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Why do we read sad books? Eudaimonic motives and meta-emotions

Eva Maria (Emy) Koopman *

Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

While it is commonsensical that we read stories to generate pleasant emotions (enjoyment), the fact that we also read stories which generate sadness had been deemed more puzzling. Recent studies have stressed the potential role of "eudaimonic" (meaning-making) motives in preferences for sad media, particularly sad films. The current survey study ($N = 343$) explored the role meaning-making motives (insight and personal growth) play in a preference for sad books relative to other motives, like catharsis beliefs and wanting to experience emotions (meta-emotions). The study also took into account gender and age. Results indicate that both meaning-making motives and meta-emotions predict a preference for sad books. This pattern was compared to preferences for specific book genres. A preference for thrillers was associated with meta-emotions, while a preference for poetry was associated with a need for insight. However, no specific genre was associated with both meta-emotions and insight. As sad books appear to address both needs for feeling and meaning-making, they serve a unique function for readers.

1. Introduction

> I climbed the stairs of the inn first and went into the room. The fire was not out, but there were no flames. I lit a candle quickly. I was surprised not to hear any sound from Pretty-Heart. I found him, lying under his coverlets, stretched out his full length, dressed in his general's uniform. He appeared to be asleep. I leaned over him and took his hand gently to wake him up. His hand was cold. Vitalis came into the room. I turned to him.
>
> "Pretty-Heart is cold," I said.
> My master came to my side and also leaned over the bed.
> "He is dead," he said. "It was to be. Ah, Remi, boy, I did wrong to take you away from Mrs. Milligan. I am punished. Zerbino, Dulcie, and now Pretty-Heart and ... this is not the end!"
>
> Malot, 1878, chapter XIV, gutenberg.org

Many of those who have read Hector Malot's *Nobody's Boy* [1878] when they were young, must vividly remember this scene in which Remi recounts the death of Vitalis' beloved monkey Joli-Coeur. Like *Nobody's Boy*, countless popular and acclaimed literary works include scenes of suffering, from the tragedies of Sophocles to the dark, violent universe of Cormac

* Correspondence to: Zweedsestraat 55-C, 3028 TL, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 104088890; fax: +31 104089135.
E-mail address: e.koopman@eshcc.eur.nl

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McCarthy. Given this unremitting popularity of sad narratives, these stories appear to satisfy certain human needs. Finding out what these needs are may tell us something fundamental about human experience and the intricacy of our media preferences. Why do we expose ourselves to stories about suffering, stories that make us sad, that make us cry?

This "tragic paradox" or "drama paradox" has gripped the attention of scholars ever since Aristotle's *Poetics*, but in recent years it has received renewed scrutiny in the fields of empirical aesthetics and media psychology (e.g., Hanich, Wagner, Shah, Jacobson, & Menninghaus, 2014; Kim & Oliver, 2011; Koopman, 2013; Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). Most of these studies concern sad films. To get a fuller idea of people's attraction to sad stories, it is relevant to also look into other sad narrative media. The current article focuses on the function of sad books, i.e. narratives about tragic events composed as written, verbal texts of a substantive length (implying, among other things, that people have to form their own mental images). In order to identify potential psychological motives that predict why some readers have a preference for sad books, I draw on theories and insights from media psychology as well as from empirical literary studies. In the selective theoretical overview given below, a gradual shift can be observed from potentially more "hedonic" (i.e., pleasure-oriented) functions of consuming sad stories to more "eudaimonic" (i.e., meaning-oriented) functions (cf. Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). Pleasure and meaning-making are not polar opposites (cf. Oliver & Bartsch, 2010); we can argue for a pleasure in meaning-making. However, I will follow Oliver (2003, 2008) in emphasizing the importance of distinguishing "eudaimonic" motives, since media preferences have in the past too often been explained within a hedonic framework that stresses a largely affective type of pleasure without much deeper meaning. Such a framework seems insufficient in explaining our attraction to tragic narratives. After discussing various explanations for a sad story preference, their relative predictive importance is explored through a survey study among 343 readers.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Mood management

According to mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988, 2000), the traditional, emotion-based approach to media consumption, our reasons for seeking out certain media are hedonic: we want to regulate arousal levels, maximizing pleasure and minimizing discomfort. At first view, mood management theory only explains a preference for cheerful media, especially when one's initial mood is negative, and a preference for thrilling media when one is bored (cf. "sensation seeking," Zuckerman, 1994).[1] Yet, Tannenbaum and Zillmann (1975) proposed that sad stories with happy endings would also fit with this general idea, due to "excitation transfer" (cf. Zillmann, 2003). The excitation-transfer theory posits the following mechanism: we feel distress when liked characters are disadvantaged, but the greater this evoked distress (or: arousal), the greater also our positive response to an eventual happy ending, as arousal is interpreted as either positive or negative affect in accordance with our current situation. However, empirical support as well as the logical basis for excitation-transfer is fickle, as the positive emotions experienced at the end of a continuously sad story may not be sufficient "reward" for people to endure hours of feeling bad (cf. Oliver, 1993).

Moreover, as Oliver (1993) has pointed out, excitation-transfer theory has trouble explaining why we consume stories with purely tragic plots, in which things only get worse and there's no redeeming happy end. It is also unlikely that we read these kinds of stories because we are too happy. In fact, empirical evidence indicates that sad media tend to be selected by those who are already sad (e.g., Dillman Carpentier et al., 2008; Kim & Oliver, 2011). Thus, sad stories pose a problem for the hedonic explanation that mood management theory provides: a "drama paradox" (Oliver, 1993, 2008; Zillmann, 1998).

Still, within the general framework of mood management theory, we can identify the potential function of catharsis beliefs. In chapter VI of his *Poetics*, Aristotle proposed that through arousing intense emotions like "fear" (*phobos*), tragedies would accomplish the "purgation" (*katharsis*) of such emotions (translation: Butcher, 1951). Whether the most appropriate translation of *katharsis* is really "purgation" is debatable (cf. Nussbaum, 1986), but the dominant translation of this small passage has led to the assumption that simply experiencing certain emotions through a mimetic medium could lead to alleviation. This so-called "catharsis hypothesis" has largely failed to be confirmed in empirical studies of media violence: generally, when exposed to a violent stimulus, people tend to become more agitated (Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999;). Regarding sadness and reading, however, the catharsis hypothesis has not sufficiently been studied (Koopman, 2013). In either case, for certain readers, the belief that having a good cry will make them feel cleansed afterwards could be a motive to select sad stories and one that appears consistent with the hedonic assumptions of mood management theory.

2.2. Liking to feel

Another emotion-based explanation for the attraction of sad stories is the idea of "meta-emotions" (e.g., Oliver, 1993). "Meta-emotions" refers to the affective response one has about one's primary mood or emotion (see originally Mayer & Gaschke, 1988; for an overview, see Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold, & Viehoff, 2008). Independent of the pleasantness of the primary emotion, meta-emotions themselves can be either positive (e.g., feeling glad about feeling angry) or negative (e.g.,

[1] Empirical evidence generally supports mood management theory when it comes to preferences for joyful and exciting media (for an overview, see Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006).