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Emotions and Narrative in  
Jane Austen and Henry James



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# Introduction

“Emotion is now a hot topic”, Dylan Evans has recently written in his introductory book on the subject (xiii). In fields as diverse as philosophy, psychology and anthropology, there has been an enormous outpouring of research on the emotions in the last ten to fifteen years.<sup>1</sup> This research has up to now not lead to a unified theory of emotion; on the contrary, it has made clear that the research on emotion is (and must remain) an interdisciplinary endeavour. In this spirit, I aim in this study to explore an interdisciplinary aspect of emotion: What is the relationship between feelings and narrative? In order to pursue this question, I must also take an interdisciplinary approach. I work with theoretical writings from various fields – above all different strands of philosophy and sociology – and set these sources into what I hope is a creative interplay with three great English novels. In the arts, emotions have always been recognised as a hot topic, both because our reactions to artworks have consistently been held to be emotional, and because emotions – sexual love for example – are important themes of artworks. In my study I do not concentrate on such more traditional approaches. I try to advance in both the interpretation of the literary texts and the theoretical sources a view on selected emotions that pays heed to their complexity.

The term *emotion* stems from the Latin and is a compound of *e* + *movere*. The term originally referred to, as James R. Averill explains, psychological states of agitation or perturbation (37–38), among other

1 One reason for the popularity of the topic with the wider public has also been a flow of books popularising recent scientific findings. The best known among them remains Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence*, a summary of ten years of neurobiological and cognitive research on emotion.

things. However, what today is called *emotion* was for a very long time called *passion*. Again according to Averill, *passion* is derived from the Latin word *pati* (to suffer), whose relationship to the Greek *pathos* is evident. *Pati* is also the root of expressions such as *passive* and *patient*. What is important in this etymology is the view that passions are something one undergoes or suffers. We are seized by passions and shaken about, the traditional view goes, and not actively involved in producing them. In the last chapter of my study I will argue that we need an account that pays attention not only to the passive, but above all to the “active” elements involved in having an emotion. A note on terminology: throughout the book I use the term *passion* only when explicitly talking about the concept of emotion used before the onset of modern psychology. Furthermore, I use the terms *emotion* and *feeling* interchangeably, even though feeling is often defined as being the bodily aspect of an emotion – the raised hair, stomach aches, etc.

In chapter 1 I start out from the question of how best to see the balanced relation between reason and emotion that Jane Austen seems to suggest in her novels. In order to describe this relation, I introduce the work of Martha Nussbaum and Ronald de Sousa. Like many other philosophers in recent years, they argue that emotions are not the opponents of reason, but are a central ingredient in any form of rational thinking. However, they both propose a more complex account of emotion than the one usually found in the philosophical literature on the topic; both of them claim that emotions are learnt through stories and contain a narrative ingredient. Ronald de Sousa argues that an emotion is rational if the narrative structure on which it is based – which he calls paradigm scenarios – accords with the real-world situation of the agent having the emotions. In chapter 2, I apply some of these insights to Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*. I argue, however, that we must extend the notion of paradigm scenarios to a concern for the past, present, and future. Paradigm scenarios are

not simply applied as schemes, but shape the agent's doings in important ways. In chapter 3 I turn to another field in which narrative has recently played a huge role: the theory of identity. I explore Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity in order to find out, first, why it is generally attractive to use the concept of narrative, and, second, to give an account of the role narrative plays in the formation of the self. I explore Ricoeur's ideas in a reading of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*. Finally, in chapter 4, I draw these insights together and ask how the theories of narrative identity and narrative-based emotions can be brought together. Here I will draw mainly on the work of sociologist Jack Katz, who has introduced to the theory of emotion the notion of the "double narrative project". The idea behind this is that people who are having an emotion are always involved in two projects at once: in making sense of the situation they are in and in fitting this single situation into the larger whole of their life. I return to Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* to work out where exactly emotions and identity interact, and to suggest ways in which Katz's concept needs fine tuning. I argue that we must distinguish between emotions that come and go without leaving much of an impression on the individual and emotions that change who a person is, or that alter the story individuals tell about themselves. In my conclusion I explain why my view of emotions is rather sunny, and oppose the criticism that a narrative concept of emotion relies too strongly on language.

Why do I use literary texts? In the epigraph to my introduction, Charles Darwin explains that he was unable to use works of art to study the facial expressions of emotions in humans because art aims at beauty and, as the grimaces of people rapt by emotion often are ugly, artists usually do not paint them realistically. Darwin relied on photographs instead; should we not also use neutral descriptions of emotions as they occur in everyday life? I strongly agree with Theodore Sarbin's claim that it is pointless to extend the controversy over the question 'What is emotion?', and that we should "begin a study