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Danielle Sutton

Pedagogy, Volume 21, Issue 3, October 2021, pp. 481-500 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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Exercises in Narrative Empathy in the Undergraduate
Literature Classroom

Danielle Sutton

In the fall of 2016, I took a course in life writing, one in storytelling, and an introduction to critical theory. I hadn't known that the life writing class required actual life writing, nor did I know that the storytelling class required me to stand up and tell stories, or I wouldn't have enrolled in either. Thankfully, by the time I figured it out, it was too late to change my mind. As the semester progressed, I read and theorized storytelling while simultaneously thinking through how to tell my own story, finding that the theory I was reading was generative to my thinking about storytelling and life writing, and the life writing and storytelling in which I was simultaneously engaged made the theory I was reading more concrete. I found that my own life writing was strongest when informed by theory, my theoretical thinking more clear when rooted in praxis. In particular, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's (2010) concept of the narrating/narrated "I"—which emphasizes the distance between the narrator/"I now" and the character/"I then"—allowed me to narrate past trauma from a space that was palliative. Most significantly, I was not simply "telling my story": the narrative distance facilitated by the narrating/narrated "I" resulted in my understanding my story in a fundamentally different way. Narrating, then, at least for me, became a way of knowing the same events differently.

Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture
Volume 21, Number 3 DOI 10.1215/15314200-9131862 © 2021 by Duke University Press

It was unclear, however, to what extent my experience could be taken as representative of how people generally experience narrative. Thus I began planning a course by which I might investigate the role that stories—our own and those of others—play in subject formation, particularly the extent to which they influence not only the narration of our own lives but also the lives of real and fictional others. Based on my own prior experience, I was also keenly interested in how a theoretical understanding of narrative might affect the way students narrate. With these questions in mind, I chose ENG 125: Literary Narrative—described by my institution’s course catalog as “Critical reading and analysis of a variety of literary narratives that reflect on human experience”—as the avenue for investigating these questions. In teaching the course and analyzing the data resulting from it, I identified empathy as the driving force behind student engagement with narrative, though I discovered that student concern over empathy is often expressed as a preoccupation with or discussed in terms of “truth” or perception of past events. While I confirmed my suspicion regarding the significance of a grounding in narrative theory to the production of narrative, I was nevertheless surprised to discover the primacy of the act of narration itself to student experiences of narrative empathy for others’ stories.

Creative-Critical Response Papers

Jerome Bruner (2003: 27) writes that “‘to narrate’ derives from both ‘telling’ (*narrare*) and ‘knowing in some particular way’ (*gnarus*)—the two tangled beyond sorting.” As I discovered in my own writing, the act of narration helped reinforce my understanding of more abstract theoretical concepts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this turned out to be the case for student writing as well. When planning the course, I had anticipated that my most valuable data would come either from formal essays, which I thought would exhibit the most nuanced theoretical thinking, or writing from students’ “daybooks,” a semester-long notebook assignment designed to capture students’ self-narration (including reading and class notes, responses to in-class writing prompts, and similar quotidian writing). Neither of these, however, proved particularly revealing on their own. Instead, the data for this analysis come from two of the course’s four “response paper” assignments, which asked students to compose narratives inspired by course readings (the “creative” portion of the assignment) and then write short analyses of their writing and research process (the “critical” component). What these assignments had that the essay and daybook assignments lacked is that they combined theory and praxis, resulting in higher quality writing as well as more theoretically

nuanced thinking. In this article, then, I will explore student writing taken primarily from the above-named creative-critical response papers, looking especially at the ways in which student writing exhibits the aforementioned concerns over notions of “truth” as well as rhetoric of “reassessment” or a new understanding of past events. Based on the data that follows, I speculate that writing and reflection, especially when informed by a theoretical vocabulary, helps us gain new insight into our own narratives, fundamentally altering the way we construct and understand both our own stories and the stories of others.

Narrative & Truth

Perhaps because ENG 125 largely comprises nonmajors fulfilling their general education requirements, during class discussion the overwhelming majority of my students expressed unease with both formal and informal writing assignments. Though students had been writing often in their daybooks and had completed two response paper assignments prior to response 3, those assignments were primarily literary analyses, and response 3 was the first assignment that combined creative writing and critical analysis. Though to some extent student unease with writing and reflection can be explained by their discomfort with not only the act of writing but especially thinking of themselves as writers, their discomfort increased rather than decreased as they moved through the assignments, suggesting that something other than lack of experience influenced their response to the assignments. In particular, students expressed discomfort—including confusion, resistance, anger, and sadness—in response to writing assignments that asked them to narrate from the perspective of others. With the first assignment, that discomfort was often expressed as a concern over “truth” or getting it “right,” despite the fictional nature of the character in question. The assignment, in its entirety, read:

Read Nico Alvarado’s [2014] four Tim Riggins poems, published in *Gulf Coast Magazine* 26.1. Then choose an unlikely yet compelling character from a television show or movie, and *write a series of persona poems from their perspective*—in other words, write a series of poems that bears witness to what you imagine to be this character’s experience.

In addition to these, you’ll submit a short (1–2 page) essay discussing your research and writing process, particularly what it is about the character that you find both unlikely (not like you) and compelling. How did you go about getting “in the character’s head”? How does it feel to try on someone else’s “I”? How does this “I” compare to the autobiographical narrating “I”?

Because it asked students to actively reflect on their writing processes, then, response 3 offered students their first formal opportunity to unpack their discomfort with writing, and, across the board, students expressed various levels of discomfort with the act of narration as particularly difficult. Jane,¹ for example, claimed,

I watched several seasons of this show and I researched some of the characters and more of the background of the show itself. . . . It is pretty challenging to write in someone else's perspective because it's such a conscious effort to try to get into their head and understand how they are feeling. Using this "I" is different than autobiographical narrating "I" because the writer has to think in a different perspective when writing. When writing for an extended period of time, the writer just gets used to it and writing becomes easier.

Particularly interesting to me is Jane's shift from using "I" to discuss her research and "the writer" to discuss her writing and what this grammatical shift in agency might imply. Her disinclination to discuss the assignment in first person may be a vestige of years of being told not to use "I" in academic writing, and her discomfort likely suggests a reluctance to fully inhabit her identity as "writer" of the piece. Perhaps because English is not her first language and because she does not see herself as a "good writer," two factors she had previously cited as a source of anxiety, Jane felt more comfortable discussing the writing process from a distance, in the more detached third person.

Jane's unease, however, also stems from her struggle to access what she sees as the character's "true" feelings: as she puts it, to "understand how they are feeling." Despite the assignment's focus on fictional characters, student writing in general revealed a curious preoccupation with various notions of "truth," much of it manifesting, as it did with Jane, as a discomfort with using "someone else's I." By the time students were working on response 3, we had devoted several discussion sessions to the ways in which story only seems to precede discourse when, in fact, there's no story without discourse—that discourse constitutes and creates story. When pressed, many students would likely admit that there's no "right" or "wrong" in terms of their representation of their chosen characters' feelings and ideas because the characters don't have feelings and ideas other than what's accessible through the sanctioned narratives. Nevertheless, a number of students expressed some level of anxiety over whether and how their poems corresponded to their characters' "truth." Kevin, for instance, wrote,

In order to write as Dwight [Schrute, from *The Office*], I determined what separates Dwight from the rest of the characters and exploited these characteristics into poetry. The “I” used in poems can compare to the autobiographical narrating “I” because of the position they both take: In both cases they are narrating “I’s,” however, it is much more difficult to try on someone else’s “I” compared to using the autobiographical narrating “I.”

Several other students, either implicitly or explicitly, touched on this same inability to accurately represent another’s thoughts and feelings. Renee, for example, explained,

It is hard to write in someone else’s I. . . . To write in someone else’s point of view is hard because you don’t know their thought process and what they actually think during situations. . . . I didn’t exactly know what Rachel Green [of *Friends*] thinks of each of her friends. I also did not know how she thinks of her own life.

Allison used similar language to discuss her character’s thoughts as well as her inability to truly know them:

The challenging part of writing in another person’s “I” is that I must get into their head and wonder what they are thinking. With my character, Oliver Queen, he comes off in the television show [*Arrow*] as being cold and distant which makes it harder to get in his head. That also means that I could have put some bias into his thinking by including my own interferences [*sic*] on what he is thinking. . . . The “I” that I used in the persona poems is different than an autobiography “I” because I am not actually the person and do not know *their true thoughts*. While in an autobiography they are writing about themselves and completely understand what they are thinking about. (emphasis added)

This concern over what the character is really thinking is also present in Katie’s discussion of her writing process:

Writing in a different persons [*sic*] “I” is still extremely different than when I write about my own experiences. This is because I am writing on how I think that they are thinking based off of what is portrayed in the movie rather than *what they actually may be thinking*. (emphasis added)

Amber, too, explains that “this ‘I’ is different than the autobiographical ‘I’ because *I don’t actually know if . . . the thoughts I am thinking about this character are true*” (emphasis added). Despite my attempts to trouble this belief, Renee, Allison, Katie, Amber, and others discussed their characters’

thoughts as if they actually existed, though they undoubtedly recognized on some level that was not the case. Thomas's response is more explicit about the source of his concern over "truth." As he explained, "When writing a persona poem one needs to transform in a way and become that character throughout the poem." His response continues,

The most difficult part about using someone else's "I" was keeping my own opinions off the page. This was difficult because being a fan of the show [*The Office*] one has their own idea of who the characters are, but one needs to be able to put that aside and look through the mind of the character. That's the point of the persona poem, to look into the mind of the character and not into your own. So I had to transform into Jim Halpert. This type of writing was night and day different writing from my perspective or using my "I." This is because with my "I" I know if what I'm saying is true or if it's false. Not only that but you can also back yourself up as well as have more confidence when using that "I."

In particular, Thomas's notion of "looking into the mind of the character and not your own" underscores the role that narrative empathy—defined by Suzanne Keen (2015: 124) as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition"—plays in his engagement with the assignment. Further, Thomas's response suggests that other students' concern over their characters' "true" thoughts might also be informed by narrative empathy. In fact, when we recontextualize concerns over "truth" or "facts" as concerns over narrative empathy, it becomes apparent that the majority of responses are students' attempts to navigate empathic relationships with their characters, suggesting that empathy is not just one way of engaging with narrative but the primary way—at least as far as these creative-critical assignments are concerned.

There is no doubt that, at least for some students, "truth" refers simply to the existence of a sanctioned narrative; no matter how much research goes into them, poems written by an ENG 125 student in the voice of Dwight Schrute will never "belong" to the sanctioned narrative because they're written by an ENG 125 student and not the writers behind *The Office*. It is this notion of truth to which Caleb was likely referring when he wrote:

Using the "I" of a character from a book . . . feels somewhat awkward compared to the autobiographical "I" because writing as if I'm the character feels like I'm trying to write what the author intended for the character, rather than being able to make the character himself be what I think of him.

Thus, when students like Caleb talk about “truth” what they mean is authenticity or authority—whether something belongs to the sanctioned narrative or is merely, however artfully, inspired by it. However, students overwhelmingly use *truth* to refer to thoughts rather than actions, and in focusing on their characters’ thoughts and feelings, rather than their actions, student responses suggest that concern over narrative truth is not primarily concern over coherence to the sanctioned narrative. Instead, student emphasis on interiority underscores the fact that they understand their characters not as plot agents from fictional universes but as complex, multidimensional people, despite the fact that one of the requirements of the assignment was that the character be fictional. Further, as I touched on above, in class discussion students exhibited awareness that Dwight Schrute and his companions do not really exist.² Though it’s not quite explicit in the passage below, Melody’s use of the conditional tense seems to gesture toward the fact that there is no “real” Dwight when she touches on the difficulty of coming up with “a logical internal dialogue”:

I found it very difficult to get into Dwight’s head. Although I enjoyed researching Dwight, it was tricky to channel thoughts that he might have that he does not openly express in *The Office*. Because he is such a fascinating individual, I thought that this assignment would come to me much more easily than it did. Instead, it took me a decent amount of research until I felt comfortable writing from Dwight’s point of view. Autobiographical narrating “I”s are much easier for me to use in writing. I am able to simply write down the words that are occurring in my mind. . . . Using someone else’s “I” forces you to infer the thoughts of another person. Not only do you need to pick up on their expressed thoughts, but you must also use your best judgment to *come up with a logical internal dialogue that the character would have*. (emphasis added)

Referring to Dwight as both character and person, Melody nevertheless uses the conditional *would*, underscoring the fact that she is working through this distinction. Although on some level she knows that Dwight doesn’t have an interior life, she still attempts to abide by some notion of truth, even if that’s simply adherence to what might be plausible for this character within the sanctioned narrative. Similarly, Joseph seemed to intuit this difference between the events of a story and the discourse by which those events are communicated when he explained,

[Michael Scott, of *The Office*] is a character based off a television show, it is hard to argue what he was thinking, or feeling. The only thing that can be argued is if the

activities he performed are accurate or not because there is visual representation of this, there is no representation anywhere regarding his feelings. . . . I tried to focus more on what he was seeing and feeling rather than the exact actions that he was taking. I was trying to make these poems different than how the story was told on the television show by introducing new factors.

Rather than feeling discomfort over his potential inability to stick to the “truth,” then, Joseph worked to make his poems different from the show by which they were inspired.

Though the difference is subtle, these students’ more nuanced understanding of story and discourse did seem to carry over to their thinking and writing in other areas of the course: Caleb, Melody, and Joseph each earned perfect scores (or better, including extra credit) on the midterm exam, which was designed to gauge students’ baseline understanding of narrative theory terms and concepts. It is unclear, however, what the nature of this correlation is: it may be that their more nuanced theoretical awareness resulted in more mindful narratives or that their theoretical knowledge was made more concrete through the writing of those narratives. It’s highly likely that the relationship is a mutually constitutive one.

It is noteworthy that even the students who grasp the constructedness of their stories are nevertheless grappling with their own notions of truth, yet these students’ performance on the midterm suggests that this concern with getting it “right” does not stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of the ambiguous nature of story and discourse. Rather, student preoccupation with truth, because it is almost exclusively concerned with their characters’ thoughts, feelings, and inner lives, should be read as a preoccupation with empathy. What student concern over truthfully representing their characters reveals is not, or at least not exclusively, concern over authority or sticking to the sanctioned narrative but, in fact, concern over whether they’re empathizing appropriately.

Recasting student preoccupation with truth as concern over narrative empathy helps explain one of the course’s more curious data points: response 3 resulted in a total of seven characters from *The Office*, and although the sample size is small, that’s still almost 25 percent of students who chose to write about a single series.³ Students’ familiarity with their chosen characters no doubt influenced their choice, since it meant less “research,” but I find the prevalence of *The Office* in particular unusual, as most of my students were ten years old or younger when the series debuted. I’m sure ease of access—the series was streaming on Netflix—is partly to credit for its popularity among

students, and many cited the fact that they'd watched the show several times through. Joseph, for example, explained that "using the 'I' term to describe what Michael was doing or feeling was weird, but at the same time it was easy to catch onto because I have seen the show so many times that I was able to act like I was Michael easily." Yet familiarity and ease of access alone cannot account for the prevalence of *The Office* in response 3, since the majority of students' chosen characters appeared in series available for streaming on Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Hulu. Rather, what sets *The Office* apart as a series is its interview segments, which I recall at least one student citing, during class discussion, as relevant to her decision to write from her character's perspective. In these segments, characters face and speak candidly to the camera and implicit film crew (neither of which viewers see regularly after the first episode of the series), the effect of which is that viewers assume the position of the film crew/camera, and they're the ones to whom characters are speaking. Despite the pretense of the camera crew, *The Office* nevertheless breaks the fourth wall, and this narrative situation, in which characters seem to directly address viewers, likely facilitated greater empathy between students and their chosen characters.

Narrative Empathy

That response 3 was an exercise in narrative empathy is not something that occurred to me as I was writing it. Nevertheless, as the above examination of student writing underscores, narrative empathy is exactly what I had asked of them. In "Intersectional Narratology in the Study of Narrative Empathy," Suzanne Keen (2015: 125) explains that "in its application to narrative empathy, intersectional narratology enables discussion of the complex overlays of narrative form, contexts of creation and reception, and identity that work together to provoke diverse responses to narrative, among divergent readers in a wide variety of texts." Using Keen's discussion of narrative empathy as a starting point, then, what follows is a more thorough examination of the various modes of empathic relation present in student responses. And although she does include "imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" in her definition of narrative empathy, Keen's model is nevertheless more concerned with empathy as a kind of reader response, so I will attempt to both augment Keen's framework when it proves insufficient for explaining student responses while also accounting for the unique role that the act of writing might have played in the data represented here.

Keen builds on research by psychologist C. Daniel Batson (2009) to disentangle various, sometimes conflicting, notions of empathy. Of the

eight kinds of empathy that Keen identifies,⁴ the student responses sampled above tend toward what she refers to as “deliberate perspective taking” (131), or what Batson terms “Imagining How Another Is Thinking and Feeling.” In this empathic reaction, “the ‘imagine other’ condition of empathy involves one person’s ‘feeling into’ another’s thoughts and feelings . . . focus[ing] on the other person, with an awareness of the separate being of that individual” (Keen 2015: 131). Indeed, much of the student concern over truth expressed in response 3 was in fact concern over recognizing and maintaining the separateness of their characters, fictional though they might have been. Keen explains that instead of “emotional fusion with the other,” perspective-taking empathy relies on “observation of the other and knowledge of that person . . . [It] is a more obviously cognitive operation that depends on having a theory of (another’s) mind (ToM)” (131). Particularly telling in this regard are student comments about why they chose the characters they did: Thomas, for example, explained that he wanted “to pick a character that I truly knew, a character that I spent a lot of my free time watching,” and Kevin noted that he has “watched *The Office* seasons through about three times and still consistently watch it every day. . . . Since I am such a big fan of the show I can almost hear Dwight’s voice when I attempt to write as him.” Calliope explained, “In order to write my poems . . . I watched the movie again except for this time payed [*sic*] more attention to *the way that he must have felt* as a father losing his daughter” (emphasis added). Across student responses, then, there’s an emphasis not only on knowledge of the other but also recognition of the other as distinct from the self. Students consistently asked themselves what their character might plausibly be thinking or feeling (rather than how they would feel), and their concern over truth in this sense stemmed from their desire to empathize without erasing the fundamental otherness of their chosen characters.

Perspective-taking empathy was also prevalent in student writing from response 4, a creative-critical assignment that operated on a similar principle of using narrative to “get inside someone’s head.” Loosely inspired by the nonfiction podcast *S-Town* (Reed 2017), that assignment sheet read:

In *S-Town* “Chapter V,” Brian Reed says of John B’s cousin Reta, “As she goes through her side of the story, it’s like nearly every little thing that Tyler said happened, Reta confirms, only the opposite, if that makes sense. Like she’s the lost roll of negatives to Tyler’s developed photographs.”

Using your daybook exercise from 10/24 as a starting point, think of a time you experienced a conflict, and narrate that conflict from the perspective of the

other person. It could be a serious one, like the conflict between Cousin Reta and Tyler Goodeson, or a trivial one, like a conflict with your roommate over who gets the good parking space. You may use first person or third person narration, but if you use third person be sure to focalize through the other person and *not* yourself. Narratives should be between 2.5 and 5 pages.

Students were also asked to compose a one-and-a-half- to two-page response paper reflecting on their writing/research process, using the course's theoretical text (Abbott's *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*), and answering the following questions: Why did you decide on this conflict? How did you get into the other person's head? What did it feel like to write with an "I" that is in many ways antagonistic to your own? What did it feel like to write with an "I" that you know? That exists in the world (unlike the fictional characters from response 3)? How did your choice of narrative situation (first person or third person, present or past tense, etc.) help or hinder your narrative?

The shift from fiction to nonfiction⁵ that took place in response 4 was an uncomfortable one for many students, and they continued to express concerns with regard to the truth of their narratives. As Jeremy explained, it was difficult to draw on past events without the ability to "replay" them:

At times I had trouble thinking of something to say because I wasn't sure how to word it correctly. Writing with an "I" that already exists in the world was interesting as well. In our persona poems, we had to choose a fictional character from a show and compared to doing it for this response it was different in some ways. One way that it felt different is because as a fictional character, you can branch out a lot more and study the character by watching him in his show or movie. For this, you had to really visualize and try to remember how the person reacted because it was a certain time in which it happened and you can't just go back and replay it over and over again.

Because he was attempting to maintain the otherness of the character he was narrating, Jeremy wanted to "just go back and replay [how the person reacted] over and over again" like he did with his fictional character from response 3. Larkin found the nonfiction element of the assignment "strange":

It was strange at first knowing that this person actually exists. It made me curious as to if [my mom] actually felt the way that I thought she did. It would be interesting to have her read the "I" from my side and compare it to herself. . . . In a sense using my moms [*sic*] "I," that was once an antagonist to my own, was upsetting. Most conflicts that I look back on I think I was at least [somewhat] right. In this case I wish I could go back in time and just have us comfort each other.

Both Jeremy's and Larkin's responses are representative of student writing from response 4 in that they exhibit emotional discomfort and emphasize the ways in which the assignment reoriented their perception of their past experience. In response 3, empathy was often coded as a concern over "truth," but the shift from fiction to nonfiction—in particular, an event in which the student played a role—recasts student concern over empathy in terms of a reorientation of their perception of past events. Or, building on Bruner's (2003) claim that to narrate is to know, students' knowledge of their past experience shifts to accommodate the perspective of the other, even when that perspective is a work of (their own) fiction, and it's likely this shift in perspective is responsible for much of the discomfort that students cite as a result of response 4.

Marty, too, touched on the ways in which this assignment reoriented his understanding of the situation while also gesturing toward ways that exercises in narrative empathy might encourage interpersonal empathy and thus compassionate behavior toward the real-world other:

Writing this conflict with myself as the antagonist lead [*sic*] me to reassess the issue. As the common saying goes, "we judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior"; but writing from Mike's point of view forced me to judge myself by my behavior and Mike by his intentions. It was disorienting at first, but by the end it became a helpful thought exercise for this ongoing situation. Unlike analyzing the possible intentions of a fictional character like *Bull's* Poseidon, or even a real but distant person such as Tyler Goodson, the fact that I made this analysis may directly help resolve a conflict that I am involved in by making me more sympathetic toward Mike.

Hunter also cited response 4 as an opportunity to use narrative to reorient his perspective and encourage more compassionate behavior in the future, explaining that he "actually got more out of it than I originally thought I would." He wrote:

I was extremely satisfied with how this turned out and more so with how it made me think. Will this stop [my dad and me] from getting into arguments ever again? No I'm thinking probably not. What I do see it doing however is if we get into a future conflict it will make me stop and think about why he's doing it and that there are times when I need to let loose on the stubbornness, stop and listen to what he has to tell me because he's without a doubt got my best interest in mind.

Thus, even though they can't be sure whether their narratives accurately depict the thoughts and emotions of the narrated others, students neverthe-

less cited an increased understanding for the person whose perspective they took on, one that seems to extend past the specific situation and into other areas of their relationships with those people, suggesting that the fundamentally empathic nature of narrative engagement applies to narratives that are purely fictional as well as those that are, however loosely, tethered to the so-called real world.

What seems to be unique to the nonfiction response paper, however, is the frequency with which students cited emotional discomfort. While also present in response 3, students' emotional discomfort with that assignment was largely limited to unease with regard to their narratives' correspondence to the "truth"—as when Jane, for example, found it "pretty challenging to write in someone else's perspective because it's such a conscious effort to try to get into their head." The emotional discomfort with response 4, however, differs in both quantity and quality: it not only appears more frequently, but the level of distress also seems greater. This heightened emotional response suggests that students are engaging in forms of narrative empathy other than the more cognitive perspective-taking empathy. For many students, especially those who cited extreme feelings of discomfort, the initial empathic reaction for response 4 is what Keen (2015: 132) terms the "personal distress" reaction, which "focuses on one's own sensations to the point of diverting attention to the suffering other's experience." Because of the intensity of the feelings involved, personal distress is the most self-focused reaction, and, if students cannot move past it, then it can hardly be understood as empathy; the other is all but erased by the focus on the self. Brittany, for example, had trouble ignoring her own feelings in order to write from her friend's perspective:

It was actually kind of difficult to write with an "I" that is antagonistic to my own because I would be writing the story out, but also thinking of my side. My side of the story is completely different, so when trying to write as Emily, I had to block my side out. Even though it was easy to put myself in her mind, when telling this story, it is hard to forget about how I was feeling through all of this. Throughout the story I wanted to put my side in to stick up for myself, but I knew that I had to keep going with Emily's perspective.

Brittany's discussion of the ambivalence she experienced while composing her narrative underscores the power that personal distress has to shut down empathy: she does not like how it feels to see herself as the antagonist and consider what her friend might have been feeling during their argument.

That Brittany manages to "put myself in her mind," even though

she does not “forget about how I was feeling through all of this,” suggests that she was able to at least move past personal distress and toward other empathic responses. Her emphasis on her own feelings suggests that she was ultimately engaging in role-taking empathy, which Keen explains is “rooted in . . . putting oneself in the perspective of that person” (133). Keen notes that, like the perspective-taking empathy that frequently appeared in writing from response 3, role taking is primarily cognitive because it relies on “active imagining.” Despite this similarity, however, Keen notes that the self is more central to role taking than to perspective taking because it asks “*How would I feel?*” rather than “*How does s/he feel?*” (132). Keen goes on to point out that “some theorists of narrative empathy regard this form of empathy as more ‘categorical,’ more dependent on matches with the self and group identity, and therefore less other-directed and less likely to lead to ethical expression of compassion than . . . perspective taking” (132).

Calliope, too, seems to have moved from personal distress to role taking. She also began her analysis with her feelings of discomfort:

During the process of writing this narrative, I kept wanting to refer to myself (Calliope) as “I.” It was extremely difficult to write about a situation in her viewpoint, making me to look like the bad person, when this whole time I had been seeing it the other way around. This was eye opening to me. . . . Even though it was difficult having to process these emotions, it was rather easy to write basically how she was feeling and what she was thinking. This is because I have been friends with her for years, so I pretty much knew how she processed and thought about stuff.

Particularly telling is Calliope’s reliance on the fact that she “[has] been friends with [her roommate] for years, so I pretty much knew how she processed and thought about stuff.” Though the line that separates role taking and perspective taking empathies is far from precise, Calliope’s confidence in her rendering of events nevertheless seems self- rather than other-oriented. It may be that she is moving toward perspective taking, but, ultimately, Calliope’s response is still rooted in the self.

Similar to Brittany’s desire to “stick up” for herself, Calliope didn’t like seeing herself as a bad person, and it may be that their personal distress responses prevented them from moving past role taking to what Keen (2015) sees as more ethical forms of empathy like perspective taking, or perhaps the most other-directed empathic response—and thus most likely to produce compassionate action—sympathy. Keen defines sympathy as “the concerned outcome of an other-oriented feeling *for* another,” which “expresses an appro-

propiately ‘congruent’ emotion that needs to match the other’s feelings exactly,” noting that sympathy is often regarded by philosophers “as an ethical expression of what begins as empathy, a more mature and other-directed concern” than the other concepts described (133). It’s likely that when students like Hunter, Larkin, and Marty talk about their future interactions being altered by the assignment, they are responding to feelings of sympathy. Marty even says as much in his response.

In many ways Responses 3 and 4 set students up for similar empathic reactions. Both asked students to engage in what Keen calls deliberate perspective taking—something I consistently referred to in class and in assignment sheets as “trying on” or “using another person’s ‘I.’” Nevertheless, student reactions to response 4 do not seem limited to this empathic response or even to a single type of response out of the four discussed above. Perhaps unsurprisingly, after the initial act of (or, in some cases, attempt at) perspective taking, the impulse for many students seems to have been personal distress at being forced to assume the perspective of their former antagonist. Depending on the nature of that relationship (whether the other party was an acquaintance, close friend, or family member), some students stopped at personal distress, while others moved on to role taking or sympathy. Significantly, then, even when writing prompts set students up for certain kinds of empathic reactions, we can understand those as merely starting points, open to influence by factors including (but not limited to) the nature of the student’s relationship with the narrated other and the extent to which the student is comfortable intuiting the thoughts and feelings of that other. Real-world relationships cannot help but inflect the ways in which students respond, as the above excerpts from student writing underscore. Similarly, knowledge generated through narrative engagement has the potential to extend back out and alter those real-world relationships.

Appeasement and Appropriation: The Problems with Empathy

Up to this point I’ve been discussing my students’ empathic responses without questioning whether, or to what extent, narrative empathy should be encouraged. In popular discourse, particularly that which concerns itself with narratives of those unlike us and especially when the “us,” or implied reader, is young, empathy is almost universally lauded as an unquestioned good, the highest and most worthy aim of narrative: a blog post from the play-based learning nonprofit Playworks, for example, opens by referring to empathy as “arguably the most important life skill our kids can learn” (Harris 2015). Similarly, in the introduction to a list of books that teach empathy,

Common Sense Media (n.d.) explains: “Teaching kids character strengths and life skills such as empathy is one of the most important jobs of being a parent. Empathic kids can put themselves in someone else’s shoes. It also allows them to develop other caring character strengths, such as compassion and gratitude.” Yet, as several scholars have pointed out, there is something inherently dangerous in this uncomplicated understanding of empathy, particularly when the empathizer or the one empathized with is relatively disempowered. In “Now Is the Time to Talk about What We Are Actually Talking About,” which addresses the 2016 presidential election, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2016) writes that

America’s addiction to optimism . . . allows too little room for resilience, and too much for fragility. Hazy visions of “healing” and “not becoming the hate we hate” sound dangerously like appeasement. The responsibility to forge unity belongs not to the denigrated but to the denigrators. The premise for empathy has to be equal humanity; it is an injustice to demand that the maligned identify with those who question their humanity.

Similarly, Amy Robillard (2017: 47) says of the conflation of the two that “appeasement and empathy share the practice of adopting another’s perspective, but their crucial differences need articulation in a culture far too tempted to conflate them. For evidence of such temptation, see any recent discussion asking rape victims to forgive their rapists.” Using psychologist Chris Cantor’s work on post-traumatic stress disorder, Robillard goes on to contextualize appeasement as “a defense for conspecific encounters with more dominant individuals . . . involv[ing] pacification, conciliation, and submission” (48). She concludes her essay with the claim that

empathy is listening, asking questions, imagining, *knowing you can’t know just how the other person feels*. Empathy is caring safely because you trust you’ll be cared for, too. Empathy is not something you can be shamed into. But appeasement is. Appeasement can be taught. It is taught every single day to victims of abuse who are later taught that perspective-taking is a valued intellectual and emotional skill. We call it empathy. (49, emphasis added)

Adichie and Robillard underscore the Janus-faced nature of empathy. Significantly, however, the problem isn’t empathy per se but appeasement masquerading as empathy—that is, when someone who is relatively disempowered is coerced or forced to take on the perspective of someone who has power over them. Adichie’s and Robillard’s analyses highlight the importance of the rela-

tionship between the empathizer and the empathized-with other. Depending on the context, then, it might even make sense to add appeasement, or forced perspective taking, as a ninth concept to Keen's list, particularly when asking students to take on the perspective of someone with whom they've been in conflict as I did with response 4.

As Amy Shuman (2005) points out, appeasement isn't the only danger to an uncomplicated understanding of empathy. Because many of the empathic reactions I've discussed up to this point have been augmented by relationships, it makes sense that Shuman's understanding of narrative is fundamentally relational in nature: "The general claims made for storytelling are a way of negotiating relationships between tellers and listeners, a way of demarcating a territory in which particular obligations are undertaken" (12). The problem, however, is that there's almost always a power differential inherent to these relationships:

Storytelling has been touted as a healing art or as a means for transforming oppressive conditions by creating an opportunity for suppressed voices to be heard (or for creating opportunities to listen to those voices). Very often, inspiration, redemption, emancipation, even subversion, require *the appropriation of others' stories*. . . . In listening to or even retelling other people's stories, narrators become witnesses to others' experiences, and storytelling provides some home for understanding across differences. (5, emphasis added)

Shuman cautions, however, that this appropriation on the part of listeners "can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding" (5). One need not look far to find an appropriative narrative that, as Shuman points out, "uses one person's tragedy to serve as another's inspiration," and such narratives "preserve, rather than subvert, oppressive situations" (5). Touching on the notion, per Bruner, that to narrate is to know, Shuman argues that

storytelling offers as one of its greatest promises the possibility of empathy, of understanding others. Empathy is one way that understanding can travel back toward the experience to recover the distance stories create when they are far from experience. *Empathy offers the possibility of understanding across space and time, but it rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer*. (5, emphasis added)⁶

And despite student concern over the accuracy of their perspective taking, Shuman points out that "*the problem is not the accuracy of representations* but the relationships between listeners and tellers produced by those representa-

tions” (25, emphasis added). What this means is that, even in the absence of a power differential that turns empathy into appeasement, and no matter how well intentioned or well researched narratives may be, the relationships that narrative empathy facilitates may still be appropriative, particularly when they remain focused on the self via personal growth or enlightenment rather than more just behavior toward the narrated other. We might, then, add Shuman’s notion of appropriation alongside Adichie’s and Robillard’s understanding of appeasement to more holistically represent the myriad empathic reactions to narrative.

Why Writing Matters

By way of conclusion, I will circle back to my initial research questions. While it still seems apparent that the narratives we consume do to some extent prime us to narrate in specific ways, that line of inquiry is far less compelling than it was when I began my investigation, and I now see it as background to the act of narration itself. The data sampled here underscore the significance of not only sitting down to write our stories but also, and especially, reflecting on that process. It is likely that, even without taking the additional steps of writing and reflecting, our internal autobiographical narration (in other words, the way we remember) shifts based on the narrative models to which we’re exposed. However, at least within the realm of pedagogical studies, there’s no way to measure narration without asking students to write and reflect, and student responses do indicate that writing from their characters’ perspectives helped them see things that didn’t occur to them when merely watching them onscreen. As Amber explained in response 3, “It was kind of neat to try to think through the thought patterns of a character because I, at least, don’t really think about these things when I am actually watching the show. I just get frustrated at the character and what they are doing rather than trying to think about their thought process and reasoning for what they are doing.” The above data suggest that there’s something about the act of writing and reflecting, especially when informed by a theoretical vocabulary, that fundamentally alters the way people construct and understand their own stories and the stories of others. Perhaps most significantly, student responses underscore the empathic nature of all narrative, and future research in this area should attend to the ways in which a working knowledge of the various modes of—and dangers inherent to—empathy influences narration. Future inquiries might also explore the ways in which writing prompts prime students for certain empathic responses, and instructors would do well (myself included) to augment their students’ theoretical toolkits to include an

understanding of the various forms of narrative empathy, especially the more subtle and often problematic forms of appeasement and appropriation. It is important to recognize that students may engage with several types of empathy as they move through a narrative, and, depending on the circumstances, writing prompts may also be designed to encourage students to shift from the more self-centered role-taking to the more other-oriented perspective-taking empathy, for example. If we accept that student engagement with narrative is fundamentally empathic, then booklists and writing assignments can be designed to exploit this fact, particularly in courses that concern themselves with diversity in representation and social justice. Further, just as engagement with narrative in the classroom generates knowledge in the real world, complicating our understanding of narrative empathy might counterbalance the overly simplistic notion of empathy as a virtue to be universally embraced and encouraged, helping students recognize the ways in which they are likely already being coerced into appeasement by or are appropriating narratives of real others.

Notes

1. All student names are pseudonyms.
2. In this sense, students are, perhaps unconsciously, operating under the misconception, however illusory it might be, that story precedes narrative discourse—that discourse is actually a re-presentation of (a) story that exists somewhere in the real world. Jonathan Culler (1981: 183) refers to this as the “double logic” of narrative, and, at least for Culler, it is not so much a misconception as an ambiguity that structures our interaction with narrative. This ambiguity, then, may give students the impression that fictional characters have thoughts, feelings, and ideas that, with a little effort, might be interpreted more or less correctly—in other words, to treat their characters as if they’re people.
3. Seven students out of twenty-nine, as one student had already dropped the class by this point.
4. Cognitive empathy, motor mimicry, emotion-catching and matching, aesthetic empathy, perspective taking (“How does she feel?”), role taking (“How would I feel?”), personal distress, and sympathy (“feeling for”).
5. Here, and throughout this article, my use of the term *nonfiction* is not an assessment of the text’s factuality but an acknowledgment that students are using events and people from their own lives as inspiration rather than events and people from fictional narratives. In that sense, *life writing*—defined by Smith and Watson (2010: 4) as “a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical”—is a more precise term.

6. Because narrative empathy is discussed primarily within the context of readership, the other to which we often refer is one who is socially, culturally, racially, or otherwise distinct from the reader; the self is not customarily posited as the narrated other. If the person who suffers, however, is the narrator, then life writing may be one instance in which “travel[ing] back toward the experience” can offer the benefit of increased empathy for the self along with the reorientation of perception students experienced with response 4.

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