

Emotion-based paradigm scenarios in everyday life and in literature

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Abstract Ronald de Sousa proposed the idea of paradigm scenarios: scenes and circumstances in which emotions occur as people form relationships, observe, and interact with others, in a manner that is a kind of drama. This idea is illustrated, and extended, with commentaries on Alice Munro's short story, 'The bear came over the mountain,' Franz Kafka's short stories, 'The judgement,' 'The metamorphosis,' and 'In the penal colony,' and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's television series, *Fleabag*. We often experience emotions that we do not fully understand. In works of fiction that depict emotions, we are sometimes enabled by means of paradigm scenarios to understand them more deeply than we might otherwise have been able to.

Introduction

In the Introduction to *The Rationality of Emotions* (1987) Ronald de Sousa proposed that:

The names of emotions do not refer to some simple experience; rather, they get their meaning from their relation to a situation type, a kind of original drama that defines the roles, feelings, and reactions characteristic of that emotion. Such original defining dramas I call *paradigm scenarios* (xvi).

In the human world some states have simple definitions; the definition of 'niece' is 'daughter of a sibling.' Psychological states such as 'memory,' 'personality,' and 'emotion,' do not have simple definitions. Instead, psychologists and writers of fiction endeavor to characterize them.

From a psychological perspective, we have come to know that an emotion usually happens as a subjective experience when an event occurs, most often in interaction with one or more other people, though sometimes in response to a memory or a thought. The emotion occurs when the event affects what Fridja (2007) calls a 'concern,' perhaps an aspiration or a value: a matter of importance to us. As Frijda goes on to explain, it tends to put us into a state of readiness for action, such as moving towards someone or avoiding them. Often, this state is accompanied by an expression such as a smile or a frown, along with physiological changes: perhaps an inner sense of well-being or a draining of blood from the face (see Keltner, Oatley & Jenkins, 2019).

Important for our understanding, however, is that most emotions are not specific. The preparedness for action is a kind of push without always letting us know quite why. Emotions seem likely to have derived from responses to kinds of events that have occurred repeatedly during the evolution of mammals. For humans, these include successes that prompt us to feel happy, with a push to continue with current activities that usually involve other people, losses that prompt us to feel sad and withdraw, dangers that prompt us to avoid or escape, and so on. These emotion-pushes have contributed to our survival (Keltner & Oatley, in press). For the human species, which has evolved rather recently, perhaps most important is the ability to cooperate with each other (Tomasello, 2019). Most emotions, therefore, are evoked by, shared with, or directed to others, when things don't go as expected. Collingwood (1938) proposed that works of art are translations of not-yet understood emotions into languages of words, of visual objects, or of musical effects. These translations enable us to understand emotions better for ourselves and others, and also to explore their wider implications (Rosenblatt, 1938). De Sousa's idea of paradigm scenarios contributes to this by suggesting how we might think of circumstances in which emotions occur.

In this article, the concentration is on what de Sousa calls 'drama,' because it enables a bridge to be formed from seeing how emotions occur in daily life to how they are depicted in plays, novels, short stories, films, and television series. I'll start with some short stories, the first of which is about love, then move on to stories about anger and dejection and, after that, to a television series, about emotions of other kinds. The intention is both to illustrate paradigm scenarios, and to explore their significance in our understanding and experience of emotions. Sometimes an emotion can be profound and touch us very intimately, and for this we need (I suggest) to move from psychological studies to literary works.

A love story

The example of a love story presented here is Alice Munro's 'The bear came over the mountain' (1999) republished as 'Away from her' (Munro, 2007), and adapted as a film by Sarah Polley (2007a).

In his survey of stories that were composed and told all over the world from before the era of European colonization, Patrick Hogan (2003) found that the most common of all was the love story. Typical is *Romeo and Juliet*, written by Shakespeare (1599). Like nearly all his plays the

story itself was borrowed from something he had read or heard, then expanded and enhanced by him. In this story, two young people see each other across a room, fall in love, and long to be united, but are prevented by a male parent. Alice Munro's story has some comparable elements—yearning and prevention—but configured in a different way.

This story is about Fiona, and her husband Grant who was formerly a professor of literature. It starts like this.

Fiona lived in her parents' house, in the town where she and Grant went to university. It was a big bay-windowed house that seemed to Grant both luxurious and disorderly ... Her mother was Icelandic—a powerful woman with a froth of white hair and indignant far-left politics (Munro, 2007, 1).

Around the age of seventy, Fiona starts not to remember things, and to get lost. She seems to be suffering from Alzheimers. As she puts it: 'I don't think it's anything to worry about ... I'm just losing my mind' (Munro, 2007, 4).

One day she says to Grant:

'You know what you're going to have to do with me, don't you? You're going to have to put me into that place. Shallowlake.'

Grant said, 'Meadowlake. We're not at that stage yet.'

'Shallowlake. Shillylake,' she said, as if they were engaged in a playful competition. 'Sillylake. Sillylake it is.'

The place is a care home. Grant said that it need not be permanent: 'An experimental treatment. A rest cure' (Munro, 2007, 6-7).

It turns out that they were at that stage: the placement is permanent.

Grant takes her to Meadowlake. Fiona has her own room, and the place is not unpleasant. The regulation is that after the accompanying person has brought a new resident there, she or he is not allowed to visit for the next thirty days because it had been found that otherwise, there was too much confusion, changes of mind, and the new person did not settle in.

At home, on his own, Grant remembers the affairs that he had with women students when he was a professor. There was a threat of scandal and ‘cold shoulders became conspicuous.’ He took early retirement, and ‘without making the error of a confession—he promised Fiona a new life’ (Munro, 2007, 15). It was then that they moved into the bay-windowed house.

Thirty days after taking Fiona there, Grant goes to Meadowlake to visit her. She is polite but seems not to recognize him. This happens over several visits. Instead, Grant sees that she is very attentive to a man in a wheelchair, called Aubrey. From a nurse he finds out that Aubrey had been in a coma, and had suffered brain damage, and is no longer able to do much for himself. Grant sees that Aubrey often occupies himself by playing bridge with some other people, with Fiona sitting very close and helping him.

Grant wonders whether, with her fondness for irony, Fiona is teasing him.

A lovely aspect of this story is its juxtapositions: first Grant forgets himself by having affairs with students. Then, in his marriage, he tries to forget that he has done this. Now Fiona forgets him.

Here is a quotation from a review I wrote on Sarah Polley’s (2007a) film of Munro’s story (Oatley, 2007).

The literary process by which both Munro’s story and Polley’s film work is what the great linguist Roman Jakobson (1988) has described as metonymy, which he contrasts with metaphor. Metonymy and metaphor are two poles of language and indeed, as Jakobson goes on to argue, two poles of thought. Metonymy is a syntactic operation. It works by juxtaposition: one thing is brought close to another, and throws a distinctive light on it. A common kind is whole and part (synecdoche): for instance in the movies a cut from a shot of a group of people to a close-up of the face of one of them. This kind of operation, says Lodge (1977) in his excellent book on this issue, is the principal mode of novels, short stories, and the cinema.

In terms of paradigm scenarios, we start to see that, in Grant, the emotion of love begins to grow more and more. It grows when he promises Fiona a new life and, now that she has departed for the care home, it grows further, augmented by guilt at the affairs that he has had. It’s not so much that he is jealous of Aubrey (of course he is), but although she seems not have much memory, he can see much more profoundly what a kind and thoughtful, affectionate, person Fiona is.

In psychology it has been found in diary studies that emotions are often mixed. Oatley and Duncan (1994) asked 47 employed people to record, in structured diaries, details of the next four emotions that they experienced in their everyday lives. They were asked to say what the cause of the emotion was, who was there, classify the emotion as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, or none of these, and so on. We found that on 31% of occasions in which an emotion occurred it was mixed: it occurred simultaneously with another one. For instance, 59% of occurrences of sadness were mixed, and so were 37% of occurrences of anger. Overall, the most common mixture, recorded in this study, was anger together with fear. Not only that but, in the course of an episode, 30% of emotions changed into different emotions as they proceeded. Happiness was the most stable, but in episodes of anger 41% of these changed into another emotion; in episodes of disgust 56% of these emotions changed.

In Alice Munro's story, for Grant, there is not only a mixture—love of Fiona and guilt for his affairs—but also his guilt turning into a more loving state.

When Aubrey is taken home by his wife, Fiona is devastated. Utterly bereft; she will not eat, grows very thin, and has to be fed artificially. Grant cannot bear this. He finds out the address of Aubrey, drives in his car to visit. While Aubrey is in another room watching television, in the kitchen, Grant pleads with Aubrey's wife to return her husband to the care home. She refuses. She cannot afford it. Could she, perhaps—Grant asks—at least take him there on a few occasions for some visits? Again she refuses.

What happens is that Grant starts an affair with Aubrey's wife, in the course of which—as he had hoped, and maybe planned—she does agree for Grant and herself to take Aubrey to visit Fiona.

Twenty-two lines from the end of the story comes this, with Grant speaking first:

'Fiona ...' he said

'You've been gone a long time. Are we all checked out now?'

'Fiona, I've brought a surprise for you. Do you remember Aubrey?'

...

'Names elude me,' she said harshly.

She ... stood up and lifted her arms to put them around him [Aubrey].

'I'm happy to see you,' she said, and pulled his earlobes.

‘You could just have driven away,’ she said. ‘Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken.’

Then the story’s last paragraph:

He [Aubrey] kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. He said, Not a chance.

In a foreword to the book of Alice Munro’s stories called *Away From Her*, Sarah Polley (2007b), whom I have met and discussed some of these issues with, writes this:

I first read the story on a plane on my way home from Iceland, where I had just finished acting in a film with Julie Christie. My grandmother was gradually losing her grip on her independence. My romantic life was in tatters ... I read it, stunned, and let it sit there. It seemed to enter like a bullet. So concise and nonsentimental, nothing to cushion the blow of its impact. When I was finished, I couldn’t stop weeping (xii).

Further into this foreword, Polley writes that:

I had thought that with all this fictional marriage’s failures this was not perhaps the greatest love story I’d ever read, but the *only* love story that I’d read (xv.)

In this story, love is not just, as de Sousa says (quoted in the current article’s first paragraph) ‘a simple experience.’ It’s a moving, potentially changing, emotionally based relational drama, that usually cannot just be simply measured or studied in a laboratory. People who engage with works of literary art are enabled, by means of metonymies of the kind that Alice Munro presents, to make mental associations and contrasts which otherwise they would have been unlikely for them

Not only that, but in a work of literary art, such as Munro’s ‘The bear came over the mountain,’ it isn’t that one merely reads about emotions, but like Sarah Polley as she read the story while returning home on a plane from Iceland, one experiences emotions oneself: not those of any of the characters, but one’s own. By means of engaging with fiction in which paradigm scenarios are depicted, a resonance (Rosa, 2019) can occur with a character with the result that one can understand emotions more profoundly for and within oneself.

Is love something that occurs because of voluntary decisions as perhaps Grant's was with at least one of his students? Is it perhaps, as with Fiona coming to love Aubrey, somewhat involuntary? Perhaps one might depict it with a joke: as when Aubrey whose movements from place to place are completely involuntary says, after Fiona speaks of him forsaking her, 'Not a chance.' And what about Grant's growth of love for Fiona?

Stories of anger and dejection

Although he spoke and wrote in German, Franz Kafka grew up with Jewish parents in Prague, the inhabitants of which were mostly Catholics who spoke Czechoslovakian. His father, Hermann, a massive man was angry much of the time. He made a lot of noise and bullied his wife and children. In 1919 Franz wrote a letter to his father to let him know the effects his father had had on him: undermining him, sapping him of all confidence in himself. Here's part of what he wrote:

For me you acquired the mysterious quality possessed by all tyrants whose rights are founded on their person and not on their ideas ... If I want to attain independence in the particular unhappy relationship I have with you I need to do something that has the least possible connection with you (Robertson, 2004, 8).

He showed the letter to his mother, and to his sister, Ottilia, who both persuaded him not to give it to his father. According to Robertson, it seems likely that Franz's mother, taking the side of her husband, withdrew her affection from him rather early, and failed to understand either his vulnerabilities, or other aspects of him.

Writing throughout one night from 22 to 23 September 1912, Franz Kafka completed a short story, 'The Judgment,' (published in 1913) about a man called Georg, whose mother has died and whose father seems ill. The father visits his office each day but spends much of his time in a dark room at home. Near the beginning of the story, Georg is writing to a friend who has gone to live in Russia. The friend has not been successful there and is very unhappy. Georg has not seen him for three years and writes to him only occasionally. He hesitates to tell this person about his recent engagement, which has made him, Georg, happy, because that may upset him even more.

Entering the darkened room inhabited by his ailing father, Georg tells him that he has written to his friend in Russia and has mentioned in the letter that he is engaged to be married. His father tells him that the man in Russia ‘would be a son after [his] own heart.’

The father then continues about Georg’s engagement:

‘Because she pulled her skirts up like this and this and this [enacting his words with his shirt], you accosted her and, in order to satisfy your lust with her unhampered, you disgraced your mother’s memory (68-69).

The father tells Georg that he is deluded in thinking that the man in Russia is his friend. He says that this man is far closer to him (the father) than to Georg.

‘I’ve been writing to him because you forgot to take away my writing things. That’s why he hasn’t visited here for years, he knows everything far better than you do yourself, he crumples up your letters in his left hand without reading them, while he holds up my letters in his right hand to read them!’ (70).

He demonstrates that Georg’s life is worthless, then says to him, ‘more loudly:’

‘So now you know what else there was in the world beside you, previously you only knew about yourself! You were truly an innocent child, but you were even more truly a diabolical man! And therefore know: I hereby condemn you to death by drowning!’ (71).

Georg quickly leaves the house, crosses the road, and drowns himself in the river that runs alongside it.

Franz Kafka kept a diary and the day after he had written this story, he said that working continuously in the way he had, staying up all night, was the only way to write: ‘with such coherence, only with such complete opening of body and soul’ (Robertson, 2004, 18).

The way Kafka wrote his fiction was to draw on his own life, especially of the experience of his father. Also, not long before he wrote ‘The judgment,’ he had met Felice Bauer, whom later he would twice be engaged to marry.

Franz Kafka did gain some independence, not only in his writing but in his main paid employment which, from 1908 to 1922, was with the state-run Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute. Here he

did not just strive to understand what had happened in industrial injuries, but to help people settle claims, to visit factories to examine equipment and make suggestions to forestall accidents. This job, of being helpful, was very different from the way he had experienced his parents.

Kafka wrote not just with metonymies, as discussed in the previous section, but by means of what Jakobson (1956), called the other pole of language: metaphor. This mode is a means by which one thing becomes something that it's not. In 'The judgment,' a friend is not a friend, and a father is not a parent but a condemnatory judge.

Kafka's most famous short story, 'The metamorphosis' (1915) is based on an even more unusual metaphor than the one in 'The judgment.'" The story starts like this, with one of the most famous opening sentences in literature:

One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin (117).

Gregor is no longer a human. He is a huge cockroach with rigid brown scales and too many legs. In this, he is not just a bit unacceptable, but completely unacceptable, to his family.

Another of Kafka's stories, 'In the penal colony,' (1919) starts like this:

'It's a singular apparatus,' the officer said to the explorer, running his somewhat admiring eyes over the apparatus, with which he was after all familiar. The traveler seemed to have accepted the invitation purely out of courtesy: the commander had asked him to attend the execution of a soldier, who had been condemned to death for insubordination and for insulting a superior (191).

Once again, here's the problem: 'insubordination.' The apparatus is a machine designed for a condemned person to be strapped into, and to die over the long course of a day and, while this is happening, to carve the name of the perpetrator's crime into his flesh so that he will understand it deeply. In the case of the condemned man, in this story, the words to be written were 'Honor your superiors.' In a Kafkaesque way, as we read on, we realize that not everything is as it seems, and several things start going wrong.

Was Franz Kafka angry? As you read his stories, you may decide. And dejection? His preoccupation with death?

Complex emotions: embarrassment and disappointment

As to emotions that Johnson-Laird and Oatley (1989) have characterized as ‘complex,’ which involve a mental model of the self, these too can be seen in dramas. Moving, with a more cheerful note than that of some of Kafka’s stories, a recent example is Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s witty television series *Fleabag* (2016) about a young woman who gets into terrible muddles. Sometimes when something happens or when she is in one of her muddles, she looks at the camera in a way that makes us, as audience members think she is looking directly at us, so that we understand some of what she is feeling.

Here is an example of a piece from this television series: the depiction here starts seven minutes into its first episode. The young woman, whom I’ll call ‘Fleabie,’ has applied for a loan to support the small café that she runs. She hurries into a place where a man is sitting at a desk, with the forms for her loan application before him. Here is part of the dialogue.

Man: ‘Thank you for coming in today. We really appreciate you considering us for your small business start-up loan.’

Fleabie: ‘No problem.’

Man: ‘I’ve read your application form ... are you alright?’

Fleabie: ‘Oh yeah, sorry, I just, um, I ran from the station, so I’m just a bit hot.’

She starts to take off her sweater, showing just her black bra beneath it.

Man: ‘OK. Sorry. That kind of thing won’t get you very far here anymore.’

She pulls her sweater down again.

Fleabie: ‘Oh, no, sorry. I thought I had a top underneath.’

Man: ‘Yeah, OK.’

Fleabie: ‘No, seriously ... an accident ...’

Man: ‘Please leave.’

The drama here is that Fleabie needs a loan to keep her café from going under. She starts to take off her sweater because she’s too hot without remembering that she did not have a shirt on underneath it. Embarrassment—fancy doing this, how could she not have remembered?—immediately followed by disappointment at being summarily dismissed by the loan-officer, and being unable to obtain the loan she has asked for.

Conclusion

Unlike the configurations of our finger-prints for which our evolutionarily based genetic programming seems to have been rather precise, our emotions, which occur when something happens that affects a concern, are not precise. They give us pushes and prepare us for actions in directions that are rather general. What we then do, and how we understand what has happened, and what is going on for us emotionally, is for us to decide.

A concern that is affected by the event that has prompted an emotion may derive from our childhood, when we formed mental schemas on which our relationships were based. This evidently happened to Franz Kafka with the schema he formed of the oppression of his father, which then affected the way in which he thought, and wrote about others and society. Other concerns derive from our adult relationships, and choices that we have made, as Grant’s did in Alice Munro’s ‘The bear came over the mountain.’ Yet others occur with day-to-day accidents as Fleabie’s did when she started to take off her sweater as she applied for a loan.

As Ronald de Sousa (1987) said, ‘emotions are not simple.’ His proposal of paradigm scenarios enables us to see that although some aspects of emotions can be measured and experimented upon, others remain difficult to characterize in terms of average responses. De Sousa’s proposal pushes us to consider that works of fictional art may be important for philosophers and psychologists to understand their own and other people’s emotions more deeply.

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