

Best Integrated Writing

Volume 3

Article 8

2016

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Recommended Citation

Reymann, C. (2016). Empathy in its Entirety, *Best Integrated Writing*, 3.

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Empathy in its Entirety

CALLIE REYMAN

ENG 2040: Great Books: Literature, Spring 2015

Nominated By: Dr. Christine Junker

Callie Reymann is from Marysville, Ohio. She loves traveling to see her family in Michigan and Florida. She also likes to travel out west to visit national parks since she loves, and is inspired by, nature. She loves watching mystery series, doing art, and playing with her cat, Mia. She is an English major and intends to further her education in branding.

Callie notes:

I had a very clear vision for this essay. I started writing it early in the morning, poured out my ideas for nearly twelve hours, and completed it later that night. I have never written an essay in that same manner since then. My hope is that people will take away a better understanding of empathy, one that they will value and apply to their own lives. I hope my story inspires others with Asperger's Syndrome.

Dr. Junker notes:

Reymann's essay on empathy and literature blends critical analysis with personal reflection in a way that renders both modes of thinking equally compelling. She pays careful attention to the texts she's discussing (Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*), and she links those texts and some of the key issues in those texts to her own life and her own experiences. Integrating research from outside sources allows Reymann to strengthen her analysis and definitions of empathy, which she then uses to provide a nuanced analysis of literary texts. In addition, her writing is fluid, poetic, and concise throughout the entirety of the essay.

Empathy allows someone to swap places with another person, not literally, but metaphorically. People empathize to problem-solve in social situations, to enter the mind of a character in a novel, and to make a connection by relating to others. Three authors are especially adept in their ability to stimulate empathy for the characters in their novels: Octavia Butler with *Kindred*, Rebecca Skloot with *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and Sherman Alexie with *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. However, some questions arise when empathy is mentioned. How is empathy different than sympathy? In what ways do authors develop empathy? Can empathy be tested since it involves emotion, which makes it subjective? Empathy is a complex concept, hard to measure scientifically and challenging to create in writing, but it's a crucial aspect of society that I've had plenty of personal experience with.

Quite often there is a false perception that sympathy and empathy are the same concept. At first glance their definitions don't sound all that different. Sympathy is described as, "Harmony of or agreement in feeling, as between persons on the part of one person with respect to another: the fact or power of sharing the feelings of another, especially in sorrow or trouble." Empathy is, "The psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another" (Dictionary). In reality they're like two people who look the same and get mistaken for one another all the time, but as soon as they open their mouths everyone knows exactly who is who. Effort and intention are the key distinctions between sympathy and empathy. The distinction can first be seen in the definitions, when the word vicarious is used for empathy. Vicarious is defined as, "Performed, exercised, received or suffered in the place of another: felt or enjoyed through imagined participation in the experience of others" (Dictionary). The trick with this is visualizing the correct person. Sympathy usually involves people imagining themselves in another person's situation and leads to the thought 'how would I react'. Empathy encompasses people stepping outside of themselves, to be the hurting person in the situation and see what they are experiencing in order to better help them deal with it. Sympathy aims to be polite, because voicing condolences for someone going through a hard time is the 'right thing to do.' The person struggling is often squeezed uncomfortably in a box. If event 'A' has happened to them, then they must feel 'B' and can be helped by doing 'C' – it's an impersonal equation that assumes a lot. There's no dirty work on the sympathetic person's part to dig deeper and see

where the other person is at--emotionally. Notice that the sympathy definition only mentions emotions, while the empathy definition includes the thoughts and attitude of the person being empathized with. On the other hand, empathy psychologically identifies with the other person. Empathy is therapeutic for the one receiving it because the empathetic person is trying to understand their perspective. When someone is empathetic, they disregard any preconceived notions about the person's condition; instead they ask and listen to how the suffering person is really handling the difficulty. Pain manifests differently for each person, spilling over into every part of someone's life. It's not an isolated incident, so it shouldn't be treated that way. The intention of empathy is to give support or clarification and to understand problems on an individual level. It's a choice to invest in someone's life and work hard to comprehend it as best as one can. Empathy is caring and being compassionate toward another person.

This other person doesn't necessarily have to be real for someone to empathize with them. Such is the case with characters in novels. Writers aim to make readers emotionally invested in their characters. If people didn't gasp out of surprise, squeal with joy, cry with despair or burst out laughing while reading a book, if they didn't get completely caught up in the other worldliness of the novel, what reason would they have for reading another one? This attachment likely comes from the amount of empathy a reader has for a character; it makes them feel involved in the novel. The reader becomes enmeshed in the plot by experiencing the situation, done through empathizing with the character, making them care about what happens to the character. The three authors examined here skillfully use an array of techniques to prompt readers to empathize with their characters.

In *Kindred*, sympathy paves the way for empathy, and, as the narrator, Dana influences readers' emotional response to the other characters. Pain is one flagrant aspect of *Kindred's* text that acts to inspire sympathy. People may not always feel another person's pain, but they do tend to feel sympathetic towards someone who is obviously hurting. Characters in *Kindred* are treated unfairly, verbally abused, slapped, beaten, whipped, raped, tortured and killed. The level of intensity seems to increase as the novel goes on, and the capacity for empathy grows, but not just due to the severity of the treatment. The readers also progressively get to know the characters, their backstories, their fears, their impulses and their wounds – both physical and

emotional. In the scene where Dana is sent to fetch Alice and tell her to go to Rufus or else be beaten, empathy is easier to find. Alice dejectedly decides, “I’m going to him. He knew I would sooner or later. But he don’t know how I wish I had the nerve to just kill him!” (168). The empathy isn’t just there because she has cried earlier, is obviously facing a horrible dilemma, and the reader can tell she’s upset because she wants to kill somebody. The reader empathizes because they know her. They know how many loved ones she’s lost, how she has a rebellious and passionate spirit that tried to escape, and how that fire has been quenched, replaced with hopelessness. At the same time, the reader also feels a little bit of empathy for Rufus, though not as much. Part of this comes from being aware of his reasoning behind treating Alice this way, but part of it comes from Dana’s view towards Rufus and Alice. Dana and Alice are very similar, which makes Dana act kindly towards her. Readers therefore feel more of a favorable connection to Alice. Rufus, on the other hand, has a difficult relationship with Dana, and her uncertain feelings toward Rufus rub off onto the reader. Dana doesn’t completely trust Rufus, she hopes that he can become a better person, and she grows tired of saving him – the readers empathize with Dana in these feelings and with Rufus, to the same extent that Dana does. At the very end, when Dana decides to murder Rufus, she hesitates. Dana still understands Rufus. She admits to it in this scene, “Now he sat with me – being sorry and lonely and wanting me to take the place of the dead. ‘You never hated me, did you?’ he asked. ‘Never for long. I don’t know why. You worked hard to earn my hatred, Rufe.’” (259). Dana feels sorry for Rufus and so does the reader--at least a little. Both wanted to forgive him, but Rufus has done far too many questionable wrongs to be saved in the end. Background, paired with the narrator acting as lens, is essential to creating empathy in *Kindred*, and the details behind the people become even more significant in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

Rebecca Skloot does an amazing job of slowly coaxing a personal connection from the reader by presenting complex and quirky characters, so the empathy is almost automatic. The people who are the easiest to be empathetic towards are not one-sided, with only one angle, emotion or goal. Take Zakariyya for example. His angry side is present all throughout the novel, understandably due to his abusive past and hard life. However, no one would emphasize with him if that is all there was to him. Zakariyya also has a sweet, childlike innocence to him that just wishes he had his mom growing up. Readers experience glimpses of this

when Deborah gives him Christoph Lengauer's picture, "Zakariyya's eyes filled with tears. For a moment the dark circles seemed to vanish, and his body relaxed. 'Yeah,' he said, in a soft voice unlike anything we'd heard that day" (249). He goes on to walk away staring at the photo with a child's admiration; it's such a touching moment. The same event takes place at Dr. Lengauer's lab. After getting the tour and thorough explanation, "Zakariyya reached up and touched Christoph on the back and said thank you. Outside he did the same to me..." (267). In these instances Zakariyya did not get revenge or money but seemed softened and satisfied nonetheless, so those motivations can't be all that he is. On the flip side, Zakariyya could not just be the pathetic, man missing his mom. Once again, people would feel bad for him, but just in a piteous kind of way. It's the combination of the furious and the tender that make a reader relate to him. This makes sense because people, as a part of humanity, possess the capacity for both good and evil, anger and love, success or despair. Therefore empathy is created when a person is presented as just that, a person. Detail also adds to the tangible, vivid quality of Skloot's characters. Daily life makes its way onto the pages just as often as all of the scientific jargon. The parts that deal with people don't just tell us the facts; they reveal personalities, emotions, backstories, quirks, the pieces that turn characters into people. Why is it important to know that Deborah hits people with her cane for emphasis? These details, seemingly insignificant to the plot, are what give us a sense of reality. We are not just hearing a tale, we're experiencing a life. Why include anything to do with Skloot's excursions? Because if the novel didn't, then Deborah would just be a name on a paper, and the family would just be a sad story, and this book would only serve as an interesting report. The 'behind-the-scenes' focus Skloot takes allows the reader an intimate perspective into the workings of the Lacks' environment that makes everything in it more captivating and the people worth an investment of our attention and emotion. Though Skloot enables readers to empathize with a tough character, Alexie shows people just how easy it is to empathize with an honest, quality character.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* Alexie introduces the reader to a courageous and humble spirit. Arnold's self-deprecating humor and willingness to fight against adversity make him a kid that any reader can empathize with on some level or another. Alexie presents us with a character that has never had an easy life, and the reader meets him when it gets even more difficult. He also gives us someone whose

characteristics can be admired. Arnold combats the bad luck with a good attitude, often resorting to joking at his own expense in order to cope. Take this explanation for example, “I also had a stutter and a lisp. Or should I say I had a st-st-st-st-stutter and a lisssssssthhththp. You wouldn’t think there is anything life threatening about speech impediments, but let me tell you, there is nothing more dangerous than being a kid with a stutter and a lisp” (4). With descriptions like this one, Arnold becomes someone readers want to get to know. He is funny, honest, humble, and he doesn’t take himself too seriously. Nothing kills empathy like arrogance, and Arnold fosters our literary friendship with him because he is modest and therefore likable. He tells everyone about the challenging times in his life in a way that’s accurate, that truly gets the picture across, but is also tinged with sarcasm --sarcasm that can lighten the mood or dig deeper into the injustice that surrounds his life. Arnold also faces adversity head on. He doesn’t shy away from leaving his tribe behind and facing scrutiny, in the name of having a better education. He doesn’t back down from playing Rowdy head-on in basketball, possibly getting crushed again, to prove he is stronger and braver than everyone else thinks. People can empathize with those who challenge the troubles that are stacking up against them because they’ve probably had to do the same, or wish that they would. Readers are encouraged and feel like Arnold is empathizing with them, telling their story. They’re on the same page. Arnold is also a round character, one that develops as the story goes on, and readers can root for his growth along the way. Throughout the story Arnold retains his amiable personality, but, by the end, readers get the feeling that he is starting to learn how to manage the two halves of his life. Arnold makes new friends at Reardan, while reconnecting with Rowdy. He had a teacher who supported him on the rez, and now he has a coach that reassures him out on the basketball court. He loses many loved ones, but manages to not lose himself. He is at peace with his decision and will go on to be great. Readers can empathize with Arnold because he is a character worthy of being empathized with. Empathy is considerably challenging to stimulate in writing, but it is far harder to measure in science.

Empathy is extremely hard to measure due to its emotional and subjective nature, but one test has worked hard to produce viable results. As Simon Baron-Cohen and Sally Wheelwright remark, “Empathy is an essential part of normal social functioning, yet there are precious few instruments for measuring individual

differences in this domain” (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 163). However, these researchers have designed a self-reporting questionnaire that rather than measuring IQ, looks at the Empathy Quotient or EQ (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 163). The questionnaire contains various items that participants can strongly agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree or strongly disagree with, for a possible total score of 80. When it comes to empathy in research, there is a bit of a divide. Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright acknowledge that both aspects of empathy are important as they clarify, “Researchers in this area have traditionally fallen into one of two camps: theorists who have viewed empathy in terms of affect, and those who have taken a more cognitive approach” (163). Affective theorists focus on an empathetic person’s emotional response to the other person and take into account how appropriate it is, whereas cognitive theorists emphasize the level of understanding for the other person’s feelings (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 164). The article described this type of empathy as, “Setting aside one’s own current perspective...then inferring the likely content of their mental state, given the experience of that person” (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 164). At a basic level it’s the difference between reacting and understanding. Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright felt that these two facets of empathy were too closely intertwined to separate in their EQ questionnaire, so they are co-existent in each item (166). There have, in fact, been other empathy tests, but many of them contained psychological flaws. These tests (Chapin Social Insight Test, Rating Scale, Empathy Scale, Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy, and Interpersonal Reactivity Index) were often too broad, meaning that empathy was not the only personal factor or social skill being examined (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 165). Even this empathy test has areas where it can become more accurate and thorough. In the future researchers hope to include a loved one’s evaluation to the questionnaire results (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 171). There is also the matter of the participant’s personal well-being while taking the test – empathy is so subjective. If someone is in a drunken state, if they’re angry or depressed, or if they possess certain personality traits are all factors that could affect how they respond to the items (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 171). It seems that there is always some loophole for subjectivity to creep into and muddle up the results. The EQ test has results specifically for people who have Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), otherwise known as High Functioning Autism (HFA), versus average adults; and results for empathy in terms of gender. The Asperger’s experiment showed that the disorder is an empathetic deficiency.

81% of AS or HFA subjects had a score of 30 or lower, while the others had 12% with the same range (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 163). As for the gender experiment, women scored significantly higher than men: only 4% of women scoring 30 or lower compared to 14% of the men, twice as many women scored 54 or higher and over three times as many women scored 62 or higher (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 170). However, even these numbers can be questioned. As Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright explain, “Whether this reflects women’s greater willingness to report empathetic behavior or their higher levels of underlying empathy cannot be determined from this study” (170). Social stigma socially enforced on men could cause them to feel it’s ‘unmanly’ to be empathetic. Although it is difficult, empathy can be assessed, but can it be learned?

If empathy cannot be learned or improved upon, then I am a living abnormality. At the age of three I was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. Unlike the more prevalent type of autism that deals with learning and physical related challenges, Asperger’s is based on social behavior and emotional response. As Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright further explain, “Autism is diagnosed when an individual shows abnormalities in social and communication development in the presence of marked repetitive behavior and limited imagination” (166). In relation to empathy, I naturally possess little to none of it. I am notorious in my family for shutting down a conversation with a sharp remark if it doesn’t relate to, or interest, me. My mom refers to this act as being rude, but she means that I am not giving someone my attention and heart. The researchers expand on this phenomenon, “...even though they report they have difficulty judging/explaining/anticipating or interpreting another’s behavior, it is not the case that they want to hurt another person” (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright 169). I’m not trying to discount a person when I react impolitely; I’m just naturally more self-focused. Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright make the distinction between AS, which struggles to handle emotions and psychopaths, who are unfeeling and cannot take the EQ test since they are notoriously deceitful (Self reporting) (169). When I was little my psychiatrist would make faces at me, a smile or frown for example, and ask me what he was feeling. I gave him a blank stare and told him I had no clue. Having been diagnosed years before most people with AS, I’ve used the time to learn to recognize and connect with other’s emotions. Yet, even now that translates to sympathy most of the time.

It's a huge struggle for me to step outside myself and listen to another person's hardships. I'm especially lacking in empathy when I'm tired, my empathy ebbs away with my energy. Despite these hardships, I have come a long way in my ability to empathize and will continue to improve. Empathy is something that requires practice by pausing in a situation to navigate the proper way to react to it. It's also a crucial element in social communication.

Empathy is an essential part of life for anyone who plans on interacting with humans. Some people might think my condition would make me relate to un-empathetic people. In an ironic twist of fate, I don't empathize with people who don't empathize. Empathy is a choice and a decision. I worked harder than most people to develop this skill and scorn anyone who dares to ignore their innate ability. Empathy is so vital to society, yet in modern times it seems to grow more and more absent. Culture is too self-focused. Everyone is individualistic in the way that they experience and react to events, no one can walk in their shoes, and that makes them unique, but also lonely. However, as long as someone is walking beside them acting as a guide or sounding board, they are not the only one on their difficult journey. People also require a sense of worth and validation that comes from the attentive listening on the part of an empathetic person. Someone cares about them enough to try to understand their state of mind; therefore they matter in the world. Perhaps if empathy were practiced more, then people would feel reconnected to the world and one another.

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