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On the Same Page

**An experimental approach to the connections between literature,
empathy, and theory of mind**

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One the Same Page

An experimental approach to the connections between literature, empathy, and theory of mind

Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Literários, Culturais e Interartes, orientada pela Professora Doutora Marinela Freitas e pelo Professor Doutor João Paulo Guimarães

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Declaração de honra

Declaro que a presente dissertação é de minha autoria e não foi utilizado previamente noutro curso ou unidade curricular, desta ou de outra instituição. As referências a outros autores (afirmações, ideias, pensamentos) respeitam escrupulosamente as regras da atribuição, e encontram-se devidamente indicadas no texto e nas referências bibliográficas, de acordo com as normas de referenciação. Tenho consciência de que a prática de plágio e auto-plágio constitui um ilícito académico.

[Vila do Conde, setembro de 2023]

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Resumo

A presente dissertação propõe-se a estudar as relações entre literatura, empatia e teoria da mente, e de que maneiras a leitura de romances de ficção pode melhorar a empatia e a teoria da mente do leitor. Interrelacionando psicologia, neurociência, sociologia, teoria da literatura e literatura comparada, entre outras disciplinas, espera-se desenvolver um instrumento de trabalho que possa conduzir a reflexão e análise crítica de obras literárias. O exercício será posto em prática com obras de ficção contemporânea que se afigurem como prováveis de melhorar a empatia e a teoria da mente do leitor em relação a realidades como a saúde mental e a 'saúde' do planeta.

Palavras-chave: [Empatia, Teoria da Mente, Psicologia, Ecocrítica]

Abstract

This dissertation aims to study the relationships between literature, empathy, and theory of mind, and how reading fiction novels can improve the reader's empathy and theory of mind. Intersecting psychology, neuroscience, sociology, literary theory, and comparative literature, among other disciplines, we hope to develop a working instrument that can lead the reflection and critical analysis of literary works. The exercise will be put into practice with works of contemporary fiction that seem likely to improve the reader's empathy and theory of mind in relation to realities such as mental health and the 'health' of the planet.

Key-words: [Empathy, Theory of Mind, Psychology, Ecocriticism]

(An) Introduction: Beyond the Surface

Consider the phenomenon of reading, that most mysterious of acts. It is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another's skin; another's voice; another's soul. One might argue that serious reading is as sacramental an act as serious writing, and should therefore not be profaned. That, by way of a book, we have the ability to transcend what is immediate, what is merely personal, and to enter a consciousness not known to us, in some cases distinctly alien, other...

Joyce Carol Oates

No doubt we are living in challenging times and there is a lot we need to deal with – individually and collectively. Yet just imagine, for a moment: a world without books, without storytelling, a world without empathy, would be a much more divided and a lonelier place to exist.

Elif Shafak

Picture this:

In our overwhelming, overloaded, and overstimulated 21st century world, literature and empathy are fractions of reality that seem to have been wiped from quite a lot of people's minds. Understandably, most of this is happening unwillingly or even unconsciously; with the cost of living ever rising and the quality of life ever dropping, the 99% – to use the contemporary lingo – have little to no energy to sit down and spend time with a book or to worry about other people's experiences. The capitalist mentality of eternal economic growth has spread to all aspects of life when it comes to developed societies, which means that all aspects of life must be measured in terms of productivity or monetization, and the everyday grind is thus never-ending. And, since no one can exist like that forever, leisure time is mostly dedicated to socializing or to mind-numbing activities, in an attempt to escape the harrowing reality we all live in, with most waking hours spent within four walls, working to barely make a living, in a world ridden by inequality, social unrest, political inactivity, and the always looming threats of sickness, violence, and climate change. A lot of people will say they have no interest in books, while others will admit they might be interested but lack the time or attention-span. Even in societies plagued by loneliness and mental illnesses, individuality stands at the centre, whereas the 'overs' mentioned before drive millions into hopelessness, disillusionment, emotional isolation, detachment, or apathy (Bennett, 2020; Bladow & Ladino, 2018; Bladow & Ladino, 2018; Crary, 2013; Han, 2015; Hertz, 2020).

This is an utterly bleak perspective, of course. Furthermore, generalizations hardly ever prove themselves to be accurate, since there are always exceptions to be considered. Nevertheless, it might be a portrait of contemporary life on developed countries not that far removed from the truth.

Already in the 1967 Guy Debord wrote about *The Society of the Spectacle*, and three years later Jean Baudrillard published *The Consumer Society*, both philosophers concerned with mass media culture, which had yet to grow to the level it has today. Byung-Chul Han has become one of the most prominent figures in the debate on the effects the current fast-paced and technologically driven condition of late capitalism is having on societies and on individuals. Books such as *The Burnout Society*, *The Transparency Society*, and *The Agony of Eros* have the philosopher and cultural theorist reflecting the pathological landscape he considers to be the state of contemporary society, riddled with neuronal disorders like burnout syndrome, depression, borderline personality disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (commonly known as ADHD), all of which, in his view, pose the biggest threats to global health in the 21st century (Han, 2015). He also considers contemporary society to be dominated by narcissism and a hyperfocus on the self that manifest themselves both in those same disorders and in a complete neglect of the other (Han, 2017).

Han's reflections go to some extent in line with Noreena Hertz's in-depth examination on loneliness (published in *The Lonely Century*): the 21st century is "the loneliest century we have known" (2020, p. 8), with data from studies made around the world going as far as showing that two thirds of the population is suffering from loneliness and isolation. The economist states that "[y]oung and old, male and female, single and married, rich and poor. All over the world people are feeling lonely, disconnected, and alienated" (p. 9). Interestingly, Hertz defines loneliness "as both an internal state and an existential one – personal, societal, economic, and political" (p. 14), adding she believes that the contemporary manifestation of loneliness goes beyond the human yearning for physical connection:

It also incorporates how disconnected we feel from politicians and politics, how cut off we feel from our work and our workplace, how excluded many of us feel from society's gains, and how powerless, invisible, and voiceless so many of us believe ourselves to be. It's a loneliness that includes but is also greater than our desire to feel close to others because it is also a manifestation of our need to be heard, to be seen, to be cared for, to have agency, to be treated fairly, kindly, and with respect. (p. 14)

In the same way individuals have closed off from each other, the excess of stimuli, information, and impulses of our days have radically changed the economy of attention, also defends Han (2015, p. 25). Jonathan Crary, art critic and scholar, explores this in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, reflecting that

24/7 announces a time without time, a time extracted from any material or identifiable demarcations, a time without sequence or recurrence. In its peremptory reductiveness, it celebrates a hallucination of presence, of an unalterable permanence composed of incessant, frictionless operations. [...] the effectiveness of 24/7 lies in the incompatibility it lays bare, in the discrepancy between a human life-world and the evocation of a switched-on universe for which no off-switch exists. Of course, no individual can ever be shopping, gaming, working, blogging, downloading, or texting 24/7. However, since no moment, place, or situation now exists in which one can *not* shop, consume, or exploit networked resources, there is a relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal life. (2013, p. 26)

Perception has become fragmented and scattered (Han, 2015, p. 25), attention spans are shorter and frailer, a desire for instant gratification or instant reward diminishes the engagement with slower and more contemplative cultural products, in favour of social media, video games, or television (Keen, 2007, p. XVI). Where does literature stand in this, then? A Social Sciences Institute study – commissioned by the Gulbenkian Foundation and titled *Inquérito às Práticas Culturais dos Portugueses 2020* – found that 61% of Portuguese have not read a single book in 2020. A year prior, the team had conducted a similar study in Spain, and the figure was much smaller: 38% (Pais, Antunes, & Magalhães, 2022).

In the United Kingdom, the annual National Literacy Trust research report found that levels of reading enjoyment were at one of their lowest levels among children and young people in 2022, with only 47.8% of those aged between 8 and 18 saying that they enjoy reading. The report shows that “any gains made in terms of children and young people’s reading engagement during the early part of the pandemic had completely eroded by early 2022”, since just before the first lockdown reading habits were at their lowest in 15 years of reports, and the numbers had risen significantly in 2021 (Cole et al., 2022). In the United States, the data on adults is not that different; a comparison from the surveys on public participation in the arts made by the National Endowment for the Arts (conducted alongside the national Census since 1982) shows that the percent of adults reading any books has fallen from 54.6% in 2012 to 52.7% in 2017 (NEA, 2018).

Maybe paradoxically, the United Kingdom's Publishers Association (PA) accounts 2022 to have been a record-breaking year, with 669 million physical books having been sold, the "highest overall level ever recorded", having 4.1 billion pounds come from the export market (PA, 2023; Shaffi, 2023a). A Publishers Association's survey published soon after found that a third (33%) of those inquired thought reading to be best form of escapism when having a bad day, surpassed only by watching television (54%) (Shaffi, 2023b). Another interesting phenomenon is that of celebrity book clubs; a trend that started with Oprah Winfrey in 1996 has now spread among female celebrities, in what which some consider an attempt to exude an aura of intellectuality and humanity to gain status among the masses (a somewhat misogynist point of view, no doubt). Reese Witherspoon, Emma Watson, Florence Welch, Kaia Gerber, and Dua Lipa are some of the heads of these book clubs, amassing millions of members (Hunt, 2022).

Among young people, the last years have seen an exponential rise on book popularity fuelled by dedicated corners in social media platforms like *TikTok* and *YouTube* – known as *BookTok* and *BookTube* (Bastos, 2023; Flood, 2021). A recent study promoted by the Portuguese Association of Publishers and Booksellers and executed by GfK found that less than two thirds of Portuguese have bought books in the last year (62%), but that the figures are rising, and the responsible for that rise are mostly young people. Just like in the United Kingdom, book sales have risen in 2022, earning 175 million euros and with those between 15 and 34 being the biggest buyers (28%), although Portugal is still the country with the lowest reading rates in Europe (Cunha, 2023).

Where does this leave us, then? In some circles, reading is the most boring thing one could do; in others, it is good vessel for escapism and light entertainment; in some others, it is a proof of intellectuality and humanity. What is, then, the masses perception? Books' sales are slightly rising, but the numbers on reading habits keep dropping. It makes one wonder: are people actually reading the books they are buying, or is this a representation and consumerist society situation (Baudrillard, 2017; Debord, 2002)?

And if books have, in the eyes of at least half of the population, turned into light entertainment or a waste of time, how are books still being banned in a whooping number of countries, not all of them with authoritarian regimes? Even in the United States, self-dubbed as 'the biggest democracy in the world', there were 1,477 instances of books banned from school libraries in the first half of the 2022-2023 school year alone, according to data

collected by the organization PEN America (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). One could say these are occasional cases, nothing but drops in the ocean, but it also makes one wonder: if literature has been reduced to something for the deemed inconsequential fruition of only some, what makes some politicians so terrified that they are still willing to dedicate that much energy into having books banned (Harris & Alter, 2022; Waldman, 2023)? Or how come terrorist organizations are still bombing schools and UNICEF's trucks with supplies in so many places in Africa (UNICEF, 2023)? Or why are writers from some countries still in danger, like Salman Rushdie's 2022 murder attempt reminded the world (Queirós, 2023)? In the words of Toni Morrison, "[b]ut who does not know of literature banned because it is interrogative; discredited because it is critical; erased because alternate? And how many are outraged by the thought of a self-ravaged tongue?" (2019, p. 123).

It is vital to emphasize, however, that a lack of literature reading could never possibly summarize everything that is wrong with contemporary society, nor would placing literature reading as the pivotal cultural practice on a global scale, before television and social media, solve all of humanities' problems. These are two (in extreme opposites but somewhat connected) ideas that we will return again and again, since it is quite easy to fall into such snowball thinking and exaggerations without noticing. Humans are nuanced creatures, our existences are nuanced, and the reality we inhabit is nuanced – and theory is, after all, in all fields, a game of seeking plausible explanations rather than indubitable truths. Right in the introduction to his *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, the neuroscientist António Damásio acknowledges to be "skeptical of science's presumption of objectivity and definitiveness", adding:

I have a difficult time seeing scientific results, especially in neurobiology, as anything but provisional approximations, to be enjoyed for a while and discarded as soon as better accounts become available. But skepticism about the current reach of science, especially as it concerns the mind, does not imply diminished enthusiasm for the attempt to improve provisional approximations.

Perhaps the complexity of the human mind is such that the solution to the problem can never be known because of our inherent limitations. Perhaps we should not even talk about a problem at all, and speak instead of a mystery, drawing on a distinction between questions that can be approached suitably by science and questions that are likely to elude science forever. But [...] I do believe, more often than not, that we will come to know. (2005, p. 24)

It is rather paradoxical that humans have sent objects as far as 24 million kilometres away from the Earth – the Voyager 1 is by now almost 15 billion miles away, according to NASA’s public mission status platform (2023) –, but the human brain is still one of our biggest mysteries. Our knowledge about consciousness is still fleeting, and yet it will never not be astonishing how we are particles that can recognize themselves for what they are, even if we never come to know how we do. Just like the theoretical physicist and mathematician Brian Green writes,

how utterly wondrous it is that a small collection of the universe’s particles can rise up, examine themselves and the reality they inhabit, determine just how transitory they are, and with a flitting burst of activity create beauty, establish connection, and illuminate mystery. (2020, pp. 322-323)

Another supporter of moderation is the scholar of literature and cognitive science Lisa Zunshine, who admits that all of her “speculations resulting from applying research in cognitive psychology to our appetite for fiction could be wrong”, defending, nevertheless, that “the questions that prompted those speculations are emphatically worth asking” (2006, p. 6).

A different problem that can arise, pointed out by Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett in their paper “Researching the social impact of the arts: literature, fiction and the novel”, is that not all research is “produced in the spirit of scholarly enquiry”, as they put it, “but more in that of advocacy by those wishing to advance specific institutional interests” (2009, p. 17). What they mostly mean is that most studies carried out with an intention to prove that engaging with the different arts has benefits on individuals and societies are done by those who will most likely benefit financially if the arts are politically and socially thought of from that point of view. The authors state that “[i]nstead of questioning whether or not the arts actually do have the impacts claimed for them, researchers have therefore directed their efforts to coming up with evidence that they do” (p. 17). This paper is mentioned here not out of scepticism but with the intention to highlight something else: all of those who value the arts, or have built their lives around the arts, are more likely inherently prone to believing those same arts as good for society. If one feels moved by an artistic object, one might expect all others to be moved in the same way, and even if with an analytical and impartial intention, one might always be unwillingly biased.

Irene Vallejo wrote on her *Manifiesto por la lectura* – that accompanied a 2020’s petition to the Spanish state for a national pact on reading and books –, that humankind is a particularly delicate species. Unlike others, we are neither that strong, fast, or resistant to extreme temperatures or shortage of water and food, and our defences against the outside world are quite limited. The unexpected strength, the thing that drove us to progress and growth, she believes, is imagination. Paraphrasing the philosopher and novelist, we are the only species that desires and yearns for stories, and also the only species that uses stories to explain the world and to heal (p. 11, also 2021). Elif Shafak writes beautifully about this on her book-long essay *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*:

Stories bring us together, untold stories keep us apart.

We are made of stories – those that have happened, those that are still happening at this moment in time and those that are shaped purely in our imagination through words, images, dreams and an endless sense of wonder about the world around us and how it works. Unvarnished truths, innermost reflections, fragments of memory, wounds unhealed. Not to be able to tell your story, to be silenced and shut out, therefore, is to be dehumanised. It strikes at your very existence; it makes you question your sanity, the validity of your version of events. It creates a profound, and existential anxiety in us.

In losing our voice something in us dies. (2020, p. 9)

Stories are inextricable from humanity, just as interwoven in our DNA as the need for oxygen, and they have been so for a long time. Stories help individuals make sense of who they are, of the ones around them, and of the world they inhabit. Throughout time, stories have been an important feature in survival both as individuals and as a species; with storytelling, humans have passed crucial knowledge on, enriched relationships within and between communities, developed cognitive capabilities, and allowed imagination and creativity to flourish (Greene, 2020). With language, imagination and storytelling, humans have achieved what not any other – that we know of – has, which is to live outside our own physical experiences. Brian Greene writes that storytelling “may be the mind’s way of rehearsing for the real world” (2020, p. 174) and that it is also “our most powerful means for inhabiting other minds” (p. 177). When other people are concerned, factual knowledge and rationality might not always be enough; emotions and intuitions are of essence, which means one must engage both cognitive and affective domains (Damásio, 2005).

Literature is by no means constituted by stories only, and stories are by no means a constituent of literature only, meaning they are not one and the same or interchangeable, but it is truth to both that they can have considerable power, and that power might be historically identical. Neither is this power exclusive to literature – studies focusing on all artforms enthusiastically defend so – but, since the novel is what we will be focusing on, literature is what we will be mostly referring to.

Stories can transform how people perceive each other (Vezzali et al., 2014), can influence people's worldview and provide a channel to contact with and understand worldviews that differ from their own (Green & Brock, 2000; Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997; Strange & Leung, 1999; Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999), and can even pave the way for social paradigm change (Thomson, 2015; Tompkins, 1986). Raymond A. Mar, one of the leading figures on the connections between fiction, psychology, neuroscience, and social abilities, defends that "our interactions with fictional narratives should not be viewed as frivolous", because "stories have the power to change our beliefs about the real world" (2004, p. 1414). Far from being mere entertainment, literature can change people intellectually, spiritually, and even physically. How is it possible for ink symbols on paper to drive alterations in biology? Through a myriad of ways, but as far as this dissertation is concerned, through empathy and theory of mind (frequently referred to just as ToM). This triangle – literature, empathy, and theory of mind – will thus be at the centre of this investigation, which will be explored in an interdisciplinary way, bringing together insights from the vast field of research that studies the intersection of these and the possibility of them having real-world implications.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines 'empathy' simply as "the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation" (n.d.), while the entry for 'theory of mind' positions it as "the ability to understand that other people have thoughts, knowledge, and feelings that are not the same as yours" (n.d.). Both empathy and theory of mind are incredibly complex concepts, with scholars and scientists disagreeing on their definitions and even on how different the different definitions are from one another (Maibom, 2017a). Empathy is, for example, commonly confused with sympathy, but those are not the same; the literary scholar Suzanne Keen easily separates them by defining the first as a *feeling with* and the second as a *feeling for* (2007, p. xxi). A paper from 2006 concerned with the neuronal correlations between theory of mind and empathy introduces them as "the ability to attribute mental states to others" and "the ability to infer

emotional experiences”, respectively (Völlm et al., 2006, p. 90, alluding to Frith, 1999 and Gallese, 2003). We will have time later to further analyse the proper definitions of both; for now, let us focus on the question: how do empathy and theory of mind relate to one another? In another paper, this time from 2014, Jonathan Dvash and Simone G. Shamay-Tsoory, explain the connection like this:

The ability to infer the thoughts and feelings of others is critical for appropriate and effective social interactions and discourse comprehension, but it is not sufficient. Belief understanding does not guarantee emotion understanding; emotion understanding does not guarantee empathy; and empathy does not guarantee sympathy as manifested by kindness to people. Hence, empathy is the link between knowing the thoughts and feelings of others, experiencing them, and responding to others in caring, supportive ways. Theory of mind is part of a person’s empathic ability, a broader term that also encompasses the emotional aspect of inferring and sharing the emotional experiences of another. [...] Empathy describes an individual’s ability to understand and feel the other. Because empathy links one’s feelings about the self to feelings about the other, it is a fundamental part of the social fabric of emotion. (2014, pp. 282-283)

Employing empathy and theory of mind, individuals feel other people’s pain as their own pain (Singer et al., 2004; Lamm, Decety, & Singer, 2011), experience other people’s joy as their own joy, peek into other people’s brains and get a glimpse of how they see the world. They work in approximations, intuitively feeling how their peers feel and grasping how they think. While these abilities have mostly been connected with real life interactions, studies developed over the last decades have shown that reading about other people’s experiences, even if fictional, can cause the same effects (Black et al., 2021; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2006, just to name a few), and the collective effort being made to understand the connections between literature and empathy encompass everything from one end to another – literary theory, literary criticism, comparative literature, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, neurosciences. In her introduction to the volume *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, the philosopher and researcher Heidi L. Maibom writes:

Whereas many people enjoy music because of the affect that it evokes, including empathic affect, art also contributes to our understanding of others’ experiences, whether emotional or not. Literature is a case in point. In (good) literature, we are confronted with different points of views, are given vivid descriptions of experiences we might never have had or

feelings we have never felt, and we often find ourselves being moved by people or situations that would not otherwise have moved us. (2017a, p. 7)

In a world of instant everything, reading means slowing down. Reading means sitting down with one's thoughts, it means taking the time to reflect (Martelo, 2022), it means being open to new worlds and to learn new things. As Rosa Maria Martelo writes in her essay *Devagar, a Poesia*,

poderíamos perguntar se nos tornámos, generalizadamente, nesta espécie de doentes produtivos potencial e esgotados. Se este mal se generalizou e agravou, perdendo o criativo, talvez a poesia possa estar a responder-lhe com a lentidão. E não só com lentidão: também com singularização, com a valorização da diferença, com a diferenciação identitária em resposta à massificação; e com a rejeição da hiperactividade desfocada, com a valorização do intervalo, da interrupção. (2022, p. 24)

In a world of profound divisions, of political polarization, of barricades and walls, of Us versus Them, of Self versus Other, reading regularly is a radical way of being in the world – which is exactly why so many people in power are terrified of art as a whole (Kumar, 2023). Reading means steady willingness to step into another's shoes, see the world through a different set of eyes, experiencing life a million times over and having it being different each time. Reading means accepting that one's perception of the world is not everyone's perception of the world, and it means understanding that every person's perception is just as valid, even if one could never agree with it. With time, reading means acknowledging that the world is infinitely vaster than oneself, and that, on a big-picture way of thinking, the division between Self and Other does not make that much sense, since there is much more in common between Self and Other than we have been led to believe (Bladow & Ladino, 2018; Greene, 2020; Tempest, 2020; Shafak, 2020; Vallejo, 2020).

Of course, one could argue, some people are not interested in other people's anything, they just wish to escape their own lives for a little while. And that is perfectly fine, everyone has been there. But literature – and the arts as a whole – has the capacity for more, and much more of that 'more' is still happening unconsciously. The act itself might be to escape reality, with no intention whatsoever of learning anything or experiencing anything, but there might be learning and experiencing happening nonetheless (Oatley, Mar, & Djikic, 2012).

Empathy is "one of the most researched emotional reactions in experimental psychology" (Maibom, 2012, p. 253), and most of the interest in it comes from the framing of it as "central

to social understanding” (p. 253); in other words, “the real reason empathy and empathy-related phenomena have been studied so intensely” is because of “their connection with prosocial, altruistic, and moral behavior” (2017a, p. 4). This reasoning is quite simple to understand. The more knowledge an individual has on how human beings function and interact with one another, the more they are equipped to navigate social interactions and the better pieces in the social puzzle they are. However, this is a logical reasoning, not an emotional one, which is when empathy comes handy. As an emotional response, empathy might fill the gaps logic cannot reach (Damasio, 2005).

Suffice to say, reading will not make everyone a stellar citizen, nor is there a magic number of books a person can read a year to be accepted into the group of the most altruistic on the planet. Even Suzanne Keen admits right on the preface of *Empathy and the Novel* to “find the case for altruism stemming from novel reading inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated in favor of the beneficial effects of novel reading” (2007, p. viii). Neither, for the matter, does the manifestation of empathy per se guarantee any kind of altruistic action to be set in motion (Dvash & Shamay-Tsoory, 2014). Rather, engagement with other people – or, in this case, fictional characters –, who no doubt move through the world in ways different from our own and exist in realities we know nothing about, can have “moral and social implications by broadening our understanding of other experiences” (Maibom, 2017a, p. 7) – our social perception and social cognition. This broadening of understanding might, in turn, make individuals more prone to kindness in the face of new social interactions and circumstances – “[e]l hábito de leer no nos hace necesariamente mejores personas, pero nos enseña a observar con el ojo de la mente la amplitud del mundo y la enorme variedad de situaciones y seres que lo pueblan” (Vallejo, 2020, p. 13).

Like the artist Kae Tempest writes on their book-long essay *On Connection*, “anything that can remind me that at all times, other people are existing and that their existence is as fully felt as my own, is useful” (2020, p. 38). Every human being is a ‘main character’ in this life, not just a secondary figure or an accessory to somebody else’s story, and sometimes it is easy to lose sight of that. Humanity has become disconnected. Our species has never been so close and yet so far away. We are living in the age of information and communication, a time when it has become easier to text with someone on the other side of the globe than to look the ones next to us in the eyes (Hertz, 2020). We are so overwhelmed with information, injustice, and suffering that our brains have started blocking the world out to protect us, with compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma pushing us into apathy and indifference

(Bladow & Ladino, 2018; Rauvola, Vega, & Lavigne, 2019). We can accept millions dying because we cannot name a single one (Schelling, 1968). The individual is lost among the masses, and our ability to feel empathy is falling as humans blend into silhouettes in the crowd or social media handles. “We have grown far from ourselves. [...] And we have grown far from each other” (Tempest, 2020, p. 14).

Worse, we have been pit against each other, misplacing the sources of our frustrations, and channelling them onto the easiest and nearest targets. Both media outlets and social media have been feeding on this, exacerbating already dangerous divisions and social unrest, creating bubbles where everyone thinks the same way and sees every other bubble as an enemy (Bennett, 2020; Shafak, 2020). “The moment we stop listening to diverse opinions is also when we stop learning. Because the truth is we don’t learn much from sameness and monotony. We usually learn from differences” (2020, p. 16), reminds us Elif Shafak, later adding that “[t]he less that people from different backgrounds can communicate and empathise with each other, the smaller our appreciation of our common humanity, the less egalitarian and inclusive our shared spaces, the more satisfied the demagogue” (p. 32).

Humans are deeply physiologically empathetic beings. Individuals will feel cold when in the presence of someone shivering, will feel uneasy when in the presence of someone distressed, will feel joyous when in the presence of someone laughing (Debes, 2017). When attentive to their surroundings, people will identify emotions in strangers’ faces and sometimes ‘read’ the thoughts of loved ones (Davis, 1980). Even if with some effort, individuals can understand all sides involved in an argument, relate to the experiences of people whose life could not be more different than theirs, and even love those whose way of being in the world they could not disagree more. Empathy is not a finite resource (an argument common among those who debate if compassion fatigue is the best denomination), which is to say, we have not lost it – and even if we had, we could find it again (Bladow & Ladino, 2018; Rauvola, Vega, & Lavigne, 2019). Art is one of the best ways to do so:

When we are reading or listening to stories being told, provided there is enough tension in the narrative, our brains release cortisol into our blood to help us focus and concentrate, and also oxytocin, the chemical related to care and empathy. Theatre and music have long been arenas in which we examine our moralities and consider our shortcomings, as well as celebrate our virtues. Think of the tragic plays of ancient times. We watch the hero in denial of their weakness eventually fall because of their self-blindness. Think of the old folk

songs, sagas of betrayal, pride, murder. Juicy morality tales, not unlike present-day TV dramas. All with lessons to teach about how best to approach the problem of living a life, that encourage us to greater compassion for those whose struggles we recognise. Stories and songs bring us into contact with our best and worst natures, they enable us to locate ourselves in other people's experience and they increase our compassion. But these things in a vacuum are useless. A story doesn't cultivate empathy just by virtue of its having been thought up; it must be engaged with to become powerful; the story must be read, the song must be listened to, in order to acquire its full charge. (Tempest, 2020 p. 33)

Over time, literary criticism has reflected on empathy through the lenses of understanding narrative and characters, following the logic that both writer and reader ought to employ empathy to do so and, in lack of this, engagement with the text would be cut short (Keen, 2007). In 2006, the landmark study "Bookworms versus nerds: Exposure to fiction versus non-fiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds" paved the way for in-depth scientific research on the ways reading literature enhances empathy and theory of mind (Mar et al., 2006). Many studies have followed, primarily led by Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, David Comer Kidd, Emanuele Castano and Lisa Zunshine. They have been conducting their research, however, mostly by measuring how people's beliefs, actions, feelings, or even brain dynamics, change after a specific period in time spent reading a specific text (mostly chosen from literary awards' nominations).

This makes one wonder: could it be possible to study this fascinating relationship the other way around? Could the capacity to improve empathy and theory of mind of a text be evaluated just by analysing said text? Could it be possible to build a questionnaire of sorts, a series of reflections to be made in order to evaluate a novel's potential to enhance empathy and theory of mind abilities, and could that set of guidelines have the potential to be used on any novel? Evidentially, this could only work as an experiment, and the resulting reflections could only work in the realm of the hypothetical. Among plenty other issues, one would inevitably have to assume many things, namely, to position the reader in a place of abstractness, as human beings are affected by literary texts in various degrees depending on various circumstances out of reach – for example, "[r]eaders' empathy for situations depicted in fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances, either in the moment of first publication or in later times" (Keen, 2007, p. xii).

Along the same lines, could it be possible to use that questionnaire to predict the level of influence a literary text with focus on a specific theme could have on the reader? It is fairly known that anything too large ought to be simplified for humans to understand; humans need an account of an individual's experiences to comprehend the similar experiences of a million in the same situation, which is to say, humans need stories (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997). In *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* – their first book on the philosophical discourse surrounding issues like precarity, vulnerability, violence, dehumanizing and representation, in the face of the War on Terror lead by the US – Judith Butler engages precisely with this notion, writing that

[i]f violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. [...] The derealization of the 'Other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral. [...]

How do we understand this derealization? It is one thing to argue that first, on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture. It is another thing to say that discourse itself effects violence through omission. If 200,000 Iraqi children were killed during the Gulf War and its aftermath, do we have an image, a frame for any of those lives, singly or collectively? Is there a story we might find about those deaths in the media? Are there names attached to those children? (2004, pp. 33-34)

For his own part, the scholar David Schmid points out that, "[i]n *Hiroshima*, [John] Hersey was faced with the challenge of how to personalize an event as enormous as an atomic explosion. His solution was to concentrate on the stories of a few individuals, thus reducing the immense to a human scale" (2011, p. 993), which is a device widely used in the communication sciences (Wallace-Wells, 2019). Some things are just beyond our understanding, but others are simply too abstract and distant, or hard to think about, so we tend to look away. And even if they are not, it is difficult for one to understand something one has no contact with. Wider themes and issues can be debated from all angles and presented with all information available, but, at some point, they will have to be linked to a face and a narrative for the wider public to pay enough attention to care (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997).

Climate change, for example, falls into the category of themes so immense and all-encompassing that one cannot help but feel uneasiness and bewilderment. Studies show that, for people to actually change their habits into more eco-friendly ones, they need a narrative (Wallace-Wells, 2019). They need to know specific individuals' stories, or how their changes in behaviour can help lower the direct consequences of climate change on the lives of those around them – especially those they love (Asensio & Delmas, 2016). Mental illness is another example of something that affects millions in many ways throughout their lives, and yet is still deeply misunderstood as a concept and tends to be approached with clichés and preconceptions; in other words, it needs to be humanized (Rogers, 1975). Can fictional depictions of mental illness change the reader's perception on the subject and influence the empathy felt towards those who suffer from said illness? Can fictional tales of nature and climate change have the same effects, just with a different empathic 'target' in mind?

Throughout this dissertation, empathy and theory of mind will be thoroughly introduced and analysed, with all that that entails, and their connections both with each other and with literature – fiction, in this case, and, more specifically, the novel – will be delved into from various angles. A comprehensive synthesis of the research being developed on the subject will be presented, that also underlies the thought process leading to an experimental instrument of study. Then, that instrument will be applied to literary works chosen by specific standards, in an endeavour to gain some clarity on its employability.

The divisions and disagreements on settled definitions may add some difficulty to our work here, since this dissertation is not on psychology or neurosciences and its purpose is not to define empathy or ToM. As such, later on, once we arrive at the analysis chapters, a working definition ought to be provided, and empathy and theory of mind can be simply thought of as *human abilities that allow individuals to understand and care for others*. Furthermore, this dissertation has no business in defining literature, literariness, nor in evaluating literary quality, and it also has no intention of proving the connections between empathy and ToM – the latter one we take as a fact, and the formers many before (and more qualified for the job) have concerned with. With this in mind, the research question is not *if*, but *how*: *how does reading fiction enhance one's empathy and ToM?*, which can be read as *how does reading fiction enhance human abilities that allow individuals to understand and care for others?*

As stated before, the objects of analysis will all be novels, which will be four, and will be divided into two categories. For 'The Case for Humans' Wellbeing', the objects of analysis will be Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020) and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018); for 'The Case for Nature's Wellbeing' the novels will be Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) and Emmi Itäranta's *The Moonday Letters* (2022). The analysis will be concerned with how reading these books enhances the reader's empathy and ToM, which means, for the aims of this dissertation, that the analysis will be carried out with a particular concern on the choices of devices made by the writers and how those translate on the reader and on hypothetically enhancing those abilities.

It might be worth noting that this is not a defence of fiction as a vehicle for morality or altruism. Our business here resides in the role fiction reading has in improving individuals understanding and care for other individuals, expanding their worldview and perception to a degree where they might be more receptive to differences and more resistant to distancing themselves or even stereotyping those same differences, accepting on a deeper level that all humans have different experiences and exist in different circumstances, but that their otherness can be made closer if one is open to it. Which is to say, we might never fully know other minds and other entities, but we can still try to understand them instead of alienating them.

Part A

[W]hen people use the expression 'I feel your pain' to indicate both comprehension and empathy, they may not realize just how literally true their statement could be.

Rizzolatti, Fogassi and Gallese

1.1. Empathy and Theory of Mind

Empathy has throughout time metamorphosed into something of so wide a scope that it has become an investigative feature of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, neurosciences, ethics, aesthetics, phenomenology, and so on – making of it an everchanging concept, with the added layer of being approached differently in different fields of thought (Maibom, 2017a). Which is to say, defining empathy and separating it from adjacent concepts is no easy task. Its many varieties or manifestations are so interconnected that diverse scholars attributing separate names to the same definition is not unheard of, or, on the contrary, using the same terminology to refer to completely separate phenomena (Maibom, 2012). To quote a renowned neuroscience article from 2006, “there are probably nearly as many definitions of empathy as people working on the topic” (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006, p. 435). Remy Debes highlights that empathy “is an eclectic concept”, so eclectic “that it tolerates no dogmatic claim about what it ‘really’ is”, adding with some humour that the “very inception of the English term in 1909 was an act of misinterpretation by the American psychologist Edward Titchener, who was trying to translate the German aesthetician Theodor Lipps’s concept of *Einfühlung*” (2017, p. 60), an anecdote alluded to by many scholars.

Defining theory of mind is yet more complicated. While some see it as a multitude of mind processes that encompass all others, many think of it as a folk psychological theory, and others see it as one of the varieties of empathy. Some place it solely on the cognitive field (Völlm et al., 2006; Zunshine, 2006) and others admit that it has both cognitive and affective features (Maibom, 2017a; Shamay-Tsoory, 2011; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014). For instance, by way of example, the Wiley-Blackwell’s *A Companion to Literary Theory* includes ‘Theory of Mind or Mind-Reading’ (Richter, 2018, pp. 133-139) as a section in the chapter “Contemporary Narrative Theory”, a chapter on “Empathy Studies” (pp. 201-218), and an ‘Empathy and Other Minds’ section (pp. 593-596) on the “Cognitive Literary Criticism” chapter.

Back in the 18th century, both David Hume and Adam Smith dedicated much of their time to a notion that they referred to as sympathy. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* and in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, respectively, the philosophers wrote at length about sympathy, although having different interpretations of it; whereas Hume saw it as what nowadays would be seen as kind of low-level empathy or mere mirroring, Smith saw it as, likewise, what nowadays would be seen as high-level empathy, involving imagination or imaginative perspective-taking (we will get to both concepts in a bit) (Hume, 1739; Smith 1759). Regardless the lack of alignment in terminology, Hume and Smith are probably the most engaged with philosophers in empathy studies to date. More than a century later, Theodor Lipps focused on the infamous idea of *Einfühlung*, which in a literal sense means ‘feeling into’. The German philosopher “referred to a process of inner imitation or inner resonance that is based on a natural instinct and causes us to imitate the movements and expressions we perceive in physical and social objects”, meaning we experience other people’s feelings only because we project our own feelings onto them, a logic that he also applied to aesthetic objects, since these “elicit the same responses in us that are elicited by expressions and movements of the body, and we project these inner subjective qualities onto them” (Coplan & Goldie, 2011; p. xii).

Lipp’s influence continued through the 20th century, especially in the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions. The concept of empathy – or, at the time, *Einfühlung* – was often connected to the concept of *Verstehen* (which means understanding). Some phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein were, however, critical to Lipps’s notion of empathy and, as such, chose to develop their own notions of it, with a special concern on the problem of intersubjectivity. Often referred to as *the problem of other minds*, the problem of intersubjectivity refers to whether or not we can know other individuals’ mental states and, if so, how can we know; “[t]he standard response to the problem when Husserl and Stein were writing was the ‘argument from analogy’, according to which I infer the existence of other minds by inferring that the other is the same in this respect as I am” (Coplan & Goldie, 2011, p. xii). Both philosophers rejected this argument and proposed one of their own that focused on empathy: empathy is a single mode of consciousness through which individuals directly experience other individuals’ thoughts, emotions, and desires (Husserl, 1989; Stein, 1989), and “the condition of possible knowledge of the existing outer world” (Stein, 1989, p. 60). The phenomenologists also understood empathy as “a

perceptually based experience of foreign consciousness that more complex and indirect forms of social cognition presuppose as well as rely on” (Zahavi, 2017, p. 34).

Empathy has been fundamental in clinical, developmental, and social psychology as well, especially since the mid-20th century. One of the most interesting approaches to it was that of Carl Rogers, one of the founders of humanistic psychology. He placed empathy at the heart of his client-centred psychotherapeutic method, having defended in *Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being* that

[t]he way of being with another person which is termed empathic has several facets. It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he/she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meanings of which he/she is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover feelings of which the person is totally unaware, since this would be too threatening. It includes communicating your sensings of his/her world as you look with fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which the individual is fearful. It means frequently checking with him/her as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive. You are a confident companion to the person in his/her inner world. By pointing to the possible meanings in the flow of his/her experiencing you help the person to focus on this useful type of referent, to experience the meanings more fully, and to move forward in the experiencing. (1975, p. 4)

The history of empathy is large and far beyond the scope of this dissertation¹. Let us consider, then, the matter of definition. The philosophy scholar Amy Coplan states in *Empathy - Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* that, “[d]epending on whom you ask, empathy can be understood as one or more of several loosely related processes or mental states”:

- (A) Feeling what someone else feels
- (B) Caring about someone else
- (C) Being emotionally affected by someone else’s emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions

¹ For a throughout analysis on the subject, the second part of *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* ought to be consulted in Maibom, 2017, pp. 75-133, and Suzanne Keen also presents a good account on “The Literary Career of Empathy” in *Empathy and the Novel*, 2007, pp. 37-64.

- (D) Imagining oneself in another's situation
- (E) Imagining being another in that other's situation
- (F) Making inferences about another's mental states
- (G) Some combination of the processes described in (A)–(F) (2011, p. 4)

If one were looking for single-phrase definitions, one could use those provided by *The Cambridge Dictionary* or by Birgit A. Völlm and colleagues, as mentioned on the introduction: empathy is “the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation” (n.d.) or “the ability to infer emotional experiences” (2006, p. 90), and theory of mind is “the ability to understand that other people have thoughts, knowledge, and feelings that are not the same as yours” (n.d.) or “the ability to attribute mental states to others” (2006, p. 90). If we were to blend definitions like these together, we could plainly say that empathy is the ability to understand people's feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions, and that theory of mind is a key aspect of empathy, which is why they are so often referred to in connection.

However, even if those are not incorrect, the literature about the subject will rarely dwell on these, jumping straight to the varieties of empathy. Within the scientific community, it is usually presented as having two distinct – even if deeply interconnected – halves: cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Shamay-Tsoory, 2011). Both of these halves have subdivisions of their own, further complicating any attempt of brief definition. Cognitive empathy relates to the ability one has to ascribe mental states to others, whether those states are beliefs, intentions, or emotions, and its two main accounts are theory theory (TT) or theory of mind and simulation theory (ST). Affective empathy, on the other hand, involves affect from the empathizer, and the kinds of affects accepted as empathy are at least four: affective empathy (proper), sympathy (empathic concern), emotional contagion, and personal distress (Maibom, 2017a).

As can be intuited by their names, the first instance of cognitive empathy involves theorizing and the second implies simulating – the philosophy scholar (with neuroscience and psychology on the side) Shannon Spaulding uses the terms ‘information-rich’ and ‘information-poor’ to describe them (2017). Theory theorists understand these social cognition processes on the basis of a folk psychology theory, which implies that exists such a thing as a theory about mental states – either specific laws, as proposed at first, or models and assumptions that people use in a more intuitive approach, as proposed since then –

which can be used to predict people's behaviours. Simulation theorists, by contrast, argue that predicting human behaviour can be achieved by simulating what one would have done in each situation. As such, according to both schools, to understand how other people think, feel, or act, one ought to use the theory one acquired until that point in their life (an 'information-rich' style), or to be able to put themselves in another's shoes and imagine how one would think, feel, or act in that circumstance (an 'information-poor' style) (Spaulding, 2017).²

Nowadays, most theorists on the field concede the inadequacy of either approach on its own, debating amongst themselves how to conceptualize a hybrid one that incorporates elements from the two, and in what conditions humans use each of them. Since it is known through the evolutions in social psychology that humans instantly categorize people as part of their group or of another, theorists propose that mental simulation might provide the best results when it comes to understanding other people's perspectives if they 'belong' to the same group. Spaulding writes that age, race, and gender are three features people instantly identify and use to place others inside or outside their group, but "social categorization extends beyond these classifications", since individuals "have multiple, overlapping identities, and perceived similarity is relative to a context" (2017, p. 17).

Despite being a good technique one can use to understand other people, albeit it being more cognitively demanding, theorizing is particularly useful when the 'target' is too different from the person trying to understand them. In that case, one needs to use all the information available to theorize about the person's perspective, instead of projecting their own perspective as it is done with simulating. As such, if, let us say, one is trying to understand whether the emotional state one senses on a new coworker at a work meeting is one of nervousness, and why that is, one might use one's own imagination to simulate how and why themselves would feel in that same situation if one unconsciously places the coworker in the same social group as themselves – and this is a process typical from theory theory or theory of mind. If, however, one considers that same coworker to be on a different social spectrum, one would have to quickly gather and evaluate all information one has about the

² The psychologist C. Daniel Batson has also famously proposed two distinct forms of perspective taking – an *image-other-perspective* (when one tries to see from the other's perspective) and an *image-self-perspective* (when one tries to imagine what one would see if one were in the other's place) (for more information, consult Batson, 1997, 2008, and also Preston & Hofelich, 2012).

coworker and the situation itself to infer an approximation of the emotional state and the reasons behind that same emotional state – and this is process predicted in simulation theory.

Knowing this is important because in some cases “accuracy is paramount in cognitive empathy”, but “in other cases we just need a good-enough approximation of someone’s perspective” (Spaulding, 2017, p. 18) – even if all these processes are instantly set in motion by most adult humans without much thought on the process itself being required. This means that accuracy might sometimes come second in the line of priorities, and the “interaction between accuracy and efficiency is familiar territory for the debate between the TT and the ST” (p. 18). However, accuracy and efficiency are not the only factors at play; in some cases, our social interactions are guided by self-interests such as anxiety reduction, self-esteem, or the confirmation of one’s worldview. As such, patterns of thinking like naïve realism or confirmation bias distort our capabilities to understand other people, making us prone to, respectively, believing other people easier to fool or to seek only information that confirms what we already believe (Spaulding, 2017).

It ought to be pointed out at this point that cognitive and affective faculties are far from being mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are strongly intertwined – as everything in the human body or in nature at large is. The most accurate way to clarify the divisions made is to say that cognitive empathy does not need to involve affect and that affective empathy usually involves a mix of cognitive and affective processes (Maibom, 2017a).

One thing about affective empathy is that it holds a whole range of emotional responses. Over the years, Heidi L. Maibom has developed a formulation of emotional states seen as empathic, the proposal of which is the following:

Affective empathy: Person *S* empathizes with person *O*’s experience of emotion *E* in situation *C* if *S* feels *E* for *O* as a result of believing or perceiving that *O* feels *E*, or imagining being in *C*.

Sympathy (empathic concern): Person *S* sympathizes with person *O* when *S* feels sad for *O* as a result of believing or perceiving that something bad has happened to *O*, or *S* feels happy for *O* as a result of believing or perceiving that something good has happened to *O*.

Emotional contagion: Person *S*’s feeling *E* is a case of emotional contagion if *S* feels *E* as a result of believing that person *O* feels *E*, perceiving that *O*’s expressing *E*, or imagining being in *O*’s situation.

Personal distress: Person *S* is personally distressed by person *O*'s experience of emotion *E* in situation *C* if *S* feels *E* – not for *O*, but for herself (*S*) – as a result of believing or perceiving that *O* feels *E*, imagining being in *C*, or as a result of believing that something bad has happened to *O*. (2017b, p. 22)

Among philosophers, only affective empathy proper can be seen as empathy. On the other hand, social psychologists usually refer to sympathy or empathic concern when referring to empathy, and most would not understand emotional contagion as empathy, but the Perception-Action model of empathy only describes such a process as empathy (Maibom, 2017b). Maibom further notes that these “are deeply interconnected structures, not as easy to pry apart as the above characterization suggests” (pp. 22-23).³

Frederique de Vignemont and Tania Singer's preferred concept of empathy is a good formulation of what proper affective empathy is. For the philosopher and social neuroscientist (respectively), there is empathy if

- (i) one is in an affective state; (ii) this state is isomorphic to another person's affective state;
- (iii) this state is elicited by the observation or imagination of another person's affective state; (iv) one knows that the other person is the source of one's own affective state. (2006, p. 435)

With this in mind, and to repurpose the previous example, one is empathetic if one is nervous, the coworker is nervous, one is nervous because the coworker is nervous, and one knows they are nervous because the coworker is nervous. To rule out the other three emotional states seen as empathic but not considered proper empathy by most scholars and scientists, one would sympathize rather than empathize with the coworker if seeing them nervous made one feel sorry for them but not nervous as well, one would be experiencing emotional contagion rather than empathy if the coworker being nervous made one feel nervous without one being aware they were nervous because the coworker was nervous, and one would be personally distressed but not empathizing if one was nervous on account of the coworker being nervous but was nervous for themselves and not for the coworker.

These are all possible because “emotions can be experienced in one of two ways: ‘directly’, in a way that is appropriate to our own situation, or ‘empathically’, in a way that is more appropriate to another's situation” (2017b, p. 23), as Maibom writes from research made by

³ For further explorations on this interconnectedness, see, for example, Zahavi, 2017, and Gallagher, 2012.

many along the years, including herself and influential psychologists like Martin Hoffman (2000), Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer (1987). As such, an empathic emotion is an emotion that one feels despite it being more appropriate to the situation somebody else finds themselves in. Empathy, then, is a *feeling with*, and that feeling comes in degrees and works on a spectrum of emotion, as no one could ever possibly fathom that multiple people feel equally (Maibom, 2017b). “Emotions are dynamic processes that unfold over time in response to the person’s thoughts and attitudes about the emotional experience, in response to the changing environment, and so on” (p. 25); when in contact with another in distress, for example, people may feel empathic distress, personal distress, and sympathy – simultaneously or in waves.

Some further notes can be made concerning theory of mind. Right at the beginning of *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Lisa Zunshine presents an extensive list of situations in which humans engage theory of mind that can be used to illustrate it:

when we ascribe to a person a certain mental state on the basis of her observable action (e.g., we see her reaching for a glass of water and assume that she is thirsty); when we interpret our own feelings based on our proprioceptive awareness (e.g., our heart skips a beat when a certain person enters the room and we realize that we might have been attracted to him or her all along); when we intuit a complex state of mind based on a limited verbal description (e.g., a friend tells us that she feels sad and happy at the same time, and we believe that we know what she means); when we compose an essay, a lecture, a movie, a song, a novel, or an instruction for an electrical appliance and try to imagine how this or that segment of our target audience will respond to it; when we negotiate a multilayered social situation (e.g., a friend tells us in front of his boss that he would love to work on the new project, but we have our own reasons to believe that he is lying and hence try to turn the conversation so that the boss, who, we think, may suspect that he is lying, would not make him work on that project and yet would not think that he didn’t really want to); and so forth. (2006, p. 6).

Cognitive evolutionary psychologists believe that the adaptation must have developed during a particularly neurocognitive evolutionary period that lasted from 1.8 million to 10,000 years ago, during the Pleistocene (Zunshine, 2006). Theory of mind is also believed to start occurring in children between the ages of 4 and 6 years old (Black et al., 2021).

What does this mean? There are two exercises usually suggested by psychologists that illustrate quite well what ToM is overall. A toddler of, let us say, 2 years old is in a room with

an adult. The adult places an object in a table within the toddler's eyesight. The toddler then moves to somewhere else in the room, and the adult moves the object outside of the toddler's eyesight to another place or out of vision. The toddler will most likely not be able to understand what happened to the object, since they cannot cognitively comprehend yet a perception outside of theirs. A 5-year-old would, however, easily be able to deduce what could have happened to the object. The other exercise is devised to see whether a child can understand that someone else might hold a false belief. In a false-belief test, the adult would place an object in the table and then exit the room. Another adult would move the object to a different place and then exit the room. The child would at this point be asked where they thought the first adult would look for the object when they came back. A toddler of 2 would point to the place the object currently is, while a child above 4 would indicate the place the object first was. This test is commonly applied as an aid in the diagnosis of autism in children as well (Black et al., 202; Zunshine, 2006).

1.2. The Neuroscience of Connection

The technological innovations of the last decades have revolutionized the way empathy is thought of and studied. The use of functional magnetic resonance imaging – better known for its acronym fMRI –, in particular, has changed everything. The non-invasive technique uses MRI signals to measure brain activity, relying on the connection between blood flow and neuronal activities (Guo, 2017; Debes, 2017). Using fMRI (and other neuroimaging techniques in some cases) and neuropsychological tests, social neurologists have been able to identify associations between neural substrates and social behaviour, managing to “map the physiological correlates of the processes of empathy, describe its neuronal architecture, and specify empathy circuits in the brain” (Guo, 2017, p. 44).

Examining how the activity in the brain shifts during empathic behaviours allowed the building of hypothesis on the neural representations – or the neuroanatomical mapping – of empathy. It ought to be pointed out that, in the neurosciences, empathy is something that encompasses cognitive, evaluative, and affective processes. For the psychologist and neuroscientist Tania Singer, since it relies on somewhat separable neural circuitries, empathy should be divided in three main systems: “(1) our ability to understand other people's motor intentions and action goals”, “(2) our ability to understand other people's beliefs and thoughts” (ToM, mentalizing, mind-reading, or cognitive perspective-taking); and

“(3) our ability to understand other people’s feelings” (empathy or emotional perspective-taking) (2009, p. 252).

Another important piece of information is that the neuroimaging research developed revealed two kinds of neural processes associated with empathy: a bottom-up, lower level of automatic simulation or mimicry, and a top-down, higher order one that allows one to cognitively appreciate what other people are feeling. Christine Cong Guo distinguishes those as emotional contagion and affective perspective taking (2017). Lastly, the discovery of mirror neurons must be considered.

Mirror neurons are single-cell neurons that fire when an individual is executing an action or observing the execution of that action by somebody else, which means that the neural pathways that get stimulated both by executing or observing an action are the same (or very nearly the same). First discovered by accident in 1992 by a group of researchers studying neurons of macaque monkeys’ F5 region of the ventral premotor cortex, mirror neurons are considered the “most influential empirical discovery regarding empathy” (Debes, 2017, p. 54). As research went deeper, the existence of mirror neurons in humans started being speculated. Remy Debes sums up the findings of the ‘explosion’ of research that followed – “there have been more than a thousand articles published directly or indirectly on the subject of mirror neurons” (p. 55) since 1996 – in four major points, with the acknowledgement that everything still requires further investigation.

Firstly, the neural pathway activated as a copy produced by mirroring is necessarily subdued, or inhibited, otherwise all mirroring would cause compulsory imitation. Secondly, the mirroring proprieties are not exclusive to the F5 region of the ventral premotor cortex as it was thought at first, with other regions of the brain now implicated – the inferior parietal lobe, the supplementary motor area, the Brodmann area 44 (pars opercularis of the Inferior Frontal Gyrus), the posterior sector of the Superior Temporal Sulcus, the cingulate cortex, and, lastly, both the somatosensory cortex and the particular subcortical limbic structures (as the insula or the amygdala) when it comes to emotion. Thirdly, the firing of mirror neurons does not necessarily require the same exact stimulus as that of their motor counterpart, which leads scientists to suggest the distinction between literal mirror neurons and broader mirroring proprieties of brain systems. Fourthly, human brains most likely have both mirror neurons and mirroring proprieties (Debes, 2017).

With all this in mind, research suggests that the mirror neuron system has evolved further in the human brain, going from just the initial proposition of the mirroring of actions' processing to the mirroring of intentions, thoughts, and feelings that motivate those same actions. As such, the system ought to have extended to higher cognitive and affective domains of the brain (Guo, 2017).

Now, back to emotional contagion and affective perspective taking. Emotional contagion in social neuroscience means mostly the same as it does in philosophy and psychology: "an automatic mimicry and convergence of emotion when a person responds to the perceived emotion of others" (Guo, 2027, p. 46). Just like with actions, this process relies on the synchronization of neural codes between an emotion experienced first-hand or an emotion observed in someone else. Although there are studies on vicarious responses to affective states like social exclusion, disgust, anxiety and taste, these are still very limited; the major research on this field in particular is focused on pain, since the neural circuits involved in painful experiences are some of the best understood in the neurosciences, and, as such, pain is the emotional state easier to study from an empathic perspective (Guo, 2027).

How does this work? "Empathy for pain describes a person's ability to undergo a painful experience without herself being directly exposed to a physically painful stimulus" (Guo, 2027, p. 46). Recurring to fMRI, scientists have been able to closely analyse the human brain while receiving painful stimuli alongside the human brain while in the presence of someone receiving painful stimuli. Overall, the brain regions activated are the same in both situations, mostly the anterior insula and the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex. Additionally, individuals who have higher scores on empathy tests like the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (Mehrabian, 1997) and the Emotional Concern subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) (these we will further delve into later on) also have greater vicarious reactivity to observed pain (Guo, 2017). One could say, then, "the pain itself, as a kind of vital force, appears as actually traversing one body to another, akin to the way electrical impulses pass along messages on the telegraph", as the philosopher Jane Bennett has beautifully written (2020, p. 32).

When it comes to affective perspective taking, the logic is similar, albeit a bit distinct. Even when shown pictures with only abstract symbols indicating people in pain, individuals will still have empathic reactions – brain regions activated include the ventral medial prefrontal cortex, the superior temporal gyrus, and posterior regions such as the inferior parietal

cortex, the precuneus, and the posterior cingulate cortex (Guo, 2017; Lamm et al., 2011), which are regions linked with cognitive processes that constitute a part of theory of mind or perspective taking. Like mentioned before, emotional contagion involves a bottom-up process, while affective perspective taking is a top-down one. What this means is that affective perspective taking engages higher-order cognitive areas in the medial prefrontal and posterior parietal cortices. When asked to imagine others in specific situations – as in, a third-person perspective –, individuals' brains will fire brain networks in the medial prefrontal, medial-temporal, and medial and lateral parietal region, which, again, are all regions associated with theory of mind (Guo, 2017).

Lesion studies are another big part of empathy-related studies in the neurosciences and have been centred on MRI images of individuals with neuropsychiatric disorders associated with deficits in empathy – like schizophrenia (Canty et al, 2021), Asperger's syndrome, post-traumatic brain injury, stroke, and psychopathy. As Christine Cong Guo writes, “while functional imaging of healthy controls have identified the brain circuits involved in empathy”, “only complementary data from human lesion studies can demonstrate which structures are required for normal empathy in real-life situations and which are not” (2017, p. 48). Some of the discoveries of lesions studies are that reduced perspective taking is connected to bilateral frontal and left anterior temporal atrophy, reduced empathic concern is connected to right medial frontal atrophy (Eslinger et al., 2011), a total empathy score might require integrity of brain tissue at the right temporal pole, the right fusiform gyrus, the right caudate, and right subcallosal gyrus (Rankin et al., 2006), and emotional and cognitive empathy can be entirely dissociated (as mentioned before) when it comes to brain regions (Eslinger, 1998; Shamay-Tsoory, 2011).

In 2011, behavioural scientist Raymond A. Mar performed a massive quantitative meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies pertaining to ToM. The core mentalizing network, he concluded, includes the medial prefrontal cortex, the lateral posterior superior temporal sulcus, the bilateral angular gyri, the bilateral anterior temporal areas, the posterior cingulate cortex, the precuneus, and possibly the left inferior frontal gyrus. In the same year, Simone G. Shamay-Tsoory, also a behavioural scientist, published a paper on empathy's neural bases, in which she proposes that the neural network for emotion recognition and emotional contagion is made out of the inferior frontal gyrus and the inferior parietal lobule,

while the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, temporoparietal junction, and the medial temporal lobe are key regions for cognitive empathy (2011).⁴

Some additional details on the mirror neurons research are worthy of mention. Broad implications for mirroring systems have been suggested and proposed, especially in areas of social cognition, with researchers going as far as speculating that “mirroring forms the basis of everything from imitation, language acquisition, action understanding, and empathy” (Debes, 2017, p. 56), which, in itself, is noticeably an overstatement.

Remy Debes writes that “research into mirror neurons has been brought to bear on the longstanding ‘theory of mind’ debate over how to explain our folk psychological abilities of ‘mind reading’”, and adding that the debate has been divided between so-called theory theorists and simulation theorists (2017, p. 56). This is quite an interesting categorization, since the academic equates theory of mind with cognitive empathy as a whole and not as a subsection of it – which would be the theory theory one, as explained at the beginning of the present chapter. This sort of ‘individual’ thinking is very common on the empathy literature, as it has also been stated before, with scholars and scientists alike beginning their articles or chapters by presenting their own definitions of each concept, which sheds light on the lack of consensus in hardly anything on the field.

There is something Debes points out, though, that adds something to our purposes: the difference between understanding emotion and recognising emotion. Research implies that “observing an action or emotion triggers a neural pattern in brain regions corresponding to actual action or emotion”, which makes of mirroring something that “provides the basis for representing the action or emotion ‘directly’” (2017, p. 57). This is called the direct-matching hypothesis, which means that individuals can understand someone else’s actions or emotions by matching corresponding neural patterns. The literature suggests that this kind of understanding is a solid one, claiming that direct-matching provides one with an

⁴ For further explorations on the subject, then, both of these papers might be consulted (and more recently Mar, 2018). The same goes for Zaki’s and Ochsner’s article on the neuroscience of empathy (2012) and Saxe’s, Carey’s, and Kanwisher’s paper that examines the developmental psychology and functional imaging literature on theory of mind (2004). For the divergences between empathizing and mentalizing, see Cerniglia et al., 2019. For further highlights on the neural processing of cognitive and affective ToM in young adults and adults, see Sebastian et al., 2012.

understanding of the meaning behind said actions or emotions (Debes 2017). To this, Debes argues that no, mirroring on its own could never possibly explain empathy, and that it yields only recognition of other's emotions, not complete understanding. The scholar goes as far as providing possible cognitive achievements that could account as understanding:

One might represent some mental state of the actor or emoter that:

- (a) accounts for the object(s) of the action or emotion; e.g. what she was reaching for, or who she was angry at;
- (b) accounts for the intention; e.g. not only that she was kicking the ball (the object of the kicking), but kicking the ball to score;
- (c) explains how the actor guided the action toward its goal or object(s): e.g. that she used such-and-so body technique to kick the ball in that way;
- (d) explains why the actor opted for the action in question or why the actor came to feel as he did, i.e. her reasons for intending the action or feeling the emotion. (2017, p. 59)

The nature of the representation (or matching) provided by mirroring does not, in Debes' logic, explain any of these senses of understanding. This means that mirroring, even if playing a big part in its processes, cannot be equated with empathy as a whole.

1.3. Evolutionary Theory

From a typical evolutionary perspective, one would think empathy is of no use. After all, a 'feeling with' seems unlikely to have evolutionary benefits when it comes to 'survival of the fittest', as one certainly would rather not sense their prey's emotions as they are about to kill them, their enemy's emotions when they are about to attack them, or to feel in the obligation to help or share with others the little one has. However, the ability to empathize has indeed evolved with humans throughout the millennia, as well as spread through many different organisms – chimpanzees (de Waal, 2009), dogs (Custance & Mayer, 2012), dolphins (Frohoff, 2011), and elephants (Hakeem et al., 2009; Plotnik et al., 2006) have all displayed such abilities, just to name a few.

The scholar Armin W. Schulz writes that empathy "is a complex psychological trait", since it combines an organism's sensory and emotional systems, "whose evolution is likely to have been shaped by a number of different, though complementary, selective pressures" (2017, p. 71). After stating he understands empathy – yet again – as something that involves both detecting another's emotional state and mirroring it, as well as adding that he assumes that "a key adaptive function of many emotional reactions is to guide and initiate appropriate

behavioral responses to the world” (p. 65), Schulz presents some evolutionary pressures that might constitute reasons behind empathy’s prevalence.

Cooperation is the major factor here; most research argues that empathy evolved to facilitate cooperation between individuals and even between species. This involved the evolution of traits like outward displays of emotion, ability to detect emotions on other organisms, ability to mirror those emotions, ability to infer what the other organism needs from that same emotion, and willingness to help when empathizing. Nonetheless the evolutionary complexity, the logic behind the argument for cooperation is simple: if one feels the need for help of another, one will be triggered to help the one in need. Now, there seems to be evidence that the commitment to cooperation might be both altruistic and egoistic. Both of these are also simple to understand: one helps because one genuinely wants to help, or one helps because one expects to be helped back in the future (or because one just wants to eliminate the mirrored distress). In other words, altruistic empathy-driven cooperation has the other’s wellbeing in mind, whether egoistic empathy-driven cooperation has the self’s wellbeing in mind (Schulz, 2017).

All of this implies that “the moral value of empathy is not straightforward to assess”, as some would suggest. Since morality is commonly seen as “inherently unbiased and other-directed”, and empathy might be altruistically based, but might just as likely be biased and not always altruistically oriented, “empathy is unlikely to make, at least by itself, a universally good foundation for morality” (Schulz, 2017, p. 71). This is quite an interesting analysis, since empathy is often connected to altruism, and both are often linked to morality.⁵

There is a non-cooperative side to the selective pressures on the evolution of empathy too. On this account, empathy “is adaptive for allowing organisms to react more quickly to time-sensitive environmental conditions” (Schulz, 2017, p. 69). The most obvious use for this is in the face of danger; if one senses the fear in others, one can escape the source of danger with a higher degree of efficiency than if one had to wait for direct contact with the source of danger itself. However, empathy can be helpful too if a social situation forces one to match someone else’s hostility as defence, or any other emotion required to smoothly insert

⁵ For a deep dive into empathy and morality, see Maibom, 2017c, pp. 201-282, and Coplan & Goldie, 2011, pp. 2010-330.

oneself in the surrounding social fabric, mediating faster adaptive behavioural responses (Schulz, 2017).

As this dissertation is concerned both with empathy/theory of mind and literature/fiction/the novel, it seems fitting to explore the evolutionary advantages of language, imagination, and storytelling as well. Because it is easy to wonder, “if our species was writing stories five thousand years ago, then long before that we surely were telling stories” (Greene, 2020, p. 171), so, “[w]hy were our ancestors drawn to expend precious resources of time, energy, and attention telling stories that, at first blush, don’t seem to enhance our survival prospects?” and “[w]hat evolutionary utility could arise from following the exploits of imaginary characters facing make-believe challenges in nonexistent worlds?” (p. 172).

The theoretical physicist and mathematician’s proposals on the subject are a good place to start. On *Until the End of Time: Mind, Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe*, Brian Greene explores – as the title suggests – different paths humanity has followed on the search for meaning, while also clarifying the physics behind how the mind and matter work, and how time, space, the universe, and life, came into existence. The chapter “Language and Story: From Mind to Imagination” (2020, pp. 160-187) is where our businesses reside.

His reasoning is the following: humanity’s awareness of its own death is what gives life meaning, since only understanding that time is limited will we strive to make our lives amount to something more. Literature is one among many of the ways humans have at our disposal to shoot for timelessness. However, literature’s importance for our species goes beyond a sense of meaning or immortality – it has also played a major role in getting us this far. Greene breaks down the components of literature into language, imagination, and storytelling, giving possible reasons for how humans have evolved said skills and for how they have proven pivotal throughout time (2020).

Language’s origins remain enigmatic to this day. Some suggest there might have been some kind of internal language first, and language evolved as its external vocalization. Some suggest it might have been born from song, nothing but a repurposing of sounds. The insufficiency of gesticulation in urgent situation is also proposed, as well as the need to allow gossip and communal discourse to get to more and more people as settlements grew, or even just a motherly instinct to better communicate with and about their child. A common

thesis is that language appeared as a side-effect of brains getting larger (Greene, 2020). Whatever it was, “once the human mind had language, our species’ engagement with reality was poised for radical change” (p. 169). The physicist elaborates that

[w]ith language we can articulate a vision in which the real world provides an impoverished glimpse of far richer possibility. We can conjure imagery, authentic and fanciful, in minds remote and proximal. We can pass on hard-earned knowledge, substituting the ease of instruction for the difficulty of discovery. We can share plans and align intentions, facilitating coordinated action. We can combine our individual creative capacities into an immensely consequential communal force. We can look into ourselves and recognize that though shaped by evolution we are able to soar beyond the needs of survival (pp. 161-162),

What about stories? In the pivotal “Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact: Fiction as Cognitive and Emotional Simulation”, Keith Oatley introduced the metaphor of the brain as a computer, with fiction working as a program that the computer runs as a simulation. In this way, human brains can simulate real life – just like in a videogame – by way of reading fiction, coming into contact with different approaches to different social situations, testing freely as with fiction there is no game-over. Dreaming is another metaphor proposed by the novelist and cognitive psychology researcher, since dreaming is familiar to people, while computer programming was not to most at the time (fairly, most likely it still is not today) (1999). Brian Greene repurposes the simulation as a flight simulator, writing that

it is through these simulated episodes that our intuition expands and refines, rendering it sharper and more flexible [...] Through story we break free from our usual singular perspective and for a brief moment inhabit the world in a different way. We experience it through the eyes and imagination of the storyteller. The flight simulator of story is our portal to the idiosyncratic worlds playing out in nearby minds. (pp. 175-178)

It is not just a matter of empathy, then. It is also about social cognition and social perception. Simon Baron-Cohen’s understanding of empathy, for example, is one through the lenses of social usefulness. To the psychologist, empathy encompasses cognitive abilities (to identify other people’s thoughts and feelings, which is the ToM component) and affective abilities (to respond accordingly to those thoughts and feelings, meeting the mental states with the right emotions) that allow individuals to and effectively situate themselves in the social fabric (2003).

Marta Nussbaum has even proposed that literature (mostly the novel) helps to enhance imaginative thinking and feeling about others that is central to both private and public interactions, like the administration of justice (1995), while Irene Vallejo chooses to remind her target audience that from the word *lector* the term *elector* was born (2020, p. 16). The Spanish author writes beautifully on the impacts of literature, and we will end this chapter with her words:

Propulsados por el lenguaje y la creatividad, nuestros cerebros despegaron de la mera evolución biológica, cuya cadencia es implacablemente lenta, y elevamos el vuelo con las rápidas alas de la evolución cultural. Hace miles de años, la invención de una sofisticada tecnología, la escritura, abrió las puertas a conservar conocimientos, ideas y sueños, a expandirlos y hacerlos revivir con cada mirada que se posa en las letras de una página. El filósofo Richard Rorty piensa que leer nos cambió la mente de forma irreversible. Gracias a la lectura, hemos desarrollado una anomalía llamada ‘ojos interiores’. Descubrir los personajes de una historia se parece a conocer gente nueva, comprendiendo su carácter y sus razones. Cuanto más diferentes son esos personajes, más nos amplían el horizonte y enriquecen nuestro universo. A través de los libros, anidamos en la piel de otros, acariciamos sus cuerpos y nos hundimos en su mirada. Y, en un mundo narcisista y ególatra, lo mejor que le puede pasar a uno es ser todos. (2020, p. 13)

Part B

We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.

Toni Morrison

2.1. Literature, Empathy and Theory of Mind

Let us clarify a few more psychological notions before diving into literature. Empathy can be biased. Individuals tend to be more empathic with those they accept as similar to them (a simulation theory vs theory theory sort-of situation once again) and more even with those they are close to (Schulz, 2017). Additionally, individuals tend to be more sensitive towards the feelings of other individuals rather than of groups (Maibom, 2017a). According to psychology, there are two situations at play here: psychic numbing and the identifiable victim effect.

In the 1980s and 90s, researchers began trying to understand why some therapists were showing the same symptoms as their post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) patients. Concepts such as compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD), and vicarious trauma began to emerge, often used interchangeably or, at least, without much distinction between them. With time, the focus of investigation spread; healthcare, law enforcement, and firefighting professionals were also included in the research, as well as activists, volunteers, journalists, and many others. What did all these people have in common? Spending their days immersed in continuous exposure to human suffering (Carmassi et al., 2020; Cieslak et al., 2014; Figley, 1995; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

Despite very similar and interconnected, these are all slightly different. Compassion fatigue refers to emotional exhaustion caused by repeated contact with suffering. Some use compassion fatigue as an umbrella term that includes both STSD and vicarious trauma, as well as burnout, anxiety, and depressive disorders. There are those who deny the possibility of compassion fatigue, understanding that the term implies the identification of compassion as a finite resource, and there are those who defend that the denomination does not identify compassion as something exhaustible, it only admits decreases in the ability to feel it in the absence of enough self-care. STSD implies PTSD symptoms without the traumatic events having been experienced first-person; vicarious traumatization is similar, but it entails that

the individual undergoes profound changes in his worldview (Rauvola, Vega, & Lavigne, 2019).

Psychic numbing is another concept that arose from that collective effort of research. Robert Jay Lifton was the one who coined the term, and his research was focused on the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing in 1945, both relating to what it meant for humanity that such a weapon of mass destruction could be at anyone's disposal and to the mental devices rescue workers developed to keep working in the face of such horror (1982). This 'turning off' of feeling, especially in the rescue workers' case, is somewhat beneficial. Paul Slovic's conception of it, though, is a highly apathic and inactive one. In his case, psychic numbing is a societal reaction to doom and chaos, anything too overwhelming for the human mind to comprehend, being the ultimate example the species' extinction. In this case, the coping mechanism desensitises people to the value of life and to loss, or, as Slovic et al. put it, "a form of psychophysical numbing may result from our inability to appreciate losses of life as they become larger" (2013, p. 129).

The identifiable victim effect works on a similar logic, albeit somewhat distinct. It is a cognitive bias, and it arises from the inability human brains have to envision large numbers, resulting in a tendency to offer greater help to identifiable individuals in need than to vaguely defined groups in need (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997). Thomas Schelling is usually pointed out as the one behind the conceptualization of the identifiable victim effect, which he explained stating that individuals might feel intense guilt and responsibility while hurting a specific person, but the emotion will be much less intense in the face of statistical death (1968).

If the "twentieth century is often said to have been the bloodiest century in recorded history" (Slovic et al., 2013, p. 126), the 21st is bound to be the most viscerally graphic one. With 24-hour news cycles, user generated content everywhere, 65% of the world population regularly online and 60% on social media (Statista, 2023), images from any event happening on the other side of the globe can appear in your hands in a matter of seconds. Suffering is everywhere, and a prolonged exposure to it may have physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural effects, changing people's personal, professional, and inner lives (Bladow & Ladino, 2018).

It is easy to understand why, then, the scientific community has recently been carrying studies on the possibilities of stress caused by indirect trauma without direct contact with

victims, but through prolonged exposure to trauma-adjacent content, usually through the media or social media. The DSM-5 (the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* from the American Psychological Association) already envisions the possibility of PTSD in individuals who only became aware of the trauma because it was told to them with repeated or extreme detail, although the criteria does not yet allow for exposure through “electronic media, television, movies, or pictures” (APA, 2013, p. 271), unless the exposure is related to work.

It might also be of use to point out here that empathy is quite paradoxical when it comes to similarity. It is commonly proposed that the most similar the empathizer is with the empathized, the greater the depth of empathy. However, “a certain degree of personal disengagement is required” (Maibom, 2017b, p. 26). The closer the situation the empathized currently is in is to the empathizer, whether because they are in the same situation, they have been in the same situation, or for any other reason the situation is relevant to them in some way, the likelier for the empathizer to feel strongly. Yes, empathy proper calls for an alignment in emotion, but if one is too emotionally distressed, one might care for their own distress in greater degree and lose sight from the situation, becoming more important for the empathizing individual to remove themselves from the situation than to help the empathized in however the situation requires. This means that, while it is more likely that one will empathize with someone similar to them – simulation theory, biases and so on –, it is also harder to empathize with someone whose situation is too close with one’s own (Maibom, 2017b).

Additionally, if one gets too involved, one is more at risk of the empathic affect tipping into direct affect, turning the empathic distress into personal distress and further complicating the situation – since, again, one might care for their own distress in greater degree and lose sight from the situation (Maibom, 2017b, pp. 26-27). This also works for the mostly cognitive half of empathy. Is it commonly proposed that a match of life experiences will provide one with greater insight into other people’s similar experiences. Except the match of experiences might have the opposite effect, because then one might fail to understand that other people feel differently about the situation, impairing one’s ability to acknowledge that others might feel differently and to empathize with them (Hodges, 2005; Zahavi, 2017).

How one handles the balance between personal distress and empathic distress changes from individual to individual. They can look – or feel – almost indistinguishable, and people

can move from one to another, or feel both at the same time (Maibom, 2017b, p. 27). Nancy Eisenberg has defended that it all just comes down to the fact that some people are better at regulating their emotions than others, and the ones that are not that good at it are more likely to easily tip into personal distress and further aggravate the situation by letting it dominate over empathic distress (Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2014).

All the previous information is relevant for our purposes for different reasons. Firstly, it becomes more and more obvious that there are many ways or levels in which one can experience any kind of empathic affect. Notwithstanding it being more appropriate to the situation somebody else finds themselves in, one can feel an empathic emotion no matter if one is witnessing the situation first-hand, is being told about it by someone who witnessed it, is watching a recording of it, or is reading about it. Secondly, biases like identifiable victim effect make of literature something ever more important, since the acknowledgement of such biases can help people understand larger spectres of reality through bite-sized bits – or stories. This is a narrative device widely used in journalism and in the communication sciences at large. Which brings us to our main point.

Literature as we know it would not exist without theory of mind and empathy. It would be impossible for writers to create anything other than autobiographical texts, since no one would be able to envision a mind outside their mind (*the problem of other minds* once again) (Zunshine, 2006). Readers would also fail to comprehend somebody else's autobiographical text – or any novel, for that matter –, since, again, no one would be able to envision a mind outside their mind. Everyone would essentially be talking into the void, and nobody could be moved by anything, since no one would have the ability to *feel with* (Keen, 2007). As Zunshine points out,

[t]he very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call 'characters' with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires and then to look for the "cues" that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions. [...] As a sustained representation of numerous interacting minds, the novel feeds the powerful, representation-hungry complex of cognitive adaptations whose very condition of being is a constant social stimulation delivered either by direct interactions with other people or by imaginary approximation of such interactions. (2006, p. 10)

The psychologist Jerome Bruner defends that humans organize experience and memory mainly in the form of narrative, which means it would be quite hard for society to exist as we know it, or any kind of collective living, if we did not have the capacity to organize and communicate experience in narrative form (2002). Just like Brian Greene wrote, “[w]ith math we commune with other realities; with story we commune with other minds” (2020, p. 179). *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* has a section dedicated to the interrelations between empathy and the various arts; Eileen John starts the chapter on literature by writing the following:

Literature is a form of art, using the medium of language. The experience of its medium is essential to the understanding and appreciation of a given literary work. This basic conception of literature allows for both fictional and non-fictional literary works; the literary kinds associated with fiction – the novel, short story, drama, and much poetry – raise issues of particular interest in relation to empathy, so fiction will be the focus here. Literary works do not lend themselves easily to generalization, but one thing they do fairly universally is use the resources of language to offer and portray possibilities of experience. Literary works typically explore what can be undergone, done, sensed, felt, and thought by conscious beings. [...] In the very broad sense of offering experiential shifts issuing from perspectives other than one’s own, literature seems to be rather pervasively in the empathy business. (2017, p. 306)

There is a general understanding that it is good for small children to read fiction books. Whether for linguistic, imaginative, deductive, reflective, informational, or social benefits (for example) is something that probably does not concern most people; reading fiction is good for small children, whatever the reasons for it may be, period. However, as children grow and turn into teenagers, there seems to be a shift. Aside from the social stigma that prevails in some circles and identifies reading as something boring and uncool to do, which leads many to abandon their reading habits – a lot of children stop enjoying reading at the age of 14, data shows, with statistics stronger in boys’ case –, there is something else at play. Fiction revolves around fictional characters and their fictional affairs, which leads many to associate it with play-pretend and devoid it of any usefulness. Teenagers are, then, encouraged to read ‘serious’ books, perhaps historic, politic, sociologic, philosophic, or scientific ones as a way to prepare for ‘real life’ and to forego fiction books, now mere entertainment (Cole et al., 2022; Mar et al., 2006; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Mar, 2022; Oatley, 1999; Oatley, Mar, & Djikic, 2012; Tamir et al., 2015).

In some cases, the circumstances are even direr. In the same Social Sciences Institute and Gulbenkian Foundation study mentioned in the introduction, most of the inquired individuals said not having benefited from any kind of reading stimuli from family members during their childhood and adolescence. “Nunca os pais ou qualquer outro familiar os acompanharam a uma livraria (em 71% dos casos), a uma feira do livro (75%) ou a uma biblioteca (77%); nem tão-pouco lhes ofertaram um livro (47%) ou os deleitaram com a leitura de um livro de histórias (54%)”, mentioned the authors of the study, adding, however, that the younger the inquired, or the more academically qualified their parents, the more family support they had, which attests to the possibility for change, since Portuguese society is becoming more and more qualified (Pais, Antunes, & Magalhães, 2022, p. 7).

As mentioned before in this dissertation, fiction is far from mere entertainment, and seldom useless. On a purely linguistic and motor level, neuroscientists have by now as granted that the same neural circuits can be triggered by a conscious desire to perform an action, witnessing someone else perform said action, or reading the verb that communicates that someone is performing said action (Pulvermüller, Härle, & Hummel, 2001). What this means, in a step-by-step way, is that the electrical chain reaction that allows us to, say, move an arm, can have as an input a ball moving in our direction, a friend moving their arm within our eyesight, or reading that a fictional character has moved their arm. All three of these can be the event that triggers our sensory receptors, that in turn will trigger a whole set of synapses in motion, with neurotransmitters moving from cell to cell, until they reach the brain, which will then proceed to make the decision to trigger another whole set of synapses with a motor intention or proclaim the reaction as complete (Mar, 2011; Shamay-Tsoory, 2011).

Psychologists have by now also as granted that reading about the mental states and emotional phenomena of fictional characters will trigger cognitive and emotional responses just like interacting with other people would (Oatley, 1999). This also suggests that the same brain areas linked to social comprehension triggered by interactions with other individuals are triggered by reading about the comings and goings of fictional characters, like the ones used for “mental inference, tracking of goals, emotion recognition” (Mar et al., 2009). The Immersed Experiencer Framework proposed by Rolf A. Zwaan, for example, hypothesizes that words engage neural substrates similar to those that activated real-world situations (2004), which overall means that readers mentally simulate stories’ events – and which is in alignment with the emotional and cognitive simulation proposed by Oatley (1999). Research

also suggests the areas activated are different when reading about characters' actions or about characters' thoughts, which is overall consistent with more broad human brain mapping, which separates motor-linked areas from more complex mentalizing-linked areas, even if empathy-linked areas are thought to be fairly spread out (Carruthers & Smith, 1996; Mar, 2004; Pulvermüller, Härle, & Hummel, 2001; Tager-Flusberg, 2001).

Thus, people with frequent reading habits are more prone to having higher degrees of empathy and theory of mind, which in turn will lead to better social cognition (Mar et al., 2006; Mar et al., 2009). In "Bookworms versus nerds", Raymond A. Mar and colleagues proposed that three possible arguments can be made to justify the connections between narrative reading and social comprehension: frequent readers "expose themselves to concrete social knowledge embedded within stories, which is then applied to realworld interactions", "hone their social-inference and monitoring skills, and that these improved skills are exercised in the real-world", or "individuals who are very empathic, and skilled at making social inferences, simply enjoy reading fiction more and are more likely to engage in this activity" (2006, p. 698). "None of these individual hypotheses exclude the other possibilities, and in all likelihood some combination is at play", they add (p. 698). Seven years later, P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp acceded to their proposal and expanded it with some detail in "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy?", writing the following:

[f]irst, the simulation of real-world experiences in fiction might be associated with processes that people use in daily life to comprehend what happens in the world. Consequently, through this sensemaking process, people gain a better understanding of the world and how they should interact with other people. People learn from fiction about the human psychology, and gain knowledge about how to react to other people in social situations, as argued by Mar et al.. When an individual reads a story, he/she predicts the actions and reactions of the characters, by inferring what they are thinking, feeling, and intending. In order to do this, the reader sympathizes with the characters in the story, through taking the perspective of the characters and to experience the events as if it is the reader's own experience. Moreover, some stories are able to make sense out of the senseless, and offer possibilities to understand other people across time and space, an opportunity which is not readily available in daily life. The sympathy a reader feels for the characters is then integrated in the self-concept of the reader, through which the reader accumulates his/her ability to take the perspective of others, and to feel empathy. Moreover, enhancement of empathic skills through fiction reading can contribute to people's goals of who they want to be in their lives, such as to become a person that cares

for other people's welfare. Hence, sympathetic reactions to fictional characters are integrated into broader response patterns in daily life, and empathic skills of the reader are enhanced. (2013, p. 2)

"Second", they add, "Mar et al. argued that fiction experiences enhance imaginative thinking", alluding to the framework proposed by Zwaan (2004). "Thus, by reading a story, people imagine a narrative world that is similar to our own world", in which they "imagine how it is to see through the eyes of other people, by imagining and actually experiencing the thoughts and feelings of characters in a story" (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 2), and that imaginative process makes people more empathic.

David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano's "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind" paper on *Science Magazine* is "the most cited article in the field" (Castano et al., 2023, p. 9). Emphasizing theory of mind, they hypothesise that

[f]amiliarity with fiction, self-reported empathy, and performance on an advanced affective ToM test have been correlated, and limited experimental evidence suggests that reading fiction increases self-reported empathy. Fiction seems also to expand our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them. Although fiction may explicitly convey social values and reduce the strangeness of others, the observed relation between familiarity with fiction and ToM may be due to more subtle characteristics of the text. That is, fiction may change how, not just what, people think about others. We submit that fiction affects ToM processes because it forces us to engage in mind-reading and character construction. (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 377)

There are some interesting notions at play here. The very act of reading requires openness to "letting a stretch of language generated by another occupy one's consciousness", and this occupation is quite intimate, engaging processes of perception thought, and feeling (John, 2017, p. 306). There is, then, some "relaxation of control", which allows "other patterns of attention, conceptualization, and evaluation occupy the experiential foreground" (p. 313). However, readers, even in full simulation mode (Oatley, 1999), can still usually differentiate themselves from the other, not losing awareness that that another's perspective is at work (Coplan, 2004), which is one of the requirements for empathy to happen (Vignemont & Singer, 2006), but can also leave us questioning "[h]ow can I be me, thinking and feeling as I do, while thinking and feeling on behalf of a character" (John, 2017, p. 313, alluding to Goldie, 2011)?. To this, the philosophy professor Amy Coplan argues that empathy always

maintains proper distance between self and other, in a differentiation-in-empathy that maintains the integrity both of the subject and the object (2004, 2011). In this regard,

[t]he presence of self-other differentiation in empathy has a number of important effects. First, it prevents empathy-induced experiences from motivating the empathizer to act as though she is actually having the target's experiences. Second, it enables the empathizer to have her own separate experiences while simultaneously empathizing. Third, it enables the empathizer to observe the boundaries of the other as well as his- or herself and to respect the singularity of the other's experience as well as his or her own. (2004, p. 144)

Side by side with Oatley's simulation, there is Richard Gerrig's emotional transportation theory. In *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, the psycholinguist wrote about the phenomenon by which stories capture readers, often mentioned as engagement, and describe it using a metaphor of travel. Fiction can transport readers to different times and different places and, once transported, readers will experience the thoughts and emotions the story's characters do (Gerrig, 1993). "Such thoughts and experiences are not merely a form of entertainment, but have lasting real-world consequences", defend Mar et al., which is shown by the way "[p]eople speak of certain, favorite, books as 'life-changing' for example, and it is common for feelings of sadness or elation to persist after closing the pages of a book" (2006, p. 695). It has also been hypothesised that transportation into a story increases empathy, theory of mind, and prosocial behaviour (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Johnson, 2012). Another important notion is that of activation of concern (Giovannelli, 2009), which is something that depends entirely on the reader, regardless of the writer's talent, and can be central for that lasting effect to manifest. After all, according to Susan L. Feagin, to truly appreciate a fictional work, a reader must read *with feeling* (1996).

In *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen writes that "middlebrow readers tend to value novels offering opportunities for strong character identification", feeling "both empathy with and sympathy for fictional characters", and judging "the success of novels based on how well they could identify with characters' feelings" (2007, p. ix). "Perhaps we have a flexible critical practice that lets empathy and failure of empathy matter when we can tell how those effects figure into the aims and power of a given work", considers Eileen John. "If we think more loosely about the pleasures of reading, not worrying about literary value, it seems that many readers would count empathetic response as part of the pleasure" – after all, a reader considering "a work *interesting* can be the result of having formed empathetic connections to its characters" (2017, pp. 313-314). Which leads to the reflection Suzanne

Keen adds immediately after: even if narrative techniques and form are implied, most readers will not incorporate the analytical language of academical literary criticism in their conversations or informal reviews; rather, “Empathy shapes their recommendations and judgments about fiction” (2007, p. ix).

Another consideration can arise here, which is one made by E. M. Dadlez: sometimes, a reader will experience emotional connection with a morally and ethically questionable character, or with a character whose way of being in the world they do not fully understand, or with a character they do not like or relate to (1997). This “awkward position may be illuminating”, observes Eileen John, “perhaps enabling critical assessment of the character or of our own value commitment” (2017, p. 314), enabling fictional works to “make the potential, the limits, and strangeness of empathy into themes” (p. 309).

The scholar Dorrit Cohn went as far as wondering, then, that the reader can know fictional people with a degree of intimacy than they will never know of real people, writing in *Transparent Minds* that

[i]f the real world becomes fiction only by revealing the hidden side of the human beings who inhabit it, the reverse is equally true: the most real, the ‘roundest’ characters of fiction are those we know most intimately, precisely in ways we could never know people in real life. [...] But this means that the special life-likeness of narrative fiction – as compared to dramatic and cinematic fictions – depends on what writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks, another body feels. (Cohn, 1978, pp. 5–6)

How did, then, psychologists study proposals relating to fiction reading and the enhancement of empathic abilities? Most investigation developed relies on having individuals perform specific tasks and answer a battery of self-reporting tests and empathy scores like the IRI, the RMET or the IPT-15. This dissertation has already covered the fMRI component of testing for empathy, but it has not explored the psychological self-reports that are commonly used as measurement tools to assess one’s empathy, nor the measures for assessing social cognition and interpersonal perception, like the aforementioned IRI, RMET and IPT-15.

From 2009 to 2019, the Empathy Quotient, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and the Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy were by far the instruments most frequently used in research (Lima & Osório, 2021). The ‘Reading the Mind in the Eyes’ Test revised is the core measure for assessing social cognition, while the Interpersonal Perception

Task-15 assesses social perception. It is worth mentioning that for a long time Robert Hogan's empathy (EM) scale was the most widely used, since it also was one of the oldest, created in 1969. The scale has 4 factors – social self-confidence, even temperedness, sensitivity, and nonconformity –, correlating with 16 different personality measures. Another notable one is Albert Mehrabian and Norman Epstein's questionnaire measure of emotional empathy (QMEE), quite used since its creation in 1972, specially since Hogan's devised empathy only in its cognitive form.

60 questions comprise the Empathy Quotient (EQ), divided by 40 relating to empathy and 20 control items (Appendix 1). A 40-item version with the questions relating only to empathy might also be used, but with less efficiency (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). The questionnaire was developed by Simon Baron-Cohen and Sally Wheelwright in 2004, and it must be answered following a 4-point Likert scale – strongly agree, slightly agree, strongly disagree, slightly disagree. It has been adapted, reformed, and used as inspiration by many other psychology scholars, including by a team which included the two original authors and transformed the EQ into a 28-item test, eliminating items they no longer found relevant in an attempt to simplify (Wakabayashi et al., 2006). Initially designed to help diagnose Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism, it is widely used as a broad empathy measurement.

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) was developed by Mark Davis in 1980. It is a measure of multi-dimensional empathy, comprising 28 items divided through 4 (with 7 items each) subscales – Fantasy, Perspective-Taking, Empathic Concern, and Personal Distress (Appendix 2). Test participants ought to indicate for each question how well it describes them, using a 5-point Likert scale in which 0 equals 'does not describe me well' and 4 is 'describes me very well' (Davis, 1980). Davis's scales have been widely used in empathy or empathy-relating testing since the 80s.

Also a measure of multi-dimensional empathy, The Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE) is divided in five sub-scales: Perspective Taking and Online Simulation for cognitive empathy, Emotion Contagion, Proximal Responsivity and Peripheral Responsivity for affective empathy (Appendix 3). It also has a 4-point Likert scale (strongly agree, slightly agree, strongly disagree, slightly disagree), and most of its 31 items originate from other empathy measures like the IRI, the EQ and the EM (Reniers et al., 2011). The QCAE was

developed by Renate L. E. P. Reniers, Rhiannon Corcoran, Richard Drake, Nick M. Shryane and Birgit A. Völlm and published in 2011.

The 'Reading the Mind in the Eyes' Test (MIE, RMET or Eyes Test) is a test of mentalizing proposed in 1997 and revised in 2001 (Appendix 4). It was, like the EQ, developed by Simon Baron-Cohen and designed to help diagnose Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism, although it is commonly used just as a social cognition measure. It comprises 36 pictures of actors' eye-regions, asking the participants to observe them and then attribute to them one of four possible mental states. Participants are also provided a list of mental states' lexicon, as well as an explanation and example for each, which is devised as a control for individual differences in vocabulary. Overall, the measure assesses one's ability to understand and pair mental states with static non-verbal cues (Baron-Cohen et al., 1997, 2001).

Created by Mark Costanzo and Dane Archer in 1989, the Interpersonal Perception Task (IPT) is a measure that assesses for social perception. Participants are presented with a 30-minute video, which contains 30 unscripted interactions between individuals in groups of two or more (Appendix 5). After observing each interaction depicted, participants must answer a multiple-choice question; these questions have an objective and true answer, although that answer is never communicated explicitly. Rather, it is expected of participants to pick on non-verbal cues, with five common social interactions (status, intimacy, kinship, competition, and deception) being represented in an attempt to test for interpersonal sensitivity and social skills (Costanzo & Archer, 1989). The Interpersonal Perception Task-15 (IPT-15) is an abbreviated version of the IPT, presenting only 15 scenes in 15 minutes (Archer, 1993).

Since early studies (Mar et al., 2006; Mar et al., 2009) asked participants only to answer The Author Recognition Test in detriment of introducing reading tasks, this instrument ought to be introduced as well. The Author Recognition Test (ART) is a self-report that is commonly used as a measurement tool to assess one's exposure to print, which is intended to provide data from which to infer one's reading habits. Keith E. Stanovich and Richard F. West developed the test in 1989 and designed it containing 50 names of famous authors and 50 names of people who are not writers, or foils, in an attempt to determine the participants relation with the literary world while controlling for social desirability tendencies (Stanovich & West, 1989). Plenty of scholars have made their own versions of the ART, revisions better

suited to their purposes, testing for different literary genres, or creating shorter or longer versions, but always applying a signal-detection logic to the measure to discourage guessing.

The issue of social desirability is an encompassing one when it comes to both intellectual-perceived features and empathic-related abilities, and one that is taken into account in most studies: most individuals would like to be perceived as cultural, and those who would like to be perceived as good people would like to be perceived as empathic as well, which might lead them, even if unconsciously, to fail to answer truthfully to self-reports.

Considering this, researchers started having participants read a short text and then take the empathy scores (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kidd, Ongis, & Castano, 2016), substituting the nexus between potential reading habits with empathic abilities with the nexus between the actual reading of a text with empathic abilities. Some added the empathy scores both before and after the reading, in an attempt to better analyse the anticipated evolution (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013). This increase in empathic abilities is a phenomenon known as absolute sleeper effect (Appel & Richter, 2007; Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949), which occurs “when the effects of a manipulation do not present themselves immediately, but manifest themselves over time”, and, applied to our purposes, means that “the effects of fiction reading on empathy will increase over time rather than present itself directly after the experience” (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 3).

Trying to prove something usually involves having control variables, which is why researchers also test for non-fiction when trying to prove effects of fiction reading on empathy and theory of mind, and also test for popular or genre fiction⁶ when trying to prove effects of literary fiction reading. Participants might be asked to read both fiction and nonfiction texts, or to read a randomly assigned text that can be either fiction or nonfiction, or to read nothing at all and just complete the other tasks. They might be asked to read both literary fiction and popular or genre fiction, or, again, a randomly assigned text that can be either. They might be asked to take the empathy scores immediately after the reading and a specific period of time after the reading, or to read a larger text over time and take the scores once finished (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013). Investigators also started testing how fiction reading and exposure to

⁶ For a short exploration on “The role of fiction genre in predicting interpersonal sensitivity”, see Fong, Mullin, & Mar, 2013.

different literary genres can affect empathy towards different populations – an example is the study developed concerning gender role stereotyping and sexual conservatism (Fong, Mullin, & Mar, 2015).

This can make one wonder: why fiction, and why literary fiction specifically? How are scholars justifying these distinctions in their studies? “Non-fiction is typically expository in nature, whereas fiction most often takes the form of narrative” (2006, p. 695), write Mar and colleagues. “Stories contain depictions of the actual world replete with intentional agents pursuing goals to form a plot, whereas expository texts, in contrast, share no such parallels with the actual world”, which leads psychologists to conclude that, “The processing of narratives, then, shares some similarities with the processing of our real social environment” (p. 695). Additionally, “Narratives are fundamentally social in nature in that almost all stories concern relationships between people; understanding stories thus entails an understanding of people, and how their goals, beliefs and emotions interact with their behaviours” (p. 696).

“One must be careful not to confuse the discrimination between narrative and expository texts with that between fiction and nonfiction” (Mar, 2004, p. 1416): a nonfiction work might just as well be a narrative, “provided it still follows the tenets of a story presentation” (p. 1416, also Oatley, 1999). This is a distinction of utter importance, as the study of the effects of fiction reading on empathy and theory of mind is more about form than it is about genre per se.

It is also a matter of affect: fiction is supposed to be engaging, of emotional interest, capable of prompting emotions, in contrast to non-fiction, which can be engaging as well, but emotions are not necessary, nor at emotions its primary focus – information is (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013; Oatley, 2012). And identification is another important feature, one that “is sufficiently frequent in fiction to make it typical of this form”: fiction “enables readers to identify with a protagonist” (Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013, p. 30), developing an emotional connection with that character, and maybe even other characters (Oatley & Gholamain, 1997). Given the distinction made above, “It is also possible to identify with protagonists in some kinds of non-fiction, such as memoir, biography, and social history, as well as news and magazine stories” (Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013, p. 30).

This means that, yes, one could include memoirs in this kind of study. Books like Chanel Miller's *Know My Name*, David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Jay Griffiths's *Tristramania*, Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*, Saeed Jones's *How We Fight For Our Lives*, Roxane Gay's *Hunger*, Lauren Hough's *Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing*, Rob Sheffield's *Love Is a Mix Tape*, or even the most commercial ones Dolly Alderton's *Everything I Know About Love* and Matt Haig's both *Reasons to Stay Alive* and *Notes on a Nervous Planet*, are fine examples of this. Moreover, some of them are literary 'enough' to hypothetically (and theoretically) be subjects of analysis on how a given text enhances empathy and theory of mind.

Another interesting remark, in line with this, is that non-fiction has been getting similar and similar with fiction. After all, literary genres are nothing but conventions and, like any other convention, they can be deconstructed and reconstructed, recombined, and rearranged (Fowler, 1997). Creative non-fiction has been around for a long time, even if not under that designation (Singer & Walker, 2013; Hesse, 2003), and has come to a peak in popularity with the nonfiction novel and New Journalism. This school of Tom Wolfe, popular in the 1960s and 70s in an attempt to make journalism more engaging amid declining sales and attention, has created landmark works like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels*, Wolfe's own *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the 'novels in voices' of Svetlana Alexievich, and the works of Joan Didion. Wolfe identified four techniques to make nonfiction works more engaging: "scene-by-scene construction, point of view, concentration on dialogue, and depiction of what Wolfe calls status life" (Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013, p. 29, alluding to Wolfe, 1975). Could all the mentioned works enhance one's empathy and theory of mind as well? There is nothing to suggest otherwise.

"This brings us to the problem of popular fiction, which has not often been praised for the beneficial effects attributed to great literature", writes Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel*:

If immersion in culturally valued fictional worlds – canonical literature and serious fiction – predisposes readers to good citizenship, then what happens to readers (most of those who are left in the dwindling tally) who choose mass-market fiction? Does exposure to attractively rendered vice make readers vicious? The deleterious effects of violent television and videogames documented in case law and social psychology do not extend, according to most accounts, to prose fiction. The cultural tendency to value novels and

denigrate cartoons or video games, however, contributes to assumptions about good and bad forms of narrative. [...] Limiting the effects of reading to those enjoyed by highly educated consumers of serious fiction shifts the emphasis to more rarified qualities of narrative such as defamiliarization. (2007, p. ix)

Literariness and characters' depth seem to be the great debate points when it comes to the literary fiction versus genre or popular fiction distinction. David Comer Kidd and colleagues write that

[p]opular genre fiction, we submit, often draws upon and reifies readers' knowledge of archetypal or stereotypical characters. This may help explain why it is so easily read: It relies on largely prefabricated characters that are understood using highly efficient sociocognitive processes, freeing up resources for enjoying the development of the plot. [...] In contemporary literary fiction, by contrast, plot is often secondary, primarily serving to develop characters and reveal their psychological complexity. [...] Popular genre and literary fiction are, of course, contested, partially overlapping categories, and what we propose above is to be understood as a depiction of broad and relative differences between the two, rather than a clear-cut distinction. Yet, the relative greater emphasis on the inner lives of characters, rather than plot development, in literary fiction is what leads us to expect reading literary fiction to evoke ToM processes. (Kidd, Ongis, & Castano, 2016, p. 44)

The authors also allude to two central ideas from social psychology: individuation and categorization (Brewer, 1988; Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Hassabis et al., 2013; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Young et al., 2012). Usually, on a day-to-day basis, humans do not necessarily understand other humans as individuals, humans with unique thoughts, feelings, and so forth. Rather, the default manner of social perception is that of categorization, with individuals navigating social environments engaging processes like stereotyping and attribution of social roles and scripts (Hirschfeld, 2001). Individuation, then, is most likely to be applied when individuals' "attention is directed toward the subjective states of the target" (Kidd, Ongis, & Castano, 2016, p. 44). Fiction, and literary fiction in particular, is likely to evoke ToM processes by diving into characters' more complex mental states (Culpeper, 2001), activating individuation as a social perception mode.

Since, then, empathy seems to be strongly connected to character-driven storytelling, it is of essence that the characters are presented as human. They need to feel as real beings, individuals with feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions distinct from the reader's

feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions. Characters cannot be used as devices for the plot to move forward, nor can they be presented in a fully cliché way. If they fit in all the obvious boxes, if from the moment they appear they are clearly in the story to serve a purpose, if their route forward is stereotypical and the characters themselves feel like nothing but stereotypes, if the reader can predict how the narrative will unfold and see clearly throughout the text's devices, connection will be cut short. The novel can still provide a good time, but it is harder for it to have a lasting effect, since the characters might feel like characters and not people, and the reader might have difficulty engaging with the text and being transported by the text, being aware at all times that they are reading a story (Kidd, Ongis, & Castano, 2016).

In another paper (the one on *Science* mentioned before), David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano also delve into literary theory to hypothesise the reasons why literary fiction is the one "forcing" readers to engage in ToM processes. In what is "the first experimental evidence of the differential effect of these two types of fiction on social cognition" (Castano et al., 2023, p. 9), the authors write:

The category of literary fiction has been contested on the grounds that it is merely a marker of social class, but features of the modern literary novel set it apart from most best-selling thrillers or romances. Miall and Kuiken emphasize that through the systematic use of phonological, grammatical, and semantic stylistic devices, literary fiction defamiliarizes its readers. The capacity of literary fiction to unsettle readers' expectations and challenge their thinking is also reflected in Roland Barthes's distinction between writerly and readerly texts. Although readerly texts – such as most popular genre fiction – are intended to entertain their mostly passive readers, writerly – or literary – texts engage their readers creatively as writers. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin defined literary fiction as polyphonic and proposed that readers of literary fiction must contribute their own to a cacophony of voices. The absence of a single authorial perspective prompts readers to enter a vibrant discourse with the author and her characters. (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 377)

A detail worthy of mention is something a lot of scholars allude to in some way: even if literary fiction and popular fiction "differ not only in the aura they have, but also in the language they use", the discrepancy they present on effects or impact "should not be interpreted as indicating a hierarchy of fiction", something that is frequently implied in the literature when "the label highbrow and lowbrow are used" (Castano et al., 2023, p. 2; also Castano et al., 2021 and Castano, Martingano, & Perconti, 2020). These words were written

by Emanuele Castano and colleagues (among them Lisa Zunshine) and taken from a paper published last year – “On the Complexity of Literary and Popular Fiction” – in which they analyse a corpus of 203 literary and popular fiction novels to evaluate lexical and syntax complexity using Natural Language Processing. The authors’ conclusion is that yes, literary fiction novels present lexical and syntax complexity in a higher degree than that of popular fiction novels (Castano et al., 2023).

Throughout her now seminal *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen proposes a series of hypotheses concerning narrative empathy. One of her starting points is that narrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have been debating narrative techniques that can be used as devices to trigger in readers character identification, affective states, empathetic experiences, openness to others, and a greater willingness to altruism. Another of her starting points is

whether any set of narrative techniques overrides the resistance to empathizing often displayed by members of an in-group regarding the emotional states of others marked out as different by their age, race, gender, weight, disabilities, and so forth. If empathetic reading experiences start a chain reaction leading to mature sympathy and altruistic behavior, as many believe, then discovering the narrative techniques involved matters, for it turns out in laboratory experiments that we humans, like other primates, tend to experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who seem like us, as David Hume and Adam Smith predicted. We may find ourselves regarding the feelings of those who seem outside the tribe with a range of emotions, but without empathy. If novels do extend readers’ sense of shared humanity beyond the predictable limitations, then the narrative techniques involved in such an accomplishment should be especially prized. (2007, p. x)

By the end of the book, she has presented twenty-seven different hypotheses; some refute one another, so the literary scholar presents both as a way to aid in possible future paths of research, and others have been proposed earlier from different authors in the field. Some of the ideas explored in this collection of formulations are: empathy for fictional people may arise from minimal elements of characterization; empathy arises when character identification occurs more often than not, even when the reader differs strongly from the fictional people, and identification can easily occur out of an alignment of feeling; negative feeling states more readily trigger empathetic responses, but that alignment does not always occur, even in the case of an emotionally evocative fiction; novels might invoke empathy in

different ways over time, and empathy invoked might not match the author's intentions; situational empathy depends highly on lived experience, and may be enhanced by historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances; fictional texts release readers from defence obligations like scepticism and suspicion, paving the way for a suspension of disbelief and a subsequent empathetic response; empathy in readers could lead to later verifiable results in the beliefs and actions, and empathic guilt can lead to prosocial action (Appendix 6).

Another interesting suggestion of Keen's is that of different strategic empathy modes employed by writers, which vary according to whom they have in mind as their target audience. Bounded strategic empathy "operates with an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others", ambassadorial "addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end", and broadcast "calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes (universalizing)" (Keen, 2007, p. 142). A writer would, then, employ the first strategy when targeting for a social group that would identify with the narrative, the second when targeting for a social group different than that of the narrative's fictional people, and the third when aiming for a universal readership.

Character identification and emotional transportation are thought to be indispensable for empathy to arise, as already explored here. How could, however, those be analysed? In 1995, David S. Miall and Don Kuiken developed the Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ), an instrument designed to measure seven aspects of readers' orientation towards literary texts: insight, empathy, imagery vividness, leisure escape, concern with author, story-driven reading, and rejection of literary values (1975, pp. 41-42). All 7 items on the empathy factor relate to the identification with fictional character and, whether the authors have thought of them in those terms or not, plenty of the items on the imagery vividness (9), the leisure escape (11), and the story-driven reading (8) factors relate to story transportation. Additionally, the items included on the insight factor (14) could more likely than not play a part in measuring sleeper effects on empathy and theory of mind's abilities as well (Appendix 7).

Already in 2000 Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock had built a short transportation scale with 11 general items (Appendix 8), a scale which has been since fairly used by scholars when testing for emotional transportation and empathy and follows a similar logic to that of the self-reporting measure explored at the beginning of this section. Nine years later, Rick

Busselle and Helena Bilandzic start from the supposition that “the extent to which one becomes engaged, transported, or immersed in a narrative influences the narrative’s potential to affect subsequent story-related attitudes and belief” (2009, p. 321) to devise a scale to measure that same extent. Their narrative engagement scale comprises 11 different dimensions: empathy, sympathy, cognitive perspective taking, loss of time, loss of self-awareness, narrative presence, narrative involvement, distraction, ease of cognitive access, narrative realism (a lot of which present items proposed in earlier studies on the field), and transportation (which is an incorporation of Green and Brock’s scale) (Appendix 9).

A different approach to measuring identification⁷ is that of Kobie van Krieken, Hans Hoeken and José Sanders (the testing of which is outside the scope of this investigation, as it involves close textual examination in the search for linguistic cues, but it is worthy of mention for the sake of thoroughness). More concerned with language studies and communication, the three explored the relations between linguistic cues and identification with narrative characters in their 2017 article “Evoking and Measuring Identification with Narrative Characters – A Linguistic Cues Framework”. Their research delved in-depth into said linguistic cues with five narrative character’s viewpoints in mind – spatiotemporal, perceptual, psychological, moral, and emotional –, as well as their actions and motions (Appendix 10).

An additional note should be made on the matter of the effects of textual cues on readers’ responses. Some of the devices point out by Suzanne Keen as usually singled out to support character identification and so forth are the use of first-person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states (2007, p. X). In 2016, Caspar J. van Lissa, Marco Caracciolo, Thom van Duuren, and Bram van Leuven published a paper in which they explore whether if first-person narration is “more or less conducive to empathy and trust for the protagonist than third-person, internally focalized narrative” (van Lissa et al., 2016, p. 43). By the end of the article, the team has concluded the opposite of what they expected: when in the presence of what they deem as complex and potentially unreliable character, if they are the narrator of their own story as well, readers’ empathy for the fictional person will not be affected, but their trust will – “possibly, because of the awareness that he or she might be lying or deliberately manipulating them” (p. 58). However, if the narrative perspective is shifted to third-person form with internal

⁷ For the “Macro- and micro-structural cerebellar and cortical characteristics of cognitive empathy towards fictional characters in healthy individuals”, see Picerni et al., 2021.

focalization, readers will deem the character more trustworthy, even if his actions and thoughts remain unchanged (van Lissa et al., 2016).

Let us leave this section with some insights from Noël Carroll. In his chapter on *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, the major figure in contemporary philosophy of art explores “the emotional states of audience members converge, are congruent with, or otherwise resonate appropriately with what we are given to imagine are the emotions of fictional characters”. Carroll chooses to describe it this way and avoid the terminology ‘empathy’ because he has been unable to find “consensus in either ordinary language or the relevant technical literatures about how we are to understand empathy” (2011, p. 162). This leads him to believe it to be “less profitable to quibble over labels”, and more useful “to develop a conceptual cartography of what we might call the realm of affect” (p. 164), focusing on “aesthetics in the sense that Alexander Baumgarten introduced that concept”: sensations and feelings that arise as a response to the contact with works of art, which in this case are narrative fictions, and those affects are emotional responses to fictional characters (p. 162). The philosopher then explores character identification, the debate between coincident and connected emotional states, vectorially converging emotional states, sympathy, solidarity, and mirror reflexes. This seems a good enough collection of affective responses from readers to the lives of fictional people, of which Carroll defends “no single affective relationship” can describe (p. 180).

2.2. Literary Reflections on Empathy and Theory of Mind

All the previous examinations in this dissertation have led us here and to the analyses subsequently carried out. This questionnaire should not be treated as a fixed score. It is not a set of immutable laws, nor a list of mandatory instructions; rather, it is a series of guidelines that, even if its manifestation might not be sufficient on its own, may aid a novel in enhancing empathy and theory of mind. This is an experimental exercise, built out of the examination of the existent literature and of the research instruments usually employed in empathy evaluation (Appendixes), of the assessment of those with new eyes and a new study goal, and of the intent to apply it to a small corpus to evaluate its employability and usefulness. Some concern the text’s form and some concern the text’s content, but mostly they concern the reader’s hypothetical response to the text. It does not seem necessary, however, to examine each item in depth at this point, since the ideas they contain have already been explored one way or another throughout the sections up to this point.

Our aim here is, thus, to combine, in a rather unconventional way, methodologies from literary theory, literary criticism, and comparative literature, with those of psychology and the neurosciences. Following a similar logic to that of the empathy scores mentioned in the previous sections, these questions are meant to be asked the text itself. We are looking at these novels and asking them: *Are you enhancing human abilities that allow individuals to understand and care for others? Are you subtly changing the way they perceive others?* This calls for simulation, and cognitive and affective perspective-taking, abilities to infer states of mind employing only our imagination. Through this set of reflections, we are trying to visualize how readers might feel while and after reading, and how readers might change their perception towards the themes portrayed and real organisms who share these realities. All conclusions must, therefore, work in the realm of hypothesis and plausibility.

1. Does the novel take a mostly narrative form or a mostly expository form?
2. Is the narrative character-driven or plot-driven?
3. Is the novel written with a level of language easily understandable by the larger public?
4. Can the narrative activate suspension of disbelief, and, if not, is the disbelief strong enough to cause imaginative resistance?
5. Does the novel allow for story transportation?
6. Does the novel create a rich and vivid environment enough for the reader to imagine themselves in?
7. Can the novel make the reader forget time, surroundings, concerns, and even themselves?
8. Does the narrative engage the reader enough for them to read compulsively?
9. Does the way the narrative is presented make the reader care for what happens to the characters, or for how the plot turns out?
10. Which is the strategic empathy employed, and does it fulfil its intended purpose?
11. Does the novel humanize the characters, or portrays them in a way that they can feel like real people?
12. Are the characters complex, with feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions of their own?
13. Does the novel dive into the characters' psyche, providing interior representation of their consciousness?
14. Does the novel dive into the characters' emotional states?
15. Can the novel arise in the reader emotions in alignment with those of the characters?
16. Can the novel arise in the reader sympathy for the characters?
17. Can the novel instil involvement with the characters?
18. Can the novel have affective impact in the reader?
19. Can the novel have cognitive impact in the reader?
20. Is the novel likely to allow the reader to understand what the characters are going through affectively?

21. Is the novel likely to allow the reader to understand what the characters are going through cognitively?
22. Does the narrative present events in a manner that the reader can understand them in the same way the characters do?
23. Is the narrative presented in a way that the reader can understand the characters' reasons and intentions?
24. Is the narrative presented in a way that the reader can understand the characters' emotional states?
25. Can the novel drive the reader to feel protective of the characters, or to care for them in any capacity?
26. Can the novel drive the reader to wish they could change the characters' circumstances in any way?
27. Does the narrative make the reader feel touched or moved?
28. If the characters transverse positive emotional states, does the reader feel those negative emotional states with them?
29. If the characters transverse negative emotional states, does the reader feel those negative emotional states with them?
30. Are hypothetical negative emotional states triggered in the reader capable of originating the need to eliminate the origins of the emotional state and stop reading?
31. Can the novel promote character identification, even if the character's actions contradict the reader's moral code?
32. Does the novel cause any kind of emotional contagion or emotional mimicry?
33. Can the novel make the reader inclined to feel like a character, or at least like an observer?
34. Do the characters have some kind of development throughout the experiences narrated in the novel?
35. Can the novel initiate reflection?
36. Can the novel make the reader think differently about portrayed themes or experiences?
37. Can the novel make the reader rethink anything about their worldview?
38. Can the novel instil in the reader a sense of connection to others?
39. Can the novel make the reader feel different in any way?
40. Can the novel drive the reader to think about acting in a different way?
41. Can the novel influence the reader to perceive differently real individuals whose circumstances are similar to those of the characters?
42. Can the novel make the reader understand the lives of real individuals whose circumstances are similar to those of the characters?
43. After the reading, does the novel seem likely to make the reader continue to wonder about the characters as though they were real people?
44. Is it likely that the reader might feel the story world portrayed as more real than the real world?
45. Is it likely that the reader might feel that the narrative portrayed is relevant to their real lives?
46. Is it likely that the reader might feel that the novel changed their life in any way?

Part C

3.1. The Case for Humans' Wellbeing: Mental Health and Empathy

Sympathy's easy. You have sympathy for starving children swatting at flies on the late-night commercials. Sympathy is easy because it comes from a position of power. Empathy is getting down on your knees and looking someone else in the eye and realizing you could be them, and that all that separates you is luck.

Dennis Lehane

It seems to me that this knowledge – that you could have just as easily been any one of a hundred other people – is at the heart of empathy. It's the realization that every person you meet, or see on the news, or hear about could have been you, if you had made slightly different choices, or if your grandparents had made different choices, going way back, into a great tree of different choices that looks like an entire world of people who aren't you, but might have been.

Christopher Myers introducing Safia Elhillo

3.1.1. Normal People

Synopsis (Sally Rooney): *Connell and Marianne grow up in the same small town in the west of Ireland, but the similarities end there. In school, Connell is popular and well-liked, while Marianne is a loner. But when the two strike up a conversation – awkward but electrifying – something life-changing begins. Normal People is a story of mutual fascination, friendship and love. It takes us from that first conversation to the years beyond, in the company of two people who try to stay apart but find they can't.*

Human experience is one of those instances where two opposite truths can peacefully coexist: human experience is both unique and hardly unique at all. Take depression, for instance; how many have felt utter despair, and believed themselves to be misunderstood, invisible and isolated in their despair, unaware millions have felt, were feeling, and would feel the same despair, albeit different in its singular affect? How many, when it comes to diagnosis like bipolar disorder or border personality disorder, have felt their lives were not their own, their emotions were not theirs to control, and that no one would ever be able to understand their experiences?

Accounts of mental illness can help those who have never felt it understand the experiences of those who have. Similarly, accounts of mental illness might help those who are quite familiar with it understand they are not as alone as they thought themselves to be – and

perhaps even provide some comfort. Which is to say, these are two of the wonders of literature: allowing one to peek into life experiences one would have never felt and allow one to come into contact with life experiences that perfectly mirror one's own.

Normal People was published in September 2018 by Faber & Faber. The novel's narrative spans five years of the characters' lives. In January 2011, Connell and Marianne are approaching the last stretch of the school year, which also marks the end of school as a whole. In February 2015, the end of their undergraduate years is approaching, and the book leaves them contemplating what the next chapter of their lives can look like. Being a split narrative, the parallel narrations with two simultaneous points of view allow the reader to empathize with each of its main characters on their own. They are presented through their own perception and each other's, a technique that humanizes them in a way that otherwise may not have been possible, and also contributes for them to be perceived by the reader as trustworthy.

It is more a novel that explores miscommunication and how people's lives are interwoven together than it is a novel that explores mental illness – or, rather, mental illness is not what the book is 'about', or the main theme of it. Furthermore, the author is clearly more preoccupied with class divisions and class dynamics, examining in depth how socioeconomic background shapes individuals' perceptions of themselves and of others, and how those same perceptions can bring people together or pull them apart, while also exploring how perceptions of status and social hierarchies can affect every aspect of people's lives. Connell and Marianne's dynamic is no doubt a complex one. While still in school, Connell is the one perceived as popular, while Marianne stands outside of social circles; in college, their roles are inversed. Economically, Marianne is from a wealthy – albeit fundamentally dysfunctional – family, while Connell lives with his working-class mother, who also happens to work for Marianne's family as a housecleaner. At Trinity College, Marianne lives in her grandmother's vacant house and has everything paid for, while Connell has to struggle working odd jobs to pay for tuition and a shared bedroom on a shared house. When the scholarship exam arrives, Marianne takes it as a matter of prestige, but for Connell it means earning full tuition, housing, and meals.

Even so, mental health issues are markedly present from the first to the last page. In the face of the abuse suffered from an early age at the hands of, initially her father, and later her

brother, Marianne develops two different coping mechanisms. During a first phase, while in school, she creates a wall between her and the outside, a barrier that manifests in the way she moves through the world and is designed to protect her from further violence, since if no one can get too close, no one can hurt her. On a second phase, a year into university, Marianne's coping mechanism manifests in the way she approaches her sexual relationships with men. If once violence was done to her without her consent, now violence is done to her on her own terms; submitting herself to the will of men in sadomasochist dynamics provides her some momentary relief – even if each time her pain seems to later on deepen – because it allows her to take back control of the narrative. Since she has never known close human relationships without violence, she cannot separate violence from love, which desensitizes her to the violence itself and makes her willingly search for those who will perpetuate that dynamic (Abrams, Chronos, & Grdinic, 2022). Additionally, Marianne does not seem to regard herself worthy of anything different, of a healthy life or of love in its purest form, taking physical violence as a confirmation that others perceive her in the same way she does: as a deeply damaged person.

Connell's struggles are different. He is a deeply anxious, overthinking, and insecure person. He has two major depressive episodes throughout the book, both of which seem to be triggered by outside events that exacerbate underlying recurring emotional states. The first episode happens in the final months of school, and it is triggered by Marianne's disappearance from classes; the second one happens three years later, after an old friend from school commits suicide. These events could seem to be unrelated to Connell, except they do have a big similarity: his ever-present guilt. The way Connell treated Marianne while in school (keeping their relationship a secret out of shame) is something that at first seems to not any emotional impact on him, but later proves to be decisive to the person he understands himself to be. Rob's death is somewhat different, since Connell had no interference in that particular chain of events; to him, however, that is precisely the problem, as he wishes he could have helped, or at least paid attention and offered his support.

Both characters feel immense self-loathing over the years, and it grows worse at certain points – sometimes, it feels like they are stuck in a permanent state of negative introspection. They both feel disconnected from humans at large, they both question their place in society, they both struggle with imagining any kind of future for themselves. At a certain point in the narrative, when Connell is comparing his new girlfriend Helen with

Marianne, he reflects that, now, “he doesn’t have that persistent sensation that he belongs nowhere, that he never will belong anywhere”, and that, before, Marianne “made him feel that he was like her, that they had the same unnameable spiritual injury, and that neither of them could ever fit into the world”. His conclusion at the time is that “he was never damaged like she was. She just made him feel that way” (Rooney, 2018, p. 169). However, just a few months later, Connell finds it “impossible to move either forward or backwards, only downwards, onto the floor, until his body was arranged motionless on the carpet”, which leads him to the realisation that “[l]ife is the thing you bring with you inside your own head” (p. 201). Needless to say, *Normal People* is a fundamentally sad book, although emotion is always approached in a subtle and nuanced manner.

Sally Rooney’s second novel is a work of literary fiction. And, as it is a work of literary fiction that also turned out to be massively popular, it could be at odds with the separation made by the literature on empathy and ToM, although it is quite obvious that the real issue is the particular set of literary conventions inside which the novel is placed. Kidd and Castano, admitting to “the absence of a clear means of quantifying literariness”, proposed that “prize-winning texts are more likely to embody general characteristics of literature than bestsellers of genre fiction” (2013, p. 378). Winners of literary prizes are, then, expected to drive readers’ attention to more nuanced characters and with complex mental states, while characters in works of genre fiction focus on characters more likely to be unidimensional and stereotypical (Kidd, Castano, & Ongis, 2016, p. 47). Scholars have, then, proposed ‘serious’ literary prizes like the American National Book Award for Fiction or the British Booker Prizes as a device for selection of literary fiction, in opposition to bestselling lists like those of *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* or on *Amazon* as a device for selection of popular or genre fiction.

“At 30, the *Normal People* author is already the most talked-about novelist of her generation” (which is the millennial) (Brockes, 2021), writes a columnist of *The Guardian*, while another columnist, this time for *The Irish Times*, calls her “a literary superstar” and “the voice of her generation” (Ingle, 2021). *Normal People* has gotten to the status of platinum at the Nielsen Bestseller Awards in 2021, which means that it sold more than a million copies just in the United Kingdom, but the *British Vogue* reported in that same year that the novel had already sold more than three million copies worldwide (Marks, 2021). It has been longlisted for the Booker Prize in 2018 and for The Women’s Prize for Fiction in 2019, and it has won The Costa Book Award for Best Novel, The Irish Book Award for Novel

of the Year, The Waterstones' Book of the Year, all in 2018, and also The British Book Award for Book of the Year in 2019, among others. On *Goodreads*, the most popular social platform for book cataloguing and reviewing – with 90 million members registered by 2019, according to Statista (n.d.) –, *Normal People* has been rated by more than 1.2 million readers, with a current rating of 3.81 (Goodreads, n.d.-a).

Normal People's adaptation for television has also become BBC's most popular programme of 2020, with more than 62 million streams on the BBC iPlay (British) and more than 3 million streams on the RTÉ Player (Irish), with additional cable viewership both on BBC One and on RTÉ One to account for (BBC Media Player, n.d.). The series' scripts were also co-written by Rooney, which no doubt had its role in the seamless medial transposition. With a gentle range of colour hues and perfectly balanced composition as its major direction of photography highlights and striking cast work (with nominations for Outstanding Lead Actor, Directing, Writing and Casting for a Limited Series at the 72nd Emmy Awards), the success of the show undoubtedly sent a second big wave of people in the direction of the novel. Given their rare similarities, most of the analysis made here concerning the novel could be applied to the TV series as well.

In 1972, the notable psychiatrist Jan Hendrik van den Berg wrote in *A Different Existence: Principles of Phenomenological Psychopathology* that

[t]he psychiatric patient is alone. He has few relationships or perhaps no relationships at all. He lives in isolation. He feels lonely. He may dread an interview with another person. At times, a conversation with him is impossible. He is somewhat strange; sometimes he is enigmatic and he may, on rare occasions, be even unfathomable. The variations are endless, but the essence is always the same. The psychiatric patient stands apart from the rest of the world. (1972, p. 105)

The leading philosophy professor Matthew Ratcliffe has come to similar conclusions in his lengthy exploration on the subject: the feeling of isolation is prevalent throughout first-person accounts of psychiatric illness, and this isolation does not seem to be an exclusive feature of any particular diagnosis. It is essential to keep in mind at all times, however, that no two diagnoses are the same, no two individuals are the same, and no two experiences of interpersonal and social isolation are the same (2015, 2017). That being said, “[i]f we start by construing empathy in a fairly permissive way, as a matter of understanding what others

experience, it is clear that actual and perceived failures of empathy are a central theme in the testimonies of many psychiatric patients” (2017, p. 191). In the mind of the depressed, other people seem to be incapable of understanding – “they seem unsympathetic, distant, and even hostile” (p. 191). As such, “the patient may knowingly or unknowingly fail to engage with the perspectives of others”, being incapable of empathy as well: individuals fail to understand others and fall on a tendency to misinterpret (p. 191).

Mental illness, then, is quite an interesting object of analysis from an empathic lens, since both parties (the patient and those close to them) reportedly fail to empathize with each other, while also reporting not feeling empathized with, and none of the experiences invalidates the experiences of the other. It also makes one wonder: “What, exactly, is lacking or judged to be lacking when the sufferer states that others do not or cannot empathize with her?” and “[w]hen she does feel empathized with, what is it that she recognizes?” (Ratcliffe, 2017, p. 190).

Ratcliffe has developed a study with colleagues in 2011 on depression experiences, and some of the results were later incorporated into more extensive research published on *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology*. One of the most interesting features of the study was the assortment of numerous first-person accounts of what it is like to go through a depressive experience. Some of the testimonies include: “they don’t understand and so act like nothing is wrong”; “it feels like no one else has ever experienced anything like this before, like you’re all on your own”; “I find other people irritating when depressed, especially those that have never suffered with depression, and find the ‘advice’ often given by these is unempathetic and ridiculous”; “nobody understands or loves me”; “everyone seems so annoyingly normal, happy, able to cope, unaware of the turmoil that is filling my room, my head, my life, my world”. Additionally: “I get angry with my partner and children for any reason, yet really they are being themselves. I also find it hard to show kindness and emotion to them”; “when I start to get depressed, I only filter through the negative messages from friends and family, so even the most benign comment can be perceived as an insult”; “I find it much harder to understand their points of view and they seem to struggle to understand mine” (2017, p. 192, citing from 2015).

Regardless of this being related to a particular diagnosis or not, both Marianne and Connell feel extreme isolation and difficulty in properly placing themselves in social settings. Furthermore, they find it difficult to understand other people, what they feel and what they

want, but also fail in asking other people for answers and in sharing how they feel, which leads to recurring misunderstandings and overall poor communication – especially between the two of them. Both of them also acknowledge the desire for a normal and good life, but neither believes themselves worthy of such. At a certain point, it is said that his investment in literature “suggests to Connell that the same imagination he uses as a reader is necessary to understand real people also, and to be intimate with them” (Rooney, 2018, p. 69); this alludes to instances at the core of this dissertation, but also that his understanding of others does not come easy. Even so, he is always trying to gain others’ approval, which leads him at times to make poor moral choices, which is, in turn, at odds with his desire to be (or be perceived as) a good person. Marianne, on the other hand, seems to comprehend other people to a certain level, mostly cognitive, but fails to emotionally engage with them; this no doubt stems from her complicated relationship with the male figures in her family, with her negligent mother (who also seems to support the violence) and with the bullying she suffered at school. At times, her disillusionment with life is so strong she seems to want to disappear, stopping to eat and isolating herself.

Does *Normal People*, then, seem likely to enhance the reader’s abilities to understand and care for others? It seems to overall go in line with the questionnaire’s reflections. It takes a narrative form and is character-driven, and it efficiently checks all points for story transportation, providing good ground for narrative engagement. Its language level is accessible, even if some of the literary conventions engaged might fall slightly out of what some readers might be used to, one has to consider; just by way of example, the Irish novelist writes without speech marks, inner monologue majorly surpasses any kind of verbalization in quantity, major sections of the narrative are told retrospectively, and by now each of her three books has been described as a “brainy novel about love and friendship and late capitalism” (Ingle, 2021). When it comes to characters’ affective and cognitive states, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions, everything is feasibly understood – even if times that understanding does not come right away.

Arising in the reader emotions in alignment with those of the characters and character identification entails a different set of hypothesizing. Theoretically, the novel offers all the elements thought to be conducive to empathy and theory of mind. There are, however, some issues to be taken into consideration. At the beginning of the book, the reader does not know the characters that well yet, and their actions might arise emotions not in alignment with those of the characters. For example, when Marianne and Connell first start

seeing each other, Connell's desperate need to keep the relationship a secret most likely causes the reader to feel revolted, and on Marianne's side the reader might feel only pity. We do not know yet to which extent Connell's feelings go, his perception of Marianne is muddy at best, and his anxiety concerning social status seems frivolous, which might be at odds with some readers' moral code. On the other hand, Marianne might seem to some as self-absorbed, too controntational and too judgemental (all used to describe her throughout the book), since we know her opinions but not her feelings concerning almost anything yet, nor do we know the extent of her trauma. The subtle way Rooney plays with emotions could be argued to be inducing of sympathy only, but not empathy proper.

As the novel progresses, however, the emotional involvement with these two characters grows. By the time Marianne goes to Sweden to study (by the third year of their degrees), her character is much more likable and understandable, since the reader has now had time to get to know her. Additionally, Marianne's behaviour in the presence of men makes more sense (although for some readers this might still place narrative transportation at risk). Connell's major depressive episode is also a major point in affect and empathy; the play with emotion is still subtle, Connell is more numb than intense in his affects, but empathy seems to be more probable here. Rooney's chosen strategic empathy could be considered as broadcast, meaning she envisions any possible reader as a possible empathic target. Socioeconomical background might also play a role, as each character comes from an extreme socioeconomical end on their hometown and the reader might stand anywhere in that spectrum. Another relevant spectrum would be the political one; in such a markedly ideological novel, any reader that does not identify with the main characters values will no doubt feel some imaginative resistance as the literary scholar Marco Caracciolo envisioned it (2013). The same could be argued, for instance, of individuals who come from violent homes, who have suffered bullying at school or who have survived other traumatic experiences, and, as such, the characters distress might tip them into personal distress, creating resistance in a different manner, since the reader keeps being pulled back to their own life experiences.

Does the reader feel and perceive differently after having read the book? That will differ for each person. Those who never had any real contact with the experiences narrated might go through a process of revaluation, or might be overall unchanged. Those who have been through similar experiences might feel seen and understood, and to those readers *Normal People* might provide a cathartic moment, or, again, might be overall unchanged. Can the

novel influence the reader to perceive differently real individuals whose circumstances are similar to those of the characters? Past experiences aside, *Normal People* seems to guarantee the basic elements for empathy to arise and for social cognition processes to be influenced. If prior feelings, prejudices, or attitudes towards mental illness are changed, that will rely on if the conditions for transportation, identification, and overall empathy are met for each individual reader, and if the level of involvement is enough to cause such. This, could be argued, might be true for any novel, since, regardless of the text itself, the final step in the process will always be a subjective one.

That being said, in a country where men account for 80% of deaths by suicide (Ryan, 2018), *Normal People* shows readers – especially male readers – that having emotions is normal, feeling lonely is normal, mental illness is normal, and also that it is normal to talk with other people about those experiences and to seek help when help is needed. In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, bell hooks calls for a feminist deconstruction of the patriarchy by showing men the social cages they trap themselves in – “patriarchy keeps them from knowing themselves, from being in touch with their feelings, from loving” (2004, p. 14). Thus, “[t]o know love, men must be able to let go the will to dominate. They must be able to choose life over death” (p. 14). ‘Toxic’ masculinity is a concept fairly present in contemporary thought, and it is subtly examined by Rooney.

Additionally, Rachelle L. Pavelko and Jessica Gall Myrick have argued that not only representations of mental illness in the media have focused on stigmatization and trivialization, there is also a new phenomenon of treating the symptoms of these conditions as beneficial. People diagnosed with mental illness are either violent, unreliable, unstable, or in need of saving, or highly organized, full of energy, quirky, or enigmatic (2020). *Normal People*, then, plays a role in deconstructing stigma and misconceptions, given its accurate representation of mental illness’ experiences, its refusal to fall into exaggerations, and its portrayal of healing on the characters own time and terms.

3.1.2. The Midnight Library

Synopsis (Matt Haig): Nora's life has been going from bad to worse. Then at the stroke of midnight on her last day on earth she finds herself transported to a library. There she is given the chance to undo her regrets and try out each of the other lives she might have lived. Which raises the ultimate question: with infinite choices, what is the best way to live?

Matthew Ratcliffe points out – aside from isolation, detachment, and a sense of being misunderstood, that is – something even more complex: patients suffering from severe psychiatric illness often describe “inhabiting a radically different world, an isolated, alien realm that is set apart from the consensus reality taken for granted by others as an unwavering backdrop to their experiences, thoughts, and activities” (2017, p. 193). If there is no common ground regarding what the ‘world’ is, then there cannot be any kind of assumptions of commonality, and it can become quite hard for people to be on an experiential same page. This suspension of assumptions entails not only recognizing that the person “may not share a common, habitual, unthinking appreciation of norms, roles, and functions, which more usually appear as integral to the experienced world”, but may also “have lost the sense that things could ever be different in a meaningful way, the sense of being spatially and temporally situated in a shared world, the sense that reality is separate from her imaginings” (p. 194, also 2012). Acknowledging that the person’s experiences might likely be outside of what most people take for granted is also essential, which means being open to the unique perspective the person might have, while also resisting the temptation to stereotype, typify or impose perspectives (2017).

In her *Tristimania: A Diary of Manic Depression*, the writer Jay Griffiths precisely explores this falling from the normal world into an alien one. She writes that “[s]ome say they are in an ‘abyss’ or a ‘black hole’; others that they are ‘drowning’” (2017, p. 52), but she “was in another land, the other world” (p. 53). Her “own mind had become unfamiliar territory” (p. 81), and she found herself unable to “translate myself outwards into the world” (p. 8). This makes one wonder: “Where does self end and illness begin?” (p. 29).

At the beginning of *The Midnight Library*, we find Nora struggling to grasp reasons to keep on living. Her head is a spiralling place, with every setback sending her into the same loop of thoughts: she is all alone, she has wasted her life, she has ruined all her opportunities, she has disappointed everyone, she has hurt everyone, nobody needs her anymore, she cannot stand the pain living brings her, she cannot see why she should stay alive. Her regrets have kept building over the years, but she has by now lost the will to repair any of them. As Ratcliffe writes, “[d]epression can involve a kind of self-absorption, a preoccupation with one’s own predicament”, and even “[t]houghts about other people are often principally concerned with one’s own suffering” (2017, p. 192).

When Nora tries to commit suicide, she wakes up in a place called *The Midnight Library*, which is the furthest thing from a regular library. A limbo where those between life and death might find themselves in, the library provides a means for the person to experience different paths, the possible lives they could have lived had their decisions been different at a certain point in the past. It is speculated (by the book's fictional people) that the library is a mental metaphor, a simplification of a more complex reality, one in which those between life and death would somehow be able to visit different multiverses, but only those at a middle-point in life and with deep regrets about the past, who do not wish to die per se, just wish that their lives were different (Haig, 2020, pp. 144-152).

This is, of course, a metaphor on its own – a metaphor of a metaphor, a simulation inside a simulation. Regretting and wishing things could be different are no doubt inherent to most human realities. Fantasizing with trying different lives is an inevitability; human awareness of our limited time will leave even the happiest and most fulfilled people wondering how life could be like had they either made different choices at certain points in the past or had their existences been different altogether. It could be argued that *The Midnight Library* is the epitome of the empathic novel just by its main premise. As many have put it (Dennis Lehane's speech in 2012 or Christopher Myers's introduction to Safia Elhillo's *Home Is Not A Country* (2022) are two examples), empathy is acknowledging that someone else's circumstances might easily have been your circumstances, and in some cases all that separates completely different lives is pure luck. Does, however, *The Midnight Library* accomplish its empathic purpose?

Matt Haig has been writing for quite some years, but his popularity did not shoot up until the publication of his memoir in 2015. His work remains, however, yet to be recognized by the literary establishment, which could be inferred from his lack of nominations to major literary awards. Nonetheless, he seems to be another one of contemporary readers' favourites, with repeated wins in the Goodreads Awards and emotional reviews in that same platform (readers' reviews posted on Goodreads concerning these four books could make a dissertation on its own). *The Midnight Library*, published by Canongate in August 2020, has spent more than a whooping one hundred weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list (Haig, 2023). It has been reviewed on *Goodreads* by more than 1.5 million readers, with a rating of

4.01, having been the Winner for Best Fiction in the 2020's Goodreads Choice Awards (Goodreads, n.d.-c).

The British novelist seems to have an unique talent for writing speculative fiction, with plenty of nods to science fiction and even fantasy, without alienating wider audiences. His last three novels all follow the same general logic – incorporating sci-fi elements into narratives that explore what makes us human, through a very characteristic aesthetic and philosophical lens, and with an obvious lesson for readers to take – and they have all been tremendously successful with the wider public. It is also the only of the four novels chosen for analysis that was clearly thought of and written within the parameters of popular fiction, even if incorporating elements from other literary genres. Noël Carroll writes that “emotions are, by design, extremely pronounced and clear cut” in popular fictions, and that “standardly it is part of the job description of the popular fictioneer to make his productions immediately accessible” (2011, p. 162). *The Midnight Library* no doubt operates within this logic, placing emotion at its centre and having it be even more pronounced due to the theme in question. The chapters are short, the language is quite accessible, and Nora's feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions are always portrayed in a rather transparent fashion (with all the other characters working as a backdrop, existing only through Nora's depression-filtered perspective, a feature *Normal People* shares to some extent).

Matt Haig's novels are often described as feel-good books, something that might sound odd, given that he normally delves into gloomy topics. The author accomplishes this feat by allowing his characters to grow throughout their journey; by the end of the novel, the protagonist has accepted their reality, found a way to surpass their obstacles, and is standing at an overall better place in life. At the beginning of *The Midnight Library*, Nora is full of regrets, blaming herself for everything that has gone wrong in the past and believing all other possible life paths would have been better. By the end of the novel, Nora understands that “it is not the lives we regret not living that are the real problem. It is the regret itself. It's the regret that makes us shrivel and wither and feel like our own and other people's worst enemy” (Haig, 2020, p. 277). The lesson, then, is that the seeds of distress lie not in the circumstances themselves, but in the mental states through which we look at them.

The psychotherapist Wendy Jones writes for *Psychology Today* that Nora's healing does not come from learning all the ways other lives can go also wrong, but from “reconnecting with her past observations, perceptions that had been filtered out by the depressive lens” (2022).

Yes, some other life paths might look better at first blush. Had she gone through with her marriage, she would be the owner of a lovely and lively pub on the countryside; had she gone through with swimming, she would be a gold medal winner at the Olympics and have OBE next to her name; had she gone through with music, she would be a world famous rockstar, selling out arenas and dating Hollywood stars; had she gone through with the move to Australia with her best friend, she would be swimming in the ocean and basking in the sun every morning; had she gone through with her interest in glaciology, she would be in Svalbard doing important research to help the fight against climate change. The catch? Firstly, she would still be depressed in most of those loves, even medicated in some. Secondly, respectively: her marriage would be a failed and unhappy one; her father would still be alive but her mother would have died alone; her brother would have died with an overdose; her best friend would have died in a car crash just a month after having arriving to Australia; she would be deeply uncomfortable, uncertain, and almost get killed by a polar bear.

There is a life where Nora has said yes to a surgeon who invited her for coffee; they are now married and have a small girl, and she is currently taking a sabbatical year from teaching to write a book on Henry David Thoreau. That is the life Nora stays the longest in, and the one she believes to be the perfect one. Even so, she ends up back at the library anyway, which means deep down that was not the one for her either, and that knowledge translates as: no other life can be the one because all other lives are not yours. You will always be a stranger in someone else's life, even if that someone else could have been you if you had made a minor different choice 20 years ago. "It is quite a revelation to discover that the place you wanted to escape to is the exact same place you escaped from. That the prison wasn't the place, but the perspective", as she puts it (Haig, 2020, p. 284).

Does *The Midnight Library* succeed in enhancing the reader's abilities to understand and care for others? At first glance, yes. Like *Normal People*, it takes a narrative form and is character-driven, its language level is accessible, it seems to check all points for story transportation, its protagonist's cognitive and affective states are easily understood. When we get to emotional alignment and character identification, the situation changes, but in a different way than that of Sally Rooney's novel. Concerning mostly elements that might cause disengagement from the fictional world, the most obvious one is that of the recourse to science fiction elements. Even if, again, Haig creates a rich and vivid environment enough for the reader to situate themselves in, forgetting time, surroundings, concerns, and even

themselves, depending on the reader's own sensibilities and preferences, that might not be enough, and they might find themselves being pulled back to reality again and again, shaking their heads in disbelief as a response to the narrative's perceived implausibility.

Another element that might cause disengagement is Nora herself. Nora's alienation is noticeable – she is stuck in a loop of strong negative emotions and thoughts, and fails both in engaging with her surroundings from a logical perspective and in even attempting to understand other people. Her alienation, though, still allows for a sense of shared world, just not a shared reality. Since Nora's reality is a wholly desperate one, anything that happens to her and anything that is said to her will be blown out of proportion in her mind, in an extremely emotional and dramatic way. This is normal in mental illness, as the severely depressed mind has no other kind of thinking or feeling available. Even so, this is also where so many readers clash with the book; since their reality is not the same, and since they can perceive the world in a more neutral and logical way, *The Midnight Library* might feel like an excessively melodramatic novel. A quick survey throughout the reviews posted on Goodreads reveals just that (n.d.-c).

Nearing the end of the book, readers seem to find another problem, one that almost seems paradoxical: too much positivity. Readers complain about motivational sentences that feel like they should be in the walls of hipster coffee shops or in inspirational *Instagram* accounts (Goodreads, n.d.-c). At times, the novel seems to slip from a fictional paradigm to a self-help one, which might make the reader feel disconnected and disrupt transportation. Additionally, this motivational aspect, or the lessons the novelist intends to pass on, if you will, might be common ground for a lot of readers, which creates another layer of disconnectedness. The strategic empathy Haig most likely had in mind was broadcast, but it feels more like an ambassadorial affair. Even so, it might be worth noting that it is perfectly possible for a reader to fail to intellectually connect with a book and the book still inspire affect in them.

As Suzanne Keen proposes, “[e]mpathy with characters doesn’t always occur as a result of reading an emotionally evocative fiction” (2007, p. 72). *The Midnight Library* is quite the emotionally evocative fiction, but it might not necessarily enhance the reader's empathy, or even instil empathy. Even so, it might just as well instil empathy and enhance the reader's empathy, and even influence the reader's perception and attitudes towards mental illness and psychiatric patients – it will all depend on readers themselves. It is worth noting,

however, that the novel “gets depression spot on”, as the psychotherapist Wendy Jones attests (2022). Additionally, it “is a tonic to anyone who tumbles down this rabbit hole of what-if thinking”, as Angela Haupt writes for *The Washington Post*, later earnestly admitting: “It turns out, I didn’t need a midnight library to shift my own perspective. I just needed a single book” (2021).

3.2. The Case for Nature’s Wellbeing: Climate Change and Empathy

‘Nature’ isn’t just beautiful and intriguing and awesome, it is our life-support system. If the future generations don’t care or aren’t interested in the rest of nature, if they aren’t taught about ecology and that we only eat and breathe because of plants, why would they bother with conservation or connection? If they haven’t felt the soothing calm of a walk in the woods or heard the song of a nightingale, what will they miss, through ignorance? You can’t love someone you don’t know, or notice, or spend time with.

Lucy Jones

Humankind has become so disconnected from the natural world we no longer perceive ourselves as part of it; we have placed ourselves above all other forms of life and convinced ourselves that destroying everything else for our own (temporary) benefit is acceptable if only labelled as ‘survival’, ‘evolution’, ‘profit’, or ‘the way things are’. Furthermore, the deeply dysfunctional relationship the contemporary city-based human has developed with the natural world has profound implications in the human body as well. How could one ever want to protect something one does not understand? How could one feel empathy for organisms one has come to see as things, or to not see at all? Could literature transform this?

Many have been reflecting on these matters and asking these questions. In *Losing Eden*, the writer and journalist Lucy Jones digs into the intersections of science and nature’s and human’s wellbeing alike, interweaving personal stories, field research, and recent scientific data supporting human biological and neurological responses to the environment. Her underlying line of thought is, if nothing seems to make the large public care enough to protect nature *because of nature*, then maybe knowing about the benefits nature has on the human body can convince the large public to care enough to protect nature *because of themselves* (Jones, 2020). Both humanity and nature would, then, largely benefit from a

symbiotic dynamic of mutualism, the ecological interaction developed between species where each species benefits from the interaction.

Lucy Jones reflects that the scarcity of accurate denominations when it comes to anything natural “does us a disservice” (2020, p. 155). Some examples of what she means are: nature (“problematic as a word because, of course, we are part of nature even if we don’t think we are, or accept we are, so in a way it solidifies the separation between people and the rest of the living world”), natural capital and ecosystem services (“highlights an attitude that needs to change: that ‘nature’ is only worth something if it is giving us dividends”), environment (“doesn’t even sound like something that’s alive”) and the use of ‘the’ rather than ‘our’ before it (“underlines the misconception that we live on some kind of separate planet, that we are somehow not alive because of the living world around us”), national park and acronyms like SSSI, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (“sounds like something for us, rather than homes for species in their own right”), environmental collapse (“‘ecocide’, for example, with its acknowledgement that humans are complicit in the destruction of the Earth, seems to me a much more realistic and authentic word”), climate change (“too innocuous a description of what is happening to the planet”), extinction (“doesn’t say anything about humanity’s complicity in global trends”), or pork and beef (“emphasizes our alienation and disconnection from the land and other living creatures”) (pp. 155-156). All these words, in Jones’s view, “frame nature as a lesson, or something that is ours, and strip away the wow factor and the wonder”, while also failing to “describe both the peril and harm we have enacted on the Earth” (pp. 155-156).

The journalist David Wallace-Wells believes that, when it comes to climate change, humanity suffers from a failure of imagination; “[t]his is climate’s kaleidoscope: we can be mesmerized by the threat directly in front of us without ever perceiving it clearly” (2019, p. 191). He dedicates a section in his hallmark *The Uninhabitable Earth* to storytelling (pp. 191-211), arguing that it is one of the biggest problems when it comes to climate change communication. If one were to think about big Hollywood blockbusters, in a logic of escapist entertainment, climate disasters and apocalyptic events only work when placed in the far future. “You can tell stories ‘about’ climate change while it still seems a marginal feature of human life, or an overwhelming feature of lives marginal to your own” (p. 194); however, as the effects of climate change become more and more real, audiences will have no interest in seeing in their screens what they are already seeing outside their windows. Wallace-Wells adds that “in fictional stories of climate catastrophe we may also be looking for catharsis,

and collectively trying to persuade ourselves we might survive it" (pp. 192-193). There are also complications with major narrative elements. Who would the heroes be? Who would the villains? What would the villains be doing, and how could the heroes stop them? What could a happy ending look like? Climate change is, more than a fight of humanity against the natural world, a fight of humanity against humanity, and "[c]omplicity does not make for good drama" (p. 199). It is easy to place the blame on oil companies, who no doubt have crimes to pay for, but "transportation and industry make up less than 40 percent of global emissions" (p. 199). It is also easy to point fingers at negationist politicians who, again, have crimes to pay for, but to "believe the fault for global warming lies exclusively with the Republican Party or its fossil fuel backers", for example, "is a form of American narcissism" (p. 200).

Amitav Ghosh also explores the relationships between climate change and stories, history, and politics in his book-length essay *The Great Derangement*. The Indian writer questions why contemporary fiction struggles with climate change, wondering:

if the urgency of a subject were indeed a criterion of its seriousness, then, considering what climate change actually portends for the future of the earth, it should surely follow that this would be the principal preoccupation of writers the world over – and this, I think, is very far from being the case. (2016, p. 13)

In 2005, Sander L. Koole and Agnes E. Van den Berg tried to explain this by applying the terror management theory (TMT) to the relationship most humans now have with nature. The TMT is a social and evolutionary psychology theory that entails a basic psychological conflict arising from the clash between humans' self-preservation instinct and the awareness that death is inevitable and unpredictable. The conflict produces terror, and people have a fundamental need to protect themselves from that existential terror. The social psychologists propose, then, that, since "[t]he laws of nature dictate that all forms of life are finite, and therefore death and decay can be witnessed everywhere in the natural world" (Koole & den Berg, 2005, p. 1015), responses to nature might be influenced by people's instinct to protect themselves from terror. Thus, humans have worked to distance themselves from nature, building all sorts of artificial artefacts and developing a certain disdain for all things natural, a disdain that in fact is nothing but disguised fear. "By enlarging the gap between humanity and nature, people implicitly affirm their beliefs that they are

symbolic beings, which are not subject to the natural laws of death and decay” (p. 1015), the authors add.

Lucy Jones believes that this TMT framework

goes some way towards explaining our separation from nature, how and why we have turned away from the natural world and what we notice, or pretend not to notice. I believe that this partly explains what is happening in our wider society in response to ecological collapse. It mirrors the society-wide act of ignoring the scientific fact that our world is dying. We are very able, seemingly, to read about mass extinction, or accept that we are consigning *Homo sapiens* to be a short-lived species, but at the same time continue our lives as if nothing has happened. We really don't want to believe it and we have an incredible capacity to turn away, move on and distract ourselves. By distancing ourselves even more from the living world, we can continue to put our fingers in our ears and hope it will all go away or that someone else will fix it. It is the denial of death on a global, planetary scale. (2020, p. 167)

Parallel with this distancing from nature as a whole, the TNT also explains, then, why a lot of people will distance themselves from anything related to climate change. The way we talk about the climate crisis is, thus, a delicate subject. Studies show that flooding audiences with terrifying news does not encourage people to do anything; in fact, it only breeds apathy and inaction. This type of overly negative message – dubbed as doom and gloom – might not be the best way to communicate, even if the data is factually correct, is one of the findings of the psychologist and politician Per Espen Stoknes (2015). Climate change is of such an immense and complex scale that the human brain has difficulty understanding it; Timothy Morton has attributed to global warming his concept of hyperobject: something tremendously distributed in time and space, so unsurmountable to humans that it becomes almost invisible (2013).

Thus, the best approach is, according to the results of an experiment carried out by a project at the University of California – the UCLA ENGAGE –, to simplify the information, to refer to consequences that are close to people and to present it alongside tangible action. Households who received data demonstrating the link between climate change and premature death of children (instead of, for example, data about financial benefits per month) decreased their energy intake by 8%, and households with children who received the same information decreased 19% (Asensio & Delmas, 2015, 2016). Slightly contrary to this, however, are the results published in *Nature Climate Change* of a survey of the

academic literature on the subject. In short, the authors – Daniel A. Chapman, Brian Lickel and Ezra M. Markowitz – conclude that there is no single way to tell climate change stories, and no single rhetorical approach that can assuredly work with any given audience (2017). As Wallace-Wells puts it, “Any story that sticks is a good one” (2019, p. 210).

3.2.1. The Island of Missing Trees

Synopsis (Elif Shafak): In 1974, two teenagers, from opposite sides of a divided Cyprus, meet at a tavern in the city they both call home. The tavern is the only place that Kostas, who is Greek, and Defne, who is Turkish, can meet in secret, hidden beneath the leaves of a fig tree growing through the roof of the tavern. This tree will witness their hushed, happy meetings, and will be there when the war breaks out and the teenagers vanish. Decades later in north London, sixteen-year-old Ada has never visited the island where her parents were born. She seeks to untangle years of her family’s silence, but the only connection she has to the land of her ancestors is a fig tree growing in the back garden of their home.

Let us ask again: can literature change the way people perceive the natural world in general and climate change in particular? If behavioural science concludes that individuals are more prone to changing their habits when confronted with the consequences of said actions to the ones they love, if people might feel vicarious traumatization in the face of other’s suffering and develop coping mechanisms like psychic numbing, if individuals have cognitive bias like the identifiable victim effect that prevents them from connecting with large groups of suffering people, how can literature make any difference? Furthermore, there is the added layer of the fact that the countries suffering the most from climate change are the ones contributing to it the less, and also the ones that less means have to deal with those consequences. From an American or European point of view, “consumers of news have been trained over decades to see disasters like these as tragic, yes, but also as an inevitable feature of underdevelopment – and therefore both ‘natural’ and distant” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 215). Climate change’s impacts are becoming even more undeniable by the day, and millions are suffering because of them every day, but even more millions still fail to care about both those populations in pain and the planet’s future. How could contemporary fiction possibly change this?

Published in August 2021 by Viking (Penguin Books), *The Island of Missing Trees* feels more like a collection of stories than a unified narrative – granted, each story constitutes a piece from the puzzle. Events are told from different points of view, at different historical times and in different places. This, from the get-go, might create some discomfort in the reader;

unlike *Normal People*, which has two parallel points of view and, even if distinct, quite close locations and timelines, Shafak's book explores considerably different realities.

Chronologically, the narrative follows Defne, a Turkish Muslim, and Kostas, a Greek Christian, two teenagers in love living in a divided country at one of the worst years of its existence – “[y]ou don’t fall in love in Cyprus in the summer of 1974. Not here, not now. And yet there they were, the two of them” (Shafak, 2021, p. 168). A Greek military coup, a Turkish invasion, and an island left to violence and chaos. Kostas is sent by his mother to live with an uncle in the United Kingdom, and only manages to come back years later, in the early 2000s, already a successful evolutionary ecologist and botanist. Defne is by then an archaeologist working for the Committee for Missing Persons, and they eventually rekindle their relationship, marrying soon after and moving to London. In the late 2010s, their child Ada is now a teenager grieving her mother's death alongside a father she cannot relate to.

Connecting these stories is a fig tree, the narrator of around half of the book. The tree was at the centre of The Happy Fig, a tavern owned by Yusuf and Yiorgos (like Defne and Kostas, born from different sides) where the teenagers used to meet before the conflict erupted. After leaving Cyprus for the second time, now with Dafne with him (and without knowing it yet, Ada), Kostas visits the tavern and tries to heal the tree before cutting a branch to take with them to London. The tree's consciousness lives, then, now in London with them.

Elif Shafak's novel is one of displacement, abruptly unfinished stories, and broken lives. The author explores migrations and sociopolitical contexts, and how human lives can evolve amidst those, while also interweaving ecological consciousness. *The Island of Missing Trees* is a story about forbidden love, pain and loss, memory and absence, guilt and redemption, home and spaces in-between; Shafak makes justice to her reputation, blending ethnicism, extremism, pacifism, feminism, queerness, environmentalism, and protection of human and non-human rights, without it ever feeling like too much.

The choice of the fig tree as a narrator is quite an interesting one. Anthropomorphized animal characters are not that rare, even if they are more common in children's literature or in the fantasy genre. Brian Green has argued that theory of mind is responsible for “our innate tendency to ascribe a mind to anything we encounter that even hints of having agency. [...] Same goes for animals, and so we instinctively ascribe intents and desires to them too” (2020, p. 186). Anthropomorphized plant characters are rarer, but one as a narrator is quite original. Side by side with the third-person narrative used in the other

chapters, the author places the tree's voice in equal standing, employing the rhetorical device of personification or prosopopoeia. "Like Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016) before her, Shafak makes the contemporary novel an arboreally engaged form, as she explores the affordances of narrative form for telling tree stories" (2023, p. 1), writes Stephen O'Neill. However, as *The Overstory* only "gestures towards tree writing", *The Island of Missing Trees* "goes further to unmute the tree within literary fiction" (p. 4). The literary scholar states that the "novel highlights the urgency of nonanthropocentric modes of storytelling in these times of Anthropogenic climate crisis" (p. 2), arguing that

The Island of Missing Trees does the imaginative work of representing nature, using personification as a creative entry point into animist ontology. It does the epistemological work of understanding nature through its incorporation of plant science and knowledge. And it does the ethical work of valuing nature throughout, reorienting human story towards the stuff of other life forms. [...] should be understood as expanding upon traditional literary-arboreal representation to provide a set of arborealities that are imaginative, intertextual, and ethical, and that offer new directions for other writers interested in the aesthetic and ontological possibilities of trees. (p. 18)

The novel's empathic elements (towards nonhuman organisms, that is), then, are the employed literary devices around the fig tree. With a nod to magical realism, the tree both narrates the humans' comings and goings and adds her own perspective on things, explaining how the fauna and flora live alongside those humans and how they are affected by them. Where humans refuse to remember out of pain and trauma, nature remembers everything. Trees know

life is all about self-learning. Under stress we make new combinations of DNA, new genetic variations. Not only stressed plants but also their offspring do this, even if they themselves might not have undergone any similar environmental or physical trauma. You might call it transgenerational memory. At the end of the day, we all remember for the same reason we try to forget: to survive in a world that neither understands nor values us. (Shafak, 2021, p. 100)

This transgenerational memory is something Ada feels as well. She suspects she has always "carried within a sadness that was not quite her own", but she cannot find an answer to the question: is it "possible to inherit something as intangible and immeasurable as sorrow?" (Shafak, 2021, p. 18). The teenager's confusion is even more overwhelming by the fact she

knows almost nothing about her family history. Dafne made Kostas promise to never burden their child with their pain, wishing for her to be a regular British child, so Ada knows only the basic historical facts but not what her parents have gone through or how they situate themselves in the conflict. She has also never met any family member, a fact that pains her deeply considering not a single relative came to her mother's funeral. But, alongside her own history, the fig tree remembers everything from their history as well, and human history as a whole.

A tree is a memory keeper. Tangled beneath our roots, hidden inside our trunks, are the sinews of history, the ruins of wars nobody came to win, the bones of the missing. The water sucked up through our boughs is the blood of the earth, the tears of the victims, and the ink of truths yet to be acknowledged. Humans, especially the victors who hold the pen that writes the annals of history, have a penchant for erasing as much as documenting. It remains to us plants to collect the untold, the unwanted (p. 211),

writes the novelist. The tree narrates all the missing pieces in Kostas and Dafne past, all the moments and feelings they have tried so hard to bury. Ada might never fully partake in that knowledge, of course, especially before the arrival of her aunt Meryem, but the reader does. Additionally, animal and plant histories run hand-in-hand with human history and, as such, the fig tree delves into that side of the past as well, narrating hers and that of her lineage, that of the land, that of the flora, and stories of the fauna that comes in contact with her – bees, ants, butterflies, birds (especially Hugo, The Happy Fig's parrot), and many more.

The fig tree declares that “[m]ost arboreal suffering is caused by humankind” (Shafak, 2021, p. 45) and that, while “no species is obliged to like another species”, “if you are going to claim, as humans do, to be superior to all life forms, past and present, then you must gain an understanding of the oldest living organisms on earth who were here long before you arrived and will still be here after you have gone” (p. 44). In her understanding, humans both know very little about trees (and about most organisms) and refuse to learn anything more. She also believes that, while humans are able to empathize or feel sympathy for some animals,⁸ they cannot do so with trees, and part of the reason why “is because, in order to connect with something other than themselves and genuinely care about it, they need to interact with a face, an image that mirrors theirs as closely as possible” (p. 46). *Arboreal-*

⁸ For a throughout analysis on the subject, Alexa Weik von Mossner has a chapter on “Beyond Boundaries: Imaginary Animals and the Intricacies of Trans-species Empathy” in 2017, pp. 105-134.

time is also too complex, more akin to *story-time* than *human-time*, full of “bends and twists”, and that is why “[t]hey are incompatible” (p. 47).

Kostas, however, has felt empathy for both animals and plants throughout his whole life; at times, he even feels greater empathy for non-human lifeforms than he does for humans, to the point of getting his mother worried. There is a moment in the 2010s timeline when Ada asks her father if trees feel pain. Kostas acknowledges that “[t]here are two ways of answering that”, and that “[t]he scientific consensus is that trees are not sentient in the way most people use the word”, but his daughter instantly understands he does not agree with that. “I think there’s still so much we don’t know, we’re only just beginning to discover the language of trees”, Kostas says, expanding with:

But we can tell with certainty that they can hear, smell, communicate – and they can definitely remember. They can sense water, light, danger. They can send signals to other plants and help each other. They’re much more alive than most people realize. (Shafak, 2021, pp. 41-42)

While ecological consciousness is a major component of the novel, climate change also plays its part. Kostas understands his vocation – evolutionary ecology and botany – when he learns from a scientific magazine that “the world would experience dangerous levels of warming”, followed by “collective deaths of species”, and forests could play a positive role in slowing “down catastrophic ecological change” (Shafak, 2021, pp. 187-188). Shortly after Meryem arrives to London, the three family members sit in the living room watching the news, as the “[w]eather reports warned that the worst was yet to come, asking people to stay indoors unless strictly necessary” (p. 122). The older woman then laments “[s]igns of the Apocalypse, that’s how I feel. I worry the end is near for humanity” (p. 122). Ada answers her (“without lifting her gaze from her phone”), that “[i]t’s climate change. Not a revengeful God. We are doing this to ourselves. We are going to see more floods and hurricanes if we don’t act now. No one is going to save us. Soon it’ll be too late for coral reefs, monarch butterflies” (p. 122). This interaction both reflects the tree’s monologues and the daily dynamics of many homes over the last years. And, just like the negligence of humans, the wars of humans, or the destruction made by human hands, climate change is a reality the fig tree alludes to many times, commenting how it is already disturbing many species’ survival and clearly understanding it as another layer of humans’ carelessness.

In what way can our questions for reflection be applied here? *The Island of Missing Trees* is a work of literary fiction, although, like *Normal People*, it is a considerably popular one. While the novel was shortlisted for The Costa Novel Award in 2021, for The Women's Prize for Fiction and The Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards in 2022, and was longlisted for The Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize in 2022, among others (Shafak, n.d.), it also is a best-seller and has a punctuation of 4.17 on *Goodreads* – the highest of the four books here analysed – from a total of more than 81 thousand ratings (Goodread, n.d.-b). The Turkish-British author (her surname is originally written as Şafak) is, after all, quite the popular author, being the most widely read female writer in Turkey. *The Island of Missing Trees*, however, has only been published in Turkey this past July – Elif Shafak has been living in London for more than a decade, and has written both in Turkish and English for a long time, with the 2021 novel being published first in the United Kingdom (Shafak, n.d.).

The book is both mostly narrative in form and mostly character-driven, although it has a bigger plot component than the previous novels, and it could be argued that it takes expository form at times. Wallace-Wells has defined cli-fi (climate fiction) as “genre fiction sounding environmental alarm, didactic adventure stories, often preachy in their politics” (2019, p. 195). Although *The Island of Missing Trees* is neither a dystopia nor a post-apocalyptic tale – the paradigm most common for these narratives to take –, it definitely falls under the preachy feature. The fig tree monologues at length about fauna and flora, which, even if quite interesting, and even if “the tree's voice is a delight” (Ross, 2021), breaks the narrative's rhythm and invariably removes the reader from the story world created.

Additionally, the way the novel is structured, as mentioned before, might also pull the reader from the story. Aside from form, there are many elements that might cause the reader to feel imaginative resistance towards the book, maybe even to the level of abandoning the reading midway. Having a tree both as a character and a narrator might feel strange for many readers; even those used to magic realism, fantasy, or maybe science fiction might feel it, since it is a choice somewhat unexpected in a work of literary fiction. Furthermore,

the more 'human' the tree – its love for Kostas, the way it feels 'jet lagged', even its concern for Ada – the less interesting, even mawkish, it seemed. Add the contrivance of small creatures whispering plot points to its branches and for me, coincidence trumped craft. (Ross, 2021)

The more human the tree is, the more freakish the experience will likely become for some readers. For others, the fig tree might be welcomed without resistance, and insights from this ancient and almost omnipresent being might feel nothing short of fascinating. There are, then, two sides to story transportation here. Elif Shafak creates a deeply rich and vivid environment, especially impressive when one considers how hard it is to portrait such delicate subjects and themes. The world designed, thus, has all the necessary elements for the reader to situate themselves in, even enough to forget time, surroundings, concerns, and themselves. The tree's character, however, might provoke imaginative resistance, removing the reader from the fictional narrative and breaking story transportation; the novel's structure itself, with all its shifting perspectives and timelines, and its episodic use of a more expository form on the tree's chapter, might have this effect as well.

The author writes in such a respectful and striking manner, full of care and attention, that all characters seem possible to promote character identification – both human and nonhuman. Is it a novel strong on affect – it might even be too emotional for some readers, which creates a situation like that of *The Midnight Library* – and seems likely to make the reader care for its fictional organisms and feel moved by their stories. All of them are complex, with feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions of their own – even the nonhuman ones – and all of these are straight-forward for the reader. The author's chosen strategic empathy ought to be the broadcast one, since, although it could be argued that empathy is at the service of "a specific end", Shafak could not possibly aim to cultivate "empathy for the in-group" in "chosen others" (Keen, 2007, p. 142), as the author is human, not a tree or other organism. Shafak's intention is, then, to stimulate empathy for *life* – not for humans, neither for a particular group of humans or peoples, nor for trees, or bees, or birds, or any other specific species. *The Island of Missing Trees* is, essentially, a call for empathy and care for all forms of life.

Can the novel initiate reflection? Can the novel make the reader think differently about portrayed themes or experiences? Can the novel make the reader rethink anything about their worldview? Can the novel instil in the reader a sense of connection to others? Can the novel make the reader feel different in any way? Can the novel drive the reader to think about acting in a different way? The answer to all these questions is, again, a rather subjective one, but mostly likely affirmative. However, the changes seem more probable to occur over time; the readers' attitude towards nature as a whole, the readers' perception on climate change, the readers' affective involvement with anything nonhuman (or not created by humans),

and the readers' emotional stirring in the face of climate change might all suffer subtle alterations as time after reading passes. This is the phenomenon already addressed of absolute sleeper effect: "the effects of fiction reading on empathy will increase over time rather than present itself directly after the experience" (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 3).

3.2.2. The Moonday Letters

Synopsis (Emmi Itäranta): Part space-age epistolary, part eco-thriller, and a love story between two individuals from very different worlds. Sol has disappeared. Their Earth-born wife Lumi sets out to find them but it is no simple feat: each clue uncovers another enigma. Their disappearance leads back to underground environmental groups and a web of mystery that spans the space between the planets themselves. Told through letters and extracts, the course of Lumi's journey takes her not only from the affluent colonies of Mars to the devastated remnants of Earth, but into the hidden depths of Sol's past and the long-forgotten secrets of her own.

The Moonday Letters might be both *solastalgia's* and *soliphilia's* novel of excellence. To introduce context to what is meant by this, however, a retracing of steps is required.

When Lucy Jones writes about the need for a new vocabulary (2020, pp. 155-156), she writes it with Glenn Albrecht's work closely in mind. The environmental philosopher – especially focused on the relationship between ecosystems and human health – has been for almost two decades reflecting on negative emotional and psychological experiences caused by environmental change. Opposing the *Symbiocene* (a neologism created after the concept of symbiosis, meaning a new period in Earth's history in which there is a deep interconnectedness of all life on Earth) as an ideal alternative to that of the Anthropocene, Albrecht defends that the world is currently living through an open emotional war occurring between the forces of creation and the forces of destruction. He, then, has created a range of emotional concepts he calls *psychoterratic dis-eases* – which are the ones humanity is experiencing right now in various degrees – and has juxtaposed them against positive states – the ones we should aim for and that can help turn the Anthropocene into the *Symbiocene*. The research the philosopher has developed and published in various papers is collected in *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*, and some of the negative *psychoterratic* states are *ecoanxiety*, *meteoranxiety*, *nature deficit disorder*, *environmental generational amnesia*, *ecoparalysis*, *solastalgia*, *tierratrauma*, *tierrafurie*, and *global dread* (Albrecht, 2019).

Solastalgia became Albrecht's most famous neologism. It has been used widely across academia and the arts since then, and its definition is the following:

The pain or distress caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the lived experience of negative environmental change. It is the homesickness you have when you are still at home. (Albrecht, 2019, p. 200)

By contrast, *soliphilia* is the concept the Australian understands as the positive counterpart of solastalgia. *Soliphilia*, thus, means "[t]he giving of political commitment to the protection of loved home places at all scales, from the local to the global, from the forces of desolation" (Albrecht, 2019, p. 200). *Soliphilia* is essential, then, for both humanity and the planet to reach the *Symbiocene*.

In her chapter "From Nostalgic Longing to Solastalgic Distress: A Cognitive Approach to Love in the Anthropocene" (in *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*), Alexa Weik von Mossner analyses a short-story collection through the lens of Albrecht's *psychoterratic* states. Drawing from cognitive psychology, social anthropology, and affective science, the literary scholar and novelist wonders:

Once we realize that our environment plays a central role not only in how we feel but also in our cognitive understanding of how we feel about that environment, the question that suggests itself is, What happens to our emotions when that environment changes drastically? (2018, p. 52)

Reading *The Moonday Letters* is both a compelling and deeply eerie experience. Emmi Itäranta is quite a skilled writer, and the novel accomplishes the coveted yet rare feature of feeling otherworldly while also contemporary. Adopting the literary device of found artefact, the novel is presented as a document collection from the 22nd century published somewhere in the 24th century or later. Through the main character's letters, digital communication, encyclopaedia entries, transcripts, myths, news articles, scientific reports, and even artistic artefacts, the novel feels to some extent like being transported in time to a time we already know; this, of course, helps immensely in achieving narrative transportation, and the strategy of incorporating nonfiction texts in a fictional text helps to attest the accuracy of Lumi's account, while also helping the novelist to introduce information important to the worldbuilding that Lumi had no way of knowing or would not likely be aware of.

The Moonday Letters' Finnish edition was published in 2020 by Teos (with the title *Kuunpäivän kirjeet*), and the English version in 2022 by Titan Books. Emmi Itäranta wrote (as

she usually does) both versions in temporal alignment, with each language informing the other, a fairly unique process of creation (Rossi, 2021). The novel is a blending of science fiction – mostly cli-fi –, fantasy, mystery, and romance, albeit written in quite a literary manner – and the combination of genres is so impeccably done that it never feels odd or unconvincing. Part space-age epistolary, part eco-thriller, *The Moonday Letters* has three major underlying reflections: Can you ever truly know another person, even if that person is the one you love? How much destruction can humans enact before it is universally considered unacceptable? How far is too far when it comes to climate activism, and can planet-wide ecoterrorism be justified?

The year is 2168, and Lumi, a psychic healer born on Earth, was supposed to meet with her spouse after a long work trip; the spouse in question, however, keeps postponing their encounter, until they vanish at last, either made captive by others or planning to disappear on their own. Lumi's mission becomes, then, to re-examine their shared past ("do you remember it the way I do?", Itäranta, 2022, p. 163), in an attempt to search for clues on where Sol might be and why they might be missing in the first place. Sol is an astro-ethnobotanist from Mars, remaining elusive and slipping through Lumi's (and the reader's) fingers throughout the novel. Lumi knows very little about Sol's Project Earth work, and Sol cannot understand Lumi's magical world. Even so, even if born on different planets and benefiting from different status because of it, and even if working in far ends of the professional spectrum ("[y]our world is built from science, from what can be proven and measured. My world looks toward that which can be sensed but not shown to others", p. 139) – the two have found unity in each other.

In *The Moonday Letters*'s world, Earth has become mostly uninhabitable and most of humanity lives in human colonies spread over other astronomical objects – like the Moon, Mars, Europa, or Venus – or in the (at least) twenty-two cylinder cities, the space station-like habitats that orbit Earth and Mars. Lumi's letters are inherently poetic, and she writes in a dreamlike and reflective tone, as her quest to find her spouse is more one of looking inward than outward. Her letters are more diary entries than correspondence, and while she admits in using the letters as a personal record of their lives – Lumi has been writing to Sol in notebooks for years, as a way for them to share her travels, as a means to better understand their life, and now as an effort to bring Sol back to her –, they at times break the illusion by indulging in too many descriptions of what the 'you' has made in the past (the 'you' in case is Sol, and they would definitely remember their own actions). Furthermore, Lumi both fails

to acknowledge obvious elements of the puzzle – because she does not want them to be a part of their shared but fracturing reality – and to provide all information, deliberately sidestepping other elements of the puzzle – as, if they turn out to be true (which they are), then she nonetheless has the instinct of protecting her spouse from all possible consequences.

How does *The Moonday Letters* perform with our questionnaire? The novel mostly takes a narrative form (even if composed of diegetic chapters), although the official documents that interpolate with the letters might take an expository form. It is mostly character-driven, even if, like *The Island of Missing Trees*, it has a bigger plot component (rather slow-passed and introspective) than the other novels analysed in this dissertation. When it comes to popularity, since that has been referred about the other books, *The Moonday Letters'* punctuation is of 3.81 on *Goodreads*, from a total of little less than 1.5 thousand reviews (Goodreads, n.d.-d). It is by far the least known book of the four selected, although it as gathered stellar reviews from magazines and the like, been awarded the Tähtivaeltaja Award for the Best Finnish Science Fiction Book in 2020, and longlisted for The British Science Fiction Association Award for Best Novel earlier this year (Itäranta, n.d.). The level of language is fairly accessible, although one has to keep in mind that one of the features of science fiction is the invention of original vocabulary, and Itäranta's work is no exception.

The Moonday Letters appears to provide many opportunities for empathy. Lumi feels like a real person, with feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions of her own, and those at all times understandable to the reader (sometimes, even more to the reader than to Lumi herself). The reader deeply feels Lumi's *solastalgia* on Earth, that is doubled about the cylinder city of Fuxi, and then enhanced regarding Earth all over again. The reader feels her pain when she loses her parents once, then twice, and also feels her exponential distress as she tries to find her spouse without success. There are, after all, plenty of emotional linguistic cues; when Lumi departs the Earth for the first time, she feels "sadness, akin to physical pain, when I first looked at Earth glowing in space through the window of the vessel. Yet at once I was light and bubbling, all roads open unlike ever before, the future a shimmering, branching path of gold" (Itäranta, 2022, p. 88). That being said, many of the narrative choices made might also pose barriers for empathic connection to arise. One could assume those barriers to be all directly connected to the genre, but one could also assume that those who seek science fiction are quite used to the sci-fi experience, and their comfort with the genre might

surpass those barriers. However, most of them concern particular choices of form and not inherent qualities of the genre.

For a start, the epistolary framing might both not work for some people and turn narrative transportation and character identification elements muddier. The letters, as mentioned, do not feel like letters, much less like letters someone would write to their spouse; even considering all previously mentioned considerations, the letters still feel to some extent like something written for the eyes of a third party. The absence of speech marks might also confuse some readers.

Sci-fi might complicate engagement per se, as the shared world is yet to be constructed, but the Finish author's world-building is thoroughly competent, with more than enough spatiotemporal and perceptual cues for the reader to feel immersed in this universe. Furthermore, everything works more on a speculative framework, and the technological evolution is quite plausible, without much disbelief arising in this regard. The problem, thus, lies with the novel's more esoteric side. Lumi is a healer, but a healer that cures patients' psychic maladies, travelling (in 'soul-journeys') to another dimension to retrieve the missing parts of their spirits or to find what the spirit needs to heal. There are energy transferences, interactions with memories, soul-animals that serve as protective and guiding spirits (Lumi's an Iberian lynx), and whole new landscapes in the alternate spiritual world that feel like heaven and hell combined. A more daydreaming but equally abstract component to the narrative is the imaginary house – the Moonday House – Lumi and Sol have been creating piece by piece for years. Frequently travelling and thus far from each other, the couple uses this house as a way to feel connected when even many astronomical objects apart – “[a]nd so we had a shared home, in our thoughts”, Lumi writes (Itäranta, 2022, p. 162). Each (or all) of these components might reasonably create nothing but imaginative resistance in the reader. Even harder to feel transported to than the Midnight Library or the fig tree's mind, Lumi's spirit world and the couple's Moonday House are places some readers might be unable to visit.

Character identification might also be hard for different reasons. One of them is the already pointed out epistolary form. Another is the fact that Lumi feels somewhat naïve or willingly blind almost from the beginning, with the reader at all times aware they know something that feels quite obvious to everyone but Lumi. While this might be common in genres like those of mystery or crime, it does not bode that well here, especially when one has empathy

in mind. A third feature is that, while technically Sol can be considered the second main character, they are hardly ever presented ‘in the flesh’; rather, the reader’s contact with them is mostly through Lumi’s perspective – which is also a deeply biased one. All characters are, in truth, products of Lumi’s perception.

It could also be argued that, even if character identification might not arise towards the main characters themselves, identification might still arise towards the humans of this world at large. It seems hard not to feel empathy – or, at the very least, sympathy – for these future people who will always long for a home they have never known. *Solastalgia* prevails from the first to the last chapter, and the emotional state seems to be shared by most humans, no matter how far from Earth they were born. This “pain or distress caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory” (Albrecht, 2019, p. 200) is debated at different moments. One of the first letters, in fact, portrays that feeling well: “We carry within us every home, including those that no longer exist, so we’d have somewhere to return to” (Itäranta, 2022, p. 36). In one of her re-examinations of the past, Lumi remembers a moment shared with Sol. They had asked her if she misses Earth, to which Lumi replies with “[i]t’s always there. The longing. Like breathing. Most of the time I don’t pay attention to it, but sometimes it clogs and hitches and tightens into a knot” (p. 191). They have then the following interaction:

Did you know that even people who have never been to Earth miss it? I asked after a while. I’ve heard of the phenomenon, you said. In medicine it is known as the birth-home syndrome.

I’ve seen it in my patients. People who were born and grew up on Mars long for Earth. For the horizon, the open sea, the sky and the sun. Science believes it is because evolution has not caught up with the changes. As a species, we evolved in Earth conditions and for them, not for underground artificial light. A longing like that can lock itself under the skin and eat a person from within. Healers believe it is one of the reasons for soul-sickness. The soul will try to wander toward the home from which it has been ripped away and tears itself apart. (p. 193)

Earlier in the novel, Lumi has had a similar reminiscing with Enisa, a Martian journalist who tries to help her find Sol. Lumi says she misses Fuxi, where she and Sol had their first shared home, before the cylinder city had to be evacuated and shut down. Enisa then says:

I don’t claim to know what it’s like. But I do have a secondhand impression, handed down through generations. Like dark hair, I guess, or a spine structure that means you’re likely to

develop scoliosis. Something you don't tend to think about, until you realize not every family has it. My family left Earth a few generations ago. One of those stories everyone has heard: drought, famine, a war that ground everything to dust. My great-grandparents wished to be able to return sometime. When I was a child, my great-grandmother didn't talk about it very much, but I could tell she missed Earth. She would say that there was always two of her: the one who left, and the one who stayed. (Itäranta, 2022, p. 107)

This feels akin to Elif Shafak's transgenerational memory. Lumi writes:

I knew exactly what Enisa meant. I imagined her great-grandmother, a dark-haired young woman, continuing her life in a landscape already lost, in a city where the trees had been bombed to carcasses and the buildings crushed into the ground: a shadow that always walked by the woman who left. I imagined my own other, left-behind self in the landscape of Winterland, a specter that no longer belonged in my world, but could not disappear either, because she had nowhere else to go. (Itäranta, 2022, p. 108)

The author's aim is, then, to promote empathy for both humanity and the planet with all that entails. With what could be described as a mix of broadcast strategic empathy and ambassadorial strategic empathy, the author tries to create, more than empathy for her characters per se, empathy for all life forms, for the world we still have, for the species we have not yet drawn to extinction, for all the interconnected systems that allow for life to have developed and for life to still exist. It is, then, empathy at the service of "a specific end", but not exactly "empathy for the in-group" in "chosen others" (Keen, 2007, p. 142); rather it is a more universal and abstract kind of empathy (Bladow & Ladino, 2018).

Emmi Itäranta's "novels have been characterised as lyrical dystopias with strong ecological undercurrents" (Itäranta, n.d.), and she has talked at length in interviews about climate change and the broad consequences of the Anthropocene (Kanerva, 2020). One could say that, in *The Moonday Letters*, the author builds a whole world in an effort to make the reader imagine how life could look like in environments entirely built and tightly controlled by humans. The novel follows the strategies of eco-dystopian science fiction, but it does not feel like a dystopian work. In fact, *The Moonday Letters* should not be categorized as neither utopian nor dystopian; rather, it feels more like a linear extension of current events. The world almost a century and a half from now, as Itäranta envisions it, is still very much operating in a capitalist, extractivist, and even colonialist logic.

Earth, made largely uninhabitable by apocalyptic extreme weather events, is now just a reminiscence of what once was. The planet's state is never undressed on a full scale – the information-dumps common to science-fiction and fantasy that the Finnish writer manages to avoid so well –, but hints are provided here and there. The oceans seem to have suffered the most serious damage: they have turned into massive carbon sinks, which has had a significant impact on global temperatures, and the level of acidification has made maritime life almost impossible and damaged earth ecosystems acutely. It can be deduced that most ice sheets have melted, since sea levels have risen significantly, which in turn has led to the flooding of dangerous sites like nuclear power plants, that have been releasing radiation ever since. As Mars has become the major political centre, all undesired activities have been relegated to Earth, and all sorts of industries keep polluting the planet with toxic fumes as well. A massive extinction of species is also alluded to, as expected. “Every single day Earth inhabitants die from epidemic diseases and hunger, from environmental toxins, in the vessels of human traffickers in the darkness of space” (Itäranta, 2022, p. 193) – the last one an obvious reference to the ongoing catastrophe in the Mediterranean. Wars seem to have broken somewhere in the past as well, as bombs are mentioned in one of the passages above.

The planet has no proper countries, no proper populations, only holiday isles – Winterland, Hollywoodland, Lakeworld, Barrier Reef Island, Whale World, Vacation Archipelago of Londons, and so on –, built for the nostalgic fruition of outer space-born wealthy individuals, and the poverty-stricken workers who keep them running. These holiday isles are not that unfeasible, in fact; there are currently many artificially built and operated environments spread across the globe. One of them, “the world's largest indoor rainforest” (Seeler, 2017), is located in Germany and is called Tropical Islands Resort. Built inside a former aeroplane hangar, the holiday isle's air is kept at a consistent 26 degrees Celsius, while the water is kept at 31, and it harbours a beach by the side of a lagoon, a rainforest, a camping zone, and abundance of commodities (2017).

Ironically, what once was the motherland is now looked on with scorn; all human cities outside of Earth are still called ‘colonies’ and were established by ‘the First Settlers’ who ‘colonized’ the Solar System, but all their inhabitants look down on the (few) Earth-born. This could be interpreted as born from the deeply felt *solastalgia* and *tierrafurie* (Albrecht 2019) for a reality they never knew, and a misplaced blame on those who are still born on the planet yet cannot answer for their ancestors’ crimes. Travel is also highly controlled for

those Colony-born and mostly forbidden for those born on Earth, but even if it were encouraged, most people – regardless of where they had been born – would not be able to afford to. It is, then, a work that tries to influence “readers’ perceptions of their actual, contemporary world by evoking speculative future worlds that are recognizable and at the same time substantially different” (Mossner, 2018, p. 57).

Let us remind Wallace-Wells definition of cli-fi: “genre fiction sounding environmental alarm, didactic adventure stories, often preachy in their politics” (2019, p. 195). *The Moonday Letters* is a piece of genre fiction that encompasses environmental alarm, but, even if the author is noticeably socially and politically motivated, just like Elif Shafak is, it never feels like a ‘preachy’ work – neither a ‘didactic’ one. There is an underlying advocacy for paradigm dismantling and the creation of a new way of life throughout the novel, however, that refers to the world of 2168, yet no doubt is meant to just as well allude to Earth’s current reality. It never feels like too much, however.

Reflections on the Anthropocene are majorly present in the novel. A geological era triggered and characterized by human activity, the Anthropocene is both an echo of humans’ abilities and limitations; humankind is capable of causing transformations on a global scale but just incapable of understanding the risks and lasting consequences of those same transformations (Mossner, 2018). Thus, one of the strengths of Emmi Itäranta’s work lies with empathy and perception: if the reader feels empathy, they might change their perception of the risks involved, of the path humanity is headed that can still be halted, of the natural richness that is still alive and just outside their window – it is, then, a “future-oriented form of eco-nostalgia that is based on the anticipation of loss and regret” (Mossner, 2018, p. 48). Deliberately creating *solastalgia* in the reader, the Finish novelist also builds the basis for *solaphilia*, the emotional state for hope and change, “[t]he giving of political commitment to the protection of loved home places” (Albrecht, 2019, p. 200).

This *solaphilia* side takes a bigger role in the last part of the novel. In the conversation already mentioned, Sol asks Lumi what she would sacrifice to fix the Earth – “[w]hat would be the highest price you’d pay for it?” (Itäranta, 2022, p. 193). Sol, it turns out, would pay the highest prices, even if she then acknowledges not to be certain of her choices. With the pieces of the puzzle Lumi has gathered, the documents included, and the long letter written by Sol at the end of the novel, everything comes to light. In Project Earth, and later Project Inanna, Sol had been working on a way to clean the planet’s oceans relying on biomatter

and symbiotic processes. She had also been part of an underground environmental organization called Stoneturners since she was a student, a fact the reader deduces right away even if Lumi refuses to. The group had recently started to become radicalized, and their aim was to restore Earth's ecosystems and release the planet from Mars' control. "Humans started a new geological epoch. Why couldn't they also finish it and replace it with something new? What if human traces could be erased in some manner? Make another world, where nature dictates the direction? Create a new epoch, the Biocene?", their logic goes (p. 347).

Sol's fungal spores end up being released on the Pacific via a series of induced earthquakes. "The strike is the largest known biological terror attack in history", but "environmental organizations and experts have rushed to emphasize that to date, the spores have not been found to cause harm to humans", and "calling the biomatter released in the seas a weapon should be carefully considered", can be read in news agencies (Itäranta, 2022, p. 322). Since an early trial had been the cause of Fuxi's destruction, as the fungi in environments other than Earth turned out to kill the flora, Earth is put on quarantine (in what later becomes known as the isolationism of the Inanna period). How far is too far when it comes to climate activism, then, and can planet-wide ecoterrorism be justified?

For the Stoneturners, everything is justified, as they place nature above humanity. An entry for *Encyclopedia Ecologica* from 2312 is provided in the novel. Attributed to biocentric environmental philosopher Mirai Parata, the principle of inviolability would have been created in 2032 and would imply that "the value of or need for protection of the environment is not defined by the occurrence of life forms, but the untouched natural landscape is of inherent value in itself". Humans, then, should "leave landscapes as they are, wherever we go" (Itäranta, 2022, p. 97-98). After the entries for the Holocene and the Anthropocene in the *Anthrobiocene Encyclopedia of Geology* are given, the novel ends with a new one:

The Biocene refers to the geological epoch that follows and partially overlaps with the Anthropocene. The term was first proposed by geologist Karina Kiselyova in 91 MC. [...] According to the general definition, the Biocene refers to an epoch that is characterized by a significant shift in human activity toward building infrastructures on the terms of nature and ecosystems. [...] Nobel Prize winning biologist Áirá Guttorm has proposed the term Anthrobiocene to describe the passage of time, a sub-epoch or transition period of the Anthropocene that can be considered to be a part of the Biocene. According to Guttorm,

the Anthrobiocene is characterized first and foremost by three traits: (1) the complete disruption of physical connections between Earth and space colonies for several decades, and the developments following from this on different celestial bodies; (2) the fundamental shift on Earth in relating to natural resources and their exploitation; and (3) the slow recovery of Earth ecosystems as a direct consequence of the aforementioned. (pp. 353-354)

These two fictional eras remind that of Albrecht – the *Symbiocene*. The novel does not directly condemn Sol's actions. Itäranta's intention seems to be: can we avoid further destruction now? Can we bypass the process and set in motion the recovery of Earth ecosystems sooner? And one may add: Can emotional states like *solastalgia*, *soliphilia*, and empathy help humanity get to that point? With a concern for both the present and the future, the novel is a call for action, and that action is rooted in empathy. There seems to be evidence that instilling in the reader both positive and negative emotions might have impacts on the way people perceive climate change and what they do about it (Mossner, 2017).⁹ Invoking both *solastalgia* and *soliphilia*, Emmi Itäranta seems to be trying to achieve exactly that, making the reader *feel with* these fictional people trapped in this alien world – that yet does not feel that alien, that might just be our descendants reality if everything keeps its present course.

⁹ Alexa Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* has its third part – "Experiencing the Future" – focused on this debate, in 2017, pp. 134-189.

(A) Conclusion: Blurring Distances

[B]eing empathic is a complex, demanding, strong yet subtle and gentle way of being.

Carl Rogers

This formulation of words is just this formulation of words – it could easily be any other from an infinite array of possibilities. In matters as abstract and immaterial as these, words are nothing but vessels, and even with 100 pages, the intended meaning might not be the meaning perceived. After all, these are nothing but an “arrangement of words that repeat, imperfectly and creatively, events that exceed those words but also find some expression in them”, as Jane Bennett has put it in her *Influx and Efflux* (2020, p. xx). The literature is vast, the perspectives, positions, debates, and understandings are tremendous, and many of the ones presented here could easily be substituted by those from other authors, if the angles chosen were slightly different. Just like Jonathan Culler wrote in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*,

[o]ne of the most dismaying features of theory today is that it is endless. It is not something that you could ever master, not a particular group of texts you could learn so as to ‘know theory’. It is an unbounded corpus of writings which is always being augmented as the young and the restless, in critiques of the guiding conceptions of their elders, promote the contributions to theory of new thinkers and rediscover the work of older, neglected ones. [...] A good deal of the hostility to theory no doubt comes from the fact that to admit the importance of theory is to make an open-ended commitment, to leave yourself in a position where there are always important things you don’t know. But this is the condition of life itself. (1997, pp. 15-16)

This also reveals the obvious: this dissertation and the present research could easily be expanded. Insights from many fields of thought could have been included in depth – they might ought to be included, some could even say –, instead of just being alluded to (or perhaps not even mentioned, in some cases). It might also be useful to point out – although it is fairly obvious by now – that literally theory, literary criticism, and comparative literature have not been explored here – reception theory in particular – in the way they could have, had the length of this dissertation been longer. Although notions and approaches are engaged with, and the methodology follows those of comparative literature to some extent, certain debates have not been presented like some of the ones on psychology have, for

example. This was a deliberate choice, made out of lack of space, a desire to combine the different fields and, moreover, to bring different perspectives into the discussion.

Additionally, the analysis on each of the selected novels could be expanded in different ways (and each of the novels could easily inspire a dissertation on their own). The work from other philosophers, psychologists, or literary theorists could be engaged with and explored in further analyses, and many more ideas could be included in our questions for reflection. Reader's reviews on platforms like *Goodreads* or *Reddit*, or even reaction videos or video-essays spread through *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and *YouTube*, would no doubt allow for quite an interesting investigation, and work as a complement to the reflections made in this dissertation concerning the four contemporary novels chosen. Given the lack of space, that analysis has been left out of this dissertation and will be continued in the future. Similarly, another component for further future exploration is one made out of the combination of sociological and psychological approaches – conducting interviews and surveys with both specialists in the themes involved and real readers, in order to make further deductions concerning the four novels' read world impact. One last point is that this investigation ought to be expanded into other novels with other pertinent themes in mind.

These four novels were chosen for particular reasons. All are creations of capable writers; as example, the four authors have all been nominated for The International Dublin Literary Award which, aside from being one of the wealthiest literary prizes in the world (of €100,000), is also quite influential for both promoting excellence in world literature (although accepting only novels written or translated into English) and having the nominations being submitted by public libraries around the world (over 400 library systems in 177 countries are invited to nominate each year) (Dublin Literary Award, n.d.).

All seem to offer good representations of the realities we intended to examine here. While *Normal People* and *The Island of Missing Trees* offer more nuanced takes on the respective themes, *The Midnight Library* and *The Moonday Letters* place them at their centre. *Normal People* and *The Island of Missing Trees* are examples of literary fiction (that have grown into popularity), *The Midnight Library* is an example of popular fiction (and indeed a popular book), and *The Moonday Letters* is an example of genre fiction (science fiction, in this case, and also the least popular book of the four, serving as a counterpoint for the other three), and from their overall popularity one can deduce that they are broadly read contemporary

books. Literary genres aside, all four are not that massively different from each other when it comes to the reading experience. One could speculate, from the get-go, that all four could enhance human abilities that allow individuals to understand and care for others.

All four novels and their authors have repeatedly been described as empathic, compassionate, moving, inspiring, thought-provoking, life-changing, and so on. One could not possibly include all references here, but let us highlight these: Jammela Jamil has blurbed Matt Haig's book calling him "[t]he king of empathy" (Haig, 2020), *The Guardian* has blurbed Elif Shafak's work as "made ferocious by its uncompromising empathy" (Shafak, 2021), *Speculative Fiction in Translation* reviewed Emmi Itäranta's work as one of "empathetic peaceful calm" (Haeusser, 2022), and *The Vice* has written that Sally Rooney's novel "pace comes almost completely from the empathy they [the characters] generate" (O'Neill, 2018).

It is safe to say, then, that, by choosing these four works of fiction, one would have a small sample of works perceived as empathic and that have also been quite read, which in turn makes of them good vessels for an examination such as this (how fiction reading can enhance the reader's empathy and theory of mind).

As expected, however, there are no clear answers. Terry Eagleton opens *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* by stating that "[p]hilosophers have an infuriating habit of analysing questions rather than answering them, and this is how I want to begin" (2007, p. 1), and while this is not a work of philosophy, this is nonetheless the position we must assume here – let us remind António Damásio's enthusiastic scepticism (2005, p. 24). The four analyses made, thus, are nuanced, at times conflicting, and denote only hypothesis; analyses such as these could not be done any other way, as no one could presume to know exactly how hypothetical readers might perceive, feel, or react.

As also expected, then, all four books seem to create good ground for both invoking empathy and enhancing the reader's empathy and theory of mind. It seems pertinent to remind that, while theory of mind will always be invoked when reading a literary work (as Lisa Zunshine proposed and demonstrated in 2006), empathy might not always be, as low-level empathy surely will be felt, and maybe even sympathy, but proper empathy might depend on a set of conditions specific to the reader (Keen, 2007; Maibom, 2017a). One curious thing about empathy is that it is such a subjective state that one will know why it has arisen when it arises, but one might find it difficult to know in what general conditions one might feel it. Like Zunshine writes, "our tendency to interpret observed behavior in terms of underlying

mental states [...] seems to be so effortless and automatic (in a sense that we are not even conscious of engaging in any particular act of ‘interpretation’)” (2006, p. 7); while she refers to theory of mind, empathy is automatic just as well. Thus, as “the deeper personal meaning of each ‘conversation’ between the story and the reader varies widely depending on the circumstances of the latter and her perception”, (2006, p. 21).

While it is obvious that empathy may arise from the contact with art pieces across all media, this dissertation could not be focused on art as a whole. Within literature, one has many genres to choose from, and not all of them narrative; even so, as explored here, the last decades have been quite fruitful when it comes to novel reading as a potential enhancer of empathy and theory of mind, which is why the novel was the chosen object of examination. Our analyses here attest that potential, underlining, however, that it is possible for feelings, perceptions, and attitudes towards a specific reality to be changed as consequence of having read a novel, but whether that change occurs and the level of the change will at all times be depend on the subject, no matter how hard a novelist might try to achieve it.

One (slightly paradoxical) thing becomes clear with this investigation: the more the author’s voice passes through the text, the more the reader will feel disengaged from the fictional world and its characters, the less transformative the empathic experience will be (if empathic at all). In novels like Haig’s, Shafak’s and Itäranta’s, the authors intentions for the books can be easily acknowledged from the texts themselves; Haig’s and Shafak’s, specially, could be described as “preachy in their politics”, like Wallace-Wells puts it (2019). These two last authors have a quite emphasized advocacy vein, and they regularly express their positions and concerns on contemporary debates in their private social media accounts. Their drive to place their art at the service of a ‘greater good’, for the observant reader, transpires in their works, and while said works seem to be effective in achieving what they set up to, they might also be not as efficient as they could precisely for being too ‘preachy’. Perhaps more subtle approaches (like that of Rooney), or at least less evident, might break the immersion in the story world less often; it might also just come down to the recognition that most people do not like being told what to do (as some scholars speculate). This does not mean, however, that their works are not necessary or important; our analyses mean simply to examine and point out possibilities only, not indubitable truths.

Suzanne Keen has defended, as already alluded to, that, since humans “tend to experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who seem like us”, if it turns out that “novels

do extend readers' sense of shared humanity beyond the predictable limitations, then the narrative techniques involved in such an accomplishment should be especially prized" (2007, p. x). This investigation's purpose was not to identify techniques, but to test the suppositions on the matter across fields of thought. We highlight, nonetheless, Keen's position, especially when it comes to techniques that might increase empathic abilities over time and with a lasting effect – not for manipulation purposes, as Bal & Veltkamp have mentioned (2013), but to encourage a politics of openness and kindness.

In "Toward an Affective Ecocriticism", Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino defend that environmental humanities' scholars "must find new, more compelling ways to foreground connections between environmental and social justice", and "must reach across ideological, species, and scalar boundaries to find common ground" (2018, p. 3). The idea behind this logic is that "both climate and social justice activists require altruistic emotions as a foundation for action", so, "[p]erhaps looking for micro-moments of affective intersection and building from them may be one small way forward in a political atmosphere of bubbles, divides, and seemingly entrenched polarization" (p. 3). Reading, they point out, is one of the instances where affect begins at the micro-scale.

Humans undoubtedly have way more affects than those we can name, and while affects are a crucial part of what makes us human – in some science-fiction worlds, affect is what separates humans from machines –, they have been overlooked for a long time. In his preface to the 10-year edition of *Descartes' Error*, António Damásio observes that the affective turn came "a century late", but that "[e]motion is finally being given the due that our illustrious forerunners would have wished it to receive" (2005, p. 12). The neuroscientist points out that in instances where emotion is left out of "the reasoning picture", "reason turns out to be even more flawed than when emotion plays bad tricks on our decisions" (2005, p. 14). His goal was, rather than placing emotion and reason against one another, to "see emotion as at least assisting reason and at best holding a dialogue with it", especially as emotion also delivers "cognitive information" (2005, p. 14). Feelings, then,

along with the emotions they come from, are not a luxury. They serve as internal guides, and they help us communicate to others signals that can also guide them. And feelings are neither intangible nor elusive. Contrary to traditional scientific opinion, feelings are just as

cognitive as other percepts. They are the result of a most curious physiological arrangement that has turned the brain into the body's captive audience. (2005, p. 20)

Oliver Sacks, another of the most prominent neurologists of our time, has notably said to a techno-pioneer that his daughter could not possibly “have a solid understanding of human nature or of society” if she had never read “any of Jane Austen’s novels” (Sacks, 2019). It is quite interesting to see scientists of this level taking emotion and fiction in such high regard, as many more ‘rational’ people would understand affects and fictional people as second-category. It is also quite interesting, to see the impact both affects and fictional people can have in people’s lives, and how big of an influence they can have when combined. As Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley put it,

[e]ngaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference. [...] It may be difficult for a reader to know whether any particular book will impart useful knowledge or provide a compelling simulative experience before reading it. However, reading a diversity of literary fiction over an extended period of time is likely to do more good than harm with respect to one's social understanding, in the sense that it is likely to increase pluralism, which is important in a democratic society. (2008, pp. 183-185)

If contemporary fiction can enhance empathy and theory of mind, then this is an area to focus on. And if readers evaluate their experiences with novels based on character identification, transportation, and emotional responses, and if all of those are thought to activate empathy, and if *feeling with* fictional people might be conducing to a better understanding of real people – and even of future people and of nonhuman entities –, and to a world more attentive, more open to differences, more thoughtful, more kind, then there is something worthy of investigation here. If novels can make people understand different realities, different ways of moving through life, and perhaps even make them care enough to act differently (maybe become social justice and climate activists, as Bladow and Ladino propose), then why should not these connections be studied by different academic fields, and why should those studies not reach across disciplines? Examinations like these might not create a better world on their own, but they might have a positive impact nonetheless – even if that impact is as big as a fig tree.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Empathy Quotient

(Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright 2004)

1. I can easily tell if someone else wants to enter a conversation.
2. I prefer animals to humans.
3. I try to keep up with the current trends and fashions,
4. I find it difficult to explain to others things that I understand easily, when they don't understand it first time.
5. I dream most nights.
6. I really enjoy caring for other people.
7. I try to solve my own problems rather than discussing them with others.
8. I find it hard to know what to do in a social situation.
9. I am at my best first thing in the morning.
10. People often tell me that I went too far in driving my point home in a discussion.
11. It doesn't bother me too much if I am late meeting a friend.
12. Friendships and relationships are just too difficult, so I tend not to bother with them.
13. I would never break a law, no matter how minor.
14. I often find it difficult to judge if something is rude or polite.
15. In a conversation, I tend to focus on my own thoughts rather than on what my listener might be thinking.
16. I prefer practical jokes to verbal humor.
17. I live life for today rather than the future.
18. When I was a child, I enjoyed cutting up worms to see what would happen.
19. I can pick up quickly if someone says one thing but means another.
20. I tend to have very strong opinions about morality.
21. It is hard for me to see why some things upset people so much.
22. I find it easy to put myself in somebody else's shoes.
23. I think that good manners are the most important thing a parent can teach their child.
24. I like to do things on the spur of the moment.

25. I am good at predicting how someone will feel.
26. I am quick to spot when someone in a group is feeling awkward or uncomfortable.
27. If I say something that someone else is offended by, I think that that's their problem, not mine.
28. If anyone asked me if I liked their haircut, I would reply truthfully, even if I didn't like it.
29. I can't always see why someone should have felt offended by a remark.
30. People often tell me that I am very unpredictable.
31. I enjoy being the center of attention at any social gathering.
32. Seeing people cry doesn't really upset me.
33. I enjoy having discussions about politics.
34. I am very blunt, which some people take to be rudeness, even though this is unintentional.
35. I don't tend to find social situations confusing.
36. Other people tell me I am good at understanding how they are feeling and what they are thinking.
37. When I talk to people, I tend to talk about their experiences rather than my own.
38. It upsets me to see an animal in pain.
39. I am able to make decisions without being influenced by people's feelings.
40. I can't relax until I have done everything I had planned to do that day.
41. I can easily tell if someone else is interested or bored with what I am saying.
42. I get upset if I see people suffering on news programmes.
43. Friends usually talk to me about their problems as they say that I am very understanding.
44. I can sense if I am intruding, even if the other person doesn't tell me.
45. I often start new hobbies but quickly become bored with them and move on to something else.
46. People sometimes tell me that I have gone too far with teasing.
47. I would be too nervous to go on a big rollercoaster.
48. Other people, often say that I am insensitive, though I don't always see why.
49. If I see a stranger in a group, I think that it is up to them to make an effort to join in.
50. I usually stay emotionally detached when watching a film.
51. I like to be very organized in day-to-day life and often make lists of the chores I have to do.
52. I can tune into how someone else feels rapidly and intuitively.

- 53. I don't like to take risks.
- 54. I can easily work out what another person might want to talk about.
- 55. I can tell if someone is masking their true emotion.
- 56. Before making a decision I always weigh up the pros and cons.
- 57. I don't consciously work out the rules of social situations.
- 58. I am good at predicting what someone will do.
- 59. I tend to get emotionally involved with a friend's problems.
- 60. I can usually appreciate the other person's viewpoint, even if I don't agree with it.

Appendix 2

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index

(Davis 1980)

The Fantasy Scale

- 26. When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me.
- 5. I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.
- 7. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play, and I don't often get completely caught up in it. (-)
- 16. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters.
- 1. I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me.
- 12. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me. (-)
- 23. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character.

Perspective-Taking Scale

- 28. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
- 15. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments. (-)
- 11. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.
- 21. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.
- 3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view. (-)
- 8. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
- 25. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.

Empathic Concern Scale

- 9. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them.
- 18. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them. (-)
- 2. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.

- 22. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.
- 4. Sometimes I don't feel sorry for other people when they are having problems. (-)
- 14. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal. (-)
- 20. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.

Personal Distress Scale

- 27. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces.
- 10. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation.
- 6. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease.
- 19. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies. (-)
- 17. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me.
- 13. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm. (-)
- 24. I tend to lose control during emergencies.

(-) = reverse-scored

Appendix 3

The Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy

(Reniers et al. 2011)

- 25. I can easily work out what another person might want to talk about.
- 26. I can tell if someone is masking their true emotion.
- 24. I can sense if I am intruding, even if the other person does not tell me.
- 19. I am good at predicting how someone will feel.
- 27. I am good at predicting what someone will do.
- 20. I am quick to spot when someone in a group is feeling awkward or uncomfortable.
- 16. I can pick up quickly if someone says one thing but means another.
- 22. I can easily tell if someone else is interested or bored with what I am saying.
- 15. I can easily tell if someone else wants to enter a conversation.
- 21. Other people tell me I am good at understanding how they are feeling and what they are thinking.
- 13. I am happy when I am with a cheerful group and sad when the others are glum.
- 14. It worries me when others are worrying and panicky.
- 9. People I am with have a strong influence on my mood.
- 8. I am inclined to get nervous when others around me seem to be nervous.
- 3. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
- 6. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I was in their place.
- 5. When I am upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.
- 30. I always try to consider the other fellow's feelings before I do something.
- 4. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.
- 28. I can usually appreciate the other person's viewpoint, even if I do not agree with it.
- 1. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view.
- 31. Before I do something I try to consider how my friends will react to it.
- 18. I find it easy to put myself in somebody else's shoes.
- 29. I usually stay emotionally detached when watching a film.

2. I am usually objective when I watch a film or play, and I don't often get completely caught up in it.
11. I often get deeply involved with the feelings of a character in a film, play, or novel.
17. It is hard for me to see why some things upset people so much.
7. I often get emotionally involved with my friends' problems.
23. Friends talk to me about their problems as they say that I am very understanding.
10. It affects me very much when one of my friends seems upset.
12. I get very upset when I see someone cry.

Appendix 4

The 'Reading the Mind in the Eyes' Test Revised

(Baron-Cohen et al. 1997, 2001)

List of target mental states terms for each item (in italic) and their distractors

1 <i>playful</i>	comforting	irritated	bored
2 terrified	<i>upset</i>	arrogant	annoyed
3 joking	flustered	<i>desire</i>	convinced
4 joking	<i>insisting</i>	amused	relaxed
5 irritated	sarcastic	<i>worried</i>	friendly
6 aghast	<i>fantasizing</i>	impatient	alarmed
7 apologetic	friendly	<i>uneasy</i>	dispirited
8 <i>despondent</i>	relieved	shy	excited
9 annoyed	hostile	horrified	<i>preoccupied</i>
10 <i>cautious</i>	insisting	bored	aghast
11 terrified	amused	<i>regretful</i>	flirtatious
12 indifferent	embarrassed	<i>sceptical</i>	dispirited
13 decisive	<i>anticipating</i>	threatening	shy
14 irritated	disappointed	depressed	<i>accusing</i>
15 <i>contemplative</i>	flustered	encouraging	amused
16 irritated	<i>thoughtful</i>	encouraging	sympathetic
17 <i>doubtful</i>	affectionate	playful	aghast
18 <i>decisive</i>	amused	aghast	bored
19 arrogant	grateful	sarcastic	<i>tentative</i>
20 dominant	<i>friendly</i>	guilty	horrified
21 embarrassed	<i>fantasizing</i>	confused	panicked
22 <i>preoccupied</i>	grateful	insisting	imploring
23 contented	apologetic	<i>defiant</i>	curious
24 <i>pensive</i>	irritated	excited	hostile
25 panicked	incredulous	despondent	<i>interested</i>
26 alarmed	shy	<i>hostile</i>	anxious
27 joking	<i>cautious</i>	arrogant	reassuring
28 <i>interested</i>	joking	affectionate	contented
29 impatient	aghast	irritated	<i>reflective</i>
30 grateful	<i>flirtatious</i>	hostile	disappointed
31 ashamed	<i>confident</i>	joking	dispirited
32 <i>serious</i>	ashamed	bewildered	alarmed
33 embarrassed	guilty	fantasizing	<i>concerned</i>
34 aghast	baffled	<i>distrustful</i>	terrified
35 puzzled	<i>nervous</i>	insisting	contemplative
36 ashamed	nervous	<i>suspicious</i>	indecisive

Appendix 5

The Interpersonal Perception Task

(Costanzo & Archer 1989)

Questions accompanying IPT scenes

- 1) Who is the child of the two adults?
- 2) What is the relationship between the man and the woman?
- 3) Who is the higher status person?
- 4) Who is the woman talking to on the telephone?
- 5) Which person is telling a lie?
- 6) Who won the fencing bout?
- 7) Who is the higher status person?
- 8) Who is the woman talking to on the telephone?
- 9) Which is the lie and which is the truth?
- 10) Which woman is the mother of the boy?
- 11) Who won the racquetball game?
- 12) Which woman is talking to someone of higher status?
- 13) What is the relationship between the man and the woman?
- 14) What is the relationship between the man and the woman?
- 15) Which is the lie and which is the truth?
- 16) Who won the racquetball game?
- 17) Who is the higher status person?
- 18) Which man is the father of the little girl?
- 19) Which is the lie and which is the truth?
- 20) Which woman is engaged to be married to the man?
- 21) Who won the 100-yard dash?
- 22) In which scene is the woman talking to someone of higher status?
- 23) Who won the game of chess?
- 24) Which is the lie and which is the truth?
- 25) Who are the women talking to?
- 26) Who won the game of one-on-one basketball?

- 27) Who is the higher status person?
- 28) Who is the woman talking to on the telephone?
- 29) Which man is the father of the two little boys?
- 30) Which is the lie and which is the truth?

Appendix 6

A Collection of Hypothesis about Narrative Empathy

(Keen 2007)

Empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization;

Character identification often invites empathy, even when the character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways;

Spontaneous empathy for a fictional character's feelings opens the way for character identification;

Empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states, whether or not a match in details of experience exists;

Empathy with characters doesn't always occur as a result of reading an emotionally evocative fiction;

The capacity of novels to invoke readers' empathy may change over time (and some novels may only activate the empathy of their first, immediate audience);

Empathy for a fictional character need not correspond with what the author appears to set up or invite;

Situational empathy, which responds primarily to aspects of plot and circumstance, involves less self-extension in imaginative role taking and more recognition of prior (or current) experience;

Readers' empathy for situations depicted in fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances;

Generic differences are likely to play a role in inviting (or retarding) readers' empathic responses;

Unusual or striking representations in the literary text promote foregrounding and open the way to empathetic reading;

Empathizers are better readers, because their role-taking abilities allow them to comprehend causal relations in stories;

Readers' perception of a text's fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion;

Readers' empathy could produce verifiable results in the beliefs and actions of populations of actual readers;

Novel reading may participate in the socialization and moral internalization required for the transmutation of empathic guilt into prosocial action;

Though a key ingredient of successful fictional world-making, authors' empathy does not always transmit to readers without interference;

Novelists as a group may be more empathetic than the general population;

Fiction writing may cultivate novelists' role-taking skills and make them more habitually empathetic;

Authors' empathy can be devoted to socially undesirable ends;

Empathic distress at feeling with a character whose actions are at odds with a reader's moral code may be a result of successfully exercised authorial empathy;

Empathic inaccuracy may contribute to a reader's strong sense that the author's perspective is simply wrong;

Both authors' empathy and readers' empathy have rhetorical uses, which become more readily to notice when they conflict in instances of empathic inaccuracy;

Concord in authors' empathy and readers' empathy could be a motivating force to move beyond literary response to prosocial action;

Bounded strategic empathy operates with an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others;

Ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end;

Broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes (universalizing);

Empathy for group members emerging from categorical identity with a group does not, on its own, lead to an ethics of compassion.

Appendix 7

The Literary Response Questionnaire

(Miall & Kuiken 1995)

Insight

Reading literature makes me sensitive to aspects of my life that I usually ignore.
In literature I sometimes recognize feelings that I have overlooked during my daily life.
I often find my shortcomings explored through characters in literary texts.
I find that literature helps me to understand the lives of people that differ from myself.
Reading literature often gives me insights into the nature of people and events in my world.
I often see similarities between events in literature and events in my own life.
I often find my own motives being explored through characters in literary texts.
I find that certain literary works help me to understand my more negative feelings.
Literature enables you to understand people that you'd probably disregard in normal life.
I sometimes find that reading a literary text makes me feel like changing the way I live.
In my reading, I learn to recognize more readily certain types of people or events, i.e., I can see these types more clearly after reading about a particular example in a literary text.
When I begin to understand a literary text, it's because I've been able to relate it to my own concerns about life.
Literature often gives special emphasis to those things that make a moral point.
Sometimes while reading literature my feelings draw me toward a distinctly unsettling view of life.

Empathy

Sometimes I feel like I've almost "become" a character I've read about in fiction.
I sometimes have imaginary dialogues with people in fiction.
When I read fiction I often think about myself as one of the people in the story.
I sometimes wonder whether I have really experienced something or whether I have read about it in a book.
I actively try to project myself into the role of fictional characters, almost as if I were preparing to act in a play.

Sometimes characters in novels almost become like real people in my life.

After reading a novel or story that I enjoyed, I continue to wonder about the characters almost as though they were real people.

Imagery Vividness

I often see the places in stories I read as clearly as if I were looking at a picture.

I can readily visualize the persons and places described in a novel or short story.

I sometimes think I could draw a map of the places I have read about in a work of fiction.

Sometimes a scene from a story or poem is so clear that I know its smell, its touch, its "feel".

I often hear dialogue in a novel as though I were listening to an actual conversation.

When I read a literary text, a scene that is only partly described often becomes a whole, vividly present place in my mind.

When reading a story, sometimes I can almost feel what it would be like to be there.

I usually hear the tone of speech in a dialogue from a story or novel.

Often when I read literary texts, descriptions of smells suggest colors, descriptions of colors suggest feelings, and so on.

Leisure Escape

Sometimes I like to curl up with a good book just to enjoy myself.

When I have spare time my favorite activity is reading a novel.

Very often I cannot put down a story until I have finished reading it.

Reading literature is a pleasurable way to spend time when I have nothing else to do.

Reading a story is a wonderful way to relax.

While reading I completely forget what time it is.

I find that reading literature is a great help in taking my mind off my own problems.

I like to become so absorbed in the world of the literary text that I forget my everyday concerns.

Once I've discovered one work by an author I like, I usually try to read all the other works by that author.

I am often so involved in what I am reading that I am no longer aware of myself.

I often wish I had more time for reading literature.

Concern With Author

One of my primary interests in reading literature is to learn about the themes and concerns of a given author.

In reading I like to focus on what is distinctive about the author's style.

One of my primary interests in reading is to learn about the different genres of literature.

I like to see how a particular author's work relates to other literature of the author's period.

When reading I usually try to identify an author's distinctive themes.

One of my primary interests in reading literature is to appreciate the author's understanding of society and culture.

I think literature is especially interesting when it illuminates facts about the author's life.

When I find a work of literature I like, I usually try to find out something about the author.

The challenge of literature is to comprehend the author's unique view of life.

I am often intrigued by an author's literary technique.

Story-Driven Reading

I like to see tension building up in the plot of a story.

The type of literature I like best tells an interesting story.

I think the most important part of fiction or drama is plot.

When reading a novel, what I most want to know is how the story turns out.

I like it best when a story has an unexpected ending.

I prefer to read fiction in which there is plenty of action.

When reading a novel my main interest is seeing what happens to the characters.

I find it difficult to read a novel in which nothing much seems to happen.

Rejection of Literary Values

I think people should spend less time talking or writing about literature.

Even if literature were well taught, I think high schools should not devote so much time to it.

For me a work of literature is destroyed by trying to analyze it.

One of the things I dislike most about being a student of literature is the teacher who tells you what a literary text means.

Reading literary texts from past centuries should be left to literary scholars and historians.

I don't believe that literature is socially relevant.

I disliked English in high school because most of the texts I was asked to read I would not have chosen myself.

Works of literature often seem to make the issues of life more complicated than they actually are.

If I want to spend time reading, I don't choose "literary" texts.

Appendix 8

Transportation Scale

(Green and Brock 2000)

1. While I was reading the narrative, I could easily picture the events in it taking place.
2. While I was reading the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind. (-)
3. I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative.
4. I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it.
5. After finishing the narrative, I found it easy to put it out of my mind. (-)
6. I wanted to learn how the narrative ended.
7. The narrative affected me emotionally.
8. I found myself thinking of ways the narrative could have turned out differently.
9. I found my mind wandering while reading the narrative. (-)
10. The events in the narrative are relevant to my everyday life.
11. The events in the narrative have changed my life.

(-) = reverse-scored

Appendix 9

Narrative Engagement Scale

(Busselle & Bilandzic 2009)

Empathy

EP1: At key moments in the film, I felt I knew exactly what the characters were going through emotionally.

EP2: At important moments in the film, I could feel the emotions the characters felt.

EP3: During the program, when a main character succeeded, I felt happy, and when they suffered in some way, I felt sad.

EP4: I never really shared the emotions of the characters. (-)

EP5: The story affected me emotionally.

Sympathy

S1: I felt sorry for some of the characters in the program.

S2: I was embarrassed for some of the characters in the program.

S3: I was worried for some of the characters in the program.

Cognitive perspective taking

CP1: I was able to understand the events in the program in a way similar to the way the characters understood them.

CP2: I understood the reasons why the characters did what they did.

CP3: I could understand why the characters felt the way they felt.

CP4: My understanding of the characters is unclear. (-)

CP5: It was difficult to understand why the characters reacted to situations as they did. (-)

CP6: I could easily imagine myself in the situation of some of the characters.

Loss of time

LT1: During the program, I lost track of time.

LT2: The program seemed to drag. (-)

LT3: When the program ended, I was surprised that it was over so quickly.

Loss of self-awareness

LS1: At times during the program, I completely forgot that I was in the middle of an experiment.

LS2: I forgot my own problems and concerns during the program.

LS3: While watching, I found myself thinking about what I had done before the experiment or what I would do after it. (-)

Narrative presence

NP1: At times during the program, the story world was closer to me than the real world.

NP2: My attention was focused more on my surroundings than on the program. (-)

NP3: The program created a new world, and then that world suddenly disappeared when the program ended.

NP4: During the program, my body was in the room, but my mind was inside the world created by the story.

Narrative involvement

NI1: I was mentally involved in the story while viewing.

NI2: I was never really pulled into the story. (-)

NI3: While viewing I was completely immersed in the story

NI4: Overall, the viewing experience was intense for me.

NI5: I wanted to learn how the story ended.

NI6: While viewing I wanted to know how the events would unfold.

Distraction

D1: I found my mind wandering while the program was on. (-)

D2: While the program was on I found myself thinking about other things. (-)

D3: I had a hard time keeping my mind on the program. (-)

Ease of cognitive access

EC1: I could easily follow the action and events.

EC2: I had a hard time recognizing the thread of the story. (-)

EC3: I had to work to stay focused on the story. (-)

Narrative realism

NR1: The story was logical and convincing.

NR2: I understood why the events unfolded the way they did.

NR3: At some points in the story, it was not quite clear why something happened. (-)

NR4: At points, I had a hard time making sense of what was going on in the program. (-)

Transportation

While I was watching the movie, I could easily picture the events in it taking place.

I could picture myself in the scene of the events shown in the movie.

After finishing the movie, I found it easy to put it out of my mind. (-)

I found myself thinking of ways the story could have turned out differently.

The events in the story are relevant to my everyday life.

The events in the story have changed my life.

While I was watching the movie, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind.

(-)

Appendix 10

Propositions on the relation between linguistic cues and identification dimensions

(Krieken & Hoeken & Sanders 2017)

P1: Linguistic cues of a narrative character's spatiotemporal viewpoint enhance the reader's spatiotemporal identification with that character.

P2: Linguistic cues of a narrative character's perceptual viewpoint enhance the reader's perceptual identification with that character.

P3: Linguistic cues of a narrative character's psychological viewpoint enhance the reader's cognitive identification with that character.

P4: Linguistic cues of a narrative character's moral viewpoint enhance the reader's moral identification with that character.

P5: Linguistic cues of a narrative character's emotional viewpoint enhance the reader's emotional identification with that character.

P6: Linguistic cues of a narrative character's action and motions enhance the reader's embodied identification with that character.