

Literary Consciousness: Fictional Minds, *Real* Implications

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Does Hamlet have a big toe?
N. Holland.

1. Fictional minds/real people.

Are literary characters human beings? Do they have a consciousness, an identity, a past and a future? Do they inhabit real worlds? Do they perform real actions and engage in real communication? The obvious first answer is no, they are just imaginary constructions, phantoms of our brains, verbal holograms with no matter. And yet, fictional minds share many of the features that real humans possess and their behavior mimic human interactions.

Whenever we stop to ponder literary consciousness, several questions permeate our thoughts: How can the study of fictional characters help us understand real minds? What is the dynamic that exists between those characters and the readers who follow their adventures? What are the functions and implications of such a dynamic? What conclusions can we draw for the study of the literary phenomenon out of the character-reader connection? How can those conclusions help us build a more comprehensive theory of literature? These are some of the challenges that we literary scholars face.

2. Literary “humanness”

Let us think of the characteristics that both real and fictional minds have in common. I will employ the term “humanness” to convey those features which, by virtue of mimesis, are both humanoid (as applied to characters) and human (as found in real

beings). We will begin by considering three of the main elements that shape the human mind:

1. Consciousness: the faculty of being aware of our own organism.
2. Theory of mind: the ability to recognize other individuals' minds as distinct from our own.
3. *Ecodialogical* context: the immersion of the human organism in the natural and social world that surrounds it, as well as the dynamic exchanges that take place among human beings.

Literary characters clearly exhibit those three main human principles. They have a consciousness, an awareness of their own selves, of their own minds. Just like humans, they can exhibit a wide range of consciousness states: they may be awake or dreaming like Segismundo in Calderón's *Life is a Dream*; they may have a moment of mental clarity, like Prince Myshkin in from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* before he suffers a seizure. They also have a theory of mind. Not only they are able to recognize their own selves, but they can also acknowledge the existence of other individuals' minds, and the benefits or dangers that those minds may entail. Finally, they are immersed in the context, both physical and social, that constitutes their fictional world, and they carry out a number of interactions with other characters.

After agreeing on these affinities, we may observe that the three "humanness" features that both real and fictional minds share operate at two levels: a microcosm (the fictional world, in which characters are embedded and interact) and a macrocosm (the real world, in which readers live).

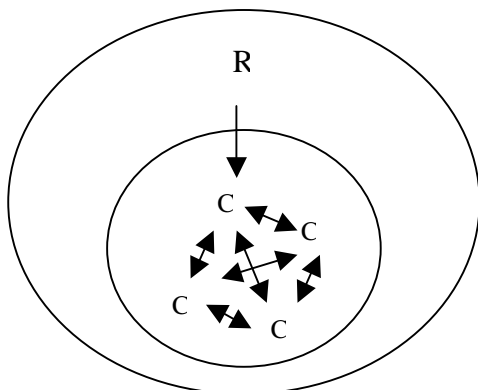


Figure 1. The figure shows the two levels at which literature functions. The outer circle symbolizes the *real* world in which the reader (R) is immersed, whereas the inner one represents the *literary* world in which the characters interact with one another¹.

It is precisely at the intersection of those two levels, the fictional and the real, in the dynamics between the symbolic human activity of literature and the embodied minds that engage in literary interaction, where we might be able to find the key to the meaning of the literary phenomenon. In their journey from the brain of the author and the processes involved in creativity to the reader's response, while traversing the world of the characters, literary scholars must consider all the perspectives and employ all the resources available to them. A wide range of fields, such as those grouped under the label "cognitive sciences" (psychology, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, philosophy, linguistics, etc.) and the latest technology developed for the study of the mind in action (brain imaging) are the critics' telescopic and microscopic lenses, the instruments that will facilitate their circular top-down/bottom-up understanding of the relationship between the human mind and its symbolic production, and, ultimately, the understanding of human cognition.

Let us concentrate on one of the "humanness" features that might be of special relevance in helping us comprehend how the human mind engages in fiction: theory of

mind. We will discuss how this concept can be traced and operates in the fictional microcosm and will speculate about the implications that it could have for the minds that experience literature. I'll take to scrutiny one of the most famous characters of Hispanic literature: don Quijote's faithful partner, Sancho Panza.

3. Theory of mind

What is exactly a theory of mind? Several definitions have been proposed, since Premack and Woodruff employed in 1978 this term to talk about the capacity to impute mental states to self and others and to predict behavior on the basis of these states.² For Robin Dunbar, theory of mind meant to understand how others feel and think,³ whereas philosopher Daniel Dennett put it in the terms of "intentional stance," assuming that the others' have intentions.⁴ As Steven Mithen reminds us, the ability to recognize others' mental states is fundamental for human beings.⁵ From the evolutionary point of view, to be able to predict potentially aggressive behavior might certainly have given an advantage to some individuals. In addition, having the ability to identify people's beliefs and desires could have been the key to manipulation of these people's behavior for our benefit. Here is where another term, machiavellian intelligence,⁶ named after the author of *The Prince*, comes into play.

Let us look more closely at Cervantes' famous character, Sancho Panza. "Hypnotized" by the carrot of prosperity, Sancho participates in all the adventures that don Quijote designs for their chivalric universe. However, between the "simple-minded" Sancho that first warns his master about the windy lack of agency of the giants, and the cunning Sancho who enchants Dulcinea in DQ part two there is a fundamental difference: the development of a machiavellian intelligence.

Sancho is a great example of cognitive development in a text, and the main catalyst of his growth is precisely the sophistication of his ToM, his ability to read other

minds and act accordingly, an ability that he uses to better adapt to DQ's chivalric world. In this sense, we may employ a developmental psychology metaphor to say that Sancho is basically a three year old child in the process of understanding how other minds (particularly DQ's chivalric mind) work.

4. Two crucial moments in Sancho's growth

There's a particular occasion in which DQ's "eccentricity" really makes Sancho very uncomfortable. The situation appears in chapters 30 and 31 of the first part of the book, when DQ asks for details of the interview that Sancho supposedly had with Dulcinea.

The immediate antecedent to this scenario is the penance episode. Following the chivalric rules, DQ had stayed in the mountains performing his sorrow deeds after sending Sancho with a letter to his lady. The truth is that Sancho never gets to accomplish this task. He encounters the priest and the barber at the inn, where new events distract him from his duty. Later on, when DQ avidly asks for the details of the interview, Sancho faces a delicate situation. If he admits that he never delivered the letter, DQ will be enraged. The easiest way out is to act like any four year-old would, in order to avoid punishment and suffering: to lie. Sancho makes up the story of his visit to the lady, and clumsily offers all sorts of details, hoping to cover DQ's expectations. However, those details are not based on chivalric conventions, but come directly from Sancho's own village schemata, making the clash between the fictional and the real extremely hilarious:

"When you arrived, what was that queen of beauty doing? Surely you found her stringing pearls, or embroidering some heraldic devise in gold thread for this her captive knight."

"I didn't find her doing anything," responded Sancho, "except winnowing two *fanegas*⁷ of wheat in a corral of her house."

.....

“But there is one thing you will not deny, Sancho: when you approached her, did you not smelled the perfume of Sheba, an aromatic, somehow pleasing fragrance whose name I cannot recall?...”

“What I can say,” said Sancho, “is that I smelled a mannish kind of odor, and it must have been that with all that moving around, she was sweaty and sort of sour.”⁸ (258-59)

DQ corrects Sancho, concluding that he must have smelled himself. They discuss Dulcinea’s reception of the letter (she tore it into tiny pieces, not to give her secrets away). Finally DQ asks:

“... what jewel did she give you as a reward for the news of me that you brought to her? Because it is a traditional and ancient custom among knights errant and their ladies to give the squires, maidens, or dwarves who bring the knights news of their ladies, or the ladies news of their knights, the gift of a precious jewel in gratitude for the message.”

“That may be true, and I think is a good custom; but that must have been in the past; nowadays the custom must be just to give a piece of bread and some cheese, for that’s what my lady Dulcinea handed me over the corral fence when she said goodbye; and it even looked like the cheese was made of sheep’s milk.”⁹ (260)

Interestingly, DQ justifies all those anti-chivalric details that Sancho offers in a quasi-carnavalesque fashion. To the cheese token he responds: “She is liberal in the extreme... and if she did not present you with a jewel of gold, no doubt it was because she did not have one near at hand...”¹⁰ (260). There’s only one thing that strikes DQ as awkward. Sancho seems to have flown to el Toboso and back, for he has covered a distance of more than thirty leagues in only three days. It would have been difficult for the squire to explain such a *décalage*; luckily, DQ provides an explanation: a friendly sorcerer must have carried him through the air. Sancho is quick to add: “That must be it... because, by my faith, Rocinante was galloping like a Gypsy’s donkey with quicksilver in its ear”¹¹ (261).

This first trial-error moment, in which Sancho tests for the first time his ability to fabricate a chivalric scene, will have a continuation in chapter X of DQ part II, where he

shows us how much he has learned in the last 30 chapters about DQ's world by making an impressive demonstration of his manipulation skills through chivalric discourse.

In chapter 8 of the second part, don Quijote and Sancho prepare for their third sally. They head for el Toboso with the intention of paying Dulcinea a visit. A series of strange confessions follow their arrival to the village and their inability to find Dulcinea's palace in the middle of the night: don Quijote reveals that he actually has never seen his lady, and he is simply in love because he heard about her fame. In turn, Sancho admits that he never saw her either. DQ shows his surprise: "That cannot be," replied Don Quixote. "At least you told me that you saw her sifting wheat, when you brought me her answer to the letter I sent with you"¹² (511).

Nonchalantly, Sancho responds that his interview with Dulcinea was also a matter of having heard about seeing her and bringing him her answer, and skillfully manages to convince DQ to leave the village. He alone will come back in the morning and arrange a secret meeting between the two lovers, out of the village, where Dulcinea's honor will be safe from people's gossip. The episode ends with the chronicler Cide Hamete's explanation of Sancho's urgency to repair the mistake he has done by revealing to DQ not having seen Dulcinea.

Chapter 10 features an already grown-up Sancho who reflects on the situation that he has arrived to and logically reasons the most efficient way to get out of it. His monologue reveals, step by step, the machiavellian mind at work of a character who up to now had been presented to us as a developing child, a brute in the process of acquiring an education through don Quijote's chivalric world.

As Diane Gillespie reminds us, "the stories we tell to ourselves and each other disclose the ways we conceptualize the world and in turn reveal how others have prepackaged the world for us" (183). The story that Sancho tells to himself throughout

his monologue takes him back to the pre-chivalric state of discernment, to the real world in which gentlemen who act as knight errants are simply mad. For the pragmatic sake of avoiding the task of looking for an inexistent lady, Sancho steps back from the chivalric scene, takes a critical distance: "I've seen a thousand signs in this master of mine that he is crazy enough to be tied up, and I am not far behind, I'm as much a fool as he is because I follow and serve him"¹³ (515) . Then he combines both his pre-chivalric and chivalric conceptions of the world, in order to find a way out of his predicament: Although he acknowledges DQ's mental state as abnormal, as he builds his machiavellian strategy he draws from the chivalric background acquired in his master's company. Since enchantments are a common token in chivalry, he figures: "...it won't be very hard to make him believe that a peasant girl, the first one I run into here, is the lady Dulcinea..."¹⁴ (516). The ultimate purpose of Sancho's plan is to obtain long-term protection against some of the impossible tasks that DQ imposes on him: "Maybe I'll be so stubborn he won't send me out again carrying his messages, seeing the bad answers I bring back..."¹⁵ (516).

Thus, Sancho swears once and again that the three peasant girls whose way he has blocked are Dulcinea and her damsels. So skillfully he employs the chivalric discourse and conventions, that the reader has the impression of having the chivalric pair enchanted themselves, their identities swapped, their thoughts transposed to the other's mind. As the three peasant girls harshly demand him to get out of their way, Sancho cries "O princess and universal lady of Toboso! How can your magnanimous heart not soften at seeing the pillar and support of knight errantry on his knees in your subliminal presence?"¹⁶ (518).

The farce proves so efficient that DQ accepts Sancho's version of the facts: the enchanters have transformed the lovely Dulcinea into an ugly peasant girl. He then asks

rhetorically for his squire's opinion on his misfortune, which he sees as caused by external forces, but which the readers, Sancho, and the chronicler, Cide Hamete, can all recognize as the product of the squire's development of a theory of mind and the exercise of his machiavellian intelligence: "Sancho, what do you think of how the enchanters despise me? Look at the extent of their malice and ill will, for they have chosen to deprive me of the happiness I might have had at seeing my lady in her rightful person"¹⁷ (519).

5. From the book to the reader

We have traced the development of Sancho's theory of mind, concentrating in two particular moments:

1. An initial trial-error rehearsal in which he is still not completely acquainted with DQ's beliefs and constructs a clumsy fiction that holds together thanks to his master's aid. His theory of mind is slowly developing.
2. A skillfully manipulated situation that results from Sancho's machiavellian mind in action. At this point, the character has acquired the sufficient knowledge about the conventions that rule DQ's behavior and can recreate those chivalric environmental conditions for his own benefit. He possesses a fully developed theory of mind.

We may now go back to some of our preliminary questions: what can the psychological development of a fictional character tell us about the readers who have been following such development and about the meaning of literature in general? What is the immediate relevance of a theory of mind for literary criticism?

First, we need to look at the connection that exists between characters and people. We can now go back to the idea of mimesis, and the three main characteristics that fictional and real minds share. What is the exact thread that connects both worlds?

Let us consider the following factors: 1. suspension of disbelief, 2. “as-if” devices, and 3. empathy/sympathy.

As scholars like Joseph LeDoux or Antonio Damasio¹⁸ bring to mind, consciousness is fundamentally emotional, and all the interactions that we carry out with the physical-social world are mediated by emotions. Engaging in literary activities, writing or reading a book, interacting with the characters that inhabit fictional worlds is no exception to this. Because of their mimetic-symbolic nature, fictional situations and characters give rise on us to the same emotions that their real counterparts do. The explanation to this analogue phenomenon might reside on the idea that whenever we engage in literature, we voluntarily suspend our disbelief¹⁹, we transitorily put aside our own consciousness and our own environment to dive in the minds and the worlds of the characters, which we take as if they were people. Once we have equated the fictional with the real, we are able to experience emotion in front of the characters’ situations, just as we would do if we were witnessing an *authentic* scene. This occurs in two phases: First, we must make use our theory of mind to recognize the minds we are contemplating as different from our own; we must acknowledge that they have different beliefs and desires than those we have. This understanding of the other minds is called *sympathy*. Then, we exercise our *empathy*, our ability to emotionally project ourselves into the other’s situation. It is precisely this empathic component of our social interaction the one that allows us to “feel” for literary characters. It is interesting to note that thanks to these human intrinsic sympathetic and empathetic mechanisms, a work of fiction can provoke on us emotional reactions regardless of the format in which the fictional worlds come. Thus, in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* the heroine’s suicide may leave us profoundly sad; in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Creon’s “official” murder of his own niece can fill us with rage and indignation;

and in Alejandro Amenábar's film *The Sea Inside*, Ramón's farewell before he departs for his euthanasia will most likely move us to tears.

Theory of mind is a fundamental first step into experiencing literature, since it provides us with the basic character recognition mechanisms that we need in order to understand fictional minds, feel empathy for them, and make sense of literary worlds. These are the same mechanisms that we employ in real life. One of the outcomes of exercising our ToM abilities when engaging in literature is, as we have stated, the experience of emotion. Indeed, intense emotion or catharsis is at the very core of art, and we may well claim that emotional thrill is one of the main purposes of literature, perhaps even an inevitable by-product, for we are programmed to have a ToM and feel emotions towards others. We must consider, however, other further implications of ToM as it appears in three levels of literature: 1. among the characters, inside the fictional world. 2. in the writer's or the reader's mind, as they engage in literature. 3. between the real human beings who live immersed in the world of literacy.

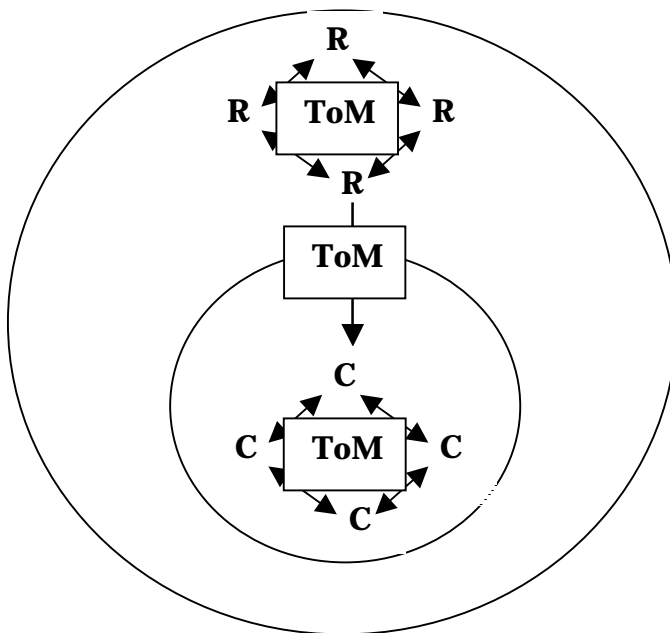


Figure 2. This diagram, a variant of the previous one (figure 1), illustrates the three different levels at which theory of mind (ToM) operates. R stands for reader and C for character.

We have stated that emotion plays an important role in the experience of literature. In fact, as neuroscientists claim, our cognition is mediated by emotion. Our consciousness is fundamentally emotional, and so is our learning. This is acknowledged by neuroscience accounts of emotional memory,²⁰ as well as by educational notions like self-worth theory.²¹ In its origins, literature and the performing arts were highly connected to learning. Medieval religious plays or *exempla* were, for instance, intended for social behavior acquisition and regulation. They would usually feature hyperbolic emotions, and their cathartic ends would often be followed by a moral. In parallel to this didactic purposes, emotion would soon become a commercial feature for playwrights and poets, as it is for novelists and filmmakers today. The more they could thrill and shake the audience, the more their pieces would succeed. These two aspects of literature and drama, the learning and the feeling, seem to have evolved simultaneously, appealing to the individual-dionysian and the collective-apollonian aspects of human society. People felt the need to transitorily abandon their immediate reality by jumping into fictional worlds, while social regulative systems would use those fictional spaces for educational and control purposes. Thus, literature would function as a “pleasant” catalogue of human possible (and acceptable) behaviors.

6. The laboratory of literature

In this regard, diving into the literary experience could be considered a set of experiments that readers perform *virtually*, some sort of simulation. Literature may indeed be one of the tools that our species developed and has available for adaptation and survival. The interactions that literary characters carry out among themselves, the situations in which we find them, their thoughts, deeds, etc. constitute real folk-psychology treatises, prototypes or schemata²² based on cause and effect principles (we see how characters behave and what happens to them as a result of their actions).

The contemplation of those literary situations help the readers build a set of personal rules or recommendations which they can extrapolate to their lives. By observing fictional worlds, they can learn about the real world; by watching characters exercise their theory of mind to obtain a benefit and avoid a prejudice, they can draw conclusions that may guide them in their sailing through the social sea. Literature acts as a model that stands for reality. Let us consider the following analogy: A bird's eye view of the Spanish landmark building Monasterio del Escorial provided by a wooden model can provide us with the necessary distance to better understand its organic nature, a perspective that is hard to obtain when we walk around the *real* building. The perspective of human behavior that we get by reading a book, a view both distant and emotionally close to us via empathy, allows us to reflect on certain social patterns that we also find in our own environment. Such is the theory-of-mind function of literature.



Figure 3. A picture of the Monasterio de San Lorenzo del Escorial, also known as El Escorial, the famous building that Phillip the II built for his retreat in the mountains of Madrid, Spain. On the right, a picture of the model displayed inside the monastery's museum, intended for visitors to have an overview of its structure.²³

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank Jim Swan for his suggestions on how to improve this diagram.

² In their article "Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?"

³ “Having a Theory of Mind means being able to understand what another individual is thinking, to ascribe beliefs, desires, fears and hopes to someone else, and to believe that they really experience these feelings as mental states” (*Grooming* 83).

⁴ In page 76 of *Consciousness Explained* he claims that in human interaction we must treat our interlocutor as “a rational agent, who harbors beliefs and desires and other mental states that exhibit intentionality or ‘aboutness,’ and whose actions can be explained (or predicted) on the basis of the content of those states.”

⁵ See *The Prehistory of the Mind*, especially pages 84 and 132.

⁶ Term first used in this context by Byrne and Whiten (1988).

⁷ About 1.6 bushels (translator’s note).

⁸ -... Llegaste, ¿y qué hacía aquella reina de la hermosura? A buen seguro que la hallaste ensartando perlas, o bordando alguna empresa con oro de canutillo para éste su cautivo caballero.

-No la hallé -respondió Sancho- sino ahechando dos hanegas de trigo en un corral de su casa.

-... Pero, no me negarás, Sancho, una cosa: cuando llegaste junto a ella, ¿no sentiste un olor sabeo, una fragancia aromática, y un no sé qué de bueno, que yo no acierto a dalle nombre?..

-Lo que sé decir es que sentí un olorcillo algo hombruno; y debía de ser que ella, con el mucho ejercicio, estaba sudada y algo correosa. (329-30)

⁹ -...¿qué joya fue la que te dio al despedirte por las nuevas que de mí le llevaste? Porque es usada y antigua costumbre entre los caballeros y damas andantes dar a los escuderos doncellas o enanos que les llevan nuevas, de sus damas a ellos, a

ellas de sus andantes, alguna rica joya en albricias, en agradecimiento de su recado.

-Bien puede ser eso así, y yo la tengo por buena usanza; pero eso debió de ser en los tiempos pasados: que ahora sólo se debe acostumbrar a dar un pedazo de pan y queso, que esto fue lo que me dio mi señora Dulcinea, por las bardas de un corral, cuando della me despedí; y aun, por más señas, era el queso ovejuno. (331)

¹⁰ “-Es liberal en extremo... y si no te dio joya de oro, sin duda debió de ser porque no la tendría allí a la mano para dártela...” (331).

¹¹ “-Así sería... porque a buena fe que andaba Rocinante como si fuera asno de Gitano con azogue en los oídos” (332).

¹² “-Eso no puede ser... que, por lo menos, ya me has dicho tú que la viste ahechando trigo, cuando me trujiste la respuesta de la carta que le envié contigo” (621).

¹³ “Este mi amo, por mil señales, he visto que es un loco de atar, y aun también yo no le quedo en zaga, pues soy más mentecato que él, pues le sigo y le sirvo...” (627).

¹⁴ “...no será muy difícil hacerle creer que una labradora, la primera que topare por aquí, es la señora Dulcinea...” (627).

¹⁵ “Quizá con esta porfía acabaré con él que no me envíe otra vez a semejantes mensajerías, viendo cuán mal recado le traigo dellas...” (627).

¹⁶ “-¡Oh princesa y señora universal del Toboso! ¿Cómo vuestro magnánimo corazón no se enternece viendo arrodillado ante vuestra sublimada presencia a la coluna y sustento de la andante caballería? (630).

¹⁷ “-Sancho, ¿qué te parece cuán mal quisto soy de encantadores? Y mira hasta dónde se extiende su malicia y la ojeriza que me tienen, pues me han querido privar del contento que pudiera darme ver en su ser a mi señora” (632).

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- ¹⁸ See Damasio's *Descartes' Error* and LeDoux *The Emotional Brain*.
- ¹⁹ See Norman Holland's article "The Willing Suspension of Disbelief: A Neuro-Psychoanalytic View."
- ²⁰ See Zigmond's *Fundamental Neuroscience*.
- ²¹ Self-worth theory combines cognition and emotion to claim that "achievement behavior results from an emotional conflict between hope for success and fear of failure." See *Learning Theories*, p.320.
- ²² All these different terms may be applied to convey the patterns or scripts that humans use as frames or orientation for their behavior.
- ²³ Model picture source: <http://dmgmit.eresmas.com/pictures/mad20.html>. Building picture by myself.

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