Introduction

Studying Narrative, Studying Emotion

When empirical researchers in the social sciences consider the nature of emotions and emotion concepts, they most often conduct anthropological interviews, send out surveys, analyze linguistic idioms, test stimulus response times, and so on. They may move toward medical and biological study as well, giving injections to test subjects, engaging in neuroimaging, and the like in order to gather as much relevant data as possible. But, with only a few exceptions, they almost entirely ignore a vast body of existing data that bears directly on feelings and ideas about feelings – literature, especially literary narrative.[1] Stories in every culture both depict and inspire emotion. Indeed, the fact that some stories are highly esteemed in any given culture suggests that those stories are particularly effective at both tasks – representing the causes and effects of emotion as understood or imagined in that society and giving rise to related emotions in readers. Of course, one cannot assume that depictions of emotion accurately represent those emotions. This is the common, and quite reasonable, objection to treating literature as empirical data. However, we have very good reason to assume that widely admired depictions of emotions tell us something important about the way people in a

[1] As just noted, there are exceptions here, especially among researchers influenced by psychoanalytic work, for psychoanalytic theory has drawn on literature since the time of Freud. A recent example is Labouvie-Vief, who combines developmental and empirical psychology with a study of myth from several Mediterranean cultures in order to discuss aging.

given society think about emotions. In other words, we have a body of commonly enjoyed, elaborate, narrative portrayals of emotion scenarios. At the very least, these would seem to tell us far more about common emotion ideas than some verbal definition of an emotion term. Moreover, emotional reactions to literary works – the sorrow, anger, mirth felt and expressed by readers – clearly tell us something about what moves people in a particular culture, what touches them emotionally. Indeed, literary response is as close as we can usually get to a wide range of genuine and spontaneous human emotions that are most often concealed in private interactions.

In these ways, the celebrated stories of any given society form an almost ideal body of data for research in emotion and emotion concepts. The central contention of this book is that anyone who pays attention to this body of literary data by examining it cross-culturally, cannot help but be struck by the uniformity of narrative structures and of the emotions and emotion ideas that are inseparable from those structures. More exactly, there are extensive and detailed narrative universals. These universals are the direct result of extensive and detailed universals in ideas about emotions that are themselves closely related to universals of emotion per se.

LITERATURE AS A HUMAN ACT

One reason literature has played such a limited role in cognitive study is that science seeks generalities while literature seems to be tied to narrow particularity. In connection with this, even humanists have been resistant to the idea that there are universal patterns in literature. The sharp contrast between literature and the stuff of empirical research seems to be one of the few things that most humanists and scientists agree on. Both literary critics and readers from other disciplines tend to think of literature in terms of nations and periods, genres, schools, and movements. Indeed, the tendency is much more pronounced among professional students of literature. Literary historians and interpreters categorize works of literature by groups, opposing the groups to one another and scrutinizing these groups for differences. What distinguishes Romanticism from Neo-Classicism?, Post-Modernism from Modernism?, European drama from Sanskrit theater?, western lyric from Chinese *tz'u*? These are the sorts of

questions asked in comparative literary study. Asking these questions leads one to find answers, and thus to find differences. When finding specific differences, one tends to exaggerate group difference. In other words, when one examines what separates this group from that group or this body of literature from that body of literature, distinguishing features become salient, while commonalities fade into the background. The result is a disproportionate sense of discrepancy and opposition.

But in fact there are far more numerous, deeper, more pervasive commonalities than there are differences. As Donald Davidson has argued, even to understand and think about difference, we need to presuppose a vast range of similarities. In Davidson's words, "disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement" (137). Put differently, literature – or, more properly, verbal art – is not produced by nations, periods, and so on. It is produced by people. And these people are incomparably more alike than not. They share ideas, perceptions, desires, aspirations, and – what is most important for our purposes – emotions. Verbal art certainly has national, historical, and other inflections. The study of such particularity is tremendously important. However, literature is, first of all and most significantly, human. It is an activity engaged in by all people at all times. As Paul Kiparsky put it, "literature is neither recent nor a historical invention. In fact no human community lacks a literature"; no group is "so wretched that it does not express its memories and desires in stories and poems" ("On Theory" 195–6). More recently, Mark Turner has argued that, "literary criticism has given us a concept of literature as the product of circumstances . . . not as a product of the capacities of the human mind. We do not ask, what is the human mind that it can create and understand a text? What is a text that it can be created and understood by the human mind? These questions are not at the center or even the periphery of our critical inquiries" (*Reading Minds* 16). The professional division of literature by nationality, ethnicity, and so on, tends to occlude this fundamental, human condition of verbal art. The following chapters address literature, then, not as the expression of an ethnic *Weltanschauung*, nor as evidence of an historical episteme, but rather as a human activity – something people do, and always have done, in all parts of the world, and at all times.

At one level, this is, then, a study of literary universals. It is also a cognitive study.[2] Indeed, it is my contention that literary universals are to a great extent the direct outcome of specifiable cognitive structures and processes applied in particular domains and with particular purposes. In this way, the study of literary universals is largely a subfield of cognitive research.[3] Moreover, it is a crucial subfield *for* cognitive science. Cognitive science can hardly claim to explain the human mind if it fails to deal with such a ubiquitous and significant aspect of human mental activity as literature. In this way, cognitive science is not only important to the study of literary universals. The study of literary universals is equally important for cognitive science. Indeed, a small, but significant – and expanding – group of cognitive scientists has come to recognize the necessity of incorporating literary study into their domain as work by Steven Pinker, E. O. Wilson, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, Howard Gardner, Keith Oatley, Jeffrey Saver (see Young and Saver), and others attests.

But this is not a book on literary universals in general – which is, in any case, too large a topic for a single work. In Chapter 1, I do introduce general principles for the cognitive study of literary universals. However, the bulk of the volume focuses on the relation between two crucial elements of literature and the human mind – narrative and emotion. Despite the recent cognitive interest in literature, this is an area that has hardly been explored, leaving aside the work of one or two researchers, most importantly Keith Oatley – and even Oatley has not studied this nexus cross-culturally, in an attempt to isolate universal structures. Again, the general absence of attention to this is

[2] I am, of course, not alone in linking literary study with cognitive science. The last decade has seen the growth of a significant movement in literary study based on cognitive science. Work by Turner, as well as Norman Holland (*Brain*), Ellen Spolsky, Paul Hernadi, Jerry Hobbs, Mary Crane, Alan Richardson, and a number of other writers, has provided a valuable alternative to recently dominant approaches to literature. This book is, to a certain extent, part of that movement. At the same time, however, there are some differences between my views and mainstream cognitivism, as I have discussed in *On Interpretation*. For the most part, these differences do not bear on the topics discussed in the following pages. Thus I shall leave them aside, except for a brief discussion in the Afterword.

[3] One important qualification here is that some literary universals do not seem to be a matter of psychology per se, but rather of social conditions, either changeable or permanent. We shall discuss some examples in Chapter 1 when treating implicational universals.

unfortunate, for it is an area of seemingly obvious value for cognitive science.

Narrative is, of course, central to verbal art. Indeed, it is, as I shall argue, even more definitive and widespread than is commonly recognized. For example, it lies concealed in such apparently nonnarrative works as lyric poems. What is crucial for our purposes is that narrative is intimately bound up with emotion. Literary stories, especially the stories we most admire and appreciate, are structured and animated by emotions. Any coherent sequence of events might constitute a story. But the stories that engage us, the stories we celebrate and repeat – "paradigm" stories – are precisely stories that move us, most often by portraying emotions or emotionally consequential events. Conversely, the emotive impact of verbal art cannot be discussed separately from its narrative structure. Indeed, even real life emotion is bound up with narrative. As a number of writers have pointed out, our affective response to a situation, real or fictional, is not a response to an isolated moment, but to the entire sequence of events in which that moment is located, whether explicitly or implicitly. Consider someone's death. This is narratively embedded, first of all, in the simple sense that we infer the person was alive and some causal sequence led to his/her death. But it is narrative also and more significantly in the sense that we respond to the death in terms of the narrative details through which we understand the person's life. Suppose we learn that someone died in an automobile accident. We are likely to respond one way if we learn that the person was in the final stages of a terminal illness with only a few pain-filled weeks to live. We are likely to respond differently if we learn that the person was driving to his/her wedding. Skeptics might reply by arguing that narrative in these cases is simply a matter of causal inference and evaluative judgment, and thus is not narrative in any interesting or substantive sense. It is certainly true that what I am describing is in part ordinary causal analysis and evaluation. However, that is not all there is to it. One argument of the following pages is that our ideas about, evaluations of, and most crucially our emotive responses to all sorts of things are guided and organized by a limited number of standard narrative structures. Human thought, action, and feeling are not simply a matter of rational inference. They are also a matter of emplotment in a narrow, specifiable sense.

Before going on, it is worth pausing for a moment over the notion of "paradigm" stories. Paradigm literary works are works that are widely shared by writers and readers within a tradition and that serve to establish evaluative standards and structural principles within a tradition. In the following pages, I shall refer repeatedly to prototypical literary works. These are not the same as paradigm literary works, though the latter are most often instances of the former. Specifically, prototypical works are works that share all our standard criteria for verbal art. They share all the properties we consider "normal" for literature. Thus, romantic novels and epic poems – including many that are unknown or even unpublished – are most often prototypical literary works. Riddles are not. Paradigm works usually share these prototypical properties, but add our collective familiarity and esteem.

By "esteem" here, I mean esteem as *literature*. We may admire a work for many reasons. It may express courage in the face of political oppression. It may teach moral lessons that we find valuable. It may celebrate our national heritage. But we may admire a work for any of these reasons and still consider it a poor work of literature. In the following pages, I am concerned with works that are widely admired as good works of literature.

Put differently, we tell and write stories every day. Some discussions of narrative are concerned with all these stories. Accounts of that sort are valuable. But they are different from an account that is concerned with prototypes and paradigms. The following analyses do not treat ephemeral stories (for example, what I tell my wife about how I had to go to three shops to get a particular spice). Ephemeral stories may be very engaging at the moment, but they are engaging for idiosyncratic and contingent reasons. What is important here are stories that have sustained interest within their respective traditions. A story that has sustained interest is unlikely to have its appeal for contingent reasons, due to the particular relationship of the speaker and addressee, or due to some unusual circumstance. As such, a story that has sustained interest is more likely to tell us something about the human mind.

The following analyses, then, aim to begin the process of describing and explaining the remarkably detailed, cross-culturally universal, and interwoven patterns of our emotions, our ideas about emotions,

and our most enduring stories. One might refer to this project as an anthropology of world literature, in which it turns out that emotions are central – indeed, definitive, and formative. I undertake this task in relation to an encompassing research program in cognitive science.[4]

UNIVERSALISM AND CULTURAL STUDY

As we have noted, a handful of writers in cognitive science have recently become interested in literature. In some cases, this interest has extended to literary universals. Indeed, there has been a surprising increase in attention to the topic over the past few years, for the most part among cognitively oriented literary and film theorists. Except for the pioneering work of Roman Jakobson and Paul Kiparsky, for a long while there was little serious discussion of literary universals – hardly a mention, in fact. However, in the context of developing research programs in cognitive science, some scholars and theorists have begun taking the idea seriously. In addition to my own earlier efforts (see "Literary," "Possibility," "Beauty," "Shakespeare," and 286–95

[4] It should go without saying that this analysis does not treat every aspect of narrative, not even every cognitive aspect. Thus it does not in any way preclude other cognitive approaches. Perhaps the most obvious omission is what narratologists call "discourse," the mode of presentation of a "story." The "story" is the events as they happened according to a particular narrative. The discourse is the way in which these events are presented. For example, in a murder narrative, the story begins with the murderer plotting the murder. It moves to commission of the murder, then the discovery of the crime, then the investigation. But murder narratives are not typically told this way. They usually begin with the discovery of the crime, then the investigation leads us to learn about the preceding events. Thus the discourse presents the events of the story out of chronological sequence. Discourse is clearly central to the emotional impact of a work. I have not discussed it simply because it is another topic, and a huge one. Readers interested in this topic should consult Brewer and Lichtenstein for empirical research and Tan for an extended and influential development in relation to film.

More generally, there are many very useful ways in which narrative may be studied cognitively – and, indeed, has been studied cognitively. A particularly valuable cognitive treatment of narrative is David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* that addresses the film viewer's cognitive construction of the story out of the discourse. The most influential cognitive examination of narrative in literary study is probably Mark Turner's *The Literary Mind* that focuses on the mini-narratives of everyday life and their relation to conceptual blending. These, too, do not at all exhaust the possibilities.

of *Philosophical*), a number of other writers have taken up the topic. These include well-established theorists, such as David Bordwell ("Convention") and, in a very different way, Wendy Doniger, as well as younger critics, such as Alan Richardson and Joseph Carroll, and independent or extraacademic writers such as Ellen Dissanayake. In addition, cognitive scientists such as Steven Pinker, though they do not directly address the issue, clearly presuppose literary universals in their work on cognition and literature. Indeed, recently, the University of Palermo sponsored a website devoted to the topic of literary universals (http://litup.unipa.it). The aim of this website – the Literary Universals Project – is to bring together researchers from different fields in order to advance a research program in the area. With the continuing development of cognitive science, the study of literary universals is likely to expand in both breadth and depth.

Still, literary universals remain a minority interest. Mainstream literary critics and theorists pay little attention to the topic. As we have already noted, in professional literary study, the focus of both theory and practice tends to be on difference, cultural and historical specificity, and so on. What Carl Plantinga said of film theorists applies equally to literary theorists: They tend to seek "explicit ways to link" literary phenomena "to particular historical conditions and to ideology" (450). In keeping with this, a self-evaluation by the American Comparative Literature Association worried that comparative literature "may well be left behind on the dustpile of academic history" if it does not incorporate the current trends variously referred to as "culture studies," "cultural critique," and "cultural theory." Indeed, the authors of this study insisted that all work in comparative literature "should take account of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which . . . meanings are produced," which amounts to an insistence that all comparatist study be focused on historical and cultural particularities (Bernheimer et al. 5,6). Again, this sort of work is undeniably important. Indeed, my own work (for example, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity* and *The Culture of Conformism*) has been, to a great extent, located within the field of culture study. But to say that such particularist study is valuable is not to say it is all that is valuable.

When universalism is mentioned in humanistic writing, it is most often denounced as a tool of oppression. For example, in their

influential introduction to postcolonial literary study, *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin maintain that the notion of universality is "a hegemonic European critical tool" (149). There are exceptions, certainly, and not only among writers in cognitive science. For example, the important Kenyan Marxist novelist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, has proclaimed himself "an unrepentant universalist" (xvii). However, there has been a general sense in literary study that attention to or advocacy of universals is somehow politically suspect.

There is a fairly straightforward case against such political claims. After all, no racist ever justified the enslavement of Africans or colonial rule in India on the basis of a claim that whites and nonwhites share universal human properties or that their cultures share universal principles. On the other hand, in saying this, I do not want to fall into the opposite error of claiming that everything that goes by the name of "universalism" is politically good. Things are never that simple. Indeed, one does not have to look far to see how universalist claims have been used to support oppression. Typically, humanist criticisms of universalism refer back to those universalist claims that derive from and serve to further colonial, patriarchal, or other ideologies supporting unjust domination. However, as Kwame Appiah has noted, what anticolonial opponents of universals "are objecting to" in these cases "is the posture that conceals [the] privileging of one national (or racial) tradition against others in false talk of the Human Condition" (58). In other words, they are objecting to false and duplicitous claims of universalism, assertions of universality that are untrue and are, in addition, offered in bad faith. Appiah continues, "antiuniversalists . . . use the term *universalism* as if it meant *pseudouniversalism*, and the fact is that their complaint is not with universalism at all. What they truly object to – and who would not? – is Eurocentric hegemony *posing* as universalism" (58; see also Lalita Pandit 207–8).

It is important to stress that this conclusion in no way detracts from the standard forms of particularist literary study. It responds, not to their positive worth, but to their exclusivity. More exactly, proponents of cultural and historical study sometimes seem to assume that the study of universals is opposed to or contradictory of cultural study. But to argue for the study of universals is not at all to argue against the

study of culture and history. All reasonable students of literature – including those engaged in a universalist project – recognize that particularist research and interpretation are extremely valuable. Indeed, the study of universals and the study of cultural and historical particularity are mutually necessary. Like laws of nature, cultural universals are instantiated variously, particularized in specific circumstances (cf. Ngũgĩ 26; see also King 33, 127, on the culturally "rooted" universalism of Derek Walcott and Wole Soyinka). Thus, to isolate universal patterns, we often require a good deal of cultural and historical knowledge. At the same time, in order to gain any understanding of cultural particularity, we necessarily presuppose a background of commonality (as, once again, Donald Davidson has argued forcefully [183–98]; see also Brown 151–2). In short, the study of universality and the study of cultural particularity are not contradictory, but complementary.[5]

UNIVERSALITY AND NARRATIVE: RESEARCH PROGRAMS, RESEARCH METHODS

Needless to say, these general comments do not establish that there actually are literary universals. They do not even indicate just how one might go about isolating universals. The first chapter takes up the nature of and criteria for universals. Specifically, Chapter 1 draws on work in linguistics – the field that has made the greatest advances in the study of universals – in order to explain what constitutes a literary universal and what counts as evidence for the existence of a universal. The second chapter considers the issue of literary emotion, drawing in particular on Indic literary theory and cognitive research to present an account of why literature moves us.

Chapters 1 and 2 are, in a sense, preliminary to my main project, introducing basic principles about literary universals and literary emotion. Chapter 3 presents and defends my claims about narrative universals and their relation to emotion concepts. In that chapter,

[5] Other writers have implicitly presented universalism and particularism as at least compatible, if not complementary. Good examples would include Zhang and Kövecses.