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Multiple perspectives in the novel and storyworld possible selves: An alternative approach to narrative engagement

Abstract: This chapter argues that an alternative approach to readers' character-related narrative engagement is necessary. The study of this type of reader response has been dominated by investigations of immersive and identificatory (or empathetic) reading that focus on readers' engagement with single characters, usually the protagonists or main focalizers, whose perspective readers are said to share. However, we need to arrive at a better understanding of how readers engage also with the many other characters that inhabit the fictional worlds of novels, providing the richness of perspectives that characterize the genre. Since the theory of Storyworld Possible Selves provides a differentiated model of character-related engagement, I take it as a starting point for my argument that readers are likely to relate to the full variety of perspectives offered in a narrative text. For my alternative approach, I revive the notion of multiperspectivity, and I sketch different types of readers' reaction to perspectivization.

1 Introduction: The one *and* the many

The argument I propose in this chapter is quite simple.[1] When readers make sense of extended narratives, such as novels, they are likely to engage, cognitively and emotionally, not only with the protagonists or the dominant focalizers of the text but also with many other characters in the fictional worlds that novels explore. While most scholarly attention has been devoted to readers' engagement with *single* characters, the study of narrative engagement can only be complete if

1 I would like to thank the organizers and participants of the NarraLingCog International Seminar at the University of Alcalá de Henares in May 2023 for valuable feedback on a keynote lecture I presented there, which is the basis for this chapter. The argument was developed before the new book by Peter Dixon and Marisa Bortolussi, *The Analogical Reader*, was available at the end of 2023; I have accommodated their ideas, which I wholeheartedly endorse, in my argumentation. The title of this introductory section adapts that of Alex Woloch's book, *The One vs. the Many* (2003), a rare and fine example of a study of the complexities of character constellations.

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we can also describe readers' reactions to constellations of characters. Much as individual characters are frequently foregrounded in many narratives, the novel as such is interested in the lived experience of many fictional beings and their relationships to each other, and it usually confronts readers with scenarios containing multiple characters. A short – and, admittedly, both random and subjective – count of characters in 23 British novels between the nineteenth century and today yields an average of ca. 22 characters per novel, even if the standard appears to have approached ten over the last century.[2] Many late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century novels feature several important focalizers, and some even several homodiegetic narrators; we find embedded intradiegetic narration also occurred in previous centuries. All of this can make it difficult to determine who the protagonist is that the reader is supposed to engage with. The issue here is not merely the numbers of characters that may lay claim to the reader's attention, but the fact that each of them potentially represents a perspective the reader can engage with, as I will explore below. Furthermore, the way that characters are correlated in complex constellations is relevant for understanding the story, beyond our engagement with protagonists.

The theory of Storyworld Possible Selves (henceforth SPSs), which combines insights from cognitive linguistics and social cognition (Martínez 2014, 2018a), replaces assumptions of a reader's wholehearted identification with a character. By detailing how readers can activate different sections of their self-concepts, which they blend with certain perceived aspects of characters (see introduction to this volume and section 3 below), SPS theory offers support for my attempt to reach a more differentiated discussion of narrative engagement. I will take the idea of a *partial* engagement inherent in SPS theory as a cue for proposing a further differentiation that addresses SPSs as potentially distributed across the personnel of a storyworld, which is one way of modelling readers' engagement with multiple characters. At the basis of such necessary differentiations lies the relationship be-

2 I counted characters who act and speak in the novels, or who are extensively spoken about or appear in the thoughts of other characters extensively enough to be mentally represented by readers, leaving out those who are silent, not named except by function, or mentioned only briefly. Though all of this is partly a matter of judgment, which consequentially makes my list subjective, it errs rather in counting *fewer* characters than there are. Here are my results, in rough chronological order: Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*: 26 characters, *Joseph Andrews*: 32; Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*: 20, *Sense and Sensibility*: 26, *Emma*: 16, *Persuasion*: 18; Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*: 36, *Bleak House*: 48, *Dombey and Son*: 54, *Great Expectations*: 26; George Eliot, *Adam Bede*: 21, *Middlemarch*: 25, *The Mill on the Floss*: 28; Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*: 20, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: 32; E.M. Foster, *A Room with a View*: 11, *A Passage to India*: 18; Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*: 16, *Mrs. Dalloway*: 10; Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*: 10, *On Beauty*; 6; *NW*: 6; Ian McEwan, *Atonement*: 11, *Saturday*: 10.

tween readers' engagement with characters and questions of perspectivization. I will reconsider that relationship by differentiating between general and marked forms of both perspectivization and multi-perspectivity, and between perspective taking and perspective construction. However, I will first briefly sketch the way in which the dominant paradigm in the study of character engagement has tended to focus on readers' empathetic or identificatory engagement with single characters, which is usually thought to involve adopting that character's perspective.

2 Studying narrative engagement: The dominant paradigm

Although narrative engagement and character engagement are not conterminous, because there are aspects of a narrative (such as setting, or the aesthetic qualities of the language) that readers can react to without engaging with characters, it makes sense to assume that they frequently co-occur. Two related areas of response have been at the center of cognitive and empirical literary studies. First, readers' sense of getting "lost in a book" (Nell 1988) has been studied intensively as "transportation" into fictional worlds (Gerrig 1993; Green 2004), also called "immersion" (Sestir and Green 2010) or researched under the label "absorption" (Kuijpers et al. 2014; Hakemulder et al. 2017; see Kuijpers et al. 2021 for an overview). Some scholars, such as Busselle and Bilandzic, lump the terms "engaged, transported, or immersed" together (2009, 321), and while they do not mention absorption, they add the term "narrative presence" to refer to "the sensation of being present in a narrative world", which is "due to comprehension processes and perspective taking" (2009, 325). Kuijpers et al. (2014) and Loi et al. (2023) treat the experience of transportation as one aspect among others – emotional engagement, mental imagery, and attention – of readers' absorption. Being somehow mentally 'present' in a narrative world is thus conceived to be largely congruent with transportation or immersion, and, most importantly for my argument, is usually held to be linked with the reader adopting a character's perspective.

In the second focus of current research on narrative engagement, character-related responses have been focused on, mostly under the labels "empathy" (Coplan 2004; Keen 2007, 2013; Koopman 2016) – sometimes differentiated from "sympathy" (Busselle and Bilandzic 2009) – and "identification", a particularly widespread concept (Oatley 1999; Cohen 2001, 2006; Sestir and Green 2010; Kotovych et al. 2011). It has been argued that immersion (or transportation, or absorption) and identification are distinct, but closely related phenomena, the latter

being a special, character-focused version of the more general former kind of experience (Sestir and Green 2010, 276; Kotovych et al. 2011; Forster 2021, 254). Whether immersion in the storyworld is a prerequisite for identification with a character or the other way around, however, is an open question (Forster 2021, 255; Kuijpers, Douglas, and Bálint 2021, 287). In light of these connections, this kind of reading experience can be called 'identificatory and immersive reading' in summary fashion. The double phenomenon has attracted so much attention because it is considered to be very powerful, potentially impacting readers' belief systems, self-concepts, empathy, and social-cognitive abilities (Hakemulder 2000; Green, Strange, and Brock 2002; Slater and Rouner 2002; Hakemulder et al. 2017; Kuzmičová and Bálint 2019; Kuiken and Sopcak 2021; Loi et al. 2023).

The results produced within this – the dominant – paradigm in reader response research seem to be beyond any doubt, given the number of studies conducted in these fields, the fact that the measuring tools employed in empirical studies have been validated, used, and reused, and the fact that the multidisciplinarity of the field highlights the broad relevance of the phenomena investigated.[3] Still, some criticism is also appropriate. First, as the above sketch has indicated, multi-disciplinarity has produced such a range of concepts and terms with partly overlapping and fuzzy definitions that they are in danger of losing their discriminatory power. The metaphors of transportation, absorption, immersion, or presence, or metaphorical descriptions of reading experience – such as being 'in the shoes of' a character or 'seeing the world through a character's eyes' – that abound in studies of immersive and identificatory reading may be intuitively plausible, but they obfuscate the complex and diverse perceptual, cognitive, affective and evaluative processes that underlie the experiences of narrative engagement.[4] Second, the dominant paradigm's tendency to investigate engagement with a single character is unsatisfactory. We need an approach that at

3 Input has come from cognitive narratology, film, media and communication studies, cognitive linguistics including cognitive poetics, cognitive stylistics, and cognitive semiotics, as well as cognitive psychology, social psychology, neurobiology, cognitive anthropology, phenomenology, and philosophy of mind. The variegation in theoretical models, concepts and terms that characterize the discussion is thus not surprising at all.

4 See Dixon and Bortolussi (2023, 26, 58–62, and ch. 4) for a thorough criticism of the way that, in many discussions of narrative engagement, the concepts I have mentioned in this section are frequently confounded; cf. also Martínez (2018a: chapter 1). Martínez summarizes the situation as follows: "All these engagement phenomena – empathy, identification, self-transformation, idiosyncratic resonance – are well-documented by researchers in the psychology of narrative reception and emotional response, but [. . .] their actual operations are seldom specified in terms that make them amenable to linguistic and literary research." (2018b, 255).

least complements the account of engagement with individual characters, as I will demonstrate below.

The merging of self and character in empathy and identification that counts as the most impactful mode of perspective taking shares a family resemblance with the kinds of blends that SPS theory describes, as Alber (2021) has argued. However, the approach really goes beyond this kind of reading experience, since:

> SPS theory is *not* a theory of narrative identification. On the contrary, its pillars in Blending Theory and Self-Schema Theory allow the study of *empathy as just one of the potential emotional responses to narrative experiences* [. . .], resulting from mirror SPS blending [. . .] with a focalizer constructed as similar to the experiencing self in contextually relevant aspects. (Martínez (2025, 232); emphasis added)

Taking my cue from this decoupling of identification and character-related narrative engagement, in the next steps of my argument I claim, first, that all characters in novels offer themselves for the kinds of blends that result in SPS projections, not only protagonists or focalizers; second, the kind of perspective taking usually implied in conceptions of identificatory and immersive reading needs to be differentiated from a form of character engagement in which narrators' and characters' perspectives are recognized and understood without being adopted by the reader. In other words, what I will call perspective *construction* can and will occur without perspective *taking* (3.1). This opens the floor for a discussion of readers' potential engagement with multiple-character scenarios, a phenomenon that has been addressed under the label multiperspectivity, which ought to be revived but also requires a differentiation (3.2).

3 An alternative approach: General vs. marked forms of perspectivization and multiperspectivity, and storyworld possible selves

3.1 Character perspective

Narrative perspective, also called point of view (or viewpoint), has been a central concern of narratology (van Peer and Chatman 2001; Hühn, Schmid and Schönert 2009; Schmid 2010, section III; Niederhoff 2013; Zeman 2018). Narratology holds that the quality and effects of a story are shaped by perspectivization, that is, the spatio-temporal position, personality, and beliefs of the narrator, and/or the characters whose experience is foregrounded, and that every narrative is necessarily perspectivized. Cognitive linguists have likewise shown that all acts of communi-

cation involve perspectivization (Verhagen 2007; Vandelanotte 2017; Langacker 2019). Thus, a ubiquitous form of perspectivized communication exists that we can call *general perspectivization*. Both narratologists and some cognitive linguists (Zeman 2017, 2018) have shown that perspectivization is of particular importance in narratives, because they acquire meaning through the dynamic relations between story and discourse, understood as the ways in which what is presented intricately depends on the perspective from which it is presented.[5] Since focalization is the narrative strategy that can best give access to the perceptual, cognitive, emotional and evaluative constitution and processes of characters – and narrators, if they are either homodiegetic, or overt heterodiegetic narrators – we can circumscribe focalization as *marked perspectivization*. In the narratological tradition, the importance of homodiegetic narration and focalization for character reception has been emphasized, because these modes give access to a fictional being's thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and memories, and are therefore likely to lead to a close relation between reader and character.

Although most current metaphors concerning perspectivization are based on its perceptual aspects, and especially vision, perspective is usually understood to also cover an experiencer's knowledge, feelings, and attitudes. I follow A. Nünning's definition of character perspective, which comprises "the totality of an individual's knowledge and belief sets, intentions, psychological traits, attitudes, ideological stance and system of values and norms that have been internalized" (2001, 211). The spatio-temporally specific perceptual position of the character that is so prominent in the terminology of perspectivization – and so important for most cognitive-linguistic approaches to it – is not mentioned here but should be factored in. Whatever a character says and does in a particular space and time, what they perceive, think, feel, and remember, is intricately linked, and this network can be thought of as their perspective.[6] Dixon and Bortolussi (2023, 17–21) conceive of perspective as a set of a person's or character's evaluations and the justifications of these evaluations based on their knowledge and experiences, which an observer interprets as being sufficiently coherent and general. I take this definition to be congruent with the one I am using here. Niederhoff (2013) maintains that "the mere existence of a character does not imply that his or her perspective is of any importance" (n.p.), his example being that "[i]f we learn that a character is a teenage girl, we can make certain assumptions about her knowledge, her interests, her values, etc. But this only turns into a perspective when we learn about her views of the world around her" (Niederhoff 2013, n.p.).

5 Apart from the narratological contributions mentioned above, cf. the chapters in Igl and Zeman (2016) on this point, and my observations in section 3.2 below.

6 Cf. also Palmer's (2004) notion of the fictional mind, which is closely related, and Hartner's (2012) use of the term in Nünning's sense.

I agree with this assessment and claim that readers have several ways of getting to learn about a character's views of the world around them.

The most obvious invitation to construct a character's perspective appears to lie in linguistically salient focalization, that is, marked perspectivization. However, this is no automatism, as a recent empirical study has indicated (Eekhof et al. 2023);[7] and, what is more, *all* pieces of information a reader can gather on a character – from whatever source: narratorial or figural, self- or altero-characterization, verbal information as well as traits inferred from behavior, among others (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 2010, 30–38, 47–58) – can be used by the reader to assemble a general impression of their perspective. This view is supported by a cognitive approach to the reception of literary characters which states that readers create mental models of characters by integrating various sources of input.[8] That perspective construction does not rely solely on focalization becomes conspicuous when a character is permanently absent and appears 'only' as the object of a narrator's or other characters' focalization or speeches. Take, for instance, Jack Dodds in Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1999), or Kath Peters in Penelope Lively's *The Photograph* (2003):[9] both characters are dead when the respective narratives begin – Jack has died recently, Kath a long time ago. Still, a central point of both novels is that other characters remember different aspects of the deceased, which offers readers piecemeal, often incoherent – or downright contradictory – snippets of heavily subjective information. It is impossible to imagine how readers could make sense of these novels without integrating that information into tolerably coherent mental models of Jack and Kath that construct what they knew, felt (for instance, what they desired or feared), and how they evaluated things; in other words, what their perspective was. Thus, a character does not even have to act in the here and now of the storyworld, let alone be a focalizer, for the reader to be able to (re-)construct that character's perspective. I propose to call the process of assembling information on a character's "views of the world" *perspective construction*.

More support for the claim that we do not need to have the workings of a character's psyche spelled out to us in focalization to construct their perspective comes from proponents of Theory of Mind, mind reading (Goldman 2006) and

7 The study found no support for the hypothesis that readers' use of their social-cognitive abilities is related to the presence of linguistic viewpoint markers. Rather, the authors suggest that "readers rely on their social-cognitive abilities to engage with the inner worlds of fictional others, more so than on the lexical cues of those inner worlds provided by the text". (2023, 411)

8 For versions of this theory, see Culpeper (2000, 2001); Schneider (2001, 2013); Culpeper and Fernandez-Quintanilla (2017); Vaeßen (2021).

9 See Vaeßen and Strasen (2021) for an approach to the construction of a mental character model in *The Photograph*.

other approaches in social cognition. They have shown that our ability to ascribe an inner life – mental states including knowledge, beliefs, or motivations – to other human beings is a basic social skill. Not only do we continually employ that skill in our everyday lives, but we also bring it to our understanding of people in fiction (Palmer 2004; Zunshine 2006). The mental models that can be formed for potentially all characters, be they protagonists or not, will therefore include the construction of their perspective, in a general sense. According to Dixon and Bortolussi (2023), *perspective taking* makes it necessary for the reader to construct analogies not only with regard to a character's evaluation (of a situation, event, or other characters), but also with regard to the character's personal knowledge and experiences as reconstructed from the events in the storyworld. According to Dixon and Bortolussi's definition, perspective taking is thus a special experience of strong analogy between reader and character.[10] Given the numbers of characters in novels, there must be more cases in which we observe and understand a character's evaluations and their justifications emerging from storyworld events, without being able, willing, or required to construct those strong analogies.

Many scholars have differentiated between two different kinds of engagement with characters. Caracciolo (2014, 110–132) suggests speaking of consciousness-attribution – which is close to Theory of Mind – on the one hand, and consciousness-enactment, on the other, the latter referring to the immediate, embodied "merging of reader's story-driven experience and of the experience attributed to the character" (Caracciolo 2014, 123), which occurs "when a story gives sustained attention to a character's experience" (Caracciolo 2014, 125). In a similar vein, Koopman (2016, 18), referring to work in Philosophy of Mind and Psychology, differentiates between "'affective' (or 'warm') and 'cognitive' (or 'cold') empathy," the cognitive variety referring to an observer's ability to understand someone else's perspective, and the emotional one referring to emotions felt to be similar to those of another person. She also compares cognitive empathy to Theory of Mind, and affective empathy to emotional contagion, that is, "the automatic mimicking and experiencing of someone's emotional state" (Koopman 2016, 19), and emphasizes that the two types frequently interact. V. Nünning (2014) also regards a cognitive mode of understanding and pursuing a

10 Analogy is not the only prompt for character engagement, though, because disanalogy can also prompt a strong cognitive-emotional reaction to a character. Du Bois' (2007) stance triangle differentiates between convergent (i.e., analogical) and divergent (i.e., disanalogical) perspectival alignment in communication; Martínez (2018a, ch. 2) refers to this model and connects it to Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) mirror and double-scope blending: a reader may feel a strong disanalogy with a character and create a double-scope self-schema SPS blend. The avoidance of perspective taking – in Dixons and Bortolussi's (2023) conception of the term – requires further research.

characters' thoughts and feelings as different from an affective kind of sharing of the characters emotions. She makes a strong argument for a reading stance in which the reader is *aware* of the character's perspective but does not adopt or get lost in it (V. Nünning 2014, 238–241). Variations in approach and terminology apart, the point of these differentiations is that not every engagement with the perspectivization a text offers – what I call perspective construction – needs to result in actual perspective taking of an empathic, identificatory and immersive kind. I contend that perspective construction is just as important for novel-reading as the more engaged, emotional, form that relates the reader strongly to one character via perspective taking.[11]

3.2 Storyworld possible selves, analogies, and perspective construction

Like many other approaches to narrative engagement, the theory of SPSs originally highlighted the importance of marked perspectivization that is manifest in (linguistically salient) focalization. According to the original design of the theory, storyworld possible selves (SPSs) are the result of blending operations that integrate two mental input spaces, namely "the mental representation that readers entertain of themselves, which in social-psychology is known as the *self-concept*, with its constituent networks of *self-schemas* [. . .] and possible selves [. . .]" (Martínez 2018a, 20; italics in the original) and "the mental representation that readers build for the intradiegetic perspectivizing entity, that is, one with ontological existence inside the narrating situation, be it a focalizer [. . .] or the narrator" (Martínez 2018a, 19–20). Recently however, Martínez added another category, stating that "*character SPSs* are to be distinguished from character-focalizer SPSs in that the former involve linking matches with a character construct built for a non-focalizing narrative entity" (Martínez 2025, 232, italics in the original). Blending is based on the existence – or, indeed, construction – of some sort of underlying analogy (the generic space) between the two input spaces, which allows them to be blended into an emergent space. Analogy is also the backbone of Dixon and Bortolussi's (2023) recent contribution to the study of perspective taking.[12] Both approaches share the advantages that, on the one hand, instead of metaphorically naming the *experience* of character engagement, they propose models of the un-

11 I would therefore not adopt the binary of 'cold vs. warm' empathy, because, on the grounds of a basic conceptual metaphor, the implication is that the 'warm' variety is somehow better than the 'cold' one.

12 The fact that Dixon and Bortolussi also speak of source and target domains (the reader's experiential background and knowledge, and the character's life as constructed by the reader, respec-

derlying mental operations, and, on the other, they acknowledge that character-related engagement is often tentative, partial, and shifting. Both approaches also allow the assumption that SPS blends and other kinds of analogies can be activated for any of the characters in a novel.

The major types of SPSs that result from the blends produced in reading are (Martínez 2018a, 124–133): a) *self-schema SPS*, involving perceived similarity between oneself and the character; b) *past possible self SPS*, involving a match between a character and oneself in a past stage; c) *desired possible self SPS*, emerging when the character has traits one hopes to have oneself; d) *undesired possible self SPS*, the opposite of the previous type; finally, readers will integrate past reading experiences into their self-concepts, which may result in what Martínez (2014, 125–127; 2018a, 132–133) calls *past SPSs*. However, on the basis of the above considerations, I suggest that multiple characters in one narrative can offer the reader not only opportunities for such blends but also aspects of the characters that resonate with them in some way.

An example can illustrate this. Reading Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1815), a reader may establish an *undesired possible self SPS* in relation to the main focalizer, Emma, whose love for matchmaking and lack of social tact are likely to evoke a distancing feeling in the reader. If readers have perhaps displayed some tactlessness in their past lives, a *past possible self SPS* with a strong negative ring to it may result from the way they perceive Emma; the shame Emma feels being told off by Mr. Knightley for snubbing Miss Bates during the Box Hill outing is likely to be a powerful reminder of the times readers were held accountable for an injustice they committed towards others.[13] At the same time, beside these SPS blends related to Emma, what would stop a reader who has perhaps been clumsy in their wooing for someone from performing a blend in which a (shameful) past version of themselves matches with this aspect of Mr. Elton? In another phase of their lives, they may have been persuaded by peers not to engage in a relationship with a person who was not 'good enough', and therefore activate yet another *past possible self SPS* in a blend with Harriet Smith. It is very likely, too, that the

tively), which get mapped onto each other (2023, 35), indicates the compatibility of their approach with Martínez' use of blending theory.

13 I believe that this specific quality of a past possible self SPS, which might be termed the 'shamed past possible self SPS' plays a major role in literary reading that has not been acknowledged enough. We tend to remember the social blunders, moments of selfishness, and injustice towards others keenly and painfully from our past, and many novels, since they usually present less-than-perfect characters, are likely to remind us of our own imperfections. As indicated in footnote 10 above, the phenomenon of avoidant reception might prove a fruitful field of further investigation in cognitive and empirical literary studies.

same reader may acknowledge Mr. Knightley's maturity and moral impeccability and construct a *desired possible self SPS* with that character. Finally, many readers are likely to harbor anxieties about being under financial and social constraints that prevent them from acting according to their wishes, so that an *undesired possible self SPS* in connection with Jane Fairfax may result.[14] This brief example implies that I consider the self-schemata and variants of possible selves activated for SPS blends in terms of *the self in relation to others*, an issue to which I will return in the next section. Here, my point is that our past experiences and knowledge are likely to resonate with us even partially and distributed across the multiple characters of an extended narrative.

3.3 Marked and general types of multiperspectivity

While, according to Zeman (2017, 2018) the mere duality of the level of narration and the level of the characters provides all narratives with a basic multiplicity of perspectives, Hartner (2014, 358–360) points out that some theoreticians consider only marked cases as 'true' multiperspectivity. These are narratives in which the differences and frictions between prominent viewpoints and their potential irreconcilability are foregrounded. A particularly strong variety is achieved through instances of multiple focalization, in which one event is successively rendered through various focalizers (Genette 1980 [1972], 190). However, what I propose to call marked multiperspectivity can also be observed, for instance, in the epistolary novel, in novels with multiple homodiegetic narrators, and in other arrangements where events are rendered by different observers in stretches of intradiegetic narrative, diary entries or other documents, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), to name two classical examples. In *Last Orders* and *The Photograph*, mentioned

14 Martínez differentiates between primary SPSs, which are highly predictable for a particular community of readers, and more idiosyncratic secondary or 'slipnet' SPSs (Martínez 2018a, 170–171). The potential SPSs I have just listed are likely to belong to that latter category, but they are no less important for the processes of meaning construction. To what extent the reader's gender influences their SPS construction is an interesting question that requires empirical study. I assume that female readers can develop a desired possible self SPS in relation to Mr. Knightley, if they construct that character's integrity as a predominant trait, not his gender; vice versa, male readers may understand enough about social constraints to construct an undesired possible self SPS with Jane Fairfax. One attraction of SPS theory is that the reader's personality traits need not be congruent with that of the character; otherwise, factors such as differences in class, education, first language, bodily constitution, etc. would prevent character engagement just as much as gender.

above, the differences and sometimes incompatibility between the various living characters' characterizations of the deceased persons is emphasized. Narratologists have concentrated on marked cases of multiperspectivity, where the discrepancies between the perspectives are the central theme, for their potential effects. If close relations have been established between readers and characters, they acquire additional complexity, and are potentially disturbed, when readers recognize the limitedness of the perspective of a character they have engaged with, after the viewpoints of other characters or the narrator contradict or adjust that character's perspective. Such recognition may also trigger epistemological insights into the potential subjectivity of worldviews.

In contrast to the marked form, I take *general multiperspectivity* in the novel to consist in the presence of multiple, at least potentially or partly conflicting, views of the world, aims and motivations, wishes and fears of characters in a narrative. These worldviews account for the quality of the relations between characters. The phenomenon was famously addressed (albeit through other metaphors than visual ones) in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984 [1963]; 1981 [1975]), who describes the novel as inherently 'dialogic', 'polyphonic', or 'heteroglossic' (cf. Hartner 2014), emphasizing the unavoidable differences between viewpoints ('voices') of characters, narrators, addressees, and authors that result from their respective ideologies and social positions.[15] Many other approaches have supported the view that the overall meaning of a narrative emerges from the underlying fabric of the relationships between the characters – protagonists and minor characters – and their potentially diverging motivations, from early functionalist approaches and actant models (Propp 1984 [1928]; Greimas1983 [1966]) to more recent investigations of what I call general multiperspectivity. Woloch (2003), for instance, argues that, in a novel, many characters 'jostle for space' – and, concomitantly, the readers' attention to the themes they represent – and that minor characters are centrally involved in 'character systems' that bring out the thematic structure of the narrative.

The important point for my argument is that, although all individual characters (and narrators) possess a perspective – in the general sense of perspectivization – which readers can construct without adopting it, narratives really need to be studied in terms of the constellation of perspectives that they feature, and the relations between them. Narratologists have called this narrative's 'structure of

15 Zeman (2018, 191–193) differentiates between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' multiperspectivity. Horizontal multiperspectivity includes differences between perspectivizers on the same level of a narrative, that is, mostly between the characters. Vertical multiperspectivity consist in contrasts between perspectivizers on different narrative levels, that is, between narrators and characters.

perspectives' (A. Nünning 2001; A. Nünning and V. Nünning 2000). The relationality of perspectives is not only in the nature of the novel, but also in the nature of the human mind. Evolutionary biology considers our ability to monitor the behavior not only of single other humans, but of groups of others, and to grasp the complexity of social constellations, an asset in the survival of the human species. It has been argued that storytelling may have developed to train these skills (Zunshine 2006; Boyd 2009; Auyoung 2018; among others). In the wake of the recent success of approaches to embodied, or 4e-cognition, it may also be useful to remind ourselves that the social is a central aspect of 4e-cognition: the mind develops as *socially* embodied, *socially* embedded, *socially* extended, and *socially* enactive (Johnson 2008, 165–166). There is no reason to believe that the social and relational constitution of the human mind is not active in engaging with narratives that deal with complex social relations.

Work in cognitive linguistics (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2016; Zeman 2017) and cognitive narratology (Palmer 2004; Hartner 2012) has shown that readers are able to integrate multiple viewpoints into a coherent representation of the whole narrative; the underlying cognitive principle assumed to achieve this is blending, as in Martínez' SPS theory. In the cognitive-linguistic version, narrator and character viewpoints can be hierarchically embedded, lower-level character viewpoints usually being compressed to be contained in the higher-level narrative viewpoint; in the cognitive-narratological one, the emphasis is on the semantic surplus value of the blend, which emerges from the alignment of two (or more) perspectives, such as the overall impression of different attitudes towards a person or event; the blending network here sheds light on the interaction of perspectives, rather than their embedment. The 'mere presence' of many characters in novels may give rise to multiperspectivity of the general kind, with which the reader is likely to be able and willing to engage. This is what I consider to be the backbone of novel reading. As literary psychologists have phrased it, "literary narratives fundamentally deal with relationships among individuals and the navigation of conflicting desires" (Mar and Oatley 2008, 174).[16]

16 The title of Mar and Oatley's (2008) paper is "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience", which neatly sums up the point I am making.

4 Further theorizing and testing multiple-character engagement

The approaches I have touched upon so far, some of which use blending theory, offer themselves for such a more differentiated conceptualization, but there are other candidates. Scholars have investigated the mental construction of space in narrative as *social* space, where characters meet and interact, and cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics have turned to contextual frame theory (Emmott 2003; Stockwell 2020 [2002], 189–200) to focus on the physical presence of characters in a current scene. Since a comprehensive cognitive theory must observe "the balance of textually-presented and cognitively inferred information that a reader uses to construct narrative contexts" (Emmott 2003, 296), other models that account for how readers mentally arrange characters that are currently not in textual focus must be added.

Neurobiological evidence, for instance, suggests that we use brain areas involved in spatial navigation also for mentally arranging social relations (Tavares et al. 2015; Shafer and Schiller 2018). Taking this as a prompt to inquire into the spatial mental representation of character constellations, we conducted a pilot study in which we asked readers to talk about a novel they had recently read, placing them in front of a constellation board and a set of (differently shaped and colored) wooden figurines of the kind used in some forms of systemic psychotherapy. Without being instructed how to use the materials, participants spontaneously started arranging the figurines on the board, labelling them with the names – or sometimes merely the roles or functions – of the characters they remembered. They made use of spatial dimensions such as closeness, distance and grouping to express the quality of the relationships between them, using the center of the board for the protagonist(s) and the surrounding spaces to place the representatives of minor characters; the board was also covered with a sheet of paper on which they could write further specifications of how characters were related, and most comments focused on conflicting aims and motivations. I take this as strong evidence that we apply conceptual metaphors, image schemas and force dynamics to make sense of social relations in fictional worlds, as some scholars have suggested (Kimmel 2009, 2011; Caracciolo and Kukkonen, 2021, ch. 6). The procedure needs a more systematic, less playful replication to really count as a fully-fledged empirical study, and it had some other shortcomings: participants indicated that they would need a three-dimensional space – which, however, supports the neurobiological evidence – and they stated that one ought to use the constellation board at different times in the reading, because their understanding of the constellations changed dynamically. However, it might be a prom-

ising starting point for indirect, qualitative investigations of readers engagement with multiple perspectives in the novel.

5 Conclusion and outlook

In this chapter, I have proposed some differentiations that may be helpful in assessing the different and potentially overlapping forms of character-related engagement with narrative. The characters in a novel approach their world individually through their senses, and on the basis of their cognitive, emotional, and evaluative dispositions, which is to say, their individual perspectives. All characters' utterances and actions are therefore perspectivized (general perspectivization). Novels usually foreground some characters' perspectives through focalization, that is, they employ marked perspectivization, which is likely to evoke that kind of strong engagement with single characters that has been called perspective taking. However, readers can potentially construct the perspectives of *all* characters, if they can assemble information on their views of the world, and potentially blend aspects of their self-concept as well as present and past possible selves with those of the characters in question. Dixon and Bortolussi (2023, ch. 6) list "multiple perspective taking targets" among the "challenges to perspective taking," and explain that:

> [i]n most fiction, characters interact with each other and with their surroundings, form inferences to produce assessments and judgments, including of themselves, and attribute motivations, desires, feelings, and causality. Such complexities place enormous cognitive demands on readers, who must not only track all shifting perspectives but also remember who said what to whom when and for what reason, a potentially overwhelming task of perspectival bookkeeping [. . .]. (Dixon and Bortolussi 2023, 165)

It is true that it seems difficult to take only one characters' perspective and deal with those complexities at the same time. However, my twofold argument is that the challenge appears less daunting in view of the fact that, first, the human mind is equipped with fundamental skills for making sense of the complexity offered by different and frequently conflicting perspectives of multiple individuals, and that, second, the social and relational nature of the novel with its general multiperspectivity of character constellations is likely to trigger perspective construction, but not necessarily perspective taking. Dixon and Bortolussi (2023, 165) go on to say that "[h]ow such complex fiction affects our elaboration of the story world requires further empirical attention." I believe that some more theoretical conceptualization is necessary before more empirical testing can be done, because the social, relational and multiperspectival aspects of narrative engagement must be better integrated into a theory of narrative engagement than has been the case.

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