

119. Hatfield, E. (2009). Commentary: Fictions and feelings: On the place of literature in the study of emotion. *Emotion Review*.

Commentary

What role can the arts play in the study of emotion? There is a natural alliance between a love of poetry, fiction, and films and the acquisition of a greater understanding of emotions like love and hate, joy and sadness, fear and anger. We all live only one life. In novels—at least in the rich, probing, and intelligent ones—we can find ourselves magically transported to 5th century China, 18th century London, or the Forbidden Planet in the 9th Starburst Galaxy. In being exposed to worlds and characters unlike our own, we can expand our horizons and probe inner lives more deeply than when we are circumscribed by the rules of scholarship; we become wiser in the ways of the world.

There can be a problem, however, in assuming that the world of the play or novel imparts an accurate understanding of real life emotions. If I am reading Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, Julian Barnes' *Arthur & George*, Ian McEwan's *Endless Love*, Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theatre*, or John Updike's *Rabbit* series, I know I am in the hands of a master. They have closely and honestly observed love and life. But there are other novels whose very titles warn of what lies within: *Dr. Death and the Vampires*, *Spicy Adventures*, and *Slaves of the Silver Serpent* do not inspire trust. These are the perfect books to read on a warm summer day at the beach, on a long flight, or when you have

the flu and possess only enough energy to do itumb through a beach novel or gaze blankly at yet another rerun of *Law and Order*.

Yet even chick-lit, real-man survival tales, pornography, and the worst of sensationalistic trash have the potential to contribute insights to the scholarly apprehension of society's ideology and humankind's dreams and desires. But the odds are improved when imbibing the Bard, Ingmar Bergman, or Alan Furst rather than Danielle Steele, or the "Friday the 13th" massacres.

In "Fictions and Feelings," Patrick Hogan's claims are modest. He argues that literature offers a valuable supplement to scholarly research. He observes that the world's classics are an invaluable guide to understanding the nature of emotions. (As an example, he provides a meticulous analysis of "A paradigmatic work: *Romeo and Juliet*" as an aid to understanding love.) A study of humankind's favorite stories through the ages, he argues, can inspire scientific research, assist in the formulation of theories, and in the design and interpretation of experiments. It provides a deep and nuanced understanding of complex social emotions, such as guilt and disgust. It gives us an idea of what sparks emotions in natural settings. I would add that the study of literature allows us to transcend time and space in our testing of individual hypotheses. Emotion researchers, for example, have studied the impact of Westernization on views of love, by analyzing Japanese romance novels before and after the American occupation. Do these novels end in death and suffering or have the characters all lived "happily ever after?" Sociologists have studied the impact of culture and SES on love and sex by conducting qualitative analyses of comic

books, novels, and films depicting the lives of Indian Brahmins in contrast to tales written by street people. They have examined differences in street peddled pornography in Denmark, Japan, and Africa. Cultural and historical research combined with films and novels that take us to other places and times can forge naturally reinforcing approaches of great value.

I certainly agree with Patrick Hogan's main contention: that a knowledge of literature can contribute mightily to our understanding of emotion. To attain a deep and broad understanding of emotion, ideally we would combine the insights of scholars in a wide range of disciplines. Today, creative artists and scholars from a wide variety of theoretical disciplines—cultural theorists, social psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, evolutionary psychologists, neuroscientists, neurobiologists, primatologists, and historians among others—are attempting to understand the complex nature of emotion. They are employing an impressive array of new techniques. Primatologists are studying primates in the wild and in captivity. Neuroscientists are pouring over fMRIs. Anthropologists venture out into tribal societies. Social psychologists conduct interviews, surveys, experiments, and chemical assays. Historians are now studying history from the “bottom up” rather than the “top down,” generally examining the lives less of kings and queens than those of ordinary people. They utilize demographic data (marriage, birth, divorce, and death records), architecture, medical manuals, paintings, church edicts, law cases, songs, the occasional treasure of a diary that turns up in someone's attic, and valued works of imagination. If all these sources of insight and information converge, we can

feel fairly confident that our conclusions are plausible. Patrick Hogan's observations rightly invite us to venture beyond our specialized worlds.