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Contextual Beliefs: A Creative Interpretation of the Fictional Emotion Paradox

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"But she did not take her eyes from the wheels of the second car. And exactly at the moment when the midpoint between the wheels drew level with her, she threw away the red bag, and drawing her head back into her shoulders, fell on her hands under the car, and with a light movement, as though she would rise immediately, dropped on her knees. And at the instant she was terror-stricken at what she was doing. 'Where am I? What am I doing? What for?' She tried to get up, to throw herself back; but something huge and merciless struck her on the head and dragged her down on her back." (Anna Karenina, Part 7, Chapter 31, pg. 798)

Artist Statement:

This piece serves to reflect that emotional responses are not often based on beliefs about the reality of the situation, but instead based on beliefs about the narrative. In essentially ignoring the reality of the situation, the reader is willingly pulled into a suspension of disbelief.

The image depicts the death of Anna Karenina through a pair of eyes flooded with the words and image of her suicide. Tears welled in the eyes reflect genuine emotion, yet it is apparent that the eyes are only seeing words on the page and what is reflected in their own imagination. In the moment, the viewer believes what is happening to Anna despite the cues that the death is fictional. Colin Radford questions this emotional reaction, claiming it is paradoxical to be moved by something known to be fictional. He argues that (1) to be sad we must believe that a loss has actually occurred, (2) the events and characters in a fictional work do not exist in reality, (3) thus it is irrational to respond emotionally to a fictional character's plight (Radford 1989). Despite Radford's paradox, the suspension of disbelief allows the viewer to experience real emotions for characters they've temporarily forgotten are fictional. A viewer's mind is

completely focused on the narrative at hand, so in that moment Anna really has jumped to her death on the tracks.

Radford counters this solution with an intuitive problem: if the reader truly believed what was happening based on the emotional stimuli, they would spring to action, help the person in need. This objection though depends on the certain connection between emotion and reaction. When considering fictional stimuli, the audience seems to enter a willing suspension of disbelief in which their entire attention is focused not on reality, but the story unfolding before them. The eyes in the piece are not those of someone leaping to action, but instead wholly focused on the words in front of them. Fictionality does not alter narrative processing (Bussele, 2008). It is instead beliefs about the context of the situation, not the emotional stimuli within the narrative, which drive one's actions. The reader believes Anna's suicide within the context of the story, recognizing that loss of life in the world of the novel, and the loss of the character the reader had gotten to know so personally. The depiction of real sadness in the charcoal eyes is made apparent through the artist's inclusion of expression and tears, both signs of a genuine emotion. It would not make any sense for a reader to display such signs of emotion unless they truly felt sadness. For most, a genuine emotion presupposes a belief. In this case, the reader *believes* Anna's suicide (shown through their apparent sadness); however, the reader is also aware of the larger context, that she is reading a book. This separate contextual belief allows the reader to passively feel the emotion, and perhaps wish they could help, but accept that there is nothing that can be done. In embracing the lack of responsibility, the anxiety of reaction is alleviated from the emotional response. The reader cannot save Anna, but doesn't have to. This allows a reader to dwell on the very genuine emotion in a different way than if the situation was real (Goldstein, 2009).



11"x14" mixed medium drawing using charcoal, pastel, and graphite on toothed charcoal paper.

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Artistic Inspiration:

Indonesian based artist Veri Apriyatno's photorealistic paintings of eyes reflecting their surroundings.

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