

Chapter 6

CHARLEY'S WORLD: NARRATIVES OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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Through directly perceiving an art work – seeing a picture or a sculpture, listening to music, reading a novel – we can come aesthetically to appreciate that art work, and also to gain an understanding of the world – of reality outside or beyond the work itself. A suitably informed critic can help us to do these things – to see what we otherwise would fail to see.

This is a view that I accept. I do not intend to argue for it here (see Sibley 2001a; Graham 1995; Young 1999, 2001). I will, however, consider an example from literature which I think nicely illustrates the truth of the view: it concerns the experiences of Charley, a character in a novel by Somerset Maugham called *Christmas Holiday*. Although fictional, what happens in the fiction illustrates how an art work's aesthetic properties, and its cognitive value, can come to be appreciated by someone (Charley) through his direct perception of it, in this case in the presence of someone else – a critic we might say. The particular art work that Charley experiences in the novel is a Chardin still life, hung in the Louvre, depicting a loaf of bread and a flagon of wine. I begin by discussing what happens in the novel, and give an account of how, in the novel, Charley is affected through his experiences.

I then turn to the reader, and consider how the reader of the novel can be affected by Charley's experience – more specifically by imagining the experiences that Charley has in the novel, and then by coming to be actually affected by what he imagines. The reader can be affected in at least two respects: first, by gaining a new worldly understanding; and secondly, by coming to have a changed aesthetic disposition – a different way of appreciating art works.

At this point, things will turn a bit tricky, for we will have been working on the implicit assumption that the Chardin still life that Charley experiences, while of course real *in the fiction*, does not, in fact, exist and hang in the Louvre, or at least it does not need to exist in order for the novel to have the effects on the reader that I have mentioned so far. But what if there is, in fact, such a Chardin in the Louvre, which, let us also assume, the reader has himself seen before reading the novel? Can the reader's imagining seeing the Chardin, as part of his imaginative engagement with the novel, affect his appreciation of its aesthetic properties in enabling him to see things in the work that he otherwise would have failed to see?

Answering these questions leads me in the concluding section to the final issue that I want to discuss, one concerning aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgment. It is a widely accepted view that the aesthetic properties and cognitive value of an art work cannot be appreciated without the art work's being perceived, or experienced, directly; so direct confrontation with an art work is *necessary* for these kinds of appreciation, as it is for aesthetic judgment. In the light of my discussion of how the reader of *Christmas Holiday* can be changed, I want at least to raise the question of whether these accepted views are as stable as one might initially think. While it is surely right to privilege direct aesthetic experience, it is a mistake to have too stark a dividing line here – one which is insufficiently faithful to the subtlety of the psychological phenomena.

In Somerset Maugham's *Christmas Holiday* (1939/2001), Charley is the son of Leslie and Venetia Mason. The family is rather prosperous. At the time of the events that take place in the novel, Charley is twenty-three, having spent three years at Cambridge and one in his father's private firm, where he will be expected eventually to take over. Charley has been brought up to appreciate art, albeit in a rather conventional way, especially by his mother, who considers herself to have good aesthetic taste.

As a treat, to celebrate Charley's passing the exams that will enable him to follow in his chosen calling as secretary of the Mason Estate, his father sends him to Paris for a Christmas holiday. He had been to Paris several times before, but always with his parents. This would be his first time alone, and his parents expect him to have a 'good time.' When he gets there, he calls on his old friend Simon, who takes him to a brothel. There, Simon introduces him to a girl, a Russian immigrant, called Lydia. On something of a whim, Charley invites her to the midnight mass at St. Eustache, for which he happened to have two tickets. When they get there, after the *Adeste Fidelis*, a choirboy sings a canticle, and suddenly Charley becomes conscious that Lydia is crying, in a way that causes Charley, being English and not brought up to be overly expressive, considerable embarrassment: "Her sobbing grew