SEM11. Empathy in aesthetic experience: Themes, genres, forms

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 20

Convenors
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Abstract
Empathy is one of the most defining experiences of the human condition. It is no coincidence that both literary and non-fiction works on posthuman and human-machine interactions often highlight the question of whether these new 'beings' can experience emotional engagement, not only with other machines but also with humans themselves (Braidotti, 2013; Winterson, 2021). Moreover, the theme of empathy and its limits has long been central to works of fiction which deal with experimentation with human life and nature. From Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to its more recent reinterpretations, such as Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019), the failure of empathy has been a key theme in examining the complex relationship with new forms of otherness.

Empathy is a feeling that is also involved in the aesthetic experience, especially if we consider it as a form of encounter and dialogue with the other. From Nussbaum (1990) to the more recent insights from neuroscience (Keen 2007), numerous contributions over the past few decades have enriched the debate on the role of literature and art in fostering empathy and enhancing the exercise of "putting ourselves in another's shoes" (Chavel, 2012). Not only can artistic fruition be seen as an exercise in empathy, but the creative process itself can stem from this feeling. In literary genres such as biography and narrative medicine, empathy is crucial, but also plays a significant part in various forms of rewriting and intermedial reuse – such as transpositions and fanfictions – where empathy for minor characters can lead to a revision of canonical works from postcolonial or gender perspectives. At the same time, art serves as a privileged space for exploring various forms of empathy. It often presents negatively connoted figures and spaces that foster ambivalent, destabilizing relationships – simultaneously invoking both attraction and repulsion. This dynamic is what Ercolino & Fusillo (2022: 10) term "negative empathy", which allows one to test "the limits of the ethical positioning of the user of the work of art".

This seminar aims to engage with the latest discussions surrounding the role of empathy, with a particular focus on investigating the limits of this experience in both aesthetic fruition and production. It invites proposals that explore this topic across a range of domains, including – but not limited to – the following:
- the role of empathy in the reading experience
- the role of empathy in aesthetic fruition (theatre, cinema, tv series, graphic novels)
- the role of empathy in the writing experience (including both original texts and rewritings and adaptations from the perspective of minor characters)
- empathy as a theme
- empathy and literary genres (e.g. biography, narrative medicine, posthuman)
- negative empathy.

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SEM11. Papers

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 20
- *Learning to be sympathetic in All is True by Shakespeare and Fletcher: Instructions for rulers and magistrates* (Maria Grazia Dongu, Università degli Studi di Cagliari)

- *A common stream: Empathy and the tides of consciousness in Virginia Woolf* (Serena Ammendola, Università della Calabria)
- *Empathy and lack of empathy in contemporary psychiatric narratives: the cases of Kavan, Quin and Galloway* (Daniele Corradi, Università di Parma)
- *William Trevor and the lures of critical empathy* (Angelo Monaco, Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro)
- *Empathy at the edge of the human: Trauma, voice, and otherness in Ishiguro's narratives* (Claudia Cao, Università di Cagliari / Angela Leonardi, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

SEM11. Abstracts

A common stream: Empathy and the tides of consciousness in Virginia Woolf

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Virginia Woolf's work deeply explores empathy as a force that connects not only characters with each other, but also with nature and the past, transcending the boundaries of individual consciousness. This abstract examines Woolf's representation of empathy as 'vicarious and spontaneous sharing of affects' (Keen, 2007), evident in her treatment of human frailty, ecological interconnectedness and the persistence of memory.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf confronts the clinical detachment of the doctors with the empathic resonance of the protagonist. War veteran Septimus Warren Smith, modelled on Woolf's own struggle with mental health, is pathologised by those who coldly dismiss his trauma as a 'lack of proportion'. Their cold rationality contrasts sharply with Clarissa Dalloway's visceral response to his suicide, which she interprets as an act of defiance against the constraints of life. Her identification with Septimus - despite their social separation - reveals empathy as an egalitarian force that unites different lived experiences. Woolf extends this empathy to non-human life in *The Death of the Moth* (1942), where she anthropomorphises a moth's struggle against mortality, framing its 'superb' final protest as a universal metaphor for human resilience. By narrating the moth's plight through intimate, humanised language ('he', 'his'), Woolf elicits spontaneous emotional mirroring, embodying Keen's concept of shared affection. Similarly, in *Kew Gardens* (1919), the meticulous journey of a snail becomes a site of empathetic attention, reflecting Woolf's belief that even the smallest life possesses narrative significance.

Empathy in Woolf's work also transcends temporal boundaries. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Mrs Ramsay's painful absence reverberates through the memories of others, illustrating how emotional bonds persist beyond physical presence, defying the abyss of death. This underlines the role of empathy in shaping collective consciousness, as characters internalise shared histories and landscapes.

Woolf's work posits empathy as the foundation of the human condition, challenging the separation between mind and body, man and nature, present and past, life and death. Through stream of consciousness, anthropomorphism and temporal fluidity Woolf redefines empathy not only as an emotional resonance, but as an ethical imperative to perceive the interconnected fragility of life.

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Empathy at the edge of the human: Trauma, voice, and otherness in Ishiguro's narratives

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In Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction, empathy emerges as both a narrative strategy and an ethical problem. From the traumatic silences of *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) to the dystopian reflections of *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and the posthuman affectivity of *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Ishiguro's works challenge traditional understandings of intersubjectivity and the human. Drawing on recent critical theory in empathy studies and posthumanism (Hayles 1999; Pinotti 2014; Keen 2007;

Colombino 2025), this paper examines how Ishiguro constructs empathetic engagement not only through the portrayal of emotionally complex protagonists, but through narrative structures that dislocate the reader and reframe identification.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's fragmentary, elliptical memories of postwar Nagasaki resist cohesion, mirroring the structure of trauma and forcing the reader to empathize with absence, ambiguity, and unreliability. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy H.'s subdued narrative voice and use of autobiographical framing complicate readerly empathy, especially as it becomes clear that she is a clone bred for organ donation. Finally, *Klara and the Sun* offers a deeply affecting perspective through Klara, an artificial being whose moral intuitions and emotional perceptions often exceed those of her human counterparts. In all three works, internal focalization, temporal disjunction, and symbolic objectscapes (photographs, cassette tapes, sunlight) coalesce into what Shameem Black has called Ishiguro's "inhuman aesthetics" (2009), pushing empathy to its limits.

These narratives interrogate the ethical boundaries of care, affect, and relationality—between self and other, human and nonhuman, memory and forgetting. As Zsófia Novák (2023) notes, Ishiguro's fiction partakes in a broader literary shift toward "inter-creatural empathy," where the permeability of human-nonhuman borders becomes the ground for new forms of ethical reflection. Ultimately, Ishiguro's novels construct empathy as a gesture both necessary and fraught: a mode of engagement shaped by gaps, silences, and the refusal of closure.

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Empathy and lack of empathy in contemporary psychiatric narratives: The cases of Kavan, Quin and Galloway

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Suffering from mental illness represents an experience of profound existential pain, one that, by its very nature, transcends the realm of so-called normality. For this reason, to possess such fundamental human qualities as compassion and empathy can be of crucial importance in dealing with individuals who face this kind of predicament. Empathy, in particular, would seem to be a necessary requirement for those whose very role in society is to care for individuals with mental health conditions – not to mention the pretension to cure them. Yet, the history of psychiatry demonstrates that this essential human quality has largely been set aside in psychiatric practice, which has traditionally favored a purely medical approach, often objectifying and dehumanising in nature. While this trend was especially prominent during the era of involuntary commitments and closed asylums, it remains disturbingly present in the psychopharmacological era as well.

In this context, it is striking to observe that one of the first things that stands out to readers engaging with the testimonies and autobiographical narratives of former mental patients, such as Anna Kavan's *Asylum Piece* (1940), Ann Quin's *The Unmapped Country* (1973), or Janice Galloway's *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989), is that the principal source of suffering for many patients throughout their involvement with mental institutions often lies not so much in the pathology itself, but rather in the process of dehumanisation and in the utter lack of empathy experienced during hospitalisation or in otherwise dealing with the institution. Narratives such as these, in fact, emerge first of all as desperate pleas for empathy, warmth, and understanding: the very human comforts that patients have been denied during their often-prolonged involvement with the psychiatric system and its various practitioners. These accounts, in turn, offer readers the

opportunity to cultivate their own empathy and deepen their existential understanding of mental illnesses, potentially fostering a more positive and compassionate attitude toward people who suffer from similar pathologies.

Given these premises, the aim of this paper is to examine three contemporary texts and authors that present first-person accounts of mental illness and/or experiences within the psychiatric system. The main objective is to assess the impact and significance of empathy in the dealing and treatment of mental health conditions, as well as the negative repercussions of more dehumanising approaches. Some considerations will also be made on the importance of testimony and the role of writing in relating such experiences to others. The texts under consideration include works written both before and after the phase of major reforms and the introduction of psychotropic drugs that reshaped psychiatry around the 1970s, leading to the dismantling of traditional mental hospitals. This temporal scope will allow some considerations on whether these changes have resulted in more humane and healthier practices in recent times.

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Learning to be sympathetic in all is true by Shakespeare and Fletcher: Instructions for rulers and magistrates
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While there has been renewed interest in sympathy, scholars have often excluded the early modern period from a thorough analysis of this emotion, distinguishing it from the passive passions that drive human beings. Robert Meek convincingly demonstrates, however, that sympathy is discussed in depth in early modern sermons, pamphlets, and dramas. As Meek puts it, sympathy was not considered a passive emotion but an active response that authors, characters, and readers could engage in; not the emotions themselves but the words to define them were invented or used in the eighteenth (sympathy) and twentieth (empathy, as distinct from sympathy) centuries (2013: 14; Schliesser 2015: 3-4).

In line with Meek's statements, I aim to show that charity is a substitute for sympathy in Shakespeare's and Fletcher's *All is True*. This concept upholds the Christian system of justice and service to the common good, while being challenged by passions such as greed, ambition and betrayal. These latter forces embody the threats to the long-standing alliance between the king and his nobles and operate according to a diverse value system that denies or mocks charity and compassion. While not neglecting recent discourses on empathy and morality, which have shifted towards understanding these concepts as integral to ethical decision-making (Mayborn 2013), I primarily seek to compare Shakespeare's discussion with the *Mirror for Magistrates* tradition to trace the depiction of a good and empathetic ruler and magistrate in the Elizabethan era, highlighting the crucial role of empathy in ethical decision-making.

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William Trevor and the lures of critical empathy
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In my presentation, I intend to reflect on the relationship between empathy and literature by taking into consideration William Trevor's novel *Felicia's Journey* (1994). Winner of the Whitbread Prize and adapted into a film directed by Atom Egoyan in 1999, the story follows a young, unmarried, pregnant girl, Felicia, who leaves her small Irish town

searching for her boyfriend, Johnny Lysaght. Once Felicia gets to the English Midlands, penniless and frustrated, she meets Joseph Ambrose Hilditch, an overweight catering manager who offers to assist her in looking for Johnny. And yet, as the narrative unfolds, the reader learns that Hilditch is a pathological liar with a history of childhood abuse. Hilditch thus embodies an eccentric, deviant character typical of Trevor's work—a psychopath fixated on food and grappling with an emotional void. Though Trevor intentionally avoids delving into Hilditch's mental illness, readers feel an almost magnetic pull to empathise with Hilditch's malevolent motives, extending compassion for his troubled past. Thus, using flashbacks and narrative embedding, Trevor deepens the reader's initial interpretations and expectations of the central character, Felicia.

Building on the theoretical framework of narrative empathy, which highlights the ethical potential of literary writing (Keen 2007; 2015; Nussbaum 1997; 2001), my presentation's working hypothesis posits that Trevor resists the allure of easy empathy. Instead, the novel seems to engage with what Eric Leake calls "critical empathy" (2024), understood as a social phenomenon located in the rich contexts of our encounters. In truth, *Felicia's Journey* depicts cruelty and suffering as ordinary phenomena, blurring the border between perpetrator and victim, prompting readers to question their emotional responses to marginalised characters such as Hilditch. Trevor's exploration of the darkest sides of human nature shatters the readers as they run the gamut of emotions, from empathy to shock. Ultimately, *Felicia's Journey* calls for interpretation, inviting the reader to unravel the ethical effects of empathy. In so doing, Trevor's fiction edges towards the aesthetics of vulnerability, encompassing a reading and writing ethics that confronts the more unsettling facets of human existence.

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