

Workshop: Empathy, Understanding, and Appreciation

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Empathy with the victim – or the perpetrator? Abbas Khider's "Ohrfeige" and the reader's change of perspective

In the last two decades, philosophers like Amy Coplan, Gregory Currie, Suzanne Keen or Jenefer Robinson claimed that it is possible – at least in principle – to empathize with fictional characters (whatever their ontological status might be). Some of them, among them most prominently Jenefer Robinson, hold the more ambitious view that emotional engagement is even necessary for an understanding of fictional characters, with empathic emotions being the most promising candidates for the emotional engagement in question. Nevertheless, the claim that empathic emotions are necessary for an understanding (or at least a better understanding) of fictional characters turns out to be hard to support. In my opinion, the only way to prove (or refute) this thesis is to look at specific literary texts and to investigate the role of empathic emotions not in an abstract way, but with regards to one or more particular examples.

Therefore, I will take a closer look at Abbas Khider's "Ohrfeige" ("Slap in the Face"), a novel about the young Iraqi Karim applying for asylum in Germany at the turn of the millennium. I will try to show that empathic emotions are highly relevant for a proper understanding of this character (and therefore of the text as a whole), not only because the author seems to intend the arousal of sometimes very contradictory emotional responses, but especially because the text forces the reader to shift her empathic reactions – and therefore to change her perspective – towards the characters and subjects presented in the text. In my view, understanding and empathic emotions go hand in hand and could be conceived of as some kind of "hermeneuticempathic circle": The reader's prior empathic reaction alters while she learns and understands more about Karim's background, his fears and wishes. This modification of the reader's emotional engagement gives rise to a better understanding of Karim's actions and motives in turn, which once again results in another adjustment of her empathic feelings, and so on. So in my opinion, at least in this specific case empathic emotions and the associated change of perspective enhance the reader's understanding of the main character and his actions, which results not only in a better understanding of the novel as a whole, but (hopefully) also of the real world and especially of real individuals with related problems and in a comparable situation.