Joy of Ugly Feelings: Korean "Bad Taste" Webtoons as a Case Study

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Many literary scholars, such as Lisa Zunshine, Alan Palmer, and George Butte, have been engaging with cognitive and neuro sciences as well as cognitive and social psychology in order to illuminate what happens when we read and why we read at all. Drawing on the idea that "we have an evolved craving to read the minds of others and a corollary craving for the kind of narrative action that catalyzes this reading of minds" (Abbott 448), these theorists consider reading fiction as an act of reading and misreading the minds of characters in the fictional world. Speaking of mental states in works of fiction, Zunshine, in particular, borrows from cognitive science the concept of "Theory of Mind" (ToM) and explains it as a term used by cognitive psychologists and philosophers, "interchangeably with *mind-reading* to refer to our ability to explain observable behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions" ("Why Jane Austen" 276). When we see someone constantly glancing at her watch during a lecture with fidgety movements, for instance, mind-reading allows us to assume that she is bored with the lecture and hopes that it will be over soon. Such assumptions are, of course, often incorrect. However, as Zunshine points out, reading minds and making attributions about them is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment.

Zunshine further argues that this mind-reading makes literature possible, as "[w]e make sense of what we read by investing the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call *characters* with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires and then looking for the 'cues' that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions" ("Why We Read" 30). In other words, we engage in mind-reading when we attribute to a character a certain mental state on the basis of her observable action orchestrated carefully by the author. As much as mind-reading is important for readers to make sense of the fictional world and characters, empathy, a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect (a term used to include broadly affection, emotion, feeling, mood, motivation, and so forth), is required to facilitate the emotional fusion between readers and fictional characters, allowing for a more immersive and engaging reading experience for readers. According to Suzanne Keen in "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," empathy can be provoked "by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (208). Importantly, empathy through reading is influenced only when readers are "emotionally transported into a narrative world," that is, when readers can imagine themselves in the fictional world and the experience of the characters in that world (Bal and Veltkamp 3). Because empathy

occurs when we mirror and further identify with what we believe to be the emotions of others in a particular condition or context, empathy should be distinguished from sympathy, our feeling supportive about others' feelings, and is agreed to be both affective and cognitive by many psychologists. Empathy and mind-reading are therefore closely related to each other and shape our reading experience.

But what happens to our reading when we face fictional characters whose minds we cannot read? What do we do if there are not enough coherent narrative details in the text and the "cues" to which Zunshine refers are nowhere to be found? Furthermore, what happens to our interaction with characters when the feelings elicited in fiction are so aversive and negative that we stop mirroring and sharing emotions of these characters? One obvious option would be to stop reading, since, as Keen notes, "novel reading can be so easily stopped or interrupted by an unpleasant emotional reaction to a book" (208), while some others might continue to read to the end in spite of all the negative responses. In this essay, I will question the cognitivist idea that readable minds and empathy arouse narrative desire and enable our capacity to engage with fiction. Mind-reading and empathy indeed do all these things. However, the belief that reading is ultimately an act of making inferences about characters and their actions and attributing to them certain mental states is somewhat problematic, as there exists in the history of fiction, as well as in our real world, many engaging characters with absolutely unreadable minds (the obscure copyist Bartleby in Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," for instance). It is also true that we do not always attribute characters' actions to their mental states. Instead, we sometimes react to other characters and events in the text. In what follows, by using Korean "webtoons" (comics created for the purpose of being published and read online) as a case study, I will discuss ways in which the absence of readable minds and empathy creates a mode of reading that engages readers even as they remain detached from the fictional world that they witness but do not experience.

The beginning of webtoons in Korea dates back to the early 2000s. According to the 2015 statistics by Korean Webtoon Association, about 5,700 webtoons are officially registered in various portal sites by approximately 4,600 active webtoon writers, and about ten million people read these webtoons daily (Park). Many factors have contributed to the popularity of webtoons. For one, most webtoons are free of charge and published frequently in series (most episodes are updated weekly), making their content both accessible and current. Second, they are interactive in nature. Readers provide feedback almost simultaneously, shaping both the story and style of webtoons. Third, webtoons can do many things that print comics cannot do. Some webtoons, for instance, have background music for readers to listen to while reading. Finally, webtoons have more varieties in subject matter and visual style, since they are less vulnerable to a censorship control.

The lack of censorship, which is quite common across most online platforms, has allowed webtoon writers to be more flexible and creative about what they write and draw. This has also led to the birth of a new comic genre 병맛웹툰 that can be loosely translated into "bad taste" or "ridiculous" webtoons. These comic webtoons deal with topics that are controversial, if not tabooed, in Korean society such as sex, homosexuality, disability, and race. They are very often discriminatory and violent in both the verbal and visual components without a coherent plot, theme, message, and drawing style or narrative context needed in order for the situation to make sense. Readers of these webtoons acknowledge the unpleasant, incoherent, and absurd nature of the work, but the popularity of this type of webtoon continues to grow nevertheless. Readers, for instance, respond to these webtoons enthusiastically, leaving thousands of messages claiming that these webtoons are "ridiculous" and "nonsense," but "fun" and "cool." The record number of responses received for a single episode is 745,110 (Park).

Readers laugh, but they do so at a woman who is happily walking the street with her boyfriend in one panel and is brutally beaten up by two strangers in the next panel without any reason that can be inferred from the narrative or the context of the event (see Fig. 1). The popularity of these "bad taste" webtoons can

Fig. 1: *Kimchi Man* (2014) by GG

be baffling and potentially unsettling for some, precisely because of the conflicting feelings and confusion they elicit. Many readers are amused by these webtoons in spite of their violent and disgusting visuals and text, as well as the fact that the text

often fails to make sense. Is it still our craving for mind-reading and capacity to feel with others that drives readers' enthusiasm for these webtoons? Or is there something else in these webtoons that shapes our engagement with this type of narrative?

GG (귀귀, pronounced as "Gyui Gyui"), one of the most famous "bad taste" webtoon writers in Korea, has been both controversial and popular due to his overly explicit use of violence in his work. GG was criticized in 2012, for example, by *Donga-Ilbo*, a major newspaper company, for his popular series 낚시신공 'the fishing genius,' which takes place in a high school. The newspaper company claimed that the series encouraged violence and bullying. *Naver*, the portal site that published the series, thus issued a public apology and terminated its publication. GG's readers, however, do not seem to be bothered by the violence in his work. GG has been prolifically publishing since his debut in 2007. Even the terminated series is still easily accessible on numerous personal blogs, and the popularity of GG's work has led to successful merchandizing of
clothes, cups, and other items featuring his characters.

One of GG's most famous webtoon series revolves around a super-hero looking character named "Dr. P," a mysterious physician who treats his patients with methods that are highly problematic. The series starts with a patient walking into Dr. P's office complaining about his toothache. As the unnamed patient (bald, short, wrinkled) walks in and asks for help, Dr. P suddenly breaks the patient's leg and tells him that he will be able to forget about the toothache due to the severe pain in his leg (see Fig. 2). Not surprisingly, the patient is horrified and struggles with even greater pain. In response to the patient's suffering, Dr. P now attacks the patient's spine and says, "Since I have broken your spine and paralyzed you, you will no longer feel the pain in your leg" (*Dr. P Series,* "Episode 1"). With a close-up shot of the patient's bloody and distorted face as a short preview for the next episode, the first episode of the series ends (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 2 (above): from *Dr. P Series*, "Episode 1"
Fig. 3 (right): from *Dr. P Series*, "Episode 1"

I find the visuals and text of this particular episode cruel and unpleasant, but there is something about them that keeps me (and many other readers) reading the episode. I even laugh while reading, without knowing fully who and what I am laughing at. There are clearly an innocent victim and a violent aggressor, but I neither understand nor relate to either character's thoughts, behaviors, and actions. Dr. P's actions and behaviors are so incoherent, absurd, and out of context that I cannot attribute to him any motivation. The experience of the patient, on the other hand, is equally difficult to make sense of. Even if I notice his pain and feel bad for him, I cannot mirror his feelings in his incomprehensible situation and do not feel emotionally transported into the narrative world. Consequently, I fail to identify and empathize with the patient. Neither character offers me a point of view through which I would like to navigate the fictional world, but I continue to read this and other episodes nevertheless. That is, although neither mind-reading nor empathy seems to occur in my reading experience to make sense of the fictional world, there is still a strong desire for narrative.

What happens in GG's episode, then, is at odds with how narrative operates (as cognitive literary scholars would explain) and defies our typical efforts to make sense of the minds of characters and engage with them emotionally. The popularity of the episode, however, is a clear indication that something other than mind-reading and reader empathy is at work here, something that reveals that literature can be incomprehensible, unpleasant, and amusing simultaneously. The nature of displeasure and pleasure has been a long-standing interest in emotion research. Some researchers view them as mutually exclusive because, as Ulrich Schimmack in "Pleasure, Displeasure, and Mixed Feelings" points out, they describe different quantities along a single dimension, "just like 'short' and 'tall' are opposing labels for different heights" (81). According to these researchers, just as one cannot be short and tall simultaneously, opposite feelings along a single dimension, such as pleasure and displeasure, cannot occur concurrently. Other researchers, on the other hand, argue that these two conflicting feelings in fact could occur at the same time, and consequently, are "at best represented by two unipolar dimensions" rather than a single bipolar dimension (Schimmack 82). Recent developments in functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) offer a compelling ground for this two unipolar, co-activation approach. The mapping of the emotional brain through fMRI pictures, for instance, has shown amygdala as the main neural correlate for fear and other likely negative emotions, whereas happiness and other likely positive emotions usually require prefrontal cortex participation, among other areas (Andrade and Cohen 286). With the evidence from fMRI pictures, it seems safe to

conclude that pleasure and displeasure, represented by two unipolar dimensions, are indeed not mutually exclusive and therefore can occur concurrently.

Fig. 4: *Dr. P Series,* "Episode 2" (2008) by GG

What is interesting about this co-activation approach is that the concurrence of mixed feelings is most likely to happen in what Eduardo Andrade and Joel Cohn in "On the Consumption of Negative Feelings" call "the detachment manipulation condition" (288). When participants in an experiment watched short documentaries prior to watching a horror film, for instance, they were able to establish a more neutral emotional state that functioned as a "protective frame of mind" and reported positive emotional responses while still experiencing fearfulness (289). The detachment manipulation condition, in other words, allows individuals to remain detached from negative feelings and adopt a frame of mind "adequate to convince [themselves] that real danger/threat is not actually present" (295). The result of this research can be translated into the concept of point of view in literature and film. Previous studies by cognitive literary scholars, such as David Herman and Patrick Hogan, have shown that readers draw on their normal modes of understanding people and encoding social episodes when reading stories. Comprehending stories, then, involves relating the actions, thoughts, and behaviors of the characters in the text to existing knowledge and memory of the real world. It is also believed that readers' interpretive strategies and emotional responses enhance when they identify with the traits or motives of the characters, that is, when readers associate with the point of view of one or more of the characters in the fictional world. Narratives thus often manipulate point of view by using concepts such as focalization, a technique to select or restrict narrative information in relation to experience and knowledge of the narrator or the characters in fiction. Andrade and Cohn's research, however,

indicates that readers or viewers must not share the point of view of the characters or the narrator in fearful narratives in order to occupy a more neutral, detached emotional state that allows for a "protective frame of mind" (289); they thereby experience mixed feelings.

Scott Hemenover and Ulrich Schimmack conducted a similar experiment where participants watched a disgusting-humorous scene from the movie *Pink Flamingos* (1973), in which the main character eats dog feces in a funny manner. Participants in the experiment were divided into two groups. Some were given a role of an insider and read the following instructions: "Imagine that you are this main character doing, thinking and feeling what this character does. Put yourself in the frame of mind so that you are responding as you would if it was actually you experiencing the situation as the main character" (Hemenover and Schimmack 1106). The other participants, on the other hand, were invited to take a position of the outsider and were asked to read the following: "Imagine you have no connection to what is happening and that what is happening cannot impact you in any way. You are simply observing and reacting the events as they unfold" (Hemenover and Schimmack 1106). Participants completed a consent form prior to watching the clip and answered questionnaires after the clip assessing their emotional responses between amusement and disgust. In order to measure mixed feelings, ratings were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). The result of the experiment shows that those participants who watched the scene from the position of the protagonist (the character who eats the dog feces) reported disgusting feelings, whereas those who took the outsider's position reported mixed feelings of disgust and amusement. The experiment reveals to us two important findings: that the co-occurrence of two conflicting feelings (disgust and amusement, displeasure and pleasure) is indeed possible, and that taking an outsider's point of view enhances the experience of mixed feelings.

It is important to consider, then, how GG's webtoons facilitate the experience of mixed feelings to entertain readers with what can be potentially unpleasant and aversive. As an example, let us turn to another Dr. P episode, which was the sequel to the episode mentioned earlier. This subsequent episode is different only because the brutality and violence depicted in the panels are even more severe this time. The episode starts with a close-up shot of the patient lying on the floor with a face grossly distorted with pain. Dr. P looks at the patient briefly and takes his next move by smashing the patient's face and breaking his teeth: "Once all your teeth are gone, there is no reason why you should have any toothache" (*Dr. P Series,* "Episode 2"). Bleeding fatally and almost unconscious, the patient finally says, "Please just kill me" (*Dr. P Series,* "Episode 2"). Dr. P then proceeds with his next and last action by crushing the patient's skull and announces, "Any pain we feel originates from our brain. With your brain being dead, you will never recognize any pain" (*Dr. P Series,* "Episode 2," see Fig. 4). Three panels with

the patient's bloody face repeat one after another, which I will not include here due to their highly graphic nature. The episode ends with the death of the patient.

Given that avoiding an insider's point of view is a major determining factor in eliciting mixed feelings in viewers, it is worth noting that GG's episode encourages readers to take an outsider's position and remain detached from the narrative. It does this by centralizing unreadable minds and hindering character identification. There, of course, are other narratives with unreadable minds that still lead to an engaging reading experience and invite readers to identify with the characters. Porter Abbott in "Unreadable Minds and the Captive Reader," for instance, outlines three types of default reading positions in fiction made possible through unreadable minds. Namely, characters who appear to be unreadable can (1) be stereotyped by others, (2) invite a symbolic reading, or (3) function in the characterization of another. Dr. P's unreadable mind, however, does not facilitate these three types of default reading. Whereas stereotyping and symbolizing require a certain degree of familiarity for association, the absurd and incoherent nature of Dr. P's action only further displaces him from the recognizable narrative situation (the doctor-patient interaction) and precludes any kind of categorizing or typology. Dr. P's unreadability does not lead to the characterization of another character either and fails to operate as "a catalyst in a drama of non-reading, with the focus on the captive reader as she/he copes with the unreadable" (Abbott 451). The only other character in the episode, the patient, cannot take the position of the "captive reader" and cope with the unreadable Dr. P, as each brief episode lacks any sustained interaction between the two characters. Their interaction does not lead to the characterization of the patient. Instead, the patient is rendered into a mere dehumanized object for Dr. P's bizarre violence and in turn another inscrutable mind. Dr. P stops being the "catalyst in a drama of non-reading" for the patient and for readers.

Dr. P's unresolved unreadability, however, does something crucial that enables readers to view the narrative with a degree of ease in spite of the violence and its ethical implications. Precisely because we give up on Dr. P as a plausible character, Dr. P's action becomes benign. We are therefore released from the burden of ethically evaluating Dr. P and can take an outsider's position as an observer while keeping a safe distance from what is unpleasant and troubling within the narrative world. This "comfortable" distancing is further maintained due to some narrative elements that prohibit empathetic responses for the patient character. For one thing, the visualization of the patient makes him, the innocent victim, appear less significant than his aggressor, Dr. P. Whereas the appearance of Dr. P reminds one of a superhero—he is tall, strong, and firm in his demeanor and wears the recognizable superhero cape—the patient is generally uncharacteristic and lacks any depth as a character. His only interesting and recognizable visual marker is the toothbrush stuck in his bald head, which makes him even more

unrealistic, and he is drawn with sketchy and unsophisticated lines. We might feel sorry for the patient, but we do not come to identify with him and share his point of view.

While readers associate neither with Dr. P nor with the patient, the narrative environment is optimized to provoke mixed feelings. Readers can continue to read the episode without being too troubled by the unpleasantness of the violence depicted in the narrative and can even be amused by the absurdity of it. Of course, some readers might be puzzled and even baffled by the ambivalence of the mixed feelings of pleasure and displeasure. This emotional indeterminacy in GG's episode, however, is in fact crucial. According to David Miall in "Affect and Narrative: a Model of Response to Stories," readers follow familiar codes, frames, and schemata of the real world and relate them to stories when they read. When readers confront an unfamiliar narrative situation with no coherent schema and are put in a state of uncertainty, readers' affective response takes over to reshape their interpretive strategies and direct them through the narrative. After an affective response is made, "affect will then guide the formation or appropriation of a schema adequate to the developing narrative" (Miall 261). With affect as a new guiding force, readers either apply existing schema to an unfamiliar domain or create a new schema. In the case of GG's episode, not only is the narrative situation unfamiliar, but the ambivalent and conflicting emotional responses aroused in the minds of readers may further de-familiarize readers without offering a new interpretive direction for them. In other words, as GG's readers experience mixed feelings, they will have a hard time coming to terms with their own emotional response to the characters in the narrative world and might even give up on their interpretive endeavors before they can create a new schema and investigate the narrative more deeply.

This interpretive challenge, however, helps readers avoid what Suzanne Keen calls "personal distress," "an aversive emotional response also characterized by apprehension of another's emotion" (208). In reading, personal distress, like empathy, occurs when readers orient the (negative) feelings or experiences of the characters towards themselves and identify with them. Personal distress, however, is different from empathy as this overly aroused negative emotional response causes "turning away from the provocative condition of the other" (Keen 208), not the pro-social or altruistic actions or thoughts. When readers experience personal distress in reading, then, they are more likely to stop reading even as they feel for the character in her situation. That is, if GG's readers were to engage more deeply with the episode and attempt to make sense of the patient's unpleasant condition, they might experience this personal distress and eventually stop reading the narrative. However, neither the existing knowledge of the real world nor an affective response helps readers create the right schema to investigate the narrative further. In consequence, GG's readers give up on making sense of the aversive situation of the

patient before personal distress steps in and instead enter a more neutral and detached emotional state. Mixed feelings of pleasure and displeasure in GG's episode, while they might not lead to the creation of a new interpretive strategy, prohibit personal distress and allow readers to continue to view the narrative with an adequate distance.

Notably, too, GG's episode does not have what is so essential to comics, the complexity and ambiguity provided by "the gutter." Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* explains the gutter as the empty space between the panels that plays "host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics" (66). Whereas comics panels "fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments" (67), this empty space called the gutter helps readers take two separate images and connect them to mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. Many comics artists deliberately complicate this mental process for readers for different aesthetic, thematic, and cognitive purposes. For example, they sometimes fill the gutter with different images and even colors, while some others might merge the gutter into the panels ("bleeding"). By doing this, comics artists manage to encourage readers to more actively engage with and imagine the construction of the narrative, thereby inviting them into the fictional world more readily. The gutter in GG's episode, however, eliminates this complexity and intensity by functioning primarily and simply as a dividing border between the panels. Throughout the episode, the black straight lines, the conventional form of the gutter, consistently divide the panels, making it easier for readers to assume that these separate images transform into a single, unified idea without having to interrogate and imagine what really happens in between. Likewise, the vertical, top-down arrangement of the panels in GG's episode preempts any ambiguity of complex page layout and panel display. All readers have to do in GG's episode is to keep on scrolling down the screen and read from top to bottom without trying hard to figure out the right direction for reading and understanding. While the violence and overall unreadability of the episode might add anxiety and discomfort to readers, the physical reading experience in general becomes less intense. We view and could possibly apprehend the violence and pain that the patient undergoes, but the ways in which the comics is structured lessen our burden of becoming the actual part of the making of this narrative world. While we are less involved in the "making" of the comics, we are given enough distance from what really happens in the panels and therefore can make sure not to direct the unpleasant condition of the narrative towards ourselves.

Our attraction or tolerance for the "badness" of the "bad taste" webtoons can further be thought of in relation to the ways in which negative feelings are often transformed into an important "operational requirement" in what we do and feel. Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings*, for instance, explores the deeply equivocal status of what she calls "ugly feelings," such as envy, fear, paranoia, irritation, and disgust,

and notes the critical productivity of these feelings in today's sociopolitical and economic contexts:

> Fears of particular dangers . . . haunt the workday like a mood that cannot be escaped. This fear, however, is . . . a special tool of the trade. Insecurity about one's place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privilege, and anxiety over being 'left behind' translate into flexibility, adaptability, and readiness to reconfigure oneself. (4)

Ngai further illustrates the ambivalent nature of "ugly feelings" by discussing Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." In this short story, Bartleby's refusal to do anything other than copying provokes in the mind of his employer a repugnance that includes a great deal of fascination:

> Significantly, in keeping with his convivial "Wall-Street spirit," it is the prudent suppression of [Bartleby's] aversion that enables the Lawyer to tolerate his employee's discomforting presence . . . . If the disgusting is always that which is insistent and intolerable, Melville suggests that tolerance is always, in some fundamental way, a negation of disgust. (Ngai 333)

Just as disgust is conjoined by desire in "Bartleby the Scrivener," we are on the one hand repulsed by the violence in GG's webtoons and on the other hand tolerate this violence. Rather than actively investigating and judging the (unreadable) actions, behaviors, and minds of the characters, we take an outsider's position and manage the "badness" from a distance. In fact this "badness" is more than just tolerable. The thousands of enthusiastic responses for GG's webtoons indicate that readers thrive on and draw immense pleasure from what is supposedly ridiculous and abhorrent.

A popular culture critic Myungsuk Lee explains that the wide popularity of "bad taste" webtoons in Korea is indicative of the frustration and distress that young Koreans feel living in the perfection-driven competitive Korean society (Kim). While the society is hungry for what is right and perfect, the "bad taste" webtoons are incoherently put together, use "wrong" images and languages without shame, and are drawn sketchily with indelicate and hasty lines. All these "bad" elements, however, enable "bad taste" webtoons to defy the "higher" social and cultural standards and expectations, while not making any specific and didactic message about these values. Readers of "bad taste" webtoons are free to release themselves from the burden of having to be always right and perfect and think deeply of what they see and feel. Abbott in his examination of unreadable fictional minds also cautions our impulse to make sense of what is unreadable and posits that narratives

with unreadable minds "work best when we allow ourselves to rest in that peculiar combination of anxiety and wonder that is aroused when an unreadable mind is accepted as unreadable" (448). Similarly, GG in an interview once said, "I do not want my readers to think too deeply about what happens in my webtoons and try to make sense of the characters' actions and minds because they are not supposed make any sense. I simply want my readers to empty their mind and head and enjoy the unrealistic, incoherent, and messy [fictional] world as depicted in my webtoons" (Kim). When we can abandon the impulse to read and make sense of the minds of others and the characters in the real and fictional worlds, then, we can fully become the captive reader of the unpleasant, which no longer will be unpleasant.

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