

# Emotions in Literature

**Curriculum:** ADVANCED

**Created by:** Dar Bagby

**Definition:** Authorial emotional creativity (i.e., when an author incorporates emotion of some sort into a moment within a story) is generally attempted in order to develop the characters, as well as the story, in an effort to gain the reader’s involvement with the characters so that the reader becomes enveloped in the same emotions as those characters. It is an outcome that, for the most part, cannot be universally accomplished because of personal interpretation and the amount of variants in both its portrayal (by the author) and its reception (by the reader). However, if based on *basic* emotions—ones that span time and are recognizable within multiple cultures, both past and present—it is possible for a writer to capture the empathy of his/her readers on a global scale.

In other words, something that makes *you* laugh or cry or feel lonely may not have any impact on someone from another culture or another part of the world. This does not mean that, as authors, we should avoid using emotions in our writing. In fact, I’m not sure that could even be done! But we know that “great literature” makes us feel things—emotions—and those feelings cause us to want to share our own emotions in return. In a nutshell, that is why we write.

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**Goals:** 1) Be able to express emotions that will have an impact on a particular audience.

2) Be able to recognize the limitations of including certain emotions in a story.

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**Tools:** 1) some things that will promote feelings of nostalgia in the enthusiasts (e.g., old photos,

a couple of antique kitchen utensils, an old piece of fabric, an old doll and/or other toy,

some books from when the enthusiasts would have been toddlers, etc)

2) a copy of the HANDOUT for each enthusiast

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**Ice Breaker:** On a table, spread out the items you brought. Have the enthusiasts come up and look at them. When they go back to their seats, discuss what memories were tapped by the items. Maybe one of them will recognize something his/her mother used when she baked a cake. Maybe

one will remember his/her mother or father reading a certain book as a bedtime story. Maybe one will remember a relative who looks like someone in a photo.

Bring up the point that they were feeling nostalgia, which is an emotion. Ask if the emotion made them feel good or bad and why. Explain that those feelings are the ones they need to present in their writing, because emotions are what readers want to experience, too.

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## **Lesson**

Distribute the HANDOUT to the enthusiasts and encourage them to take notes on the pages.

You have now written plenty of stories, developed plots and characters, and tried to appeal to different audiences. So it's time for you to move into a realm that factors in something that takes precedence over many other factors in literature. It's not that you have avoided it in the past, but you may not have had a deep understanding about it. I'm talking about emotions in your writing.

We all need "emotional outlets." Without them we would suffer such conditions as overwhelming depression, bipolarism, PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), and a myriad of other major, and sometimes irreversible, stumbling blocks in life. For some, reading is a perfect way to get through tough times. Why? Because books are capable of providing that much-needed outlet. They appeal to our emotions as well as to our intellect.

Sometimes a good laugh or a good cry relieves the tension we have been feeling. When we read about others' problems, they might make ours look miniscule in comparison. When we have suffered a tragedy, we can read about others who have experienced the same situation, and we realize we are not alone. Sometimes we simply want to escape the "real world," and what better way to accomplish that than to read something light and amusing or an adventure or fantasy that takes us to a far-away place?

Now let's think about it from a writer's point of view. Have you ever experienced a sense of relief by writing down your emotions? Imagine that you and your significant other (S.O.) have had a disagreement over something, and you wish you could tell him/her exactly what you think, but it would tax the relationship for you to do so. You sit down with pen and paper in hand, or you sit down at your computer, and you spill your guts. Maybe you "let him/her have it will both barrels." Wow! How good did that feel? Then you go back and read what you've written and realize, "I feel better now that I've gotten that out of my system." And you probably never even have to show it to or mention it to your S.O.

As authors, we often have things inside us that are waiting to come out—possibly even ready to explode—and we simply HAVE to write them down. But as important as it is to us to vent, is

what we have to say going to appeal to another person, a reader? Why do we feel it may be interesting to someone else? And why should that even matter? Perhaps it's time to make a distinction between being a writer and being a successful author.

Writers may write anything, from a personal journal, which may never be seen by anyone else, to the "Great American Novel." But maybe they don't have any interest in promoting their material to the general public. They are writers, but they are not necessarily successful authors. Perhaps a mathematician writes an article about a formula he/she has perfected and realizes only his/her peers are the ones who will be interested in reading it. He/she is a writer, and also an author, with a limited audience. Writers of children's stories may only write for their own children. They have authored a story but are satisfied that their children are the only ones benefitting from their works. Can you see a distinction between writers and successful authors?

You have the urge to write, and emotions are leading you in that direction. So let's talk about them; they are the heart of the matter. They don't suddenly appear fully formed; they develop over a period of time, just as a plot develops in a story. You can have a great idea for a story, but without the plot, it is going nowhere. It is likewise with the emotions that prod you to write.

Let's look at a scenario: your dog did something that made you laugh; you felt happy for that moment. You would love to share that emotion, but there isn't much of a story in that single, momentary episode. You begin to think about the possibilities of putting together other episodes that center around that one, and you are on your way to creating a story. Not only that, but you are accomplishing both emotional creativity (allowing your emotions to lead you into writing a book) and reader involvement in the emotion, the one your brain is urging you to share. You are on the road to becoming at least a story writer, if not a successful author.

But your emotion (in this case, happiness), though it may be considered a basic emotion, will not be excited in everyone's brain by the same scenario. For instance, dogs are considered food in some countries. What are the chances that your dog's antics will amuse the people who eat them? This is considered a cultural variation. You can't expect your book to be a best-seller in that culture. In brief, emotional episodes that make *you* laugh won't make *everyone* laugh. Should you reconsider, or is it more important for you to recognize your audience and be satisfied with that? You must therefore consider individual differences in emotional acceptance.

Emotional acceptance has a lot to do with literature's history in theater. In some instances, the audience in attendance was "shown" what to feel by the actions of the characters in addition to their spoken words. In literature we don't have a character's physical reactions to look at; we have to grasp them only from the words on the page. That obviously deletes our visual receptors. For example, a single sentence can be interpreted in several ways just by emphasizing a different word:

*"I want to go **now**."*

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*"I **want** to go now."*

*“I want to go now.”*

It is important, therefore, that, as a writer, you make it obvious to the reader which way the line is to be read so it conveys the emotion intended. How? By developing your characters so each one’s idiosyncrasies can be recognized and interpreted as you meant for them to be. It’s not so easy unless you understand how important a role emotion plays in your writing.

Don’t let yourself fall into the melodrama pit. If you overemphasize your character’s qualities with extended descriptions and ridiculous development, your character will appear unreal, even silly. The days of the heroine being tied to the railroad track by the villain and the hero’s daring rescue are not over, they have just been tempered to match our current expectations. If your female protagonist sheds tears while pressing the back of her hand to her forehead and longingly looking toward the west, where the love of her life has just ridden off, you had better consider a rewrite!

What all of this boils down to is:

- 1) Emotions are an integral part of writing, both on your part as the creator and on the reader’s part as the receiver.
- 2) You must know your audience so you can tailor your emotional moments to their liking and acceptance.
- 3) You are responsible for guiding your reader to the emotions being presented in your work, and you do this by clearly developing your plot and characters in a vein that will lead the reader to the correct conclusions.
- 4) Stay away from melodramatic pitfalls.

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**Activity:** Read the character descriptions below and ask the enthusiasts to determine what sort of emotion that character might present in this situation: *A high-speed chase is in progress. The person being pursued is doing crazy things while trying to outrun the pursuers.*

1. The pursuer is driving a police vehicle at breakneck speed with only one hand on the wheel, leaning back in the seat, clearly at ease, all the while smirking and saying, “You’ll be sorry when I get my hands on you. You can’t outrun me. You don’t have a chance of getting away.”

2. There is a second person in the pursuit vehicle who has beads of sweat on his brow and upper lip. He is nervously rubbing his fingers and thumb together with one hand while his other hand is on the strap over his holstered weapon. He stares straight ahead at the vehicle being pursued and chews on his lower lip.

3. The person being pursued is laughing hysterically as he runs red lights and stop signs and weaves in and out of traffic. His bloodshot eyes flit back and forth between the road and his rearview mirror.

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**Discussion:** 1) What role do emotions play in your job as a writer?

2) What role do emotions play in your reader’s acceptance of your story?

3) Why is it important to develop your characters and plot in relationship to

your emotional creativity and the reader’s emotional acceptance?

## **Emotions in Literature – HANDOUT**

### **ADVANCED**

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