

Literature and the Mind (An Introduction)

Igor Žunkovič

Literature not only recounts authentic narratives about our historical, social, and environmental contexts, but also delves deeply into these settings. Primarily situated within the realm of the human mind, it offers a profound exploration of our collective experiences and surroundings. From the earliest texts, we find in literature a striving for the higher, the transcendent. Psychology and psychoanalysis began scientific research into the human psyche a century ago, and at the end of the twentieth century, literary studies embarked on the path of research into the relationship between literature and the mind with psychonarratology and cognitive narratology.

On the other hand, we have known since Plato that literature influences the reader. For some it means inspiration, for others consolation, and for others entertainment. Teachers observe, and scientific research confirms, that children who read more have better academic results, while cognitive research even shows that readers of literature are more empathetic and better able to understand the thoughts, intentions, and feelings of others.

Literature and the mind thus interact on several levels, on the level of literary figures, genres, literary style, but also on the level of readers, feelings, empathic experience, and thought. Finally, many scholars recognize the significant social contribution of literature precisely because of its insight into the human psyche. The interpretation of the inner, mental life of literary characters, their feelings, (often illusory) expectations and intentions that guide their actions, is one of the fundamental aspects not only of academic literary studies but also of literary reading in general. This opens up two problem areas—the psyche of literary characters and the experiences of readers—which, in the light of modern literary theory are different but deeply interwoven and mutually dependent problems.

In their groundbreaking book *Psychonarratology*, Marissa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon assume that readers construct literary characters with the same cognitive mechanisms they use to experience people in their everyday lives. On the one hand, this premise is understandable as it is based on cognitive psychological and philosophical findings since

the 1990s; on the other hand, literary theory continues to distinguish between author, implicit author, narrator, literary character, implicit reader, and reader as different instances within the literary discourse. A superficial equation of the psyche of literary figures with the psyche of readers is therefore just as problematic as making hasty connections between them.

The thematic section “Literature and the Mind” is therefore dedicated to researching the psyche in literature and literature in the mind from the perspective of current aspects of literary theory, in particular cognitive, psychoanalytical and phenomenological aspects. However, theoretical considerations in literary studies are always supplemented by interpretative and analytical readings of literary texts, through which they are evaluated and scrutinized. A further type of text in this subject area consists of analyses of the thematic characteristics of selected literary texts that deal with mental illness and the complex confrontations of literary characters with illness and suffering. These questions already concern literary ethics and, above all, considerations on the role of literature in therapeutic processes, psychiatry, and bibliotherapy.

From a psychiatric perspective, **Borut Škodlar** and **Martin Peter Kastelic** deal with questions of the relationship between literature, the psyche, and psychiatry. They are interested in autobiography as a genre with transformative potential which they analyze through the distinction between ipsity and identity, whereby they understand the latter primarily as the basis of autofiguration. Their narratological analysis of the self-narrative shows possibilities of identity construction with the question of the reliability or unreliability of autobiographical narration taking center stage. They note that it is important for psychiatry to distinguish between the narrating and the narrated self or ego, which not only allows the reader to recognize and understand certain psychological states of literary characters, but also enables “reflection and processing” or, as they say, “mentalization [...] of one’s own life.”

Davor Piskač analyses the positive use of literature in therapeutic processes in a similar way. The starting point for his considerations is systems theory and the concept of conceptual metaphor as an emotional conceptual metaphor. He understands the latter as symbolically produced media that serve to communicate between different areas such as literature and psychology. At the center of his analysis is the insight that literary bibliotherapy can address the reader’s psyche, its growth, and stability by exploring the emotional experiences of literary characters through the analysis of emotional conceptual metaphors.

Vanesa Matajc examines the aspects of Florijan Lipuš novel *Boštjanov let* (Boštjan's Flight) that could also be addressed in psychiatric or bibliotherapeutic readings. She sheds light on a traumatic event from the protagonist's childhood that leads to a specific narrative construction of his identity, which primarily follows a single symbolic motif from Slovenian mythology. By analyzing the "literary structuring of common basic human experiences," the author demonstrates the power that literature can exert on the individual and his ability to exist and experience.

From the point of view of literary theory, there is certainly a plethora of approaches that analyze the psyche of literary figures and even authors in relation to their texts and fictional literary figures. One of these traditions is literary psychoanalysis, which is represented in this thematic selection by **Katalin Ludmán** with her analysis of the Hungarian author Péter Hajnóczy. She highlights two of his short stories, "The Stoker" and "The Blood Donor," which have similar thematic starting points—a critique of bureaucracy and the individual's struggle to assert himself in society. Both are written in a documentary style and function as "case studies" of the protagonists' delusions. The author compares the psychoanalytical content of the texts on the one hand with their autobiographical aspects, which relate to mental illness, and on the other with their potential therapeutic role, particularly in a psychiatric context.

Alojzija Zupan Sosič analyses the representation of illness in contemporary Slovenian novels. She focuses on the social meaning of illness, i.e. on the analogous relationship between illness and the social world described in the novels (capitalism, cultural memory). The thematisation of addiction is not only linked to the author's autobiography, but also to the environment in which addiction exists as a phenomenon, be it as a stigma or as structural discrimination. She sees the multi-perspectivity or polysemy of the illness as a special quality of all the novels discussed, which moves from the diagnosis of an individual psychophysical condition to the diagnosis of a social problem.

Robert Smid continues the analysis from a social perspective of the psyche, drawing methodologically on Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction and, in part, feminist theories, when he examines the representation of the monstrous in cases of classical English literature such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. First, he defines the monstrous as something elusive, borderline, existing between everything and nothing, essentially transcendent. Furthermore, he particularly emphasizes the image/trope of the

mother (and consequently the father), which is symbolically present in both texts. The image of the mother not only peels back the layers of monstrous femininity, but also enables a thematic exploration of the unnatural conception of life. From this perspective, both analyses are ultimately united in the concept of hybridity as a paradoxical indicator of the limits of binarity.

In a similar way, **Vesna Kondrič Horvat** demonstrates the monstrous in literature in her examination of Fritz Zorn's *Mars*. The monstrous isn't only the disease that devours the protagonist's body, but also the society that causes this disease. It's no longer about the analogy between the illness of the individual and the illness of society, but about the question of society's responsibility towards the individual—an analysis of the way in which society makes the individual ill. After a long period of depression and doubt, the protagonist finds relief in the monstrous malignant lymphoma. If the socially induced neurosis has caused the cancer that the protagonist could not find a place for, then the realization that something else, something alien is growing inside the individual, something that will “devour and destroy” him, could actually be liberating.

In her contribution on the expression of sadness in contemporary picture books, **Mateja Pezdirc Bartol** addresses one of the most topical issues in cognitive literary studies, namely the question of emotion in literature. Emotions, as emphasized in Piskač's contribution, form the core of the effect that literary texts have on readers. This is particularly important when it comes to very young readers, for whom picture books are intended. Therefore, the author's observation that picture books play a crucial role in introducing children to a wide range of emotions is significant, especially because sadness is expressed in them bimodally, i.e. through both verbal and visual communication. In this respect, the analysis is closely related to the findings of cognitive literary studies, which emphasize the visual nature of human perception and the crucial role that the visual images presented in picture books play in their understanding.

The final analysis in this thematic section deals directly with the topic that is touched upon at least in fragments in all other studies: the relationship between literature and ethics. **Ana Medvešček** adopts the Finnish comparatist Hanne Meretoja's classification of three types of ethical potential in literary texts and uses it to construct her own model for analyzing prose texts. The author believes that it is possible to define the influence of specific narrative techniques on the ethical potential of a text and to apply it meaningfully to its analysis and interpretation.

The validity of such an approach is tested by analyzing Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Vitomil Zupan's *Klement*.

The range of topics presented here could by no means cover the entire field of research opened up by the thematic exploration of various relationships between literature and the mind. However, it should at least shed light on the fundamental current paths of this research, which in retrospect, when their contribution to literary studies and comparative literature becomes clearer, can really be evaluated historically. What we have before us, then, is not a map, but a signpost by which we can recognize the current lines of research into the meaning and literary role of various aspects of the psyche, such as emotions, illness, thought, experience, and others as well as the methods and theories used. It seems that there are more and more considerations that evaluate not only the ethical-theoretical but also the practical aspects, especially the therapeutic and pedagogical-didactic use of literature, with psychoanalysis and cognitive literary studies forming the theoretical basis. On the other hand, the focus is on the thematisation of illness, both the role of physiological illnesses for the mental states of the protagonists and the mental illnesses themselves.