

Dissertation Progress Report

by Annie Thomas

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Dissertation progress report

The initial idea for the dissertation was *The Body and the Book: writing, unwriting and re-writing empathy*. I should have recognised earlier in the process that the topic would strain the confines of the form. At the time, it seemed as if I was trying to define my topic slightly too early: I was at a stage where several areas of interest were converging around empathy, but had not read enough to narrow them down or make more tangible connections between them. Therefore, when constructing my first proposal I made the mistake of attaching importance to all my satellite subjects, rather than considering them as markers pointing to my theme. Thus, I struggled to form a proposal that cohesively explained how they all connected.

Consequently, the initial proposal was vast and unfocused, only my insistence that its ideas were significantly connected held it together – linking art, seeing, feeling, books, anatomisation, empathy, and empathy as a skill that was corruptible, and then illustrating it all with texts and characters reaching back from the 1500s (Faustus), through the 1800s (Dostoyevsky and Poe), to the 1900s (King and Hoban). In retrospect, it was the process of trying to construct a convincing proposal that exposed the impossibility of tying so many disparate ideas together in a ten-thousand-word format. Therefore, writing the proposal dramatically cut the time that would have been lost undertaking unrelated research, and in stubbornly bending all these elements into a shape that they would never fit.

In a preliminary meeting with my dissertation supervisor, a very clear frame was drawn that pinned only the most relevant ideas in place. Consequently, the topic of the dissertation has been narrowed to empathy, with a specific interest in its use as a tool that can be used either altruistically or in a corrupt fashion; empathy as skill that

can be switched on or off; and what manipulates or skews empathy in another. The current working title is: *Sharing the Psyche of Pitiless Protagonists: How Novelistic Literature Disrupts the Reader with the Spectre of Problematic Empathy*.

Currently, the work has two aims. The first is to investigate the more complicated and corruptible aspects of empathy, by viewing it as a neutral skill rather than only an altruistic one. I need to establish a general consensus on empathy since no definitive definition is available, I can then declare the position taken by this work. The intention is to argue that more than the empathising individual and the object of empathy are at play when experiencing empathy, and that vigilance should be paid to any shift in empathy, particularly when pressure is exerted by power structures that manipulate empathy with scarcity or fear. To achieve this, I will:

- Use work from the social sciences concerning the sociology and psychology of empathy
- Identify various forms of empathy, e.g. normal, faulty, positive, negative - using work on personality types with a 'faulty' empathy to inform understanding of what a 'normal' empathy might be.
- Examine empathy as a skill that can be switched on or off, and identify what manipulates or skews empathy in another.

The second aim is to examine the influence of empathy on novelistic literature and vice versa, so that particular works of literature can be used as a means to further explore problematic empathy. The position that will be taken is that literature requires empathy from the reader to allow immediate access to a concept through emotional identification with protagonists. Understanding the negative aspects of empathy should not negate the positive, rather, it should allow us to note when our empathy

has shifted, and prompt an examination of ourselves and the world that surrounds us. This will be accomplished by:

- Using work found on literary theories concerning empathy and the novel. Research so far suggests Cognitive Literary Theory has a role here, but other psychological and sociological theories will be explored
- Noting the role of the enlightenment in creating an emotional, rather than a scholarly, reader, briefly illustrated by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Then, the empathetic opposite, yet parallel, expression can be examined in Poe.
- Employing a close reading of Poe's, *The Black Cat* to explore the effect on a reader when their empathy is attached to a character that loses theirs. The idea is this shows that such a loss is possible, that empathy is not reliably fixed, and to show how the removal of empathy feels and what its removal allows.
- Extending this with a close reading of King's *The Shining*, which offers a malignant structure (the Overlook Hotel) through which to explore how social structures affect empathy. This will include how the reader sees (and feels) the structure influencing Jack Torrance's empathy; victim empathy versus empathy with presiding power; how empathy for victims inadvertently reinforces positions of power and powerlessness, and the potential for atrocity when this empathy is then removed or realigned.

BLOCK 1	• Meet with dissertation supervisor: decide frequency of future meetings; discuss and refine proposal; confirm that texts confined to <i>The Black Cat</i> and <i>The Shining</i>
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	• Prepare and submit dissertation proposal and annotated bibliography • Reread and further familiarise myself with the chosen texts during evenings, and begin reading research intensively • Collate research into a system that holds, reflects on and highlights pertinent aspects of reading – Word document • Submit report on research progress for assessment
BLOCK 2	• Supervisory Meeting - discuss progress - get feedback • Write first draft of introduction (750-1000 words) • Explore existing methodologies around empathy and literature, most probably in the social sciences • Continue reading core texts
BLOCK 3	• Supervisory meeting – discuss progress - feedback on introduction • Redraft introduction • Continue intensive reading • Write draft of chapter one on empathy (2000 words) send to supervisor • Supervisory meeting – feedback on chapter one • Begin second chapter on empathy in literature and introduce main texts (3000 words) • Review progress with report
BLOCK 4	• Redraft first chapter and finish second to submit to supervisor

	• Supervisory meeting - discuss progress – feedback on chapter two • Review progress. Prepare and give presentation (for assessment)
BLOCK 5	• Write draft of third chapter – problematic empathy explored and extended through close reading of two texts (3000 words) • Supervisory meeting- discuss progress – feedback on chapter three • Write draft conclusion (up to 1000 words). Have proofread • Supervisory meeting- discuss progress – feedback on conclusion • Seek feedback on my writing from friends • Rewrite as needed
BLOCK 6	• Supervisory meeting - get feedback on penultimate draft • Final review and rewrite, attach bibliography • Send dissertation for printing and binding • Submit dissertation by 8 May 2020

Dissertation Progress Report

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

72/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

This report provides evidence of your having revisited your original research proposal in the light of discussion with your supervisor and feedback from within the tutorial group. The self-reflective awareness with which this is done is commendable. Aims and objectives have been revised as the research proposed has become much more sharply focused, although there is quite rightly an acknowledgement that these may change as the research progresses.

The report clearly articulates the objectives that are intended to achieve the research project's aims. You might perhaps have identified a small number of key critical or theoretical texts with which your research will need to engage.

The tabulated plan with targets for completing stages of research and parts of the dissertation is useful. A further stage that has been omitted from the plan is the oral presentation. This will likely take place in January. It will be an opportunity for another review of progress.

There are some problems with the presentation of the report. These consist partly of grammatical errors.

PAGE 1

PAGE 2

PAGE 3

PAGE 4

PAGE 5

ENGAGEMENT WI

Very Good
(2.1/Merit) 60-

(including reading, referencing, academic conventions and academic honesty)

FAIL 0-29%	Little or no evidence of reading and/or reliance on inappropriate sources. Views and findings mostly unsupported and non-authoritative. Referencing conventions used incoherently or largely absent.
MARGINAL FAIL 30-39%	Poor engagement with essential reading. No evidence of wider reading. Reliance on inappropriate sources, and/or indiscriminate use of sources. Heavily reliant on information gained through class contact. Inconsistent and weak use of referencing.
SATISFACTORY (3RD/PASS) 4	Engagement with a limited range of mostly relevant and credible sources. Some omissions and minor errors. Referencing conventions evident though not always applied accurately or consistently.
GOOD (2.2/PASS) 50-59%	Engagement with an appropriate range of research-informed literature, including sources retrieved independently. Some over-reliance on texts. Referencing may show minor inaccuracies or inconsistencies.
VERY GOOD (2.1/MERIT) 60-	Engagement with a wide range of research-informed literature, including sources retrieved independently. Selection of relevant and credible sources. Very good use of referencing, with no/very few inaccuracies or inconsistencies.
EXCELLENT (1ST/DISTINCTIO	Engagement with an extensive range of relevant and credible literature, informed by the latest research. Consistently accurate application of referencing.
EXCEPTIONAL (1ST/DISTINCT	Exceptional engagement with an extensive range of relevant and credible literature, informed by the latest research. High-level referencing skills consistently and professionally applied.

KNOWLEDGE AND

Excellent
(1st/Distinctio

(Knowledge of the basic underlying concepts and principles of a subject.)

FAIL 0-29%	Major gaps in knowledge and systematic understanding of the subject matter. Substantial inaccuracies. No awareness of knowledge of the latest research and/or advanced scholarship within the discipline.
MARGINAL FAIL 30-39%	Gaps in knowledge, with only superficial systematic understanding. Some significant inaccuracies and/or irrelevant material. No awareness of knowledge of the latest research and/or advanced scholarship within the discipline.
SATISFACTORY (3RD/PASS) 4	Limited knowledge and systematic understanding of the relevant concepts and principles within the subject area which to some limited extent, is informed by current research and scholarship.
GOOD (2.2/PASS) 50-59%	Knowledge is reasonably detailed, accurate with a good systematic understanding of the field of study and to some extent, current research and scholarship.

VERY GOOD (2.1/MERIT) 60-	Knowledge is reasonably extensive coherent and detailed. Exhibits very good understanding of the breadth and depth of established views, and the work is, at least in part, well-informed by current research and scholarship.
EXCELLENT (1ST/DISTINCTIO	Excellent coherent and detailed knowledge and systematic understanding of the principles and theories of current research and scholarship. Clear awareness of challenges to established views and the limitations of the knowledge base.
EXCEPTIONAL (1ST/DISTINCT	Exceptionally coherent and detailed knowledge and systematic understanding of the principles and theories of the subject, well-informed by current research and scholarship. A critical, sophisticated and nuanced awareness of the ambiguities and limitations of knowledge.

COGNITIVE AND

Excellent
(1st/Distinctio

(Evaluate underlying concepts and principles of a subject and interpret qualitative and quantitative data in order to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements.)

FAIL 0-29%	Wholly or almost wholly descriptive work. Little or no analysis, synthesis or evaluation. Failure to develop arguments, leading to illogical or invalid judgements. Unsubstantiated generalisations, made without use of any credible evidence.
MARGINAL FAIL 30-39%	Largely descriptive work, with superficial use of critical evaluation. Weak development of arguments and judgements. Information accepted uncritically, uses generalised statements made with scant evidence and unsubstantiated opinions. Ideas sometimes illogical and contradictory.
SATISFACTORY (3RD/PASS) 4	Limited attempt at critical thinking, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, tending towards description. Some evidence to support emerging arguments and judgements but these may be underdeveloped or with a little inconsistency / mis-interpretation. Asserts rather than argues a case.
GOOD (2.2/PASS) 50-59%	Some critical thinking, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Can analyse new and/or abstract concepts and data without guidance. An emerging awareness of different stances and ability to use evidence (that may be incomplete) to support the argument. Mostly valid arguments and logical judgements. Some tendency to assert/state opinion rather than argue on the basis of reason and evidence.
VERY GOOD (2.1/MERIT) 60-	Sound critical thinking, analysis, synthesis and evaluation demonstrating critical thinking. Ability to devise and sustain persuasive arguments, and to review the reliability, validity and significance of evidence (that may be incomplete) to make mostly appropriate and valid judgements.
EXCELLENT (1ST/DISTINCTIO	Excellent critical thinking, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Ability to investigate contradictory or incomplete information and make strong, persuasive, arguments and sophisticated judgements. Some evidence of independent thought and ability to 'see beyond the question', suggesting a grasp of the broader field and wider concepts.
EXCEPTIONAL (1ST/DISTINCT	Exceptional critical thinking, analysis, synthesis and evaluation based on judiciously selected evidence. Ability to investigate contradictory or incomplete information and make strong, persuasive, arguments and sophisticated, nuanced, judgements. Evidence

of independent thought and ability to 'see beyond the question', suggesting an outstanding grasp of the broader field and wider concepts.

PRACTICAL SKI

Excellent
(1st/Distinctio

(Different approaches to solving problems in particular contexts.)

FAIL 0-29%	Limited or no use of methods, materials, tools and/or techniques. Little or no appreciation of the context of the application. Limited understanding of the application of theory to practice or making appropriate links between the two. Very weak problem-solving skills in complex and unpredictable contexts.
MARGINAL FAIL 30-39%	Rudimentary application of methods, materials, tools and/or techniques but without consideration and competence. Flawed appreciation of the context of the application. Weak understanding of the application of theory to practice, with only occasional evidence of making appropriate links between the two. Weak problem-solving skills in complex and unpredictable contexts.
SATISFACTORY (3RD/PASS) 4	An adequate awareness and mostly appropriate application of well-established methods, materials, tools and/or techniques. Basic appreciation of the context of the application. Theoretical knowledge and understanding applied in practice, but not always making logical links between the two. Can identify problems and propose basic solutions in complex and unpredictable contexts without fully appreciating the complexity.
GOOD (2.2/PASS) 50-59%	A good and appropriate application of standard methods, materials, tools and/or techniques. Clear appreciation of the context of the application. Mainly consistent, accurate and logical application of theory to practice, making appropriate links between the two Can identify problems and propose mostly appropriate solutions in complex and unpredictable contexts.
VERY GOOD (2.1/MERIT) 60-	A very good application of a range of methods, materials, tools and/or techniques. Very good consideration of the context of the application, with perceptive insights. Can identify problems and propose appropriate solutions in complex and unpredictable contexts. Evidence of some innovation and creativity.
EXCELLENT (1ST/DISTINCTIO	An advanced application of a range of methods, materials, tools and/or techniques. The context of the application is well considered, and insightful. Application and deployment extend beyond established conventions. Can identify complex problems and propose excellent solutions. Innovation and creativity evident.
EXCEPTIONAL (1ST/DISTINCT	Exceptional levels of application and deployment skills in unpredictable, practical contexts, drawing skilfully on the latest research within the discipline. Can identify complex problems and propose sophisticated solutions. Assimilation and development of cutting edge processes and techniques.

TRANSFERABLE

Excellent
(1st/Distinctio

(Communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments; the qualities needed for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility within a structured and managed environment.)

FAIL 0-29%	Communication medium is inappropriate or misapplied. Work is poorly structured, disorganised and/or confusingly expressed. Very weak use of language and/or very inappropriate style. Little or no evidence of autonomy (or collaboration, where relevant) in the completion of tasks. Little or no evidence of the skills required in graduate employment.
MARGINAL FAIL 30-39%	Communication medium is poorly designed and/or not suitable for the audience. Work is poorly presented in a disjointed manner. It is loosely, and at times incoherently, structured, with information and ideas often poorly expressed. Weak use of language and/or inappropriate style. Weak independent initiative (or collaboration, if relevant). Limited evidence of the skills required in graduate employment.
SATISFACTORY (3RD/PASS) 4	Can communicate in a suitable medium but with some room for improvement. Mostly ordered presentation and structure in which relevant ideas / concepts are reasonably expressed. Work may lack coherence in places. Can work as part of a team, but with limited involvement in group activities. Demonstrates the basic skills required in graduate employment, with some areas of minor weakness.
GOOD (2.2/PASS) 50-59%	Can communicate effectively in a suitable format, but may have minor errors. Mostly coherent, organised work, in a suitable structure and is for the most part clearly expressed. Can work effectively independently and/or as part of a team, with clear contribution to group activities. Demonstrates the skills required in graduate employment, with some areas of strength and some of minor weakness.
VERY GOOD (2.1/MERIT) 60-	Can communicate well, confidently and consistently in a suitable format. Work is coherent, fluent, well-structured and organised. Can work very well autonomously and/or as part of a team, with very good contribution to group activities. Demonstrates very good graduate employment skills, with just occasional minor weakness.
EXCELLENT (1ST/DISTINCTIO	Can communicate professionally confidently and consistently in a suitable format. Work is coherent, very fluent and is presented professionally. Can work autonomously with initiative. Where relevant can work professionally within a team, showing leadership skills as appropriate, managing conflict and meeting obligations. Demonstrates excellent graduate employment skills and an appetite for further development.
EXCEPTIONAL (1ST/DISTINCT	Can communicate with an exceptionally high level of professionalism. Work is exceptionally coherent, very fluent and is presented professionally. Can work exceptionally well and professionally within a team, showing advanced leadership skills. Demonstrates exceptional graduate employment skills and an appetite for further development.