Nhu, 2015) of the Author Recognition Test (ART; Stanovich &

West, 1989) to evaluate the participants' exposure to literature. The German version consists of 60 names of real authors and 60 foils; the scoring counts every hit (correct checking of an author's name) with 1 and each false alarm (false checking of a foil's name) with -2. The sample showed a normal distribution of the ART score with a mean of $M = 22.6$ ($SD = 9.35$, $\min = 3$, $\max = 46$).

Trait empathy. We assessed participants' trait empathy with the Saarbrücker Persönlichkeitsfragebogen, the German version (Paulus, 2012) of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983), with the four subscales Fantasy Scale (FS; $\alpha = .76$, $M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.75$), Emotional Concern (EC; $\alpha = .67$, $M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.61$), Perspective Taking (PT; $\alpha = .76$, $M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.63$), and Personal Distress (PD; $\alpha = .76$, $M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.75$). In addition to measuring trait empathy, we also employed the Reading the Mind in the Eyes test (RMET) in order to assess participants' affective theory of mind abilities (reading/recognition of facially expressed emotions; Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste & Plumb, 2001; Bölte, 2005; Pfaltz et al., 2013; $M = 26.3$, $SD = 3.46$, $\min = 15$, $\max = 33$). A correlation analysis revealed significant positive correlations between the subscales FS \times EC: $r = .56$, FS \times PT: $r = .19$, FS \times PD: $r = .22$, and EC \times PD: $r = .24$, and between FS \times RMET score: $r = .20$.

2.4. Procedure

After filling out the German version of the ART, participants read one of the three experimental versions of the excerpt from

Table 2

Version contrasts of the text-focused ratings.

Variable	Contrast	η_G^2 /est.	MSE/SE	DF	F/t	p
Suspenseful		.038	2.59	(2, 138)	2.71	.070 [†]
	bad - evil	0.68	0.33	138	2.07	.040*
	bad - good	0.65	0.34	138	1.93	.055 [†]
	evil - good	-0.03	0.34	138	-0.09	.928
Captivating		.044	2.72	(2, 138)	3.18	.045*
	bad - evil	0.66	0.34	138	1.96	.052 [†]
	bad - good	0.80	0.34	138	2.34	.021*
	evil - good	0.15	0.34	138	0.42	.672
Carrying away		.003	2.77	(2, 138)	0.22	.799
	bad - evil	0.08	0.34	138	0.25	.805
	bad - good	0.23	0.35	138	0.67	.507
	evil - good	0.15	0.35	138	0.42	.675
Interesting		.012	2.22	(2, 138)	0.84	.434
	bad - evil	0.20	0.30	138	0.66	.513
	bad - good	0.40	0.31	138	1.30	.197
	evil - good	0.20	0.31	138	0.65	.516
Boring		.012	2.48	(2, 138)	0.83	.438
	bad - evil	-0.02	0.32	138	-0.06	.957
	bad - good	0.36	0.33	138	1.10	.273
	evil - good	0.38	0.33	138	1.15	.253
Entertaining		.136	2.45	(2, 138)	10.82	<.001***
	bad - evil	1.29	0.32	138	4.07	<.001***
	bad - good	1.28	0.33	138	3.94	<.001***
	evil - good	-0.01	0.33	138	-0.04	.968
Surprising		.003	2.52	(2, 138)	0.22	.805
	bad - evil	0.20	0.32	138	0.63	.529
	bad - good	0.16	0.33	138	0.47	.636
	evil - good	-0.05	0.33	138	-0.14	.887
Well-made		.018	2.20	(2, 138)	1.28	.282
	bad - evil	0.06	0.30	138	0.20	.846
	bad - good	0.46	0.31	138	1.48	.141
	evil - good	0.40	0.31	138	1.29	.201
Aesthetically valuable		.002	2.96	(2, 138)	0.11	.897
	bad - evil	0.06	0.35	138	0.17	.865
	bad - good	0.17	0.36	138	0.46	.644
	evil - good	0.11	0.36	138	0.30	.768
Beautiful		.009	2.60	(2, 138)	0.62	.537
	bad - evil	0.36	0.33	138	1.11	.271
	bad - good	0.23	0.34	138	0.67	.501
	evil - good	-0.14	0.34	138	-0.41	.686
Morally valuable		.012	2.87	(2, 138)	0.85	.429
	bad - evil	0.03	0.34	138	0.08	.940
	bad - good	0.41	0.35	138	1.18	.241
	evil - good	0.39	0.35	138	1.10	.274

Note.

[†] $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Saramago's novel (each presented on 7 pages). Next, they answered seven control questions through which we checked whether the participants had read the text attentively. All further tasks were presented and responded to in the following order: the aesthetic evaluation items; questions regarding familiarity with the novel or the movie based on the novel; the RMET; the questions designed to measure sympathy, cognitive and affective empathy, transportation and felt suspense; and the questionnaire regarding trait empathy. Finally, demographic data and self-reports on reading habits were collected.

2.5. Analysis

2.5.1. Data preprocessing

We first examined the reading times and analysed the control questions for the 196 participants who completed the questionnaire. The reading speed ranged from 1.8 words/min to 1707.9 words/min (due to participants who took longer breaks and then resumed the online questionnaire; excluding these participants, the high bound was 57.9 words/min). One hundred fifty-six participants made no errors in the control questions; 40 participants gave one or more incorrect answers. Reading speed (in words/min) and number of wrong answers (0–7) were significantly correlated ($r = .47, p < .001$; for $\log(\text{wpm}) \times \text{errors}$: $r = .24, p < .001$; Spearman's $\rho = .13, p = .073$). We excluded 13 participants (6.6%) with a reading speed higher than 600 words/min (a quite lenient exclusion criterion; see Rayner, Slattery & Bélanger, 2010), 40 participants with one or more incorrect answers to the seven control questions, and one participant whose native language was not German. All statistical analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team, 2018).

The raw data and analysis scripts are available at Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/p8xyh/>).

2.5.2. Statistical inference tests

In order to test the hypotheses, we computed analyses of variance (ANOVAs) both on the single items measuring the aesthetic and moral evaluation of the text variants and on the mean score of the measures for the person states experienced during reading. The results of these analyses provided the basis for comparing the three text versions.

3. Results

3.1. Aesthetic evaluation

As expected, and even independently of version, mean ratings for “suspenseful,” “captivating,” “carrying away,” “interesting,” and “surprising” were altogether relatively high, and ratings for “boring” were very low. Ratings for “entertaining,” “aesthetically valuable,” and “beautiful” centred around the midpoint of the scales (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

The ANOVAs for the ratings for “captivating” and “entertaining” yielded significant results, $F(2, 138) = 3.18, MSE = 2.72, p = .045, \eta_G^2 = .044$ and $F(2, 138) = 10.82, MSE = 2.45, p < .001, \eta_G^2 = .136$, respectively. The ANOVA for the “suspenseful” ratings yielded an only marginally significant effect, $F(2, 138) = 2.71, MSE = 2.59, p = .070, \eta_G^2 = .038$, and hence call for a cautious interpretation.

We obtained the following significant differences between the three experimental text versions (for details see Table 2):

- (1) The BadCharacter version was rated as significantly more “captivating” and “entertaining” than the GoodCharacter version, $t = 2.34, p = .021$ and $t = 3.94, p < .001$. Ratings for “suspenseful” are also higher for the BadCharacter version, but this effect is only marginally significant.
- (2) The BadCharacter version was also rated as significantly more “suspenseful” and “entertaining” than the EvilCharacter version, $t = 2.07, p = .040$ and $t = 4.07, p < .001$, respectively. Ratings for “captivating” show a trend in the same direction, yet the effect is only marginally significant.
- (3) The ratings for the GoodCharacter and the EvilCharacter versions do not differ significantly on any of the 11 aesthetically evaluative dimensions (all $ps > .2$).

Thus, we found a marked preference for the BadCharacter version over both the Good- and the EvilCharacter versions based on three of the eleven aesthetically evaluative ratings. Qualitatively, the result pattern is analogous for several of the other dimensions, including “interesting,” “surprising,” and “well-made,” yet the version differences fail to reach significance.

These results support the findings made in emotion psychology that were summarized under the formula “Bad is stronger than good” (see section 1 Introduction); they extend this formula beyond the mere strength of emotional affection to distinct degrees of perceived aesthetic appeal. At the same time, we show a non-linear limitation to this rule: Pushing badness to the level of evilness, erases the aesthetic benefits of badness rather than further enhancing them. As a result, the morally most divergent versions, i.e. the Good- and the EvilCharacter versions, do not show any significant differences on the scales for aesthetic evaluation.

This pattern of results not only strikingly confirms that aesthetic and moral evaluation are categorically different processing routines, at least within certain limits; it also provides strong empirical evidence for the notion that moral badness can positively contribute to and even enhance aesthetic enjoyment.

As predicted by our theoretical reasoning, the preference for the Bad- over the Good- and EvilCharacter versions of the excerpt is reflected in rating items that by definition include affectively positive and negative experiential dimensions (i.e., “suspenseful”) or are at least open to including negative emotion teasers (the “entertaining” quality), but not in items such as “beautiful” and “well-made,” which are wholly positive in valence.

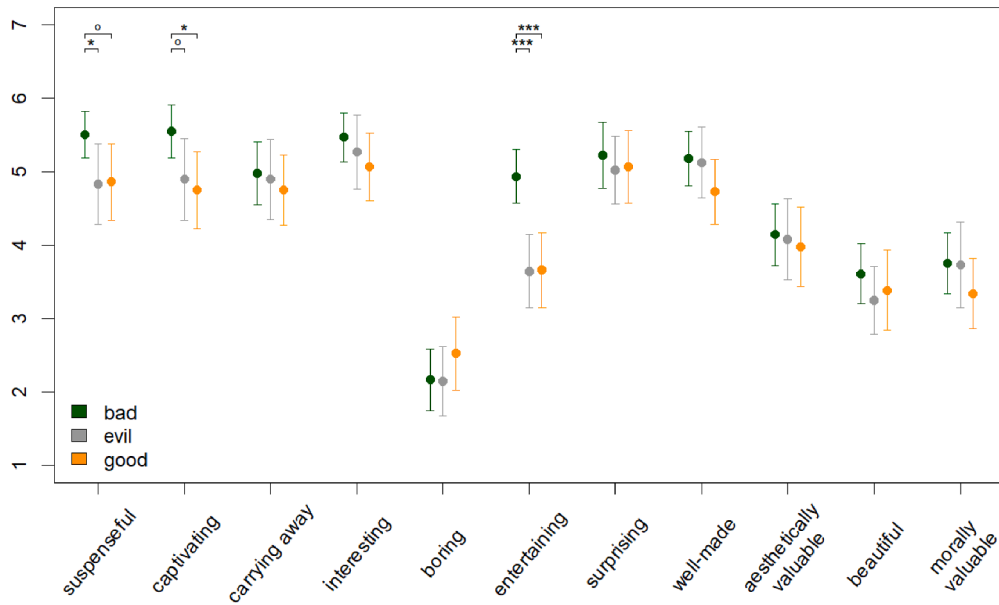


Fig. 1. Mean ratings for the aesthetic and moral evaluation measures. Error bars represent the 95% CI. Significant differences between the conditions are designated by $p < .1$, $* p < .05$, $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$.

3.2. Moral evaluation

Our data do not show a version effect for “morally valuable” as predicted by the construct of “poetic justice,” namely, that the fate of being struck blind might be more morally valuable if it affects a bad or an evil character rather than a good one. We only obtained evidence for a trend in this direction.

3.3. Person state measures

The multi-item measures administered for Empathy, Perspective Taking, as well as for Emotional Involvement, and Imagination (i. e., the three dimensions of Transportation) yielded no significant differences between the versions. In contrast, the ANOVAs for the mean scores for Felt Suspense, Attention and Sympathy did show significant differences between the text versions (see Table 3 and Fig. 2).

The ANOVAs for the mean scores for Felt Suspense as well as for Attention were marginally significant, $F(2, 138) = 2.63$, $MSE = 2.40$, $p = .076$, $\eta_G^2 = .037$, and $F(2, 138) = 2.90$, $MSE = 1.69$, $p = .058$, $\eta_G^2 = .040$, respectively. The higher ratings for the text-focused attribute “suspenseful” are mirrored, and thereby consolidated, specifically in significantly higher ratings for subjectively Felt Suspense for the Bad- compared to the EvilCharacter version, $t = 2.11$, $p = .037$. As predicted by the studies that emphasize an attentional negativity bias of our emotional dispositions (Carretié, Mercado, Tapia & Hinojosa, 2001; Delplanque, Silvert, Hot, Rigoulot & Sequeira, 2006; Smith, Cacioppo, Larsen & Chartrand, 2003), Attention scores are significantly higher for the EvilCharacter version and higher by trend for the BadCharacter version compared to the GoodCharacter version, $t = 2.21$, $p = .029$ and $t = 1.97$, $p = .051$, respectively.

The ANOVA for the mean score for Sympathy yielded a significant version effect, $F(2, 138) = 3.47$, $MSE = 2.09$, $p = .034$, $\eta_G^2 = .048$. The EvilCharacter version scores were significantly lower than both the Good- and the BadCharacter versions, $t = 2.41$, $p = .018$ and $t = 2.12$, $p = .036$. At the same time, in line with similar findings by Zillmann and Cantor (1977), Sympathy and Empathy did not

Table 3

Person (Reader)-focused mean scores.

Person states	Bad M	SD	Evil M	SD	Good M	SD
Sympathy	4.61	(1.31)	3.99	(1.61)	4.72	(1.40)
Empathy	5.05	(1.31)	4.85	(1.39)	5.00	(1.32)
Perspective Taking	4.99	(1.44)	4.77	(1.19)	5.23	(1.32)
Emotional Involvement	3.67	(1.35)	3.85	(1.56)	3.42	(1.20)
Imagination	5.47	(1.09)	5.04	(1.39)	5.07	(1.08)
Attention	5.83	(1.27)	5.90	(1.21)	5.30	(1.42)
Felt Suspense	5.82	(1.13)	5.16	(1.93)	5.24	(1.47)

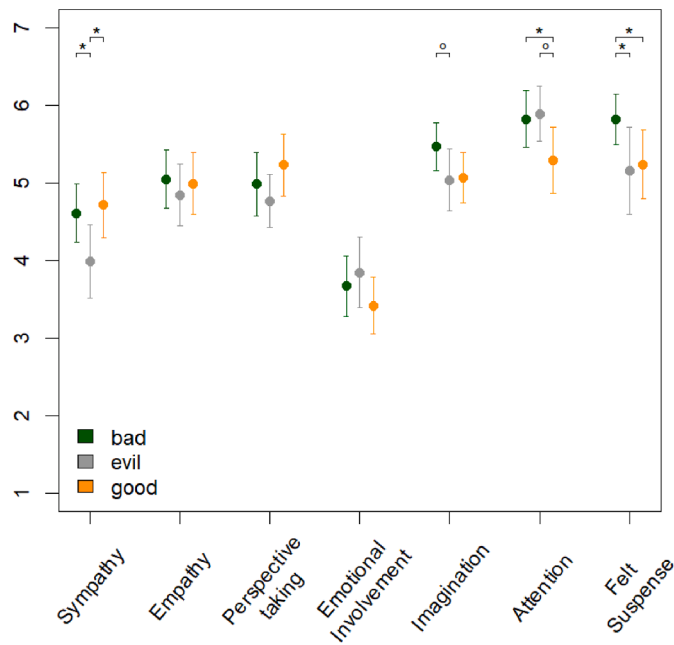


Fig. 2. Mean scores for the person state-measures. Error bars represent the 95% CI. Significant differences between the conditions are designated by $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

significantly differ for the Good and the BadCharacter versions ($t < 1$, $p = .73$, and $t < 1$, $p = .84$ for Sympathy and Empathy, respectively). Hence in this regard, too, we observed an adverse effect of badness only for the text version in which badness was pushed to the level of evilness.

This result differs from that obtained by [Krakowiak and Oliver \(2012\)](#) who did report a negative effect of their BadCharacter version on Sympathy. Our data do not put us in a position to tell apart whether this difference in results reflects the great differences in the experimental modifications between the two studies or other differences of the underlying texts.

The results for Empathy do not show any significant version effect at all. This result lends at least partial support to the understanding referred-to above that Sympathy is more likely to involve morally judgmental dimensions compared to Empathy.

4. Discussion

Our experimental case study on the poetics and aesthetics of character choice in narratives provides evidence that a general finding of the positive psychology of emotions—namely, “bad is stronger than good”—accords well with higher ratings for important dimensions of aesthetic reward and concomitant enjoyment when reading a Bad- vs. a GoodCharacter version of a literary narrative. Most notably, even though the differences were only small, the BadCharacter version was rated as more “suspenseful,” “captivating,” and “entertaining” compared to both the Good and the EvilCharacter version. For all other aesthetically evaluative dimensions for which we collected ratings we obtained no significant differences between the three versions. Moreover, in line with both Aristotle’s reasoning and recent findings of inverted u-shape functions, pushing badness to an extreme level (the EvilCharacter version) erased rather than enhanced all advantageous aesthetic effects distinctive of the BadCharacter version.

The adverse effect of the EvilCharacter version on aesthetic evaluation went along with an adverse effect on sympathy. In contrast, the Good and the BadCharacter versions did not differ neither in sympathy nor in empathy. This strikingly highlights the degree to which the reading of fictional narratives enjoys special licenses. Given that the deeds of perpetrators do not harm any real persons, readers can feel free from the “reality check” and circumvent the morally evaluative routines expected in real contexts in favour of obtaining higher aesthetic rewards. This applies even more so as fictional persons—in contrast to real ones—simply cannot be helped by the reader under any circumstance ([Vaage, 2013](#); see also [Konijn & Hoorn, 2005](#)). Again, however, this license for fiction appears to have limits, as it does not aesthetically redeem excessive departures from moral values as in the Evil Character condition.

We see some indications that our findings may well apply beyond a cognitive art framing. The public fascination with criminals performing spectacular coups and even with serial murders suggests a positive attention, intensity, and memory effect also for real-life bad characters and potentially even for individuals that might well deserve being labelled “evil” characters. Studies on such cases might shed further light on the topic investigated in this article.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

As this is a single case study, our results cannot readily be generalized to other narratives and call for replications. One could also

suspect that the failure of the EvilCharacter condition to share the aesthetic benefits of the BadCharacter condition may reflect a special effect of the Nazi past of this character on our German participants. To be sure, Hollywood cinema has turned Nazi figures, not without substantial degrees of fascination, into internationally notorious emblems of evilness; still, the effects of these figures on Germans may differ from those on non-Germans. This, however, is far from certain for the more recent generation, yet could readily be tested by drawing on participants from countries other than Germany.

Furthermore, many of the individual effects reported are small, and the statistical evidence is rather weak, calling for a cautious interpretation of the data. At the same time, the multiple weak effects do point in a similar direction, most notably, in the case of the text-focused ratings for “suspenseful” and the person-state ratings for subjectively felt “suspense,” and the convergent version effect on ratings for “captivating.” We therefore see reasons to believe that the many small effects obtained do reflect consequences of the experimental manipulations—i.e., of the insertion of a few words of background information regarding the protagonists distant past.

Finally, the study presented here has a primary focus on potential aesthetic benefits of character badness for the processing of narratives. Importantly, our findings do by no means rule out that character goodness and good acts can likewise—on grounds other than the specific psychological mechanisms that motivated our study design and with regard to processing dimensions we did not cover—make important contributions not just to aesthetic, but also to moral evaluation (Zillmann, 2000). Future research may study the potential co-presence and interaction of such effects.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101550](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2021.101550).

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