

Pain Demands to Be Felt: Why We Choose to Engage With Tragic Works of Fiction

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I woke up to my phone singing a song by The Hectic Glow. Gus's favorite. That meant he was calling—or someone was calling from his phone. I glanced at the alarm clock: 2:35 A.M. *He's gone*, I thought as everything inside of me collapsed into a singularity.

I could barely creak out a "Hello?"

I waited for the sound of a parent's annihilated voice.

"Hazel Grace," Augustus said weakly.

"Oh, thank God it's you. Hi. Hi, I love you."

"Hazel Grace, I'm at the gas station. Something's wrong. You gotta help me."

"What? Where are you?"

"The Speedway at Eighty-sixth and Ditch. I did something wrong with the G-tube and I can't figure it out and—"

"I'm calling nine-one-one," I said.

"No no no no no, they'll take me to a hospital. Hazel, listen to me. Do not call nine-one-one or my parents I will never forgive you don't please just come please just come and fix my goddamned G-tube. I'm just, God, this is the stupidest thing. I don't want my parents to know I'm gone. Please. I have the medicine with me; I just can't get it in. Please."

He was crying. I'd never heard him sob like this except from outside his house before Amsterdam.

"Okay," I said. "I'm leaving now."

John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*¹

For many of us, cancer, suicide, murder, and heartache are a thing of fiction, a constant fear just over the edge of the horizon, but a reality we are lucky enough to evade. However, in works of tragic fiction these horrible events become a constant expectation through which our most beloved (and sometimes most hated) characters must suffer. When we consume these fictional works, be

through film or literature, we get swept up in a whirlwind of emotions, feeling our hearts shred as the plot unfolds. Time and time again, we return to these works, such as John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, a tragic young adult novel about two teens with cancer that fall in love. Why is it that we choose to involve our emotions in the pain of fictional characters? When reading the scene above, during which Green's character, Augustus Waters, approaches death following a lifelong fight with cancer, we may find ourselves crying intensely, ruminating on the terrifying thought of losing a loved one; despite this intense pain, we return to the works again and again, almost thriving on the agony we experience.

The above phenomenon seems quite puzzling, as we would normally seek to avoid such situations in our everyday lives (if at all possible) in order to escape the pain that accompanies them. In addition, it is odd in that we encounter the paradox of fiction, the phenomenon wherein we feel extremely intense emotions in response to a completely fictional event. In "A Strange Kind of Sadness," Marcia Eaton attempts to solve the paradox of fiction. Eaton addresses this problem in light of works of fiction that elicit negative emotions, arguing that the emotions we feel are, in fact, real, but that it is rational to feel them because of the manner in which we engage with the work.² She seeks to explain why we continually interact with works that are painful, arguing that unlike in real life, we have a certain degree of control over works of fiction that allows us to feel pain and pleasure simultaneously. This control causes us to revisit works and subject ourselves to the same pain repeatedly, as we can experience a situation without also experiencing its negative repercussions; in essence, we are able to walk away from the work unharmed, making the experience joyful and enlightening.

In this essay, I will argue that Marcia Eaton's control theory of works of fiction is inadequate in solving the paradox of fiction, as it fails to properly describe how we truly engage with works of fiction. Instead, I will propose an alternative theory that explains why we revisit painful works of fiction, focusing on the desire for a safe, detached experience, rather than a desire for control. I will also address a significant error that Eaton makes regarding the emotional catharsis one feels while engaging with fictional works.

The Distance Hypothesis

In attempting to explain why we return to tragic works, Edward Bullough elucidates a more traditional solution to the paradox of fiction, the distance hypothesis; as explained by Bullough, the distance hypothesis centers on psychological distance, a distance that lies between ourselves and the fictional objects of our affection.³ This distance, he states, "[puts] the phenomenon...out of gear with our practical, actual self...permitting only such reactions on our part as emphasize the

‘objective’ features of the experience.”⁴ Through separating ourselves from the artwork, having our emotions be a certain distance from the work itself, we are able (under Bullough’s view) to truly contemplate the work. Eaton, however, rejects this hypothesis, as it “makes aesthetic experience sound schizophrenic,” meaning that having one part of ourselves engaged in the artwork and one part separated comes across as though we are crafting different personalities for ourselves, much like occurs in the mental illness of schizophrenia.⁵ I believe, however, that the distance hypothesis ultimately fails because Bullough wrongfully assumes that objective features of art are “blotted out” when we feel real emotions.⁶ Rather, as I explored above, the objective features of art are often what is controlling our emotions at a given moment, and as such it seems ludicrous to presume, as Bullough does, that they are ignored. In this way, the distance hypothesis becomes inadequate, as Bullough’s wrongful assumption leaves a large hole in the distance hypothesis that must be filled by a new theory.

Aesthetic Pain and Aesthetic Pleasure

On a similar vein, Marcia Eaton offers an alternative hypothesis to explain our fixation on tragic works. In her essay, she begins to reveal her theory, first establishing the emotional reaction that tragic works of fiction evoke. Eaton asserts that art may give us aesthetic pains or aesthetic pleasures; by this, she means that aesthetic pains are those that cause us discomfort or distress, whereas aesthetic pleasures are those that bring about joy or happiness. She classifies the consumption of sad movies, such as *Soldier in the Rain*, as aesthetic pleasures, as such works bring about an overall positive experience (despite the negative pains that the works elicit). This causes one to question whether or not the pain we feel in these experiences is real, since we are categorizing it as something that gives us pleasure (which we would typically not do with regard to pain). Yet Eaton determines that the pain is as real as we would feel in an ordinary experience. Although Eaton does not think that works of tragic fiction can be categorized as painful experiences, I believe that we do experience pain from aesthetic experiences, albeit in a different way than in their non-aesthetic counterparts. This pain is different because it is something we can enjoy (as Eaton labels it, an aesthetic pleasure), one that is cathartic in a way that ordinary pain is not. As Eaton explains, “sadness is not the sort of thing we think of as enjoyable. We do not, at least normally, describe the times we feel sad as ‘fun’ times.”⁷ Whereas everyday experiences cause us pain that bring real consequences, fictional experiences evoke pain that can be walked away from if the observer so chooses. Because of this, the pain is different in aesthetic experiences than it is in ordinary ones; it may feel equally negative, but it can hardly be categorized as the same phenomenon.

Accepting that this pain is real, but different from everyday pain, we also must acknowledge that tragic works still cause aesthetic pain. Eaton argues that this is false, as aesthetic pain is something that isn't enjoyable; since she gets some sense of happiness out of watching a sad movie, for example, she believes that it cannot be classified as an aesthetic pain. However, keeping in mind the two different types of pain, we can certainly see how a sad fictional work would be classified as an aesthetic pain, rather than merely an aesthetic pleasure. Certainly, the pain I get from hearing a tone-deaf choir is a different type of pain from that which arises while watching a sad movie; the music would be more akin to ordinary pain caused by a low quality artwork, whereas the sad movie would be a pain solely because of the way the artwork connects to my life and impacts me. Regardless of this distinction, we can hardly say that the movie does not cause me some kind of pain. While I would agree that it is a pain I enjoy, it is a pain nonetheless. This prompts me to propose a third category under which works like Eaton's common example, *Soldier in the Rain*, can fall – one in which works cause both aesthetic pain and aesthetic pleasure. Although Eaton overlooks this proposed third category, instead sticking with two (aesthetic pains and aesthetic pleasures), I find the third category's addition to be helpful in understanding the nuances of aesthetic experience, as it still gives value to the pain that artwork evokes, whereas Eaton's distinction disregards any pain that gives us pleasure as well, labeling it an aesthetic pleasure.

Coming Back for More: Eaton's Control Hypothesis

Regardless of how we categorize a work, it still seems questionable to continually engage with it when we know the pain it causes. Eaton argues that we subject ourselves to this agony because of the control that a work of fiction brings. When consuming fiction, we have a level of control over the situation that we lack in everyday life; we have power over the situation and know that we can escape it, she argues, whereas in real life we lack this ability. Eaton contends that Aristotle's theory on the paradox of fiction holds some truth, explaining, "in controlled surroundings tragedy permits us to purge ourselves of bottled-up feelings.... The unreality of the situation is sometimes important to understanding it."⁸ Eaton says that this unreality helps in understanding a situation because it enables us to step back and look at the situation more objectively, offering more control over the situation. Control allows us to feel aesthetic delight (also known as relative pleasure), which is essentially the removal of positive pain, as we can truly get a glimpse at the fear, danger, sorrow, or depression a character experiences without experiencing it ourselves. For example, rather than actually struggling through a battle with cancer, I may be able to instead witness it through the eyes of a fictional character, thus avoiding the experience but still seeing how painful it is for someone to

go through, seeing the character's strength, gaining insight into the situation and their thoughts/emotions, etc.⁹

Eaton points out that this sadness we feel for tragic works seems strange, as it is directed towards abstract situations and qualities rather than practicalities; usually, we focus our concerns on practical matters, so feeling such strong emotions towards the fictional ones seems bizarre. However, Eaton concludes that this unusual focus is exactly what makes us appreciate a work. Through attending to formal properties, such as features of a film like lighting or the soundtrack, we are able to respond to details that become irrelevant in everyday situations, thus giving an added layer of depth and importance to a work. Whereas I may focus solely on my friend's needs and emotions if I sit by her as she sobs uncontrollably in real life, watching the same event in a fictional setting would allow me to observe and appreciate the minor details, such as how beautiful she looked when she cried, or the way the light hit her face. These seemingly insignificant details in real life become the very thing that makes art moving in the fictional world, and cause us to admire the skill of the creator in a way that we would not otherwise do.¹⁰

Losing Control

Although Eaton's control hypothesis is a wonderful attempt to explain the paradox of tragic works of fiction, I believe it ultimately falls short because Eaton fails to recognize that (1) we may lack control in various ways when consuming works, and (2) we can potentially have a similar level of control in our everyday lives. With regards to the first point, it seems as though we may not always have this proposed control with regards to fictional works, as often within the works themselves the formal features of the work (music, lighting, or scenery for film, and literary devices such as metaphors or foreshadowing in literature) are intentionally designed to sway our emotions one way or another. For example, referring to the aforementioned passage from *The Fault in Our Stars*, it is evident that Green's intentional lack or misuse of punctuation, rushed dialogue, and word choice for Augustus' pleas to Hazel are designed to intentionally evoke sympathy in the audience, as they aim to show Augustus as weak, terrified, and desperate to handle the situation without medical intervention. This technique can also be seen in the popular movie, *Jaws*, in which the infamous music that plays when the shark approaches is used to strike fear into the hearts of viewers. These seem to be obvious examples of times in which we lack control in that our emotions are being carefully guided through the works themselves, thus suggesting that we do not have as much control as Eaton maintains. In these cases, non-cognitive aspects of the work bypass our rational, conscious thought, going straight to our emotional, instinctual selves, thus causing a gut reaction devoid of the conscious control Eaton holds as omnipresent. While we can still choose whether or not we engage

with the work in the first place, once we enter into the work it seems as though we are willingly giving up some of our control, instead putting the artist into the driver's seat.

In addition, it seems as though (regarding the second point above) we can potentially have a similar amount of freedom in our everyday lives, albeit not in every situation. Certainly I have no control over whether or not a loved one is struck with cancer, a natural disaster devastates an entire country, or a neighbor is viciously murdered in the heat of the night. However, in some tragic circumstances that would parallel fictional events, I can gain control in real life. For example, if by some chance my best friend was in a horrible accident and, following weeks in the Intensive Care Unit of the local hospital, passed away, I would have the opportunity to control how I reacted to the situation. Certainly, I could not bring the friend back from the dead, regardless of how much I wished, bargained, or pleaded. However, I could choose to emotionally divorce myself from the situation, escaping my grief by burying myself in a sea of graduate school applications, copious amounts of tequila, or by engaging in a string of meaningless one night stands with sketchy men from bars – all which stand to provide me with an escape from the sadness of my reality. Alternatively, I could take my pain by the horns, fully immersing myself in it by coming to terms with the loss, reflecting upon fond memories with the friend, and taking the opportunity to grieve and heal with the help of loved ones, all in the effort to submerge myself fully in the experience of loss in order to one day rise above it. In summation, it appears as though I could, in fact, control a real life situation similarly to how Eaton argues that we control fictional ones, as I am responsible for choosing whether or not to fully delve into the pain. Because of these reasons, Eaton's argument leaves us wanting something more; although control is a facet that makes revisiting tragic works worthwhile, her definition and use of the term are ultimately inadequate in fully capturing our inspiration to consume these works.

An Alternative to Eaton's Control Hypothesis

While Eaton does an excellent job in attempting to resolve an ongoing puzzle, she ultimately fails to construct an alternative that is satisfying. Because of the aforementioned flaw with her notion of control, a new solution is necessary. If not control or distance, what is it that causes us to subject ourselves to what could be described as a very mild form of torture? One might argue that I am simply being masochistic as I choose to read John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* for the eighth time, and that I get some sort of secret thrill out of reading about children with cancer meeting their untimely demise. However, while this may be the case for some individuals, it certainly cannot explain the behavior of the majority of society. We know that people thoroughly enjoy this pain that they experience with certain works of fiction; looking at the show listings for any movie theatre, or

simply taking a stroll down the fiction aisles of Barnes and Noble can easily attest to this. I believe that two things keep us going back and willingly subjecting ourselves to this pain when interacting with works of fiction: the first is a sense of safe, detached experience, one which allows us to feel sometimes dangerous emotions while avoiding the negative repercussions that accompany them in real life situations; the second is that fictional works provide us with exposure to cultures of which we would otherwise be ignorant, allowing us to see the world in a different light.

The First Facet: Safe Experience

Having the opportunity to interact with tragic works of fiction allows us to have a safe experience that is as close as possible to the real thing without actually being said situation. It is so addictive precisely because it causes us to feel the pain that we would feel in our everyday lives, while still providing a means of escape from the situation (since we can easily turn off a movie or close a book, thus ending the experience altogether). While control and distance are equally insufficient in explaining the appeal of these works, it seems as though a safe experience is where the charm lies. Through experiencing fictional situations, we get a sort of emotional catharsis that is unparalleled in everyday life, one that elicits positive emotions (such as relief, reassurance, and a feeling of belonging) and a desire to revisit the experience whenever the same catharsis is needed. Eaton rejects this notion, claiming that “it is wrong to say that crying is pleasant when we read *Anna Karenina*, though it is true that we feel more than just pain.”¹¹ Instead, she believes that the overall experience is what is pleasant, and that the crying involved in said experience is painful. However, I contend that the crying itself is also pleasant, on a different level than the work as a whole. It often feels good to cry over something that I know won’t actually cause me to suffer, as it gives me the opportunity to have an emotional response or release without the actual experience itself; while the work may be pleasant because it makes me feel good, the crying itself is pleasant because it makes me feel so bad without actually harming me. The avoidance of pain while still experiencing relief through crying (as in the example above) is pleasant in that it gives us an outlet that we would otherwise lack. This view is similar to Aristotle’s position, in which he argues that tragedy “is an imitation of an action... [with] pity and fear affecting the proper purgation (catharsis) of these emotions.”¹² Aristotle argues that a perfect tragedy imitates actions that excite real emotions, causing us to have the proper emotional response to a fictional event. This emotional catharsis that comes from fiction is safe in that it provides us with an emotional outlet while allowing us to avoid the typical repercussions of real life scenarios.

We can run a parallel to this with other things outside of art that show that the emotional catharsis an experience brings can be very pleasant. For example, we see with things like haunted

houses that people purposely seek out an opportunity to be terrified; they willingly subject themselves to a situation in which strangers dressed in horrifying costumes and makeup will jump out at them in the dark, solely because the adrenaline rush they get from being so afraid is very fulfilling. Likewise, people go great distances to ride the tallest, fastest, most frightening roller coasters, solely because the ride makes them feel sick without actually being sick. These experiences give a sort of release that is otherwise absent, allowing them to experience those emotions without being harmed in any real way. While I may be temporarily afraid of a haunted house or feel ill at the very peak of a hill on a roller coaster, the pain subsides and I am left feeling as though I've had an experience that is much more devastating than what I've actually incurred.

In addition to art being a safe, detached experience in that it removes real-life repercussions, tragic works also serve as a safe place as they allow us an escape from the sense of responsibility that is typically attached to tragic events in real life. For example, if I were to read a newspaper article about a national disaster in my area that devastated the local population, I might feel obligated to go out and help restore the area, or at the very least donate money or supplies to help with said efforts. However, if I were to simply read a fictional story about victims of a natural disaster, I could easily escape this sense of responsibility, as I would have no obligation (or ability, for that matter) to assist the community from the fictional work.

The Second Facet: Exposure to Other Cultures

In addition to providing us with cathartic release through a detached experience, we also engage with tragic works of fiction because they enable us to more readily sympathize with others. In particular, the aforementioned interaction is particularly important with works of realistic fiction, in which characters come from a different background or have disabilities/characteristics that differ from the reader, as these works expose the reader to a new way of life, thus increasing our ability to sympathize with others. For instance, in the novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, a young man named Oskar goes on a journey that he believes his now deceased father set up for him prior to his passing. Although the work doesn't explicitly state this, it is evident that Oskar has some form of autism (presumably Asperger's syndrome); through the tone and unique structure of the writing, the audience gets a true look at the anxiety and thought patterns of an individual with this kind of disability, and is able to comprehend the pain and isolation that he feels. While I may never truly know what it's like to have Asperger's, I can come close if provided with an accurate portrayal through a work of fiction. The joy of witnessing a work of fiction (particularly literature or film) is that it doesn't just tell the audience what a given way of life is like – it shows them. This is evident in scenes like the one quoted at the beginning of this paper, in which we see

the emotional turmoil and struggle of a teenage boy seeking to maintain control and dignity while dying from a monstrous illness. In the excerpt of Green's work, we are met with the desperation of Augustus, who is in an absolutely dire situation (which later requires intense hospitalization), showing a glimpse of what life is like for those suffering from cancer, constantly straddling the thin line between life and death. Both Foer and Green's works demonstrate that we go back to fiction time after time to be exposed to a lifestyle that we may not know otherwise, providing support for my theory that the appeal of tragic fiction lies in part in its ability to expose the audience to other ways of life.

We choose to return to tragic works, despite how painful they may be to witness, because they allow us to see a way of life that is completely different from our own. This provides a unique opportunity, as we can learn about cultures that we would otherwise lack the opportunity to experience; for example, I can read a book about a growing up in a Congolese community, although I might be unable to travel there and experience it firsthand. This is especially helpful as, even if I had the resources to visit the Congo, I would only (at best) gain an understanding of what it was like to visit there; seeing as though I was born in the United States, I will never have the opportunity to understand what it is like to actually grow up there, but through works of fiction I can gain a better idea of what that may be like. Likewise, I can gain exposure to cultures and historical events from the past that are impossible to revisit. Through watching a play on what life was like for Jews during the Holocaust, I am faced with the chance to understand the daily experience of someone so similar and yet so different from myself, thus boosting my sympathy for others and concern for humankind. This sympathy causes me to feel more connected to the global community, as I can see ways in which my life is similar to those who are thousands of miles (or decades) away. Once I truly understand the struggles of individuals from different cultures or ways of life, I am able to be more understanding of and compassionate about their struggles; rather than judging due to a lack of knowledge, I gain meaningful insight into a new "world" and can respond more appropriately based on this information. This newfound connection and insight is part of the moral importance of fiction; it is pivotal to broaden our horizons and at least attempt to understand the world around us, and fiction enables us to do just that.

One might argue that while literature and film do a great job of depicting a life that is different than our own, it is not necessary for the work to be fictional; instead, we could simply watch documentaries or read biographies about people and other cultures. However, this is problematic, as not all cultures or peoples want to or can be recorded or observed. Some people, such as individuals with Asperger's, may have anxieties about having someone document their everyday lives, or may simply not want their personal details to be displayed for the world to see. Recording personal events, such as divorce, death, or financial struggles, could be seen as a

devastating invasion of privacy not worth whatever good the rest of us could gain by way of understanding. Arguably, most individuals wouldn't want strangers delving deep into the innermost secrets of their lives (they are, after all, called secrets for a reason). When positive experiences arise, such as weddings, births, or promotions at work, people are typically quite quick to share, as they feel overwhelming joy and want to celebrate said situations with the people around them. However, there are deeper sides to each of us, struggles with mental illness, horrible fights with significant others, crippling debt, and even uncertainties about the future, which are harder to bring up in everyday conversation, as most would rather keep them private. As such, while we may be deeply compelled to see that others experience these terrible, heartbreaking situations, it is typically much easier to get that information from works of fiction versus from real life, as many individuals refrain from being open with the general population about said tragic affairs.

There are also belief systems, such as that accepted by the Amish, which prohibit the use of film, thus making documentary footage impossible to obtain. This would prevent us from understanding the ways of life of many groups, thus maintaining a disconnect between their societies and the rest of the world. Allowing a work about said groups to be an accurate fictional portrayal (one that portrays the cultures and customs of a group as closely as possible) avoids violating the rules of the culture at hand. In addition, historical fiction can make us feel a connection in a more compelling way than historical documentaries often can. Many times in historical documentaries or biographies, the information is displayed in a dull or detached way, as if the people being portrayed are simply shadowy figures from the past. Allowing them to be instead portrayed in a fictional work brings more life to the characters, causing them to come across as though they were real people rather than abstract entities of history.

When a work is fictional, we can avoid exploitation of a given population, as those peoples won't be filmed or recorded to use for a company's financial gain. It would be unfair to subject vulnerable populations, such as a tribal group in a developing country, to unnecessary exploitation. If in a dire enough situation, said individuals may agree to being videotaped or recorded without actually wanting to be, simply because they are in need of the money. From this, companies would profit from the work produced, thus putting the cultures that were recorded in an unfair situation and showing a blatant disrespect for persons. Through fictionalizing a story, individuals' privacy can be respected, but at the same time we can use their stories as inspiration to create a given artwork (such as John Green did with his friend, Esther Earl, who was a cancer patient and influenced his characters in *The Fault in Our Stars*).

The Thing about Pain

There is no question that our society is fascinated by tragic works of fiction, perhaps because (as John Green's Augustus proclaims) "that's the thing about pain. It demands to be felt."¹³ As such, I have constructed what I believe to be the best possible explanation for the appeal of tragic fiction, which is that it allows us to have a safe experience, devoid of potential real-life consequences, oftentimes exposing us to cultures that were previously unknown. I have also considered and critiqued two alternative solutions, Marcia Eaton's control hypothesis and Edward Bullough's distance hypothesis, ultimately concluding that both leave us wanting something more. While the paradox of fiction still remains, it seems less problematic, as caring for fictional entities provides cathartic release for the experiencer and can potentially benefit the community at large. As such, while it may seem bizarre to care so deeply about characters like Augustus Waters that only exist on paper or in film, it is also necessary, as the fictional worlds we experience broaden the parameters and enrich our experience of the real world.

Notes

¹ John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars* (Dutton Books, 2012), 242.

² Marcia M. Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41.1 (1982): 52.

³ Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912): 89.

⁴ Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," 89.

⁵ Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," 55.

⁶ Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," 55.

⁷ Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," 51.

⁸ Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," 60.

⁹ This is why many people enjoy horror films, as they can "experience" the sheer terror of a victim running from a murderer without actually living through it.

¹⁰ Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," 62.

¹¹ Eaton, "A Strange Kind of Sadness," 62.

¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book IV 1-4, translated by Malcolm Heath (Penguin Classics, 1997).

¹³ Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*, 110.

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