



Architecture as Feeling Engine: Affective Communal Reading of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013)

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Abstract— This article examines how the narrative architectures of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013) function as “feeling engines” that engage readers’ emotions and interpretive practices. The study proposes the Affective–Communal Reading Framework (ACRF), which integrates theories of affective poetics and reader-response criticism, to compare the two novels’ distinct forms *Cloud Atlas*’s nested Matryoshka-like structure and *The Luminaries*’s astrologically-scaled design, and their influence on gap-filling reading habits across interpretive communities. Three research questions guide the analysis: (1) How do *Cloud Atlas*’s nested narratives cue readers’ emotional responses and gap-filling processes? (2) How do *The Luminaries*’s astrological form and neo-Victorian conventions affect readers’ interpretations and communal reading norms? (3) In what ways can the ACRF illuminate the cooperative role of individual affect and social context in constructing each novel’s moral and aesthetic significance? This study argues that both novels, though structurally different, use formal deviation to defamiliarize readers and prompt “felt” shifts in understanding (Miall & Kuiken, 1994, 2002). By drawing on Wolfgang Iser’s concept of textual “gaps” and the “wandering viewpoint” of the reader (Iser, 1978) alongside Stanley Fish’s theory of interpretive communities (Fish, 1980), this paper demonstrates that readers’ emotional engagement and community-shaped assumptions work in tandem to complete the texts’ meanings.

Keywords— Affective Poetics, Reader-Response Theory, Interpretive Communities, Narrative Architecture, *Cloud Atlas*, *The Luminaries*, Neo-Victorian Fiction, Foregrounding, Defamiliarisation, Gap-Filling.



I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary fiction has increasingly experimented with ambitious narrative architectures that challenge readers’ expectations and interpretive habits. David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Eleanor Catton’s *The Luminaries* (2013) are two celebrated novels – both

prize-winning and widely discussed that push the boundaries of novelistic form. Mitchell (2004) structures *Cloud Atlas* as a series of six nested stories, each set in a different era and genre, arranged in a symmetrical “Chinese box” or Matryoshka-doll pattern (Eve, 2015; Gomathi, 2024). Catton (2013), in *The Luminaries*, constructs an

intricate neo-Victorian mystery structured according to astrological principles, complete with star charts and a part-length structure that wanes like the phases of the moon (Mullan, 2014). In each case, the author's name and the year of publication, Mitchell (2004) and Catton (2013), have become shorthand for innovative form in early twenty-first-century fiction. Yet these complex architectures are not mere stylistic games; they profoundly shape how readers engage with the story, feel about characters and events, and collaborate (often implicitly) as interpretive communities to make meaning. The question driving this research is how such narrative 'architecture' functions as a *feeling engine*, a mechanism that generates emotional responses and directs the gap-filling operations of readers, ultimately influencing the moral and aesthetic significance that different reading communities derive from the text.

Prior studies of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Luminaries* have tended to focus on their postmodern playfulness, genre hybridity, or historical commentary (Beville, 2015; Knepper, 2016; Mathur, 2019; Scheckter, 2017), but fewer have explicitly analyzed the role of reader emotions and social reading contexts in making sense of these novels' elaborate forms. This paper addresses that gap by proposing an integrative framework, the Affective Communal Reading Framework (ACRF), and applying it to Mitchell (2004) and Catton (2013). The ACRF synthesizes Miall and Kuiken's insights on affective defamiliarization, Iser's reader-response dynamics of gap-filling, and Fish's interpretive community concept. Through this framework, we seek to explain how *Cloud Atlas* and *The Luminaries* guide readers to *feel* and to *interpret*, and how those feelings and interpretations are mediated by communal reading practices (academic critics, genre fans, general readers, etc.). By comparing a structurally nested novel with an astrologically structured one, we can observe how different architectures cue different "gap-filling habits" (the strategies readers use to connect fragments and solve narrative puzzles) across interpretive communities.

This paper devotes separate sections to each novel's narrative architecture and the reading experience it generates, with close attention to moments of affective defamiliarization (e.g., abrupt structural breaks, genre shifts, and metafictional insertions) and to how readers, individually and collectively, respond to the interpretive "gaps" that these structures create. For *Cloud Atlas*, this paper explores how its concentric, discontinuous narratives invite the reader to become a unifying consciousness, piecing together six different stories while experiencing a range of emotions from confusion and curiosity to awe and moral concern (Knepper, 2016; Itakura, 2021). For *The Luminaries*, we examine how its strictly patterned yet enigmatic astrological framework creates a distinctive

blend of reader responses – from the cognitive pleasure of puzzle-solving to the feeling of being 'befuddled' or awed by a grand design (Mullan, 2014), and how different communities of readers (e.g. literary critics, genre enthusiasts, astrologers, casual readers) have variously completed the text's meaning based on their familiarity with its elaborate schema (Scheckter, 2017; Mathur, 2019). By foregrounding the cooperative role of emotion and community, we aim to show that the true "moral and aesthetic significance" of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Luminaries* emerges not solely from the texts themselves, nor from readers alone, but from the dynamic interplay between evocative form and interpretive context.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE AFFECTIVE COMMUNAL READING FRAMEWORK (ACRF)

The Affective Communal Reading Framework (ACRF) developed in this paper is an integrative approach that explains literary interpretation as a collaboration between a reader's affective experience and the norms of the interpretive community to which that reader belongs. In articulating the ACRF, it draws on three key theoretical sources: (a) Miall and Kuiken's affective-poetics theory of reader response to stylistic foregrounding; (b) Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological model of reading as the filling of gaps by an implied reader's consciousness; and (c) Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities, which socially regulate interpretation. By merging these, the ACRF posits that readers' emotions (shaped by textual cues) and their *communal interpretive strategies* work together to 'complete' the text.

Affective Foregrounding and Felt Shifts: Miall and Kuiken (1994, 2002) propose that certain textual features, especially deviations from ordinary language or form (what Russian formalists called *ostranenie* or defamiliarization), have a special capacity to evoke affective responses in readers. Such features might include striking metaphors, unusual syntax, non-linear narrative arrangement, or any pattern that disrupts readers' habitual expectations. When encountering these foregrounded elements, "the reader's normal schemata are disturbed, and a process of reflection or re-evaluation is triggered, often accompanied by a feeling" (Miall & Kuiken, 1994, p. 389). For example, a sudden break in narrative chronology or an unexpected point-of-view shift can produce feelings of surprise, curiosity, or even confusion all of which alert the reader that this moment is significant and invite a deeper engagement. Miall and Kuiken (2002) describe *levels* of feeling in literary response, distinguishing initial affective reactions (interest, intrigue, suspense) from more profound "aesthetic

feelings” that emerge as readers reflect on patterns and meanings. As an example, consider the moment in *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2004) when the first narrative (Adam Ewing's Pacific journal) cuts off mid-sentence, ‘Anything as exquisitely alive as’ at the end of a chapter. This abrupt break in the middle of a word is a foregrounded deviation from narrative closure, likely to produce a jolt of confusion or curiosity in the reader. According to affective-poetics, such a *felt shift* spurs the reader to ask, ‘Why did the text break here? What does this interruption mean?’ The emotional perturbation (a mix of frustration and intrigue) instigates an “affectively guided search for alternative interpretations” (Miall & Kuiken, 2002, p. 230). In other words, feelings of surprise or puzzlement caused by defamiliarization directly lead readers to hypothesize, predict, or reinterpret, a process we will see in both novels under study. The ACRF thus starts from the premise that narrative architecture, when it deviates from linear or familiar forms, is not an inert container but an active *affective device*: it makes readers feel something, which in turn makes them think *and* feel their way toward meaning.

Textual Gaps, the Implied Reader, and the Wandering Viewpoint: Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory complements the affective perspective by detailing how readers construct meaning through interaction with textual indeterminacies. In *The Act of Reading* (1978), Iser argues that literary texts always contain *gaps*, moments of indeterminacy, omissions, or unanswered questions, which are essential to the reading experience. These gaps are not flaws but deliberate spaces for the reader's imagination: “By impeding textual coherence, the blanks transform themselves into stimuli for acts of ideation” (Iser, 1978, p. 275). The ‘wandering viewpoint’ concept is especially relevant to Mitchell's and Catton's works: as the reader, for instance, shifts from the 19th-century diary in *Cloud Atlas* to a 1930s composer's letters, then to a 1970s thriller, and so on, her viewpoint must continuously readjust, wandering among diverse styles and times while trying to form an overarching narrative. At each transition, there is a gap. How did we get from the previous story to this one? What connections unite them? The reader attempts to fill in, if only provisionally, until more of the text is revealed. Iser (1978) notes that reading is an inherently *intersubjective* act: the text's “instructions” for assembling meaning only come alive through the reader's participation, and each reader's realization of the text will be slightly different. A highly fragmented or nested form creates a multitude of micro-gaps (between segments) and macro-gaps (what overall message to take away) that readers labor to resolve. The emotional dimension (from Miall & Kuiken) dovetails with this: it is often the *feeling* of suspense, uncertainty, or anticipation that propels the reader's “ideation” to fill gaps

(Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Thus, affect and gap-filling are entwined: feelings signal where the gaps are and how urgently they demand filling, while the activity of filling gaps can itself produce new emotional rewards (satisfaction when pieces click, shock when a realization dawns, etc.).

Interpretive Communities and Communal Norms: Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities (1980) adds a crucial social dimension to the framework. Fish challenges the notion that meaning resides fixed in the text or solely in individual readers; instead, he argues that what a reader finds in a text depends on the interpretive strategies that her community has normalized. In Fish's formulation, “interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them” – and they make them according to shared understandings of what one is *supposed* to do with a text (Fish, 1980, p. 327). These shared understandings are taught, often tacitly, by institutions (schools, critical traditions, fan cultures) and they determine everything from what counts as a valid question to ask about a text to what counts as evidence from the text to answer it (Fish, 1980). For instance, a member of a literary academic community might approach *The Luminaries* already primed to notice its astrological motifs and Victorian intertextuality, seeing those as keys to interpretation (Scheckter, 2017). A casual mystery reader, by contrast, might focus on the whodunit plot and character motives, perhaps skimming over the star charts as extraneous. Each set of readers writes a different meaning “into” the novel based on their community's strategies (Fish, 1980; Mambrol, 2016). Fish famously demonstrated this concept in an anecdote where students, believing a list of names on a board was a poem, “found” rich religious allegory and poetic structure in it, because, as members of a literature class, they approached it with the strategies for reading poetry (Fish, 1980). In short, interpretive communities *socially calibrate* reading: they decide which gaps *should* be filled and how, which anomalies are meaningful or which are accidents, and what emotional or ethical responses are appropriate. Communities can be as formal as scholarly circles or as informal as fandoms or book clubs. Notably, communities can also differ in emotional orientation: a horror fiction fan community might valorize feelings of fear and shock as marks of a good text, whereas a literary community might prize a text that elicits empathy or aesthetic wonder. Thus, communal norms influence not just cognitive interpretation but the reader's emotional engagement and the way those emotions are discussed or valued.

In summary, the ACRF suggests that the process of reading *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2004) or *The Luminaries* (Catton, 2013) is one in which textual form (nested or astrologically segmented) produces foregrounding effects

that evoke emotional responses, which in turn prompt readers to fill interpretive gaps in real time. This individual, affect-driven process occurs under the guidance (and constraint) of communal interpretive norms, meaning that how a reader interprets the cause of their feelings or the solutions to the narrative puzzles depends on what their interpretive community has primed them to see. Next, this paper applies this framework to each novel in detail, identifying specific instances of how narrative architecture engages the reader's feelings and how communities have converged or diverged in making meaning of those structures.

Nested Narrative and Affective Gap-Filling in *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2004)

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) is emblematic of early 21st-century experimental fiction, celebrated for its intricate "nesting" of six stories that span different genres, time periods, and voices. The novel's architecture is often compared to a Russian Matryoshka doll or a musical sextet: each narrative is encased within the next, except for the central tale which stands whole, and then the earlier narratives resume in reverse order, creating a symmetrical (palindromic) structure (Eve, 2015; Gomathi, 2024). Specifically, the sequence is: (1) the 1850 Pacific diary of Adam Ewing (broken off midway), (2) the 1931 letters of Robert Frobisher (also cut off), (3) a 1975 California detective thriller about Luisa Rey (ends abruptly), (4) a 21st-century comic picaresque of Timothy Cavendish (cut off), (5) a dystopian 22nd-century "orison" transcript from clone Sonmi-451 (cut off at a revelation), (6) a far-future oral tale by Zachry in post-apocalyptic Hawaii (the only story told fully, at the novel's center), after which Sonmi's, Cavendish's, Luisa's, Frobisher's, and Ewing's narratives each conclude in turn. Mitchell's nested design is a striking case of foregrounding at the level of form: it breaks the conventional linear novel and advertises its own artifice. The reader, encountering the first abrupt cut-off (Ewing's journal stops mid-sentence in the 1850 diary), is immediately defamiliarized. As noted earlier, such a structural rupture produces a felt shift: confusion, surprise, even a mild anxiety about what happened to the narrative one was just invested in. For example, many readers report feeling a keen sense of loss or worry when the Pacific journal of Adam Ewing is cut off just as a possibly treacherous doctor is about to administer medicine (Mitchell, 2004). In a traditional novel, a cliffhanger or sudden break might be a momentary device, but here Mitchell prolongs that uncertainty for hundreds of pages. This elicits what Miall and Kuiken (2002) would call a *sustained narrative feeling* of intrigue and anticipation: we carry forward questions (Will Ewing survive? What was the rest of that sentence?) as a kind of emotional undertow

beneath our engagement with the next stories. Indeed, *Cloud Atlas* encourages this carry-over: each new section explicitly references the previous one as a text within the story (Eve, 2015). Frobisher, in 1931, writes in his letters that he has discovered "half of a journal of a Pacific voyage, in an old bookshop, unfortunately torn in two, most curious!" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 64). This not only ties the plots diegetically but also reassures the reader that the bewildering break was intentional and that the text itself acknowledges it as a puzzle piece. The effect on the reader is a little burst of recognition and delight: so the stories are connected! That emotional reward is important – it motivates the reader to hunt for further connections, turning reading into a participatory game of pattern-matching (Hopf, 2011; Timm, 2018).

As the novel progresses, each narrative shift performs a similar function. The stylistic contrasts between sections (19th-century pastiche, modern thriller, sci-fi dialect, etc.) are sharply drawn, constituting foregrounded deviations whenever we move from one to the next. The reader must *adjust* to each new voice, effectively restarting the reading process multiple times (Knepper, 2016; Machinal, 2011). This could risk alienating readers, but Mitchell embeds a chain of embedded texts that serve as breadcrumbs linking the segments: Frobisher's letters are read by Luisa Rey in the next story; Luisa's story manuscript is submitted to Cavendish; Cavendish's life becomes a movie that Sonmi-451 watches; Sonmi's recorded orison becomes scripture for Zachry's people in the far future (Eve, 2015; Trimm, 2018). These embedded artifacts are themselves gaps made visible: each artifact appears without a full explanation of how it survived or what its ultimate significance will be, prompting readers to speculate. For instance, when Luisa (1975) reads the Frobisher (1931) letters, she marvels that they end abruptly with Frobisher's unfinished sextet composition, and as readers, one might wonder if one might ever get Frobisher's fate (Mitchell, 2004). By experiencing Luisa's curiosity, the reader's own affective state (curiosity, concern for Frobisher) is mirrored and amplified. Iser's "wandering viewpoint" concept is vividly enacted here: the reader's perspective has wandered from Frobisher's mind to Luisa's, and in doing so collects knowledge (Luisa found more letters than we originally saw) but also feels the same incompleteness that Frobisher's story left with us.

In the final pages, Ewing resolves to devote his life to combating injustice, declaring that "my life amounts to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean. Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 529). This line, explicitly connecting individual and collective significance, often leaves readers with a shiver of emotion, a sense of transcendent unity or optimism, that strongly

confirms the novel's communal reading as a humanist message (Itakura, 2021). Academic and critical communities have cited this as the emotional crescendo that ties the novel's stories together into a coherent ethical vision (Itakura, 2021; Eugenides, 2005).

However, not all interpretive communities responded in the same way. Some genre-oriented readers, for example, science fiction fans or mystery readers, appreciated specific segments of *Cloud Atlas* (the cyberpunk dystopia of Sonmi-451 or the detective story with Luisa Rey) but found the overall structure perplexing or even frustrating when those segments were interrupted (as noted anecdotally in reader forums and reviews from general audiences in 2004-2005). A reader expecting a payoff in each genre could be disoriented by Mitchell's decision to halt each story at a climactic moment. Without the communal norm that "postmodern narrative can break rules deliberately," some readers saw these breaks as flaws or were emotionally disengaged by the constant switching. One might say these readers were part of a community with the assumption that a novel should primarily entertain in a straightforward way; thus, their affective response to *Cloud Atlas*'s architecture may have been irritation or impatience rather than intrigue. Indeed, interpretive communities also influence what readers do when they feel confused: one community (e.g., literary scholars) teaches that confusion is a sign to delve deeper, whereas another community (e.g., readers seeking escapism) might take confusion as a sign that the book is not for them. Fish's theory helps explain this divergence: the meaning of the very same structural feature, say, the non-linear structure, is constructed differently by different communities, one treating it as meaningful and emotionally resonant (What a profound way to show interconnection), another as meaningless complexity (Why is this told out of order? It's needlessly hard to follow).

Within the novel's world, Mitchell (2004) even provides a gentle satire of interpretive communities through the character of Timothy Cavendish, a vanity-press publisher. Cavendish dismisses the manuscript of Luisa's story (which in his timeline is presented as a fictional thriller) with little interest, illustrating a rather philistine interpretive stance, a community of one that doesn't 'get' the deeper import. Later, Cavendish's own surreal adventure in a nursing home is made into a film, which future clone Sonmi finds oddly moving without knowing why. These layers suggest that texts can acquire new meanings in new contexts, a very Fish-ian idea that meaning is not stable but depends on who is reading and why. Sonmi's heartfelt response to the old "ghastly ordeal" film is particularly poignant because it shows an interpretive act far removed from authorial intent, yet valid for her

community and time (Itakura, 2021, discusses how Sonmi's people revere the film as a testament of human dignity, a reading Cavendish likely never imagined).

All in all, readers who accept that habit (often because their interpretive community primes them to trust the text) report a powerful experience of catharsis and intellectual satisfaction by the end (Itakura, 2021). They have, in effect, cooperatively authored the novel's significance: the author provided the drops, the reader-ocean made them into a multitude. Those readers for whom the habit did not take hold – often outside the literary community that celebrates such complexity, may put down the novel feeling only confusion or discontent, their emotional response leading them to a different closure (perhaps 'this novel is overrated' or 'too confusing,' a meaning constructed in alignment with a community that values clarity or linearity). Thus, *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates the ACRF vividly: narrative architecture engages emotions (surprise, curiosity, awe) that drive gap-filling, and the outcome of that gap-filling (coherent moral/aesthetic meaning or lack thereof) depends significantly on interpretive community norms. The novel's reputation as a "cult classic" and a "demanding read" shows how it has, over time, consolidated an interpretive community that embraces its pattern, many readers now approach *Cloud Atlas* already aware that they should expect a mosaic and that part of the fun is solving it (as evidenced by reading guides and book club discussions that frame it this way). In the next section, we will see a parallel case in *The Luminaries* (Catton, 2013), which presents a different form of structural complexity and has elicited its own spectrum of affective-interpretive responses across communities.

Astrological Structure and Interpretive Community in *The Luminaries* (Catton, 2013)

Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013) is another formidable work of narrative architecture, distinguished by its use of a rigid astrological framework to shape the story's structure, characters, and even its chapter lengths. This is a classic instance of stylistic foregrounding on a grand scale, the novel deviates from the normal historical fiction format by introducing an arcane symbolic code. Readers experience a 'felt shift' of disorientation: Am I supposed to understand these star charts? Do they matter to the story? These affective questions arise even before the main narrative begins. Catton's first chapter then immerses the reader in a scene reminiscent of a 19th-century sensation novel: twelve men gather in a tavern to discuss a series of mysterious events (a wealthy man's disappearance, a prostitute's overdose, a trove of gold found). The prose style mimics Victorian diction and omniscient narration. Initially, a reader might set aside the astrological puzzle and

engage with the story at face value, feeling the pleasures of suspense and curiosity as the intricate plot unfolds. However, the awareness of a deeper pattern – those charts and the symmetrical structure- lingers. As one reads, there is an implicit *gap* between the story and the chart framework. The affective result is often a dual-layer engagement: on one level, the reader feels the normal emotions of a well-told mystery (e.g., eagerness to find the truth, suspicion towards certain characters, the cognitive excitement of hypothesizing solutions), and on another level, the reader feels a meta-curiosity about how the astrological scheme will influence the narrative (Scheckter, 2017). Indeed, interpretively savvy readers (perhaps those in an academic or writerly community) may notice by Part 3 or Part 4 the halving pattern and derive intellectual pleasure from predicting the remaining part lengths and how rapidly the conclusion will arrive. The halving of chapter lengths itself evokes a feeling of acceleration; many readers describe the first part as slow and dense, while later parts feel breathless or urgent (Mullan, 2014; Stead, 2013 review). This is a deliberate affective design: Catton stated that the form imposed editorial constraints ‘mathematically’ and even ‘astrologically’; certain content simply *could not* be moved or cut without breaking the pattern (Raymond Huber Guide, 2020). The upshot is that the reader in the latter sections experiences a cascade of rapid resolutions and revelations, almost overwhelming after the protracted build-up, which can produce a mix of exhilaration and bewilderment.

Now, interpretive communities have responded to *The Luminaries*’s architectural bravura in varied ways, highlighting how communal assumptions mediate the affective experience. The literary press (critics, Booker judges, etc.) largely lauded the novel’s structure as ingenious and meaningful. For instance, the Booker committee’s endorsement and critics like John Mullan (2014) in *The Guardian* emphasized that the astrological pattern “shapes the strange and intricate plotting” and provides a hidden order to the narrative chaos. Within that community, familiarity with literary precedents (e.g., Chaucer’s astrological structuring of *Troilus and Criseyde*, or the zodiac imagery in Spencer and Calvino) allowed readers to contextualize Catton’s experiment as part of a lineage of using cosmic patterns in literature (Mullan, 2014). The expectation in this community was that the structure *contributes* to meaning, that it is not a mere gimmick but a lens through which to interpret theme and character. Thus, critics attempted to decode the symbolism: noting for example that each of the twelve men in the first chapter corresponds to a star sign archetype (secretive Scorpio, bold Mars in whatever, etc.), and that the two ‘luminaries’ of the title refer to the Sun and the Moon,

identified with two central characters whose destinies and romance are at the heart of the story (Mullan, 2014; Scheckter, 2017). For these readers, such alignment of cosmic and human patterns was emotionally and aesthetically resonant; it suggested a thematic statement about fate versus free will, about humans enacting roles written in the stars (Scheckter, 2017). Many scholarly readers experienced a sense of intellectual delight at recognizing the symmetry and allegorical subtext, as well as an affective appreciation for the audacity and “beauty” of a novel so structured (Mathur, 2019). Scheckter (2017) opines that the text, ‘framed by a heavy armature of astrology, simultaneously carries multiple levels of meaning, symbolism, allegory, irony, scientific method, legal process, sailor’s lore, etc.’ This encapsulates the scholarly view that the astrological frame enriches the novel by layering it with interpretive possibilities. Each of those levels might speak to a different community: for example, the legal process level appeals to readers of legal thrillers, the sailor’s lore to fans of maritime adventure, and the allegory to literary scholars. The truly remarkable feat, for those praising Catton (2013), is that she managed to weave a story that functions across all these registers at once. The ACRF here would note that such a multifaceted design invites a communal reading experience: different readers can discuss the novel each from their angle (one notes the tarot-like symbolism, another focuses on the feminist subtext of two women at the story’s center in a male-dominated world) and all find textual support, making the novel a kind of crossroad for interpretive communities.

However, just as with *Cloud Atlas*, not all communities responded favorably to *The Luminaries*’s elaborate form. A number of general readers found the novel initially intriguing but ultimately perplexing or unsatisfying. In online book discussions and reviews (e.g., Goodreads, book blogs), some lamented that the astrological structure “did not add anything” or that they didn’t understand it but still enjoyed the basic story. Others, conversely, said the novel felt overlong and that the structural “tricks” were an obstacle to emotional connection with characters. The interpretive community of historical fiction or neo-Victorian enthusiasts had yet another angle. Many such readers loved the vivid historical setting and intricate plot of *The Luminaries*, noting Catton’s mastery of Victorian-style narration. For them, the novel succeeded as a grand pastiche and a gripping mystery, even if one ignored the astrology (Gunn, 2013; some reader guides explicitly say you can enjoy it without knowing the star stuff). This suggests that within that community, the communal norm allowed *bracketing off* the structural experiment as optional. They filled the interpretive gaps in the straightforward way one would with any mystery: looking for clues in

characters' testimonies, piecing together timelines, etc., while treating the charts perhaps as mere decoration. Their emotional trajectory would be akin to reading Wilkie Collins or Dickens, excitement at twists, satisfaction at revelations, and empathy for certain characters (like the beleaguered Anna Wetherell, at the center of the mystery). Interestingly, Catton's narrative offers pertinent truths rather than 'whole truths' (Catton, 2013, p. 281), as one character, Moody, articulates, everyone has only partial knowledge. This resonates with Iser's idea of distributed perspectives and gaps. Readers in this camp might relish how all the partial accounts finally converge to shed light on the central enigma, yielding a complete picture only in the very final pages. The emotion of solving a puzzle is primary here.

In sum, those who approach the novel with a different set of communal expectations might focus on one layer (mystery or romance) and either overlook the grand design (experiencing the novel as a lengthy but ultimately conventional yarn) or be put off by what seems an extraneous gimmick (experiencing the novel as needlessly convoluted). Importantly, the novel's moral and aesthetic significance, perhaps a commentary on how people seek order (stars, charts) to make sense of the chaos of human affairs- becomes fully apparent only through an affective-communal reading. It requires the reader to feel *both* the chaos (via confusion, multiplicity of perspectives) and the imposition of order (via noticing the structure and possibly taking comfort or delight in it) and to interpret those feelings through a community that validates the effort. In a way, Catton (2013) built the interpretive community into the text by making the twelve men in the hotel a microcosm of readers: each has a piece of the puzzle, they must listen to each other's accounts (just as we read each chapter), and collectively reconstruct the truth. The reader is the thirteenth person at that gathering, emotionally and cognitively participating in that communal act of interpretation (Birke et al., 2023). The affective payoff is not only the solution of the mystery but also a meta-awareness of having been part of a grand design, a feeling of intellectual camaraderie, and maybe an awe at the 'clockwork' precision of the novel's construction.

III. DISCUSSION: ARCHITECTURE, AFFECT, AND COMMUNITY A COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

Comparing *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2004) and *The Luminaries* (Catton, 2013) through the Affective Communal Reading Framework illuminates both commonalities and contrasts in how narrative architecture can function as a 'feeling engine.' Both novels use unusual

structural designs to defamiliarize the reading process and thereby engage the reader on a deeper level, encouraging what Miall and Kuiken (2002) would call reflective engagement and what Iser (1978) would deem an active, gap-filling reading. Yet the nature of their structures, one nested and cyclical, the other astrologically deterministic and diminishing, cues somewhat different affective repertoires and invites different modes of communal interpretation.

In common, Mitchell and Catton leverage structure to serve thematic and moral ends, but only through the participatory work of readers. *Cloud Atlas*'s sextet of stories, with its boomerang symmetry, reinforces a theme of interconnectedness across time; however, that theme isn't handed to the reader transparently. The reader *feels* it by experiencing the echoes between stories (a prophecy in one becomes history in another, an act of kindness in one story reverberates as hope in a later one) and by assembling the global narrative mosaic piece by piece (Trimm, 2018; Knepper, 2016). Emotions of recognition, déjà vu, and ultimately cathartic unity ('multitude of drops' epiphany) are induced by the structure and are crucial for the implied moral takeaway about the collective impact of individual actions (Itakura, 2021). Similarly, *The Luminaries* uses its zodiac structure to mirror the idea that human lives might be influenced by unseen patterns or fate. But again, that idea isn't explicit; it emerges as the reader perceives how meticulously the characters' fortunes rise and fall in accordance with the stars. The feeling that "[i]t was as if the ancient patterns had no meaning here" (Catton, 2013, p. 20), a line one reviewer noted, actually strikes the reader when seeing how characters desperately seek patterns (omens, fortunes) to explain events, while the novel's own pattern looms beyond their awareness (Pechorin's Journal, 2014). Both novels, then, create a kind of dramatic irony between structure and story: the reader, through effort, can perceive a grand design (the novel's architecture) that the characters within cannot fully see. This positions the reader almost as an overseer, evoking what some scholars term an 'aesthetic feeling' of mastery or insight (Miall & Kuiken, 2002) – a complex emotion combining intellectual satisfaction and a sense of transcendence over the narrative. That emotion is not purely individual; readers often validate it communally by discussing these novels and confirming each other's discoveries ("Yes, I noticed the comet birthmark linking the protagonists, it gave me goosebumps!" or "I realized each part of *The Luminaries* was half the length of the previous; it was mind-blowing when I figured out why!"). In this way, interpretive communities amplify the effect: sharing in an online forum or book club, the eureka moments extend and deepen the pleasure, and also canonize certain interpretations (e.g., most readers now agree the comet

birthmark in *Cloud Atlas* implies a spiritual connection or reincarnation theme; that consensus is a community product that shapes new readers' expectations).

However, contrast arises in the specific 'gap-filling habits' each form encourages and the potential emotional pitfalls. *Cloud Atlas* encourages a habit of comparison and synthesis: as readers, we constantly compare the six stories, hunt for recurrent motifs (such as the comet birthmark, the image of clouds/seas, or the theme of domination vs. resistance), and synthesize them into a coherent worldview. People learn to hold multiple stories in mind and see them as one overarching narrative about humanity. The emotional arc is accordingly cumulative; each story builds upon the feelings of the previous, leading to a final crescendo of meaning in Adam Ewing's last journal entry, which retroactively colors all the prior tales with significance (Itakura, 2021). Interpretive communities reading *Cloud Atlas* often emphasize this cumulative effect, describing the novel as 'greater than the sum of its parts' an ocean from drops, which indicates their shared strategy of integrating the pieces (Eve, 2015; Hopf, 2011). In contrast, *The Luminaries* encourages a habit of pattern recognition and retrospection: readers advance through the plot somewhat linearly (even as the chronology goes backward) but are constantly invited to see patterns, the alignment of characters with star signs, the repetition of certain numbers or motifs (the number twelve, for instance, recurs). Gap-filling often involves identifying simultaneous rather than sequential connections (e.g., the misunderstanding that two events happened at the same time under a certain planet's influence).

The interpretive communities around *Cloud Atlas* thus frequently discuss ethical and emotional reactions, shame at humanity's cycles of cruelty, and hope in acts of kindness (Itakura, 2021), indicating a communal norm of reading it as a moral parable that one should feel. Communities around *The Luminaries* may debate more about plot intricacies or historical context, indicating a norm of reading it as a clever construct to analyze. These are tendencies, not absolutes. Certainly, many readers feel deeply for Catton's characters and analyze Mitchell's puzzle-like elements, but communal conversation and scholarly focus reveal this divergence. For instance, academic articles on *Cloud Atlas* often engage with its philosophical or ethical implications (e.g., genocide, postmodern temporality, global interconnection: Eve, 2015; Hicks, 2016), whereas writing on *The Luminaries* might emphasize its genre play and structural virtuosity (Scheckter, 2017; Knežević).

Through the ACRF lens, these differences underscore how each narrative architecture creates a distinct

'affective pact' with the reader. Mitchell's (2004) nested loops say: trust that these disjointed pieces will emotionally and narratively cohere, a pact many readers accept thanks to community buzz that frames the novel as rewarding and meaningful. Catton's astral map says: pay attention to the details and patterns that reward with the elegance of seeing fate's design, a pact that some readers relish and others shrug at, depending largely on whether their interpretive community primes them to appreciate elaborate design. Notably, both authors incorporate within their novels an image of communal truth-seeking: *Cloud Atlas* gives us the orison archive and the implied future readers of histories, *The Luminaries* gives us the twelve men in a room and later the courtroom and séances, always groups trying to interpret evidence together. These mirror the actual readership engaging in collective interpretation. In doing so, the novels perhaps acknowledge that meaning is not solitary. As ACRF posits, it's achieved through a dance of emotion and consensus. A single reader might feel something, but discussing it with others can either solidify that feeling's significance or alter their perspective. For example, a reader might finish *Cloud Atlas* unsure whether the recurring actors (in the 2012 film adaptation) or the birthmarks literally signify reincarnation. In a fan forum, others argue it's metaphorical, the consensus leans toward metaphor (or at least open-ended). That reader now "completes" the text's meaning with that communal guidance, potentially shifting their emotional takeaway (maybe from mystical awe to a more grounded humanist message). Similarly, readers of *The Luminaries* who lack knowledge of astrology have created and shared guides to understand the charts (e.g., Huber's 2020 guide). Through those communal aids, the initially cryptic structure becomes more accessible, altering the reader's affect from confusion to appreciation.

Thus, in both cases, the highest realization of the novels' moral and aesthetic significance, their full 'meaning event' (Fish, 1980), emerges when readers' affective responses (the confusion, suspense, surprise, delight, empathy) are channeled through communal sense-making. The ACRF helps explain why two readers can have such divergent experiences with the same text: without an interpretive community's framework, one reader's confusion remains just confusion (negative affect, no payoff), whereas another's is transmuted into fascination (because their community has taught them that confusion is the gateway to profundity in postmodern literature). It also explains why reading these novels in a group setting (class, book club) often enhances enjoyment: the communal process allows the pooling of affective reactions and the co-construction of meaning, validating emotional responses and collectively filling gaps that might stump a solitary reader.

IV. CONCLUSION

Narrative architecture in fiction is far more than a cosmetic feature; as demonstrated by David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2013), a novel's form can serve as a powerful 'feeling engine' that drives readers' emotional and interpretive engagement. Through a comparative analysis using the Affective Communal Reading Framework, we have shown that the nested doll structure of *Cloud Atlas* and the astrologically-scaled structure of *The Luminaries* both function to defamiliarize readers' habitual reading processes and trigger active gap-filling, but they do so in distinct ways and with distinct effects on interpretive communities.

Mitchell (2004) employs a radical nesting of stories that at first disrupts the reader's sense of coherence, provoking feelings of confusion and curiosity that propel the reader to search for connections. As the reader progresses, these connections emerge through affective highlights, motifs, echoed narratives, and a mounting emotional resonance that encourage the reader to weave the disparate tales into a holistic vision of interdependence and moral progression. Catton (2013), in *The Luminaries*, presents a different yet parallel case. Her astrologically structured narrative defamiliarizes linear storytelling by imposing a cosmic order onto human affairs, thereby generating an initial sense of puzzle and wonder. Readers are tasked with filling gaps in a mystery plot while simultaneously deciphering an underlying astrological code. Those who accept the challenge, often with the aid of communal discourse such as readers' guides or online discussions, find that the novel delivers both the satisfactions of a Victorian mystery and the additional reward of a grand design revealed. Emotions of suspense, surprise, and intellectual thrill accompany the reading process, and in the end, a sense of elegant closure emerges as the seemingly chaotic threads of fate are shown to have been orchestrated by the novel's structural 'stars.' Interpretive communities (literary critics, neo-Victorian scholars, and enthusiastic readers) have debated and largely appreciated the astrological architecture as a meaning-making machine: it amplifies themes of determinism, chance, and the human yearning to find order in coincidence (Scheckter, 2017; Mullan, 2014). At the same time, the split reception, some finding the structure enriching, others alienating, underscores the role of community norms in shaping the reading experience. The ACRF analysis of *The Luminaries* highlights that when readers approach the novel with the communal understanding that its unusual form is intentional and significant, they are more likely to engage

emotionally with its patterns and complete its intended meaning: a commentary on how narrative (like astrology) can impose meaning on the flux of reality, and how we collaborate in interpreting our world's mysteries. Readers from communities less versed in metafictional or structural play may miss or dismiss that layer, resulting in less emotional and interpretive payoff. The novel's full aesthetic significance, as a simultaneously earnest and tongue-in-cheek exploration of whether lives are predestined or self-authored, emerges most clearly in the space of communal reading, where diverse pieces of the puzzle (each reader's insight or feeling) are shared to form a more complete picture.

In bringing these two case studies together, we find strong support for the central proposition of the Affective Communal Reading Framework: that readers' emotions and communal norms cooperatively complete a text's moral and aesthetic significance. Neither *Cloud Atlas* nor *The Luminaries* yields all its treasures to a reader approaching in isolation or purely analytically. It is through the reader's affective investment – the sense of wonder at Mitchell's interlocking destinies, the curiosity and eventual satisfaction at Catton's clockwork plotting – that the impetus to interpret deeply is born. And it is through the frameworks provided by interpretive communities, the shared recognition that these novels are doing something extraordinary, and how to talk about it, that individual interpretations coalesce into recognized meanings. In other words, feeling without interpretation remains inchoate (awe without understanding), while interpretation without feeling may miss the point (analysis without empathy). It is the fusion of the two, in a social context, that allows these works to resonate as greatly as they do.

In conclusion, *Cloud Atlas* and *The Luminaries* show two paths by which narrative architecture can shape reader response: one *nested and iterative*, fostering a gradual emotional synthesis across disparate stories, and one *schematized and encyclopedic*, inviting a cognitive-emotional decoding of an elaborate design. Both achieve their fullest impact through the ACRF's dual channels of affect and community. As readers, when we allow a novel's form to surprise and move us, and when we engage with fellow readers in interpreting those surprises and feelings, the study partake in what Iser (1978) called the 'dynamic happening' of literary meaning. These two novels keep reminding us that a text's significance is not just on the page; it blooms in the interplay between the stirring of our hearts and the meeting of our minds.

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