Reading

Suffering

Reading Suffering

An empirical inquiry into empathic and reflective responses to literary narratives

Lezen over lijden

Een empirisch onderzoek naar empathie en reflectie in reactie op literaire verhalen

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General Introduction

It always irritated Borges when he was asked, "What is the use of literature?" It seemed to him a stupid question, to which he would reply: "No one would ask what is the use of a canary's song or a beautiful sunset." If such beautiful things exist, and if, thanks to them, life is even for an instant less ugly and less sad, is it not petty to seek practical justifications?

But the question is a good one. For novels and poems are not like the sound of birdsong or the spectacle of the sun sinking into the horizon, because they were not created by chance or by nature. They are human creations, and it is therefore legitimate to ask how and why they came into the world, and what is their purpose, and why they have lasted so long.

(Mario Vargas Llosa – "Why Literature?," 2001)

When I was nine years old, I had a distressing experience involving Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (*Notre-Dame de Paris*, 1831). My mother was reading a Dutch edition of the book to me and we were nearing the end. Hunchbacked Quasimodo had rescued the beautiful gypsy Esmeralda earlier on in the story, so *Notre-Dame* appeared to be one of these heroic tales about not judging a book by its cover. As it turned out, *Notre-Dame* was (among other things) about witch-hunts, betrayal, and the general injustice in the world. It is a tragedy, ending in the death of all the protagonists. After we finished the book, I felt devastated. But also, some realization had sunk in, although at the time I would not have been able to formulate what it was that I realized. I did not, as some may have, stop reading these kinds of tragic narratives. Rather, I kept feeling attracted to stories about suffering, from Flannery O'Connor's southern gothic tales to David Vann's literary sublimations of his father's suicide.

This dissertation is not about me, but my experience may be illustrative of a more wide-spread human need to hear about the pain of others in a way that allows for a space to empathize, to reflect, and to gain insights. That human need can be deduced from the tremendous popular success of, for example, John Green's cancer novel *The Fault in Our Stars* (2013) or, in the Netherlands, A. F. Th. van der Heijden's novel about the loss of his son, *Tonio* (2015; original Dutch version: 2011). According to (auto)biography specialist Julie Rak (2013), the current interest in books that address excruciating life experiences is noticeable, but of course, suffering in all its variety has always been an important subject for literature. From Achilles' grief in Homer's *Iliad* (760–710 BC) to Joan Didion's grief in her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2006), the need to communicate about loss, pain and despair remains. What is it that readers find in these kinds of texts?

And when people read about suffering, what does it do to them? Among the claims scholars and critics have made concerning the effects of literature, particularly literature about suffering, those that appear to recur most often are that it has the ability to evoke empathy and that it can trigger people to reflect (e.g., Althusser, 1983; Booth, 1988; Bronzwaer 1986; De Botton, 1997; Habermas, 1983; Nussbaum, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2010; Pinker, 2011; Rorty, 1989; Scarry, 1999; Sontag, 2007). However, these psychological reactions to literature have hardly been systematically investigated. While recently there has been considerable progress in the area of reader response research, empirical evidence backing the positive claims about literature is lagging behind (cf. Keen, 2007). This makes it all the more relevant to explore general patterns in readers' experiences, to find out whether and how reading literary texts can lead to such prosocial effects like an increased understanding of others.

In this dissertation, I provide preliminary answers to four research questions concerning our relation to (literary) narratives about suffering:

(I)   What are readers' motives to read about suffering?

(II)   To what extent do literary narrative texts about suffering evoke affective responses during reading, reflection, empathy towards others and prosocial behavior in comparison to non-literary texts?

(III) To what extent do personal characteristics of readers influence those affective responses, reflection, empathy towards others and prosocial behavior?

(IV)   To what extent and how do affective responses during reading influence reflection, empathy towards others and prosocial behavior?

Each of these questions is expansive and would warrant multiple research projects. As a whole, the dissertation aims to give a comprehensive account that answers all of these questions to some extent, rather than attempting to answer one of them in full detail. At the same time, it was evidently necessary to delimit the concepts that are mentioned in the research questions. Below, I first discuss how the three parts of the dissertation attempt to answer the questions. Subsequently, I define the main concepts with more specificity, and finally, I remark upon the relevance of the current project.

Why do people want to read stories about the suffering of others?

Part I of the dissertation tries to provide an answer to this age-old question. It does so by reviewing previous theoretical and empirical work (Chapter 1), as well as through a survey into general reader preferences (Chapter 2) and a survey into readers' motives for reading one specific best-selling novel about grief, A. F. Th. van der Heijden's "requiem novel" *Tonio* (Chapter 3). Using insights from literary studies as well as from media psychology, pleasure-oriented ("hedonic") and meaning-oriented ("eudaimonic") motives for reading tragic stories are explored. The first type of motives are consistent with the theory that

we seek out certain media because we want to maximize pleasure and minimize discomfort (e.g., Zillmann, 1988). The second type challenges that hedonic interpretation of media preference, and suggest that a large part of why people choose to expose themselves to sad media lies in a search for meaning (e.g., Oliver, 1993, 2008). The survey studies show the extent to which people claim to read in order to gain insight in relation to other motives. Furthermore, the *Tonio* study makes a start on looking at readers' feelings and thoughts during reading (research question II). Explicit attention is paid to Aristotle's catharsis-concept, with the suggestion that instead of purging us of unpleasant emotions, tragic narratives may help us contextualize such emotions (cf. Nussbaum, 1986; Scheele, 2001).

While the first two chapters use an overarching concept of suffering as all kinds of mental and physical pain, the rest of the dissertation focuses on depression and grief. These types of mental pain, especially grief, are regularly described in contemporary literature. Depression and grief share certain symptoms, most notably sadness, and both could be seen as loss-related (see Freud's 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," in Strachey, 1959, cf. Leader, 2009). As Freud conceptualized it, "mourning" (i.e., grief) is a conscious process of dealing with the loss of a beloved. In "melancholia" (i.e., depression), the exact loss tends to be unclear, and may not be consciously experienced as a loss. What happens in melancholia, according to Freud (1917; in Strachey, 1959), is that the lost object or person in which one had invested one's libidinal energy has become internalized as part of oneself. Any anger or ambivalence one feels towards this object or person thus is turned towards oneself, leading to the guilt and suicidal ideation that can accompany depression.[1] Since grief has a clear object and tends to be less self-reprimanding, it may be easier to empathize with than depression for those who have not experienced these mental states themselves. Comparing

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[1] Note that the term "melancholia" (the predecessor of "depression") has meant different things throughout its history; it used to be associated more strongly with anxiety than sadness, according to, for example, Leader (2009).

responses to texts about depression and grief allowed me to identify the influence of readers' personal experience on empathic and reflective reactions (Part II). Whether and how people's own experiences determine their responses during reading was further investigated in Part III, which looked in further detail into reader reactions to two novels about depression.

What are the effects of reading literary texts about suffering?

For whom do literary texts about suffering evoke feelings, thoughts and empathy with others, and to what extent are such responses different from those to non-literary texts? Research questions II-IV are the focus of the second and third part of the dissertation, which start from the claims by various authors, critics, and academics that literary reading increases empathy and reflection (e.g., Althusser, 1983; Booth, 1988; Bronzwaer 1986; De Botton, 1997; Habermas, 1983; Nussbaum, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2010; Pinker, 2011; Rorty, 1989; Scarry, 1999; Sontag, 2007). Such claims may sound reasonable if you are an avid reader, as you may have had one or multiple experiences of a literary text influencing your feelings and your thoughts. However, we can wonder to what extent texts need to be "literary" to accomplish empathic and reflective reactions – could an informative or simple narrative text not have the same effect? The argument made by one of the main proponents of literary reading, Martha Nussbaum (1995, 1997, 2001), is that by triggering readers' imaginations and emotions, literature can function as a playing field of ethics, helping readers engage with characters who are different from themselves and confronting them with the fact that there can be multiple perspectives on one situation (cf. Hakemulder, 2000).[2]

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[2] Nussbaum can be seen as representing a stream within the "ethics of reading" that is humanistic, trying to find moral guidance in literary texts. On the other side of the spectrum of the ethics of reading are poststructuralists or deconstructivists, who see the ethics of literature exactly in the fact that literary texts do not offer us one meaning, one vision of "the good life," but keep obscuring morality through multilayeredness (Attridge, 2004; Gibson, 1999). Korthals Altes (2006) has criticized both extremes for "reducing literature to a preset idea about what ethics actually is" (p. 15). I would argue that any discussion of the ethics of reading restricts the meaning of ethics through defining its subject.

Yet, following that argument, it can be questioned how "literary" texts need to be to cause such effects, whether "middlebrow literature" might not have similar or even stronger effects (cf. Keen, 2007).

In Part II, I argue for the importance of distinguishing between the effects of a text being "narrative" (presenting related events happening to characters), "fiction" (depicting imagined events: what could have been or should be instead of what actually was, cf. Aristotle's *mimesis*) and "literary" (directing attention to the form, containing aesthetic and/or unconventional features), and I review the evidence we have for a specific effect of literariness on empathy and reflection (Chapter 5). In addition, I present two reader response studies, one comparing reactions to literary narratives, non-literary narratives and informative texts (Chapter 6), and the other comparing reactions to texts differing in their level of literary stylistic features (Chapter 7). While the two empirical studies in Part II are largely quantitative, Part III tries to provide more insight in the affective, empathic and reflective reactions of readers through qualitative methods, namely reading diaries and interviews (Chapter 10). Chapters that have not been mentioned yet form the introductions and conclusions to the other chapters.

Defining the terms

In order to research the effects of "literature" on "affective responses," "empathy" and "reflection," we need to be clear on what these concepts signify and how they could potentially be measured. Let me first explain what is meant in this dissertation by the contested term "literature." Within the psychological perspective that I take, the subjective reader experience is crucial (cf. Miall, 2006).[3] My definition of "literature" and "literariness" is therefore partly text-

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As long as the critic alone, as the "ideal reader" (Iser, 1978), determines what the ethics of the text are, there is no escape from normativity. The best way out of this dilemma, in my opinion, is to find out what "regular" readers actually do with literary texts.

[3] Although cognitive processes are inherent to the reading process, this dissertation does not aim to elucidate purely cognitive or neurophysiological aspects. For those interested in a neurophysiological

immanent, partly subjective. With that approach, I follow reader response researchers Miall and Kuiken (1994, 1999), who themselves have relied on the definitions of literature by literary scholars, particularly the Russian formalist Shklovsky (1965) and the structuralist Mukařovský (1976).

Shklovsky (1965) coined the term "*ostranenie*" (meaning "estrangement" or "defamiliarization") to indicate that the function of literature is to make everyday objects and situations appear strange, by using, for example an unfamiliar perspective or idiom. Similarly, Jakobson (1960) posited the "poetic function" as one particular function of language, designating those strings of words that have as their main purpose to show the possibilities of language, focusing the attention on the form – this function is mainly found in literature. And Mukařovský (1976) argued that what makes a text literary is "foregrounding" (orig. Czech "*aktualizace*"): textual features standing out from "ordinary" language use. What is "ordinary" and what is "unfamiliar" can of course be debated and always needs a (social and textual) context, but the gist in all these definitions is of text elements being surprising and striking for a reader.

A competing, sociological perspective on what constitutes "literature" would put the focus on its socio-cultural construction, it being the outcome of what institutions like universities and literary magazines happen to find interesting at a certain time and place (e.g., Fish, 1980; Smith, 1988). The problem with such a focus, as Miall and Kuiken (1999) have also argued, is that there are narratives, sentences and metaphors that have survived throughout the ages, still feeling "novel," even though the social context has changed radically (e.g., *Don Quixote* or the poetry of Sappho). At least a proportion of literary texts feels original to readers regardless of their reading experience, and foregrounded textual features generally increase the likelihood of a text being

approach to literary reading, I refer to Miall (2011). Those wanting more information about a cognitive perspective on (literary) reading, or "cognitive poetics," can turn to, e.g., Gavins and Steen (2003) or Stockwell (2002).

evaluated as original or striking (see for empirical evidence Miall & Kuiken, 1994).

In Part II and III, I look into the effects of that originality (or: "foregrounding") as a text feature in narratives, while making sure the textual elements are subjectively perceived as making the text more original as well (for which I use the term "perceived foregrounding"). I also explore the effects of the subjective experience of originality separately. This does not mean that I deny that what is deemed original and what is not is established within a socio-cultural context – in fact, the novels that I discuss have all to greater or lesser extent been selected in first instance because of critical acclaim – but given the psychological focus of the project, this context is not further researched. Within the two experiments, readers were presented with the texts without any paratextual information; they thus knew nothing about the status of the authors.

Texts can evoke "affective responses," which signifies all the feelings that readers may have during and after reading. I concentrate on two types of feelings that have previously been theorized to potentially lead to empathy and reflection (e.g., Mar & Oatley, 2008; Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011; Miall & Kuiken, 2002): "narrative feelings" and "aesthetic feelings" (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Tan, 1996).[4] In the conceptualization of Miall and Kuiken (2002), which I follow, narrative feelings are those affective states triggered by characters and/or the narrative event sequence, predominantly identification, sympathy and empathy with characters, and absorption into the narrative world.

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[4] Note that throughout this dissertation, I do not make strict distinctions between "emotion," "affect" and "feeling." However, as overarching concepts for people's responses during reading, I prefer the terms "affective responses" and "feelings," since "emotions" – in the definition of Frijda (1986) – involve both an interest and an action tendency, and particularly the latter may not always be clearly present in the reading situation. Feelings, in Frijda's categorization, are more indistinct, including, for example, the experience of pleasantness or liking. In speaking consistently of "narrative feelings" and "aesthetic feelings," I follow Miall and Kuiken (2002), who also used the term "feelings" for affective responses to the narrative world and the style of the text. The earlier conceptualizations of Kneepkens and Zwaan (1994) and of Tan (1996), on the other hand, used the term "emotions."

Absorption can be distinguished from empathy, sympathy and identification in the sense that it is not a feeling towards characters but a feeling of being immersed in the narrative world, experiencing it as vivid (also called "transportation"; e.g., Green & Brock, 2000; Kuijpers, 2014; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). The distinctions between the character-oriented narrative feelings are somewhat more complex. Generally, those distinguishing between empathy, sympathy and identification define empathy as feeling someone else's feelings ("feeling with"), sympathy as feeling concern for another without feeling what the other feels ("feeling for"), and identification as taking a character's perspective combined with recognizing similarities (cf., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Chismar, 1988; Coplan, 2004; Keen, 2006; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011).[5] Sympathy is theoretically different from empathy in the sense that it "does not require a simulation of the other or insight into his state of mind, but does require a positive attitude of being 'for' the other" (Breithaupt, 2012, p. 85). However, empathy and sympathy can be difficult to distinguish empirically, since, as Keen (2006) has pointed out, in popular usage it is not common to differentiate between the two.[6] Since I rely on readers' subjective experiences in the current project, I keep the theoretical distinctions in the back of my mind while also taking into account to what extent readers themselves make the differentiation between empathy, sympathy and identification.

While narrative feelings are about the content of a text, aesthetic feelings are directed towards the formal (stylistic) features of the text, such as images, contrasts and perspective, and include a heightened interest in the form, finding it original, good, striking or beautiful (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Of course,

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[5] Necessarily, my explanations and definitions of how I use these terms are limited. For more extensive discussions on the difference between "empathy" and "sympathy," see, e.g., Chismar (1988), Keen (2006), and Koopman (2010). For the term "identification" within (empirical) aesthetics, see Cupchik (1997). The concept "identification" of course also has a rich history in psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's writings (see Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973).

[6] For example, within the context of responding to characters, some have conflated identification and empathy as both being about internalizing characters' goals and merging with the character (e.g., Cohen, 2001; Igartua, 2010), while others have stressed that identification and empathy are separate constructs (e.g., Coplan, 2004; Keen, 2006; Mar et al., 2011; Zillmann, 1994).

negative feelings such as sadness, irritation and boredom are also possible. In this dissertation, negative feelings fall under the more general concept "distance" insofar as they indicate a lack of the other narrative and aesthetic feelings, but under "empathic distress" insofar as they are an (unpleasant) emotional response to characters who are in mental or physical pain (cf. "personal distress" – Davis, 1980, 1983; Keen, 2006). While it is not always easy or possible to distinguish whether a feeling is a response to style or content, I reserve the term "narrative feelings" for reactions most likely to be caused by events, for example, curiosity and surprise (cf. Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). Overall, in considering aesthetic feelings, the current project pays little attention to effects of plot/narrative structure, rather focusing on people's subjective response to stylistic elements like metaphors, contrasts, and detailed descriptions, since these are more specific to literature as a language-based medium.

"Empathy" can be felt for characters (cf. "narrative empathy," Keen, 2007), but the kind of empathy that I am mainly interested in is empathy for other people in real life, as this is eventually the type of prosocial effect of literature that Nussbaum and others are hoping to see. In its base, such empathy can be defined as "the notion of responsivity to the experiences of another" (Davis, 1980, p. 3). Or, in the more extensive definition of Keith Oatley (2011):

> Empathy has been described as involving: (a) having an emotion, that (b) is in some way similar to that of another person, that (c) is elicited by observation or imagination of the other's emotion, and that involves (d) knowing that the other is the source of one's own emotion. (p. 113)

However, just feeling something similar to another person does not help the person in question; attitudes and behavior need to be in line with those feelings as well (cf. Keen, 2007). The type of empathic reaction that we are then describing is a mixture of "affective" (or "warm") and "cognitive" (or "cold") empathy. This distinction has been made by, amongst others, Davis (1980,

1983): "cognitive empathy" is the ability to understand someone else's perspective and "emotional empathy" is about feeling similar emotions to someone else. The basic form of cognitive empathy has been called "Theory of Mind" (ToM, see: Baron-Cohen, 1991; Premack & Woodruff, 1978): attributing mental states (what someone thinks, feels, wants or believes) to others. The most basic form of emotional empathy is "emotional contagion," the automatic mimicking and experiencing of someone's emotional state (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1994). While theoretically useful, in our everyday empathic responses, cognitive and affective processes constantly interact, especially when reactions become more complex than basic emotional contagion (cf. Frijda, 1986; Izard, 2009; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Nathanson, 2003). Consciously experiencing empathy can be argued to be impossible without cognitive processes like perception, attention, and making inferences (cf. Frijda, 1986). As Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz and Perry (2009) emphasized while providing neurological evidence that cognitive and emotional empathy are mediated by different brain structures: "Every empathic response will evoke both components to some extent" (p. 625). The responses I look at in this dissertation are complex combinations of affective and cognitive empathy. Although sometimes one component may be dominant, overall, I will use the overarching term "empathic reaction" to cover the combination of emotional and cognitive elements.

Finally, even though it has received less theoretical and empirical attention, "reflection" may be at least as socially relevant to explore in the context of literary reading as empathy. To quote Keen (2007), "Empathy is easy to feel, but like all fleeting emotions, it passes, and relatively few altruistic actions (…) can be securely linked in a causal chain to our empathic feelings" (p. 35). When people are triggered to reflect, on the other hand, this might increase their capacity to consider multiple perspectives on one situation and it could change their minds in moral and personal issues, possibly having longer-term effects

than a mainly affective empathic response. Throughout the dissertation, "reflection" signifies people's conscious thoughts and insights about oneself, others, society, and life in general.

In Part I, I mainly use the concept of catharsis as "clarification" to designate a deeper kind of reflection, but since clarification is theoretically connected to the experiences of pity and fear, it can cause confusion if this concept is used when those emotions do not occur. "Reflection" is thus the more inclusive term for all kinds of thoughts throughout the dissertation. While reflection is seen as a predominantly cognitive process, thoughts and feelings are likely to interact, with feelings potentially fueling thoughts and possibly even leading to a deeper kind of understanding (cf. Nussbaum, 1990). Texts that we find striking, interesting or moving may demand more cognitive elaboration, which, in turn, could evoke new feelings (cf. Koopman, Hilscher, & Cupchik, 2012; Miall & Kuiken, 1994). In this way, reflection and empathy could also be interrelated. I therefore pay attention to whether and how thinking and feeling appear to go together.

Why this project is relevant

The explorations in the first part of the dissertation are relevant to our understanding why people read and watch sad stories in general, and those in the second and third part are helpful to determine which responses literature can evoke and how. This does not imply, however, that the aim of this dissertation would be to find "useful" functions of literature. I do understand the temptation among researchers to treat literary reading in this way. While the values of reading and literature have often been defended, they appear to have become more contested in this time with its diversified media landscape – this time, moreover, which demands that our actions are efficient and productive (cf. Nussbaum, 2010). The eagerness with which empirical studies showing any positive sign of reading (e.g., Kidd & Castano, 2013) are welcomed in the popular

press, suggests that those lamenting the death of the novel – a supposed death, which is not sufficiently backed up by the numbers[7] – are starving for measurable proof to revive the object of their affection. If "studies show" that literary texts do indeed significantly impact empathy and/or reflection, this would attest to the importance of reading high quality texts, which could have implications for government policies on for example high school education and the general promotion of reading. Policies that could "save" literature, save books.[8]

However, narrowing literature to its ability to foster empathy may not be the smartest move for bibliophiles. There may, namely, be other ways to make people empathize with out-groups that might be more direct, more effective, like writing an essay from another's perspective or simply talking to one another (cf. Batson & Ahmad, 2009). If literature's right to exist is primarily seen in its prosocial function, any evidence that it is less effective than other means could be detrimental to how people perceive literature. In addition, if such a utilitarian perspective on literature is used by policy-makers and publishers, it may lead to the censorship of those books depicting asocial characters and events (e.g., Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, 1991).

Like any art form, literature springs from the craft and creativity of its maker; it cannot be reduced to a specific prosocial effect. As Borges (quoted by the Nobel Prize-winning Peruvian writer Vargas Llosa at the beginning of this Introduction) rightfully pointed out, if there is any beauty to be found in a text, that alone is a justification for its existence. And for those who really need an additional, practical effect, Keen (2007) has suggested that there is little reason

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[7] Social polls in the U.S. show that although Americans read less than in the seventies, three quarters of them still read books, with 28% reading 11 or more books a year (Weismann, 2014). The percentage of young American adults who read has not declined since 2002 (NEA 2012 survey, in Weissmann, 2014). In the Netherlands, 26% of the respondents in a recent large-scale representative survey indicated to read a literary novel at least once a month and half of the respondents said that they would generally like to read more (Witte & Scholtz, 2015).

[8] Those defending literature tend to be attached to its traditional material appearance: the book in printed form. At the same time, one could argue that "literature" or "literariness" can be found in such contemporary media as tv-series, documentaries and games.

to doubt that reading novels "improves the vocabulary and informs the reader about subjects, times, people, and places (real and imagined) in a way that extends knowledge beyond individual experience" (p. xv).

The aim of this dissertation is to further our understanding of literary reading, to investigate the claims by Nussbaum and others about potential effects of reading well-crafted narratives about suffering. To find out, as Vargas Llosa expressed in the opening quote, why people keep reading those narratives. Out of curiosity, out of a search for truth. Not in order to be able to list all the things that literature can do, but to see how it works. Literature cannot be saved through exaggerated or simplified stories about its supposed redeeming qualities. Such stories have a tendency of backfiring and are against everything that literature stands for. Literature, however, might be saved if enough people take the time and effort to see what it is really about, what it can and what it cannot do and why. If people take it seriously. Just like well-intentioned persons, well-written books deserve no less.

Part I. The Attraction of Sad Stories

I climbed the stairs of the inn first and went into the room. The fire was not out, but there were no flames. I lit a candle quickly. I was surprised not to hear any sound from Pretty-Heart. I found him, lying under his coverlets, stretched out his full length, dressed in his general's uniform. He appeared to be asleep. I leaned over him and took his hand gently to wake him up. His hand was cold. Vitalis came into the room. I turned to him.

"Pretty-Heart is cold," I said.

My master came to my side and also leaned over the bed.

"He is dead," he said. "It was to be. Ah, Remi, boy, I did wrong to take you away from Mrs. Milligan. I am punished. Zerbino, Dulcie, and now Pretty-Heart and ... this is not the end!"

(Hector Malot – *Nobody's Boy*, 1878, chapter XIV)

Many of those who have read Hector Malot's *Nobody's Boy* [1878] when they were young must vividly remember this scene in which Remi recounts the death of Vitalis' beloved monkey Joli-Coeur. Like *Nobody's Boy*, countless popular and acclaimed literary works include scenes of suffering, often heart-wrenching or mind-baffling – from the tragedies of Sophocles to the dramatic social realism of Émile Zola and from the dark, violent universe of Cormac McCarthy to the best-selling young adult fiction of John Green. Given this unremitting popularity of narratives about suffering, these stories appear to satisfy certain human needs. What are these needs exactly? What do readers gain from reading narrative representations of suffering, or at least: what do they think they gain? This question is central in the first part of this dissertation. Instead of "narratives about suffering" or "narrative representations of suffering," in what is to follow,

I will mostly use the shorter term "sad stories." While "sad stories" sounds less precise, it has the advantage of capturing both the fact that sad events are portrayed and the potential sadness evoked in the reader (cf. "sad films," Oliver, 1993).

I start this first part by providing a concise overview of theoretical and empirical work addressing the attraction of sad stories. Subsequently, two empirical studies are presented: Chapter 2 discusses a survey study of readers' motives to read "sad books" in general, and Chapter 3 focuses on the motives to read one specific sad book: A. F. Th. van der Heijden's *Tonio*.[9] Together, these chapters shed light on so-called "hedonic" (pleasure-oriented) and "eudaimonic" (meaning-oriented) concerns while reading narratives about suffering, and provide an answer to the question why we want to read such narratives. Synthesizing the results of the two empirical studies, Chapter 4 offers a preliminary conclusion and points the way to the next chapters.

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[9] The two empirical studies have been published separately in international peer-reviewed journals. The study in Chapter 2 has been published in a somewhat different form in *Poetics*, under the title "Why do we read sad books? Eudaimonic motives and meta-emotions" (Koopman, 2015a); the study in Chapter 3 has been published in a different form in *Scientific Study of Literature*, under the title "The attraction of tragic narrative: Catharsis and other motives" (Koopman, 2013). Chapter 1 combines the introductions of both empirical studies.

1. Theorizing Our Attraction to Sad Stories

Why does someone want to read about the pain and hardships of others? In this chapter, readers' attraction to sad stories is scrutinized through earlier theoretical and empirical investigations. First, I reflect on the question which narrative forms suffering can take that are relevant for our investigation. The literary concept "tragedy" will be central in this discussion. Subsequently, I turn to readers' potential motives for reading sad stories, drawing from empirical literary studies as well as from media psychology. Within this overview, I discuss a revised understanding of the classic Aristotelian catharsis hypothesis, which has been theorized before by Nussbaum (1986) as well as by Scheele (2001). This different interpretation of catharsis explains the attraction of sad stories through a focus on meaning-making, while integrating affective responses (cf. Oliver & Bartsch, 2010).

1.1. Defining "Tragedy"

Distressed characters can be found within various kinds of stories, or plot structures. In practically every story, protagonists face some trials and tribulations. But is this always perceived as suffering, as "sad"? From the perspective of reader response research, this is eventually up to the individual reader: every reading experience is an interaction between text and reader, in which the meaning of the text is realized by the reader (e.g., Jauss, 1982; Rosenblatt, 1978). For a specific reader, personal experiences can make a story that other people find comic or romantic feel sad (e.g., when the story is about a happy marriage while the reader is currently going through a divorce). This empirical perspective is important to keep in mind, and will be central in the second and third part of the dissertation, which look into reader reactions to

suffering characters. This first part, however, tries to find general motives to read about suffering. This implies a more general attraction to stories considered "sad," an attraction which can be illuminated by taking a – brief and inevitably fragmentary – look at how literary scholarship has previously discussed "tragedy."

The most logical place to start when exploring tragedy is Aristotle's *Poetics*, an incomplete manuscript consisting of lecture notes on poetic (or: literary)[10] types, composed between 360 and 320 BC (Halliwell, 1987). Scholars agree that Aristotle's general aim is to redeem literature, after Plato in the *Republic* had banned the poets from his ideal state, arguing that they only imitate reality and that their imitations trigger us to feel all sorts of emotions, turning us into sentimental fools (e.g., Gassner in Butcher, 1951; Halliwell, 1987). Aristotle, on the other hand, argues that by showing us what could occur, narrative representations can teach us more universal truths than historical and philosophical treatises (*Poetics*, Chapter IX).[11]

This is particularly the case for the two literary genres which deal with "serious" subjects: epic and tragic poetry. Of the four literary types Aristotle discusses – epic and tragic poetry, comedy and dithyramb (*Poetics*, Chapter I) – he expresses a clear preference for these two, and more specifically for tragedy. He argues that tragedy possesses all the valuable aspects of epic poetry, but that tragedy's more concise plot structure makes it superior (*Poetics*, Chapter XXIV).

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[10] "Poetry," "literature" and "arts" have been used interchangeably for Aristotle's term "poetry" (*poiesis*/ ποίησις), but "literature" may be the most appropriate if we take into consideration how we understand these terms today. "Poiesis" means "making," thus is closest to "arts," but in modern parlance we tend to think predominantly of the pictorial arts when talking about "arts," while in the *Poetics*, Aristotle only discusses those forms of "mimesis" (representation) that use language (see Chapter I of the *Poetics;* in addition, the forms of mimesis he discusses can use rhythm and melody, as musical accompaniment was more common in Aristotle's day). Aristotle goes on to stress in his second chapter that the forms of mimesis he discusses all portray "people in action"; his focus is thus on narrative forms.

[11] I have looked at various translations of Aristotle's *Poetics* (Benardete & Davis, 2002; Butcher, 1951; Golden, 1968; Halliwell, 1987). If, in the text, I paraphrase a general statement by Aristotle which is basically the same in all translations, I do not refer to one edition, but to the chapter within the *Poetics*. If, however, I use a longer quote, and/or if translations differ and this is crucial to the interpretation, or if I discuss an interpretation, I mention the specific source this comes from.

Aristotle goes into quite some detail when it comes to what a tragic plot should look like, but given the fact that our concern is not with constructing the perfect play and that "plot" has lost its centrality in contemporary literature, we do not need to repeat his entire argument. More relevantly for the current purpose, Aristotle stresses the importance of suffering:

> To the definitions of reversal and recognition already given we can add that of suffering: a destructive or painful action, such as visible deaths, torments, woundings, and other things of the same kind. (Chapter XI, Halliwell, 1987, p. 43)

Later, in Chapter XIII, Aristotle equates "suffering" with "fearful and pitiful events" and stresses that this is "the *distinctive feature* of this type of mimesis" (Halliwell, 1987, p. 44, my emphasis). He goes on to explain which types of characters and events will evoke pity and fear: "pity is felt towards one whose affliction is undeserved, fear towards one who is like ourselves" (ibid.).

Apart from finding "suffering" central, Aristotle also appears to prefer a sad ending over a happy one (even though happy endings did belong to the possibilities for tragic poetry in his day). He states that ending "with affliction (…) [makes] the most tragic impression," and praises Euripides for using such endings (Halliwell, 1987, p. 45). This stress on the "tragic *impression*" illustrates that Aristotle sees the potential emotional reaction of the audience as a good indicator of the quality of a (tragic) representation, as is also implied in his definition of tragedy in Chapter VI: "a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude (…) and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions" (Halliwell, 1987, p. 37). I will later come back to the translation of the word *katharsis*, for now it suffices to say that it can be translated as either "purgation," "purification," or "clarification" (Golden, 1968, p. 133). Different translations have different implications for the audience response theory Aristotle proposes here, but in all cases it could be said that the tragic representation evokes emotions which we do not find altogether

pleasant in real situations and that something happens to us through experiencing such emotions in this (fictional) way.

While Aristotle's discussion of tragedy can help to inspire hypotheses about the emotional effects sad stories could have, we should keep in mind that a) he was concerned with describing what he personally deemed the ideal tragedy, not necessarily with the most common, b) he had quite a specific genre (and audience) in mind, with a limited, concise plot structure.[12] Concerning point b, Aristotle's prescriptive account of literary modes was necessarily based on what existed at the time of writing, and literature has progressed radically since, if only in producing "the novel."[13] It is therefore useful to complement Aristotle's account with more contemporary discussions.

While also somewhat dated, Northrop Frye's (2000) *Anatomy of Criticism* [1957] offers a comprehensive overview of story types that still basically corresponds to the types we find in literature today. Frye (2000) makes a broad distinction between "comic modes" and "tragic modes," and pays extensive attention to the various "tragic fictional modes." According to Frye (2000), comedies are an inherently "social" genre, with characters finding their place within a society. There is a pleasurable resolution, a happy ending, for most if not all involved (even antagonists tend to get some consolation in comedies). Before that resolution, the heroes have to deal with obstacles. Yet, Frye agrees with Aristotle that this never becomes too upsetting in a comedy, as there is a light tone of absurdism and foolishness, guaranteeing that any unhappiness is based on misunderstanding and miscommunication and will in time be lifted.[14]

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[12] Music, for example, was an integral part of tragedy for Aristotle. According to today's standards, what Aristotle describes may come closest to successful Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals like *Evita* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

[13] There is some debate over which literary work should be seen as the first novel. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-1615), Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) are often nominated. These discussions are not very productive, however, as it all depends on one's definition and misrepresents literature's history as one of stages instead of as one of continuous development.

[14] According to Aristotle, the comic may be about mistakes and "shame," but it "is lacking in pain or destruction: to take an obvious example: the comic mask is ugly and misshapen, but does not express pain" (*Poetics*, Chapter V, Halliwell, p. 36).

Tragedies, however, are concerned with the rupture between individual and society, typically showing death, suffering and sacrifice (Frye, 2000). For Frye, there is no explicit need for a higher power influencing the events.[15] Camus's atheistic *L'Étranger* (1942) is just as much a narrative within the tragic mode as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (approx. 429 BC). These two examples are different in type, though: within the overarching tragic and comic modes Frye distinguishes a "high mimetic mode" (with a protagonist "superior" to ourselves, but not to his environment: not a god or half god, but a leader), a "low mimetic mode" (with a protagonist neither superior nor inferior to us, but pretty much like us), and an "ironic mode" (with a protagonist "inferior" to ourselves).[16] Frye does not mean "superior" and "inferior" as a moral judgment, but as the might, intelligence and skills the protagonist has, "the hero's power of action" (p. 33). In Frye's taxonomy, *L'Étranger* would be an "ironic" tragedy and *Oedipus* would be a "high mimetic" tragedy.[17]

While Frye does not pay as much attention to emotions as Aristotle, he does say that the type of tragedy most likely to evoke tears is the realistic "low mimetic or domestic tragedy," which he also calls "pathos" (p. 38). In these dramas, protagonists are likely to be isolated because of a weakness which we can relate to, and are therefore easily found sympathetic. Among the examples Frye gives are Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1892) and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856).

What matters most according to Frye, for categorization purposes, is the predominant mood of the work. This does not only apply within the tragic and comic mode, but also to mixtures of the two main modes. While the most

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[15] As the careful commentary of Hardison (in Golden, 1968) explains, Aristotle's concept of "tragedy" was not particularly religious either.

[16] Frye also discusses "myth" (in which the protagonists are gods) and "romance" (in which the protagonists are half gods), but these are not very relevant for my purposes (they rarely occur in contemporary literature).

[17] The term "ironic" has a complicated history and can be used in various meanings, which I will not delve into here. For Frye, what appears to be most important to characterize a story as an ironic tragedy is the nihilistic mood of the story.

prototypical tragic narrative has an unhappy ending, a happy ending is not sufficient to make a story comical; the "predominantly sombre mood" is a better defining feature, as is the concentration on the individual cut-off from society (Frye, 2000, p. 207). This is in line with our experience of "tragic" stories which end happily, like *Nobody's Boy* (low mimetic tragedy). The misfortunes that befall people in tragic stories are not as reversible as those in comedies. Animals and people may die before the character finds some safe haven. Losses and hardships are not just forgotten because Remi turns out to be somebody's boy after all.

Frye's (2000) classification has its merits in that it helps us understand why we can feel sad when we read Sophocles or Dickens but also when reading Camus: in each case we see an individual suffering, struggling with and being isolated from society in some sense. It also explains why these experiences may not evoke precisely the same response. The usually ironic mode of existentialism, where we watch people being entirely stuck, more so than we ourselves may feel, would likely evoke different emotions than the high mimetic mode, which depicts the fall of the hero who is superior to us.

However, Frye does not provide much indication how responses to the various modes would differ, he adds little to Aristotle's account in that respect. In addition, the extent to which characters are superior, similar or inferior to us is debatable. A character's superiority changes according to how a reader perceives herself as well as the character, and may change over the course of the narrative according to which cues the reader picks up on. One can read *Madame Bovary* as an "ironic" tragedy as much as one can read it as a "low mimetic" (i.e., realist) tragedy. To some extent, Frye (2000) finds a way out of this problem, by acknowledging that his distinctions are not set in stone: multiple modes may occur in the same piece of literature. This, of course, relativizes his categorization, but as any categorization is an artificial construction, this acknowledgement is also warranted.

Synthesizing the perspectives of Aristotle and Frye, the most distinctive features of tragedy could be said to be the representation of "suffering" and "a

predominantly sombre mood." This is in line with other scholars' attempts to define "tragedy." Hoxby (2015) has explained that while the mainstream post-Kantian idea of the tragic was quite rigid in its focus on action and collision, the early modern poetics of tragedy stressed suffering, or *pathos*, as the defining trait of tragedies.[18] Eagleton's (2003) summary of definitions of "tragedy" throughout the decades arrived at the conclusion that "no definition (…) more elaborate than 'very sad' has ever worked" (p. 3). For Eagleton (2003), a sad atmosphere and painful events are what defines tragic narrative. In a recent exploration of contemporary tragedies, Carney (2013) gives a similar definition, focusing on the implication of painful events for the person encountering them: "The idea of the tragic here is in its essence the exploration of *the human relationship to loss*" (p. 3, my emphasis). "Loss," for Carney (2013), can be "literal death," but also "the experience of the internal death of the self that comes from various forms of alienation: social, personal, or psychic" (p. 15).

We thus arrive at a rather inclusive definition of tragedies as those stories in which loss and isolation are central, and which tend to evoke the emotions of pity, fear, and sadness in readers. We could therefore carefully conclude that tragedies are not just a type of sad stories, but that "tragedy" and "sad story" can be seen as synonyms, while of course acknowledging the rich history of the term "tragedy."

1.2. Explaining Our Attraction

The various versions of the "tragic mode" – stories with a sombre mood, depicting individuals in painful, pitiful circumstances – are the stories that are likely to make us sad. Not everyone may appreciate that feeling. Indeed, that

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[18] Hoxby (2015) does warn that this early modern conception of tragedy "cannot tell us what is tragic any more than the idealist philosophy of the tragic can. The burden of making that judgment is passed down from one generation to another in cultures that value the category" (p. 7). Indeed, when discussing what constitutes "the tragic" it is difficult if not impossible to escape essentialist thinking, while literary genres are dynamic social constructions.

some people do appreciate experiencing the kinds of emotions through narratives that we tend to consider unpleasant in daily life, like sadness and fear, may at first view seem rather illogical. This "tragic paradox" or "drama paradox" (Oliver, 1993; Zillmann, 1998) has gripped the attention of scholars ever since Aristotle's *Poetics*, but in recent years it has received renewed scrutiny in the fields of empirical aesthetics and media psychology (e.g., Hanich, Wagner, Shah, Jacobson, & Menninghaus, 2014; Kim & Oliver, 2011; Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). Most of these studies concern sad films, but they are still informative for the current exploration into sad books (i.e. narratives about tragic events composed as written texts of a substantive length). In order to identify potential psychological motives that predict why some readers have a preference for sad books, I therefore draw on theories and insights from both empirical literary studies and media psychology. I follow Oliver (2008) in emphasizing the importance of "eudaimonic" (i.e., meaning-oriented) motives, since media preferences have in the past too often been explained within a "hedonic" (i.e., pleasure-oriented) framework that stresses a largely affective type of pleasure without much deeper meaning.

1.2.1. Mood Management

According to mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988, 2000), the traditional, emotion-based approach to media consumption, our reasons for seeking out certain media are hedonic: we want to regulate physiological arousal levels, meaning that we select those media that will neither lead to boredom nor to stress, and we want to maximize pleasure and minimize discomfort, thus either selecting media that lift negative moods or prolong positive moods (Oliver, 2003; Zillmann, 1988, 2000).

At first sight, mood management theory only explains a preference for cheerful media, especially when one's initial mood is negative, and a preference for thrilling media when one is bored (cf. "sensation seeking," Zuckerman,

1994).[19] Yet, Tannenbaum and Zillmann (1975) proposed that sad stories with happy endings would also fit this general idea, due to "excitation transfer." The excitation-transfer theory posits the following mechanism: we feel distress when liked characters are disadvantaged, but the greater this evoked distress (or: arousal), the greater also our positive response to an eventual happy ending, as arousal is interpreted as either positive or negative affect in accordance with our current situation. The previously felt (negative) excitement during the suffering of the character is "transferred" to the culminating emotion, which is positive arousal: happiness. This would explain the attraction of suffering within a story like *Nobody's Boy*. However, empirical support as well as the logical basis for excitation-transfer is fickle, as the positive emotions experienced at the end of a continuously sad story may not be a sufficient "reward" for people to endure hours of feeling bad (cf. Oliver, 1993).[20]

Moreover, as Oliver (1993) has pointed out, excitation-transfer theory has trouble explaining why we consume stories with purely tragic plots, in which things only get worse and there is no redeeming happy end. It is unlikely that we read these kinds of stories because we are simply too happy. In fact, empirical evidence indicates that sad media tend to be selected by those who are already sad (e.g., Dillman Carpentier et al., 2008; Kim & Oliver, 2011). Thus, sad stories pose a problem for the hedonic explanation that mood management theory provides: a "drama paradox" (Oliver, 1993, 2008; Zillmann, 1998).

Still, within the general framework of mood management theory, we can identify the potential function of *catharsis beliefs*. In Chapter VI of his *Poetics*, Aristotle proposed that through arousing "pity" and "fear," tragedies would accomplish the "purgation" (*katharsis*) of these emotions (Butcher, 1951). As will be discussed later on, whether the most appropriate translation of "*katharsis*" is

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[19] Empirical evidence generally supports mood management theory when it comes to preferences for joyful and exciting media (for an overview, see Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006).
[20] In addition, Frijda (1986) has stated that there is no empirical proof that a greater extent of arousal corresponds with greater degrees of either pleasantness or unpleasantness.

really "purgation" has been debated, but the dominant translation of this small passage has led to the assumption that simply experiencing certain emotions through a mimetic medium could lead to alleviation. This so-called "catharsis hypothesis" has largely failed to be confirmed in empirical studies of media violence: generally, when exposed to a violent stimulus, people tend to become more agitated (Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999; Scheele, 2001). Regarding sadness and reading, however, the catharsis hypothesis has not sufficiently been studied. In either case, for certain readers, the belief that having a good cry will make them feel cleansed afterwards could be a motive to select sad stories and one that appears consistent with the hedonic assumptions of mood management theory (cf. Kim, 2007).

1.2.2. Liking to Feel

Another emotion-based explanation for the attraction of sad stories is the idea of "*meta-emotions*" (e.g., Oliver, 1993). "Meta-emotions" refers to the affective response one has about one's primary mood or emotion (see originally Mayer & Gaschke, 1988; for an overview, see Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold, & Viehoff, 2008). Independent of the pleasantness of the primary emotion, meta-emotions themselves can be either positive (e.g., feeling glad about feeling angry) or negative (e.g., feeling ashamed about feeling joyful) (Mayer & Gaschke, 1988). I concentrate on positive meta-emotions, as these form the more likely motives to seek out sad stories.[21]

In favor of the meta-emotions hypothesis, there is empirical evidence that sadness during watching a movie contributes to general enjoyment of the movie (Oliver, 1993). However, is it the sadness itself that is appreciated, or something

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[21] There is some debate whether the concept "meta-emotion" needs to be seen as an affective response or whether it can also include a predominantly cognitive response, like a normative evaluation (see Bartsch et al., 2008). In order to be able to see to what extent emotional motives play a role in reading sad books, I thought it most useful to conceptualize a "meta-emotion" as an affective response (cf. Bartsch et al., 2008; Oliver, 1993). Following Oliver (1993), in my conceptualization liking to experience a certain emotion suffices as an affective response.

else? As Hanich et al. (2014) showed, sadness aids and intensifies "feeling moved" when watching movies, and feeling moved is a crucial mediator of sadness in predicting appreciation of a sad scene. Hanich et al. (2014) therefore posited a "being moved hypothesis" (p. 131), which proposes that people's positive experience of "feeling moved" explains why they seek out sad (fictional) stimuli. Since our emotion system has a "negativity bias," meaning that we have better alertness and memory for negative emotions like fear and sadness (e.g., Rozin & Royzman, 2001), Hanich et al. (2014) suggest that sad media also have the potential to make us feel more intensely moved than joyful media.

Hanich et al. (2014) do not discuss their findings in terms of meta-emotions, yet the way they describe "feeling moved," as "an overall positive emotional state" and "a complex emotional response in which more prototypical emotions – and even opposing ones *such as* joy and sadness – are involved *as building blocks*" (p.132, my emphasis), suggests that feeling moved itself already has a meta-emotional quality. They basically say, namely, that feeling moved can consist of different combinations of emotions and that people always like to experience it. Hanich et al. (2014) further indicate that their results suggest that "we simply like to be moved" (p. 130), which then sounds slightly tautological.[22] The concept "feeling moved" is currently being further developed (e.g., Menninghaus et al., 2015), and this mixed emotional state may indeed play a unique role within appreciation for sad media. For now, it does not seem incompatible with the idea of liking to experience a range of feelings. The expectation then becomes that sad narratives are attractive because experiencing emotions makes us feel alive, and sad stimuli are particularly effective in arousing feeling.

Not only do sad stories allow us to experience emotions, they enable us to experience emotions in a safe way. As Aristotle notes in the *Poetics*, stories are

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[22] Also note the sense of "motion/moving" in the English word "emotion" as well as its Latin origin (*emovere*). Saying one simply likes to feel moved thus closely resembles saying one simply likes to feel.

forms of "mimesis," they are representations of characters and events which are not simple replications but attempts to simulate and embellish reality, to play with it (cf. Oatley, 2011). Aristotle relates this explicitly to children's imaginative playing and points to the pleasure human beings derive from such playing. This may be especially true for stories explicitly presented as "fiction" (cf. Keen, 2006, 2007; Oatley, 1999, 2011), but it could also apply more broadly to representations which do not just or not predominantly intend to inform us of certain facts, but in which attention has been paid to structure, form and/or style (contrast a newspaper article, which predominantly seeks to inform, with a memoir, in which structure and style are at least as important as the facts). When we know we are dealing with an (artful) representation, we can feel emotions without having to act on them, without the stress of having to make decisions; we can thus experience emotions in a playful way (cf. the concept of "psychical distance" or "aesthetic distance," see Bullough, 1912; Cupchik, 2002).

1.2.3. Comparing to Feel Better

The simple fact that a sad story presented in the form of a book or a movie is not the same as sad events actually unfolding before our eyes (in the same time-space continuum that we inhabit) creates a certain distance which could also potentially allow for more cognitive reflection on the content. Our attraction to sad narratives might thus contain a larger cognitive component than the explanations discussed above allowed for: they could be used to compare our own situation to the situations of characters.

First of all, the safe "play mode" of stories can function as a form of *preparation* (cf. Kim, 2007: "information utility," p. 14). Comparing reactions to films and remembered personally experienced events, Goldstein (2009) found sadness levels to be similar, but anxiety levels to be significantly higher for the personally experienced events. Some people may thus view or read tragic stories – for example Tolstoy's "Death of Ivan Iljich" (1886) – to vicariously experience the worst that could happen, in order to gain a sense of control over their own

anxieties. This in turn may have to do with the realization of our own vulnerability and mortality, as terror management theory claims (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Johnson, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). To the extent that anxiety is lessened, the preparatory motive is conceptually close to catharsis beliefs, but preparation can be seen as a relatively cognitive (rather than emotional) function. The intense experience of anxiety is no necessary precondition here, and after reading, anxiety does not have to be fully purged in order to feel more "prepared."

Apart from comparing our fears of certain possible situations with the portrayals of those situations in stories, we can also contrast tragic story events with our current (less tragic) situation. This is what happens in *downward social comparison*. Social comparison theory suggests that a comparison with those (fictional or real) who are worse off makes people feel better about their own lives (Festinger, 1954; Gruder, 1971; Wills, 1981). We pity poor Remi in *Nobody's Boy*, and simultaneously or subsequently, we are glad that we are not in his position. Kim (2007) has discussed downward social comparison in the context of sad media quite positively, positing that seeing awful events happening to others could be a precondition to "re-evaluate (…) difficult situations and find positive life meanings" (p. 39). Yet, I would argue that this "learning" element need not be an intrinsic part of downward social comparison, which could also stay at the level of *Schadenfreude* or simple relief.

Conceptually related to downward social comparison, is the function of *comfort*. Social comparison is also involved here, but with a more equal outcome concerning the comparison between oneself and the character. Those of us who have first-hand experience with suffering can find comfort in the fact that we are apparently not the only one going through this. Within reading research into bibliotherapy, it has for example been found that some people who are mourning tend to seek and find comfort in novels about grief, through recognition of their own feelings (e.g., Cohen, 1992; Koopman, 2014).

The three functions discussed in this section can still be related to the dominant hedonic framework, in the sense that people can quite obviously employ them to feel better (cf. Oliver & Raney, 2011). However, they also start to go beyond the management of such transitory affective states as moods, being instead involved with feeling better in the longer run, through a comparison between our own situation and the events depicted in the narrative. The reader may acquire strategies to deal with certain feelings (cf. Kim, 2007). These three functions, therefore, can be situated in between a "hedonic" framework that suggests we consume sad stories to feel better, and an "eudaimonic" framework that proposes we consume sad stories in order to learn something.

1.2.4. Eudaimonic Motives

The idea that media are not only used for entertainment in the sense of lifting one's mood and experiencing pleasant feelings has become more prevalent in recent years (cf. Oliver & Raney, 2011). Sad films have been shown to be used for non-hedonic purposes, such as dealing with experiences one regrets (Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006) and gaining insight in negative experiences through comparison (Kim & Oliver, 2011). In trying to explain the attraction of tragic narrative by going beyond pleasure, Zillmann (1998) furthermore suggested that dramatic narratives can make us conscious of human emotions, relations and vulnerabilities.

Propagating a more nuanced framework to explain the "drama paradox," Oliver (2008) has proposed to make a differentiation between "enjoyment" (which is associated with mirth, pleasure or relaxation) and "gratification," which she defines using the Aristotelian moral concept of "eudaimonia" (εὐδαιμονία; "eu" means "good" and "daimon" means "spirit"). According to classical scholar Ackrill (1981), eudaimonia is most properly translated as "human flourishing." For Oliver (2008), it is all about knowing and/or feeling what makes life worth living. Affective responses are not ignored here, but they simply no longer take center-stage as within a mood management framework.

Oliver (2008) has offered the following "eudaimonic motives": "greater *insight*, self reflection, or contemplations of poignancy or meaningfulness (e.g., what makes life valuable)" (p. 42, my emphasis) (cf. Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). We could thus say that eudaimonia is not about feeling better, but feeling more complete, acquiring a broadened or deepened perspective of what it means to be human (cf. Nussbaum, 1997).

This idea of eudaimonic motives corresponds to the Aristotelian "catharsis," but in an alternative interpretation, which integrates cognition and emotion. This alternative interpretation (cf. Scheele, 2001), follows from translating *katharsis* as "clarification" instead of "purgation" (see Golden, 1968; Halliwell, 1987; Keesey, 1979; Nussbaum, 1986). Through experiencing pity and fear, those emotions – or, in another translation, the "incidents" that are pitiable and fearful (Golden, 1968, p. 11) – could thus also become "clearer" instead of simply being dispelled. As is perhaps argued most convincingly by Hardison (in commentary to the translation by Golden, 1968), translating *katharsis* as "clarification" is consistent with Aristotle's proposition, in Chapter IV of *Poetics*, that we enjoy mimetic expression because we can recognize what we see, and learn from that. Aristotle did not develop this argument further, but it could follow from this view that "catharsis" entails achieving insight into the shared nature of suffering. As Nussbaum (1986) has emphasized, such "clarification" is not purely intellectual: through experiencing certain emotions in response to a tragic story (e.g., pitying a character, being horrified by his fate), we could intuitively understand these emotions, their triggers, and ourselves better. This may not be enjoyable, but it can be meaningful and valuable when we feel we have reached a deeper understanding of life. Thus, in this alternative conception of catharsis, negative emotions can be transformed through media and arts, put in a different light, instead of "purged."

1.2.5. General Motives for Reading

When looking at the specific reasons people have for reading sad books, it is important to also keep in mind general reasons people have for reading. Of the motives discussed so far, catharsis beliefs as well as the comparative motives (preparation, downward social comparison and comfort) are likely best fulfilled by books with sad content, but this is not necessarily the case for meta-emotions ("liking to feel") and eudaimonic motives (meaning-making). To start with eudaimonic motives: sad books may be deemed especially meaningful, but meaning could also – perhaps to a lesser extent – be found in, for example, (non-tragic) historical fiction. Previous categorizations of general reading types or preferences, thus not specific to sad media, also identified meaning-making as a reason to read. Rosenblatt's (1978) distinguished "aesthetic reading" from "efferent reading," with the first designating the type of reading in which one does not only explore the work but also oneself, and the second designating reading purely for information. In Kuiken and Miall's (1995) Literary Reading Questionnaire, the potential eudaimonic dimension of reading has been captured under the header "insight." And more generally, Cupchik (2001) has argued that looking at or reading aesthetic materials is motivated both by pleasure and by interest, and is ultimately guided by a search for meaning.

Similarly, while it was argued above that sad stories may evoke stronger emotions, making meta-emotions a motive to select those stories over others, it can be argued against this that thrillers and erotic novels also evoke strong emotions. Wanting to experience emotions in the safe way that stories allow for can be a general reason to read. This is again reflected in categorizations of different types of reading, namely in the type of reading called "story-driven reading" (Hunt & Vipond, 1985, 1986), in which one reads for engagement with characters and events, and in Nell's (1988) "ludic reading," which is reading in order to temporarily leave one's reality behind and become absorbed in the narrative world. This type of reading can also be closely associated with the "narrative feelings" as outlined in the General Introduction: the general feeling

of absorption, and the character-related emotions empathy, sympathy and identification. Narrative feelings may generally be appreciated by readers as contributing to a more worthwhile reading experience, regardless of whether the book in question is sad, cheerful or somewhere in between. Still, following the suggestion that we are more alert to negative events and emotions (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), readers looking for intense narrative feelings might be expected to prefer sad books. It is likely, as Keen (2007) has hypothesized, that "empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states" (p. 72).

What has not been captured yet in the motives discussed above, is that in reading – especially literary reading – we do not just respond to the content, but also to the form. In categorizations of reading types, the type of reading which is first and foremost focused on the beauty and/or originality of the language – thus, with "aesthetic feelings" – has been called "aesthetic reading" (in German: "das ästhetische Lesen": Graf, 1995; Pette, 2001; not to be confused with Rosenblatt's (1978) more eudaimonically inspired "aesthetic reading"). Readers who specifically want to experience aesthetic feelings might have a preference for sad books, not because they enjoy the tragic events as such, but because literary authors tend to focus on portraying sorrow and suffering (as Tolstoy's famous opening sentence of *Anna Karenina* epitomizes through stating that unhappy families are a more interesting subject than happy families). Yet, we might also find an aversion against sentimentality among those who are specifically interested in style.

Finally, thus far I have spoken only of psychological motives for reading, individual (cognitive and affective) needs that are fulfilled through reading a sad story, but social concerns, of course, also play a role when choosing a book. Apart from Bourdieusian analyses into the association between social status and reading literature (e.g., Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999; Kraaykamp, 2003), and research that looks from a cultural studies perspective at readers' (mostly women's) uses of literature (e.g., Long, 2003; Radway, 1984), there appears to

be little systematic reader research into the relative importance of various social functions (cf. Griswold, Donnell & Wright, 2005; Griswold, Lenaghan & Naffziger, 2011). Since the current research project had a psychological rather than sociological approach, social motives receive little attention in this dissertation. However, a few crucial potential social motives for reading will be taken into account in Chapter 3, which explores the reasons for choosing one specific book. These main motives are one's close social interactions (being part of a book club – cf. Long, 2003; recommendations from friends; cf. Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999), and the influence of mass media attention on the popularity of a book.

2. Meta-Emotions and Meaning-Making:

A Survey Study Into Psychological Motives for Reading "Sad Books"

In the previous chapter, a wide range of reading functions which are potential motives for reading sad books has been discussed. Previous research into the reasons for people's attraction to sad stories has tended to concentrate on one or just a few of these (e.g., "meta-emotions" in Oliver, 1993; "feeling moved" in Hanich et al., 2014). Kim (2007) is an exception, as this study took into account both emotion-based functions like catharsis beliefs and meta-emotions, and functions with a larger cognitive component: downward social comparison and personal growth. However, Kim (2007) did not look at one's overall preference for sad media, but at whether one's preference is mood dependent.[23]

The survey study discussed in this chapter took a broader, more explorative approach, in order to provide a comprehensive overview of our reasons to prefer sad books. Such an approach is appropriate given the relative neglect of sad book preferences in empirical studies. It was investigated which of the motives discussed in Chapter 1 are the strongest "predictors" of a preference for sad books, and whether the predictors of a sad book preference are different from those of other specific genre preferences (e.g., thrillers). The main research question was as follows: *What are the most important reading motives for readers who prefer sad books?*

The current study included both functions that are traditionally placed under mood management, and functions that can be considered eudaimonic.

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[23] More specifically, participants were offered specific descriptions of a sad drama, a comedy and a game show and Kim (2007) investigated whether their preference changed according to the mood they had been induced to feel. Results indicated that people generally (regardless of mood) preferred comedy over sad drama. However, when sadness was induced, this influenced people's preference for sad drama for those wanting to gain insight (but not for those wanting emotional relief).

Within that first category (mood management), the following functions appear mainly relevant for books depicting suffering (in comparison to more "cheerful" books): seeking comfort, downward social comparison, catharsis (as purgation) beliefs, and preparation. Meta-emotions, narrative feelings and aesthetic feelings could be just as relevant for books with more cheerful subject matter. As outlined in Chapter 1, however, one can also argue that sad stories could be particularly apt to evoking strong emotions, thus rendering meta-emotions as a possible predictor of a sad story preference. For eudaimonic motives, a similar argument has been made above: while, generally, reading could be partly guided by a search for meaning (Cupchik, 2001), sad stories may fulfill that need better than more cheerful stories by providing the reader with more serious content to reflect on.

Apart from the functions of reading, the current study also took into account the demographic variables age and gender. Generally, older people are more likely to read than younger people (Cloïn, Kamphuis, Schols, Tiessen-Raaphorst, & Verbeek, 2011; Griswold et al., 2005; Zill & Winglee, 1988). Moreover, genre preferences have been shown to differ according to age, at least when it comes to films, with young adults being more likely than older people to watch scary or sad films (Mares, Oliver, & Cantor, 2008). This could be explained through socio-emotional theory, which poses that when one's time left on earth becomes more limited (as it may feel for older people), people tend to avoid exposing oneself to media eliciting negative affect (Mares & Sun, 2010). It remains to be seen to what extent this is the case for sad books. Age is thus a factor to control for.

When it comes to gender, previous research has found that women have stronger preferences for sad films than men (De Wied, Zillmann, & Ordman, 1994; Mares et al., 2008; Oliver, 1993). This could be partially explained by the societal norm that "boys don't cry," as studies have also shown that females tend to report higher fear and sadness (e.g., Lombardo, Cretser, Lombardo, & Mathis, 1983; Shields, 1987), while males with lower identification with the masculine

role also report relatively higher fear ratings than males who do feel very masculine (Carsrud & Carsrud, 1979; Krasnoff, 1981). As reading novels generally is less common among men than women (cf. Cloïn et al., 2011; Tepper, 2000; Zill & Winglee, 1988; Witte & Scholtz, 2015), men who read might already be less concerned with dominant societal norms regarding femininity and masculinity than men who do not. We can thus doubt whether we would find the same gender effect for sad books as for sad films. In either case, respondents' gender was considered a factor to control for in this study.

2.1. Methods Sad Books Study

2.1.1. Procedure

Between the end of November 2013 and the beginning of February 2014, a questionnaire was presented online to measure readers' genre preferences (including their preference for "sad books"), what they find important when reading ("functions of reading"), and demographics. On average, the survey took about 20 minutes to complete. Within the survey, "sad books" were defined as narratives that evoke a sad mood in readers, by depicting pitiful and/or tragic events. While Frye's definition of tragedy is more intricate, I did not want to restrict the respondents in what they would think of as sad books. Therefore, I did not present them with the definition of a narrative depicting an individual being isolated from society. Instead, to gain further knowledge into which specific books readers consider "sad," they were asked to give an example of a book they had found "sad" as well as "impressive": "Can you name a sad book that impressed you? You can choose whether you want to further explain this." By asking readers for *impressive* sad books, I hoped they would talk about books that had personal meaning and emotional impact for them, not just books they rationally knew to be "sad."

The survey was specifically aimed at readers: it was promoted and linked to by public libraries throughout the Netherlands.[24] Apart from that, the national book club organization Senia posted a link to the survey in a digital newsletter, the largest book community of the Netherlands De Boekensalon posted the link in messages on Twitter and Facebook, and review website 8WEEKLY posted a banner on their website.

To prevent expectations about the aim of the study from influencing people's responses, the survey was presented as research into general genre preferences. The instruction to respondents was as follows: "Through this research we aim to find out what kinds of books people prefer, for what reasons, and to what extent those reasons go together with personal characteristics." For the same purpose, questions about what one finds generally important about reading (the "motives" or "functions of reading") were asked before asking about one's preference for sad books. An exception to this were questions specific to the functions of sad books (see Measures), which were asked after one's preference for sad books was determined, since this order was deemed more logical by participants in a pilot ($N = 10$).

Questions about demographics were saved for the end of the questionnaire, which is standard practice, as these questions are not very interesting for respondents and may therefore discourage them to continue with a survey (Bradburn, Sudman, & Wansink, 2004). Furthermore, respondents tend to get sloppier at the end of surveys, due to fatigue and boredom (e.g., Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009). Saving the easy demographic questions for the end limits the hazard that participants are misreading questions. After the survey was taken offline, respondents were debriefed through a general mailing (to those who had left an email address) and through a short report of the main results posted on

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[24] The libraries of all twelve provincial capitals in the Netherlands were approached. Out of these libraries, the following agreed to participate by posting a link either on their site, in their newsletter, on Facebook and/or in a Twitter message: Groningen, Leeuwarden, Flevomeer, Utrecht, 's-Hertogenbosch, Arnhem, Zuid-Kennemerland (Haarlem), Rotterdam. In addition, the library of Schiedam (which is close to Rotterdam, where I lived during the execution of this project) participated.

the websites or in the newsletters of the participating libraries and reading organizations.

2.1.2. Respondents

Given the fact that volunteer sampling was used, the resulting sample cannot be said to be representative of either Dutch people or of readers in general. Still, the manner of recruiting respondents discussed under "Procedure" led to a sample with a demographic compilation that was in line with previous findings about those who read, namely: mostly female, highly educated, and older (cf. Cloïn et al., 2011; Witte & Scholtz, 2015). Of those who completed the survey (N = 343), 83.4% were female (n = 286). [25] One person did not indicate his/her gender. The mean age of the sample was 46.39 (SD = 15.95; range: 14-80). Highly educated people (university or higher vocational education) constituted 80.5% of the sample.[26] Overall, the respondents were avid readers, with a self-reported average of 38.79 (SD = 37.89; range = 1–220) books read a year. Just for comparison, according to self-report data gathered by Stichting Marktonderzoek Boekenvak (2014), Dutch people read about 8 books a year on average (average 8.4 in 2013, average 7.8 in 2014). In the current study, readers with an extremely high number of books read per year (100 or more) tended to indicate preferences for genres like detectives and thrillers.

2.1.3. Measures

Participant irritation caused by repetitive questions can hamper the reliability of results (Bradburn et al., 2004). An effort was thus made to use only those questions which were necessary. In general, this meant the number of items per

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[25] As demographic questions were asked at the end of the survey, there is no information about the composition of the respondents who started the survey but did not finish it. In total, 540 people started the survey. Considering the way the survey was distributed, it can be assumed that many may just have clicked on a link out of curiosity.

[26] Categories of educational level differ per country. The Netherlands has a system in which universities do not provide higher vocational training. Higher vocational training ("hbo") is offered by separate institutions, which, together with universities, are considered to provide "higher education."

construct was kept at a minimum. Unless otherwise indicated, items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1= don't agree at all, 7= agree completely; or, for the functions of reading: 1= not important at all, 7= extremely important). All scales can be found in Appendix A: Scales for Survey Study Part I.

Dependent variables. The main dependent variable was *sad book preference*, inspired by Oliver's (1993) Sad Film Scale (SFS). Oliver's Sad Film Scale consists of 13 items which are answered on a 7-point Likert scale. Formulations were adjusted to make the scale about books instead of movies. Furthermore, multiple items of the SFS already included motives (e.g., "One reason I enjoy sad movies is because they help me to release my own sadness"); those items were not used in this study in order to separate sad book preference and the motives for that preference. The Sad Book Scale (SBS) in the current study consisted of seven items, e.g., "I like it when there are tragic events in a book" (α = .79; Appendix A lists all items in English and Dutch).

In addition, to explore whether the predictors of a sad book preference were distinctive for sad books, in a second round of analysis, motives for reading sad books were compared with motives for reading specific narrative genres. These genres were based on categorizations in libraries and bookstores: *adventure; (auto)biography; diary/letters; detective; erotic; poetry; horror; thriller; historical novel; family; humor; psychological novel*; *romance; science fiction; fantasy; classics*; *political/societal novel; travel report; sports; contemporary literature.* While books within many of these genres can portray tragic events and induce sad moods, none of these genres can be completely identified as "sad." Respondents used a drag-and-drop format in which they could choose multiple genres as either genres they liked to read or genres they did not like to read. They did not have to put all genres in either "like" or "do not like"; they could also refrain from indicating a preference. Responses were recoded into a dichotomous scale, with 0 designating "do not like to read" and 1 "like to read." Given the dichotomous measurement, logistic regression analyses

were conducted, in which the separate genre preferences were the dependent variables.

Independent variables. Independent variables consisted of the various reading *motives*, and the demographic variables *gender* and *age* (control variables).

Motives. The potential motives for reading sad books, as explicated above, were derived from various sources, most importantly Oliver and Raney's (2011) pleasure-seeking versus eudaimonic motives for watching movies, Miall and Kuiken's (1995) Literary Reading Questionnaire, and Kim's (2007) functions specific to a preference for sad movies. The items were further complemented by self-constructed items. Principal components analyses (looking at the items of each scale separately) and reliability analyses (per proposed scale) were conducted to make sure that the separate scales possessed sufficient internal consistency. The following scales were used, of which the first five could potentially be applied to all genres, while the second five (which mostly followed items in Kim, 2007) were specific to books depicting sad/tragic events.

- *Meta-emotions*. One's general need for and appreciation of experiencing emotions could be measured by Maio and Esses' (2001) Need for Affect scale, but this study was interested in one's appreciation of experiencing various emotions when reading. Therefore, items were self-constructed, starting with a general item "I like to experience strong emotions when I read," followed by seven items about specific emotions (tension, fear, sadness, being moved, joyfulness, indignation and anger). "I like to experience being moved" could be considered tautological, as Hanich et al. (2014) argued for the intrinsic positive appraisal of being moved. The same would go for "joyfulness," which also has an intrinsic positive valence. Yet, some people may not read to experience emotions of whatever kind, but for other purposes (e.g., acquiring information). In order to have a complete picture of one's appreciation of emotions when reading, all items were added together in a sum construct "meta-emotions" (α = .71; 8 items). As this sum construct

included such diverse emotions, it had the potential to be related to various types of books.

- *Absorption/Empathy*. As noted in the General Introduction, narrative feelings can be split up into absorption, sympathy, empathy and identification. That people want to read about sympathetic characters was deemed too obvious as an overall motive to read to be able to make a difference, and was therefore not taken into account in this study. For absorption into the narrative world, empathy with characters and identification with characters this study used items previously developed by Koopman (2011, 2014) in research about functions of reading during grief. The items followed the theory concerning the distinctions between absorption, empathy and identification. The identification items were limited to similarity identification (Andringa, 2004), the empathy items to emotional empathy (e.g., "I find it important that I can feel the emotions of characters myself to some extent"), and the absorption items were about one's general transportation into the narrative world (e.g., "I find it important that I can be absorbed in the narrative world"). In a principal component analysis using all items about absorption, empathy and identification, items about empathy with characters loaded on the same factor as items that were about transportation into the narrative world more generally. Conceptually, this is logical, as Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) categorize both absorption and empathy items under "narrative engagement." Taking this into account, as well as the explorative purpose of this study, a sum item "absorption/empathy" was made (α = .74; 5 items).

- *Identification*. Identification is theoretically distinguishable from both absorption and empathy (e.g., Mar et al., 2011), and since the two (similarity) identification items also loaded on a separate scale from the absorption and empathy items, "identification" was kept as a separate function. Despite the fact that the scale was small, internal consistency was good (α = .77).

- *Style*. Three items were used to measure the importance of style (i.e., aesthetic feelings) to readers: the importance of a beautiful style, an original style, and memorable sentences. These three items together had poor (α = .53), but not unacceptable internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2003).[27] Corrected inter-item correlations ranged from .28 to .44. For this specific scale, high internal consistency was less relevant, as concerns with beauty and with originality are different aspects of the general concept of valuing style. Therefore, the three items were combined in one sum construct "style."

- *Insight*. Oliver and Raney (2011) define "eudaimonic motivations" as "a need for greater insight into or understanding of the human condition more broadly than the fulfillment of needs focused on the self" (p. 989), and Miall and Kuiken (1995) define their "insight" dimension as "an approach to reading in which the literary text guides recognition of previously unrecognized qualities, usually in the reader, but also in the reader's world" (p. 41). Based on the eudaimonic items of Oliver and Raney (2011) and the insight-items of Miall and Kuiken (1995), this scale measured the importance people attribute to being probed to reflect and to be able to find meaning when reading (α = .89; 8 items). Examples of items ("I find it important that..."): "... a book provides me with new insights," "... the book has a deeper meaning." Together with the *personal growth* scale (see below), this is the clearest eudaimonic scale.

- *Catharsis beliefs*. The catharsis beliefs scale measured people's belief that reading sad books would help them release negative feelings. It was based on Kim's (2007) scale "catharsis beliefs," which originally consisted of four items. To avoid repetitive items, two of these items were used (α = .76). Items were rephrased and adapted to fit the subject of reading, e.g.: "Through reading sad books I can purge negative feelings that I had stored up."

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[27] According to George and Mallery (2003), Cronbach's alpha values can be categorized as follows: "α > 0.9 - Excellent, α > 0.8 - Good, α > 0.7 - Acceptable, α > 0.6 - Questionable, α > 0.5 - Poor, and α < 0.5 – Unacceptable" (p.231).

- *Downward social comparison*. The downward social comparison scale measured people's tendency to compare their own situation (positively) to that of others through reading sad books and feeling better about their own lives accordingly. It was based on Kim's (2007) scale "downward social comparison," which originally consisted of four items. To avoid repetitive items, three of these items were used (α = .82). Items were rephrased and adapted to fit the subject of reading, e.g.: "Books about tragic events make me feel relatively more content about my own life."

- *Comfort*. The comfort scale was self-constructed, as this function has not been included as such in studies by other researchers (as far as I am aware). It measured the comfort derived from reading sad books by combining two items used in a previous study by Koopman (2014) into functions of reading during grief (e.g.: "When I read about others who are suffering, I feel less alone.") The scale had high internal consistency (α = .86).

- *Preparation*. The preparation subscale measured people's belief that reading sad books could help them prepare for tragic events in real life. It was also self-constructed. The three items (e.g., "Reading about tragic events gives me the sense I could handle it if such events would occur in my own life") showed high internal consistency (α = .89).

- *Personal growth*. This subscale measured people's belief that reading sad books would aid their personal growth. It was based on Kim's (2007) scale "positive transformation and personal growth," which originally consisted of five items. To avoid repetitive items, three of these items were used (α = .89). Items were rephrased and adapted to fit the subject of reading, e.g.: "Sad books make me start to think about my own life." While this eudaimonic function is conceptually related to *insight*, they can be distinguished by the focus of *personal growth* on finding personal fulfillment; *insight* is more generally about gaining insight into the human condition. As a further matter of distinction, the personal growth items were formulated to be specifically about sad books (following the original subscale of Kim, 2007).

2.2. Results Sad Books Study

2.2.1. Impressive Sad Books

First of all, in order to know what we are talking about when we talk about "sad books," let us see what the respondents themselves considered to be impressive sad books. In response to the open question, 264 respondents mentioned one or multiple titles and/or author names. Table I.1 gives a list of the authors/titles that were mentioned more than once.

As this list demonstrates, a few dominant themes emerged: 1) books set in a context of war (e.g., Stefan Brijs; Tatiana de Rosnay), 2) books set in a context of societal injustice other than war (e.g., Harriet Beecher Stowe; Thomas Hardy); 3) books about loss/grief (e.g., Anna Enquist; A. F. Th. van der Heijden), 4) books about tragic characters in ordinary circumstances (e.g., Leo Tolstoy; John Williams), 5) literary books with a dark/nihilistic mood (e.g., Albert Camus; Gerard Reve), 6) children's books (e.g., Hector Malot). These are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories. Hector Malot's *Nobody's Boy*, for example – which appears quite prominently in the list – deals with loss as well as with poverty (social injustice), and can be seen as a children's book.

Of the 264 respondents who mentioned a title and/or author in response to the open question, 81 provided more elaborate answers, explaining what had made them sad and/or what they consider to be sad books. They often talked about their pity and empathy with characters, and/or emphasized that this book had moved them. Ten of them talked explicitly about being brought to tears. This sensation of being saddened by a book was not considered pleasurable by everyone. As one participant said about *Nobody's Boy*: "I hated that book and still do. Because of the injustice, I think. All the nice animals and people dead. It totally ruined my youthful reading pleasure for some time." While this reaction is obviously negative, it also expresses how impressive sad reading experiences can be. Indeed, seven people explicitly mentioned that a book they had read

many years ago had left an indelible impression (e.g.: "The death of Evangeline is burned into my memory.").

Experiencing sadness when reading is thus not intrinsically pleasant for everyone, as could have been expected. More informatively, it was not necessarily the sadness of the impressive sad books that readers were drawn to or valued. Eight respondents indicated while writing about an impressive sad book that this book also contained hopeful or joyful elements, which they appreciated. Furthermore, ten people reported that style can be crucial in making the sadness impressive, or even pleasurable. This participant, for example:

> My favorite book of all times is *La Chute* by Camus (…) and that is quite sad actually. Still I read it with a constant smile, because it's so beautifully constructed.

Or this participant, commenting on Ted van Lieshout's *Gebr.*: "Beautifully written, not recognizable per se, but it moved me incredibly. I think that has to do to a large extent with how the story is presented."

Finally, it is relevant to note that three people explicitly indicated that "sad" can take on different forms, making differentiations comparable to Frye's (2000) distinction between ironic tragedies and low mimetic tragedies. One participant was particularly eloquent in formulating this distinction, writing that on the one hand, he likes books which express "the aesthetic melancholy 'within' human existence" (as an example, he mentioned Hardy), but on the other hand, he also finds books impressive which "describe the inherent tragedy 'of' human existence" (his example: Camus). This latter type (which resembles Frye's ironic tragedy), he said, "is far less pleasant" and even "shocking," but he still finds both types "valuable."

Table I.1.

List of Sad Books Based on Respondents' Responses (n = 264)

Author name / Book title	Frq.
Tatiana de Rosnay / *Sarah's Key*	13
A. F. Th. van der Heijden / *Tonio: A Requiem Novel*	13
Hector Malot / *Nobody's Boy*	11
John Williams / *Stoner*	9
Khaled Hosseini	8
Ray Kluun / *Love Life*	7
Jan Siebelink	7
Arthur Japin	5
Markus Zusak / *The Book Thief*	5
Harriet Beecher Stowe / *Uncle Tom's Cabin*	4
John Boyne / *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*	4
Anna Enquist	4
John Green / *The Fault in Our Stars*	4
Paolo Giordano / *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*	3
Gerard Reve / *De Avonden*	3
Patrick Süskind / *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*	3
Leo Tolstoy / *Anna Karenina*	3
David Vann / *Caribou Island*	3
Julian Barnes	2
Sebastian Barry / *The Secret Scripture*	2
Stefan Brijs / *Post voor Mevrouw Bromley*	2
Philippe Claudel / *Monsieur Linh and His Child*	2
Albert Camus	2
Louis Couperus	2
Anne Frank / *The Diary of a Young Girl*	2
Thomas Hardy	2
Kristin Harmel / *The Sweetness of Forgetting*	2
Murat Isik / *Verloren Grond*	2
Yvonne Keuls / *Het Verrotte Leven van Floortje Bloem*	2
Judith Koelemeijer / *Hemelvaart*	2
Karl Ove Knausgård	2
Agota Kristof	2
Ted van Lieshout / *Gebr.*	2
Cormac McCarthy / *The Road*	2
Ian McEwan	2
Haruki Murakami / *Norwegian Wood*	2
Jodi Picoult / *My Sister's Keeper*	2
José Saramago / *Blindness*	2

Note: The list is alphabetized by author's last name, per frequency category.
Respondents who mentioned an author did not always specify a title.
When books are available in English translation, the English title is given.

2.2.2. Predictors of Sad Book Preference

In order to establish which motives are related to a sad book preference, first, a preliminary correlation analysis was conducted for all motives and the Sad Book Scale sumscore. As Table I.2 shows, all motives except for style and identification were moderately correlated with a sad book preference. The separate emotions of the meta-emotions construct – except for joyfulness and tension/suspense – were also individually correlated with the Sad Book Scale. Of these emotions, not surprisingly, feeling moved and sadness showed the strongest correlations with the SBS, respectively $r = .45$ ($p < .001$) and $r = .43$ ($p < .001$). Removing the item about "feeling moved" from the meta-emotions construct only slightly diminished this correlation with the SBS, from $r = .33$ to $r = .31$ ($p < .001$). In order to have a meta-emotions construct covering a wide spectrum of emotions, all items were kept in the sum construct for further analysis. On a sidenote, Table I.2 shows that all motives having to do with comparing oneself to a character (e.g., comfort) were more closely associated with insight than with meta-emotions, suggesting that these motives might be at least partly eudaimonic.

Table I.2.
Pearson Correlations Between the Sad Book Scale and the Various Potential Motives

(N= 343)	Insight	Abs./Emp.	Ident.	Style	Cath.	DSC	Comf.	Prep.	Pers. Growth	Sad Book Scale
Meta-emotions	.16**	.36***	.13*	.20***	.22***	.10	.10	.11*	.15**	.33***
Insight		.18**	.25***	.51***	.27***	.41***	.39***	.35***	.47***	.29***
Absorption/ Empathy			.33***	.13*	.22***	.15**	.23***	.11*	.15**	.27***
Identification				.12*	.27***	.26***	.36***	.21***	.21***	.07
Style					.11*	.12*	.12*	.10	.20***	.09
Catharsis						.53***	.58***	.62***	.63***	.32***
Downward Social Compar.							.65***	.57***	.78***	.28***
Comfort								.73***	.63***	.28***
Preparation										.31***
Pers. Growth										.37***

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

As a further preliminary analysis, it was checked whether men and women scored differently on the motives. There were no significant differences, except for meta-emotions, with men scoring slightly higher (M = 31.80; SD = 4.16) than women (M = 30.17; SD = 4.81), $F(1, 331)$ = 5.40, p = .021, η^2 = .02.

Subsequently, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the most important motives to predict a preference for sad books, while assessing the separate contributions of gender and age, of motives relevant to reading in general, and of motives specific to sad books. In the first step, the demographic variables gender and age were entered, in the second step the five motives which could apply to books in general (meta-emotions, absorption/empathy, identification, style, and insight), and in the third step the functions specific to sad books (catharsis beliefs, downward social comparison, comfort, preparation, and personal growth). Tolerance values and variance inflation factor (VIF) values did not indicate problems of multicollinearity.

Table I.3 shows the results of the regression analysis. In the first step, gender had no effect, but age was a (small) significant contributor, with younger people showing a higher preference for sad books. However, the effect of age disappeared in the second and third step. The second step, with the general functions of reading, showed a significant increase in R^2 and produced a significant model, which explained 18.7% of the variance in sad book preference (adjusted R^2), $F(7, 320)$ = 11.78, p < .001. Insight and meta-emotions were the most important predictors, while there was a small positive effect of absorption/empathy, and a small negative effect of style. In the full model (third step in Table I.3), meta-emotions, insight, and absorption/empathy remained significant predictors, and style still had a small negative effect, but personal growth also made a significant contribution to the explained variance. In addition, identification now had a very small but significant negative effect. The complete model explained 23.9% of the variance in sad book preference (adjusted R^2), $F(12, 315)$ = 9.54, p < .001. Meta-emotions, insight, and personal growth were the most important significant predictors.

Table I.3.

Predictors of Sad Book Preference, Hierarchical Regression Model

	R	R²	R² change	B	SE	β	t
Step 1	.13	.02					
Gender				-.02	.06	-.02	-2.40
Age				-.05	.02	-.13*	-.30
Step 2	.45	.21***	.19***				
Gender				-.03	.06	-.03	-.50
Age				-.04	.02	-.09	-1.66
Meta-emotions				.32	.07	.25***	4.44
Insight				.27	.05	.32***	5.26
Absorp./Emp.				.24	.10	.14*	2.39
Identification				-.20	.14	-.07	-1.35
Style				-.35	.15	-.13*	-2.26
Step 3	.52	.27***	.06***				
Gender				-.03	.06	-.02	-.44
Age				-.02	.02	-.05	-.99
Meta-emotions				.30	.07	.23***	4.24
Insight				.17	.06	.20**	3.03
Absorp./Emp.				.22	.10	.13*	2.24
Identification				-.32	.15	-.12*	-2.17
Style				-.30	.15	-.11*	-1.99
Catharsis				.24	.17	.10	1.44
DSC				-.06	.13	-.03	-.41
Comfort				.22	.18	.10	1.19
Preparation				-.18	.13	-.11	-1.43
Personal Growth				.36	.14	.23**	2.66

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

2.2.3. Predictors of Other Genre Preferences

In order to determine to what extent the pattern of predictive functions found for sad books is a distinctive pattern, a comparison was made with regression results for specific genre preferences. Logistic regression analyses were executed with gender, age, meta-emotions, and insight as predictor variables. Apart from meta-emotions and insight, no other general motives were used. This had two main reasons: 1) the contribution of the other variables in predicting a sad book preference was minimal; meta-emotions and insight were the predictive functions of interest, 2) the stability of regression models decreases when one puts in many variables relative to the number of participants.

The number of respondents was lower for the specific genre preference variables than for the variable sad book preference, as they could choose which and how many genres they selected as either preferred or not-preferred. The concern for stable statistical models therefore also implied that analyses were only conducted for those genres which had at least 40 people in each group (0= don't like to read it, 1= do like to read it), after missing variables were taken into consideration. This meant the following ten genres were explored: (auto)biography (n_0 = 51; n_1 = 108), diary/letters (n_0 = 74; n_1 = 42), detective (n_0 = 44; n_1 = 137), poetry (n_0 = 84; n_1 = 58), thriller (n_0 = 45; n_1 = 161), travel (n_0 = 56; n_1 = 69), political/societal (n_0 = 45; n_1 = 112), humor (n_0 = 43; n_1 = 64), romance (n_0 = 54; n_1 = 55), fantasy (n_0 = 132; n_1 = 54).

In order to make a fair comparison, two extra analyses were conducted for sad book preference with the same predictors as for the specific genres. First of all, in a standard multiple regression which only used meta-emotions and insight (with gender and age as control variables), both meta-emotions (β = .27, p < .001) and insight (β = .27, p < .001) were positive significant contributors; these four variables together predicted 16.4% of the variance in sad book preference (adjusted R^2), $F(4, 323)$ = 17.03, p < .001. Secondly, and allowing for a more straightforward comparison, a similar logistic regression for sad book preference was done as for the specific genres. This logistic regression could be

conducted by first making a dichotomous variable for the scores on the Sad Book Scale, based on a median split procedure (results can be found in Table I.4).

Results of the logistic regression analyses indicated that none of the specific genre preferences showed the same pattern as the regression for sad book preference: for the specific genres, it was never the case that both insight and meta-emotions were positive predictors, not even when taking into account results bordering on significance. The different outcomes regarding the influence of meta-emotions and insight could be categorized as follows: 1) neither meta-emotions nor insight was significant (*romance*); 2) meta-emotions was a positive, insight a negative predictor (*thriller*, *fantasy*); 3) insight was a negative predictor, meta-emotions had no effect (*detective*, *humor*); 4) insight was a positive predictor, meta-emotions had no effect (*diary/letters*, *political/societal*); 5) insight was a positive, meta-emotions a negative predictor (*poetry*, *travel report*); 6) insight had no effect, meta-emotions was a negative predictor (*biography*).

It would be excessive to report outcomes for all ten genres, as the separate genres are not our main interest here. To bring out the difference with the results of sad book preference, Table I.4 therefore provides the details for the dichotomous Sad Book Scale, as well as for four conceptually different genres: romance, thriller, humor, and poetry. To interpret the results, it is useful to keep in mind that if the "odds ratio" for a specific predictor variable is higher than 1, this indicates that this predictor variable raises the odds of having a certain genre preference; it is associated with having this preference (without necessarily causing it). A value below 1 indicates a negative association. As Table I.4 shows, in the logistic regression analysis, meta-emotions and insight both still significantly predicted a sad book preference. In contrast, neither meta-emotions nor insight was a significant predictor for a romance-preference. Liking to experience emotions increased the likelihood of a thriller preference with a factor 1.23, while finding it important to gain insight decreased this likelihood. For poetry, we see the reversed pattern, with meta-emotions having a significant

but negative effect (odds ratio .90) and insight having a significant positive effect (odds ratio 1.13). For humor, only insight was a significant negative predictor.

Table I.4.

Odds Ratio Values per Predictor for Specific Genres (Logistic Regression Analyses)

Predictors	Romance	Thriller	Humor	Poetry	SBS
Gender	13.11***	2.78	.75	.45	1.10
Age	.99	1.03*	.99	1.01	.98*
Meta-emotions	1.07	1.23***	.92	.90*	1.10***
Insight	.99	.83***	.94*	1.13***	1 .06**
Nagelkerke's R^2	.23***	.33***	.11	.28***	.14***
n	109	206	107	142	343

Note: Gender was entered as a dummy variable (1= female).
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

2.3. Conclusion and Discussion Sad Books Study

The survey study in this chapter aimed to identify those motives for reading which are generally more important to people who have a preference for sad novels than for people who do not have such a preference. The motives that were explored were meta-emotions, narrative feelings (absorption/empathy and identification separately), style (i.e., aesthetic feelings), catharsis beliefs, preparation, downward social comparison, comfort, personal growth, and insight. Some of these motives were predominantly emotion-based and arguably more pleasure-oriented, or "hedonic" (meta-emotions, catharsis beliefs, and absorption/empathy), some were meaning-oriented, or "eudaimonic" (insight, personal growth), and the others fell in between these two categories.

Results indicated that both eudaimonic motives ("insight" and "personal growth") and meta-emotions (liking to feel various emotions while reading) predict a preference for sad books. Thus, people with a stronger preference for sad books are also more likely to find it important that reading makes them experience emotions and that reading leads to insights. As we saw in the analyses of the specific genres, none of those other genres were related to both the need for meaning-making ("insight") and the need for feeling ("meta-emotions"), suggesting this could be unique for sad books. Apart from meta-emotions and the eudaimonic motives, absorption/empathy was the only other motive that made a significant – yet, rather small – positive contribution to a sad book preference. While style and identification were negative predictors of a sad book preference, their effects were negligible.

Both the experience of feeling and the experience of learning (or: meaning-making) thus appear important to the attraction of sad stories; it is not a matter of either/or. This substantiates the argument made by Oliver and Bartsch (2010) and Oliver and Raney (2011) that eudaimonic motives may be at least as important as hedonic motives in selecting sad media. The finding that absorption/empathy was a significant predictor also suggests that sad books may fulfill the need for empathizing with characters better than more cheerful books, in correspondence with Keen's (2007) hypothesis that readers may empathize more readily with fictional characters in sad or difficult situations.

The need to feel and the need to learn were each unique predictors of a preference for sad books, but are these needs also in some way connected? Previous studies have argued that certain affective responses to sad media, like feeling moved (Hanich et al., 2014) and tender affective states like empathy (Oliver, 2008) could be connected to meaning-making. In the current study, the correlation between insight and meta-emotions was significant, but small, which suggests that these experiences do not necessarily have to go together. However, with the present results, little can be said about the quality of these experiences, since participants were asked whether they like to feel emotions like sadness,

fear and anger while reading, but not why they like this. Is it "simply" because readers – from a mood management perspective – find it pleasurable to heighten their arousal levels in a relatively safe way, to engage in the playful mode of simulation (Oatley, 1999)? Or is it the case, as Nussbaum (1986, 1990, 2001) has suggested, that strong feelings help us gain an extended, embodied sense of human experience?

This question, how feeling and learning interact when reading about suffering, is related to the theoretical issue of catharsis. In the current study, catharsis beliefs did not predict a sad book preference, and thus catharsis as purgation does not seem to be central for those who like sad books. However, the combination of meta-emotions and insight does keep the option open for a central role of catharsis as "clarification": gaining insight through experiencing emotions like pity and fear. Chapter 3 will investigate this further, exploring to what extent readers report to experience clarification and purgation when reading one specific novel about grief, and to what extent insight can be connected to reporting emotions.

Another issue that deserves further attention is the role style plays in making sad books attractive. Being concerned with style was a small negative predictor of a sad book preference. This might imply that the emotional content of sad books draws attention away from the form, but as the correlations brought out, without putting the other motives into the equation, style was not negatively related to a sad book preference. Moreover, the responses to the open question suggested that style matters in making sad books moving as well as making sad content manageable for those readers who are not primarily attracted to misery. Indeed, multiple readers indicated that they do not specifically seek out sad books, but that they found the way sad events were narrated in a specific book impressive. Thus, while there may not be a general relation between being concerned with style and a sad book preference, in specific cases, style may be the primary reason why a certain reader wants to read a sad book – something that will be explored further in Chapter 3.

Apart from psychological motives, the current study also took a broad look at the predictive value of the demographic variables age and gender. The fact that no gender effect in sad book preference was found needs some further explanation, since this finding is in contrast with other studies about sad media preferences (e.g., Oliver, 1993). Yet, the finding corresponds to the expectation that male readers may be less concerned with dominant social norms than male movie-viewers. This outcome is at least suggestive of the idea that male readers may be less afraid to explore and report feelings than the general male population. Indeed, female readers in this study did not score higher on a need for meta-emotions than male readers (rather, they scored a bit lower). Such potential differences between males who read and males who do not suggests the relevance of conducting larger-scale comparative studies into the attraction of sad media, which can simultaneously look into reading, viewing and listening preferences. It remains to be seen, namely, whether men and women have the same reasons for reading sad stories as they have for watching sad movies. In such studies, it would be advisable to not just take the medium into account, but also people's preference for perceived artfulness and the "type" of sadness encountered. As "sad books" in this study could include anything from easy-reading tear-jerkers to nihilistic works, potential distinctions between those with a preference for the first versus those with a preference for the latter were obscured.

Indeed, as the responses to the open question in this study also suggested, it would be interesting to make further distinctions within the denominator "sad." Northrop Frye's (2000) distinction between heroic tragedies (with a protagonist "superior" to ourselves, but not to his environment), sentimental dramas (with protagonists neither superior nor inferior to us, but pretty much like us), and nihilistic narratives (with a protagonist "inferior" to ourselves) could be useful here. We could hypothesize that sentimental dramas evoke more pity than the other types and may also be read more often to experience emotions than to gain understanding, while for nihilistic narratives this may be

the other way around. Such differentiations may help to further determine when hedonic and when eudaimonic motives play a role.

Apart from using quite a broad, inclusive definition of "sad books," the current study implicitly took a "sad book preference" as a relatively fixed reality. Of course, such preferences can depend on specific circumstances. Not only can one's mood matter (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2008; Kim & Oliver, 2011), social circumstances – like being part of a book club – can also be decisive for which books one chooses to read. And, more generally, cultural context plays a role in determining which reactions to sad media are acceptable and which are not. As Walsh (1997) has argued, using the example of the fictional death of Dickens's Little Nell, the Victorians may overall have been more willing to feel strong emotions in response to sentimental literature than we are today. Walsh (1997) asserts that this has to do with differing criteria of what good literature is: while today's readers find Little Nell an unrealistic character, Dickens's contemporaries responded to the values expressed through the character (i.e., innocence).

There are further points of critique to be made. Unavoidably, the current study suffered from the limitations quantitative surveys generally suffer from. First of all, we force respondents to choose one number out of seven instead of explaining their experience, and subsequently we use statistical tests to give us the most likely patterns, the common denominators, thus obscuring the unique experiences that some individuals may have and that are worthwhile to study in themselves. Secondly, we need to trust that people know themselves, while some of these processes may be unconscious. Social desirability is a concern here as well – people may report that insight is important to them, while really, they would rather spend their time watching videos of cats playing the piano. Connected to this point of criticism, the current study asked about what people find important when reading, which may be different from their actual motives to select a specific book. Those actual motives may be at least as much about

one's social context (i.e., depending on one's friends, book club, and the media attention a book receives) as about one's individual reading needs.

The study in Chapter 3 attempts to counter some of these criticisms. It uses more open questions, letting respondents talk about their own motives to choose a specific sad book and their reading experience of that book, in order to understand their experience in more detail and depth. Furthermore, contextual motives are included in its questions. The focus on one specific book makes the reasons why people select a sad book more concrete. Together, these two studies can provide a general idea of the motives which lead readers to approach narratives about suffering. This helps to contextualize people's experiences during and after reading about suffering, which will be discussed in the second and third part of the dissertation.

A. F. Th. van der Heijden – *Tonio. Een requiemroman* [2011]

A. F. Th. van der Heijden's *Tonio. A requiem memoir* (2015) [*Tonio. Een requiemroman*, 2011] is largely based on true events, namely the death of the author's twenty-one-year-old son in a traffic accident and the aftermath of this loss. The homo-diegetic narration of this tragic event by the author/father is intertwined with the meticulously preserved memories he has of his son, and with his personal life events and reflections.

Tonio is largely autobiographic (i.e., non-fiction), but (as the subtitle may already have suggested) it is also highly narrativized, with a plot structure that is similar to a detective. The I-narrator tries to establish the identity of the mysterious girl that Tonio photographed not too long before his untimely death. He finds the girl, but she does not help him answer questions about his son that continue to bother him (predominantly: did Tonio die as a virgin?).

While Van der Heijden does not shy away from describing emotional events, his writing style remains rather cerebral, with a preference for long sentences with complex, sometimes archaic words and allusions to cultural knowledge. As an example, this is the way he describes his memory of the last time he and his wife saw Tonio:

> With all my angst on the subject of his vulnerability, it never occurred to me that the lively pair of o's that smiled at me so eagerly via the name Tonio were typographically identical to those that glowered out from the rigid congruence of the word "dood" — death.
> The last time Miriam and I saw him, two surgical drains stuck out of his forehead, a short one and a slightly longer one, like horns. They had been inserted earlier that day to siphon off excess fluid from his swelling brain. Even with everything going through my mind at that moment, my own brain still had room for a scene from the movie *Camille Claudel*, which Miriam and I had seen many years earlier
>
> (Van der Heijden, 2015, p. 4; transl. Jonathan Reeder)

This citation suggests that Tonio's tragic fate was already foreshadowed in his name, but it also shows how the narrator/father keeps describing associations rather than the actual feelings at a specific moment. The possible tendency to keep the impact of the grief at bay is further suggested by the extensive length of the novel – since ending it would mean the author is forced to return to the reality in which Tonio is no longer present.

Box I.1. Brief narratological and stylistic description of *Tonio*

3. "An Incredibly Well-Articulated Nightmare."

Readers' Reactions to *Tonio*, a Novel About Grief

In the previous chapter, we established the importance of eudaimonic motives in people's general preference for sad books. We also saw that apart from an appreciation for gaining insight, an appreciation for experiencing diverse emotions while reading (meta-emotions) was related to a sad book preference. These findings raise various new questions, among others which emotions people experience when reading sad narratives, what kinds of insights or other meaningful experiences they have, and whether we can see a relation between specific emotional experiences and eudaimonic experiences. Moreover, the motives people report deserve further investigation. There could be a social desirability bias for reporting that one finds it important to gain new insights through literature. Even if people in all honesty want to gain insights, their reasons for choosing a particular sad novel may also depend largely on their social context, for example whether others have recommended the book to them. Focusing on the reasons people report to read one specific novel can bring this to the fore. Finally, the question whether we can redefine "catharsis" as "clarification" instead of "purgation" needs to be further explored, as this is important to how we think about the attraction of tragedy.

In an attempt to address these issues, delving deeper into the motives people have to willingly expose themselves to another person's pain, a mixed-methods survey study was conducted which investigated readers' reactions to a recent Dutch novel about grave suffering: A. F. Th. van der Heijden's *Tonio. A requiem memoir* (2015). In *Tonio*, originally published in Dutch in 2011, Van der Heijden narrates the loss of his 21-year-old son. The book has become strikingly

successful. In 2012, it won the prestigious Dutch Libris Literatuurprijs as well as the popular vote of the NS Publieksprijs, and by June 2013 it had sold almost 200,000 copies, a huge number by Dutch standards (up to the period in which this survey study was executed, July 2012, the book had already sold around 130,000 copies).

Given its commercial and critical success, *Tonio* appeared to be the ideal case to investigate why people read about suffering. As I conducted this study at the height of the success of *Tonio*, I could find a sufficient number of respondents who were able and willing to discuss their reading experience. In addition, the relevance of this novel when studying catharsis became evident when Van der Heijden himself made this statement in television show *Nieuwsuur*, after receiving the Libris Literatuurprijs (7 May 2012), based on reader responses he had received:

> Many people wrote to me that they recognized themselves in my book, because they had lost someone themselves. (…) But more people who read the book have not lost a child and still they read it. This is because of their own fears; these people read the book to *allay their fears*. Why did the old Greeks go to horrific plays? Because of catharsis. It did not happen to me, but it could happen to me. In some way this solves something. [transl. and emphasis EMK]

Van der Heijden thus claims that people who lost a child read his book for recognition, while parents who did not have to cope with such a loss read the book to reduce or alleviate the intensity of their fears. Thereby, he appears to propose that readers used his book for emotion management: catharsis as purgation. Is he right in this analysis? To what extent did readers of *Tonio* experience catharsis in the sense of purgation, and to what extent in the sense of clarification? What were their motives for reading and what were their experiences during reading?

3.1. Methods *Tonio* Study

3.1.1. Procedure

To get responses from a varied sample of *Tonio* readers, an online survey was distributed through three different websites: review site 8WEEKLY, the Facebook page of Utrecht's public library, and an online forum for bereaved parents. The survey stayed online during July 2012.[28] In order to delve deeper into the reader experience, both closed and open questions were used, and analyses were both quantitative and qualitative. Responses to the open questions were coded in MaxQDA, software for facilitating the conduct of qualitative research.

In addition to answers to the survey questions, responses to two forums about *Tonio* were examined: bol.com (the Dutch "Amazon") and goodreads.com. While the primary focus was the survey, responses to the forums were coded in an attempt to achieve data saturation through data triangulation (e.g., Fusch & Ness, 2015).

3.1.2. Respondents

The volunteer sample showed a satisfying variety in respondents' background characteristics. 67 Dutch readers responded, of whom 53 were female. The relatively low number of men is in line with the generally lower tendency among men to read novels (e.g., Cloïn et al., 2011). Respondents' ages ranged between 19 and 69 years (*M* = 46.10; *SD* = 12.58). 37 respondents had children, 30 did not, of whom 3 were childless after their child had passed away. In total, 7 respondents had lost a child.

On bol.com, 28 readers had left remarks (of whom at least 18 could be identified as female); on goodreads.com, 10 readers (9 female) engaged in the

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[28] This study has been executed before the survey study discussed in Chapter 1. However, for the argument made in this section of the dissertation, the reversed order – going from the general to the specific – was deemed more logical.

discussion, only 6 of whom had read the novel. Most bol.com readers who provided age details fell within the age range 50-59 years (n = 12). The goodreads.com readers did not provide age details.

3.1.3. Measures

After requesting basic information (age, gender and when and whether one finished the book), the survey started with a closed question about the reasons for choosing to read the book. In order to take into account the specific nature of this requiem novel, the multiple choice options were derived from a brainstorming session with literary scholars, in addition to being based on the theoretical background discussed in Chapter 1. Aesthetic reading (curiosity about the quality) and story-driven reading (curiosity about the story) were included in the options, as well as comfort (for those grieving), social factors (friends/acquaintances or one's book club suggesting the book), and being a fan of the author, as Van der Heijden is an author with a relatively large following in the Netherlands. Eudaimonic reading was not included within the multiple choice options, as people might choose this option because of social desirability and making that choice could further influence their responses to the open questions. Instead, it was expected that if people read to learn something, they would indicate this in response to a subsequent open question about their expectations of the book. For similar reasons, catharsis beliefs and media attention were not included in the multiple choice options, but were asked about in later questions. The multiple choice options of the first question thus were:

- I am a fan of the work of Van der Heijden;
- I was curious about the quality of the book;
- I was curious about the story of Tonio;
- My reading group picked the book;
- A friend/acquaintance suggested the book to me;
- I hoped the book would support me in my own mourning process;
- Other, namely…

Respondents could select multiple options. As indicated above, people's motives were further explored through an open question that followed: What were your expectations of the book?

The next four questions addressed the feelings and thoughts people experienced while reading. The two questions about children were specific to the subject matter of *Tonio*. These two questions were an indirect way to get at potential feelings of identification, and more specifically the fear that something similar would happen to the reader:

- Which thoughts did reading the book evoke?
- Was reading *Tonio* an emotional experience for you? If so, which emotions did you experience?
- Do you have children yourself? If so, did this play a role (and how) in your reaction to the book?
- Have you lost a child yourself? If so, did this play a role (and how) in your reaction to the book?

Note that the second, third and fourth questions required yes/no responses. An explanation was only required if one answered "yes," although people answering "no" were free to provide further comments on the question.

Subsequently, two questions followed about specific motives for starting to read the novel. The first of these questions addressed the search for catharsis (as purgation), the second the extensive media attention the novel received:

- Van der Heijden has indicated that he thinks people read his novel to allay fears of losing a child. Do you recognize your own motive to read the novel in this statement?
- Do you think you also would have read the novel had it not received as much media-attention as it did? (Answering options: Yes, probably, because…; No, probably not, because…)

Finally, readers were asked whether they would recommend the book to others and whether they had any other remarks.

3.1.4. Analysis

The answers to the survey questions were coded using a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The aim was cross-case analysis (Schreier, 2001), i.e., acquiring (new) knowledge through comparing and contrasting individual responses. No coding frame was developed in advance and neither were there explicit directional hypotheses. Some expectations existed beforehand and the survey questions partly determined the main concepts (e.g., motives, emotions, catharsis). This combination of concept- and data-driven categorizing is common within qualitative content analysis as described by Schreier (2012). The overall mixed method of coding and further analysis used in this study can be labeled "pragmatic eclecticism," after Saldaña (2013), who argues for using and combining those coding approaches which fit your research goals.

The yes/no-questions led to rather straightforward dichotomous categories, while the number of unique thoughts and feelings reported were counted to arrive at frequency categories for Thoughts and Feelings. The responses to the open questions were categorized using a thematic qualitative content analysis with multiple coding rounds (cf. Schreier, 2012). In three rounds of coding, the codebook was produced and refined (using open coding first, then axial coding), making distinctions between main codes and sub codes. While making larger categories (axial coding), I also wanted to keep the richness of responses (e.g., the variety in emotions) intact by retaining sub codes in the coding scheme (see Table I.5: *Qualitative Coding Scheme* Tonio *Survey*).

During the coding rounds, each response to a question was given one or multiple codes in the qualitative coding software MaxQDA, taking into account the context of the question, but not letting the categories be limited by that. For example, in response to the question about thoughts, respondents tended to

report emotions, which were then coded as emotions. During this process, a particular code (e.g., Pity) could be attributed multiple times to the same respondent, each time this response occurred. Yet, to enable numerical comparisons between respondents, this was corrected for during an additional, fourth coding round, in which each respondent was only given each code once. For the codes that were deemed relevant to determine people's motives for reading and their experiences during reading, dichotomous variables were entered in SPSS (see Table I.5). These dichotomous variables indicated whether or not a certain response (e.g., pity) was given by each respondent, and could be used to calculate frequencies as well as correspondences between codes (chi-square analysis).

One of the main questions guiding the study and thus the coding process was to what extent catharsis as purgation and catharsis as clarification appeared in readers' experiences. Since the survey posed no explicit question about the latter type of catharsis, responses were scrutinized to see whether respondents reported meaningful insights. Clarification was conceptualized as reporting insight into general human experience and existence, thus going beyond one's personal experience in remarking on loss, sorrow or grief and extending the range of one's compassion (cf. Nussbaum, 2001).

In response to the question about emotions, I expected to see both narrative and aesthetic feelings. The definitions of various narrative and aesthetic feelings have been discussed in the General Introduction, but here is a short recapitulation: narrative feelings are affective responses triggered by characters and events, while aesthetic feelings are directed towards stylistic elements. Potentially useful theoretical distinctions have been made between the narrative feelings empathy (feeling with), sympathy (feeling for), and identification (feeling similar). These distinctions were expected to return in readers' responses, yet, in order to let the responses speak for themselves, no *a priori* categories were made.

To begin establishing the validity of the qualitative coding, a literary scholar who has extensive experience with qualitative analysis of reader responses (e.g., Andringa, 2004) examined the responses and made her own general codes. This was done after the second coding round, based on approximately 60% of the respondents. The literary scholar arrived at similar codes. We discussed what seemed to be the recurring reactions within the responses, like seeking and finding recognition among those who had lost someone themselves, the high prevalence of empathic responses, and the differentiations that could be made within the empathic responses. This led to a level of consensus that provided enough confidence in the validity of the measures to continue the coding process. To further establish validity, after the third coding round, the responses on bol.com and goodreads.com were explored. These fitted well within the existing coding frame; no relevant new codes appeared.

Table I.5, the qualitative coding scheme, shows the main and sub codes derived from the open questions. In the respondents' answers, the (theoretical) difference between empathy and sympathy turned out to be difficult to determine, as the Dutch word "medeleven" can mean either "empathy" or "sympathy," feeling with or feeling for. Where sympathetic reactions and empathic reactions were distinguished, they were frequently mentioned in direct succession, for example: "I felt a lot of compassion, and was sometimes very sad myself." The apparent alignment between these emotions for the readers of *Tonio* led to combining empathic and sympathetic reactions towards the characters and author under the main code "Sympathy/ Empathy." Subcodes of Sympathy/ Empathy included multiple emotions that were each coded separately (e.g., "Pity"). Sympathy/ Empathy is related to, but distinct from the main code labelled "Identification," which included all responses in which readers made an explicit connection between the characters'/author's experiences and their own experiences or concerns, for example being afraid of losing one's own child.

3.2. Results *Tonio* Study

In presenting the results, the responses to the questions have been divided into those addressing the experience *before* one started to read (motives and expectations), those *during* reading (feelings and thoughts) and those *after* reading (actions) (cf. Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011). For feelings and thoughts, it was sometimes unclear whether an experience took place and/or continued after reading; in these cases this is indicated. Of course, all responses were in fact recorded after respondents had read the book. This differentiation thus relied on respondents' reconstructed memories.
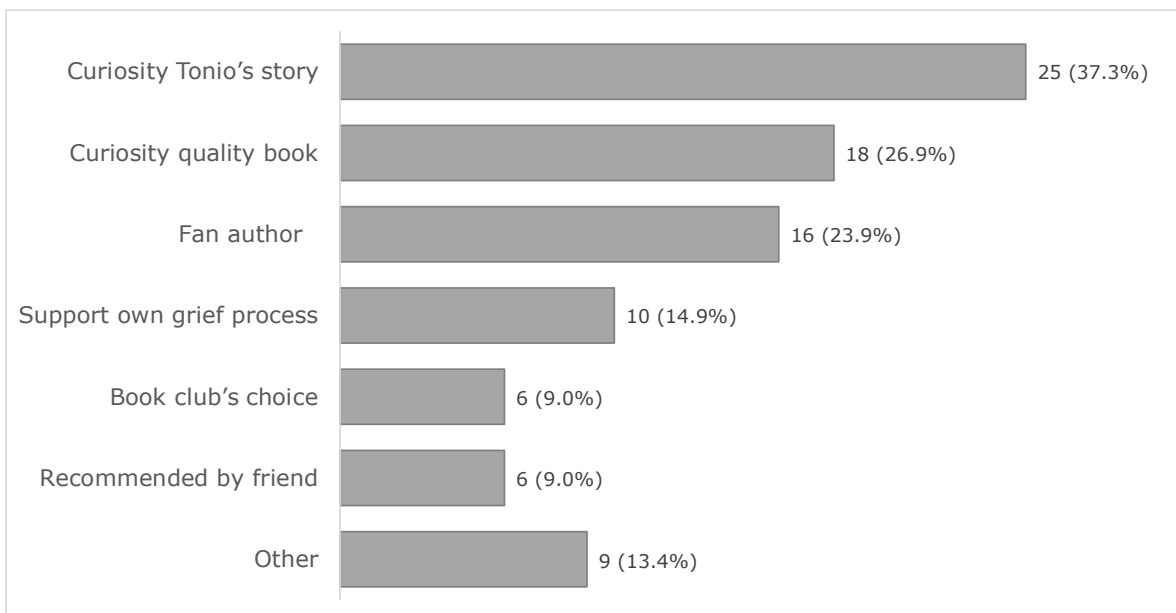
Figure I.1. Reasons chosen for reading *Tonio* (Question 1; *N* = 67)

3.2.1. Before Reading: Story-Driven Readers, Aesthetic Readers, Fans

As can be seen in Figure I.1, in response to the multiple choice question about reasons for reading *Tonio*, the reasons most frequently selected were: curiosity about Tonio's story (i.e., story-driven reading) (*n* = 25), curiosity about the quality of the book (i.e., aesthetic reading) (*n* = 18), and being a fan of the work of Van der Heijden (*n* = 16). Chi-square analyses showed no significant

relationships between these three types of curiosity, indicating that they are separate concerns.

The answers to the open question about expectations led to similar motives (see Table I.5 for the all codes and subcodes). In response to the open question, comments indicating curiosity about the content (*Motives: Story-driven*; n = 10) resembled reported curiosity about the story on the multiple choice question; comments indicating interest in style (*Motives: Eudaimonic – Grief Articulation*; n = 12) resembled reported curiosity about story quality; and comments about the author's reputation (*Motives: Author*; n = 21) converged with reports of being a fan. Chi-square analyses showed significant correspondences between those three curiosity items on the multiple choice question and these three motives listed in response to the open-ended question about expectations. Of the 25 readers who chose the multiple choice option "story," 7 also reported *Motives: Story-driven* in response to the open question ($\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 7.28$, $p < .05$, Cramer's $V = .33$); of the 18 who selected the multiple choice option "quality," 8 indicated in their response to the open question *Motives: Eudaimonic – Grief Articulation* ($\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 11.79$, $p < .005$, Cramer's $V = .42$), and of the 16 readers who marked the multiple choice option "author," 13 also wrote about *Motives: Author* in response to the open item ($\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 24.33$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .75$).

3.2.2. Before Reading: Eudaimonic Motives

However, as the name of the qualitative code *Motives: Eudaimonic – Grief Articulation* already indicates, the responses about expected articulation could be seen as more than simply aesthetic interest. These comments went beyond curiosity about how well-written the novel would be and a need for beautiful sentences, but indicated a need to know something more fundamental, namely how grief and pain can be articulated generally and whether and how expressing something painful in language can transform the painful experience. This is why those comments were classified under "eudaimonic" motives. A 31-year-old

male, for example, said: "The question rises to what extent the author can find a language to articulate such a sensitive subject." Or, as a 29-year-old woman said: "I hoped that language would transform the pain into something beautiful."

Other comments more straightforwardly accentuated readers' desire for meaning-making, or insight. Specifically, readers expressed a general interest in the grief theme (*Motives: Eudaimonic – Theme*; *n* = 9) and interest in how others deal with grief (*Motives: Eudaimonic – Dealing with Grief*; *n* = 13). As an example of the latter, a 47-year-old mother stated that she wanted to know "how a father can cope with such an immense loss and the pain that comes with it... How he could articulate that." This comment combines a need to find out about coping with grief with a need to know about the articulation of grief (and was thus double-coded). All comments under the main code "Eudaimonic" showed to lesser or greater extent a need or desire to know more about how loss and grief can be understood.

3.2.3. Before Reading: Seeking Support During Grief

While one might expect that gaining insight into dealing with grief is of particular concern to those who are grieving themselves, neither *Motives: Eudaimonic – Theme* nor *Motives: Eudaimonic – Dealing with Grief* showed significant overlap with the multiple choice item used to identify concern with seeking support during grief. Thus, (insight-related) curiosity about grief was differentiable from seeking support during grief and the first was in fact reported by those who did not explicitly state to have experienced a loss themselves. Seeking support was itself a fairly frequently selected reason for reading *Tonio*, with 10 readers (14.9%) indicating in response to the multiple choice question that they chose the book hoping to find support during their own grief process. Again, answers on the multiple choice question and the open question converged: of those 10 who had chosen the multiple choice option "support grief," 7 explicitly wrote about expecting to find support in their grief process (*Motives: Support Grief*) ($\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 32.35$, $p < .001$, Cramer's *V* = .75).

As respondents' answers indicated, they were seeking others whose experience resembled their own, for example: "[I was hoping for] support in my own grief process, knowing you're not the only one going through this." Or: "[I was hoping for] an intimate personal view and through that recognition of my own way of dealing with a significant loss." This search for support can contain both an emotional component (finding comfort and perhaps even anxiety reduction in not being alone in their distress) and an eudaimonic or cognitive component (perhaps understanding their own experiences better through reading about somebody else's). However, the responses are not precise enough to determine the relative importance of these components.

3.2.4. Before Reading: Catharsis Beliefs

Regarding whether readers read for catharsis, a similar ambiguity between emotional and cognitive components could be observed, with the cognitive component appearing to be more important for catharsis than might have been expected.

First of all, catharsis as purgation (the purely emotional variant) did not seem to be a prominent motive. In response to the question whether allaying one's fear was a motive to read the book, only 5 of the 67 respondents (7.5%) answered "yes" (*Motives: Catharsis – Purgative*). Five others partially agreed (*Motives: Catharsis –Purgative partly*). Yet, some of these readers explicitly reported a need to gain insight in their explanation why they (partly) agreed. For example, a 45-year-old mother said: "I wanted to know how One copes with the loss of a child. I fear this is the worst thing that can happen to a parent." The capitalization of "One" and the mention of "fear" emphasizes that this is a great concern for this woman, but the emphasis on "knowing" suggests the catharsis she sought is insight-oriented.

Of the 10 readers reporting catharsis as purgation (partly or completely) as a motive, 4 later reported gaining existential insight. This suggests an epistemic (knowledge-oriented) aspect to these readers' conception of catharsis,

which moves away from abreaction (fear reduction) and towards catharsis as clarification. We will see further evidence for catharsis as clarification in the section about people's responses during reading.

3.2.5. Before Reading: Social Factors and Other Considerations

While it was less frequently reported than reading because of content or style, reading because of social factors played a clear role. In response to the multiple choice question, recommendations by friends and being part of a book club were each selected by 6 respondents (together: 17.9%). Social factors were also evident in the responses to the open questions, with 9 respondents making remarks about recommendations of friends or acquaintances or about being part of a book club as part of their motives for reading (*Motives: Social – Friends/ Acquaintances/ Book club*). In addition, media-attention appeared to play a significant role, as 17 readers indicated in response to the question about media-attention that they probably would not have read the book had it received less attention (*Motives: Social – Media Attention*).

The media attention the novel received may also have played a role for the 13 people reporting they read *Tonio* because of their general reading habits. Nine respondents said that they read practically anything (*Motives: Reading Habits – Bookworm*) and four said that they were looking for a good read for the holidays and *Tonio* seemed to fit the profile (*Motives: Reading Habits – Entertainment*). For the first category, the media-attention could have attended them to what is out there to read, and for the second category, *Tonio*'s bestseller-status could have made it seem like an entertaining read.

Finally, it should be noted that while people were not explicitly stating that they *hoped* that reading *Tonio* would be emotional, thirteen respondents said that they *expected* an emotional experience (*Expectation: Emotional*). This is suggestive of the importance of meta-emotions, of wanting to feel when reading, which was found to be crucial to reading sad books in Chapter 2. However, similar to the findings in Chapter 2, this study showed that an intense emotional

experience is not necessarily appreciated by everyone: of the people expecting an emotional experience, four also remarked that they were afraid the book would be too emotional for them.

Table I.5.

Qualitative Coding Scheme Tonio *Survey*

Main categories	Main codes	Main sub codes	Example	Frq.
1. MOTIVES	*Author*		"I read most of the works by this author."	21
	Story-driven		"I wanted to get to know Tonio."	10
	Eudaimonic	*Dealing with grief*	"I wanted to know how a father deals with such an immense loss and the accompanying sadness."	13
		Theme	"I am interested in the subject."	9
		Grief Articulation	"I hoped the language would transform the pain into something beautiful."	12
	Support Grief		"Support in my own grief process, knowing you're not the only one going through this."	8
	Social	*Media attention*	"I had read a few reviews, and I knew the book was nominated for prizes."	8
		Friends/ acquaintances/ book club	"A friend recommended it to me."	9
	Reading habits	*Bookworm*	"I try to read all important Dutch literature."	9
		Entertainment	"I was looking for an entertaining book."	4
	Catharsis as purgation	*Cath. purgative*	"I recognize that motivation, yes."	5
		Cath. purg. partly	"Not completely, but perhaps partly."	5
		Cath. no motive	"No, not at all, what nonsense"	49
		Anti-catharsis	"On the contrary, I think reading only increases your fears."	7

1. NEGATIVE MOTIVES	*Distaste emotionality*		"People like to wallow in the pain of others; for me that was a reason not to read the book."	4
	Author-related	*Not knowing the author*	"I did not really know the author."	4
		Author unloved	"I'm not a fan of Van der Heijden."	5
1. EXPECTATIONS	*Emotional*	*(Incl. 4 fearing emotionality)*	"I was expecting it to be extremely sad."	13
	Content (non-emotional)		"I understood it was an ode of a father to his lost son."	8
	No expectations		"I had no specific expectations."	11
2. NARRATIVE FEELINGS	*Sympathy/ Empathy*	*Pity*	"I felt sorry for these people that they had to go through this"	23
		Sorrow/ Pain	"I felt the sense of a deep loss"	21
		Despair	"I felt the desperation of the parents"	6
		Intimate	"The story of Tonio felt close-by"	14
		Moving	"I was moved (…)"	9
		Admiration	"How brave of this father to write this down"	14
		Symp./ empathy unspecified	"I felt empathy for the parents who could not accept the loss"	17
	Identification	*Fear*	"I only have one son as well… don't want to think about this happening to me."	18
		Identification unspecified	"That's exactly how it is."	14
		Painful	"On the one hand it was confrontational, rough, painful…"	5
		Comforting	"…but it was also comforting; you experience a certain support through the story."	4
	Emotionally intense	*(Incl. 5 with trouble reading on)*	"very emotional, gripping, excruciating"	23

	Negative	*Voyeurism*	"I felt like an intruder in a very emotional and intimate phase in the lives of two people, which led to shame and involvement"	4
		Theatrical	"I had the feeling the author was putting himself on display"	8
	Emo. distance		"I could not identify"	12
2. AESTHETIC FEELINGS	*Positive*	*Appreciation articulation grief*	"It's special that someone can articulate grief in such a way."	23
		Unsentimentality	"Well-written, not unnecessarily emotional."	10
		Appreciation unspecified	"It's a huge literary accomplishment"	16
		2/3. Lingering presence	"The book was impressive and keeps lingering."	8
	Negative	*Distanced style*	"It was slow, very distanced, annoying, technical, (…)"	6
		Length	"The story was a bit too long"	5
2/3. THOUGHTS	*Clarification*		"This book gives you a deep inside view into what grief is, what it does to a person."	13
	Personal		"Am I a complete person, given that I have no children?"	9
	Simple (content, style, author)		"What a shame Tonio's life ended so soon."	16
3. ACTION	*Recommend*	*Already recommended*	"I've already recommended it to a number of people."	4
		Selective recommendation	"I would not recommend the novel to people who are already a bit depressed."	13
	Comfort author		"I wish to hereby show my support to the author and his wife (…)"	4

Note: Responses have been divided into those "before reading" (1), "during reading" (2), and "after reading" (3). The notation "2/3" indicates responses which are difficult to classify in either "during" or "after," as they tend to start during, but continue after reading. Codes with a frequency below four are not provided. Yes/no responses are included for the catharsis-hypothesis, to show the variance in opinions on this issue.

3.2.6. During Reading: Narrative Feelings

As Table I.5 shows, the expectation that reading *Tonio* would be emotional turned out to be justified. Most respondents (*n* = 55) indicated that *Tonio* evoked emotions, i.e., at least one of the sub codes of the main code Narrative feelings, and 23 explicitly reported an intense emotional experience. These emotions largely consisted of sympathetic and empathic emotions, i.e., feeling for the other or even feeling what the other feels (but without losing the distinction between oneself and the other). As can be seen by the different sub codes under *Narrative feelings: Sympathy/ Empathy*, respondents frequently experienced empathy and sympathy generally, pity, being moved, and finding the story intimate. To a certain extent, people even reported that they themselves felt the pain and sadness, and the despair described in the book. In addition, respondents reported admiration for characteristics of the author, i.e., for his "courage" to write about his loss (when the admiration was about the style, this was coded under "Aesthetic feelings").

Apart from sympathetic/empathic responses, there were distinct emotional responses which indicated that readers imagined themselves in the position of the character and recognized that they were similar to the character (*Identification*). These emotions more directly involve one's own goals and concerns. Within the narrative feelings of identification, fear of losing one's own child had a special space. While the majority of respondents said they did not read to allay fears about losing a child (catharsis as purgation was not a dominant motive), parents who read *Tonio* were clearly confronted with this fear. Of the 37 respondents with children, half (*n* = 18) explicitly talked about this fear when asked how having children themselves affected their response (*Narrative feelings: Identification – Fear*). Seven readers remarked in response to the catharsis-question that this fear was in fact exacerbated by reading, like this 53-year-old mother: "Allaying the fear, that doesn't work, it only gets bigger and more real."

Experiencing fear went together with reporting more emotions in general. Those 18 respondents who spoke of fear scored significantly higher on the frequency of reported emotions (M = 2.33; SD = 1.37) than those 47 who did not (M = 1.47; SD = 1.23) ($F(1, 65)$ = 6.13, $p < .05$, η^2 = .09), while the frequency of reported thoughts did not differ ($F(1, 65)$ = .003, $p = .96$). A chi-square analysis using fear (*Narrative feelings: Identification – Fear*) and an inclusive category variable for the empathic emotions of pity, empathy and/or sympathy, showed a complete overlap: all of the respondents who had talked about fear had also reported at least one form of sympathetic/empathic emotion ($\chi^2(1, N = 67)$ = 8.37, $p < .01$, Cramer's V = .35). In this sense, Aristotle seems to be right: for a noteworthy proportion of the readers, reading a tragedy tends to evoke pity and fear. Yet, experiencing sympathy or empathy is not necessarily associated with experiencing fear, perhaps because people distinguish between their own situation and that of the character/narrator.

As can be imagined, when reading was intensely emotional, this could be experienced as painful, as 5 readers indicated (*Narrative feelings: Identification – Painful*). Under the empathic emotions, we already saw people reporting having felt the pain and sadness of the author and his wife themselves, but the pain that came from recognizing one's own situation formed a specific type of response. Even though for these readers, who had experienced either the loss of a child (n = 2) or of another family member (n = 3), the recognition was painful, two of them also explicitly talked about appreciating the recognition because of the comfort it brought (*Narrative feelings: Identification – Comfort*). In total, four people spoke about the comfort of recognizing one's own feelings and experiences – three of them had lost a child. That grieving readers found comfort through identification was confirmed by responses on bol.com.

Not all readers felt emotionally involved: twelve readers reported a distanced emotional experience (*Narrative feelings: Emotional Distance*), and while most parents (n = 30) indicated in response to the closed question that having children influenced their reading experience (*Children role: yes*), for some

(*n* = 7) it did not. None of these 7 parents felt strongly involved. As a 32-year-old mother indicated: "I had hoped the book would move me, but it did not, so there was no relation." Four of these readers indicated that the author was being "too personal" or "too egotistic" (*Narrative feelings: Negative – Theatrical*). Noticing the exhibitionism/theatricality of the author did not necessarily inhibit narrative engagement though: four other readers who did feel narrative engagement also made these remarks, suggesting an ambivalent reading experience. A related ambivalent response was given by readers who felt themselves to be "voyeurs" to the intimate tragedy of the author (*Narrative feelings: Negative – Voyeurism*). These readers did feel emotionally engaged, but they struggled with their voyeuristic position. As a 31-year-old man in the survey remarked, he constantly felt "like an intruder during an especially emotional and intimate phase in the life of two people," which made him feel "both shame and involvement."

3.2.7. During Reading: Aesthetic Feelings

Aesthetic feelings were less frequently reported than narrative feelings. Still, most respondents (*n* = 46) made positive remarks about the style (*Aesthetic feelings: Positive*). The appreciation of the style, insofar as it was explained by respondents, largely had to do with readers being impressed by the way in which Van der Heijden turned such a sensitive subject into a literary work (*Aesthetic feelings: Positive – Appreciation articulation grief*; *n* = 23). In their final judgments, seven respondents combined terms like "horrible subject" and "beautifully articulated" (e.g., "it's a nightmare, but incredibly well articulated"). These responses are suggestive of a form of meaning-making: readers seemed to gain some knowledge into grief by seeing how it can be put into words. However, people who reported this did not tend to also report clarification; the Appreciation articulation code did not show a significant overlap with the Clarification code, $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = .91$, $p = .763$, Cramer's $V = .04$.

Readers' appreciation also partly had to do with the perceived "unsentimentality" of the novel (*Aesthetic feelings: Positive – Unsentimentality*; *n*

= 10). Readers remarked they were happy to find that the book was "no tear-jerker," "not unnecessarily emotional." On bol.com the rather cerebral style of the author was often lauded as realistic ("no false sentiments. Everything is so pure and real"). Some, however, were disappointed by what they perceived as a distanced style (*Aesthetic feelings: Negative – Distanced style*; *n* = 6). As a 19-year-old man put it:

> I noticed that he remained very distanced. Often I thought: why don't you get to the core, to your feelings. That's probably because of Van der Heijden's grandiose, woolly vocabulary: this builds a sort of wall between the text and the reader.

One reader, a 55-year-old woman, even got angry for this reason: "His son died and yet he did not manage to move me??????" Yet, the respondents of the survey who remained unmoved were a minority.

Next to those respondents who felt strong and direct emotional impact, eight readers indicated that the emotional impact of the novel was less fierce than haunting (*Lingering Presence*). They explained that the emotional experience of the novel stuck with them, for example: "The choice of words made the theme very emotional, not in the sense of direct tears, but as a feeling that you as a reader take with you for the rest of the day." Or: "Serenely written. Not a book to really cry with, but one that makes you pause with what happened." These responses are thus not just about people's experience during reading, but about a longer-lasting affective response.

3.2.8. During/After Reading: Clarification and Other Insights

Especially relevant for the purposes of this study, thirteen respondents (19.4%) explicitly spoke of a reflective experience that could be classified as "clarification" (*Thoughts: Clarification*). While they were not explicitly asked about it, these respondents wrote about gaining deep meaningful insights into the fundamental human experience of loss (mostly in response to the question

whether they would recommend the novel, but also in response to the question about thoughts). It is not entirely clear whether and to what extent these thoughts already occurred during reading. Some insights may have become more explicit after closing the book. Characteristic for the responses that showed this experience was the use of general terms like "human" and "people" in combination with mentioning emotions as well as understanding/ knowledge: "I *learned* something about the *despair and panic* that can overtake *a human being* when confronted with a great loss," said a 23-year-old female reader (my emphasis). And a 31-year-old father: "this book [gives one] *a deep inside view* in what loss does to *people*, what *grieving* is."

This type of insight can be contrasted with more simple thoughts about the content, style, or author, like: "What a shame Tonio's life ended so soon" (*Thoughts: Simple (content, style, author)*; $n = 16$), and with thoughts that did not transcend the personal level: "It started me thinking about my relationship with my roommates." (*Thoughts: Personal; n = 9*). This latter category also included thoughts of the respondents who had lost someone themselves. They made comments about recognizing certain elements from their own life. While these comments sometimes showed increased acceptance, they remained at a purely individual level, for example: "I saw some differences; like that (...) they had a simple funeral. We did that differently and I realized while reading that I am glad we did." Those who had indicated in response to the multiple choice question that they read *Tonio* for support in their grief process were significantly more likely to report these kinds of personal insights, $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 7.14$, $p < .01$, Cramer's $V = .33$.

If we assume that Aristotle could have meant "clarification" instead of "purgation" when talking about catharsis, it is interesting to explore the connection between what was categorized as "clarification" on the one hand and fear and pity on the other. The responses of readers in this study could not confirm a connection between experiencing vicarious fear and clarification: responses about having gained deep insight did not show a particularly strong

overlap with mentions of fear (only 3 of the 13 reported *Fear*). Empathy/sympathy seemed more important – 10 of the 13 who experienced *Clarification* reported at least one empathic emotion, and 7 specifically reported pity (*Narrative Feelings: Empathy – Pity*). However, this was not significantly different from those who had not reported *Clarification*, neither for empathic emotions in general ($\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 0.50$, $p = .83$, Cramer's $V = .03$), nor for pity specifically, although that connection was stronger ($\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 2.73$, $p = .10$, Cramer's $V = .20$).

Yet, within readers' responses, a pattern was found that seems very close to the Aristotelian mechanism of catharsis as clarification, including the dependence on pity and fear. This pattern emerged when considering the remarks about style, notably the response that appeared similar to having found meaning, albeit concentrated on style, namely people's appreciation for the way Van der Heijden had articulated his experience (*Aesthetic feelings: Positive – Appreciation Articulation*). As mentioned above, this type of response is suggestive of having derived a sense of meaning from one's reading, as respondents remarked on the transformation of the chaotic pain of the loss into a structured, or beautiful, narrative. Of the 23 people who gave such a response, 10 had also reported *Fear*, a relation which was significant ($\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 4.92$, $p < .05$, Cramer's $V = .27$). Twenty of the 23 who appreciated the articulation had reported empathic emotions, a relationship that bordered on significance ($\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 2.81$, $p = .094$, Cramer's $V = .21$). This interrelation between these particular emotional and meaningful experiences suggests that something might have become clearer than it was for readers, partly because of having gone through similar emotions as the character and partly because a frightening situation is put into a structured, well-articulated form. Yet, we have to be careful to not read more into the "appreciation articulation" responses than there is, since, as said above, these responses did not show overlap with *Clarification*.

3.2.9. After Reading: Taking Action

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the emotional impact *Tonio* had, some respondents felt a need to take action. A large majority of 51 respondents indicated in response to the closed question that they would recommend the novel to others. A more empathically charged impulse to act than recommending the novel was found among three of the respondents in the survey: they felt a clear urge to contact the author to provide him with support (*Action: Comfort Author*). They either indicated this under "extra comments" or directly addressed the author there. On bol.com this reaction was more widespread (7 out of 28 readers), which can be explained by the public nature of bol.com and the private nature of the survey – the author might read the comments online while there was no chance of him reading the survey responses. Of course, actual communication with the author is not very likely, making these expressions of heartfelt empathy particularly remarkable.

3.3. Conclusion and Discussion *Tonio* Study

What solution to the drama paradox do these findings suggest: why did readers want to read a specific sad book? First of all, while story-driven reading (curiosity about Tonio's story), eudaimonic reading (wanting to learn something about loss) and aesthetic reading (being interested in the style) were the main motives for choosing to read *Tonio*, we have to stress that readers do not live in a vacuum: social factors like media-attention and whether friends recommend the book play a role in our choice to read sad books we may otherwise not want to read. Moreover, we should not underestimate the attraction of a well-known author: many readers simply want to read more of an author they have already established as "good." Still, the importance of eudaimonic motives was evident. As the qualitative responses showed, curiosity about content and style were not limited to sensationalism and seeking enjoyment or to purgation of unpleasant emotions. This curiosity appeared for a large part focused on gaining insight.

Readers indicated having an interest in the theme of loss and wanting to find out more about how others deal with grief. Responses expressing hope that Van der Heijden would find a way to articulate grief also reflected curiosity as a desire for insight.

The fact that readers did not just read *Tonio* for hedonic reasons could be said to be further confirmed by the fact that many readers felt empathy and identification with an array of distressing emotions, from sadness and despair to fear. Yet, the other-directed emotions sympathy and pity can be considered to have an attraction in themselves. As Zillmann (1998) has suggested and as we also saw in the previous chapter: people like to feel moved (cf. Hanich et al., 2014). Feeling empathy and sympathy appears closely related to this: we may like to feel for and with (fictional) others as a way to realize our emotional capacity. Emotions like fear and despair may also be appreciated as long as they are responses to representations instead of to real events. In either case, these emotions were not simply purged through being experienced. Within the current study, almost all readers of *Tonio* denied that distress alleviation (i.e., cathartic purgation) was a motive for reading about suffering. The findings suggest that seeking insight (or: clarification) might be more important than seeking the purgation of negative emotions.

For the small number of readers who explicitly reported having lost someone, the reading experience was, logically, even more painful. However, reading also had clear benefits for them: those who were bereaved indicated that they read to find support, and indeed, they actually experienced comfort. They seemed to endure the re-experiencing of their loss because of a sense of sharing that appeared to be not only emotional, but also insight-oriented: an exploration of whether others' suffering resembles one's own (cf. Leader, 2009). Bereaved readers were more likely than other readers to report personal insights. This suggests that, for those who are grieving, reading about grief can help to reflect on and contextualize their experiences. As the findings in the previous chapter already indicated, identification, comfort and insight may thus go hand in hand:

when one recognizes events and feelings, this can give readers a sense that they are not alone as well as triggering them to think about what happened to them and how they handled it (cf. Koopman, 2011, 2014). Of course, grief processes can differ substantially (Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001), and these differences (for example one's attitude toward confronting the loss and the time passed since the loss) may influence what kind of insight is attained (cf. Sikora, Kuiken, & Miall, 2010).

If "clarification" is interpreted as the extension of one's range of compassion, including a shift in understanding (cf. Nussbaum, 2001), then we cannot really speak of clarification for the respondents who were grieving. For them, namely, this extension was rather limited. The insights they experienced (with the help of the author's articulation) pertained especially to their own lives – enabling recognition that they were not alone in their grief. Yet, can we truly speak of "clarification" for those respondents who did report an extended understanding of the grief experience in general (an enlarged understanding of the human condition) if they did not experience the emotions of pity and fear? In the current study, findings suggested that empathic emotions are more important to deep insight than fear, and also that empathic emotions are not more prevalent among those who experience such deep insights than among the other readers. In the survey study in Chapter 2, we also saw that insight and meta-emotions can, but do not have to, go together.

We do, of course, have to take into account here the non-experimental, predominantly qualitative set-up of the current study. Some readers who experienced fear or insight may not have reported this, as the openness of the questions allowed for diverse responses. In addition, as there was quite some overlap between deep insight on the one hand and pity on the other, we might find significant relations between these responses in larger samples. Finally, it could even be argued that the lack of reported fear after reading for those who experienced "clarification" is indicative of this fear being "transformed" (and thereby lessened) through reading, which would be in line with the Aristotelian

mechanism. Yet, for now, it seems reasonable to keep the option open that deeper insights are not necessarily accompanied by specific emotions.

We could say that this study did find an Aristotelian pattern, a pattern combining a type of insight with fear and sympathetic/empathic feelings. A specific appreciation for the way grief was *articulated*, the way the author gave shape to it – which could be seen as related to the experience of clarification – did co-occur with both fear and pity. However, the lack of a relation between appreciation of the articulation and the "clarification" code suggests that these may be different types of insight. That appreciating the articulation was connected to both fear and empathic emotions could also be explained by a generally more involved reading experience, which does not necessarily have to go together with consciously experienced insights. In Part II, such interrelations between narrative and aesthetic feelings during reading and reflection will be further explored through experiments. Indeed, experiments can tell us more about correlational and causal relations than the current survey study.

All in all, similar to the survey study discussed in Chapter 2, the *Tonio* study showed that readers' motives in seeking out a book about suffering go beyond the hedonic. Catharsis as purgation can be a motive to read tragedy, but probably only for a small minority. Most readers agree that a great fear cannot be expelled by reading about it. Rather, the responses to *Tonio* suggest that readers may search for meaningful reading experiences, gaining insights into human existence, and that sad books can provide such a meaningful experience. *Tonio* is one example of how literature offers the opportunity to imagine extreme events that we hope we never have to encounter ourselves, and of how this imagining can expand our worldview. Yet, to what extent empathy and stylistic appreciation are vital for such meaningful, reflective experiences, and whether and when empathy for a character translates to empathy for a wider group of people, those are questions that deserve further exploration.

4.Conclusion Part I and Outlook

I felt I must write about it… If I was doomed to be sent to this island of punishment, of grief and bereavement, at least I wanted to map it in my way. I wanted to give my private names to everything that came to me being in this situation. I read books of other people who experienced something like that and they were good books and meaningful, and yet they did not give me my words. You know, a writer is someone who feels claustrophobia in the words of other people, and I had to find my own words, and to describe the indescribable.

(David Grossman in the Dutch television show *Boeken*, 16 September 2012)

In this above citation, the Israeli author David Grossman expresses the strong need that writers can feel to articulate painful experiences they had to deal with – in Grossman's case, like Van der Heijden's: the loss of his child (see Grossman, 2012). As Grossman indicates, as a writer, he needed to find his own words to "describe the indescribable." Unlike Grossman, many (if not most) of us do not suffer from a "claustrophobia" in other people's words. On the contrary, describing the indescribable may be invaluable for those who do not have the words and/or experiences themselves, possibly providing a frame to understand human experience. An author's artful articulation of suffering can give readers a sense that something which was muddled is now clarified, can provide us with a framework for our chaotic experiences and for our vague imaginings of what we have not (yet) experienced.

Both empirical studies in this first part confirmed the need for these kinds of insightful, or eudaimonic, experiences. Indeed, of all the functions reading can have, gaining insight and experiencing personal growth were among those which have the strongest connection with a preference for sad books, indicating that this may explain at least partly why we choose to read books about suffering. The case study into why readers chose to read *Tonio* also showed the importance of

eudaimonia and further suggested that through reading about grief, readers are more likely to find meaning (i.e., catharsis as clarification) than to get rid of unpleasant emotions like fear (i.e., catharsis as purgation).

But our reasons for reading about suffering are not purely eudaimonic; wanting to learn about ourselves, the world, and others is not the whole story. Practical and social factors are also involved (like being part of a book club or wanting to know what everyone talks about when a book has received a lot of media attention), as well as individual hedonic, or at least emotional, motives. In the sad books study, the construct meta-emotions (i.e., liking to experience various emotions while reading) had similar predictive ability for a sad book preference as the eudaimonic functions, and absorption/ empathy had a small but significant predictive value. We like to think, to find meaning, but we also like to feel.

Could feeling and meaning-making be connected? And if so, in what ways? The first study revealed a low but significant correlation between insight and meta-emotions as motives. The implications of such a correlation are unclear, but generally it can be hypothesized that feelings can form a type of insight (Nussbaum, 1986, 2001). Affective experiences like appreciating a beautiful sentence, feeling moved or feeling empathy with a character can be said to be at least partly concerned with finding value in life (cf. Hanich et al., 2014; Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). In addition, if readers are willing to reflect on their feelings, they can also be a trigger for further insights (Nussbaum, 1986, 2001). Possibly connected to this second mechanism, the *Tonio* study found an overlap between responses of pity and of clarification (which could have been significant with a larger sample). However, as discussed in Chapter 3, the term "clarification" may not be justified if pity and/or fear are not necessarily part of this response of having gained deep insight through reading about suffering. For some readers, both empathic emotions and fear may be involved in gaining insight, for others only empathic emotions, and yet again others might gain insight without experiencing any strong emotions.

To what extent narrative emotions play a role in influencing readers' tendency to start thinking about a text will be explored in Part II, which turns the focus from motives for reading towards responses during and after reading. In Part II, I will refrain from using the word "clarification," and instead speak of "insight" and "reflection," which are less suggestive of a transformation in the reader and leave the option open that emotions do not play a large role. Thereby, I am stepping away from Aristotle. To understand what goes on during and after reading about suffering, it may be more enlightening to keep an open view than to cling to his catharsis-hypothesis, which was specific to an ideal type of ancient Greek tragedy.

The fact that the focus, from now on, will be on what reading about suffering does to readers instead of on their motives to read, does not mean, of course, that the last word has been said regarding why people read sad books. While the sad books survey of Chapter 2 showed that sad books generally could be unique compared to other literary genres in addressing both a need for meaning-making and for feeling, this finding needs to be qualified by further research. An interesting challenge for future studies is to determine the extent to which meaning-making and feeling matter for different types of "sad books," and for sad books in relation to other sad media.

Yet, within this project as a whole, the main interest lies in the *effects* of reading about suffering. Even when readers do not start out to read looking for a meaningful experience, they still may stumble upon meaningful scenes while reading. We already saw this to some extent in the *Tonio* study, which paid attention both to motives for and effects of reading. The following chapters will continue where the *Tonio* study left off, by looking further into readers' experiences during and after reading about suffering, using experiments. Part II investigates the extent to which stories about suffering can evoke empathic, other affective and reflective responses. It also considers to what extent textual and personal differences play a role in evoking such responses.

This interest in the contribution of textual factors implies that the second part pays more attention to "literariness." According to some scholars (e.g., Blanchot, 1995; Caruth, 1996; Kristeva, 1989), the complicated feelings of loss and pain may be best conveyed through literary language, which "defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). Responses in both the sad books study and the *Tonio* study suggested that there is something redeeming in the literary form, that style can help to draw us in. Without a beautiful or interesting form, many readers may not find sad books worth the trouble. But is a beautiful or interesting style crucial to evoking empathy and reflection? The example of *Nobody's Boy* may tell us otherwise, at least when it comes to empathy. As Leslie Jamison (2014) states in *The Empathy Exams* (p. 127):

> Even melodrama can carry someone across the gulf between his life and the lives of others. A terrible TV movie about addiction can still make someone feel for the addict – no matter how trite the plot twists, how shameful the puppetry of heart strings. Bad movies and bad writing and easy clichés still manage to make us feel things toward each other.

We may feel for characters despite bad or mediocre writing. However, are those feelings of similar intensity as when we read writing of high quality? Do these feelings equally translate into actual empathy with people in a similar situation to the characters? And are we as likely to start to reflect? These are among the questions underlying Part II.

Part II. Empathy and Reflection When Reading About Suffering

Literature can give standards and pass on deep knowledge, incarnated in language, in narrative. Literature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours.

(Susan Sontag – "Literature is Freedom," 2007, p. 205)

The claim above, made by the famous writer, critic and activist Susan Sontag, may be one of the most eloquently formulated, but it is certainly not the only claim concerning the power of literary texts. Ever since Aristotle's *Poetics* (1987; orig. around 335 BC), authors, critics, and academics have made immense claims concerning the ethical potential of narrative drama and poetic language (e.g., Althusser, 1983; Booth, 1988; Bronzwaer 1986; De Botton, 1997; Habermas, 1983; Nussbaum, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2010; Pinker, 2011; Scarry, 1999; Rorty, 1989). According to Booth (1988), reading literature, as a form of role-playing, helps us get into the minds of others, possibly leading to an increase in our empathic abilities (cf. Hakemulder, 2000; Oatley, 1999; Rorty, 1989). Others, like Althusser (1980), Habermas (1983), and Bronzwaer (1986) have praised the way literature's polyvalence can lead us to consider different scenarios and meanings, thereby making us reflect on our own norms, values and prejudices.

Somewhat more recently, the humanistic philosophers Nussbaum (1990, 1995, 2001) and De Botton (1997) have popularized the notion that reading literature could make us more compassionate and better able to reflect on who we are and would rather be. Reading literature, Nussbaum (1995) has said, triggers a type of imagination that is "an essential ingredient of an ethical stance

that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own" (p. xvi). As she has further argued, literature about suffering would be especially useful in training our empathic concern (Nussbaum, 2001):

> The narratives to which we would naturally turn for a development of compassion through the arts are narratives of tragic predicaments (…). We can easily see that such works of art promote compassion in their audience by inviting both empathy and the judgment of similar possibilities. (…) [A]lbeit in a fictive way, tragedies promote concern for someone different from oneself, through the compelling resources of poetry and drama. (…) Tragic fictions promote extension of concern by linking the imagination powerfully to the adventures of the distant life in question" (p. 351)

However, as Suzanne Keen has rightly remarked in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Nussbaum fails to provide convincing empirical evidence for her claims, instead "she assumes it must be so" (p. xviii). Looking into the empirical evidence available at the time, Keen (2007) concluded that while reading does seem to lead to empathy with characters ("narrative empathy" in her terms), there is little indication that it translates to empathy in real life, particularly altruistic behavior. Indeed, it is rather unlikely that any narrative text about suffering can evoke empathy with real-life others and reflection about oneself and others (cf. Keen, 2007). If we truly want to understand the positive potential of reading, what needs to be determined are the conditions for certain empathic and reflective effects to occur: who is affected by what kind of narrative text, in which ways, and how?

With that purpose in mind, Chapter 5 gives an overview of what is known regarding this issue. Note that Chapter 5 is not limited to literature about *suffering*. Rather, it tries to deduce general effects of reading (literature), while acknowledging that the content of a work, in interaction with the reader's personal experience, will always play a crucial role in its reception. Chapter 6 and 7 will look more closely at that interaction, by presenting two empirical

studies in which people read about grief and depression. Chapter 6 discusses an experiment about empathic and reflective reactions to three different "genre" conditions (expository, non-literary narrative and literary narrative), and Chapter 7 focuses more specifically on whether and how "literariness" (namely, "foregrounding": striking textual features) can influence affective (including empathic) and reflective responses.[29] Together, these chapters contribute to our knowledge about how and when reading about suffering can evoke empathy and reflection, and to what extent literariness plays a role in this. Chapter 8 synthesizes the results of the two experiments, gives a preliminary conclusion and points the way to the third part of the dissertation.

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[29] Chapter 5 is mainly based on a theoretical article written together with Frank Hakemulder, which was published in *Journal of Literary Theory*, under the title "Effects of literature on empathy and self-reflection: A theoretical-empirical framework" (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). In addition, it is based on the theoretical background sections of the articles related to Chapter 6 and 7. The study in Chapter 6 has been published as two articles, one about empathy, one about reflection; the article about empathy was published in *Poetics* ("Empathic reactions after reading. The role of genre, personal factors and affective responses," Koopman, 2015b), the article about reflection has appeared in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* (*PACA*; "How texts about suffering trigger reflection: Genre, personal factors and affective responses," Koopman, 2015c). An adapted version of the study discussed in Chapter 7 was also published in *PACA* ("Effects of 'literariness' on emotions and on empathy and reflection after reading," Koopman, 2016).

5. Effects of Literature on Empathy and Reflection:

A Theoretical-Empirical Framework

Rhetorically, the claims by Sontag, Nussbaum and others about literature's positive impact on empathy and reflection are convincing. But are these claims backed up by empirical evidence? And if such an impact is found, is this due to unique literary text qualities or to other aspects that literary texts share with other texts (e.g., narrativity)? This chapter discusses the relation between literary reading, empathy and reflection. After briefly recapitulating the key terms, I give an overview of the empirical and theoretical evidence that literary reading has an effect on empathy in its various forms. Within this overview, conclusions of earlier reviews are integrated (Hakemulder, 2000; Keen, 2007; Mar et al., 2011). Subsequently, I scrutinize the effects of literary reading on reflection. Finally, the findings for empathy and reflection are synthesized in a global explanatory model, adapted from Koopman and Hakemulder's (2015) "multi-factor model of literary reading."

5.1. Defining the Terms: Literature, Empathy, Reflection

Before I delve into the effects of literary reading on empathy and reflection, let me first define the key concepts (see the General Introduction for a lengthier discussion). Concerning "*literature*," I use a partly text-immanent, partly subjective definition. I consider literary language to deviate from "everyday" language, focusing attention on the language itself ("foregrounding": Mukařovský, 1976), but this originality also needs to be realized by the reader

(Miall & Kuiken, 1994, 1999).[30] "Literariness" can be seen as being present in a certain text to a lesser or greater extent by identifying such stylistic features as metaphors and similes, but if the reader browses over these features, is unimpressed by them, then they are unlikely to make a difference. It is therefore important to take into account the feelings which readers experience in response to the formal features of a text. These have been conceptualized as "*aesthetic feelings*" (Kneepkens & Zwaan; 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Tan, 1996). "Aesthetic feelings" include perceiving the beauty of sentences or the crafty structure, but also finding the form original and striking. The latter can be called "perceived foregrounding" and especially this aspect is an indication of the subjectively experienced literariness of a text (Miall & Kuiken, 1999, 2002).

Of course, the social-cultural context within which "literature" is constituted also matters for how people experience texts. As Zwaan (1994) has shown, for example, when readers expect that they are reading something "literary," they read differently, i.e. more carefully (his participants took longer to read a newspaper story when it was presented explicitly as literary). Yet, I want to find out whether effects can be attributed to texts themselves: do highly original texts have a different impact from their more straightforward, less original counterparts, regardless of whether these texts are presented as literary or non-literary? While the socio-cultural context will also play a role here, it will not be part of this, psychologically oriented, investigation.

As will become clear in the discussion of the empirical evidence in the coming paragraphs, when testing the "effects" of reading (literary) texts, it is relevant to distinguish between different textual aspects: "*narrativity*" (i.e., human or anthropomorphic beings undergoing a succession of events, cf.

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[30] There is of course ample discussion concerning what constitutes everyday and original language use – or, what constitutes a "norm" and a "deviation" within language use. Following Fricke (2008), it can be argued that while there are countless deviations from language norms in everyday language use, literary authors handle such deviations in a more conscious way than most of us. According to Fricke (2008): "A deviation becomes poetic only by fulfilling a recognizable function" (p. 191). Whether it is within the text or between the text and other contexts, the deviation adds to the meaning of the text.

Tomashevsky, 1965), "*fictionality*" (as opposed to non-fiction), and "*literariness*" (containing aesthetic and unconventional features). The larger category "narratives" can include (besides novels and short stories) such "genres" as diaries, magazine articles, and the anecdotes we tell each other in daily conversations. Fiction is a subset of this larger category. Literature can be fictional, but it can also be explicitly presented as based on facts, as in literary journalism or literary memoirs. Literature also does not have to be narrative, as is often the case for poetry. However, since the recurring claims concerning the effects of reading tend to be made about literary *narratives*, this is what I focus on.

"*Empathy*" was defined in the General Introduction broadly as "the notion of responsivity to the experiences of another" (Davis, 1980, p. 3), with a distinction between affective and cognitive aspects. "Cognitive empathy" is the ability to understand someone else's perspective (Davis 1980, 1983; cf. "Theory of Mind" or ToM: Baron-Cohen, 1991; Premack & Woodruff, 1978) and "emotional empathy" is about feeling similar emotions to someone else (cf. "emotional contagion": Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1994). As noted in the General Introduction, for higher level mental processing like literary reading, the separation between cognitive and affective aspects becomes somewhat artificial, since both types of processes interact (cf. Frijda, 1986; Izard, 2009; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Nathanson, 2003). I use the overarching term "empathic reactions" to refer to this complex combination of affective and cognitive empathy.

Empathic reactions can be evoked by seeing the tribulations of real people, but also through reading about (fictional) characters. This second type of empathic response can be called "narrative empathy" (after Keen, 2007), and is part of the broader concept "*narrative feelings*" (see Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Narrative feelings include feeling empathy and sympathy with characters (feeling with and for them; e.g., Coplan, 2004; Keen, 2006), identification with characters (seeing oneself as similar to them, taking on their

perspectives; e.g., Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011), and absorption (also called "transportation," feeling immersed in the narrative world; e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000; Kuijpers, 2014). In the available literature, these distinctions between various narrative feelings have often not been made, or somewhat different definitions have been used. When discussing the effects, I will try to be as clear as possible about which narrative feelings are involved.

Finally, I use the rather broad concept "*reflection*" to designate the conscious experience of having thoughts and insights about oneself, others, society, objects, the human condition, and/or other aspects of the world we inhabit. The term "reflection" carries the association of rich introspection, but in this part of the dissertation, it will be used more inclusively, in the sense of "thinking." The term "deep reflection" will be reserved for those thoughts that demonstrate gained insight into one's own or human nature. While "reflection" may be a predominantly cognitive process, feelings are also likely to be involved in triggering and coloring thoughts (cf. Koopman et al., 2012; Nussbaum, 1990). Given the expected relation between feelings and thoughts, we could also expect a relation between empathic and reflective responses after reading.

5.2. Effects of Reading on Empathy: Theory

How could reading influence empathic reactions? The idea that narrative texts would have stronger effects on empathy than expository texts makes sense theoretically. When reading a story, Oatley (1994, 1999, 2002, 2008) argues, we make mental models of the narrative world, take on the goals and plans of the protagonist (perspective-taking), and subsequently experience emotions according to our evaluation to what extent these goals are accomplished (cf. Hakemulder, 2000). This type of simulation, or "role-taking," Oatley (1999) suggests, is likely to result in identification, empathy and/or sympathy with these characters (cf. Mar and Oatley, 2008). Further theoretical explanation of this perspective is provided by Kotovych, Dixon, Bortolussi and Holden (2011),

who argue that reading is like a conversation between narrator and reader: when we try to understand a character in a book, we make similar inferences about what the other is thinking and feeling as in conversation, and making such inferences would increase our understanding of and identification with the character. Reading narratives could, in this way, function as practice for inferring emotions and taking the perspectives of others in real life. Through the process of imagining others' experiences, readers could eventually feel more empathy for others outside of the narrative world (Mar and Oatley, 2008; Nussbaum, 1995).[31]

Claims have furthermore been made that "fictional" narratives would be especially conducive to empathic reactions. Particularly Oatley (e.g., 1999, 2002) has argued that fiction creates a beneficial environment to engage with others: as these others are not presented as existing in the real world, we may be less defensive and more inclined to indulge in feeling (cf. Keen, 2006, 2007). We can care for characters without having to worry about our ability to actually come to their aid. As Breithaupt (2012) has posited, human beings are "hyper-empathic": we are social beings who are, overall, biologically very well prepared to feel what others feel and to deduce what others think (p. 85). This empathic ability, Breithaupt argues, is something we need to block if we do not want to be overwhelmed by the perspectives of others. When reading or viewing fiction, however, the "self-loss" caused by empathy is not threatening, because the limited length of the story promises "an end to the empathic engagement when the development has come to an end" (Breithaupt, 2012, p. 85). To some extent, this goes for all narratives, but fictional narrative constitutes a clearer separate realm to "bypass the blocking mechanisms" that people commonly use to protect themselves from an excess of empathy (Breithaupt, 2012, p. 86). Or, in the words of Keen (2006): "fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of

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[31] A similar expectation has been discussed by Harrison (2008, 2011), in what she called a "synechdocal model of interpreting character" (Harrison, 2011, p. 257): through interpreting a character as part of a larger social group, one's empathy for the character can translate to this larger group. Harrison's argument is based on Victorian social-problem literature, which aims to trigger empathy with characters and their social group in a quite straightforward way.

cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world" (p. 213). Through the fact that fictional characters are not "real" and that a fictional engagement has a time limit, the context of reading fiction may create an optimal aesthetic distance to engage with other people's tribulations (cf. Cupchik, 2002). Yet, one could also argue that this "distance" to the real world tempers empathic reactions, precisely because fiction resembles play and brackets actual consequences.

Apart from narrativity and fictionality, "literariness" has also been argued to be a factor in causing empathic reactions (cf. Hakemulder, 2000; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999). While Oatley has mostly pointed to the higher complexity of characters in literary texts (e.g., Mar & Oatley, 2008), others have shown that striking stylistic features in literary texts (i.e., "foregrounding") can increase the time needed to process the content as well as making the content more vivid (Hunt & Vipond, 1985; Miall & Kuiken, 1994), which could ultimately lead the reader to look at the world in a different way. As Miall (2000) has proposed, reading works with "special uses of language" (p. 51) helps to upset the stereotypical schemata through which we usually make sense of the world. "Through literary reading we dehabituate, that is, we are enabled to contemplate alternative models for being in the world" (Miall, 2000, p. 50). This can be called the "defamiliarization" hypothesis, based on Skhlovsky's (1965) term "ostranenie" ("estrangement" or "defamiliarization"). Miall and Kuiken (1994, 1999, 2002) have discussed such an effect of literature in the context of reflection and of affect more generally, but they did not relate defamiliarization explicitly to empathy. However, following Skhlovsky's (1965) idea that literariness sensitizes one's perception and felt sense of things, people and events, readers of literary texts might also be more likely to feel empathic understanding.

On the other hand, striking stylistic features could make readers focus more on the form than on the content (Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994). This can create aesthetic distance between the reader and the narrative world (cf.

Cupchik, 2002), which might hamper feelings for characters (Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994), and thereby possibly for real people in similar situations. Given these different options, we need to turn to empirical research to find out which effects literature has in which circumstances.

5.3. Effects of Reading on Empathy: Empirical Evidence

Reviewing the empirical evidence, there is as of yet little proof to confirm effects of *fiction* and *literariness* on empathic reactions. For the effect of exposure to *narratives* the evidence is – arguably – more convincing. When it comes to the general impact of reading *narratives* on empathy, several studies yielded positive effects on various empathic measures, like self-reported cognitive empathy (Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013), empathic attitudes towards outgroups (e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Hakemulder, 2000, 2008; Johnson, 2013; Litcher & Johnson, 1969; Marlowe & Maycock, 2001; Shapiro, Morrison, & Boker, 2004), and motivation for prosocial behavior (e.g., Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Bilsky, 1989; Johnson, 2012).

However, these studies typically did not include a thematically related non-narrative text as control condition. In Bilsky's (1989) experiment, for instance, high school students were randomly assigned to read a (literary) story or to do quiet work on their own (control group). The story presented participants with a prosocial dilemma: a character has to decide whether to offer help to another character and bear the personal costs. After reading, the *Awareness of Consequences Scale*, which measures the ability to put oneself in the position of another person, and a *Prosocial Motivation Questionnaire* were administered. Those who had read a literary story scored significantly higher on both measures than the control group. As is evident from this experimental design, it is not clear whether it mattered that what students read was *literary* and that it was a *narrative*.

Still, studies which used adequate control conditions do suggest a stronger empathic effect of narrative than non-narrative texts (Hakemulder, 2000; Djikic et al., 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013). Hakemulder (2000) found that readers of a narrative text about a woman in a fundamentalist Islamic country opposing traditional gender roles were more inclined than readers of an expository text on the same subject to believe that women in such countries find it hard to accept their secondary position in society. It may be that readers are more likely to (over)generalize from the experience of one character than from an essay recounting the experiences of many (cf. the "identified victim-effect," e.g., Kogut & Ritov, 2005). This general effect that imagining how one person feels leads to sympathy for that person (the "empathy-attitude effect"), which leads to more understanding for the group as a whole (the "empathy-attitude-action effect"), has also been shown in social psychological research by the Batson research group (Batson et al., 1997, 2002).[32] In Batson et al.'s (2002) experiment, participants listened to an interview with a heroin addict, after which they completed a scale about their attitudes towards addicts and were asked to allocate funding to an outreach program. Participants who received a perspective-taking instruction (imagining how the addict feels) allocated significantly more funding and had significantly more positive attitudes than those who were instructed to be "objective." It needs to be noted that Batson et al. (2002) had to instruct their participants to imagine themselves to be in the "character's" position. For readers, fictionality and literariness might play a role in making such engagement with the character occur naturally.

Effects of *fiction* on empathy have been claimed by Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz and Peterson (2006) and by Mar, Oatley and Peterson (2009), who found correlations between people's *empathic ability* and people's general exposure to

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[32] The term "empathy-attitude effect" that Batson et al. (1997, 2002) use is somewhat misleading, since the induced "empathy" with an individual that they are referring to is actually a composite construct "empathic feelings," which leans largely on what others would label "sympathy," namely the adjectives "*sympathetic*, *compassionate*, *softhearted*, *warm*, *tender*, and *moved*" (Batson et al., 2002, p. 1660 - emphasis in original).

"narrative fiction" (as opposed to "non-fiction"). Empathic ability was measured by the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET: Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001), in which participants view 36 pictures of actors' eye-regions and each time attribute one out of four varying emotion words to these pictures. Exposure to narrative fiction was measured by Mar et al.'s (2006) version of the Author Recognition Test, or ART). The correlation between the RMET and the ART has been replicated by Djikic et al. (2013). However, it can be doubted whether this is an effect of "fiction" in a strict sense (i.e., of narratives that do not make truth claims), or an effect of "narrative." The revised ART by Mar et al. (2006), which distinguishes between "fiction" (i.e., novels) and "non-fiction" (i.e., essays, popular science), may be better characterized as a measure of exposure to narrative texts versus non-narrative texts. Also, because of the correlational set-up of these studies, we do not know what came first: reading or empathic ability. Finally, it needs to be stressed that the RMET is a rather basic measure of empathy, measuring the very first stage of Theory of Mind: attributing the correct mental state (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001). It does not tell us much about actual empathic behavior or attitudes. Other studies suggest a limited effect of fiction. In the experiment described above by Batson et al. (2002), similar effects were found when the researchers told the participants beforehand that the interview was a work of fiction. However, the effects were not as strong (i.e., positive) as for non-fiction.

Still, there is neurocognitive evidence that when one reads the same texts as either fictional or factual, responses differ (Altmann, Bohrn, Lubrich, Menninghaus, & Jacobs, 2014). In Altmann et al.'s (2014) "fiction" condition, brain activation patterns of participants suggested that they perceived the events in stories as possibilities of how something might have been, imaginatively constructing these hypothetical events or scenarios (cf. Oatley, 1999). In the "non-fiction" condition, on the other hand, readers focused on content, on updating their world-knowledge. Altmann et al. (2014) suggest that

the simulation processes of reading fiction must involve perspective-taking and generating relational inferences.

Causal evidence for a relation between reading *literary* narratives and *empathic ability* comes from Kidd and Castano (2013). In a series of five experiments, Kidd and Castano (2013) compared reactions on multiple measures of Theory of Mind after reading literary fiction versus popular fiction, and literary fiction versus expository non-fiction. In both comparisons they found higher scores for the literary condition on the RMET and on the Yoni test (Shamay-Tsoory & Aharon-Peretz, 2007), which requires more cognitive effort than the RMET (it measures correct inference of emotions when looking at cartoons, using verbal and eye gaze cues). Again, however, these measures of ToM tell us little about empathy in real-life situations. More importantly, it is unclear to what kind of "literary" feature or features the results can be attributed, since Kidd and Castano (2013) selected the literary texts on the basis of critical acclaim and the popular texts on the basis of sales figures. They did not match the literary and non-literary text according to subject and they also did not measure in what ways the literary and non-literary texts differed. Differences between the popular and literary texts in the Kidd and Castano (2013) study might explain why Djikic et al. (2013) failed to reproduce these results on the RMET when they provided participants with either stories or expository texts of equal interestingness. While Black and Barnes (2015) claim to have replicated the findings of Kidd and Castano (2013), this study only made the comparison between texts classified as "literary fiction" and as "non-fiction." Just as in Kidd and Castano's (2013) study, the non-fiction texts of Black and Barnes (2015) contained no human protagonists, while the literary fiction texts did.

The studies discussed above thus provide little empirical evidence for an effect of literariness on empathy. When a comparison was made between different types of texts, this was a comparison between a type of narrative text (a "story") and an expository text. The only causal empirical study that showed a bigger impact of literary narratives than of popular narratives (Kidd & Castano,

2013) was limited to empathic ability and did not take into account which features of literary texts would be of influence. Studies claiming effects for "fiction" did not use separate narrative and non-narrative conditions. What we have found so far may mostly be effects of narrativity, that is to say, of imagining the feelings, thoughts and actions of a character (perspective-taking).

5.4. Personal Factors, Narrative and Aesthetic Feelings

More systematic comparisons between different types of texts are needed to determine whether and under which conditions which texts lead to empathic reactions. However, to investigate how (literary) reading can lead to empathy, it does not suffice to compare between different types of texts. A specific text may affect some readers but not others (e.g., Djikic et al., 2013). In order to grasp the mechanisms through which reading can lead to empathic reactions, it is relevant to take into account personal background characteristics of the reader as well as the reader's experience during reading: how this reader responds to characteristics of the text.

Various personal characteristics of readers could influence empathic reactions, but I will only mention a few candidates that have been mentioned previously by scholars and that will play a part in chapters 6 and 7. First of all, it is relevant to observe that while reading about others could temporarily increase (state) empathy, readers also already have a certain empathic sensitivity to others before starting to read a text. This disposition, "*trait empathy*," is a personality variable that would logically influence one's empathic reactions to real-life others directly, but perhaps also through making one empathize more with characters. As some have argued (e.g., Mar et al., 2006, 2009), trait empathy could have been developed more strongly for some people because of their *exposure to literature*. Following that argument, both trait empathy and one's previous exposure to literature are relevant personal factors to take into account when experimentally exploring the relation between reading and empathy.

Furthermore, *personal experience* can be an important factor. As Loewenstein and Small (2007) argued in their overview of factors that are likely to contribute to sympathy and prosocial behavior, having been through an experience ourselves makes it easier to feel what this is like for another. There is some empirical evidence for the importance of readers' personal experiences in the context of narrative persuasion (Green, 2004), but not as straightforwardly for empathy with others.

As suggested above, such personal factors could directly influence empathic reactions after reading, but they could also influence narrative feelings towards characters and the narrative world, which can in turn be expected to influence empathic reactions (mediation). A couple of studies have pointed to the role of narrative feelings in determining empathic outcomes. For example, Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found that reading a fiction text (as opposed to a non-fiction newspaper article) caused an increase in self-reported affective empathy after reading (measured by Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index; Davis, 1980, 1983). However, this effect only held for those participants who felt absorbed in the story (measured by the narrative engagement scale by Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009).

Johnson (2012, 2013) provides further empirical evidence for the importance of narrative feelings. Johnson (2012) assumed that the degree of being absorbed into a narrative indicates the extent to which one simulates the social experiences depicted, and that this is the main way in which reading leads to empathic responses (cf. Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1994, 1999, 2002). Indeed, in Johnson's (2012) first study, participants who reported higher "transportation" also reported higher sympathy with the character (labelled "affective empathy" by Johnson) and were more likely to engage in prosocial behavior (picking up a pen the experimenter had dropped). This effect was independent of trait empathy. In a later study, Johnson (2013) also found supporting evidence for the notion that absorption is responsible for changes in beliefs and attitudes toward out-groups. While it is unclear whether

transportation occurs before sympathy and empathy with characters (or vice versa) or whether these aspects of narrative engagement occur simultaneously, the Johnson studies (2012, 2013) do suggest that transportation and sympathy/empathy with characters work together in influencing attitudes towards others who are like the characters.

With regard to aesthetic feelings and empathic reactions, to my knowledge, no empirical studies have been conducted. Yet, there are suggestions that aesthetic features and aesthetic feelings are also connected to an overall more emotional response (e.g., Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Van Peer, 1986 – for a more extensive discussion, see Chapter 7). According to Kneepkens and Zwaan (1994), texts higher in literariness (i.e., foregrounding) would evoke more aesthetic feelings, but less narrative feelings, as they argued that a focus on the style leads away from a focus on characters and events. However, one can also argue that finding a text more beautiful helps to find its characters more sympathetic and/or vice versa: aesthetic feelings and narrative feelings may reinforce one another, in a process of oscillation (cf. Cupchik, 2001). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that aesthetic and narrative feelings are moderately to strongly correlated, although correlations between perceived foregrounding and narrative feelings appear to be lower than correlations between aesthetic appreciation and narrative feelings (Andringa, 1996; Koopman, 2011; Koopman et al., 2012).

5.5. Effects of Reading on Reflection: Theory

Reflection has received less scholarly attention as an outcome variable of reading than empathy. Nussbaum (2001) has claimed that literary reading helps us examine ourselves: thinking about how to relate to others, to ethical issues and to life in general. However, she did not explain what it is about reading that establishes this, apart from the idea that we imagine ourselves in someone else's

place – which is comparable to Oatley's role-taking theory and Hakemulder's (2000) concept of stories as "moral laboratories."

Generally, we can assume that some of the mechanisms which supposedly lead from reading to empathy with others also lead to reflection. The simulation of being someone else that is encouraged by the narrative structure can also lead to thoughts about what it is like to be such a person. The freedom to imagine different worlds without having to act on them that fictionality allows for cannot only help us indulge in that world, but possibly also bring insights from that world to everyday life. When it comes to literariness, just as for empathy, we can identify different paths that could lead to reflection.

First of all, literary texts tend to be more ambiguous than expository or popular narrative texts: polyvalence or indeterminacy is a particularly literary value. Ever since Iser (1978, 1988), we are aware of the "gaps" in the narrative structure of literary texts, gaps which the reader needs to fill with her interpretation. Kidd and Castano (2013) have mentioned this ambiguity of literary texts as a possible explanation why such texts would be better at training Theory of Mind. This ambiguity could lead readers to think more actively during as well as after reading. As Beach and Hynds (1991) have argued based on earlier reader response studies, understanding literary texts requires and trains problem solving strategies, including "question asking" (p. 461). The multiple meanings in literary texts may trigger readers to weigh various interpretations as well as to consider their own questions, and thereby to start reflecting on their own lives, including their views and behaviors (cf. Althusser, 1980; Bronzwaer, 1986; Habermas, 1983). On the other hand, readers might be so involved with the meaning of the text itself that they do not reflect further on its themes and the implications for one's own life. In addition, there may be a turning point where a text with a lot of gaps becomes incomprehensible.

While I recognize the potential of "gaps," the focus in this project lies on supposedly the clearest literary characteristic, which also has received slightly more empirical attention: "foregrounding." As explained in the General

Introduction, this concept, coined by Mukařovský (1976), signifies textual features standing out from ordinary language, with the supposed function of de-automatization instead of simple communication (cf. Jakobson, 1960; Shklovsky, 1965). Such use of striking language with an aesthetic purpose is thus meant to slow down communication, making readers pause and reflect on the meaning of what is said and how it is said (cf. Fricke, 2008; Hakemulder, 2004).

The foregrounding concept has been picked up by Miall and Kuiken in their reader response research. In early studies (Miall & Kuiken, 1994, 1999) they suggested that striking features in a literary text lead readers to become unsettled and start looking at familiar things in a different way (thus, "defamiliarization"). Later (Miall & Kuiken, 2002), they argued that a deep type of reflection connected to self-understanding results from the following sequence: striking features in the texts evoke narrative and aesthetic feelings; these are linked to personal experiences (memories) and used to reflect upon oneself and life in general. Since their argument relies on reader response research, we are now turning to the empirical evidence concerning reflection.

5.6. Effects of Reading on Reflection: Empirical Evidence

Qualitative studies provide anecdotal evidence for the overarching connection between reading and deep reflection (e.g., Levitt, Rattanasampan, Chaidaroon, Stanley, & Robinson, 2009; Shirley, 1969; Sorensen, 1999; Waxler, 2008). In Shirley's (1969) study, for example, one reader of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* reported: "After reading the book I discovered how self-centered I was and how quick I was to form my opinions" (p. 407). Generally, in Shirley's study, participants' comments showed that reading literature can stimulate moral self-evaluation. Such reports are important because they convey experiences that seem more likely to occur outside than inside a controlled laboratory setting. However, the disadvantage of such studies is that participants' reconstructions of their past experiences are not necessarily

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reliable. Moreover, it is unclear whether literariness is a precondition for these experiences.

Further insight into the type of reflection that can be potentially triggered by literary reading has been provided by a series of phenomenological studies by the Miall and Kuiken research group (e.g., Kuiken, Miall, & Sikora, 2004; Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Sikora, Kuiken, & Miall, 2010). Readers were exposed to a poem or short story, and subsequently asked to write about it. Their responses were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively to reveal common patterns of experience (for this method, see Kuiken & Miall, 2001). Through these analyses, Miall and Kuiken (2002) arrived at the concept of "self-modifying feelings" as a phenomenon which could be specific to literary reading. "Self-modifying feelings" means a deep kind of (self-)reflection which includes subtle changes in one's self-concept. However, self-modifying feelings are not automatically evoked by literary texts. As Miall and Kuiken (2002) emphasized: "self-modifying feelings are evident only among certain readers – and among them only some of the time" (p. 229). Miall and Kuiken (2002) as well as follow-up studies by Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004) and by Sikora, Kuiken and Miall (2010) suggested a connection between foregrounding, aesthetic feelings and such deep reflection: self-modifying feelings (for the 10-15% of the readers who experienced this) were preceded by emotionally engaging with striking passages, often feeling resonance with a particular image.

Apart from pointing to the possible influence of foregrounding, these studies also suggest that emotion and reflection go together (cf., Koopman et al., 2012). However, as these studies did not use a comparison condition, we cannot be sure whether reflective responses were necessarily evoked by foregrounding. An alternative explanation could be that what readers mostly respond to is content, as authors might use their most striking formulations for those moments in the texts which are most important and/or emotional (cf., Dijkstra, Zwaan, Graesser, & Magliano, 1994; Hakemulder, 2004).

Similar as for the relation between reading and empathy, for reflection as an outcome variable there is a lack of experimental studies comparing literary and non-literary texts. One empirical study that did make such a comparison, by Halász (1991), did not find more reflection (conceptualized as ideas related to the text itself) in response to a literary than to an expository text. Halász (1991) did find that "remindings" (i.e., memories) in response to the literary text were more personal, more affective, and more detailed (cf. Seilman & Larsen, 1989). Memories are not necessarily related to deeper reflection, since a story can make us think about a certain personal experience without us reflecting on it, or coming to other, meaningful insights about ourselves. Yet, it does seem that the more room there is for personal memories, the more likely it is that readers will indeed reflect on their lives. Literary texts could thus provide beneficial preconditions for a deeper type of reflection.

Other experimental studies looking at reading and reflection have manipulated text fragments to be higher in literariness. Unfortunately, they give mixed results. While Van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier (2007) found a significant effect of foregrounding on the cognitive items they used (learning something; wanting to stop and think about it; wanting to memorize it), a series of experiments by Kuijpers (2014) failed to show consistent effects of "deviation" in prose on her measure of reflection (i.e, a deepened understanding of life and finding the text meaningful). These differences could be due to the fact that Van Peer et al. (2007) only presented readers with a single line from a poem, which they varied to contain more or less foregrounding. Therefore, they did not provide readers with much other content to think about, potentially leading to a bigger effect of "form," whereas Kuijpers (2014) used longer fragments that also offered content to think about. An alternative explanation is that Kuijpers's (2014) measure was aiming too high for just brief exposure to a text with foregrounding.

Finally, there is some indirect empirical support for the defamiliarization

hypothesis. In a study on different types of foregrounding (Miall & Kuiken, 1994), literary excerpts with a higher rate of foregrounding provoked longer reading times and stronger affect, which at least suggests the possibility of providing opportunity (time) and cause (affect) for reflection (cf. Hakemulder, 2004; Hunt & Vipond, 1985).

5.7. Personal Factors, Narrative and Aesthetic Feelings

Just as for empathy, when investigating the relation between reading and reflection, it is relevant to take into account personal factors, as well as narrative and aesthetic feelings. First of all, personal experience is likely to play an important role (cf., Green, 2004; Halász, 1991; Poe, 1986). An indirect influence of previous exposure to literature, via aesthetic feelings, could also be expected. The direction of this influence, however, is less evident. Reading experience can make it easier for readers to detect strikingness (as shown in studies by Andringa, 1996, and by Miall & Kuiken, 1994), but it can also raise the threshold for experiencing surprise (as shown by Kuijpers, 2014). As trait empathy has been identified above as likely to influence narrative feelings, it may also indirectly influence reflection.

Narrative feelings, namely, appear to be a trigger for reflection. While the findings of the Miall and Kuiken research group already suggested that aesthetic feelings can lead to reflection, other empirical evidence points more strongly in the direction of a role for narrative feelings. In the context of studying responses to film, Igartua (2010) has found that a higher involvement with characters (empathy and sympathy) goes together with cognitive elaboration and a more complex reflective process (cf. Vorderer, 1993). It can be hypothesized that similar processes hold for (narrative) texts. As Levitt et al. (2009) argued, based on in-depth interviews with six readers, identification with characters' experiences can enable readers to reflect on threats and experiment with new possibilities and perspectives to deal with personally difficult situations. In an

experimental study by Koopman et al. (2012) on responses to literary rape scenes, narrative feelings like empathic distress were found to correlate positively with reporting more thoughts. That an emotional experience while reading appears to be related to reflection was furthermore confirmed by Cupchik, Leonard, Axelrad, and Kalin (1998), who showed that literary excerpts with emotional subject matter did not only evoke more emotions than literary excerpts with descriptive content, but also evoked more thoughts about the text (cf. Cupchik & László, 1994).

5.8. Adapted Multi-Factor Model of Literary Reading

The theoretical background and empirical findings outlined in the sections above can be used to draw, in broad strokes, an explanatory model for the relation between reading and empathy and reflection. Since, as observed above, there is a lack of systematic comparisons between literary and non-literary narratives as well as between fictional and non-fictional texts, such an explanatory model is necessarily preliminary. Moreover, in order to still be comprehensible, the model presented in this chapter will not include the various personal factors. Instead of the separate narrative and aesthetic feelings, it will use the overall concepts "narrative feelings" and "aesthetic feelings." This is necessary to be able to present the potential effects for literariness, narrativity and fictionality simultaneously.

In the sections above, we saw two main theoretical ideas which could explain the underlying processes leading to empathy and reflection: the idea of reading as a form of *role-taking* proposed by Oatley (e.g., 1994, 1999) and the idea of *defamiliarization* through striking textual features proposed by Miall and Kuiken (1994, 1999, 2002). The role-taking concept seems most adequate to explain empathic responses, since "walking a mile in another's shoes" is a relatively direct training of perspective-taking and of evoking empathic concern. The defamiliarization concept seems most adequate in explaining reflective

responses, since striking features in a text would allow the reader to pause and see things in different light. However, these two positions are also complementary, and can be synthesized within one model, which is presented in Figure II.1.[33] (Note that my explanations of the "role-taking" and "defamiliarization" perspective are simplifications of what respectively Oatley and colleagues, and Miall and Kuiken have claimed.)
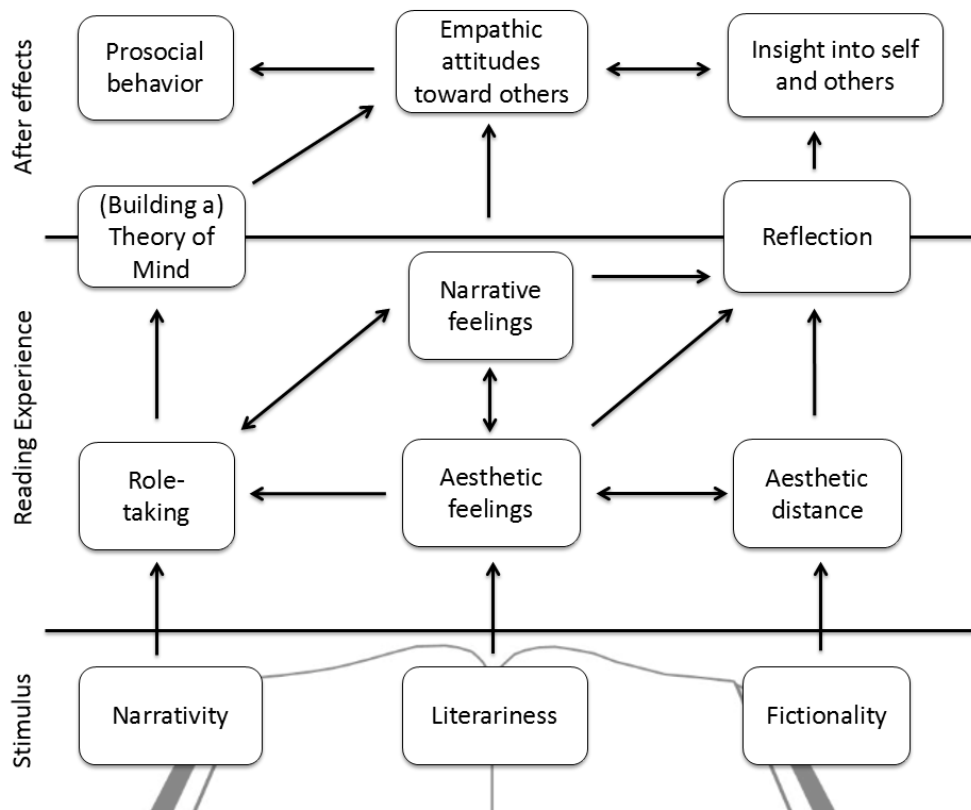
Figure II.1. *Adapted multi-factor model of literary reading*

The role-taking perspective largely comprises the left part of Figure II.1. Within this perspective, someone reading a narrative text makes inferences

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[33] Following the progression of insight during this research project, the adapted multi-factor model of literary reading presented here has been changed in some respects in comparison with the multi-factor model of literary reading presented in Koopman and Hakemulder (2015). Most importantly, the concept "stillness" (Martel, 2009) has been substituted here by "aesthetic distance," which has a similar meaning in providing a space or pause, yet is more specific to works of art, and was therefore deemed more useful.

about the character's mental states and may even adopt the character's goals and plans temporarily. Such role-taking may lead to narrative feelings. Furthermore, it may lead to an increased ability to form an adequate Theory of Mind – first about characters, but this can be extended to people in real life. Such an extension would be more likely if the characters are more complex and if readers need to make an effort to infer their motives. If characterization simply follows genre conventions (e.g., the femme fatale figure in classic detectives), then we can expect less "training" in perspective-taking and less effects in real life.

Both the increased ability to form a Theory of Mind and the experience of narrative feelings could subsequently lead to empathy towards others outside the narrative world: changed attitudes towards others and possibly increased prosocial behavior (cf. Batson et al., 2002). Of course, for prosocial behavior to occur in real life, the situational context also plays an important role (e.g., the personal costs involved; cf. Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Loewenstein & Small, 2007). The relationship between experiencing narrative feelings and real-life empathy will thus not be as straightforward as this model suggests.

This role-taking side of the model suggests why narrative texts could be more likely to lead to empathic reactions than reading non-narrative (expository) texts: without characters to make inferences about, there are no processes of perspective-taking, sympathy and empathy (cf. Black & Barnes, 2015). While Keen (2007) has argued that the ability to feel for characters has no direct relation to our actions towards actual people, Johnson's (2012) empirical findings showed that narrative feelings in response to stories can at least have modest prosocial effects. Furthermore, as the empirical evidence above suggested, both life-long exposure and short-time exposure to narratives have been associated with measures of (mainly cognitive) empathy. Still, most evidence comes from studies which mix "fiction" and "narrative" in such a way that the effects of either cannot clearly be separated. Experimental designs which distinguish between narrative and non-narrative texts are thus needed to establish whether there is a relation between narrativity and empathy. In

addition, if we want to make more general claims about reading causing empathy, we need studies measuring "real-life empathy."

As is evident from Figure II.1, the role-taking perspective only tells part of what may be going on. If we want to understand responses to literary narrative, it is relevant to take other stimuli into account than just narrativity. The defamiliarization perspective represented by Miall and Kuiken (1994, 1999, 2002) is a theory more particular to literary texts. Miall and Kuiken (1994, 1999, 2002) place the potential power of literature mainly in literariness, suggesting that foregrounded features in the text (e.g., novel metaphors, assonance, anaphora) can lead to aesthetic feelings of perceived beauty and of surprise (in its strongest manifestation: defamiliarization). As the multi-factor model suggests, such feelings could in turn draw the reader deeper into the narrative (they could impact narrative feelings). Yet, they could also lead to a sense of aesthetic distance, being able to perceive the work of art as a work of art. Either pathway could lead to reflection, but the evidence discussed above suggests that a generally more emotional experience is also more likely to make people start to think. Miall and Kuiken (2002) suggest on the basis of their largely qualitative findings that it is the combination of aesthetic and narrative feelings that is most likely to evoke deep thoughts, since it is such a combination that implies a personal resonance of readers with the text.

Finally, fictionality can be added as a third general factor. By including fictionality, the model speaks to all the claims made regarding the effects of literary narrative fiction. Even though empirical evidence that fictionality would be crucial is minimal (but not non-existent, see Altmann et al., 2014), there are important theoretical reasons to assume it could be relevant. If fictionality is shown to have an effect, this may mainly be the case because of the fact that it can provide a certain distance from actual events. Seeing the text as a construction, a representation (or: *mimesis*) could provide a space in which aesthetic feelings can flourish. This space, as well as evoked aesthetic feelings which could make readers pay closer attention to the text, may also help readers

to make inferences about mental states and to experience narrative feelings. The realization of the aesthetic construction could furthermore lead readers to reflect directly on the text and its relation to actual situations.

Within this model, one matter for discussion is the exact placing of the line between reading experience and after-effects. Currently, it is proposed that the mental processes of reflecting and of forming a Theory of Mind are part of both the realm of reading experience and that of after-effects. A reader's first thoughts can occur during reading (for instance during mind-wandering, when readers' attention is less focused on the ongoing perceptual information, and more on internally generated thoughts and feelings), or during moments the reading is interrupted. Scholes (1989) has argued that such breaches in the flow of reading may be essential in bringing life to our reading. These thoughts may later be elaborated upon when talking to others, reading about the text, or writing in diaries or book reports. As to the exact placing of the box for "(Building a) Theory of Mind," many of the processes involved in social cognition may be the same for (fictional) characters as for the human beings we encounter in our daily lives (cf. Culpeper, 1996; Sklar, 2013). While reading, as suggested above, one's ability to form a Theory of Mind may already be trained, and this ability can continue to function after reading.

As already noted, this model only provides a global picture of how reading can lead to empathy and reflection, the general framework in which the findings of the chapters to follow can be placed. The model does not include reader characteristics which can play a role and does not differentiate between the various narrative and aesthetic feelings. Chapter 6 and 7 take steps towards painting a more complicated picture, focusing – again – on reading about suffering. First of all, those chapters will make elements of the model more specific by looking into the effects of separate narrative and aesthetic feelings. Furthermore, they will take into account the personal factors discussed earlier on in this chapter. And last but not least, Chapter 7 will compare between three versions of a text with different stylistic characteristics.

6. Reading Suffering.

The Role of Genre, Personal Factors and Affective Responses in Influencing Empathy and Reflection

In Chapter 5, we saw a global picture of how different main aspects of literary narratives – narrativity, literariness and fictionality – could lead to empathic and reflective reactions. An important role was attributed to the narrative and aesthetic feelings during reading. Chapter 5 further mentioned the potential influence of the personal factors trait empathy, personal experience with the subject matter (e.g., Green, 2004), and exposure to literature (e.g., Andringa, 1996). The study discussed in this chapter builds on this theoretical groundwork by exploring readers' responses to different texts about mental pain. By exploring the effects of text genre and subject matter, affective responses during reading, and personal factors, the current study attempts to provide a relatively comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to empathy and reflection.

In order to differentiate the effects of narrativity and literariness, I compare reactions to three text "genres": literary narrative texts (stories by award-winning authors, higher in foregrounding), non-literary narrative texts ("life stories": rather straightforward, emotionally loaded stories, comparable to diaries), and expository texts. In addition, the two narrative conditions are presented as either fictional or non-fictional. Such a fiction-instruction provides a better way of exploring the effect of fiction than only using an expository and a narrative text, as effects could then be due to narrativity instead of fictionality. Finally, since readers may respond differently to texts according to whether they have had similar experiences as the characters, the current study uses two forms of suffering as subject matter: depression and grief.

The following research questions are investigated to look into the effects of narrativity, literariness and fictionality on 1) affective responses during reading, 2) empathic reactions after reading, and 3) reflection:

1a) *Do readers report different (levels of) affective responses (i.e., narrative and aesthetic feelings) when they read literary than when they read non-literary narrative texts about the same subject?*

1b) *Do readers report different (levels of) affective responses (i.e., narrative and aesthetic feelings) when reading fiction than when reading non-fiction about the same subject?*

2a) *Are readers more likely to show empathic reactions (i.e., prosocial behavior and empathic understanding) after having read narrative than non-narrative (i.e., expository) texts about the same subject?*

2b) *Are readers more likely to show empathic reactions (i.e., prosocial behavior and empathic understanding) after having read literary than non-literary narrative texts about the same subject?*

2c) *Are readers more likely to show empathic reactions (i.e., prosocial behavior and empathic understanding) after having read fiction than non-fiction about the same subject?*

3a) *Are readers more likely to report reflection after having read narrative than non-narrative (i.e., expository) texts about the same subject?*

3b) *Are readers more likely to report reflection after having read literary than non-literary texts about the same subject? Do such thoughts differ qualitatively?*

3c) *Are readers more likely to report reflection (directly and after one week) after having read fiction than non-fiction about the same subject?*

In addition, the following research questions are posed to look into the effects of the subjective experience of the text (i.e., affective responses during reading) on 4) empathic reactions after reading and 5) reflection:

4) *To what extent do which personal factors and which affective responses during reading influence "real-life" empathic reactions (i.e., prosocial behavior and empathic understanding) after reading?*

5) *To what extent do which personal factors and which affective responses during reading influence reflection?*

For all of these questions, insofar as possible, I take into account the differences between the texts about depression and the texts about grief. Within a western context, grief is more commonly seen as something that befalls people against their will than depression (which tends to lack the clear object of mental distress that grief has: the deceased beloved). It may therefore be easier for people to empathize with grieving characters and people than with depressed characters and people (cf. General Introduction). We could therefore expect larger empathic and reflective effects of genre condition for the depression texts, as it then would matter more what one has read. However, the main aim of the study is not to determine the differences between readers' responses to these two subject matter conditions, but to determine general differences between the genre-conditions (questions 1-3) and between readers with different subjective experiences of the texts (question 4 and 5).

The mixed and limited findings of previous empirical studies about the effects of reading make it unjustified to formulate specific directional hypotheses, but the previous findings discussed in Chapter 5 do offer suggestions for expectations. Regarding the effects of narrativity, literariness and fictionality on empathy, it can be expected that narrativity has a more pronounced effect on empathic responses than fictionality, as, according to role-taking theory, simulating characters' experiences is the crucial factor. It remains to be seen whether literary texts have a stronger effect than non-literary texts on empathic responses – such effects may only become evident in the longer run. Based on the empirical evidence of Chapter 5, no quantitative difference is expected in the

amount of thoughts literary and non-literary texts would trigger, but a qualitative difference is expected, with literary texts triggering deeper thoughts.

However, as I also argued in Chapter 5, just looking at genre-condition is not enough: text effects are likely to depend on readers' subjective experience of a text. Some readers will find a text original and the characters engaging, while other readers will find the same text cliché-ridden and the characters boring. This study explores both affective responses to characters and events ("narrative feelings") and affective responses to the style and composition of a text ("aesthetic feelings"), as both are potentially relevant.

Following the recommendation made by Mar et al. (2011), I distinguish between theoretically diverse narrative feelings, separating specific character-directed feelings from absorption in the story world. Within the character-directed feelings, I follow the previously mentioned theoretical distinction between empathy, sympathy, and identification. Different items are used to measure empathy and sympathy with the character, but the expectation is that these items will cluster together. In addition, when exploring reactions to texts about suffering, a distinct type of narrative feeling can be identified: "empathic distress." Empathic distress designates one's own negative feelings (anxiety, discomfort, tension, sadness) resulting from observing another's pain (Davis, 1980; De Wied et al. 1995). Experiencing empathic distress could lead people to care more, since they have an overall more emotional experience, but it could also lead people to turn away from actual suffering in order to escape their own unpleasant feelings (cf. Davis, 1983).

Within aesthetic feelings, I differentiate, following Andringa (1996), between "aesthetic attractiveness": finding a text's style good, interesting, beautiful, amusing; and "perceived foregrounding" (my term, Andringa uses the term "experience of novelty"): finding a text's style original, strange, striking. Perceiving foregrounding may indicate that the reader experiences a certain distance to the text, as does experiencing aesthetic attraction: in both cases, one could be focused more on the form than on the content (cf. Kneepkens & Zwaan,

1994). However, these responses, especially aesthetic attraction, may also indicate that the reader is overall more engaged with the text (cf. Andringa, 1996).

As the multi-factor model in Chapter 5 showed, we could expect aesthetic feelings to influence empathic reactions after reading, but the case for narrative feelings is stronger, as their impact may be more direct. Following Oatley's role-taking theory, when we feel more engaged with events and characters, we may also be more likely to take those experiences with us to the outside world (Oatley, 1999, 2002; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Regarding reflection, if we follow Miall and Kuiken (1994, 1999, 2002) as well as other empirical evidence (e.g., Koopman et al., 2012), we could expect a positive effect of both aesthetic feelings and narrative feelings on reflection. Again, thus far there is more evidence that narrative feelings would play a role here. Generally, with regard to research questions 4 and 5, it can be expected that personal factors and affective responses during reading interact in influencing empathic and reflective reactions. These interactions are further discussed under 6.1.5.

6.1. Methods Genre Study

6.1.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from five universities throughout the Netherlands during the fall of 2012. Age cohort and level of education were similar for all respondents (last Bachelor's year and Master's). To increase the chance that students with different levels of exposure to literature would participate, students from various academic backgrounds were approached (Literature/Languages, Media & Communication, Sociology, Economy/ Business). In total, 282 students started participation in the study. Of these, 218 filled out both questionnaires and could therefore be considered for analysis. Inattentive respondents were removed (as demonstrated by more than five

missing variables, or answering "recall items" incorrectly).[34] The final sample, which was used for analysis, consisted of 210 people (n_{male} = 49; M_{age} = 22.83, SD_{age} = 2.22), 99% of whom indicated to have the Dutch nationality.

6.1.2. Procedure

Participants completed an online survey in a place of their own preference, most likely their own homes. They read an instruction that the study they were taking part in investigated the recall of different texts. Subsequently, they were presented with an excerpt from either an expository, a literary narrative, or a non-literary narrative text ("life story"). These texts had a length of approximately 1500 words. In the first week, participants read one text within a certain "genre," either about grief or about depression, and answered questions about this text and themselves. After a week, they received a link to a questionnaire with another text in the same genre, but about the other subject (grief or depression). Thus, if one had read a *literary text* about *grief* the first week, one would read a *literary text* about *depression* the second week. Which genre condition one received was randomized, as was the order of the subject matter conditions.

In addition, in the two narrative conditions, participants received either the instruction that they were about to read a story based on true events ("non-fiction instruction") or that they were about to read a fictional story ("fiction instruction") (cf. Appel & Malečkar, 2012). Because of this instruction, the two narrative conditions needed twice as many participants as the expository condition.

The study thus had a mixed design, with genre and fiction-instruction as between-subjects variables, and subject matter as a within-subjects variable (see

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[34] Apart from the dependent, independent and mediating variables listed below, respondents also filled out multiple-choice items on "recall." The recall task functioned as a distraction of the aim of the study and was used to check for inattentive answering or reading.

Table II.1). Participants received 10 euros for participation and were debriefed via email.

Table II.1

Design Genre Study

Genre (between-subjects)	Fiction-instruction (between-subjects)	Subject Matter (within-subjects)
Literary narrative (*n* = 86)	Fiction (*n* = 43)	Depression - Grief
	Non-fiction (*n* = 43)	Depression - Grief
Non-literary narrative (*n* = 84)	Fiction (*n* = 43)	Depression - Grief
	Non-fiction (*n* = 41)	Depression - Grief
Expository (*n* = 40)	n.a.	Depression - Grief
(*N* = 210)		

Note: everyone received one text about depression and one about grief, but the order of these subject matter conditions was randomized.

6.1.3. Measures

Just as in Part I, an effort was made to keep the number of items per construct at a minimum to avoid frustration and fatigue among participants. Unless otherwise indicated, items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1= don't agree at all, 7= agree completely). The scales used in the study can be found in Appendix C: Scales for Studies Part II.

Dependent variables. Empathic reactions were measured in two different ways: with an attitudinal scale (*Empathic understanding*) and a behavioral measure (*Prosocial behavior*). Reflection was also measured in two ways: immediately after reading (*Direct thoughts*) and with a delay period of a week (*Deferred thoughts*).

   Empathic understanding. As the first empathic measure, participants answered to what extent they were in agreement with five statements about people who are depressed and five statements about people who are grieving

(depending on which subject matter they had just read about). These statements were selected from a slightly longer list of 7 statements that was pretested in a pilot of the main scales among 114 Bachelor's students (n_{male} = 29; M_{age} = 21.34, SD_{age} = 3.95). I recruited these students from the universities of Rotterdam and Nijmegen during the spring of 2012. The five statements which together showed the best internal consistency while not being repetitive were selected. These statements expressed understanding for others in a similar position to the character on a 7-point scale (e.g., "I feel understanding for people who are depressed"), one's ability to imagine distress (e.g., "I can imagine it must be horrible to be depressed"), and one's support for actions to alleviate that distress (e.g., "The basic insurance policy should cover therapy for depression"). Attitudinal statements adjusted to the subject matter have previously been used in reader response research by, amongst others, Green (2004) and Hakemulder (2000, 2008). Reliability measures in the current study were satisfactory both for depression (α = .73) and for grief (α = .69).

Prosocial behavior. As the second empathic measure, participants were given the option to donate (a part of) the money they received for participation to charities related to what they had read about. They could choose either or both of the following (existing) charities: 1. Vereniging Ouders van een Overleden Kind (Foundation Parents of a Deceased Child), 2. De Depressie Vereniging (The Depression Foundation). For analysis, prosocial behavior was operationalized as a dichotomous variable: donating yes/no.[35]

Direct thoughts. As the first reflective measure, respondents answered the following item on a 7-point scale after they had read the text: "The text triggered me to think." Respondents answered this item in both weeks, thus for the text about grief and for the text about depression. For analysis, the item "the

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[35] I used a dichotomous instead of a ratio variable for donating, since the amount of money people donate may be related to how much money they are able to spend and I did not ask participants about their income. The main thing is that people were willing to donate, not how much.

text triggered me to think" was used as separate dependent variable for grief and for depression.[36]

Deferred thoughts. A week after reading the first text, respondents received the second part of the online study. The first question they needed to answer in this second part, was whether they had experienced further thoughts about the first text they had read: "Did you think about the text during the last week? If so, what did you think?"

I coded the responses in a separate Word-document that only included participant numbers and answers, without any further details (most importantly, it did not include which version the participant had read). This "blind" coding was done to ensure that expectations about the kind of thoughts different versions could trigger would not influence the codes that were given. For each answer, all distinguishable thoughts were coded separately. In most cases, however, there was only one clearly distinguishable thought per participant.

As the first coder, I made a codebook which included explanations and examples. The codebook was given to a second coder, an associate professor of Modern Languages at another Dutch university. The second coder independently coded all answers, without seeing which codes I had attributed. She was requested to make any additions she deemed necessary (to the code descriptions, or even adding new categories), in order to fine-tune the codebook. These additions were discussed and led to alterations in a few codes, but no new codes, and to the definitive codebook (see Appendix D: Codebook Genre Study

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[36] While I wanted to keep these two items separate, since the extent to which thoughts are triggered can depend on the subject one reads about, the set-up with the repetition of the questionnaire for a different text after one week does allow me to give an indication of the test-retest reliability of measurement. Scores on the "triggered me to think" item in the first week correlated positively and significantly with scores in the second week: $r(208) = .35$, $p < .001$. While using single items as dependent variables is a contested practice in psychological research, multiple researchers have argued (and shown for measures such as job satisfaction and self-esteem) that single items need not have lower predictive value than larger scales (e.g., Hays, Reise, & Calderón, 2012; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001; Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997). The suitability of single items, of course, depends on the construct. For my measure of "reflection: direct thoughts," the single item was deemed appropriate since it encompassed the construct.

Part II). After the definitive codebook was established, I executed a subsequent coding round (blind; without seeing the codes of the second coder).

Intercoder reliability was established by comparing the codes of the second and first coder in both coding rounds. Since many participants indicated they had had no thoughts and both coders agreed on those instances, it would have unfairly boosted the agreement percentage to count the instances in which both coders agreed on participants having no thoughts.[37] Therefore, the agreement percentage was calculated using only those cases (thought instances) where either or both of the coders attributed a code other than "0" (no thoughts). In total, as multiple codes could be given to each answer, this meant that intercoder reliability was established for 75 thought instances of 58 people. The agreement percentage increased from 80.0% in the first coding round to 91.0% in the second.

Independent variables. The independent variables consisted of the personal factors trait empathy, exposure to literature, and personal experience with the subject matter. In addition, one item was used for the narrative conditions to see whether participants – regardless of the instruction – thought they had read a "true" story or a "fictional" story ("fiction manipulation check").

Trait empathy (TEQ – adapted). Dispositional empathy was measured using a translated version of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng, McKinnon, Mar, & Levine, 2009). The TEQ aims to be a unidimensional measure of emotional empathy (or: empathic concern), based on earlier empathy measures, like Davis (1980, 1983). It consists of 16 items and has been tested as a reliable, valid, and quick measure for empathy (Spreng et al., 2009). Based on a combination of a principle components analysis and a reliability analysis

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[37] The choice of an agreement percentage over a Cohen's kappa score was motivated as follows: Cohen's kappa tends to underestimate the agreement on rare categories, while in the current study nine different codes (apart from "no thoughts") could be given, some of which occurring just a few times. In addition, an agreement percentage was deemed preferable because of the clarity of this score (cf. Schreier, 2012, p.170-171).

conducted on the responses in the pilot study ($N = 114$), the scale was shortened. The pattern matrix of the principle components analysis showed that 13 items loaded on the first factor (with factor loadings above .30), while the other three items did not. In the reliability analysis, these items contained a lower corrected item-total correlation than .20 (Briggs & Cheek, 1986, advise against using scores lower than .20). I chose to remove these three items, which slightly increased Cronbach's alpha from .76 to .78. This led to a scale consisting of 13 items (see Appendix C for the final, translated version of the TEQ). In the current study, internal consistency was also satisfactory (13 items; $\alpha = .76$).

Half of the participants filled out the TEQ-items *before* reading, the other half *after*, at the end of the study. In order to use the TEQ as a dispositional measure, there should not be a difference between these two groups. Indeed, no effect of reading was found on the TEQ, $F(1, 208) = 0.09$, $p = 0.77$.

Exposure to literature (ART – adapted). An adapted version of the Author Recognition Test (ART; see Mar et al., 2006; Stanovich & West, 1989; West, Stanovich and Mitchell, 1993) was used to measure one's general exposure to literature. From a list with names, participants have to indicate which they recognize as authors. Guessing is discouraged, as participants are instructed that some names are fake (foils). The ART that I constructed tried to cover a broad spectrum of fiction authors by including 15 "popular" authors and 15 "literary" authors. "Popular" here designated authors of best-selling, relatively easy-to-read novels (e.g., Danielle Steel and Stephen King), while "literary" designated authors of novels which have received critical acclaim and have been nominated for literary prizes (e.g., Toni Morrison and W.G. Sebald). In each category, to fit a Dutch audience, six of the authors were Dutch and nine were international. Twelve foils were used, six Dutch and six international names (e.g., H.P. Vliegenthart and Mark Sorenson). Of the 30 real author names in this adapted ART, seven came directly from Mar et al.'s (2006) revised ART (Albert Camus, John le Carré, W.G. Sebald, Italo Calvino, Toni Morrison, Douglas Adams, and Danielle Steel). To better represent the current state of the literary field (in the

Netherlands), these names were supplemented with other international authors, among whom the prize-winning literary authors Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan and Herta Müller, and the best-selling popular authors Tatiana de Rosnay and John Grisham. For both the international and the Dutch authors, I balanced between more and lesser known authors, without using obscure authors. The complete list of 42 names can be found in Appendix C.

This adapted ART was pretested with a group of 10 self-professed avid readers (editorial board of a literary magazine) and a control group of 8 people working for an advertising firm. The avid readers' average was significantly higher than the control group average (M_{avid} = 24.00, SD_{avid} = 4.55, $M_{control}$ = 10.88, $SD_{control}$ = 4.91; $t(16)$ = 5.88, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 2.77). In the current study, the range of the ART was 29 (M = 10.71, SD = 5.46). No one chose more than 4 foils.

Personal experience. After reading, respondents indicated whether they had personal experience with the subject matter of the text (in the case of grief: not the loss of a child specifically, but grief in general). They could also indicate that someone close to them had this experience. A dichotomous variable was made (0 = no experience, 1 = having experience oneself or having someone close who does). Of all respondents, experience with depression was reported by 125, experience with grief by 108. Respondents with experience were relatively equally divided over genre-conditions (no significant differences).

Mediating variables. The mediating variables consisted of affective responses during reading: narrative feelings, empathic distress, and aesthetic feelings.

Narrative feelings. Following theoretical suggestions (e.g., Mar et al., 2011), I distinguished between various narrative feelings which are often grouped together in research as "narrative engagement" or "transportation" (e.g. Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009): sympathy, empathy, identification and absorption. Items were inspired by previous scales about narrative feelings (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000; Koopman et al., 2012). All items can be found in Appendix C. Since the theoretical distinctions may not correspond to the

experience of the respondents, a principal components analysis with varimax rotation was executed for these items. The factor structure showed three components with an eigenvalue larger than one. One of the items originally intended for "empathy" (experiencing similar emotions) loaded on the component containing the two "identification" items. These three items together formed a clear "similarity" construct. The principal component analysis thus yielded a construct *Sympathy/Empathy* (6 items; α = .85), a construct *(Similarity) Identification* (3 items; α = .68), and a construct *Absorption* (5 items; α = .88).

Empathic distress. In addition, *empathic distress* was measured, using four items based on the adjectives named by De Wied et al. (1995) in their study on empathic distress. De Wied et al. (1995) used "tense," "sad," "choked up," and "disturbed" – my equivalents for the current subject matter were "unnerved," "sad," "miserable," and "unpleasant." While empathic distress is a feeling towards characters and can thus be categorized under the "narrative feelings," since this construct is so specific to reading about suffering, it was not included in the factor analysis with the general narrative feelings. Instead, the four items were tested for internal consistency, which was high (α = .88).

Aesthetic feelings. Different studies have used somewhat varying operationalizations of aesthetic feelings. I find Andringa's (1996) distinction between aesthetic feelings about "aesthetic attractiveness" and those about "novelty" (in my terminology: "perceived foregrounding") most useful, since this allows me to look separately at those feelings about a text which are positive but could also be experienced in similar levels for non-literary texts ("aesthetic attractiveness") and those feelings which have been specifically associated with "literariness" ("perceived foregrounding" – Miall & Kuiken, 1999, 2002). The items were adapted to the current subject matter (i.e., "amusing" was replaced by "powerful" within the aesthetic attractiveness-items). A factor analysis was conducted to make sure the items in the current study covered the same distinction as Andringa's (1996). This factor analysis showed two principal components with an eigenvalue above one, corresponding exactly to the

distinction made above: a factor signifying *Aesthetic attractiveness* (α = .93; 5 items), and a factor signifying *Perceived foregrounding* (α = .83; 3 items).

6.1.4. Materials

Actual fragments from books were used, instead of self-constructed or manipulated fragments. This choice benefits ecological validity, but this set-up implies that the study cannot draw sharp conclusions about the effects of "literariness," as that would demand identifying and manipulating specific textual features associated with that concept.

The texts selected for the study were three excerpts about depression and three about grief. More particularly, the type of grief explored was grieving the loss of a child. The expository texts were Dutch translations of Wolpert's *Malignant Sadness* (1999) and Rothman's *The Bereaved Parents' Survival Guide* (1997). The non-literary narrative texts were Dutch texts by unknown authors Diane van Drie (depression) and Akkie Vastenhout (grief). The literary narrative texts were by prize-winning authors Doeschka Meijsing (depression) and Anna Enquist (grief).[38] I arrived at these texts through an extensive search through library catalogues, followed by a panel study among 11 students in Modern Languages to test a pre-selection of texts (without paratextual information) on literary status, originality, and beauty. The literary texts were deemed more original by the panel, but not necessarily more beautiful. The texts that were selected matched in time period, gender of the author, gender of the main character (female), and in beauty. For more information about the text selection, see Appendix B: Selection Materials Part II.

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[38] Of these books, only Enquist's has been translated in English, as *Counterpoint* (2010). For the other books, these are the Dutch titles with my English translations between brackets: Meijsing – *Over de liefde* (2008; *On Love*); Van Drie – *Lang niet gek* (2009; *Not That Crazy*); Vastenhout – *Het verlies van mijn kind* (2005; *The Loss of My Child*).

6.1.5. Model

To simultaneously explore the influence of personal factors and narrative and aesthetic feelings on empathy, a path analysis was executed within AMOS software (see Byrne, 2010).[39] The same was done for reflection. AMOS stands for "analysis of a moment structures" and it allows for testing a complete conceptual causal model at once, including covariances. Figure II.2 offers a visualization how personal factors and affective responses could interact to impact empathic reactions (research question 4 – only the part pertaining to empathic understanding), while Figure II.3 does this for reflection (research question 5 – only for direct thoughts, not deferred thoughts). Note that genre condition is not part of these models; the main effects of genre condition were studied separately. Furthermore, as narrative feelings are not relevant for expository texts (there are no characters to sympathize with), these models do not pertain to the expository condition, they only visualize the preliminary hypotheses for the interactions of personal factors and affective responses for the narrative conditions.

As can be seen in Figure II.2 and Figure II.3, I used the same overall model for empathic reactions and for reflection, including all personal factors and affective responses. This allowed for making a fair comparison between empathy and reflection, taking into account various factors that could be of influence. On the left side, the figures show the three personal factors: trait empathy, personal experience with the subject matter one read about, and previous (or: lifelong) exposure to literature. These personal factors could have main effects, as discussed in Chapter 5. In addition, they could influence affective responses which subsequently can lead to empathy and reflection.

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[39] Path analysis can be seen as a form of multiple regression which tries to make causal claims. It is a variant of structural equation modeling (SEM), in which only single indicators are used for the variables in the model (i.e., no measurement model). Independent variables in both SEM and path analysis are called "exogenous variables" and variables which are dependent on others are called "endogenous variables."

The effect of trait empathy on empathic reactions and on reflection may be mediated by the narrative feelings. People who are by nature more concerned for others (trait empathy) could be more likely to feel for and think about specific others in real life, regardless of whether and what they have read. However, it may also be through feeling with and for a character that someone who is generally empathic starts to reflect and to feel more for actual others in a similar position as that character. Likewise, the effect of exposure to literature on empathic and reflective responses may be mediated by the aesthetic feelings. One's general exposure to literature could have trained one's ability to feel for others and to think about texts, but it may also be that for those with little reading experience, texts are more surprising, leading to more feelings and thoughts. Personal experience would be most likely to influence identification (as perceived similarity would be higher for those with similar experiences), but possibly also general absorption, as the described events would be more familiar to someone with similar experiences.

The AMOS-analyses used maximum likelihood estimation. As model fit indices, the root means squared error of approximation (RMSEA) was used, as well as Chi-square with degrees of freedom (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). Hu and Bentler (1999) have suggested a rather strict RMSEA value of .06 or less for a good model fit, and Hooper et al. (2008) have suggested an upper value of .08. To compare the Chi-square value with a baseline (null hypothesis) model, I report an incremental fit index, namely the Comparative Fit index (CFI), which is less sensitive to sample size than the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) (Hooper et al., 2008). As indicative of a good model fit, the CFI should be .95 or higher, with 1.0 being the highest possible value (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Also, as an absolute measure of fit, I report the SRMR (the standardized difference between the observed correlation and the predicted correlation), with a value of zero indicating perfect fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).
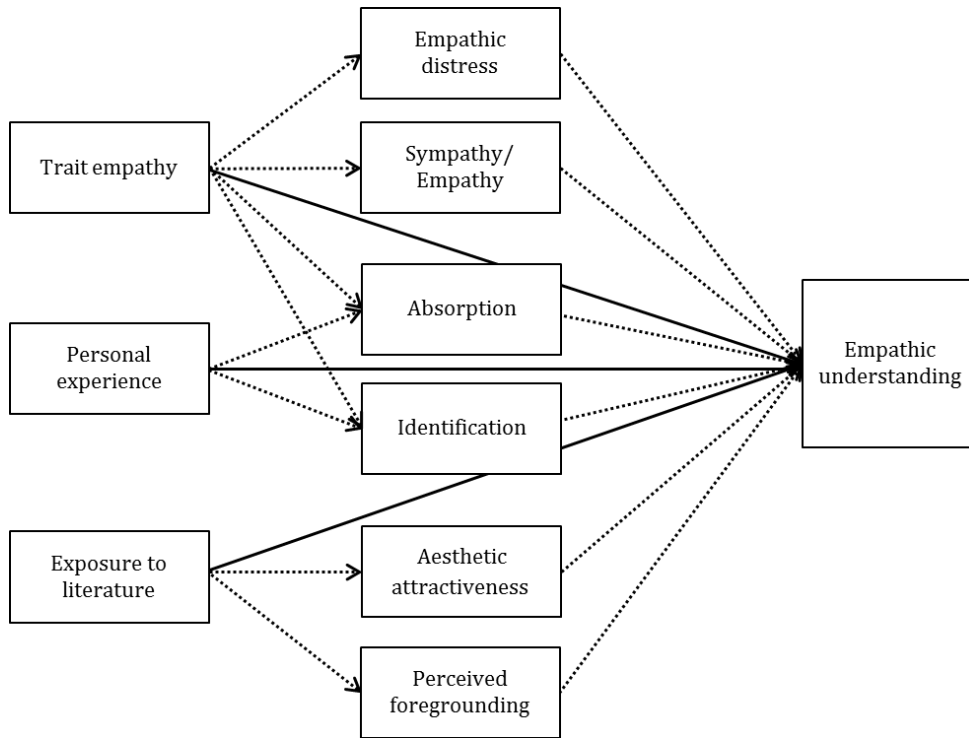
Figure II.2. Conceptual model empathy, with personal factors and affective responses

Note. Thick lines indicate main effects, dotted lines effects which may work through mediators. "Aesthetic attractiveness" and "perceived foregrounding" are perceived by the reader.
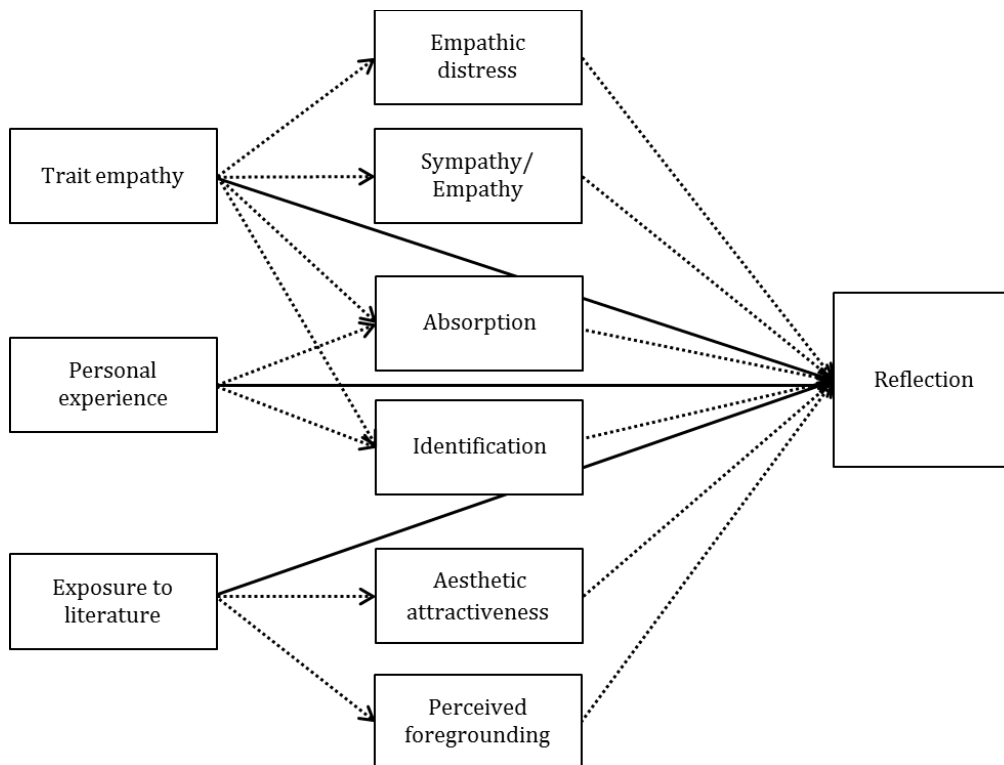

Figure II.3. Conceptual model reflection, with personal factors and affective responses

6.2. Results Genre Study

Section 6.2.1 presents the findings for affective responses as outcome variables (research question 1). The findings for empathic reactions (research questions 2 and 4) are presented in 6.2.2, with first the results for empathic understanding and then those for prosocial behavior. The findings for reflection (research questions 3 and 5) are presented in 6.2.3, with first the results for direct thoughts and then those for deferred thoughts. [40] In each case, I will first discuss the effects of narrativity and literariness (i.e., genre condition), then of fictionality, followed by the effects of the personal factors and finally the effects of affective responses (narrative and aesthetic feelings). In most of the analyses discussed below, results are presented separately for depression and grief, to fully take into account the different conditions depression and grief constitute. Two appendices provide extra information: Appendix E presents the correlations between all the narrative and aesthetic feelings for both the current chapter and Chapter 7, while Appendix F shows the parsimonious AMOS-models.

6.2.1. Effects on Affective Responses

Effects of genre condition on affective responses. Did the literary narrative texts lead to stronger or weaker affective responses than the non-literary texts? Through a series of independent samples t-tests, I compared the literary and non-literary narrative texts on narrative feelings. In addition, a series of separate ANOVAs, including post-hoc tests (Fisher's LSD) was conducted to determine

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[40] The article version about empathic reactions that this chapter is partly based on (Koopman, 2015b) presented both full and parsimonious AMOS models for the variable empathic understanding. The article version about reflection that this chapter is based on (Koopman, 2015c) presented only the parsimonious models. Since the current chapter discusses the results for both empathic reactions and reflection and also wants to show differences between the non-literary narrative and literary narrative texts, presenting both types of models would lead to visual overload. I have therefore chosen to present only the full models in this chapter, since they provide more information than the parsimonious models. The parsimonious models can be found in Appendix F: Parsimonious Models Part II.

whether there were differences on aesthetic feelings for the three genre-conditions. The first part of Table II.2 shows the effects of genre-condition on the affective responses. For each affective response, the results for the depression texts are presented first, followed by the results for the texts about grief.

As can be seen in Table II.2, both non-literary narrative texts evoked significantly higher *empathic distress* than the literary narrative texts. This demonstrates the more sentimental quality of the non-literary stories. Interestingly, however, the non-literary texts did not cause higher scores on the other narrative feelings, apart from *absorption*. The effect on absorption only occurred for the texts about depression.

Perceived foregrounding was much higher for the literary narrative texts, both in comparison to the non-literary narratives and the expository texts. This was in line with expectations. How participants rated *aesthetic attractiveness* differed per text: participants found the non-literary narrative text (Van Drie) more aesthetically attractive than the literary (Meijsing), but found the literary text about grief (Enquist) more aesthetically attractive than the non-literary narrative text (Vastenhout). Additional ANOVAs for the separate items of the aesthetic attractiveness-scale (not included in Table II.2) showed that the difference mainly could be attributed to the item "beautiful." Participants did not find either of the narrative conditions significantly "better" ($F(2, 207) = .20$, $p = .817$) or more "captivating" ($F(2, 207) = 1.50$, $p = .227$) than the other or the expository. This is important, as potential effects should not be due to one condition being more boring for participants (cf. Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, & Peterson, 2009).

Table II.2.

Effects of Genre-Condition on Affective Responses, Empathic Understanding, and Reflection (Incl. Post-Hoc Test Significances)

	Expository	Non-literary narrative	Literary narrative	Test value	Effect size	p
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)			
Affective responses						
Empathic Distress – Depression***	n.a.	16.75 (5.22) n = 83	11.51 (4.64) n = 85	t = 6.88	d = 1.06	.000
Empathic Distress – Grief*	n.a	15.19 (5.81) n = 81	13.32 (4.39) n = 82	t = 2.32	d = .36	.022
Symp./Empathy – Depression	n.a.	29.34 (7.31) n = 82	27.99 (7.14) n = 86	t = 1.21	d = .19	.226
Symp./Empathy – Grief	n.a.	29.15 (6.75) n = 84	30.01 (7.36) n = 84	t = -.79	d = .12	.432
Identification – Depression	n.a.	10.78 (3.79) n = 82	10.40 (3.59) n = 86	t = .68	d = .10	.500
Identification – Grief	n.a.	10.31 (4.09) n = 83	10.34 (3.47) n = 86	t = -.04	d = .01	.967
Absorption – Depression**	n.a.	23.77 (5.88) n = 84	20.65 (6.14) n = 86	t = 3.39	d = .51	.001
Absorption – Grief	n.a.	21.02 (7.08) n = 84	21.46 (6.72) n = 85	t = -.41	d = .06	.683
Aesthetic Attractiveness – Depression**	18.13 (6.06) n = 40	21.96** (5.75) n = 84	19.77[b] (6.59) n = 86	F = 5.87	η^2 = .05	.003
Aesthetic Attractiveness – Grief**	18.08 (6.40) n = 40	16.68 (7.68) n = 84	20.63[c] (6.49) n = 86	F = 6.93	η^2 = .06	.001
Perceived Foregrounding – Depression***	8.20 (2.91) n = 40	9.33[b] (3.35) n = 84	10.63*** (3.60) n = 86	F = 7.64	η^2 = .07	.001
Perceived Foregrounding – Grief***	8.53 (2.88) n = 40	8.76[c] (3.52) n = 84	11.84*** (3.69) n = 86	F = 20.89	η^2 = .17	.000
Empathic understanding						
Emp. Understanding – Depression	28.35 (3.70) n = 40	28.35 (4.37) n = 83	27.64 (4.11) n = 85	F = 0.74	η^2 = .007	.475
Emp. Understanding – Grief	23.70 (5.62) n = 40	25.06 (4.77) n = 83	24.94 (4.40) n = 86	F = 1.20	η^2 = .01	.303
Reflection						
Refl.– Depression* (Direct Thoughts)	4.10 (1.48) n = 40	4.56[b] (1.65) n = 84	3.83 (1.52) n = 86	F = 4.71	η^2 = .04	.010
Refl. – Grief (Direct Thoughts)	4.23 (1.56) n = 40	3.89 (1.81) n = 84	4.21 (1.53) n = 86	F = .955	η^2 = .009	.387

*. $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (2-tailed): when the comparison is between three conditions, this indicates the significant mean difference from the expository condition, based on Fisher's LSD post-hoc tests.
[b] means: differs from the other narrative condition at the <.05-level.
[c] means: differs from the other narrative condition at the <.001-level. For the narrative feelings (including empathic distress), comparisons are only made between the literary and non-literary narrative texts, and t-tests are used instead of ANOVAs. The exact *p*-values in the table are the *p*-values of the t-test or F-test.

Effects of fictionality on affective responses. As can be seen in the first part of Table II.3, independent samples t-tests showed no main effects of the fiction-instruction on any of the affective responses. But as Table II.4 shows, the manipulation-check variable (thus whether participants actually thought after reading that the text was fiction or non-fiction) did have some effects for the *grief* texts: thinking these texts were based on *actual* events went together with higher *sympathy/empathy*, *absorption*, and *aesthetic attractiveness*. This goes against the theory discussed in Chapter 5 (Oatley, 1999, 2002), which predicted the opposite effect (an effect of fictionality). Given the relatively large number of tests that were conducted, we have to be careful in interpreting the significant effects in Table II.4, since these *p*-values are not particularly low. For the depression texts, there were no significant differences.

Table II.3.
Effects of Fiction- and Non-Fiction-Instruction on Affective Responses, Empathic Understanding, and Reflection (Both Narrative Conditions)

	Fiction-Instruction	Non-Fiction-Instruction	Test value (t)	Effect size (d)	p
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*			
Affective responses					
Empathic Distress – Depression	13.62 (6.00) n = 84	14.57 (5.12) n = 84	-1.11	.17	.270
Empathic Distress – Grief	14.07 (5.61) n = 82	14.42 (4.81) n = 81	-.42	.07	.673
Sympathy/Empathy – Depression	28.20 (7.44) n = 84	29.10 (7.03) n = 84	-.80	.12	.425
Sympathy/Empathy – Grief	29.22 (7.31) n = 85	29.95 (6.80) n = 83	-.67	.10	.505
Identification – Depression	10.27 (3.48) n = 85	10.90 (3.88) n = 83	-1.11	.17	.267
Identification – Grief	10.38 (3.80) n = 86	10.27 (3.77) n = 83	.20	.03	.839
Absorption – Depression	21.95 (6.31) n = 86	22.44 (6.10) n = 84	-.51	.08	.610
Absorption – Grief	21.01 (6.89) n = 86	21.48 (6.91) n = 83	-.44	.07	.658
Aesthetic Attractiveness – Depression	20.37 (6.80) n = 84	21.35 (5.67) n = 84	-1.01	.16	.312

	M (SD)	M (SD)	Test value (t)	Effect size (d)	p
Aesthetic Attractiveness – Grief	17.90 (7.38) n = 86	19.48 (7.28) n = 84	-1.41	.22	.162
Perceived Foregrounding – Depression	10.09 (3.73) n = 86	9.88 (3.34) n = 84	.39	.06	.697
Perceived Foregrounding – Grief	9.98 (3.56) n = 86	10.67 (4.24) n = 84	-1.15	.18	.252
Empathic understanding					
Emp. Understanding – Depression	27.92 (4.74) n = 84	28.06 (3.71) n = 84	-.22	.03	.828
Emp. Understanding – Grief	24.86 (4.77) n = 85	25.14 (4.39) n = 84	-.40	.06	.688
Reflection					
Refl.– Depression (Direct Thoughts)	4.19 (1.72) n = 86	4.19 (1.53) n = 84	-.02	.00	.986
Refl. – Grief (Direct Thoughts)	3.95 (1.76) n = 86	4.15 (1.59) n = 84	-.78	.12	.435

Table II.4.

Perceiving the Text as (Non-)Fiction and Affective Responses, Empathic Understanding, and Reflection (Both Narrative Conditions)

	Perceived as Fiction	**Perceived as Non-Fiction**	*Test value (t)*	*Effect size (d)*	*p*
	M (SD)	**M (SD)**			
Affective responses					
Empathic Distress – Depression	13.23 (5.79) n = 48	14.65 (5.27) n = 86	1.45	.26	.151
Empathic Distress – Grief	13.13 (5.72) n = 46	14.92 (5.32) n = 89	1.81	.32	.073
Sympathy/Empathy – Depression	27.43 (7.43) n = 47	29.38 (7.59) n = 86	1.43	.26	.154
Sympathy/Empathy – Grief**	27.19 (9.03) n = 47	31.12 (6.07) n = 90	2.69	.51	.009
Identification – Depression	10.13 (3.73) n = 47	10.74 (3.87) n = 85	.88	.16	.379
Identification – Grief	9.87 (3.88) n = 47	10.83 (3.90) n = 90	1.37	.25	.172
Absorption – Depression	20.54 (7.03) n = 48	22.79 (5.99) n = 86	1.96	.34	.052
Absorption – Grief*	19.79 (7.38) n = 47	22.29 (6.75) n = 91	2.00	.35	.048
Aesthetic Attractiveness – Depression	20.08 (7.59) n = 48	21.17 (5.96) n = 86	.86	.16	.393
Aesthetic Attractiveness – Grief*	16.62 (7.93) n = 47	19.88 (6.94) n = 91	2.49	.44	.014

Perceived Foregrounding – Depression	9.71 (3.61) n = 48	10.12 (3.56) n = 86	.63	.11	.528
Perceived Foregrounding – Grief	10.36 (3.94) n = 47	10.21 (4.04) n = 91	-.21	.04	.832
Empathic understanding					
Emp. Understanding – Depression	28.57 (4.54) n = 46	27.88 (4.00) n = 86	-.89	.16	.376
Emp. Understanding – Grief	25.09 (4.69) n = 46	25.11 (4.63) n = 91	.03	.00	.978
Reflection					
Refl.– Depression (Direct Thoughts)	3.92 (1.75) n = 48	4.42 (1.48) n = 86	1.76	.31	.081
Refl. – Grief (Direct Thoughts)	4.02 (1.82) n = 47	4.15 (1.66) n = 91	.43	.07	.668

*. $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (2-tailed)

Note: The number of respondents that perceived the texts as based on true events is higher than the number that perceived the texts as fiction, despite the fact that an equal amount of participants received a fiction-instruction.

6.2.2. Effects on Empathic Reactions

This section presents the effects of genre-condition, fictionality, personal factors and affective responses on empathic understanding and prosocial behavior. While the effects of personal factors and affective responses on empathic understanding could be simultaneously explored in AMOS, this was not the case for prosocial behavior, as only a small proportion of readers donated. The limited amount of people donating also means the results regarding prosocial behavior have to be read with caution.

Effects of genre-condition on empathic understanding. Which of the three genre-conditions one had read did not significantly influence empathic understanding; neither for the depression nor for the grief texts (see second part Table II.2). The means on empathic understanding for grief were higher in both narrative conditions than in the expository, but the difference was not large enough to become significant.

Effects of fictionality on empathic understanding. No significant effects of the fiction-instruction were found on empathic understanding, neither for depression nor for grief (see second part Table II.3). Thinking that one had read a fictional text (manipulation check) also had no effects (see second part Table II.4). There was thus no empirical indication for a fiction effect on empathic understanding.

Effects of personal factors and affective responses on empathic understanding: depression*.* Which personal factors and which affective responses during reading influence empathic understanding, and to what extent? The model with empathic understanding as outcome variable (Figure II.2) was tested in AMOS, separately for depression and for grief. The three personal factors were entered as exogenous variables, the affective responses (narrative and aesthetic feelings) as endogenous variables (being possibly influenced by the three personal factors) and as potential predictors of empathic understanding. For these analyses, only the two narrative conditions were used, as the expository condition did not include narrative feelings. In addition, all participants with missing data had to be removed, bringing the new group size to N = 162.

The model for the depression texts displayed a good fit: $\chi^2(10, N =162) = 6.97$, p = .73; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR: .037. The personal factors and affective responses accounted for 42.3% of variance in empathic understanding. Figure II.4 shows the outcomes for this model (standardized *beta*-values), with only those relations that were significant or bordering on significance. All main effects of the personal factors were significant. Sympathy/empathy was the only affective responses that influenced empathic understanding.

Figure II.4. Empathic understanding after reading narrative texts depression (AMOS)

*† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Errors and covariances (incl. those between exogenous variables) were included in the analysis, but are not represented, for reasons of visual clarity. (2000 bootstraps)*

Effects of personal factors and affective responses on empathic understanding: grief. The model with empathic understanding as outcome variable was also entered in AMOS for the two narrative texts about grief. Again, this model displayed a good fit: $\chi^2(6, N =158) = 7.05$, $p = .32$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .033; SRMR = .039; explaining 24.4% of variance in empathic understanding. Figure II.5 shows the results with only significant relations and relations bordering on significance. The general pattern is similar to that of the depression texts (Figure II.4): there are main effects of the personal factors trait empathy and exposure to literature (bordering on significance) and of the affective response sympathy/empathy. However, while empathic understanding for depression was influenced by personal experience (Figure II.4), according to expectation, this effect was not found for the grief texts.
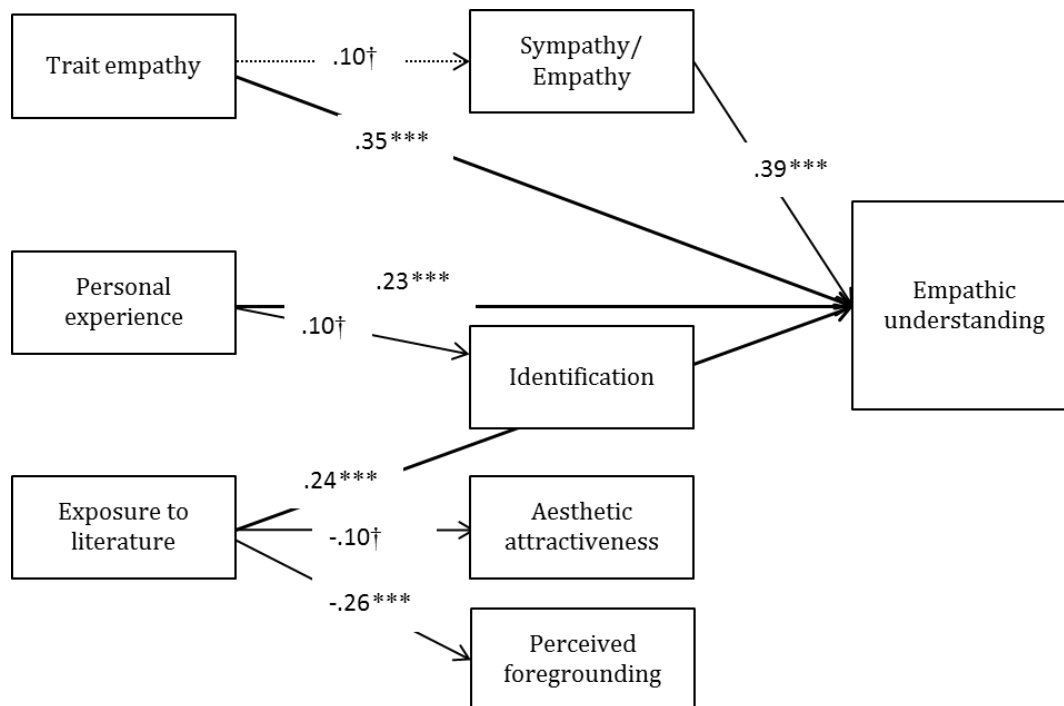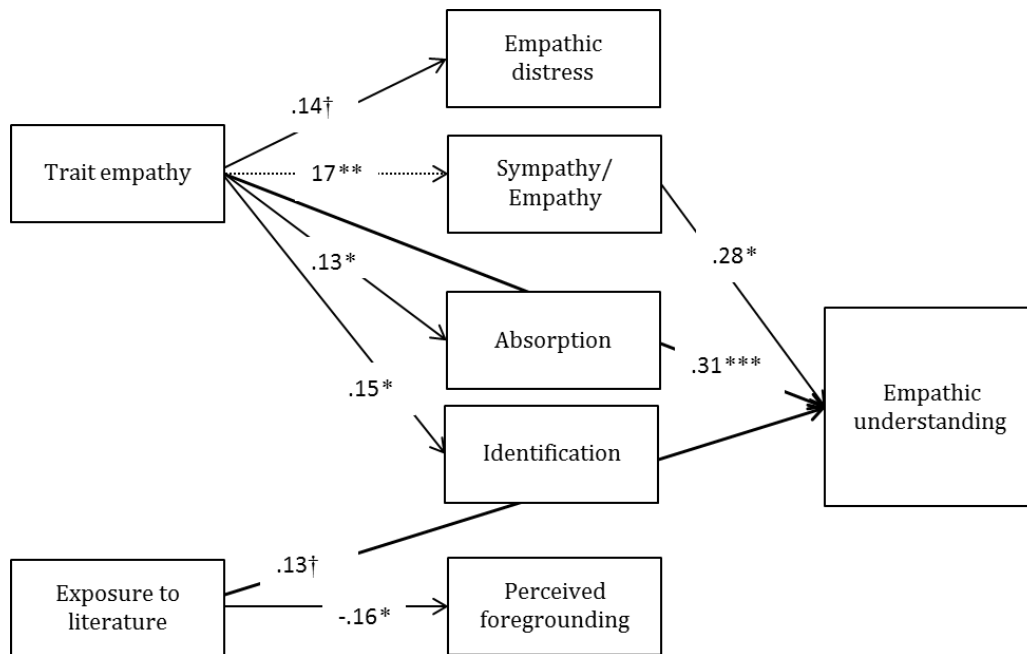
Figure II.5. Empathic understanding after reading narrative texts grief (AMOS)

*† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001*

Differences in empathic understanding-models for literary and non-literary narratives. The AMOS results presented in Figure II.4 and Figure II.5 each combined the effects of two texts, both a literary and non-literary narrative text. While this exposes the general effects of personal factors and affective responses, it says little about text effects. To shed more light on the potentially differing effects of literary and non-literary narrative texts, we can look into the different patterns of responses to these texts within each subject matter condition. However, with the small sample size for these separate analyses (between 78 and 84), these AMOS-models have relatively low statistical power, making it less likely that significant results are detected (e.g., Byrne, 2010) and causing a higher risk for technical problems in the analysis (Kline, 2015).[41] In addition, the analyses presented below are only based on the responses to one text each, which inevitably affects the external validity of the results. These analyses, with results provided in Figure II.6, II.7, II.8 and II.9, should thus be

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[41] For models as complex as the ones I am using, 162 participants is also a rather modest number, at least 200 would be preferable (for an overview of preferable estimates, see Kline, 2015, p.459).

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regarded as mainly exploratory in nature. Similar to the earlier analyses, *beta*-values bordering on significance are included in the figures.

When contrasting the figures below to the overarching figures (II.4 and II.5), it can be seen that the general pattern (with an influence of sympathy/empathy and of personal factors, mainly trait empathy, on empathic understanding) is relatively robust across texts, with the exception of the non-literary narrative grief text. For that text, only trait empathy positively influenced empathic understanding. Exposure to literature only appeared to have had a positive impact on empathic understanding when reading the literary texts.

Furthermore, these separate models show that for individual texts, experiencing aesthetic attractiveness or foregrounding might work against empathic understanding, perhaps because of a focus on the text itself. Since exposure to literature had a negative relation with perceived foregrounding, it can be the case that those with more reading experience are less easily surprised and therefore have a lower cognitive load. However, as explained above, these results should be treated with caution.

Figure II.6. Empathic understanding after reading non-literary narrative depression

† *p* < .10, * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001. χ^2(10, *N* = 78) = 9.95, *p* = .45; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR: .055; 48.6% of variance explained.

Figure II.7. Empathic understanding after reading literary narrative depression

*† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.* $\chi^2(10, N = 84) = 6.64$, $p = .76$; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR: .050; 46.3% of variance explained.
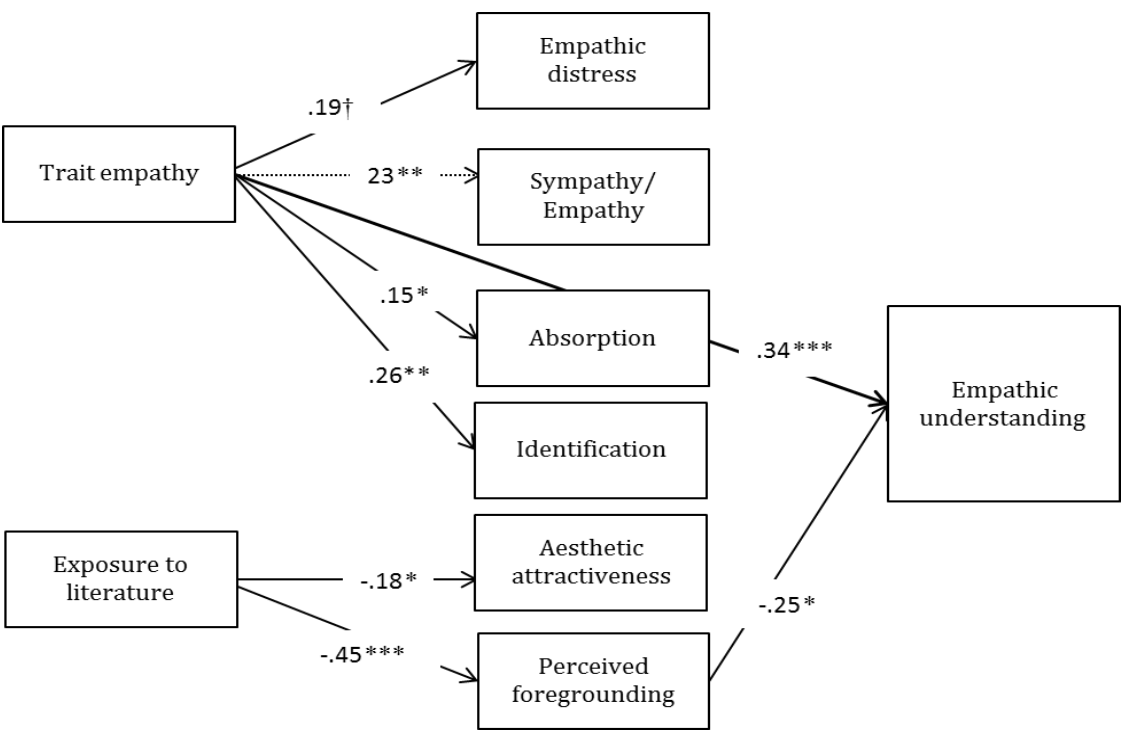
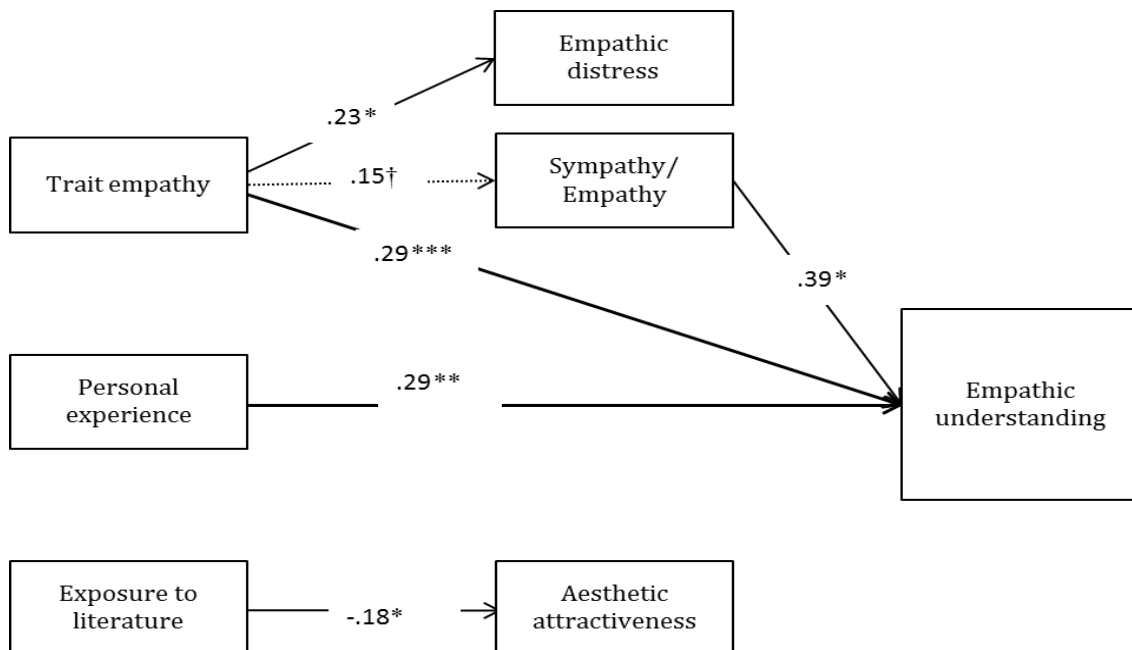*Figure II.8*. Empathic understanding after reading non-literary narrative grief

*† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.* $\chi^2(9, N = 79) = 15.34$, $p = .08$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .09; SRMR: .076; 33.4% of variance explained.
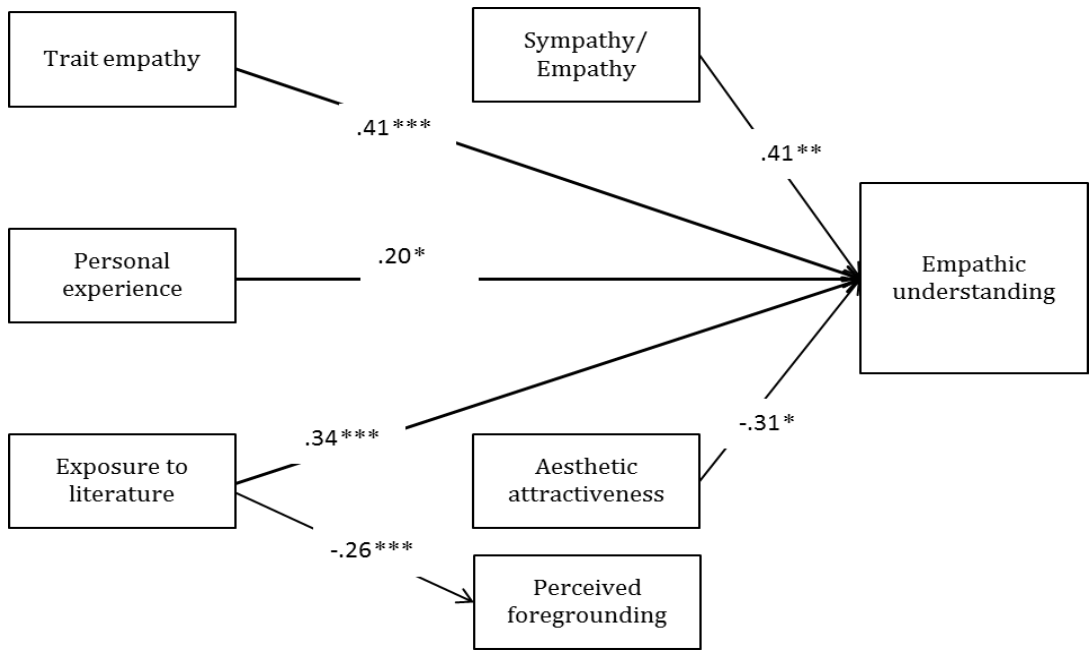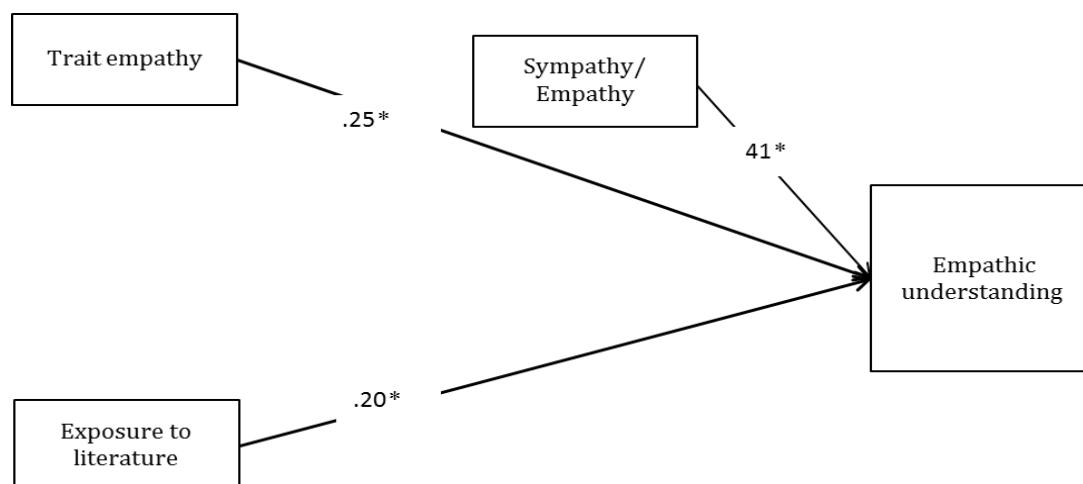
Figure II.9. Empathic understanding after reading literary narrative grief

$\dagger p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.$ $\chi^2(10, N = 79) = 6.79, p = .75$; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR: .033; 26.9% of variance explained.

Effects of genre-condition on prosocial behavior. In total, 31 of the 210 participants donated to either or both charities ($n_{\text{depression}} = 21$; $n_{\text{grief}} = 27$). While this is a small number, genre did appear to have an influence. Of those who donated to the depression foundation, fourteen had read the non-literary narrative, six the literary narrative, and one the expository text, $\chi^2(2, N = 210) = 7.52, p = .023$, Cramer's $V = .19$. A series of crosstabs showed that there was a significant difference between the non-literary narrative and expository text ($\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 5.11, p = .024, \varphi = .20$), and a smaller but still significant difference between the non-literary narrative and literary narrative text ($\chi^2(1, N = 170) = 3.84, p = .049, \varphi = .15$).

Of those who donated to the grief charity, fourteen had read the non-literary narrative, ten the literary and three the expository text. While these figures resemble those of depression, genre-condition did not have a significant effect on donating for grief, $\chi^2(2, N = 210) = 2.23, p = .328$, Cramer's $V = .10$.

Effects of fictionality on prosocial behavior. Whether one had received a fiction instruction or not did not affect prosocial behavior. Of the participants donating to the depression charity, eleven received a fiction instruction, nine a non-fiction,

$\chi^2(1, N = 170) = .18$, $p = .67$, $\varphi = .03$. Of those who donated to the grief charity, thirteen had received a fiction-instruction and eleven a non-fiction, $\chi^2(1, N = 170) = .14$, $p = .71$, $\varphi = .03$.

Thinking that one had read a fictional text (manipulation check) also had no effects on prosocial behavior. All in all, these results do not provide any empirical evidence for an effect of fictionality on prosocial behavior.

Effects of personal factors on prosocial behavior. In order to determine the effects of the three main personal factors on prosocial behavior, I ran a logistic regression analysis, first for depression, then for grief. In these regressions, I included the non-literary narrative condition (dummy variable), personal experience (dummy variable), exposure to literature (ART), and trait empathy (TEQ).

For donating to the depression foundation, the non-literary narrative condition and personal experience were both significant predictors (odds ratios, respectively: 3.13; $p = .023$, and 4.56; $p = .021$), while exposure to literature and trait empathy failed to have a significant effect. The model as a whole had a Nagelkerke R^2 of 0.14, $\chi^2(4, N = 210) = 15.00$, $p = .005$.

For donating to the grief foundation, on the other hand, none of the four variables had a significant effect – the model as a whole was also not significant.

Effects of affective responses on prosocial behavior. The extent to which those who donated experienced stronger affective responses during reading was explored through several independent samples t-tests. These did not show higher scores on any of the affective responses for those who donated. However, as there was a week between reading the first text and donating, and one can expect affective responses to have only a brief impact on prosocial behavior, separate t-tests were conducted only for the texts people read in the second week, right before donating. Thus, it was explored whether those who read about depression in the second week and who donated to the depression charity also

scored higher on the affective responses in this second week. The same test was conducted for the grief texts and grief charity. This brought out a difference between those reading about depression and those reading about grief.

As Table II.5 shows, for those reading about depression, there were significant differences for *absorption* and *aesthetic attractiveness*, despite the small sample. This indicates that – as was expected – an emotionally involved reading experience might move people to behave more prosocially, in the short run. However, this may depend on the subject: as Table II.6 shows, for grief there were no significant results.

Table II.5.
Scores on Affective Responses Right Before Donating to the Depression Charity for Those Reading About Depression in Week Two

	df	*M (n)*	*SD*	*T*	*d*	*p*
Empathic Distress	88	a) 14.36 (11) b) 13.70 (79)	a) 6.14 b) 5.55	-.37	.11	.713
Sympathy/ Empathy	90	a) 31.83 (12) b) 28.73 (80)	a) 5.37 b) 7.25	-1.42	.49	.158
Identification	89	a) 11.73 (11) b) 10.49 (80)	a) 2.97 b) 3.71	-1.06	.37	.291
Absorption*	90	a) 26.08 (12) b) 21.61 (80)	a) 4.44 b) 5.94	-2.50	.85	.014
Aesthetic Attractiveness*	108	a) 24.31 (13) b) 20.54 (97)	a) 5.87 b) 6.48	-1.99	.61	.049
Perceived Foregrounding†	108	a) 11.23 (13) b) 9.60 (97)	a) 3.81 b) 3.17	-1.70	.47	.091

† p < .10, * p < .05. Means are given for those who donated (a) and those who did not (b). *df-* and *n*-values differ as respondents in the genre-condition "expository" did not answer questions on narrative feelings.

Table II.6.
Scores on Affective Responses Right Before Donating to the Grief Charity for Those Reading about Grief in Week Two

	df	*M (n)*	*SD*	*t*	*d*	*p*
Empathic Distress	75	a) 14.20 (10) b) 14.66 (67)	a) 4.73 b) 5.61	.24	.09	.808
Sympathy/ Empathy	75	a) 30.20 (10) b) 29.61 (67)	a) 4.83 b) 7.52	-.24	.09	.811
Identification	76	a) 10.90 (10) b) 9.96 (68)	a) 2.64 b) 4.03	-.72	.28	.476
Absorption	75	a) 20.70 (10) b) 21.33 (67)	a) 5.40 b) 6.79	.28	.10	.781
Aesthetic Attractiveness	21.44	a) 20.42 (12) b) 19.05 (88)	a) 4.34 b) 7.53	-.92	.22	.367
Perceived Foregrounding	20.60	a) 10.17 (12) b) 9.83 (88)	a) 2.44 b) 4.08	-.41	.10	.688

Means are given for those who donated (a) and those who did not (b). *df-* values differ because of unequal variances.

Conclusion empathic reactions. To summarize the results for the empathic reactions: in line with the findings from previous research as discussed in Chapter 5, there appeared to be an effect of narrativity. Participants were more likely to donate to a charity about depression after reading the non-literary narrative text about this subject, and the contrast was mainly between the non-literary narrative text and the expository text. However, there were no other main effects of genre condition and there was no main effect of fictionality on empathic reactions.

According to expectation, affective responses during reading play a role in influencing empathic reactions, although the results were somewhat modest. Experiencing absorption and aesthetic attraction during reading had an effect on donating to the depression foundation, but not the grief foundation. Of all the narrative and aesthetic feelings, sympathy/empathy was the only clear predictor of empathic understanding.

Finally, all personal factors had some effect on the empathic reactions. Personal experience with the subject matter impacted both donating and empathic understanding for depression, but – as expected – not for grief. Trait

empathy had no effect on donating, but did impact empathic understanding for both depression and grief, regardless of the literary quality of the text. The influence of exposure to literature was more modest: it significantly affected empathic understanding for depression, but bordered on significance for understanding grief. Previous exposure to literature appears to affect empathic understanding more when reading literary narrative texts than when reading non-literary narrative texts. These findings are further explained in the Discussion section (6.3).

6.2.3. Effects on Reflection

This section presents the findings for reflection. Reflection was measured in two different ways, as described more fully in section 6.1.3: as *direct thoughts* (the item "The text triggered me to think") and as *deferred thoughts* (the question whether participants thought back to the text after one week, and if so, what it was they thought). The effects of personal factors and affective responses on *direct thoughts* were explored in AMOS, the effects on *deferred thoughts* were not, because of the relatively small number of participants who had thought back to the texts.

Effects of genre-condition on direct thoughts. Did narrativity and literariness affect the extent to which people were triggered to think? No quantitative difference was expected in the amount of direct thoughts. There was indeed no significant difference between the three genres for grief, but, against expectation, there was a significant difference between the three genres for depression (see the third part of Table II.2). The post-hoc test (Fisher LSD) showed that the significant difference lay between the literary narrative text (Meijsing) and the non-literary narrative text (Van Drie), with the latter scoring higher. The effect size, however, was rather small (see Table II.2). As will be discussed under "Effects of fictionality on direct thoughts," this difference only occurred for those receiving the fiction-instruction.

Effects of fictionality on direct thoughts. No significant main effects of the fiction-instruction were found on reflection ("the text triggered me to think"), neither for depression, nor for grief (see the third part of Table II.3). Looking at the manipulation check (thinking the text was fiction or non-fiction) instead of the manipulation proper also had no significant effects (see Table II.4).

However, calculating the interaction effect of genre-condition and fiction-instruction through a General Linear Model did lead to an interesting finding for depression: for those receiving a *non-fiction* instruction, it did not matter whether they read a non-literary or literary text for their score on reflection, but those receiving a *fiction*-instruction in the *non-literary narrative* condition scored significantly higher on reflection than those in the literary-condition ($M_{fiction\_non-lit}$ = 4.93, $SD_{fiction}$ = 1.62, $M_{fiction\_lit}$ = 3.44 $SD_{fiction\_lit}$ = 1.49), $F(1, 166)$ = 10.32, p = .002, η^2 = .06. Thus, a relatively more emotional and straightforward text might evoke more direct thoughts when being perceived as constructed than a text which is less emotional and more original.

Effects of personal factors and affective responses on direct thoughts: depression. Which personal factors and which affective responses during reading influence reflection, and to what extent? The model with direct thoughts as outcome variable (Figure II.3) was tested in AMOS, separately for depression and for grief. The three personal factors were the exogenous variables, the affective responses the endogenous variables (being possibly influenced by the three personal factors) as well as potential predictors of reflection. Again, for these analyses, only the two narrative conditions were used, as the expository condition did not include narrative feelings. All participants with missing data had to be removed, which resulted in a sample of 162 people.

The model for depression displayed a good fit ($\chi^2(10, N$ =162) = 6.97, p = .73; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR: .036), accounting for 43.3% of variance in reflection. As can be seen in Figure II.10, experiencing *empathic distress* and finding the text *aesthetically attractive* were the strongest predictors of

reflection. The affective responses *perceived foregrounding* and *sympathy/empathy* played a modest role in predicting reflection. This suggests, in line with expectations, that a more emotional and aesthetic reading experience goes together with more thoughts. Of the personal factors, *personal experience* was the only one with a direct and significant contribution.
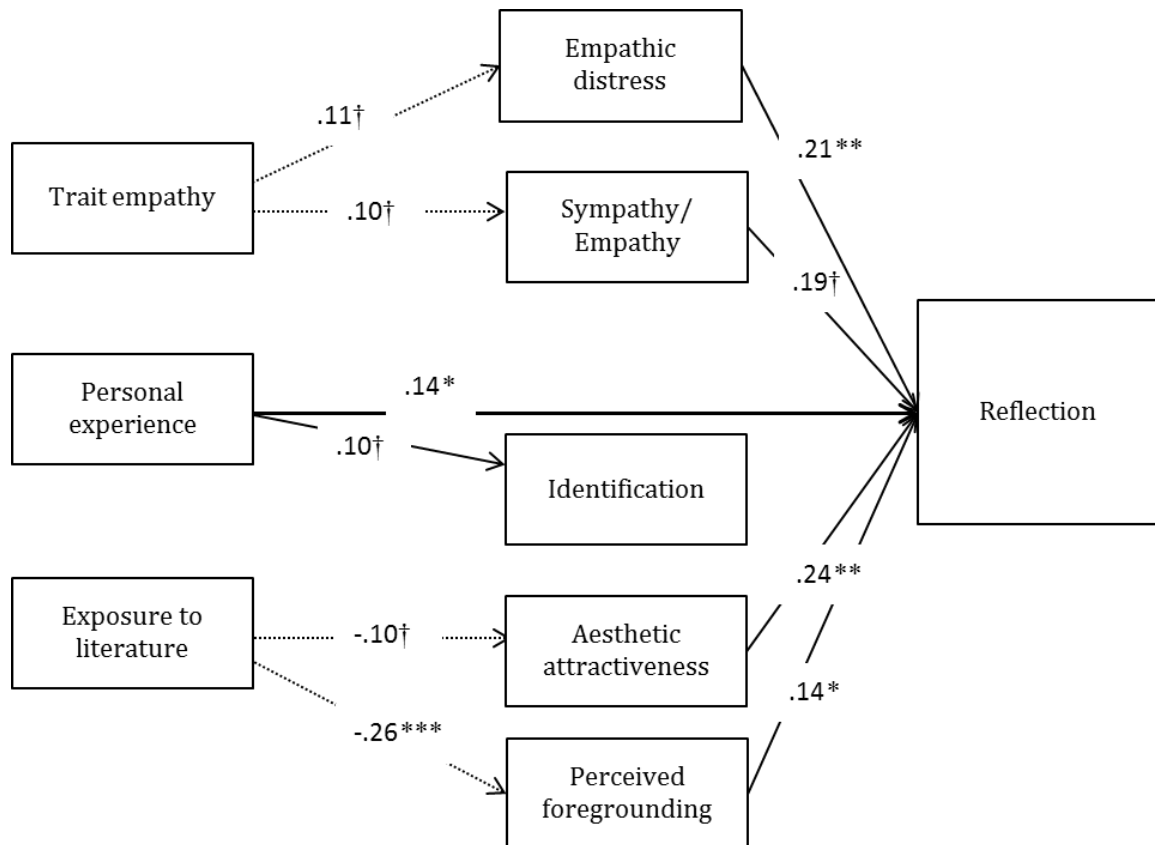
Figure II.10. Reflection after reading narrative texts depression

† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Effects of personal factors and affective responses on direct thoughts: grief. The model for grief was also explored in AMOS. It displayed a good fit: $\chi^2(12, N = 158) = 12.89$, $p = .38$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .02; SRMR: .042, and accounted for 41.9% of the variance in reflection. The outcomes of this model show similar patterns as the one for depression, displayed in Figure II.10. Both in the case of depression and of grief, *empathic distress* and *sympathy/empathy* are predictors of reflection, as well as *perceived foregrounding* and *personal experience*

(bordering on significance for grief). Yet, for the grief texts, aesthetic attractiveness was no significant predictor. Also, *trait empathy* was a direct predictor. Overall, we can conclude that empathic distress and sympathy/empathy appear to be the most consistent predictors of reflection, while aesthetic feelings and personal resonance with the text can also play a role, but the strength of those predictors depends on the text.
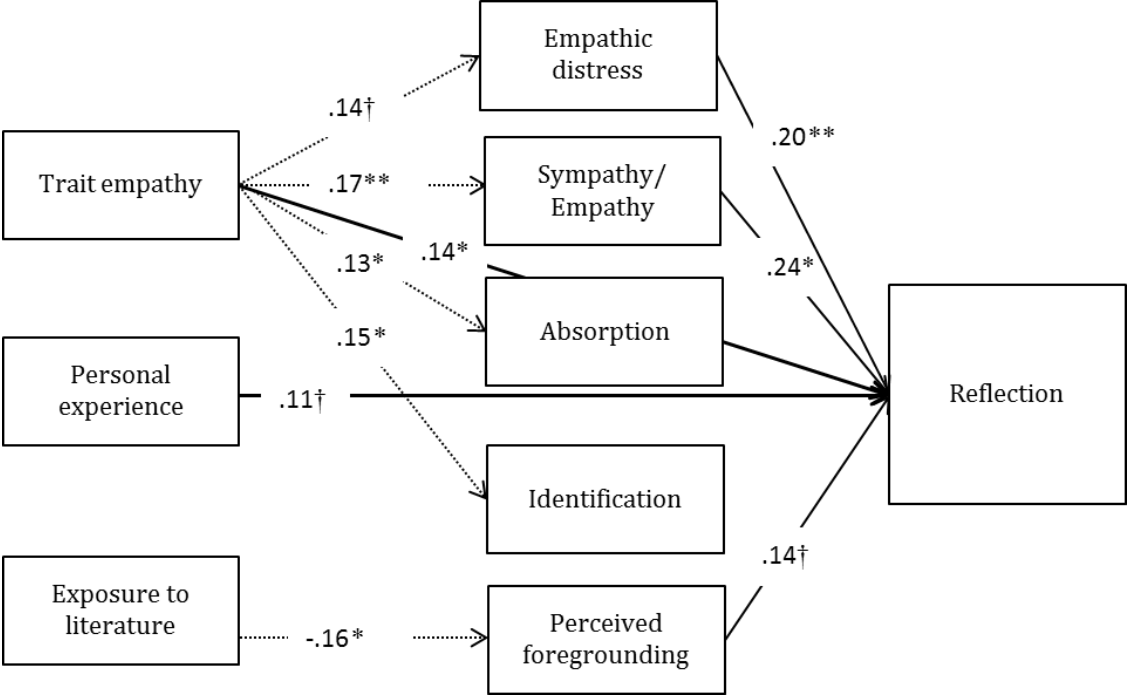
Figure II.11. Reflection after reading narrative texts grief

*† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001*

Differences in reflection-models for literary and non-literary narratives. To shed more light on potential differing effects of literary and non-literary narrative texts, let us again look at the patterns of responses to these texts within each subject matter condition, while treating these results with caution.

As can be seen in Figure II.12, II.13, II.14 and II.15, the individual texts each caused a different interaction between personal factors and affective responses when it comes to the impact on reflection. It should be noted that the low sample sizes affected the statistical power of these models, especially in the case of the literary grief text (Figure II.15). Here, *beta*-values of the affective responses

empathic distress, sympathy/empathy and identification were all above .16, but failed to reach or even approach statistical significance. However, we can still conclude from the separate models that affective responses were important for reflection. Which affective response plays the most important role appears to be dependent on more factors than just whether a text is "literary" or not.
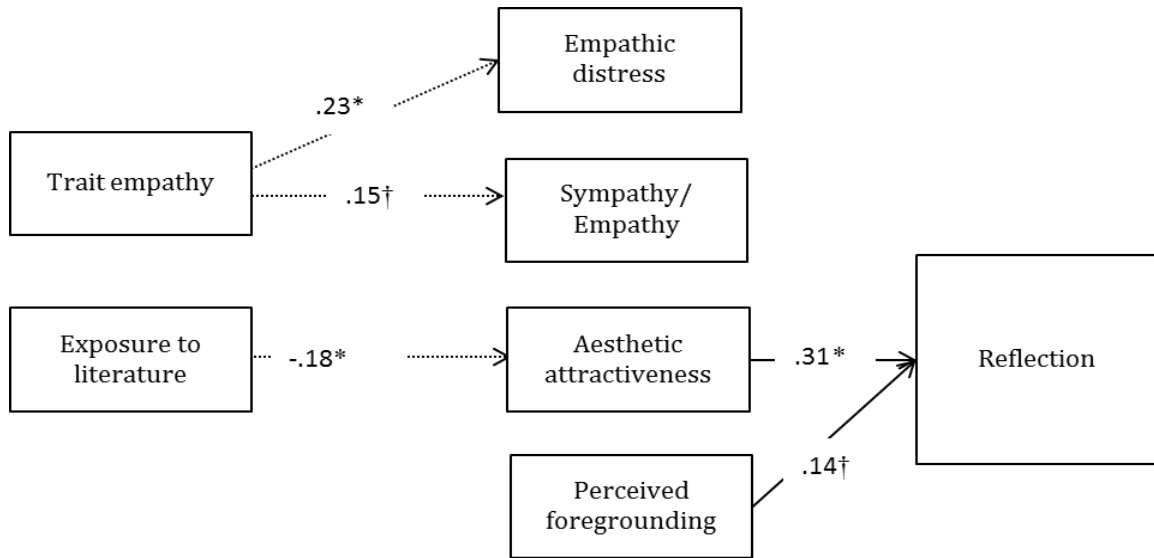
Figure II.12. Reflection after reading non-literary narrative depression

† *p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.* $\chi^2(10, N = 78) = 9.95$, *p* = .45; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR: .054; 48.9% of variance explained.
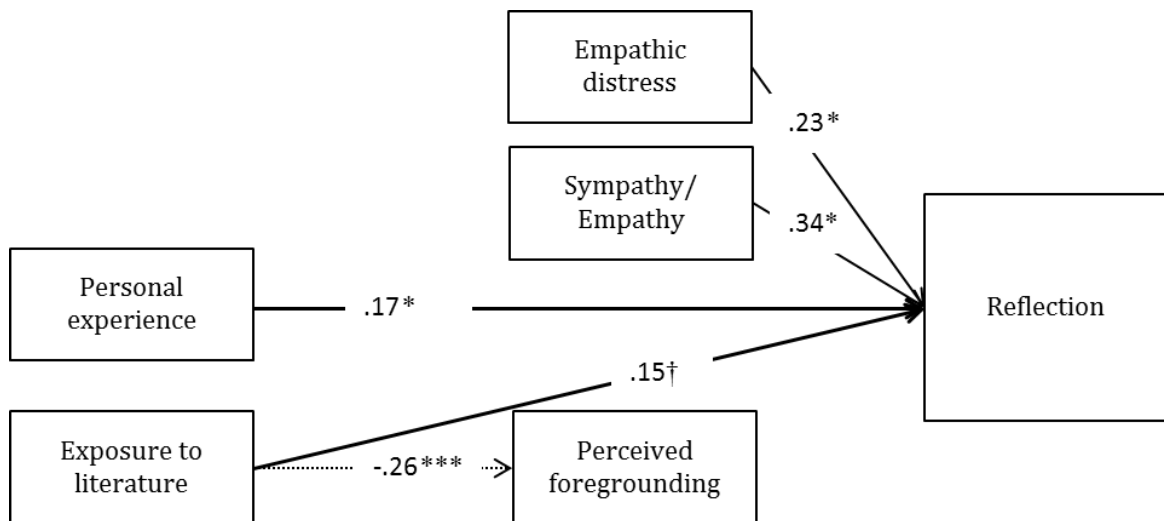
Figure II.13. Reflection after reading literary narrative depression

† *p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.* $\chi^2(10, N = 84) = 6.64$, *p* = .76; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR: .052; 40.5% of variance explained.
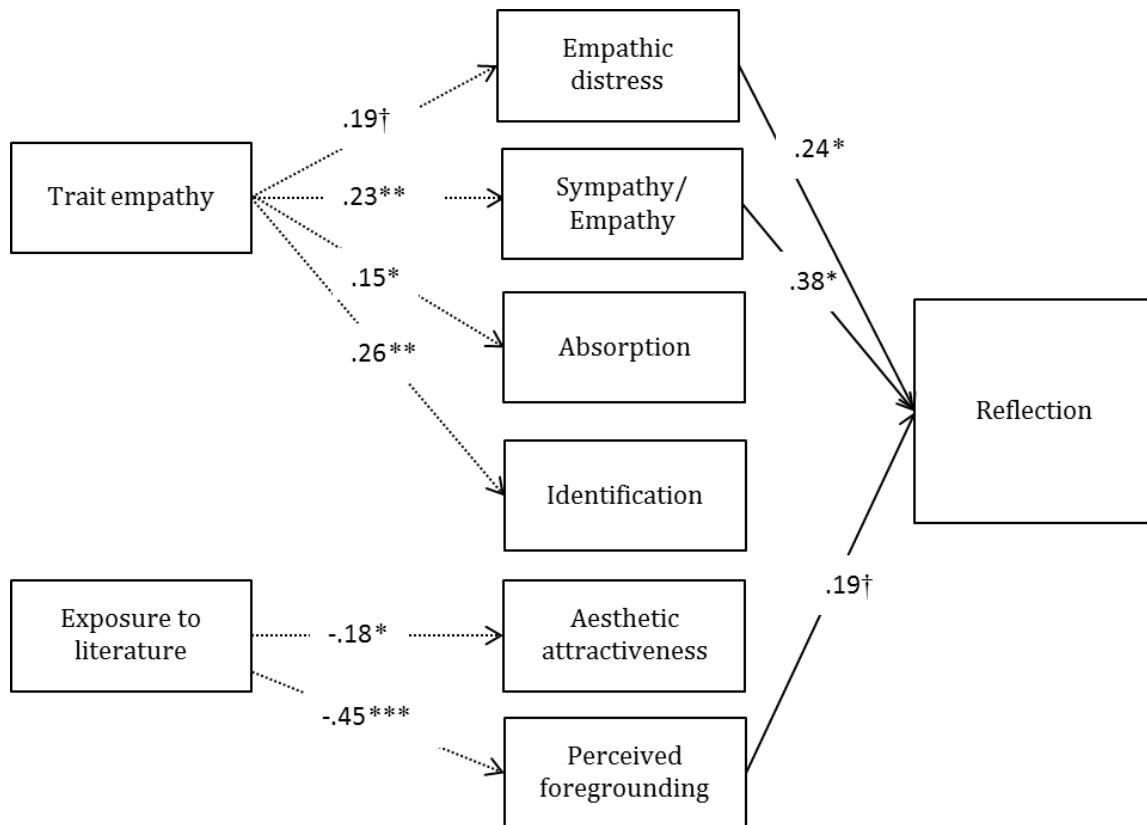
Figure II.14. Reflection after reading non-literary narrative grief

*† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.* $\chi^2(9, N = 79) = 15.34, p = .08$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .09; SRMR: .078; 49.5% of variance explained.
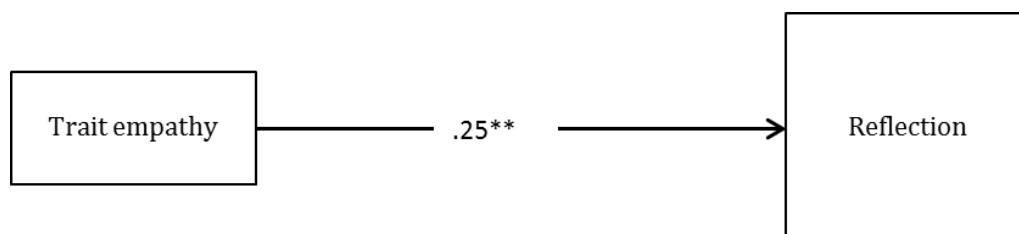
Figure II.15. Reflection after reading literary narrative grief

*† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.* $\chi^2(10, N = 79) = 6.79, p = .75$; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR: .033; 37.4% of variance explained.

Effects of genre-condition on deferred thoughts. While a quantitative difference in thoughts between the genre-conditions was not expected, it was expected that literary texts trigger deeper reflection than non-literary texts. This second aspect was explored qualitatively for the "deferred thoughts." However, it first needed to be determined whether participants thought back to the texts at all. Thinking back is an indication of the longer-term impact of a text.

In total, 58 respondents reported they had thought back. The proportion of respondents who thought back was much higher in the two narrative conditions (32.1% in the non-literary narrative condition, 32.6% in the literary) than in the expository condition (7.5%). Crosstabs comparing condition (narrative vs. non-narrative) and deferred thoughts (no vs. yes) confirmed that those in the narrative conditions were more likely to think back ($\chi^2(1, N = 210) = 9.64$, $p = .002$, $\varphi = .22$).

What did these 58 people think about? Coding the responses to the open question led to broad categories of respondents' thoughts, which are presented, in order of frequency, in Table II.7.

Table II.7.

Qualitative Codes for Participants' Deferred Thoughts, in Order of Frequency

Code name	Explanation	Example	Total frq. (n)	Frq. per condition		
				Exp.	*Non-lit.*	*Lit.*
Perspective-taking	Imagining what it would be like to be in the character's place or to be someone in a similar situation.	"I thought then: I am happy that I am not depressed. Because I really wouldn't want to hurt myself..."	13	1	9	3
Emotional	Thinking back to the emotions that the text evoked.	"It definitely changes my mood. It is mostly sad things that move me."	13	0	6	7
Negative story/style	Demonstrating negative appreciation of story/style	"I mainly thought that the text was weak in literary terms"	12	0	6	6
Deeper reflection	Showing deeper reflection on the theme, having come to a certain insight or realization.	"... it made me realize that you really have to take care of your own happiness and not depend on others for that."	10	0	3	7

Style/scene impressive	Reporting that one found the style impressive/recalling a specific image or scene.	"I thought a lot about the sentence that her cigarette was a good friend but would also betray her one day. I thought that was a very appealing image."	6	0	0	6
General	Only remarking that one thought about the main gist of the text.	"Not explicitly to the details of the story. But to the general idea."	5	0	2	3
Current events	Thinking back to the text because of a recent/current event in daily life, e.g. the news.	"It was on the news that a man had saved a woman from suicide but subsequently also was hit by a train."	5	0	5	0
Personal experience	Thinking about one's own personal experiences or those of someone close.	"I thought about it for a bit and talked briefly to a friend about it. Because I have also been in a sanatorium."	4	1	2	1
Curiosity story	Wondering about elements in the plot.	"I was thinking then about how the child would have died."	2	0	1	1

While the low frequencies of the separate thought categories make it difficult to draw far-reaching conclusions from the comparisons across conditions, there are some interesting patterns here that deserve to be mentioned. First of all, readers only recalled the impressive style or scenes of the literary texts. Also, deeper reflection occurred most often in the literary condition. On the other hand, perspective-taking occurred most often in the non-literary narrative condition.

Effects of fictionality on deferred thoughts. No significant effects of the fiction-instruction were found on having deferred thoughts, $\chi^2(1, N = 170) = .19$, $p = .66$,

φ = .03. Thinking that one had read a fictional text ("fiction check") also had no significant effects.

Conclusion Reflection. To summarize the results for reflection: in line with previous findings, there was no clear effect of genre on the quantity of direct thoughts in case of the grief excerpts. For the depression excerpts, however, against expectation, the non-literary narrative text evoked more direct thoughts than the literary text. Those who had read this text *and* had received a fiction instruction were more likely to reflect. This interaction-effect suggests that the idea that a text is fictional might indeed give readers more "space" to think when the text they are reading is emotional and simple.

As was expected, reflection appeared more long-lasting in the narrative conditions. The number of respondents who reported to have thought back to the text after one week was significantly higher for both narrative conditions than for the expository. The qualitative data furthermore provided some (tentative) evidence that literary texts evoke a deeper kind of reflection than other texts, while the more sentimental life stories seemed particularly apt at making people imagine taking another person's perspective.

Out of necessity, given the relatively small number of participants who thought back (n = 58), the AMOS-analyses for reflection were executed for direct thoughts only. Patterns for both the depression and grief narratives were rather similar. In both cases, immediate thoughts were predicted by personal experience with the subject matter, empathic distress, sympathy/empathy with the character and perceived foregrounding. When looking at the models for the individual texts, the patterns became less conclusive, but the importance of affective responses in causing reflection was generally upheld.

6.2.4. Other Results Genre Study

Relation reflection and empathic understanding. While this was not one of the research questions, since findings in Part I already showed a connection between meaning-making (or: thinking) and feeling, it was explored whether reflection and empathic understanding were significantly related. The adapted multi-factor model of literary reading (Figure II.1) suggested that insight into oneself and others could be related to empathic attitudes. Indeed, in this study, there was a significant correlation between direct thoughts and empathic understanding for depression, $r = .34$ ($p < .001$), and between direct thoughts and empathic understanding for grief $r = .22$ ($p = .002$).

Those who thought back ("deferred thoughts") also scored higher on the empathic statements. For the depression statements this difference was not significant ($M_{empdepr\_nodeferred} = 27.95$, $SD = 4.21$, $M_{empdepr\_deferred} = 28.35$, $SD = 3.95$; $t(206) = -.63$, $p = .531$, Cohen's $d = .10$), but for the grief statements it was ($M_{empgrief\_nodeferred} = 24.13$, $SD = 4.68$, $M_{empgrief\_deferred} = 26.36$, $SD = 4.78$; $t(206) = -3.07$, $p = .002$, Cohen's $d = .47$).

Relation exposure to literature and trait empathy. Finally, one finding that is relevant to mention concerns the potential effect of longer-term exposure to literature on trait empathy. Regarding the emotional trait empathy measure used in this study (the TEQ), scores did not differ for those who had had more or less exposure to literature (as measured by the ART). Correlations were not significant, neither in the pilot study ($r(114) = -.033$, $p = .729$), nor in the current study: $r(210) = -.095$, $p = .17$). This implies that those who had higher exposure to literature did not consciously consider themselves as having more empathic concern. (N.B.: the TEQ does not measure perspective-taking or actual empathy.)

6.3. Discussion Genre Study

The current study explored the influence of narrativity, literariness and fictionality, as well as the influence of affective responses during reading and of personal factors on empathy with others and reflection. Overall, the study provides partial evidence for an effect of narrativity – with the non-literary narrative text causing more people to donate to the depression foundation and both narrative texts being connected to more reflection after one week than the expository texts. However, there was no main effect of fictionality on empathy and reflection. Literariness also had no effect in the short run, but after one week, the literary texts appeared to evoke deeper reflection for a small minority. Also, lifetime exposure to literature was a predictor of empathic understanding.

With regard to fictionality, the study presented participants either with a fiction or a non-fiction instruction. Of course, such instructions need to be consciously perceived by participants to be able to have an influence. In this study, the lack of effects could not just have been due to readers sloppily skipping the introduction, since readers who afterwards reported that they thought that the text was fictional did not have a more emotional, empathic or reflective experience. The main effects that were found suggested that perceived fictionality might go together with a less emotional reading experience: readers who perceived the texts as based on true events experienced higher sympathy/empathy with the character, absorption and aesthetic appreciation for the grief texts (cf. the effects of "perceived realism," see for example Green, 2004).

Since fictionality had no effect on empathy, we might – carefully – conclude that effects on empathy that are often ascribed to "fiction" (e.g., Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Mar et al., 2006, 2009) are actually due to narrativity. This is still in line with role-taking theory: whether a story is based on facts or derived predominantly from the imagination, in either case there are characters with goals. Still, the possibility also remains that fictionality does aid in training the

imagination and in perspective-taking (cf. Altmann et al., 2014) but that the effects are only visible with repeated exposure (cf. Mar et al., 2006, 2009) or have not been captured by the current (self-report) measures. Indeed, it can be argued that if people would only read and view stories they know to be "true," it would stifle their ability to imagine different worlds.

It was not the case, namely, that fictionality had no effect at all: we did see an effect of the fiction-instruction on evoking direct thoughts for the non-literary narrative text about depression, compared to the literary text (an interaction effect). This non-literary text by Van Drie was quite emotionally laden, containing passages about auto-mutilation and hospitalization and a faster sequence of events than the literary text. It could be that for such an emotional text, readers needed the distancing device of fictionality to reflect, while the literary text about depression (which was already relatively "calm," about an older woman locking herself away in her room) did not benefit from such a distance. Overall, then, this finding appears to be in line with the idea that fictionality can provide people with a necessary aesthetic distance to reflect.

Since the narrative texts differed in more ways than just literariness, the general lack of effects of the literary texts in this study cannot directly be seen as disproving the claims that literariness matters for empathy and reflection. The contrast between the more emotional and eventful non-literary narrative text about depression and its literary counterpart, for example, may have obscured potential effects of literariness as a stylistic quality. When we do try to interpret the different effects in this study of the non-literary and literary narrative text, we can first of all argue that the narrative stimulus needs to be quite strong emotionally to have the real-life empathic effect of causing people to donate to a related charity. While the non-literary and literary texts evoked similar levels of sympathy/empathy with the character and identification, participants scored higher on empathic distress for both non-literary narrative texts than for the literary texts. Literary narratives might work against the "manipulative" effect of playing on readers' emotions and making them act, precisely because they

contain more foregrounded stylistic features. This is a question for future research. As the number of participants who donated was rather small, we have to be careful in drawing conclusions.

Given that the non-literary narrative texts caused more empathic distress, it is almost surprising that these texts did not lead to more empathic understanding or reflection than the literary texts, and that only one of them led to significantly more prosocial behavior. This lack of a difference between the non-literary and literary texts might be due to two psychological mechanisms proposed in the multi-factor model in Figure II. The emotionality (i.e., narrative feelings) of the non-literary narrative texts could form one path from reading to empathy and to reflection; the originality (i.e., aesthetic feelings) of literary narrative texts could form another path, through providing a new view on people and events. Because of these different paths, reading a simple, sentimental narrative text may lead to a similar level of empathic understanding as reading a more complex and original but less sentimental narrative text. Expository texts, in addition, could lead to a similar level of empathic understanding through spelling out the difficulties of people who are grieving or depressed.

The hypothesis that both engagement with characters and engagement with style could further understanding for a wider group is supported by two findings. First of all, subjectively experienced narrative feelings and aesthetic feelings affected donating to the depression foundation. Secondly, narrative and aesthetic feelings both predicted reflection (direct thoughts). That second finding is in line with Miall and Kuiken's (2002) defamiliarization theory: narrative and aesthetic feelings evoked by striking text features may lead readers to pause and reflect. When we find a text stylistically striking, this can demand more cognitive attention and elaboration, which is supported by evidence of the longer reading times for texts with foregrounding (Miall & Kuiken, 1994). Simultaneously, when we feel for suffering characters, cognitive efforts may be required to deal with and to interpret these feelings (cf. Koopman et al., 2012). In both cases, the text has managed to grip our emotional attention,

to stand out as significant (cf. Cupchik & László, 1994). This, consequently, could lead (some of) us to integrate meanings derived from narrative texts in our own lives.

However, there are also some challenges to the picture that both aesthetic and narrative feelings during reading lead to increased understanding for others. Firstly, while perceived foregrounding was one of the predictors of direct thoughts, this appeared the case mainly for the (rather straightforward) life stories. Perhaps there was a greater difference between those who were able to be surprised by these relatively simple texts and those who were not than for the literary texts. Secondly, while theoretically we would expect both narrative and aesthetic feelings to be of influence on empathic understanding, sympathy with the character was the only clear response during reading to impact empathic understanding. Finding the text beautiful or being absorbed in the narrative world may be less conducive to evoking empathy for people in situations similar to those in the narrative than actually sympathizing with characters (cf. Hakemulder, 2000; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Yet, we do have to take into account that not all narrative and aesthetic feelings may have been sufficiently captured by the current scales. Also, the general set-up may not have encouraged participants to read the texts carefully, while this may be necessary for literary texts to have an effect.

It needs to be remarked that participants were only presented with two short stimuli. Even though this is a common method in reader response research, it may not be realistic to expect (large) effects after reading just 1500 words. In this respect, it is relevant that one's general exposure to literature (as measured by the ART) was a predictor of empathic understanding – particularly for depression, to a lesser extent for grief. This suggests the importance of repeated exposure to narrative texts: by providing continuous practice with role-playing, reading narratives may indeed help people to understand others better (cf. Mar et al., 2006, 2009; Mar & Oatley, 2008).

It is also noticeable that the version of the ART used in the current study measured exposure to authors of popular and literary novels combined, and that the higher scores were of those who had been exposed to the literary authors. These participants also knew the popular authors, while vice versa this was not the case. We might thus be dealing with not just an effect of lifetime exposure to narratives, but with an effect of exposure to literary narratives.

As the separate AMOS-models showed, previous exposure to literature appeared to affect empathic understanding more when reading literary narrative texts than when reading non-literary narrative texts. This could possibly be the result of a re-activation of people's ability to make complex mental inferences. An alternative explanation is that those with more experience with literature needed to spend less time making sense of the text and could focus more on what was being communicated. This latter explanation is backed by the finding that those scoring higher on the ART were less likely to experience the texts as surprising.

While these results concerning the ART are promising indications of the potential power of literature, what goes against the claims that reading increases empathic ability is the finding that those with more exposure to literature did not show higher self-reported emotional trait empathy. Chapter 7 will use another measure of trait empathy, which can distinguish between emotional and cognitive trait empathy, to see whether exposure to literature is related to one's perspective-taking ability, as Mar et al. (2006, 2009) and Kidd and Castano (2013) have previously suggested and to some extent demonstrated.

In the current study, findings sometimes differed for the grief and depression texts. Personal experience did not matter significantly for empathic reactions following reading about grief, while it did matter for depression. For reflection, we also saw a stronger effect of personal experience for depression than for grief. These findings are in line with expectations. They suggest that even if we have not lost someone ourselves, we might imagine relatively easily how painful it would be, while for depression we may need some previous

experience (which can be activated through reading) in order to understand. The differences also point to the importance of using various subject matter conditions when exploring the relation between reading and empathy.

Finally, the choice to compare between excerpts from existing books without manipulating these excerpts to limit their differences can be criticized. This was considered a relatively more ecologically valid approach (cf. Halász, 1991), as well as useful to detect broad differences. Yet, with this approach it is difficult to determine which elements in the texts affect empathy and reflection, thus interfering with internal validity. To gain more certainty whether and how "literariness" has an effect, studies which use experimental manipulations are necessary (cf. Bortolussi & Dixon, 2003). The study in Chapter 7 offers such a manipulation of "literariness." This study takes a closer look at the relation between foregrounding and empathic understanding on the one hand, and foregrounding and reflection on the other, following the lead of Miall and Kuiken (1994) in distinguishing between semantic and other types of foregrounding. The study in Chapter 7 further improves upon the current study by using an instruction that encourages readers to pay closer attention to the text and by including a pre-test of empathic understanding.

7. "A Gray Joy."

Effects of Foregrounding on Emotions and on Empathy and Reflection After Reading

The pencil that the woman had used to write down her memories had dwindled to a pathetic little stump that could barely be sharpened. She looked up from the desk. Behind the wide windows the polder landscape lay stretched out in the sun. The water shone in the ditches between steaming embankments of dredged-up trash; sheep were grazing on the dike in the distance. (…) Through the green idyll curved the narrow bicycle path on which the daughter had biked away. In the middle of those lush meadows the woman had seen her daughter's back for the last time.

(Anna Enquist – *Counterpoint*, 2010 [2008], transl. Ringold)

In the heart-breaking novel *Counterpoint* (orig. *Contrapunt*), Anna Enquist transforms the experience of losing a child into literature, into art, while simultaneously showing how difficult and painful it is to even try to transform such an experience. The whole novel is structured according to Bach's *Goldberg variations*, which – the narrator proposes - Bach composed while grieving the loss of his son. With this literary construction, Enquist can be said to apply foregrounding on a macro-level. The quotation above, from the chapter "Aria da capo" is just one small example to show how foregrounding is also applied on the sentence level. In this quotation, we can retrieve three general types of foregrounding identified by Mukařovský (1976): *phonetic* (repetitions of sounds, like alliteration), *grammatical* (e.g., ellipsis), and *semantic* (e.g., metaphor). "Wide windows" and "ditches" – "dike" – "distance" are examples of phonetic foregrounding (note that in the Dutch version, other words alliterate), the repeated use of "the woman" is an example of grammatical foregrounding, and

using a *pars pro toto* in "her daughter's back" is an example of semantic foregrounding.

While such text features that "deviate" from "normal" language use do not constitute the only possible defining feature of "literary" texts, they can be used to distinguish texts as being lower or higher in literariness (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 1994, 1999). As Miall and Kuiken (1994) have shown, readers are generally more likely to find text passages which are relatively high in foregrounded features more striking than passages low in foregrounding, and to perceive these passages as having literary quality (cf. Hunt & Vipond, 1985; Van Peer, 1986; see also the panel study in Appendix B). The current study looks into the effects of that originality, as a text-immanent feature ("foregrounding"). The operationalization of "literariness" in the current study is thus limited, but this has the advantage that experimental manipulation is relatively straightforward, that results build on a growing field of empirical scholarship (in most empirical research on foregrounding, manipulations are done on the word and sentence level, e.g., Hakemulder, 2004; Kuijpers, 2014; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Van Peer, 1986; Van Peer et al., 2007), and that the results could also tentatively be generalized to non-narrative genres like poetry.

More specifically, the current study explores the role of foregrounding in general (semantic, grammatical and phonetic foregrounding combined) and of imagery (or: semantic foregrounding) in particular, in influencing affective responses during reading, empathic understanding for others after reading, and reflection. For these purposes, one of the literary texts used in Chapter 6, namely the chapter from Enquist's *Counterpoint*, is manipulated to create three versions differing in the level of foregrounding. Apart from exploring the main effect of foregrounding, readers' personal attributes are also taken into account. The research questions are as follows:

1) *Does a text higher in foregrounding lead to stronger affective responses during reading (narrative and aesthetic feelings)?*

2) *Does a text higher in foregrounding lead to a higher likelihood of empathic reactions towards extra-textual others who are in a similar situation as the character?*

3) *Does a text higher in foregrounding lead to more and/or different thoughts (reflection) than a text lower in foregrounding?*

4) *What role do personal attributes play in readers' affective, empathic and reflective responses, most importantly personal experience with the subject matter, being a parent oneself, trait empathy, and exposure to literature?*

5) *What role do affective responses (narrative and aesthetic feelings) play in influencing empathic reactions and reflection?*

The aim of the study was thus to determine the effects of foregrounding, while controlling for (as well as looking at the contribution of) personal factors. In addition, the study explored the role of the subjective experience of the text (experienced narrative and aesthetic feelings) in influencing empathic and reflective reactions. Before presenting the methods and results of the current study, I will first discuss previous studies into the effects of foregrounding. While Chapter 5 already discussed the effects of foregrounding on empathy and reflection, more can be said about the emotional effects of foregrounding, particularly the role of semantic foregrounding (or: imagery). Looking at previous studies and theory might help us formulate preliminary expectations with regard to the research questions posed above.

7.1. Effects of Foregrounding on Emotions: Further Theoretical and Empirical Background

As discussed in Chapter 5, theory suggests that foregrounding has an effect on readers' feelings and thoughts. The structuralists' defamiliarization-hypothesis proposed that foregrounding makes the common unfamiliar and would thus make readers see the world in a new light. Shklovsky's (1965) and Mukařovský's

(1976) writing about the defamiliarizing process suggests that it is accompanied by feelings and likely to lead to reflection (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 1994). Shklovsky (1965) explicitly stated that art "exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stoney" and "to increase the difficulty and length of perception" (p. 12). They were not specific, however, about the type of feelings and thoughts that would be evoked by which kind of deviating text feature.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, empirical studies into foregrounding have used different outcome measures and disagree on the effects of foregrounding. As we already saw in Chapter 5, there appear to be no specific studies on foregrounding and empathy,[42] and the results of foregrounding and reflection are mixed: Kuijpers (2014) found no effect on reflection, while Van Peer et al.'s (2007) single line experiment did. There is some consensus, at least, that foregrounding leads to slower reading times (Cupchik & László, 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 1994).

Regarding the effects of foregrounding on feelings, relatively more research has been conducted. Miall and Kuiken (1994) did a series of empirical studies testing the effects of phonetic, grammatical and semantic foregrounding, using three literary stories divided in passages with less and more foregrounding. Generally, the segments which contained more semantic and phonetic foregrounding were perceived as more striking (cf. Hunt & Vipond, 1985; Van Peer, 1986). They also evoked more affect. Grammatical foregrounding seemed to have little effect on these measures. While these results seem promising, Miall and Kuiken (1994) only used one general item to measure affect (to what extent "feeling" was aroused), so it is not clear which specific emotions are evoked by foregrounding. Do readers start to feel what characters feel, to a greater extent than if they read a less intricate text? Or do the affect

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[42] It could be argued that Kidd and Castano (2013) is an exception, but this study is not explicitly about foregrounding. Likewise, the study by Johnson, Cushman, Borden and McCune (2013), which is discussed later on in this chapter, gives indirect suggestions foregrounding might matter for empathy. This study, however, let readers generate imagery themselves, regardless of the level of foregrounding in the text.

ratings simply reflect the surprise effect of deviation? In other terms, does foregrounding affect narrative feelings, aesthetic feelings, or both?

Or, another option: does it depend on the text whether foregrounding has an effect on feelings? That foregrounding does not always automatically lead to more affect is attested to by an experiment by Van Peer et al. (2007), who, in contrast to Miall and Kuiken (1994), found no effect of foregrounding on the emotion items they used (feeling "moved," "touched," and "sad"). The lack of evoked affect could be due to the particular emotions they asked about, but could also be explained by the fact that they manipulated just one single poetic line. A short story or poem might be a better stimulus to evoke emotion, since the reader has more time to engage with the narrative world presented. In either case, the empirical evidence for a general relation between foregrounding and emotion thus far is inconclusive.

Metaphor, or imagery more generally, has been singled out in previous research as a particularly promising candidate for improving people's felt sense of what others are experiencing (cf. Miall, 2000; Miall & Kuiken, 2002). On the basis of empirical evidence, Gibbs (2002; 2006) has argued that our use of metaphors is grounded in our bodily experience, is connected to feeling, and potentially also to better understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Among other things, people are likely to use metaphors and metonyms when expressing emotion, and abstract ideas are often expressed and understood in terms of embodied metaphors, for example the idea that life is a "journey" and all its related submetaphors (e.g., taking "the road less traveled") (Gibbs, 2005; 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). Gibbs (2006) connects these findings to the fact that our brains tend to automatically simulate the bodily actions and experiences we hear or read about (the so-called "mirror neurons"), a process which may be a precondition for empathy (Gallese, 2003). Our bodies thus automatically get involved when we read a metaphor or metonym grounded in bodily experience (as most are) (Gibbs, 2006; for one recent empirical study, see Slepian & Ambady, 2014).

Related to these findings, but more specific to readers, there is some empirical support that *mental* imagery and reader emotions go together. Johnson, Cushman, Borden and McCune (2013) trained readers to generate images in their minds. They found that when those readers were subsequently presented with a short story (written to evoke empathy with the character), they were more transported in the story, had higher empathy for the character and were even more likely to exhibit prosocial behavior afterwards than a control group reading the same story. Similarly, Goetz, Sadoski, Stowe, Fetsco and Kemp (1993) found high correlations between readers' reported imagery and readers' reported emotions when reading a story about a Sioux youth.

However, these kinds of self-evoked images are not the same as semantic foregrounding in the text. Even if moving text passages would also contain more images, as Dijkstra et al. (1994) suggest, that could be because the author wants to stress the emotions experienced by the character: "character emotions may be positively related to imagery because they are an effective device to expose the personality of the character" (p. 142). And whether those images would need to be original to evoke emotions is a second issue. Dijkstra et al. (1994) expect original literary devices to have a negative association with character and reader emotions, as they "may suppress the diegetic effect experienced by the reader because they are oriented towards the literary text itself rather than the events and their possible consequences for the characters" (p. 144).

Gibbs does believe in the power of original metaphors. According to him (e.g., Gibbs, 2006), most novel metaphors build on the existing conceptual metaphors outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Novel metaphors, he claimed, could have stronger effects than conventional metaphors, because novel metaphors express a more nuanced, elaborate bodily experience (Gibbs, Leggitt, & Turner, 2002). As long as readers pause to try to understand what is being said by this novel metaphor, they will also get a sense of those nuances, which could lead to emotions like vicarious fear or sympathy (Gibbs et al., 2002).

Yet, when Gibbs tested this hypothesis, he found no difference between novel and conventional metaphorical expressions; both were equally seen by participants as reflecting more intense emotion than literal statements (Gibbs et al., 2002). We could thus wonder whether Gibbs's (2006) theory of the effects of metaphors – which make sense for conventional images/ metaphors, like having "warm" feelings for a person or trying to "grasp" a concept – also goes for the novel metaphors used in literature. We need to note here that Gibbs et al.'s (2002) participants listened to audiotapes with rather everyday short scenario's, ending in one either literal statement, conventional metaphor or novel metaphor. Reading a literary text in which metaphors are naturally incorporated may require more attention and engagement and could therefore be more likely to have effects on affective responses (cf. Mar & Oatley, 2008).

All in all, theoretically, we could expect more affective and reflective responses to texts higher in foregrounding, particularly texts higher in (original) imagery. However, the mixed or limited results of previous empirical studies warn against formulating specific directional hypotheses. It is clear that much more systematic studies are needed. Through text manipulation, the character emotions in a fragment can be kept the same, while varying the amount of foregrounding. The current study is such an attempt.

Apart from looking into the effects of foregrounding, the current study also takes into account personal factors. In the studies discussed above, the personal attributes of participants could have been another reason for the mixed results. In the current study, the primary interest of the current study is in the effects of foregrounding, and personal factors are mainly used as control variables. However, since the effects of personal factors are interesting in themselves, these effects are also reported. Similarly as in Chapter 6, I focus on the following personal factors: previous exposure to literature, personal experience with the subject matter, and trait empathy.

Previous exposure to literature, firstly, can make it easier for readers to detect strikingness (Andringa, 1996; Miall & Kuiken, 1994), but it can also raise

the threshold for experiencing surprise (Kuijpers, 2014; Van Peer et al., 2007). Secondly, personal experience with the subject matter being described can be a factor in one's appreciation for foregrounding. Controlling for personal experience becomes particularly relevant when we look at empathy and reflection as outcome measures, as the current study aims to do. Those who have personal experience with the subject matter may generally feel more engaged, more likely to empathize and more likely to reflect. Similarly, parents could be more affected when reading a text about the loss of a child than students. Finally, when we want to explore whether foregrounding can increase empathy, it is sensible to control for people's disposition to feel for others: trait empathy. As we saw in Chapter 6, trait empathy can predict empathy with characters as well as empathy with others after reading.

7.2. Methods Foregrounding Study

7.2.1. Participants

Participants were undergraduates from three Dutch universities, and, for those students who were able and willing to involve their parents in the study, one or both of their parents. As the stimulus material was about a woman who has lost her daughter, it was deemed relevant to include parents in the sample. The perspective of a mother is more dissimilar to (childless) students than to parents. Through the questionnaire, all participants were asked whether they had one or multiple children and if so, of what ages. No students reported having children.

To increase the chance that students with different levels of exposure to literature would participate, students from various academic backgrounds were approached (Literature/Languages, Media & Communication, and Sociology). Students were invited to participate during the spring and fall of 2013, through recruiting talks before classes began; if they wanted to participate, they could take a paper copy with them. Participation was voluntary and students were rewarded for participation with 5 euros. Participation of parents was also

voluntary: students could choose to take either no copy, one copy, or one or two extra copies. Most students took only one extra copy. In total, 147 people returned their questionnaire, of which 5 were not analyzed because participants had more than 5 missing variables and/or did not fit in either the category "student" or "parent." Of the final 142 participants, 64.1% were students. The overall mean age was 32.07 (*SD* = 16.79, range: 17-73); 74.6% of the total sample was female. Within the group of students, 81.3% were female, within the group of parents 62.7%. The group of parents was thus more heterogeneous, also in terms of education: 68.6% had received higher education. Of all 142 respondents, 135 had the Dutch nationality.

7.2.2. Procedure

One literary text was manipulated to contain different levels of foregrounding and participants were randomly assigned to one of three text conditions. Participants either read a) the *original* version, containing a high level of semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding, b) a version *without semantic foregrounding*, in which as many (novel) metaphors and metonymies as possible were replaced by literal alternatives, c) a version *without foregrounding*, in which not only semantic, but also phonetic and grammatical foregrounding were replaced by more common alternatives. Thus, the study used a between-subjects design with level of foregrounding as independent variable. Participants were told that the study was about the effect of emotions while reading on appreciation for a text; they did not know that there were three different conditions. Handing out an equal number of questionnaires in each condition eventually led to the following distribution of participants: Original: *n* = 49; Without Semantic Foregrounding: *n* = 40; Without Foregrounding: *n* = 53.

Questionnaires also varied with regard to when the questions about *trait empathy* and *empathic understanding* for others were asked: half of all participants answered these questions *before* reading the text, the other half *after* reading. Just as in the "genre" study in Chapter 6, to be able to use the *trait*

empathy measure as a proper measure of people's general empathic disposition, it was important that it was not significantly influenced by reading. Thus, the groups "before reading" and "after reading" should not have significantly different scores on this measure. Indeed, there was no effect of reading on trait empathy ($F(1, 140) = 1.22$, $p = .27$, $\eta^2 = .009$). Regarding *empathic understanding*, in the genre study in Chapter 6, the empathic statements were only answered after reading. Even though people are randomly assigned to a condition, with that method, unintended differences between the groups can still cause differences on the empathic statements. With half of the people answering the empathic statements *before* reading and half *after* reading, it is clearer whether reading has an effect or not (scores after reading should then be higher). Another option to test this would have been a pre-test and post-test with empathic statements for all readers, but this would have made it too obvious for readers that I was interested in an effect on empathy, possibly leading to invalid scores on the post-test (because of social desirability on the one hand, and irritation on the other).

While the study was mostly quantitative, it had a qualitative component. All participants were asked to underline those phrases in the text which evoked an emotion or feeling and mark these with an "E," and to mark phrases which evoked a thought or memory with a "G" (for "gedachte," the Dutch word for thought). After reading, they were asked to select one "E" and one "G" they found most important and describe which emotions and thoughts they had had. This procedure is based on Seilman and Larsen's (1989) "self-probed retrospection method." Seilman and Larsen (1989) used a similar instruction to get at readers' "personal remindings," with readers marking a text and coming back to this later. In this study, this procedure was used for several reasons: 1) to check whether readers have actually read the instruction and text, 2) to find out which sentences led to emotions and to thoughts – an extra way to explore the potential effects of foregrounding, 3) to see which kinds of thoughts and feelings readers experience.

The general procedure of this foregrounding study, then, was similar to the genre study described in Chapter 6. In contrast to that study, however, no fiction-instruction was used, participants read only one text, participants either filled out statements about empathic understanding before or after reading, and they were encouraged to read this text more carefully through the qualitative component.

7.2.3. Materials/Manipulation

A chapter from Anna Enquist's acclaimed novel *Counterpoint*, 2010 – orig. *Contrapunt*, 2008 was manipulated to arrive at three text versions containing different levels of foregrounding. This particular Dutch literary text about losing a child was chosen as it contained a high level of semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding, without becoming difficult to read. In addition, it had already been used in the genre study.

Table II.8 shows some of the textual manipulations. To increase validity, the manipulations were discussed with three associate professors in Modern Languages/Literary Studies, and adapted according to their suggestions. This type of manipulation is a complex and delicate process, as it is difficult to change just one foregrounded feature without changing other textual elements as well. For example, the original text by Enquist included multiple repetitions of the phrase "The cold child." ["Het koude kind."], which is semantic foregrounding ("cold" signifies "dead" here – it is a form of metonymy, as being cold is one aspect of being dead), phonetic foregrounding (alliteration), and grammatical foregrounding (an incomplete sentence). Replacing the word "cold" with "dead" simultaneously removed the semantic and the phonetic foregrounding for the version "without semantic foregrounding." However, overall, I kept phonetic foregrounding intact in the version without semantic foregrounding. You can see this in the first example in Table II.8: "juicy meadows" contains phonetic foregrounding ["sappige graslanden"] and has been left as it is for the version without semantic foregrounding, while "the child's back" (a metonym) has been

changed. In this sentence, one could debate whether "the woman" is not both grammatical and semantic foregrounding. Since it was unclear what type of semantic foregrounding this would be, I chose to treat the repetition of "the woman" within the text as grammatical foregrounding, thus only changing it for the version "without foregrounding."

The final versions hardly differed in length (original: 1606; without semantic foregrounding: 1545; without foregrounding: 1611). These versions were pretested among ten people who had a Master's degree in either Literary Studies, Media Studies, or Dutch Language and Literature, without telling them there were different versions. The participants in the pretest filled out the regular questionnaire, with an added question whether they noticed anything strange about the text they had read. They did not notice anything strange or annoying. In the actual study, participants in each condition scored equally high on an item measuring the "interestingness" of the text.

Note that while the level of foregrounding (i.e., "literariness") was manipulated, even the version without any foregrounding can still be considered literary in other respects, for example in the original way the text deals with the theme of loss: evoking the lost daughter through playing a musical piece that she used to love and reflecting on how nature is untouched by the wreckage of grief. This implies that what is measured in this study is not the effect of literariness as a dichotomous variable, but the effect of the degree of literariness.

Table II.8.

Examples of Manipulations in Enquist's Counterpoint *(2010)*

Original	Without Semantic Foregrounding	Without Foregrounding
"In the middle of those juicy meadows the woman had seen the child's back for the last time." ["*Midden tussen die sappige graslanden had de vrouw voor het laatst de rug van het kind gezien.*"]	"In the middle of those juicy meadows the woman had seen her child for the last time." ["*Midden tussen die sappige graslanden had de vrouw haar kind voor het laatst gezien.*"]	"In the middle of those lush meadows the woman had seen her child for the last time." ["*Midden tussen die bloeiende graslanden had zij haar kind voor het laatst gezien.*"]
"The cold child." ["*Het koude kind.*"]	"The dead child." ["*Het dode kind.*"]	"…, because of her dead child." [*"…, vanwege haar dode kind.*"]
"The farewell. Carrying the body to the burial. Seeing it off. Carrying. Setting up the place where she would be from now on. Taking possession of the cemetery as an outside living room." ["*Het afscheid.* *Het uitdragen. Het wegbrengen. Het dragen. Het vestigen van de plaats waar zij voortaan zou zijn.* *Het in bezit nemen van de begraafplaats als uitpandige huiskamer.*"]	"The farewell. Carrying the body to the burial. Seeing it off. Carrying. Setting up the place where she would be from now. Staying at the cemetery constantly." ["*Het afscheid.* *Het uitdragen. Het wegbrengen. Het dragen. Het vestigen van de plaats waar zij voortaan zou zijn.* *Het voortdurend op de begraafplaats verblijven.*"]	"And then the farewell, with the carrying of the body and seeing it off. They took her daughter to the place where she would be buried. She would go to that cemetery very frequently." ["*En dan het afscheid, met het uitdragen en het wegbrengen. Ze brachten haar dochter naar de plaats waar ze begraven werd. Zij kwam heel vaak op die begraafplaats.*"]

Note: The English translation ("original") is a combination of the official translation by J. K. Ringold (Enquist, 2010), and my own translation, as a few instances of foregrounding got lost in translation.

7.2.4. Measures

Most of the measures used in the current study were the same as in the genre study described in Chapter 6. I will therefore keep descriptions brief, unless the measures differed (as was the case for, most significantly, trait empathy). The

scales which were used in this study can be found in Appendix C: Scales for Studies Part II.

Dependent variables.

Affective responses. Participants filled out items about diverse *narrative feelings* and *aesthetic feelings* on 7-point scales. These items were the same as in Chapter 6, and the same constructs were used: *absorption*, *sympathy/empathy*, *identification*, *empathic distress*, *aesthetic attractiveness*, and *perceived foregrounding*. In addition, participants filled out one item about their *general emotional response* to the text, indicating on a 10-point scale to what extent the text had evoked emotions. The specific items, including the alpha values per construct, can be found in Appendix C: Scales for Studies Part II. In the current study, all constructs about affective responses had high internal consistency, with alphas ranging from .80 to .91. Apart from being used as dependent variables, the affective responses were also used as independent variables, to look into the effect of people's subjective reading experience on empathic and reflective reactions.

Empathic reactions. Empathic reactions were measured in two different ways – similar as to the genre study: with an attitudinal scale (*Empathic understanding*) and a behavioral measure (*Prosocial behavior*). To measure *empathic understanding*, i.e., showing a felt understanding of what people in a similar situation as the character go through, participants answered, either before or after reading (see Procedure), to what extent they were in agreement with five statements on people who are grieving (7-point scale). The statements were the same as those in Chapter 6, but only the statements about grief were used. In the current study, the internal consistency was $\alpha = .60$, which is low, but not unacceptable, especially given the fact that the scale encapsulates different aspects of empathic understanding (George & Mallery, 2003). In addition, as in the genre study, participants were asked whether they wanted to donate (a part of) the money they received for participation to the Foundation for Parents of a

Deceased Child. For analysis, *prosocial behavior* was operationalized as a dichotomous variable: donating yes/no.

    Reflection*.* Reflection was measured through the same single item as in the genre study. After reading, respondents answered the item "The text triggered me to think" on a 7-point scale. Apart from this quantitative measure of reflection, a qualitative measure asked participants to write about the thoughts or memories that were evoked. I coded the responses to the open questions about emotions/feelings and about thoughts/memories, in a similar procedure as the one described in Chapter 6. Participants' responses were separated from the original data file, only recognizable by the respondent's number, so I could not know which response belonged to which experimental condition (original, without semantic foregrounding or without foregrounding). While participants' responses were relatively short and most coding could thus be done within a Word-file, in a second step, MaxQDA was used to keep track of the different codes, and to explore the frequencies of these codes and of the sentences that participants underlined. Just as for the genre study, I coded all distinguishable thoughts separately. Different from the genre study, this commonly led to multiple codes per participant response, as the responses to these open questions were slightly more complex than those to the question about thinking back posed in Chapter 6.

    To validate the attributed codes, I discussed them with an associate professor of Modern Languages, who used my preliminary codebook to code responses of 40% of the participants (randomly selected). In the first stage, this coding process was "blind," meaning that the second coder did not know which codes I had given to which responses. Subsequently, codes and categories were discussed in a collaborative effort to agree on participants' responses and establish the final codebook (see Table II.10). To aid quantitative analyses of the qualitative data, frequencies of codes were established and imported into SPSS, with each participant either scoring a 0 (not indicated) or 1 (indicated once or more) per code.

Independent variables. The independent variables consisted of the personal factors trait empathy, exposure to literature, and personal experience with the subject matter. Apart from these constructs, which are explained below, two other subject variables were taken into account, namely gender and whether one was a student or a parent. Since the text was specifically about a mother losing her daughter and the current sample included mothers, gender and parenthood were deemed potentially relevant.[43] A set of ANOVAs and Chi-square analyses confirmed that the participants in the three conditions did not differ significantly on the subject variables, with one p-value of .26 (*personal experience/impact*) and the others ranging between .73 and .95. For each of the main three personal factors, I report whether students and parents differed on these variables, as an indication of the characteristics of these groups.

Trait empathy (IRI). Trait empathy was measured using two subscales of Davis's (1980, 1983) empathy scale, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), namely empathic concern and perspective-taking. These scales measure, respectively, affective or "warm" empathy ("feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern" – Davis, 1980, p. 12), and cognitive or "cold" empathy ("an ability or proclivity to shift perspectives" – Davis, 1980, p. 11). Together, these subscales give a good idea of someone's dispositional empathy. Davis's scale has been tested as producing valid and reliable results (Davis, 1980, 1983). Since Davis's scale differentiates between cognitive and emotional empathy, and thus allows me to see which of these types of empathy has a stronger relation with one's lifetime exposure to literature, it was used in this study instead of the TEQ. I used the original items of the IRI, in a validated Dutch translation (De Corte et al., 2007). To fit with the other measures, respondents answered on a 7-point Likert scale of agreement, instead of a 5-point scale as Davis (1980) uses. Both

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[43] Note that in the study in Chapter 6, gender was not taken into account, in order to limit the amount of independent variables in the AMOS-models and given that gender effects are not of specific interest to this dissertation.

subscales showed sufficient internal consistency in this study (empathic concern: α = .75; 7 items; perspective-taking: α = .74; 7 items), as did the combined total scale (α = .74). Parents and students did not differ on their scores on the IRI, ($M_{students}$ = 70.19, $SD_{students}$ = 9.07, $M_{parents}$ = 69.76, $SD_{parents}$ = 8.18), $t(140)$ = .28, p = .783, Cohen's d = .05.

Exposure to literature (ART – adapted). The current study applied the same adapted version of the Author Recognition Test (ART) that was used in the genre study (see Mar et al., 2006; Stanovich & West, 1989; West et al., 1993). The range of the ART in the current study was 30 (M= 10.93, SD= 6.51). The foils were effective: no one chose more than 3 foils. Foils were subtracted from the overall ART scores of these participants. As could be expected of a measure of lifetime exposure to literature, parents scored higher than students ($M_{students}$ = 9.69, $SD_{students}$ = 5.61, $M_{parents}$ = 13.14, $SD_{parents}$ = 7.43), $t(140)$ = -3.12, p = .002, Cohen's d = .52.

Personal experience. After a selection question whether one had ever lost a beloved, to which 111 of the 142 participants answered "yes," personal experience with grief was measured by two questions: "How hard has this loss been for you?" and "To what extent did you find it difficult to deal with the loss?" (7-point scale). These two questions come from the "impact-scale" of the Dutch version of the Inventory of Traumatic Grief (ITG) (Boelen, Van den Bout, De Keijser, & Hoijtink, 2003). The two items were combined into one scale, "Personal experience/Impact" (α = .88). Parents scored higher on this scale than students ($M_{students}$ = 6.66, $SD_{students}$ = 4.83, $M_{parents}$ = 9.20, $SD_{parents}$ = 4.35), $t(140)$ = -3.11, p = .002, Cohen's d = .58.

7.3. Results Foregrounding Study

The current study had less participants than the study in Chapter 6, particularly when split out according to foregrounding-condition. Therefore, no AMOS-models are presented, as such complex models quickly become untrustworthy with lower sample sizes (e.g., Kline, 2015).[44] Instead, General Linear Models and logistic regression analyses were executed when multiple variables needed to be taken into account. Section 7.3.1 presents the effects of foregrounding on affective responses during reading (research question 1). Section 7.3.2 discusses the effects of foregrounding on empathic reactions, i.e. prosocial behavior and empathic understanding (research question 2). The effects of foregrounding on reflection are explored in section 7.3.3 (research question 3). For each outcome variable, I first discuss the main effects of condition, followed by the effects of personal variables (research question 4) and – logically only for empathic reactions and reflection – the effects of affective responses (research question 5). The findings are supplemented by information from the qualitative data for the affective responses and for reflection. Appendix E shows the correlations for all affective responses.

7.3.1. Effects of Foregrounding on Affective Responses

Effects of foregrounding condition on affective responses. A series of separate ANOVAs, including post-hoc tests (Fisher's LSD), was conducted to determine the general effect of the level of foregrounding on the affective responses. The first part of Table II.9 shows the effects of foregrounding on all affective responses.

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[44] To quote Kline (2015): "There is no shame in using a simpler type of statistical technique in a smaller sample" (p. 459). Just in order to compare results, I did run an AMOS-analysis for "reflection," with similar results as the General Linear Model presented below: effects of empathic distress and sympathy/empathy were found.

As can be seen in Table II.9, the original condition evoked significantly more *perceived foregrounding* than the other two conditions, thus confirming effective manipulation of foregrounding. The original version also triggered a significantly stronger *general emotional response* and higher *empathic distress* than the version without semantic foregrounding. It is noteworthy here that the version without foregrounding did not differ significantly from the original version or the version without semantic foregrounding in these respects.

Table II.9.
ANOVA Mean Differences of Affective Responses, Empathic Understanding, and Reflection per Foregrounding Condition (Incl. Post-Hoc Test Significances)

	Original	Without Semantic Foregrounding	Without Foregrounding			
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*F*	η^2	*p*
Affective responses						
Emotional (general)	6.10 (2.17) n = 49	5.11* (2.15) n = 40	5.61 (1.96) n = 53	2.48	.03	.087
Empathic Distress	14.47 (5.62) n = 49	11.88* (5.04) n = 40	13.55 (4.94) n = 53	2.76	.04	.067
Sympathy/Empathy	30.84 (6.73) n = 49	28.53 (7.28) n = 40	28.79 (6.64) n = 53	1.61	.02	.203
Identification	11.10 (4.78) n = 49	10.40 (4.58) n = 40	10.64 (3.96) n = 53	.29	.004	.746
Absorption	21.78 (7.87) n = 49	19.28 (7.78) n = 40	20.74 (6.30) n = 53	1.30	.02	.277
Aesthetic Attractiveness	17.39 (6.01) n = 49	15.25 (4.75) n = 40	15.83 (4.94) n = 53	2.01	.03	.137
*Perceived Foregrounding***	11.27 (4.19) n = 49	9.30* (3.43) n = 40	9.19** (3.35) n = 53	4.89	.07	.009
Empathic understanding						
*After reading**	26.64 (4.01) n = 25	25.00 (5.37) n = 20	23.15** (4.14) n = 26	3.88	.10	.025
Before reading	23.67 (4.31) n = 24	21.70 (4.89) n = 20	24.26 (4.76) n = 27	1.79	.05	.175
Reflection						
Reflection	4.49 (1.69) n = 49	4.03 (1.63) n = 40	4.21 (1.70) n = 53	.88	.01	.417

*. $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed): indicates significant mean difference from the original condition, based on Fisher's LSD post-hoc tests. The exact *p*-values in the table are the *p*-values of the F-test.

Effects of personal factors on affective responses. These results suggest foregrounding impacts affective responses. However, does this still hold when taking personal factors into account, and what is their influence (research question 4)? A series of General Linear Models to estimate main effects of the personal variables was conducted, with as fixed factors the nominal variables condition (original, without semantic foregrounding, without foregrounding), gender (male/female), and student/parent, and as covariates the continuous variables trait empathy (IRI), exposure to literature (ART), and personal experience/impact. With these subject variables in the models, the experimental effects of foregrounding condition on perceived foregrounding, general emotional response and empathic distress were still significant ($p < .05$).[45]

  With regard to the personal factors, significant effects were found for: 1) *gender*, with women experiencing more sympathy/empathy for the character ($F(1, 134) = 7.53$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .05$), more identification ($F(1, 134) = 4.61$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .03$), more absorption ($F(1, 134) = 4.29$, $p = .040$, $\eta^2 = .03$), and more aesthetic attractiveness ($F(1, 134) = 5.58$, $p =. 020$, $\eta^2 = .04$); 2) *student/parent*, with students experiencing more empathic distress ($F(1, 134) = 13.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$) and finding the text generally more emotional ($F(1, 134) = 4.84$, $p = .030$, $\eta^2 = .04$); 3) *trait empathy*, with those scoring higher on this personal factor experiencing more sympathy/empathy with the character ($F(1, 134) = 4.96$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = .04$), and more identification ($F(1, 134) = 3.92$, $p = .050$, $\eta^2 = .03$). While the effects of gender and trait empathy are in line with what one would expect, the effects of being a student appear counterintuitive. They could be explained, however, through the Freudian concept of "resistance," as will be discussed in the Discussion section.

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[45] Note that in Koopman (2016), I report that these effects become non-significant when I included all these subject variables in a GLM. For that article, this was the case because I executed models with all possible interaction effects ("full factorial" in SPSS), which led to too low statistical power to detect significant differences. Given the modest sample size and the aims of the article, just determining the main effects of the subject variables was – in hindsight – deemed more appropriate.

Effects on affective responses: qualitative data. As indicated in the Methods section, all participants answered two open questions about emotions/feelings and thoughts/memories. The analysis of these responses sheds further light on which precise emotions people experienced and whether this differed per condition. As the overview of codes in Table II.10 shows, there was a high prevalence of emotional responses. The majority of readers experienced emotions in reaction to this short excerpt, it was only a minority of 15.5% that reported no emotions and/or feeling distanced in some way. Strikingly, this group of 22 distanced people included no less than 12 parents (six fathers and six mothers). A Chi-Square analysis confirmed that parents were significantly overrepresented within those who felt distanced (χ^2(1, N = 142) = 3.93, p = .048, φ = .17). These participants may have experienced psychological resistance against the subject matter.

The most frequently experienced emotions were "painful" ones like sadness and powerlessness (n = 61). However, there were also readers experiencing ambivalent feelings: a combination of beauty and pain, comfort and loss ("bittersweet" and "touching," n = 15), and even readers responding with pleasant emotions (n = 24), like feelings of hope or strength. Many readers reported feelings of identification, recognizing something in the character and/or her actions (n = 53), and even more readers reported some form of sympathy and/or empathy, feeling for and/or with the character (n = 58).

While it was not always clear whether reports of feelings like sadness were identificatory (about one's own sadness) or empathic (about the sadness of the character and/or others in the character's situation), in other cases it was possible to distinguish between empathic responses and identificatory responses. The "identificatory" readers concentrated on their own personal losses and the feelings those losses evoked; reading about the character, for them, seemed to be like reading about themselves. Other readers stayed much more with the response of the character, keeping the distinction between themselves and the character. Some of these readers imagined that they were

experiencing the feelings of the character, which qualifies as a fully empathic response. This response often resembled the quantitative variable "empathic understanding," in the sense that readers showed an emotionally experienced understanding of those grieving the loss of a child. A clear example of this was the following response:

> This passage very clearly shows the bifurcation which happens when someone feels depressed or is simply lost. This gave me a feeling of pity and sadness. Even though I can't really remember such a feeling, I am able to imagine it clearly and empathize with [*meeleven met*] the person who does experience it. It caused a strong compassionate effect in me and evoked the same feeling in my fantasy as what happened with her [the character] in reality.

This reader explicitly talks about experiencing similar feelings as the character, even though she cannot remember having felt this specific way herself. Such "empathic understanding" responses, combining imagining what the character felt, feeling compassion and understanding, were reported by 39 readers. This is relevant to note, to show what even a short literary narrative text can accomplish.

Table II.10.
Qualitative Coding Scheme Responses Open Questions Foregrounding Study

Categories	Main codes	Description	Example	Frq.
RESONANCE LOSS	*Personal Loss*	Comments about a loss one experienced oneself (in itself this response is neither "affective" nor "reflective," depends on what else one says about it).	"It made me think of the death of someone who was very dear to me (a parent) and who will not get to see me growing up."	58
	Loss of Someone Else	Comments about a loss someone else has experienced.	"A good friend of mine has lost her mother at a very young age…"	18
	Media	Comments that one was reminded of something one knows from the media; mediatized experience.	"Not a very personal memory per se, but more the image that you get with it: so many people putting down flowers. Like you always see on television …"	6

NARRATIVE FEELINGS	Identification - General - Missing - Anxiety Dying	Comments about recognizing oneself in the character: I do/have that too. Two specific emotions are clearly identificatory, triggered by the implicit thought "this character is (like) me": missing someone (like the character misses her daughter); fear of losing a loved one and/or dying oneself.	- -	"I also think a lot about the past and try to forget the present now and then. Here I also identified with the character." (*General*)	53 (31) (21) (11)
	Empathy/ Sympathy - Absorption - Sympathy/ pity - Empathic Under-standing	Comments about feeling for/with the character. For the subcode "sympathy/pity" it is only feeling for the character, in the case of "empathic understanding" there is feeling with as well as understanding (imagining what it is like), in the case of "absorption," one feels directly affected by the narrative world, as if one were in it.	- -	"I could almost touch the dead girl, and she feels cold" (*Absorption*) "I can vividly imagine that you do not want to go on without the one you love, a combination of knowing rationally that you have to go on but missing so intensely that you can't go on, or only on automatic pilot." (*Empathic understanding*)	58 (14) (14) (39)
	Painful - Sadness - Hopeless - Anger/ despair	Comments about emotions we experience as painful in real life. It is generally unclear whether these emotions are empathic or identificatory (there can be a mixture of both). The subcode "hopeless" includes feelings of feeling lost, alone, powerless.	- -	"… powerlessness, not being able to deal with a situation because it is outside of your own control." (*Hopeless*) "Anger and frustration because our friend was cruelly denied the possibility to stay with her family." (*Anger/despair*)	61 (46) (20) (8)
	Ambivalent - Touching - Bittersweet	Comments expressing an ambivalent emotional response, sorrow combined with more hopeful feelings, or pain combined with beauty.	- -	"moving action, small with a lot of sorrow" (*Touching*) "a beautiful ending, happy but also sad" (*Bittersweet*)	15 (5) (10)
	Pleasant - Meaningful positive	Comments about pleasant emotions. These emotions can either possess a sense of depth	-	"a feeling of strength, no one takes this moment away from me,	24 (18) (7)

	- *Pleasant simple*	("meaningful positive"), like strength or admiration, or be uncomplicatedly "light" ("pleasant simple").	being one with. But also a euphoric feeling." (*Meaningful positive*) - "The beauty of nature made me happy." (*Pleasant simple*)	
AESTHETIC FEELINGS	*Style – negative*	Negative comments about the style. Often co-occurring with "Distance," as this can be the explanation why one did not have thoughts/feelings.	"It's sad, but true: I am a seasoned literature lover and all my Gs [thoughts] are only about one thing: how bad the writing is!"	6
	Style – positive - *Appreciation articulation* - *Evocative metaphor* - *Directness*	Positive comments about the style. This can be explicit, by saying something is "beautifully" phrased ("appreciation articulation"), or implicitly by engaging with a particular image/detail in the text ("evocative metaphor").	- "I think this is beautifully put…" (*Appreciation articulation*) - "The stump of a pencil signifies how desperate the mother is, she has sunk so deep that even her pencil cannot be saved anymore." (*Evocative metaphor*)	19 (7) (12) (3)
	Defamiliarization	Only explicitly reported by one person, but included here because it was a perfect expression of being defamiliarized.	"Because the text suddenly shifts to the present tense, the language aspect is brought to the foreground. I experience a strong disruption and briefly crash with the text."	1
DISTANCE	*No emotions*	Comments about not having any emotions (or simply reporting no emotions).	"The text which stood there [sic] should evoke emotion, but I did not really feel it. Is probably also due to my mood at this moment."	10
	No thoughts	Comments about not having any thoughts (or simply reporting no thoughts).	"I did not place any Gs [thoughts] because the story reminded me in no way of situations in my own life."	7
	Incomprehension protagonist	Comments about not being able to sympathize/ empathize, not understanding the protagonist.	"I was annoyed by the fact that the woman smoked. That made it impossible for me to identify with her or to let the story sweep me away."	8

THOUGHTS	Deeper reflection - Circle of life	Comments signifying deeper reflection: on the themes addressed in the text, insights which go beyond the personal, say something about life/the human condition. A recurring theme participants commented on is that life goes on after a loss ("circle of life")	- "No one can determine for another person how he should mourn. Everyone mourns in the way that suits him/her. Everyone determines their own path in that, and there is no right or wrong." - "This sentence mainly evoked the thought how 'true' is it that, if you experience something terrible, the rest of the world simply continues." (*Circle of life*)	43 (14)
	Personal reflection	Reflection limited to the person him/herself. These remarks are not as generally applicable as those under "Deeper reflection," but they are more complex than those under "Minor thoughts." Remarks often express an inner battle.	"I also really want to write down what I feel in order to get rid of it, but it indeed often doesn't translate well to paper."	28
	Minor thoughts	Remarks about thoughts and/or memories about events which appear light. These thoughts do not express loss; they stay at the everyday level.	"It reminded me of the endless piano lessons and practice sessions I had when I was little."	20

Note: Frequencies indicate how many participants reported a certain code. It was possible for participants to report more than one subcode within a main code (e.g., reporting both absorption and sympathy/pity), but in those cases they only counted once for the entire category (e.g., the person reporting both absorption and sympathy/pity only counted once for the main code "Empathy/sympathy"), so that calculations could be made with participants as units of analysis.

But did the emotions that readers reported in the open question differ per foregrounding condition? Generally, results do not suggest an important role for foregrounding, as "pleasant emotions" and "painful emotions" did not differ significantly per condition, and neither did "identification," "empathy/ sympathy" or "distance."

However, "ambivalent" emotions occurred significantly less often for the version without foregrounding (only 1 out of 53 participants, compared to 5 out of 40 for the version without semantic foregrounding, and 9 out of 49 for the original version), $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 7.54$, $p = .023$, Cramer's $V = .23$. Thus, these complex emotions, combining beauty and pain, seem to be aided by foregrounding. This is exemplified by one participant describing her ambivalent feelings in a poetic way, talking not only about "a sad beauty" but also about "a gray joy" [*een grijze blijdschap*].

"Aesthetic" feelings also differed, with no one making positive comments about the style in the condition without semantic foregrounding, while 10 out of 53 did in the without foregrounding condition, and 9 out of 49 did in the original condition, $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 8.61$, $p = .014$, Cramer's $V = .25$. While it may seem odd that the version without foregrounding did not differ in this respect from the original condition, this can be explained by people appreciating the "directness" of the version without foregrounding. This was explicitly reported by three participants. Negative comments about the style did not differ per condition.

Finally, within the qualitative data, it was explored which sentences were underlined as evoking emotions and whether this differed per condition. The upper part of Table II.11 shows the sentences which were underlined most often for "Emotions" and how often this was done in each condition. It is noticeable that of these four sentences which were underlined nine or more times, three were underlined most often in the original condition, and the sentence that was not underlined more often was basically the same for all conditions. While the group sizes are small, the difference for the sentence about "the cold/dead child" was statistically significant, $\chi(2, N = 142) = 7.14$, $p = .028$. Cramer's $V = .22$. This, in combination with the higher scores on the quantitative items empathic distress and general emotional response, suggests that foregrounding can play a role in evoking emotions.

Table II.11.

Sentences Underlined Most Often as Evoking Emotions and Thoughts, with Percentage of Readers in Each Condition Underlining This Sentence

Underlined sentence – content	Original	Without Semantic Foregrounding	Without Foregrounding	Total frq.
	(*N* = 49)	(*N* = 40)	(*N* = 53)	
Emotions				
Playing for the child	32.7% (n = 16)	22.5% (n = 9)	17.0% (n = 9)	34
	"Within this emptiness is everything. Now she plays, now and always the woman plays the aria for her daughter."	"Within that double octave she tries to put all her emotions. Now she plays, now and always the woman plays the aria for her daughter."	"Within that double octave she would try to put all her emotions. She was playing the aria for her daughter and that's what she would like to do forever."	
Never seeing the child pregnant	10.2% (*n* = 5)	10.0% (*n* = 4)	15.1% (*n* = 8)	17
	"Never would she see the daughter pregnant, as mother, with the first gray hairs."	"Never would she see the daughter pregnant, as mother, with the first gray hairs."	"Never would she see her daughter pregnant, as mother, with the first gray hairs."	
The cold/dead child	20.4% (n = 10)	10.0% (n = 4)	3.8% (n = 2)	16
	"The cold child."	"The dead child."	"…, because of her dead child"	
Young people grieving	10.2% (*n* = 5)	5.0% (*n* = 2)	3.8% (*n* = 2)	9
	"Young people, friends, bent under a sorrow that slowed them down for a considerable time and made them stand still."	"Young people, friends, were incredibly sad, almost did not get around to doing anything anymore."	"Young people, friends, were incredibly sad, almost did not get around to doing anything anymore."	
Thoughts				
Essence of life is replacement	6.1% (*n* = 3)	12.5% (*n* = 5)	11.3% (*n* = 6)	14
	"It took years before she understood that that was exactly the essence of life: change, replacement of one thing by the other."	"It took years before she understood that that was exactly the essence of life: change, replacement of one thing by the other."	"It took years before she understood that that was exactly the essence of life: replacement of one thing by the other."	
The farewell – but not letting go	8.2% (*n* = 4)	7.5% (*n* = 3)	7.5% (*n* = 4)	11
	"The farewell. Carrying the body to the burial. Seeing it off. Carrying. Setting up the place where she would be from now on.	"The farewell. Carrying the body to the burial. Seeing it off. Carrying. Setting up the place where she would be from now. Staying at the cemetery constantly."	"And then the farewell, with the carrying of the body and seeing it off. They took her daughter to the place where she would be buried. She would go to that cemetery very frequently."	

	Taking possession of the cemetery as an outside living room."			
Obsessive studying pays off	6.1% ($n = 3$)	7.5% ($n = 3$)	7.5% ($n = 4$)	10
	Her obsessive practicing had made it possible for her to play the variations better than ever before, better than when she was healthy and whole.	"Her obsessive practicing had made it possible for her to play the variations better than ever before, better than when she was healthy and her daughter still alive."	"Her obsessive practicing had made it possible for her to play the variations better than ever before, better than when she was healthy and her daughter still alive."	
Music inadequate to express grief	4.1% ($n = 2$)	12.5% ($n = 5$)	5.7% ($n = 3$)	9
	"She recognized that the lack of denotational force and narrative structure of music was a barrier to expressing her overpowering desire to describe the child. She was forced to have recourse to language."	"She recognized that the lack of denotational force and narrative structure of music made it difficult to express her overpowering desire to describe the child. She had to use language after all."	"She found out that using music made it difficult to express her huge desire to describe her child, because music has no narrative structure. She had to use language after all."	
Playing for the child	6.1% ($n = 3$)	12.5% ($n = 5$)	1.9% ($n = 1$)	9

Note: The English translation of the original version is the official translation by J. K. Ringold (Enquist, 2010), the translations for the versions without semantic foregrounding and without foregrounding are my own.

7.3.2. Effects of Foregrounding on Empathic Reactions

Effects of foregrounding condition on empathic understanding. Since statements answered before one started to read cannot have been influenced by which foregrounding condition one read, the scores on empathic understanding *before reading* should not differ between groups. As Table II.9 shows, there was indeed no difference between the groups before reading. However, in line with claims by Nussbaum and others, reading did appear to influence empathic understanding: the overall average score on empathic understanding *after* reading was 24.90 (*SD* = 4.65), while the overall average score on empathic understanding *before* reading was 23.34 (*SD* = 4.76), t(140) = -1.98, p = .050, Cohen's *d* = .33.

Whether this effect occurred depended, as expected, on the level of foregrounding. Participants reading the version without foregrounding scored below average after reading (M = 23.15, SD = 4.14), while those reading the other versions scored above average (see the second part of Table II.9). ANOVAs, conducted to compare the means of empathic understanding *after* reading between the three conditions, revealed that the level of foregrounding had a main effect on empathic understanding after reading (Table II.9). Post-hoc analyses indicated that the significant difference lay between the original condition and the version without foregrounding (Fisher's LSD): the original version evoked more empathic understanding.

Effects of personal factors on empathic understanding. Foregrounding thus appears to play a role in increasing our understanding for people in similar painful situations as characters. But is this effect still present when controlling for subject variables? A General Linear Model was conducted to answer this question, with as fixed factors again condition, gender, and student/parent, and as covariates trait empathy (IRI), exposure to literature (ART), and personal experience/impact. The dependent variable was empathic understanding after reading; only the participants who answered the statements *after* reading were taken into consideration (n = 71).

After controlling for all the above-mentioned subject variables, including interaction effects, foregrounding still had a significant effect, $F(2, 56) = 3.47$, $p = .038$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Post-hoc tests showed the significant difference was (still) between the original and the without foregrounding condition (p = .012). None of the other variables had a significant effect on empathic understanding after reading.[46] We can therefore conclude that foregrounding – if manipulated on

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[46] For the respondents who answered the statements before reading, in the same General Linear Model (without "condition" as a fixed factor, since these participants had not read anything yet when answering the statements), only trait empathy had a significant effect $F(1, 64) = 12.59$, p = .001, η^2 = .16. To compare, the effect size of trait empathy in the GLM for those after reading was $\eta^2 = .013$.

enough levels, not just imagery – has a modest but significant and robust effect on empathic understanding.

Effects of affective responses on empathic understanding. How about the subjective experience of the text – the narrative and aesthetic feelings? Did they matter for one's empathic understanding (research question 5)? A General Linear Model (for just those participants who filled out the empathic statements after reading) with the narrative and aesthetic feelings did not lead to significant results for any of these affective responses. This was against expectation – possible explanations are discussed in the Discussion section.

Effects of foregrounding condition on prosocial behavior. In total, 44 of the participants donated: 17 (34.7%) in the original condition, 11 (27.5%) in the condition without semantic foregrounding and 16 (31.4%) in the condition without foregrounding. This difference was not significant, χ^2(2, N = 140) = .53, p = .77, Cramer's V = .06. There was thus no evidence for an effect of foregrounding on prosocial behavior.

Effects of personal factors on prosocial behavior. Did any of the subject variables have an effect on donating? A logistic regression analysis with donating as the outcome variable and gender, student/parent, education level (dichotomous high/low), trait empathy, exposure to literature and personal experience as potential predictors was conducted. This model yielded a Nagelkerke R^2 of .20, χ^2(6, N = 142) = 20.98, p < .002. Exposure to literature was the only significant predictor of donating, with an odds ratio of 1.10 (p = .006). The mean ART score of those who donated was 13.95 (SD = 7.25), while the mean of those who did not donate was 9.57 (SD = 5.68).

Effects of affective responses on prosocial behavior. Adding narrative and aesthetic feelings in the logistic regression analysis did not produce any additional significant effects on donating.

7.3.3. Effects of Foregrounding on Reflection

Effects of foregrounding condition on reflection. In contrast to empathic understanding, foregrounding had no significant effect on reflection (item "the text triggered me to think"), as the third part of Table II.7 shows. The section on the qualitative data explores this finding further.

Effects of personal factors on reflection. To explore the effects of the personal factors, a General Linear Model was conducted that comprised the subject variables as well as the condition variable. Results indicated a positive effect of *trait empathy* on the reflection item, $F(1, 127) = 3.92$, $p = .050$, $\eta^2 = .03$, and an effect of *student/parent*, $F(1, 127) = 8.22$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .06$, with students scoring higher ($M_{students} = 4.51$, $SD = .23$; $M_{parents} = 3.53$, $SD = .25$). This is in line with the more emotional experience of students.

Effects of affective responses on reflection. To investigate the effects of the narrative and aesthetic feelings on reflection, the six affective responses constructs were added in the General Linear Model with the reflection item as outcome variable. Both *empathic distress* ($F(1, 126) = 4.37$, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .03$) and *sympathy/empathy* ($F(1, 126) = 9.81$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .07$) had a significant effect on reflection. The effects of trait empathy and student/parent were no longer significant when taking these affective responses into account.

Effects of foregrounding on reflection: qualitative data. The analysis of the open questions helps us to see what people thought about and whether this differed per condition. As the overview of codes (Table II.10) shows, reflective

responses could broadly be divided in three types: deeper reflection, personal reflection, and minor thoughts. "Deeper reflection" (n = 43), signified reporting insights going beyond the purely personal, saying something about life/the human condition, in relation to the themes addressed in the text (loss, grief, death). "Personal reflection" (n = 28) was limited to the person him/herself. These remarks were not as generally applicable as those under "deeper reflection," but more complex than those under "minor thoughts." While diverse, these types of thoughts typically expressed an inner battle of the participant. "Minor thoughts" (n = 20) addressed events which appear light, cheerful or mundane. These thoughts did not relate to the theme of loss, nor did they seem to express any inner battles.

Neither type of reflection differed significantly per foregrounding condition. Deeper reflection was reported by 15 people in the original condition (30.6%), 11 in the condition without semantic foregrounding (27.5%) and by 17 in the condition without foregrounding (32%), χ^2(2, N = 142) = .23, p = .89, Cramer's V = .04. Personal reflection was reported by 9 people in the original condition (18.4%), 11 in the condition without semantic foregrounding (27.5%) and 8 in the condition without foregrounding (15.1%), χ^2(2, N = 142) = 2.30, p = .32, Cramer's V = .13. Minor thoughts were reported by 4 people in the original condition (8.2%), 9 in the condition without semantic foregrounding (22.5%) and 7 in the condition without foregrounding (13.2%), χ^2(2, N = 142) = 3.79, p = .15, Cramer's V = .16. Overall, it may be the case that the themes addressed in this text were more important to evoking reflection in the short run than foregrounding on the sentence level. This is supported by the fact that respondents often underlined similar sentences throughout the three conditions as evoking thoughts. This can be seen in Table II.11, which shows the sentences which were underlined most often. There were no differences between conditions for these sentences.

7.3.4. Other Results Foregrounding Study

Relation reflection and empathic understanding. Just as in the genre study in Chapter 6, reflection and empathic understanding (for those 71 participants who answered the statements after reading) were significantly and positively related: $r = .28$ ($p = .019$).

Relation exposure to literature and trait empathy. Unlike the results of the genre study, there was a significant correlation between one's score on the ART and one's sumscore on trait empathy in this study ($r = .19$, $p = .021$). This appeared to be due to the different measure of trait empathy, the IRI – namely, correlations differed for the two different subscales. The correlation between the ART and the subscale perspective-taking was significant ($r = .20$, $p = .020$), while the correlation between the ART and the "affective" subscale empathic concern was not ($r = .10$, $p = .219$). Since the genre study only used an empathic concern measure of trait empathy, this could explain the lack of a connection between the ART and trait empathy in Chapter 6. The correlation between the ART and perspective-taking in the current study remained significant when controlling for whether the participant was a student or a parent ($r = .19$, $p = .024$), and when controlling for whether the participant had received higher education or not ($r = .20$, $p = .020$).

7.4. Discussion Foregrounding Study

What can the current experiment tell us about the effects of foregrounding on affective, empathic and reflective responses? First of all, the clearest effect of foregrounding we saw was on the empathic statements after reading ("empathic understanding"). People who had read the original version of the text, containing a high level of semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding, also reported higher empathic understanding for other people experiencing grief than people

who had read the version without semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding. As there was no significant difference between the original version and the version without semantic foregrounding on empathic understanding, we can tentatively conclude that "literariness" needs to be quite high to cause detectable differences on this type of empathic response. Given the claims by scholars like Sontag and Nussbaum, this is an important finding: literariness could aid understanding of what others are going through.

But how does that work? A possible explanation for the effect of foregrounding on empathy is that striking textual features can make one engage more with the character and the narrative world (e.g., Mar & Oatley, 2008). Yet, in this study, there was little clear evidence for this. While there were significant results of the foregrounding manipulation on empathic distress and on a general emotional response, these affective responses themselves did not significantly affect empathic understanding. The qualitative analysis further showed that the high foregrounding version generally did not seem to evoke stronger painful or pleasurable emotions than the lower-foregrounding versions.

However, the high foregrounding version did seem to evoke more ambivalent emotions: people commenting both on the beauty or hope and on the pain or sorrow of a certain passage. This suggests that foregrounding can cause a more complex emotional experience. This emotional experience might be similar to the concept of "feeling moved," which has been described and investigated by Menninghaus et al. (2015) as a mixed emotional state, combining sadness and joy. Through such a subtle emotional effect, foregrounding might play a role in influencing empathic understanding. In combination with the emotional effect of the sentence about "the cold child," we can speculate that the various feelings that foregrounding can set in motion could be responsible for the effect on empathic understanding. Unfortunately, the current qualitative measurement could not be used to (dis)confirm this.

A third explanation for the effect of foregrounding on empathic understanding is that it generally requires more attention to the text (Shklovsky,

1965; Hakemulder, 2004; Van Peer, 1986), including longer reading times (Miall & Kuiken, 1994), which could potentially make one pause and reflect. Attention itself was not measured, so this explanation is in need of further research. One could argue that for this explanation we would also expect an effect of foregrounding on reflection, and no such effect was found. Yet, it needs to be stressed that reflection was only measured in the short run, as immediate thoughts.

This lack of an effect of foregrounding on reflection contrasted with studies by the Miall and Kuiken research group (e.g., Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Sikora, Kuiken, & Miall, 2010), but those studies did not use comparison conditions. When comparing between expository texts, non-literary narrative texts and literary narrative texts, the previous chapter also did not find an effect of literary texts on reflection as immediate thoughts. However, in the experiment in the previous chapter, people were more likely to think back to the text in both narrative conditions (compared to the expository condition) and the literary texts appeared to evoke deeper thoughts. It could be that texts high in literariness have a longer-lasting effect on reflection, possibly due to their striking passages being more memorable. This was not measured in the current study.

Confirming results of previous studies (e.g., Igartua, 2010; Koopman et al., 2012), including the one in the previous chapter, reflection seemed to be aided by affective responses. Not only did we see that empathic distress and sympathy/empathy were predictors of reflection (direct thoughts), we also found a consistent correlation between reflection (immediate thoughts, but to some extent also deferred thoughts in Chapter 6) and empathic understanding. The feelings that are aroused may thus also set thoughts in motion, as indifference is no longer an option. It may not always be the texts with the most intricate style that cause us to be most emotional, but the findings in the current chapter do suggest that an intricate style could help to move us and to lead to more complex emotional states.

Whether emotions are evoked, however, also depends on personal characteristics. In this study, there were effects of gender and trait empathy on the affective responses, which were not unexpected. The fact that students in this study were overall more emotional during reading than the parents was against expectation. This could be because these students might have had less emotional experiences so far than their parents (thus being impressed more easily). Yet, it could also be due to psychological resistance on the parents' side. "Resistance" is an originally Freudian concept, used to refer to patients' refusal to consciously engage with painful material (Freud, 1904; in Strachey, 1959). For the parents in this study, the subject matter (losing a child) was probably more confrontational and hurtful than for the students. Distancing oneself from the text is then a logical defense strategy, comparable to the more general "denial" defense, which has often been demonstrated in empirical studies (for an overview, see Baumeister, Dale & Sommer, 1998).[47]

On a critical note, the disadvantage of the current study is that it only used one literary text. The types of emotional responses that are evoked can of course differ per literary text. The current text allowed for ambivalent feelings that were "bittersweet"; literary texts dealing with other subjects could also evoke ambivalent feelings, but perhaps not with this exact combination of pain and beauty. It is also important to stress that the current study did not compare between literary and non-literary texts, but between versions of one literary texts differing in foregrounding, which can be seen as a measure of "literariness." The text without foregrounding, however, could still be deemed "literary" in the original way in which it dealt with the theme of loss. Furthermore, by manipulating foregrounding, the level of ambiguity of the text may

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[47] A nice example of resistance within empirical aesthetics is the study by Cupchik and Wroblewski-Raya (1998). Lonely participants in this study were more likely to focus on style than on subject matter when they were asked to identify with solitary figures depicted in paintings, thereby making the confrontation more manageable.

simultaneously have been affected, and ambiguity has been suggested as a potential cause of mentalizing (cf. Kidd & Castano, 2013).

How foregrounding can lead to empathic understanding, including which emotions can play a role in that process, is clearly a question in need of further empirical attention. To understand which mechanisms are involved, future manipulations could attempt to separate features associated with originality (e.g., novel metaphors) and features associated with ambiguity (e.g., gaps in the narration). A particularly interesting avenue for future research lies in the comparison between straightforward texts and texts high in literary devices. This is suggested by the lack of a difference in the current study between the version with the highest and the version with the lowest level of foregrounding on the general emotional item and on empathic distress. One reason that this emotional effect did not differ could be the more "direct" approach of the version without foregrounding. However, despite its emotional effect, the version without foregrounding could not evoke as much empathic understanding as the original version. At the same time, the original version appeared to evoke more complex, ambivalent feelings than the version without foregrounding (a "gray joy"). This suggests a pathway from literariness to subtle emotions to empathic understanding, which deserves further quantitative and qualitative investigation.

8. Conclusion Part II and Outlook

This second part of the dissertation looked into readers' experiences during and after reading about suffering. Following claims from prominent scholars like Sontag and Nussbaum about the power of literature, it was explored whether, how and when reading about suffering can evoke empathy and reflection, and what the contribution of literariness would be to such responses. To recall the question posed at the end of Part I: is a beautiful or original style crucial to evoking empathy and reflection?

The answer to the part of the question concerning empathy is not clear-cut. On the one hand, we saw that it did not matter for empathic understanding whether participants in the genre study read an expository, a non-literary narrative or a literary narrative text, even though the literary texts were considered more original. On the other hand, in the foregrounding study, we did see that the most original version of a literary text evoked most empathic understanding, an effect that remained in place when taking into account personal factors like trait empathy. These differences could be due to the fact that the two studies made different comparisons: perhaps the emotionality of the non-literary narrative text and the originality of the literary text were both paths to a similar amount of empathic understanding, thus cancelling out differences between the conditions in the first study. In the second study, with less variation between texts, the effect of originality on empathic understanding may have become observable.

An additional explanation for the fact that the second study did find an effect of the most "literary" text on empathic understanding, while the first study did not, is that the second study included an instruction which demanded more attention from readers to the text. In order for an intricate style to have an effect, such attention may be a necessary precondition. We can relate this hypothesis to

findings by Dixon, Bortolussi, Twilley, and Leung (1993) and by Hakemulder (2004) concerning the "rereading" of literary texts: in their studies, participants who read a literary text (with a high level of foregrounding) for the second time appreciated the text more, while this was not the case for simpler texts. Perhaps an instruction that makes readers concentrate more than they normally would has a similar effect as rereading, namely an increased sensitivity to the foregrounded features. Attention in the first study might have further been hampered by the fact that readers read from a computer screen (cf. Ackerman & Goldsmith, 2011; Mangen & Kuiken, 2014).

The effect on empathic understanding in the foregrounding study might be explained through the evocation of a more complex, mixed emotional experience during reading, possibly similar to the mixture of sadness and joy in the concept of "feeling moved" as studied by Menninghaus et al. (2015). Readers in whom such feelings have been evoked may be more open to the emotional states of others (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Whether this is really the (only) mechanism behind literariness leading to empathy remains to be further investigated. A more cognitive mechanism can also be theorized: by being less straightforward in conveying emotions and thoughts, highly literary texts could make readers work harder at making mental inferences about characters (e.g., Kotovych et al., 2011; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Literary reading then functions as a practice for imagining emotions and perspectives (cf. Nussbaum, 1995).

That reading may indeed train perspective-taking was suggested by the significant correlation between the perspective-taking scale of the trait empathy measure in the second study and one's lifetime exposure to literature. Lifetime exposure to literature also had an effect on empathic reactions in both studies: on empathic understanding (particularly after having read a literary text) in the first study, and on donating in the second study. The effect on donating might have become apparent in the second study because this study also included parents, with supposedly higher income than students. Income has been related to charitable giving (Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012). However, the effect on donating

could not only be explained by the inclusion of parents, since lifetime exposure to literature had a significant effect while controlling for whether one was a student or parent. Overall, these findings provide some support for the power of reading: even if short-term exposure to literature fails to have an effect, repeated exposure could train people's (cognitive) empathy.

Arguing against an effect of literariness on empathy, we saw in the genre study that those who were more surprised by the texts scored lower on empathic understanding. This seems in line with the theory that striking text features can distract from the content (Dijkstra et al., 1994; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994). Still, since perceived foregrounding correlated positively with the narrative feelings, this may not be the whole story (see Appendix E: Correlations Affective Responses Part II). We could suppose that for those with less previous exposure to literature – who were also the ones scoring higher on perceived foregrounding – the cognitive load becomes too high to experience the increased sensitivity towards others that is implied in empathic understanding. An instruction to help those with less reading experience concentrate might have helped here, as it may have done in the foregrounding study. In either case, both studies combined paint a positive picture of exposure to literature, whether in the short or the long run.

If we turn to the question whether style is important for *reflection*, again, the answer is yes and no. We clearly saw in the first study that participants were more likely to think back to the narrative texts than to the expository, but whether the narrative text was literary or not did not seem to make a difference. In addition, in both studies, there was a stronger indication that narrative feelings lead readers to reflect than aesthetic feelings (cf. Igartua, 2010; Koopman et al., 2012). However, aesthetic feelings did have a modest influence on direct thoughts in the first study. And, even though the group was small, there was an indication that the literary texts evoked deeper reflection in the longer run. Thoughts may not need to be prompted by original text features, but finding

the text striking might indeed help in being triggered to reflect, and to elaborate on one's thoughts later on.

All in all, the findings from the current studies cannot be used for a revision of the adapted multi-factor model of literary reading (Figure II.1). For all three main aspects – narrativity, literariness and fictionality – there were at least hints that the model might be correct. Even for fictionality: while there were no main effects of the fiction instruction, this instruction still led to more reflection for those reading the non-literary narrative text about depression, which was suggestive of an aesthetic distance effect.

Note that the two studies did not directly look at some of the aspects that were central in the multi-factor model: role-taking, Theory of Mind and aesthetic distance. On the other hand, additional factors (trait empathy, personal experience, exposure to literature) were explored in these studies. As the first study suggested, trait empathy and sympathy/empathy with a character could be important factors when predicting empathic understanding for others in a similar situation to a character, and as both studies combined suggested, empathic distress, sympathy/empathy with a character and perceived foregrounding can predict reflection. Yet, the differences in patterns between the individual texts demonstrate that we need many more comparisons with other texts to be able to deduce general patterns. The quest for the power of literature is far from over.

While this part of the dissertation confirmed some of the factors which influence empathy with and understanding for others, it remains puzzling *how* this process of gaining empathy and understanding through reading works, and, especially, when reading fails to have such effects. The last part of the dissertation therefore delves deeper into the reading experience, focusing on a small group of avid readers. It will explore how readers with differing personal experience with depression react while reading entire novels about depression. This approach aims to elucidate how empathy and understanding can evolve during reading.

Part III. Delving Deeper Into the Reader Experience

Really knowing that she will never be able to play for her daughter anymore, in any case not for her physical presence. It gave me a feeble feeling, like I wasn't capable of anything anymore. I felt empty.

(participant in response to the fragment of Anna Enquist's *Counterpoint*)

The studies in the previous parts of the dissertation each had a small qualitative part. They posed one or multiple open questions to give participants the opportunity to write freely about their thoughts and feelings. As the quote above, from the study into the effects of foregrounding, illustrates, these open questions at times already led to quite rich data, like expressions of deeply felt emotional experiences. Such experiences are far more difficult to capture through the use of 7-point or multiple choice scales.[48] Still, while gathering these responses, the emphasis in the previous studies was on finding general, measurable patterns in the relation between reading, empathy and reflection through mainly quantitative means. In this final part of the dissertation, fuller attention will be paid to the intricacies of the reader experience.

In order to do so, two qualitative studies are discussed in which avid readers read either three extensive fragments or two complete novels about

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[48] The phenomenological research group around Donald Kuiken (University of Alberta) tries to make questionnaires which fully capture readers' experiences. E.g., the 68- item Literary Reading Questionnaire (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) contains statements such as "Sometimes while reading literature my feelings draw me toward a distinctly unsettling view of life." While such scales can potentially capture a rich reading experience, the inherent problem with such a closed-question approach is that one never knows whether one has imprinted a feeling or idea in the reader or whether the reader already had this feeling or idea (an issue that is also relevant for qualitative interviews).

depression.[49] As the two experiments required a relatively large number of respondents (to enable statistical analyses), they necessarily relied on short text fragments (approx. 4 pages). Participants thus got little time to "know" the character, implying that sympathy/empathy may necessarily have been limited. Furthermore, the experimental set-up with mostly closed questions made it difficult to draw conclusions about why certain outcomes were found and which mechanisms are involved (cf. Maxwell, 2005; O'Dwyer & Bernauer, 2013). For example, while we saw a role for sympathy/empathy with the character in the first experimental study, it was unclear why sympathy with the character arose and whether "sympathy" meant the same thing to the respondents. The current qualitative studies attempt to make up for this.

One of the central questions for these final studies was how readers with varying personal experience negotiate distance and proximity to depressed characters. As Breithaupt (2012) has suggested, looking at such "blocking" and "unblocking" mechanisms of empathy can potentially allow for a better explanation why empathy occurs than focusing on empathic ability (p. 86). Depression was singled out as a subject, since the quantitative studies showed that for depression, sympathizing was more difficult for those without personal experience. This makes depression a more interesting subject to further explore qualitatively, both for respondents with and those without personal experience with depression. Apart from being interested in empathic reactions to the character, I was also still interested in the "real-life empathy" and reflection that reading can potentially trigger.

Chapter 9 provides the theoretical and methodological background to the two qualitative studies. Chapter 10 continues with the combined results of both studies, including the conclusion and discussion of the findings.

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[49] An article version of these studies has been submitted to a peer-reviewed international journal. At the time of writing (May 2016) it has received a revise and resubmit.

9. Two Qualitative Reader Response Studies:

Theoretical and Methodological Notes

In this final part of the dissertation, qualitative methods are applied to study the process of reading. These last two studies (one "pilot" and one "full study") try to come closer to the "natural" reader experience, having readers read more extensive texts about depression, thereby expanding upon and nuancing previous findings. By following readers throughout their reading process, it could be explored in further detail which empathic and reflective reactions occur, for which readers and in response to which text features. The research questions are as follows:

1) *How do readers negotiate and shift between experiencing distance and experiencing proximity to depressed characters?*
2) *How does reading about depression influence readers' reflection on depression, and (empathic) understanding for those who are depressed?*

I see distance and proximity as a result of the interaction between reader and text, in which the reader will at times consciously "negotiate" how close she wants to feel and at other times will feel steered by the text itself (style and content) to feel closer or more distanced (paragraph 9.2 discusses this phenomenon of aesthetic distance during reading in more detail). For the first research question, an important sub question is how this is related to characteristics of the text (i.e., style) and to characteristics of the reader, mainly personal experience with depression, but also one's general reading preferences (i.e., the reading types discussed in 1.2.5). The second research question is mostly relevant for those readers with limited personal experience. Just as in

Part II, I will look closely at the role that narrative and aesthetic feelings play in influencing reflection and empathic understanding. Through the current qualitative studies, more attention can be paid to how narrative and aesthetic feelings shift during the reading process (see paragraph 9.1).

9.1. Previous Studies Into Evolving Reader Emotions

Part of the aim of the current studies was thus to explore potential shifts in proximity, including narrative feelings like empathy and sympathy, during reading. Tracking these affective responses during the reading process is not a common thing to do within empirical literary studies. Still, a couple of earlier studies have done something similar and are relevant to our current purposes.

First of all, Davis and Andringa's (1995) "empirical study on the flow of emotional response during reading" (p. 236) explored at which moment in a text readers experience which kinds of emotions towards a character. For this purpose, Davis and Andringa used Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," in which the narrator foreshadows that the protagonist (Emily) has killed her lover, a fact which is only revealed at the end. Through a think-aloud procedure, the researchers collected readers' ($N = 16$) responses to five segments of this story. These responses were divided in emotional responses of the readers themselves and emotional responses attributed to the character(s). The second category could be seen to reflect readers' perspective-taking (i.e., cognitive empathy). The first category was further divided into "artefact emotions" (i.e., aesthetic feelings) and "fiction emotions" (i.e., narrative feelings), with artefact emotions connoting feelings like curiosity, interest and aesthetic evaluation, and fiction emotions connoting reactions to the character and events like pity and anger.

Initially, Davis and Andringa (1995) show, readers were most likely to report artefact emotions. After the first chapter, there was a sharp decline in these emotions, while fiction emotions increased from the first to the second chapter. Fiction emotions were particularly high towards the end of the story. It

was furthermore found that the sympathy (or rather: pity) for the main character built up throughout the story influenced readers' final reaction – instead of condemning the murder, readers tended to feel sad for the main character.

The second category, emotions being attributed to characters, was most prominent when reading the middle part of the story. While Davis and Andringa (1995) provide the general explanation for this pattern that "after they have passed through the beginning, [readers] start building representations of the characters and making inferences…" (p. 241), closer examination brought out that these reactions were in response to specific passages (e.g., rumors from the townspeople led readers to take Emily's side). Davis and Andringa conclude that the patterns they found could be applicable to various narratives, but that they also could have been reinforced by this particular plot structure.

A somewhat comparable but larger study into evolving reader responses was conducted by Howard Sklar. Sklar (2009) looked specifically at readers' sympathetic responses to a character in a short story, Toni Cade Bambara's "The Hammer Man." The narrative structure of this story, Sklar (2009) claimed, is such that most readers would be led from dislike to sympathy. While Sklar briefly notes that when looking at readers' emotional responses, one can distinguish "fictional emotions" and "artefact emotions," this distinction does not play any further explicit role in his analysis. Instead, Sklar focuses on Sternberg's (1978) theory of "primacy" and "recency" effects in narratives. This theory holds that readers form an (initial) impression of a character in a narrative, guided by the information provided: the *primacy effect*. This impression is later on influenced by new details the narrative gives: the *recency effect*. For some narratives (and readers, I would stress), the initial impression (thus the primacy effect) remains dominant, with readers interpreting new information in light of the first, strong impression. Other works manage to reveal information at a later point in such a way that readers revise their earlier impressions – the recency effect then has a stronger influence on readers' feelings for the character.

In the story Sklar (2009) studied, recency effects were expected to be dominant, as the narrator expresses a more positive perspective on the main character as the story develops. The responses of his participants (N = 180, high school students) confirmed this. At four points in the story, they were asked to indicate which emotions they felt towards the main character. This was done through either an open question or a closed question with multiple options. The combination allowed Sklar to look both at the number of people sympathizing and the intensity of their sympathy. Participants were indeed significantly more likely to sympathize with the main character at the final point than at the first point in the story. Yet, the reader experience turned out to be more complex: instead of a clear progression in sympathy, there was an initial increase followed by a decrease – more people sympathized at point 2 than at point 3. While additional analysis showed a steady increase in intensity among those who did sympathize, these results do suggest that readers' sympathy may vary more during a story than a straightforward primacy versus recency framework allows for.[50]

Such variation was captured in a broader qualitative study into the process of the reading experience, conducted by Pette (2001), which paid more attention to readers' personal preferences. Pette approached people in a bookstore who all selected one specific book (Javier Marías's *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me*) and researched the "reading strategies" of six of these readers who wanted to participate in her study. Responses to the book differed widely. Readers' enjoyment was partly determined by expectations based on earlier acquaintance with the author as well as on what they generally expect from a novel (e.g., finding beautiful sentences or being drawn into a different

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[50] In his dissertation, Sklar (2013) also empirically investigates a second story, Sherwood Anderson's "Hands." While his methods for studying this story are similar, instead of commenting at four points in the story, readers commented at three points. Since this gives a less thorough impression of the progression of readers' feelings towards the character, I do not discuss this second study by Sklar. Suffice it to say that for "Hands," Sklar (2013) observed a different pattern: readers started out with sympathy for the character and this feeling remained rather constant during reading.

world). Readers could actively increase the chance that they would get from the novel what they wanted (e.g., by focusing on sentences and activating literary knowledge), but their patience to keep reading when the novel did not fulfill their reading needs was limited.

Most relevantly, Pette (2001) looked at strategies readers applied to either increase or decrease feelings during reading. She found that the readers who preferred to focus on the style of the text and the readers who tended towards more identificatory reading could get equally emotionally involved, but that "aesthetic" readers had less difficulty shifting between being more and less emotionally moved than identificatory readers, since the aesthetic reader does not have to be personally involved. Among the identificatory readers, Pette found the strategies of pausing and of distancing oneself situationally from the character in order to keep the emotional impact at bay. (This search for the "optimal" distance to the narrative has been described theoretically by Cupchik (2002), and will be discussed further under 9.2.)

9.1.1. Implications for Current Studies: Evolvement of Emotions

The above-mentioned empirical studies bring out the complexity of the evolving reading experience and the importance of using sensitive measures to get the full picture. The response patterns found by Davis and Andringa (1995) and by Sklar (2009) (respectively a primacy effect and a recency effect) seem to be rather specific to the plot structure and narrative situation of the stories chosen.[51] However, both studies also reveal the selective emotional focus readers can have once sympathy is established. Generally, it can be hypothesized that readers' getting to know a character better as they progress aids sympathetic responses.

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[51] This corresponds to Brewer and Lichtenstein's (1982) "structural affect theory": different plot structures evoke different emotional patterns (e.g., curiosity) in readers. Since this theory focuses on popular (not literary) fiction (the function of which is to entertain, according to the authors), and since plot is not of main concern to the current study, I do not further engage with this theory. Plot structure has been mostly associated with suspense and curiosity. For a discussion of the three rhetorical devices suspense, surprise and mystery, see Sternberg (1978). For a discussion of plot structure, suspense and reader comprehension, see Dijkstra et al. (1994).

On the other hand, if getting to know a character reveals the differences between oneself and the character, sympathy may diminish among some readers. In the current qualitative studies, which use longer texts about depressed characters, I expect to see more complex shifts in empathy/sympathy than were evident in these two previous studies into short stories. By exploring such shifts it may be possible to identify how reading can lead to empathy with wider groups, or, on the contrary, fails to have an empathic effect.

Shifts in empathy may depend partly on people's personal experiences in relation to the theme and events. The important role of recognizing one's own experiences while reading was already demonstrated by Pette (2001). Identificatory reading, she showed, can further involvement, but it can also make the described events come too close. Furthermore, one's expectations and reading preferences play a role in one's response to the text (Pette, 2001) and will therefore be taken into account.

While looking at readers' involvement in the current studies, I try to separate reactions to stylistic features (aesthetic feelings) and reactions to characters and events (narrative feelings), exploring the ways in which these are related to overall feelings of distance and proximity. Investigating aesthetic and narrative feelings during reading is somewhat similar to what Davis and Andringa (1995) did, but as noted briefly in the General Introduction, within my distinction (which follows Miall & Kuiken, 2002), the reactions curiosity, surprise and suspense fall under "narrative feelings" insofar as they are responses to events. The term "aesthetic feelings" is reserved for reactions to stylistic aspects.

9.2. Negotiating Distance and Proximity When Reading Suffering

When exploring how reading can potentially lead to "real-life" empathy and reflection, as this project aims to do, it is particularly relevant to look at how readers negotiate proximity and distance to the represented suffering, including

how and when readers sympathize, empathize and identify with characters. The aforementioned previous studies indicate when readers are generally more likely to respond with which type of emotion (Davis & Andringa, 1995; Sklar, 2009), and how this might differ according to reading preferences (Pette, 2001). What these studies did not explore, however, is how readers deal with feelings of discomfort or distress when confronted with a character's suffering. A relevant phenomenon here, is "empathic distress," the feelings of discomfort that people can experience exactly because of their ability to empathize with someone who is suffering (Davis, 1980; De Wied et al., 1995). Artful and/or fictional representations might provide the space for people to endure their own distress and engage with it, thus overcoming tendencies to turn away from suffering and, more generally, overcoming tendencies to block empathy (cf. Breithaupt, 2012).

An "optimal" distance to the literary work may be needed for such confrontations, as Cupchik (2002) has suggested. In discussing aesthetic distance, Cupchik (2002) has followed Bullough's (1912) concept "psychical distance."[52] Taking the Kantian argument that a work of art is separated from our actual lifeworld in a way that allows for disinterested pleasure as his point of departure, Bullough (1912) posited that the distance or closeness we feel to an art work is not just a matter of people's ability to get absorbed or just a result of the qualities of the art work itself. Instead, it lies in the interaction between the disposition of the reader and the characteristics of the work. Cupchik (2002) appropriated Bullough's (1912) terms *under-distancing* and *over-distancing* to explain how we engage with art works. If a work is too realistic, reminding us too much of actual, emotional situations we have experienced, we can feel

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[52] Jauss (1982) has also discussed the distance of the reader to the text, but in a rather different way. Jauss argued that readers approach a text with a certain (largely pre-conscious) horizon of expectation, the experience gained from living in a certain period and having read earlier texts. With a new reading, a "change of horizons" can be evoked when the text challenges that familiarity (e.g., p.145). While Jauss's theory is useful for understanding how readers attribute meanings to texts from earlier periods, and how their interpretations differ when rereading, it can tell us less about the psychological process of a reader encountering a suffering character in literature than Bullough's and Cupchik's theory.

overwhelmed by it, feeling too much empathic distress ("under-distancing"). On the other hand, if stylistic features are very prominent or novel, we may not feel much emotional connection to the work anymore ("over-distancing"). A certain distance, argues Cupchik, is necessary to appreciate and contemplate the work. Such a balanced aesthetic distance can help us to be able to take in a work of art, to relate to it, without feeling overwhelmed or confused (Cupchik, 2002).

In using this theory, it is important to stress that while the idea of an "optimal" distance might suggest a "normative" type of text or type of reading, it is in fact subjective when "optimal" distance occurs. Some readers may actually welcome feelings of distress or confusion, or at least have a higher tolerance for it. As we saw in Part I, people's tolerance for unpleasant emotions like sadness differs: some are more willing to experience such emotions and therefore also to read sad books. What matters, and what will be explored in this chapter, is the subjective reader experience of feeling close, too close, or not close enough to the characters and the narrative world. Whether it is indeed a balanced aesthetic distance that is crucial for appreciation and reflection, as Cupchik (2002) suggests, is an empirical question.

As we already saw in Part II, it might be the case that *under*-distancing has a stronger relation with reflection. In both experimental studies in Part II, reporting empathic distress was significantly related to reporting being triggered to think. Those findings were in line with an earlier study by Koopman et al. (2012), in which readers who were more upset after reading a literary story about rape also reported more thoughts. Overall, however, the Koopman et al. (2012) study suggested that it is exactly through the use of aesthetic devices that literary narratives may provide access to experiences of mental pain for both those who have and have not encountered it themselves. Even though readers were upset by an aestheticized rape text (written by Gloria Naylor), the language also helped readers to feel more engaged and empathic towards the victim when compared to another text about rape (by Virginie Despentes), which was similar in explicitness but not nearly as aestheticized. Apparently, reading Naylor did

not lead to a level of under-distancing where appreciation and contemplation were negatively affected.

The Koopman et al. (2012) study gives an indication how aesthetics could provide access to the suffering of others, but as this study used short fragments, the way in which distance and proximity evolved could not be scrutinized. Moreover, in this study, participants were not asked about their personal experiences with the subject matter. People with such experiences could simply have chosen not to participate or to drop out early on. Thus the people who potentially would be most likely to experience under-distancing may not have been represented, which relativizes the results: distress and reflection can go together, but when people are too upset, perhaps they do not reflect anymore.

9.2.1. Implications for Current Studies: Personal Experience and Distancing

Given the potential importance of readers' personal background (Cupchik, 2002; Pette, 2001), in the current qualitative studies, readers with varying personal experience with depression participated. Some readers had a mood disorder themselves, others had family members with a mood disorder and yet others had no experience with it at all. This variety allowed me to explore mechanisms of under- and over-distancing. Those who wanted to participate who had personal experience with depression (either current or in the past) were warned that reading could be upsetting and reassured that they could stop the study at any time. For these readers, under-distancing could be expected.

Readers without experience with what David Foster Wallace (1996) has called "the Great White Shark of pain" (p. 695), on the other hand, might struggle with over-distancing. Despite recent attention for depression (e.g., "Depressiegala 25 januari 2016," 2016; Dehue, 2008), the disorder remains stigmatized (e.g., "Depressiegala 25 januari 2016," "Destigmatisering," kenniscentrum Phrenos, 2015; psychiatrist Jules Angst in interview with Pek,

2011).[53] The feelings, thoughts and behaviors that are considered to fall within the spectrum of depression can range from mildly to severely debilitating. While this wide spectrum, in combination with the media attention, could aid people's vague understanding of what "depression" signifies, it could also be argued to make it even harder for people to grasp what distinguishes a severe depression from a mild depression and may lower understanding even further. The rise in the prescription of antidepressants may give people the impression that others are overmedicating "normal" feelings of loneliness and unhappiness (cf. Dehue, 2008). Depressed characters may therefore be met with a certain amount of resistance and lack of understanding. It remains to be seen whether and to what extent this is the case for the readers in this study and if so, when and how this resistance is overcome.

9.3. Methodological Set-Up Qualitative Studies

Two qualitative studies were conducted: one "pilot study" and one "full study." While I wanted to find out about readers' experiences while reading an entire novel, this does require quite some time and effort from participants. Therefore, the pilot study was conducted in order to make sure that sound methods and materials were used. A second aim of the pilot study was to find preliminary answers to the research questions. Since the full study used largely the same methods as the pilot study, with some small adaptations outlined below, the data of the pilot and full study could mostly be analyzed together. Where findings differed between the pilot and full study, this is indicated in the Results section of Chapter 10.

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[53] The term "disorder" is already a loaded term, fitting within a biomedical frame in its reference to physical disorders (see for example Cromby, Harper, & Reavey, 2013), although not quite as straightforwardly as "mental illness." Discussing "depression" as a clear, homogenous entity poses similar problems. I decided to use these terms for clarity's sake as well as to indicate the severity of the type of mental pain we are talking about. I concur with Cromby et al. (2013) that the term "mental distress" can be considered more neutral and preferable, but this term can also feel too "light" for what it describes.

9.3.1. Materials

In the pilot study, participants read fragments of approximately 50 pages from two novels and one non-fiction book about depression. The novels were Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Rebecca Hunt's *Mr. Chartwell* (2011); the non-fiction book was Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon* (2001). *The Bell Jar* is a canonical novel about depression. Heavily inspired by Sylvia Plath's own life and set in the 1950's, it gives a homo-diegetic, first-person account of the experiences of protagonist Esther Greenwood. It contains many literary devices on the sentence level, particularly metaphors, similes and contrasts (for further details about the style and content of this novel, see Box III.1). *Mr. Chartwell* is set in 1964 and gives a hetero-diegetic, third-person account of the experiences of the fictional character Esther Hammerhans and the historical character Winston Churchill. *Mr. Chartwell* is easier to read than *The Bell Jar*, but it uses the striking overarching metaphor of depression coming to life as a "black dog" (for further details about the style and content of this novel, see Box III.2).[54] The plot structure is also more geared towards creating suspense than *The Bell Jar*'s. *The Noonday Demon*, finally, combines informative passages with the personal story of Solomon's own depression. Solomon also uses original metaphors to describe what depression is like. The general aim of this book appears to be to inform its readers.

These three books are all about depression and all received critical acclaim, but the way they employ literary devices and generally the way they attempt to engage the reader is markedly different. The differences in style, plot, background of the author and time of publication make for an interesting comparison. These differences also increase the chance that readers with different reading preferences would find enjoyment and/or value in at least one

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[54] In the UK and US, the "black dog" as a metaphor for a bad mood is relatively well-known, even occurring in pop songs by Bob Dylan and Nick Drake. As Paul Foley (2005) explains in his brief history of the metaphor, while the most famous user of the term may be Winston Churchill, this metaphor already appeared in dictionaries in the 19th century. Winston Churchill may have learned it from his nanny (Foley, 2005). For most Dutch readers, however, this metaphor is probably quite novel.

of these books. The variety in the books allowed me to explore the interaction between reader and text in more depth than if only one book had been chosen. In the full study, participants only read the two novels by Plath and Hunt in their entirety. I focused on the two novels since the main interest of this research project is in the effects of literary narrative, and Solomon's work, while containing literary features, is mostly expository.

9.3.2. Procedure

The procedure was similar for the pilot and the full study. In both cases, participants were interviewed before they started reading and after they had finished reading. In addition, they kept reading diaries. This combination of interviews and reading diaries has previously been applied by Pette (2001). The full study had an additional, partly quantitative measurement: both before and after reading, participants were asked to respond to five Likert-scale statements about depression (the same ones that were used in the genre-condition study in Part II). Such a combination of methods, "triangulation," helps to get a fuller picture than using just one of these tactics (Christians & Carey, 1989). In addition, triangulation increases (internal) validity (Maxwell, 2005).

Depending on participants' preference and practical concerns (where they lived), interviews were done face-to-face or by telephone. The interviews conducted before participants started reading aimed to get an idea of their personal backgrounds, reading preferences and expectations, and to allow them to ask questions about the reading diary instruction, which they had received by that time via email and/or regular mail. During the second interview, which generally took place two weeks after finishing the last text, respondents could further explain what they wrote in the reading diaries and said in the first interview. A typed-out copy of the first interview was sent to them before the final interview by email, allowing them to expand on or revise earlier statements as well as checking for errors. In addition, the second interview aimed to explore whether participants thought their conception of depression and depressed

people had changed and how. In the full study, this was also established by asking participants to comment on the statements again. For the interviews, I did not use a steady order or the same questions each time (the complete topic list can be found in Appendix H: Topic List Interviews Part III). As one of the main strengths of qualitative research is its flexibility, I wanted to allow for differences between interviews, delving deeper into topics that came up during the conversation if these appeared relevant. In that sense, I followed the "responsive interviewing method" explained by Rubin and Rubin (2005), which assumes that richer information is produced if the interviewer is attentive (i.e. responsive) to what the interviewee says and asks follow-up questions, instead of sticking to a list of pre-established questions.

As for the methodological choice to let participants keep reading diaries: diaries have proven an effective tool to study introspection in previous research (Nunan, 1992; Pette, 2001; Thury & Friedlander, 1995). In the current studies, participants were asked to record their reading experience directly after reading, aided by several questions, *inter alia* what they generally thought of the passage, what they thought of the character and style, and to what extent they experienced the character as "nearby" and the passage as "emotional" (see Appendix G: Reading Diary Instruction Part III). Since questions about proximity of the character and emotionality of the passage could be difficult to answer, as a further probe, I asked participants to rate the proximity and emotionality on a scale of 0-10. Furthermore, I told participants that during reading, they could make notes in the margins of the text itself, and underline striking sentences. This was not obligatory, as it may interfere with reading for some. Underlined sentences could be used as prompts during a follow-up interview (cf. Novak & Krijnen, 2014: Novak and Krijnen used stills selected by participants to discuss their reactions to a television series). Generally, in order to ensure participants were comfortable with the process and keeping the diary would not interfere too much with the natural reading experience, participants were told to keep the

reading diary in a way that worked for them, which resulted in not all participants answering all questions every time they read.

9.3.3. Participants

Participants were initially selected from among those who indicated in the "sad books" survey study in Part I that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up study. Participants were selected to vary in age, relationship status, education, and location within the Netherlands. It was also taken into account that they should not score below average on the Sad Book Scale. While aiming at variation in background characteristics is in accordance with the criterion of "maximized comparisons" (Christians & Carey, 1989) and "triangulating via data sources" (Shenton, 2004), the relative homogeneity in a preference for books with serious content matter was meant to ensure that participants were sufficiently motivated to read about depression.

This ideal of a diverse group, varying in background, however, appeared difficult to achieve. First of all, the respondents to the sad books survey study were mostly highly educated and female. Given the low number of men who were willing to participate in a follow-up study, some men with scores below average on the Sad Book Scale were approached. As might be expected, these men were not keen on reading about depression. Therefore, snowball sampling was eventually used to obtain an equal number of males. Four men in the pilot and three in the full study were recruited in this way. These men sufficiently differed in personal experience with depression, but in the full study, they were rather similar in age and profession (all three were retired teachers). Still, the other men in the full study differed enough from them to ascertain a varied, albeit largely highly educated sample.

Table III.1 gives an overview of the general characteristics of all participants. As Table III.1 shows, eleven readers started the pilot study, of whom ten commented on the first fragment, and nine (4 women, 5 men) finished the complete study. The two people who dropped out (a 22-year-old woman and

a 38-year-old man) indicated they were too busy. The full study started out with sixteen Dutch readers. Two women who both had experience with depression dropped out before having finished the first novel (Plath). Thirteen people (7 women, 6 men) finished the complete study. All data were analyzed, including the interviews and reading diaries of those who did not complete the study. Thus, the interviews of 27 people and the reading diaries of 24 people were analyzed. As Table III.1 further shows, nine participants in total had personal experience with a mood disorder, of whom four in the past, five currently. The mean age in the total sample (excluding those who dropped out before reading: $N = 24$) was 53.50 ($SD = 16.27$; range: 24-79). All participants had the Dutch nationality.

Table III.1.

Characteristics of Participants in the Two Qualitative Studies

Participant	Gender	Age	Profession	Own experience w/ mood disorder	Completed study?
Pilot					
Margriet	F	58	working incapacity; prev.: nurse	Yes, current	Yes
Marleen	F	57	librarian	No, but depr. in family	Yes
Victoria	F	32	graduate student (PhD)	Yes, mild, in past; depression in family	Yes
Liesbeth	F	64	retired; prev.: director library	No	Yes
Anna	F	22	teacher (English)	No	No, dropped out before reading
Alexander	M	35	freelance editor, stay-at-home dad	Yes, in past	Yes
Verloc	M	29	graduate student (PhD)	No, but depr. in family	Yes
Co	M	77	retired; prev.: chairman educational committee	No	Yes
Jacques	M	62	general director organization	No, but depr. in family	Yes
Huib	M	65	president chairman board of governors	No, but dark periods in past	Yes

Wouter	M	38	member of the municipal executive	No, but depressed acquaintance	No, dropped out after 1st fragment
Full study					
Eline	F	45	florist	No, but depr. in family	Yes
Bonno	F	58	senior developer	No	Yes
Coleta	F	66	librarian	No, but depr. in family	Yes
Giulia	F	48	unemployed; prev.: salesperson in bookshop	Yes, mild, in past	Yes
Mila	F	46	teacher (special education)	Yes, current	Yes
Melanie	F	24	teacher (primary education)	No	Yes
Adriana	F	70	retired; prev.: PR for factory	No, but depr. in family	Yes
Lise	F	27	communication manager university	Yes, current (bi-polar)	No, dropped out before reading
Aaltje	F	71	retired; prev.: welfare work	Yes, current	No, dropped out before reading
Henry	M	79	retired; prev.: marine officer	No, but depr. in family	Yes
Michael	M	27	sales assistant	Yes, current	Yes
Bo	M	65	retired; prev.: property developer	No	Yes
Malcolm	M	42	digitalizing assistant municipality	Yes, in past	Yes
Clint	M	65	retired; prev.: teacher (English)	No	Yes
GVentoux	M	65	retired; prev.: teacher (geography)	No	Yes
Joop	M	67	retired; prev.: teacher and accountant	No	No, only read first novel

Note: All names are aliases. "Prev." stands for "previously." The order in which participants are listed corresponds with the order in which they started participating in the study.

9.3.4. Method of Analysis

The method of coding and further analysis was similar to the one outlined in Chapter 3 (the *Tonio* study): it was a mixed method, combining quantitative and

qualitative content analysis in an overall thematic analysis. With this mixed method, I follow Saldaña's (2013) "pragmatic eclecticism" and Schreier's (2012) version of qualitative content analysis (which leave room for combining concept- and data-driven categorizing as well as for quantitative analysis within an overall qualitative framework). While being open to new insights deriving from the data, the coding procedure was also informed by codes derived from theory (e.g., narrative and aesthetic feelings, distance and proximity) and from the previous studies (e.g., the various narrative feelings in the *Tonio* study). The codebook thus evolved deductively (from theory) as well as inductively (from the data), which is quite usual within qualitative research (Schreier, 2012; Seale, 2004).

As the relatively longitudinal procedure already suggests (participants typically needed three months to complete the study), data were not collected at just one point. During the whole process of interviewing, transcribing reading diaries and interviews, memos were written to keep track of evolving insights, namely noting striking moments in interviews, remembering points of improvement from the pilot to the qualitative study, relating participants' responses to one another, and forming mini-theories.

The coding process itself was aided by using the qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA. In order to validate the codes, after the second, axial coding round, I showed the preliminary code book extracted from MaxQDA (including examples I added) separately to two experts in the field of reader response research. Our discussions led, on the one hand, to further integration of diverse sub codes into larger code categories (e.g., categorizing various remarks about style into "Positive," "Negative," and "Neutral" remarks), and on the other to further nuance within main codes and main sub codes (e.g. within the main sub code "Identification"). After these discussions, I again went through all the codes in MaxQDA to apply the new codes. The final codes can be found in Table III.2.

As Table III.2 already shows, in addition to qualitative coding, I used quantitative techniques, like frequency counts. The frequencies and visualizations of codes that MaxQDA provides were helpful for this. I also kept an

Excel-file with an overview of all respondents, in order to keep track of their progress, record main demographic info and pseudonyms, and keep track of the bigger picture, namely, the quantitative evolving of emotions and proximity (as far as this was possible, since not all readers rated their emotional involvement).

Finally, as indicated above, the full qualitative study used a short survey to establish readers' opinion about depression before and after reading (cf. Press & Cole, 1999 – in studying women's responses to television programs about abortion, they first let their participants answer a short survey about their views on abortion). These statements were not only used as prompts to get participants to talk, but also to measure quantitatively (with a paired samples t-test in SPSS) whether they scored higher on "empathic understanding" for depression after than before reading.

Table III.2.
Selective Qualitative Coding Scheme Pilot Study and Full Study

Main Categories	Main codes	Main sub codes	Example	Frq.
1. DEPRESSION CONCEPTION	*Reading about depression*	*Not a subject one looks for:* - *Too depressing*	"No, it's not a subject I deliberately seek out, so to say."	14 (7)
		Ambivalent experience for those with depression: - *Recognition/ support* - *Danger of getting too involved*	"There has been a period when I read for identification. But that was often eventually very negative, because I could read myself down, so to speak, and sometimes it was also nice, for recognition..."	7 (5) (6)
		Helps to understand others	"And, yes, in my surroundings I also encounter a lot of depressed people. So it also always helps to deal with that."	4
	Opinion about depression before reading	*Must be awful*	"Indeed I think it would be really awful if you were actually depressed"	13
		Societal infrastructure should be available	"Well, I definitely think those people need to be helped. That just should be part of the health insurance."	9
		Should be able to get oneself out of it	"I think, well, it really starts with your own realization, and, uh, what you can change about it yourself."	4

		Difficulties in really understanding	"But someone who is depressed would say: you can't imagine at all, it's so bad that you can't imagine how bad it is."	6
		Different variants	"But well, there are of course a lot of gradations and a lot of types of depression and different progressions."	2
1. READING HABITS	*Social aspect*	*Importance reviews/ media attention*	"… I mostly look at, honestly, reviews I have read."	5
		Part of book club	"… and I am also in a book club."	6
		Sharing tips/ books with friends/ family	"… with a friend I have in A., then I said 'hey, I've read this, I find it worthwhile' and then she said 'oh, that…' and then we'd exchange something."	5
	Main reading types	*Informative reading*	"I like, so to say, reality (…)."	13
		Ludic reading - *Relaxation* - *Suspense* - *Absorption*	"Sometimes I really want that suspense and other times I just want a nice book (…)."	18 (9) (6) (12)
		Identificatory reading	"A good book, that's a book in which you recognize your feelings"	14
		Aesthetic reading - *No involvement when style irritates* - *Imagination important*	"… I prefer texts which, uh, are also aesthetically pleasing. (…) Uh, I like an original writing style."	18 (4) (3)
		Eudaimonic reading - *Confront. w. truth* - *Experiencing what others go through* - *Articulation experience*	"I'm mostly more intrigued by, uh, does that book have something to tell me, do I come across something of which I think 'My, that's a point of view that, in my life, has not yet played such a part yet.'"	17 (2) (2) (2)
1. EXPEC-TATIONS	*No clear expectations*		"… it's a well-known author [Plath], but apart from that I don't know anything, so I don't have any expectations."	9
	Curiosity general books		"I mean, I like to read, so I am very curious what those books will be like."	5
	Curiosity way of reading		"I am very curious what the reading diary will do with me. Because, yes, I find it interesting to observe myself."	9
	Curiosity Plath	*Autobiographical aspect*	"I think I will also try to see whether the text shows signs of her (…) self-chosen end."	7

		Emotional impact	"I have the expectation that it is very sad, and unpleasant…"	3
	Fear of emotionality		"I also hope (…) that this one is not that heavy."	4
	Hope of recognition		"And, uh, maybe emotions I recognize, or that fall into place."	2
2. NARRATIVE FEELINGS	Distress (N = 15)	Discomfort/ distress	"… it made me literally nauseous…"	7
		Frustration/ powerlessness	"As a reader you see it happening as it is told, but you can't help her or can she even be helped? Powerlessness of the reader, does that exist?"	4
		Too dark	"… all of this is also very negative…."	6
	Proximity (N = 23)	General proximity	"On a scale from 1 to 10 the character feels very close, I give an 8."	21
		Transportation - General transportation - Suspense - Curiosity - Shock/ surprise - Intimate	"As a reader you follow the same undulation as Esther, whether you want to or not" "THEN THE NEW TENANT TURNS OUT TO BE A **DOG**!!!!!!" (Shock/ surprise)	18 (14) (12) (17) (4) (4)

		Empathic feelings main character
		- Moved
		- Sympathy
		   Pity/ concern
		   Relief/ hope
		   Admiration
		- Affective empathy
		- Perspective-taking
		- Empathic understanding
			"I can feel Esther's sadness." (Affective empathy)
			
			"I find Esther so understandable in her doubt, you just feel how she wavers and Churchill's words bring her back then." (Empathic understanding)
				23
				(9)
				(18)
				(13)
				(13)
				(9)
				(10)
				(22)
				(12)

		Identification/ recognition - General identification - Strong identification - Recognizing feeling - Recognizing detail - Of past self	"I could identify. I understood her way of thinking: 7." (General identification) "Wanting to punish yourself, not finding yourself good enough is very recognizable, unfortunately." (Strong identification)	19 (9) (6) (6) (15) (5)
	Distance (N = 23)	General distance	"I did not find the passage very emotional: 4."	21
		Gap in understanding character	"I can feel understanding for her mental condition, but I can't feel	23 (15)

		- No/limited identification	what it is like to be so defeated."	(12) (12)
		- Character odd/ distanced	"It doesn't make me think of my own experiences at all." (*No/limited identification*)	
		- Character unsympathetic		
		Transportation difficulties	"Thus far the events in New York are not appealing, 'cause it's a world that I don't know. I can imagine it, but still, that world is too far removed from my profession and life…"	15 (5) (2) (5)
		- Events dated		
		- Ending too optimistic		
		- Unrealistic portrayal depression		
	Negotiating proximity and distance (*N* = 22)	*Style mediates proximity*	"While I feel little closeness to the character, I still find it exceptionally beautifully written how the character feels."	6
		Style creates distance	"I notice that I mainly take a literary viewpoint. But that's not strange with such an estranging way of describing. Perhaps that's why it doesn't get emotional…" (*Defamil. makes it less emo.*)	15 (4) (7) (3)
		- Distance fits subject		
		- Humor makes it less emotional		
		- Defamiliarization makes it less emotional		
		Deliberately keeping distance	"On a scale from 0-10: 7, because I do understand her, but also 6, because I do not want to go along with it."	4
		Distance depends on mood	"I did not find the passage emotional, but that's, I think, because I'm in a very good mood today."	5
		Proximity shifts		22
		- Character comes closer	"I felt much further removed from the character, a 3 or 4 I'd say. The events are less easy to empathize with…"	(20) (14)
		- Character becomes more distant		
		Too close		
		- Briefly stopped reading	"And if you then read about someone who's also living such a struggle then that gives recognition and sometimes comes too close."	5 (4)

2. AESTHETIC FEELINGS	Positive about style (N = 22)	General appreciation style	"It's beautifully written."	20
		Descriptions work - Beautiful descriptions - Vivid descriptions - Articulation pain/ grief/ despair	"Again a wonderful observation of Ms. Hunt, that opens a world for you in one sentence." (Vivid descriptions)	20 (13) (6) (5)
		Appreciation metaphor/ imagery - Black dog (Hunt) - Fig tree story (Plath) - Two metaphors in Solomon - Smaller metaphors/ imagery	"So it's a personification (in animal form) of a mood state. Very cleverly thought up (chosen) and executed…" (Black dog) "Interesting comparison between writing poems and cutting corpses." (Smaller metaphors/ imagery)	22 (15) (6) (5) (14)
		Appreciation structure	"What I find stylistically strong, is the way the story is split up, with side paths (…)"	18
		Appreciation contrasts	"The author plays with contrasts, which I appreciate"	11
		Appreciation personal voice	"What I like about this chapter is that it's an inside view."	12
	Negative about style (N = 20)	General negative remarks style	"It's a book I wouldn't read myself because of the style and subject."	9
		Metaphor doesn't work	"The fact that depression is envisioned as a dog is a step too far for me."	13
		Negative about structure	"I really need to focus otherwise I'll lose the main thread."	11
		Too abstract	"Especially the beginning is tough with its abstract reflections."	5
2/3. REFLECTION/ IMPACT	Limited (N = 15)	No thinking back (during)	"Between the first and the second reading I haven't been busy with the book, materially or mentally."	5
		Little change in image depression	"My view of depression hasn't really changed; it's an illness whether there's a clear reason for it or not…"	11
	Lingering image/ scene		"In the meantime the image of the black dog as a metaphor for depression often came back in my memory."	11

Self-reflection (N = 11)	On one's past self	"… I can also see how I experienced the world and people around me differently in that period…"	4
	On one's current self	"Her switch from detesting to being dependent on Black Pat was recognizable. The weird realization that you feel bad and you kind of want that."	4
Reflection on depression (N = 22)	Understanding depression - Realizing how bad it is - Different variants	"That it is (…) an enormously heavy burden for people who are affected by depressed moods or melancholia …"	20 (8) (7)
	Causes	"The second book actually shows that you make a choice to let depression into your life."	9
	What to do about it	"The question remains how much influence you have yourself …"	7
	Own difficulty in understanding	"the feeling that you sometimes want to give people a little push (…), 'come on,' like, you have this and you have…"	3
	Changes in treatment throughout the years	"… it is of course interesting to read the history of psychiatry between the lines."	9
Effects on life – Personal (N = 14)	Associations real life and book	"At the station I saw a depressed looking woman, warmly dressed as if she didn't want to be in touch with the outside world (…). Do I notice this because I am reading about depression?"	5
	Wanting to (re)read related book	"The first book I will read sometime in its totality."	7
	Coping with depression	"It has helped me in my personal development when it comes to coping with depression."	1
Effects on life – Social (N = 10)	Discussing depression with others	"His son had also done an attempt. (…) Through reading the book I could talk about it."	5
	Discussing book/ subject with others more generally	"I mentioned the book to guests, and briefly told them what it is about…"	5
	Recommending book	"I recommended Mr. Chartwell to various people"	2

Note: Responses have been divided in those "before reading" (1), "during reading" (2), and "after reading" (3). "Frq." indicates the number of people who reported a specific code.

<u>Sylvia Plath – *The Bell Jar* (1963)</u>

In Sylvia Plath's only novel, the semi-autobiographical *The Bell Jar* (1963), protagonist Esther Greenwood narrates her own story in retrospect. In the current time within the narrative world, she is a mother ("last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with," p. 3), but the reader only gets small glances into that present. Instead, the narrative presents the events right before, during and shortly after the mental break-down of the character while she was still a student – all in the past tense. In the beginning of the novel, Esther is in New York for a month, together with eleven other girls who have won an internship at a magazine as part of a writing contest. She knows that something is "wrong" with her, since she can only think of death, while "I was supposed to be having the time of my life" (p. 2). Interspersed with flashbacks (e.g., to a relationship with which Esther is less than content), the plot moves in a fragmentary fashion towards Esther returning from New York to live with her mother, where she unravels quickly and ends up in a mental hospital. Esther appears to recover, partly through the care of a female psychiatrist and partly through getting access to the anticonception pill (since one of her main fears is getting pregnant). The ending of the novel is open. While the references to the current situation of the character (i.e., playing with the baby) would suggest she is doing well, Esther's negative associations with pregnancy and motherhood are more suggestive of a tragic plot structure – Esther apparently could not escape this fate.

Esther's mood is reflected in the style: the imagery the I-narrator uses shows her preoccupation with death (e.g., when she throws away flowers in a basin, the basin is described as "cold as a tomb," and she thinks: "This must be how they laid the bodies away in the hospital morgue," p. 156). Overall, the novel has a poetic style; on the sentence level, it is full of literary devices like similes and metaphors, repetitions and contrasts. The metaphor of the bell jar itself is not prominent within the book: it is mentioned only three times, briefly. However, this metaphor clarifies how Esther perceives herself and why she acts the way she acts – with a felt distance towards everyone she meets. This distance can further be seen in the wry, dark humor the narrator applies, partly through sudden harsh statements like "That morning I had tried to hang myself" (p. 152) but also through the way such scenes (e.g., trying to hang oneself) are described, namely by highlighting clumsiness and impracticalities ("After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat's tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight," p. 152).

Box III.1. Brief narratological and stylistic description of *The Bell Jar*

Rebecca Hunt – *Mr. Chartwell* (2010)

Mr. Chartwell, Rebecca Hunt's first novel, narrates the story of the fictional Esther Hammerhans and the fictionalized historical figure Winston Churchill in alternating chapters. What binds Esther and Churchill together is their acquaintance with an ominous figure: Black Pat, an enormous black dog who continues to visit them and makes their lives miserable. The narrator is not present in the narrated events, this instance is thus extradiegetic and heterodiegetic (otherwise known as "omniscient"). While focalization mostly lies with Esther and Churchill, at times less central characters focalize, like Esther's best friend Beth or her love interest Corkbowl. More strikingly, even Black Pat focalizes (e.g., "Black Pat felt his physicality mesmerizing her, he felt her being spellbound," p. 51). The events that unfold cover less than one week in July of 1964, the period in which Churchill announces his retirement, a decision which makes him more vulnerable to the harassment by Black Pat. Esther, in the meantime, has to decide whether she will allow Black Pat to live with her as a tenant. For her, it is the week in which her husband, two years ago, committed suicide. Being alone, she reasons, may be worse than being with Black Pat: she might prefer his "tonic of acid vibrancy and nerves" over "the lonely monotony of the ghost days" (p. 29). The novel immediately sets up a structure of suspense, through introducing Black Pat in the first chapter as a menacing presence ("grinning filthily in the blackness," p. 4), making the reader wonder what Pat is planning to do with Churchill and whether Esther will let this unwelcome yet somehow seductive guest in. As Dijkstra et al. (1994) have noted, "unusual initiating events and actions may induce suspense, because they challenge the reader to create a new world according to the rules of the narrative" (p. 144) (cf. Sternberg, 1978).

At the same time, the novel has a humoristic tone, which follows logically from humanizing the black dog: slapstick-like scenes such as Black Pat brushing his teeth with a big wooden spoon ensue. Generally, the externalization and personalization of depression as a black dog is the most striking literary device Hunt employs. While the book is full of crafty descriptions, with, at times, literary devices like similes and metaphors, such descriptions also often stay at a literal level (e.g., "In a terraced house in Battersea, Esther Hammerhans came tearing down the stairs with one arm through a cardigan sleeve, the rest flapping at her legs, and turned off the hob," p. 5). The overarching metaphor to some extent renders an extensive use of other literary devices unnecessary, as the symbolism is already implied, but Hunt also appears to have chosen for a more approachable style than Plath in *The Bell Jar*, with short chapters and a relatively high amount of dialogue.

Box III.2. Brief narratological and stylistic description of *Mr. Chartwell*

10. "Close, but Far Away at the Same Time"

Distance and Proximity When Reading About Depression

So I told him again, in the same dull, flat voice, only it was angrier this time, because he seemed so slow to understand, how I hadn't slept for fourteen nights and how I couldn't read or write or swallow very well.
Dr. Gordon seemed unimpressed.

(Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 1963, p. 129)

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), the main character Esther Greenwood feels as if she is trapped under a "glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (p. 178). She has trouble getting others to understand how she feels, including her psychiatrist, as the quote above indicates. *The Bell Jar* thus thematizes the gap that exists between those who are depressed and those who are not. For those who have no experience with depression, it can be difficult to empathize with the apathy, the despair, and the suicidal tendencies that can all be part of the disorder.

Within the current Dutch discourse, depression is predominantly seen as either a brain disease, being caused by a neurobiological deficit (e.g., Swaab, 2010), or a societal problem being caused by the strict demands of neoliberal societies, in which one is responsible for one's own happiness and considered a failure if one does not "succeed" (e.g., Dehue, 2008). These two tendencies within the discourse about depression are also visible in the wider western context, with a dominance of the biomedical discourse (e.g., LaFrance, 2014). The public debate pays little attention to the more nuanced biopsychosocial explanatory framework, which, when applied well, stresses the need to take into account biological, psychological, and social factors as well as the relations between these

factors when looking at mental disorders (e.g., Cromby, Harper, & Reavey, 2013). But even if all those factors are taken into account, media reports on mental disorders tend to focus on causes, cures and costs, and not – or only in passing – on what it is like for an individual suffering from the disorder. The personal experience often gets lost. It is thus not surprising if people who have not been there themselves lack understanding for depression.

Books can play a crucial role in portraying this personal experience and perhaps thereby in furthering understanding. This goes for all types of books, from mainly informative texts (e.g., Wolpert, 1999; Solomon, 2001) to non-fictional personal accounts (e.g., Bodé, 2010; Brunt, 1994) to novels (e.g., Plath, 1963, Wallace, 1996). Potentially, however, literary works are especially suitable to bridge the gap between those with and without experience with depression, by depicting detailed, vivid or original scenes. As structuralists Shklovsky (1965) and Mukařovský (1976) have argued, artful literary language makes the common unfamiliar and would thus make readers see the world in a new light, a process known as "defamiliarization." We saw in Part II that such original language might leave a longer-lasting impression.

In this chapter we will see whether and how the gap was bridged when readers read three different texts (pilot study) and two complete novels (full study) about depression. As outlined above, the focus in these studies is on what influences distance and proximity to the depressed characters and on whether and how reading influenced readers' daily lives, particularly their understanding for people with a depression.

10.1. Results Qualitative Studies

Similar to the *Tonio* study in Chapter 3, readers' experiences are divided in those "before," "during" and "after" reading. Table III.2 also follows this categorization. Note that not all the individual codes mentioned in Table III.2 are discussed below. Instead, I focus on main trends and striking findings, particularly in

relation to the research questions. In what follows, I will start by giving the context ("before reading") in which readers read: their reading preferences, their personal experience with depression and their expectations of the novels and the study. These are all factors that could help to explain their reactions, which are discussed after the context and will receive most attention. Within these reactions, I will first show the overall patterns of proximity to the character while reading. Subsequently, the relation between narrative feelings and, respectively, proximity and distance is discussed, as well as the mediating role of style. Finally, attention is given to the impact of reading, namely what readers experienced in terms of reflection and understanding, and which factors seemed to be of influence here.

10.1.1. Before Reading: Reading Preferences

In order to explain readers' potentially diverse reactions to the same text, it can be useful to take into account their general reading preferences. Synthesizing previous categorizations from reading research (discussed in Part I: 1.2.5) with participants' responses, I arrived at the following distinction: *ludic reading* (reading for transportation and relaxation; Nell, 1988), *identificatory reading* (reading to recognize oneself in a character, cf. Pette, 2001), *aesthetic reading* (reading with a specific focus on the beauty and/or originality of the style; cf. Graf, 1995), *eudaimonic reading* (reading to gain insights into human experience, cf. "insight," Miall & Kuiken, 1995), and *informative reading* (reading for practical information, e.g., about one's field of work, cf. "efferent reading," Rosenblatt, 1978). The Codebook of Table III.2 shows these main reading types, including an example of each, under "Reading habits."

Aesthetic reading and ludic reading were the dominant reading types, with 18 participants reporting these types. With 17 participants, eudaimonic reading was also quite prevalent. Informative reading was mainly prevalent among male participants in higher functions – they read extensively about their field of work. However, all readers had multiple reading preferences. Typically, those who

wanted to gain insights (*eudaimonic*) were also interested in the style (*aesthetic*) and in recognizing aspects of themselves (*identificatory*).

Most readers who also read for relaxation stressed that they found aesthetic or eudaimonic reading more valuable. The only "typical" ludic reader in this study was Melanie, who indicated that the primary thing for her while reading is "wanting to read on to know what happened." Yet, Melanie also reported that she liked realistic stories because those are easier to identify with, thus qualifying as an identificatory reader. Given these mixed preferences, it was difficult to establish a clear relation between one reading type and people's responses to these texts, as we will see later.

10.1.2. Before Reading: Experience With Depression

Participants' personal experience with depression as well as their general attitude towards people who are depressed was also deemed likely to influence their responses to the texts. As Table III.1 already indicated, four participants personally had past experiences with a mood disorder, and five in total were currently dealing with it (of whom two dropped out). There was considerable variety within these experiences: while Margriet self-identified as chronically depressed, most other participants with a mood disorder indicated to have depressive episodes, the severity of which differed. Malcolm had suffered from a depression combined with psychosis, while both Alexander's and Victoria's past mental distress was more anxiety-related.

Among those who had experience with depression, reading about this subject (both fiction and non-fiction) was a common way to try to understand one's feelings better. As Margriet said: "I often read to see how other people deal with it; that can be an eye-opener." Yet, such reading tended to be an ambivalent experience: on the one hand, one feels drawn to the subject, on the other, reading about it can make one feel worse, especially when reading novels from a depressed perspective. Alexander indicated he used to read about depression to get a sense of understanding or comfort, but that this also reinforced his dark

moods. Both Aaltje and Margriet stressed that they regulated their intake of books about depression: Aaltje avoided reading about it when she is already down and Margriet applied a quota, mixing books about depression with other books, because "sometimes you also have to take some distance." Not all participants who had personal experience with depression were keen to read about it: both Michael and Giulia indicated that they had never read about depression, with Giulia fearing it would be "too confrontational."

For those without a mood disorder, depression was not generally a topic one looked for. There were exceptions, with some participants having read about depression out of personal interest, either trying to self-diagnose during darker moods in the past (Huib), or to try to understand relatives and acquaintances better (Marleen and Eline). The increased attention for depression in society in recent years also led some to be more interested in the subject, but most participants had not deliberately read books about depression yet.

Concerning participants' conception of depression before reading, most participants without a mood disorder agreed with a statement that it must be horrible to be depressed. They also generally agreed that society has to act to help those who are depressed. Participants' average score on the empathic statements about depressed people before reading (only filled out in the full study) was already quite high: 31.43 (SD = 2.71). One person, Mila (who has a mood disorder herself), scored 35, the maximum score possible on this scale. At the same time, people showed strong difficulties in understanding what being depressed would be like, with six participants stating this explicitly. Coleta, for example: "But I notice that I find it difficult to understand the doing nothing, or the, yes, the not wanting to recover (…)." Or Melanie, who simultaneously demonstrated her impression of the severity of depression:

> I can't really empathize with it in the sense that I have no idea what you would feel then, but I think that it are people who really, yeah, get up every day with a feeling like why am I here and I don't want to be here, you know, such an, uh,

negative undertone. But I really don't, I actually don't know if that is really the case.

While readers had the best intentions and were willing to participate in a study about depression, such reactions are in line with the general lack of understanding for depression noted in the introduction.

10.1.3. Before Reading: Expectations

A considerable proportion of the participants ($n = 9$) went into the study with hardly any expectations about the books, as can be seen in Table III.2. Most expectations participants had concerned the way of reading, with keeping a reading diary ($n = 9$). These expectations were not very specific, it was mostly curiosity about one's own reactions. As Bonno put it:

> I am very curious what the reading diary will do with me. Because, yes, I find it interesting to observe myself like 'Am I thinking about the book now, oh, I'm thinking about the book.' That is a different way of reading and that is interesting.

This response already brings out that even though this study tried to stay close to the "natural" reading experience, keeping a reading diary was an extraordinary thing for most readers. A few readers indicated that they are used to making notes while reading, for example because they have taught English, like Clint, or write reviews, like Mila.

Eleven readers did have expectations concerning Sylvia Plath's novel. These expectations were mainly related to participants' knowledge of Plath's suicide – they were curious what that would mean for the novel, if it would be too dark, for example. Three readers speculated that reading Plath might be very sad for them. In addition, of the six readers who had read Plath before (this included Aaltje and Lise, who dropped out), three said they were curious what their reading experience would be like now. For all these people it was many years ago and they mainly remembered the sad atmosphere. Malcolm, who has

a long history of depression but is currently doing well, expected that he would be "more open to the things that are in there, the topics," since he finds it easier now to talk about depression.

While there thus were some expectations concerning Plath, this was not the case for Hunt and Solomon, since no one had heard of these authors. This implied a rather open view at the beginning of the reading experience, which may not be in line with the "natural" reading experience (often, we start reading a book because we have certain expectations of it). Yet, some readers' need for context was evident; Giulia and Coleta started their reading process for both books by looking up information about the author and the book, and seven others started looking up information during reading (mainly about Churchill and about Sylvia Plath).

10.1.4. During Reading: Evolvement of Narrative Feelings

Taking a broad look at the narrative feelings readers experienced during the reading process, it can be noted that particularly during the first couple of pages, readers spent quite some energy getting oriented in the story world, establishing the time, place and characters, and forming hypotheses about the character (cf. Davis & Andringa, 1995). The subsequent evolvement of emotions did not follow the same pattern for all readers. From the data of the readers who gave scores to "emotionality" and "proximity to the character," four overall patterns of engagement emerged. These prototypical patterns are visualized in Figure III.1 and can be described as follows:

1) *Distanced*: overall low to moderate proximity, which remains unchanged (e.g., Malcolm and Huib for both Plath and Hunt, Alexander for Hunt. Figure III.1 shows the pattern of Alexander).

2) *Slow-to-warm-up*: low to moderate proximity, which increases towards the end (Melanie and Bonno for both texts. Figure III.1 shows Bonno's pattern for Hunt).

3) *Fluctuating*: fluctuating proximity, with high scores for scenes in which one recognized personal issues (e.g., Eline and Alexander for Plath. Figure III.1 shows Eline's pattern.)

4) *Engaged*: overall high proximity (e.g., Bo for Plath, Eline and Clint for Hunt. Figure III.1 shows Bo's pattern).

The increasing proximity towards the end of the text observed in pattern 2 mainly had to do with the fact that readers judged the end as positive, optimistic. These readers had trouble with the apathy of both main characters and got more enthusiastic when these characters appeared to take their lives into their own hands. In response to Plath, Mila and Coleta had a combination of *Fluctuating* and *Engaged* patterns, with an already high overall engagement but extra high peaks (9 or 10 on a scale of 10) for certain scenes. The *Engaged* pattern could be seen partly as a reader attitude of openness to the text and wanting to empathize with characters. Bo, Coleta, Mila and Eline all often gave numbers around "8" for emotionality for both books. However, while the differences were subtle, their scores still differed between books, which shows the importance of the match between reader and text. (Below, attention will be paid to the reasons behind fluctuating and differing proximity.)

These four general patterns were observed in the full study as well as in the pilot, except for pattern two, which was not observed in the pilot, since those fragments did not have such a clear ending (they ended mid-story). There was also one additional pattern, not included in the figure, that was only observed in the pilot study: starting out with a relatively high amount of proximity, but losing this sympathy along the way and subsequently remaining at a low level of engagement (Victoria, Verloc and Wouter for Plath). Such a pattern is less likely when reading an entire novel, since it is suggestive of a disappointment in the text that would lead many if not most readers to close the book. Moreover, for those only reading fragments, the sympathy that was

lost did not get a chance of being recovered in further scenes (which would have led to a fluctuating pattern).
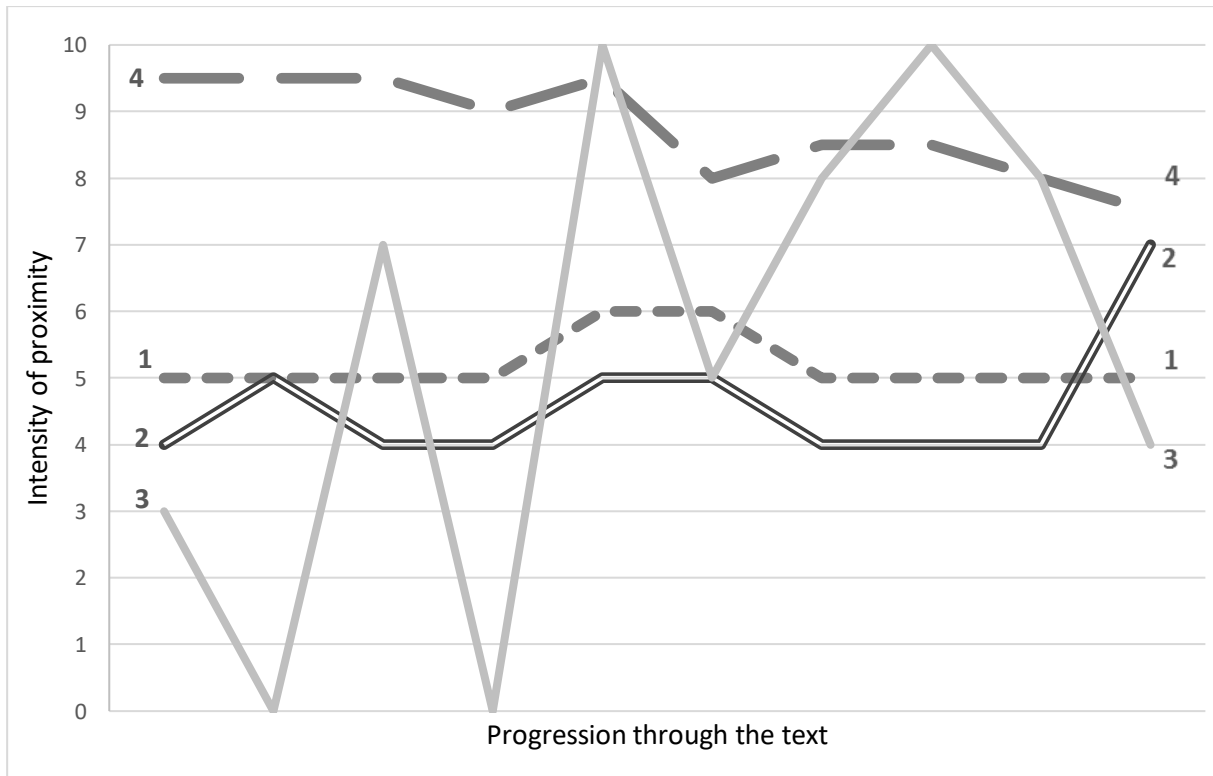
1 = *Distanced*, 2 = *Slow-to-warm-up*, 3 = *Fluctuating*, 4 = *Engaged*.

Figure III.1. Four patterns of prototypical evolving reader emotions.

Note: The lines are intended to indicate the general pattern, not the exact scores at each moment of reading, since readers differed in how often they gave a score on proximity. Each pattern is based on the concrete scores on proximity of one reader who was typical for the pattern.

10.1.5. During Reading: Narrative Feelings and Proximity

Feelings of proximity to characters and events could logically for a large part be characterized as narrative feelings: feelings of transportation, empathy, sympathy and identification. However, the picture is more nuanced than that: since readers wrote in some detail about their narrative feelings, it could be scrutinized which types of narrative feelings were related to the strongest sense of general proximity. The visualization tool "Code Relations" in MaxQDA, which shows how often a certain code is mentioned when another code is also mentioned, brought out that reporting a general high proximity score was

related to reporting sympathetic feelings (particularly hope and pity/concern), empathic feelings (particularly empathic understanding), but most strongly to identification. In many instances, identification with the character appeared to be key to increasing other narrative feelings and overall proximity. We can see that illustrated nicely in the following quote:

> The character felt close: 10. It's terrible not to be able to say goodbye to your dad, no matter how young you are at the moment. (...) I certainly thought of my own experiences when losing my father. (Eline)

Just before reading this scene in Plath that she is commenting on, Eline felt no proximity to the character at all, but the sudden similarity between her own experiences and the character's made the character come closer and the scene more emotional.

The effect of identification on overall proximity was even stronger in the case of Coleta, who did not only recognize certain specific feelings, thoughts or experiences in *The Bell Jar*, but who identified with the mental state of the character more generally:

> Esther's powerlessness, the bell jar in which she places herself, the isolation she creates herself, it touched on my own feelings of powerlessness and isolation, a heavy confrontation.

This confrontation was indeed so heavy for Coleta that she had to stop reading for a while. In terms of Cupchik (2002), she experienced under-distancing. Among those readers who said they had no personal experience with depression, she was the only one who experienced this to such an extent.

What Coleta experienced was a more typical reaction for those readers with personal experience with depression. All three readers who were currently dealing with a mood disorder were at times so drawn into the narrative (particularly Plath's) that they felt it came too close. This directly had to do with recognizing their own experiences, for example suicidal ideation (Margriet),

auto-mutilation (Mila), or low self-esteem (Michael). Such recognition was also appreciated, readers reacted enthusiastically when they recognized elements from their own complex experience, from the perverse attractiveness of depression as painted in Hunt to the battle with psychiatrists as depicted in Plath. Alexander, for example, said in response to a sentence in Solomon ("… it was also in depression that I learned my own acreage, the full extent of my soul"): "Very recognizable! I actually feel 'less full' than when I was still suffering from my disorder."

Yet, in concurrence with the general ambivalent experience that reading about depression constitutes for those with a depression, readers both wanted and shunned this recognition: Mila, Margriet and Michael all tried to find ways of reducing under-distancing, fitting with Cupchik's (2002) ideas and Pette's (2001) empirical findings. Most obviously, just like Coleta, Mila, Margriet and Michael all took a brief reading pause, with Mila reading some lighter texts in between. In addition, Margriet described taking a different reading attitude, in which she thought of the text as fictional: "If I can draw the line, that it's a story, then I can read it. If that line blurs, then I have to stop…" Michael mentioned that he may at some points have deliberately pushed emotions away, focusing on the difference between himself and the character, because he finds emotions difficult to deal with. In all these cases we see a conscious negotiation of one's distance to the text when identification makes the narrative events come too close.

Despite the important role for identification, high narrative engagement was also possible without readers recognizing their own experiences, thoughts or feelings. Many readers, for example, felt sympathy and anger when the character in Plath received electroshocks, or sympathy and tension when the character in Hunt let the black dog into her house. Hunt's text more generally managed to engage readers through the suspenseful story structure (short chapters with cliffhangers), which kept triggering most readers' curiosity. Still, engagement was strongest for Hunt when readers also sympathized with the

main character. Clint, for example, described his sympathy for Hunt's Esther as "heartbreakingly high."

Bo is another good example that it was possible for readers to feel closely engaged through sympathizing instead of identifying. Although he did not recognize himself in the characters, he constantly tried to understand them and sympathized with them, especially with Plath's Esther, leading to high overall scores for emotionality as well as proximity:

> Proximity scale 9-10: Esther is becoming more and more unreachable for her environment. Her thinking about suicide is becoming more and more pressing. As a reader, you see it happening as it is told, but you can't help her, or can she even be helped? Powerlessness of the reader, does that exist?

Bo thus felt distress, but as this quote shows, his distress was the distress of an outsider. The formulations he uses – "As a reader, you…" instead of "I…" – emphasize this. Generally, looking at those instances in which readers felt emotionality and/or proximity without feeling identification, the reactions were never quite as distressed or overwhelmed as when strong identification was involved; having to stop reading was never an issue here.

10.1.6. During Reading: Narrative Feelings and Distance

While identification could thus lead to a lack of distance, especially for those who were currently depressed, it was interesting to see that readers who had been depressed in the past did not feel under-distanced. In fact, overall they tended to feel more distance to the texts as those without an experience of depression. This appeared to have to do with a focus on the difference between oneself and the character, a mechanism by which readers could keep the text from becoming too emotional (cf. "resistance" as discussed in Part II). Giulia, Alexander and Malcolm all explicitly indicated that they may have distanced themselves from the character in Plath to protect themselves (cf. Pette, 2001). Giulia: "I do understand her, but (…) I do not want to go along with it."

To a lesser extent, this fear of letting upsetting events come too close could also be observed among those without experience with depression. Some participants got uncomfortable or frustrated with the "dark" presentation of the character's mind in Plath (e.g., Bonno and Melanie) and of the author's mind in Solomon (Liesbeth). These readers felt clearly relieved by the humoristic moments in Plath and Hunt, and were particularly happy when the characters started to get out of the black hole in these two novels.

As noted above, the scenes in which Plath's Esther became suicidal and in which she received electroshock therapy could get quite emotional for many readers, also for those without depression. However, these readers tended to show a clear limit to their affective empathy. They could sympathize, but they could not identify; they could not really put themselves into the shoes of the character. As Bonno phrased it: "I can feel understanding for her mental condition, but I can't feel what it is like to be so defeated."

While for Bonno this did not hinder the emotionality of the scenes about suicidal ideation, other readers without personal experience felt completely distanced during those scenes. Particularly those who did not see much merit in the style really seemed to distance themselves from the character, categorizing her as "too far gone," not within one's own realm of understanding anymore (e.g., Verloc, Wouter and Henry). As Huib explained:

> I find the character self-relativizing, humoristic, distant, hopeless. Proximity: 3. There are certainly feelings, and also things she undertakes, that I recognize. But on the other hand she's drifted off so far, that I don't recognize it. Pull yourself together, that's how I read the text.

Such a gap in understanding was quite prevalent, with twelve readers explicitly commenting on how odd and distanced the character in Plath felt to them. This could have been partly due to resistance against the painful subject matter, but Plath's style may have also played a role (see 10.1.7).

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As multiple readers noted, both Plath's and Solomon's text relied heavily on the "personal voice" of the narrator. This made it difficult for people to get truly involved in the text when they did not feel identification or at least sympathy. For Hunt, which was generally deemed "lighter" than Plath, this was somewhat less important. For many readers, the characters in Hunt evoked little emotions, but readers could still feel emotionally involved, partly – as noted above – because of the suspenseful story structure, but also because of the surprising figure of the black dog. Here, we necessarily have to turn to the role of style in mediating distance, which occurred both for Hunt and for Plath, but in different ways.[55]

10.1.7. During Reading: Style Mediating Distance

With the surprising figure of the dog in Hunt, we arrive at a different route to narrative engagement and enjoyment, namely stylistics. For some readers who did not feel close to the character, the style helped them to still feel – to some extent – drawn into the narrative. The metaphor of the black dog in Hunt was appreciated by a majority of the readers as striking, clever and original. This was not exclusive to those with a predominantly aesthetic reading style. "Ludic" reader Melanie, for example, also enjoyed "the different view on depression by using a dog to clarify how it can feel." The black dog could grip readers' attention as something that was interesting even when they were not particularly interested in depression (e.g., GVentoux) or in the character (e.g., Victoria).

For Plath, style could also draw readers in who otherwise might have started to feel distanced to the text. Five readers without depression remarked that the "beautiful" style of Plath helped to keep them interested despite feeling resistance to the subject. As Marleen wrote, for example: "You can enjoy it even though it's a sad subject." Looking at the sentences readers chose, this had to do

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[55] The word "mediate" is not used in a statistical sense here, but in its more common definition of establishing harmony, softening extremes ("arbitrate, conciliate").

with the imagery and details in Plath's descriptions. Eline was especially impressed by Plath's style, which helped her to arrive at a different type of proximity to the narrative world. "Proximity and emotionality are caused by the great way of writing: 9," she wrote. And: "Even though I don't feel close to the character, I still find the descriptions of how the character is feeling remarkably beautiful." In the closing interview, she confirmed how important style can be, that it can potentially override the importance of sympathy and identification: "I enjoyed reading *The Bell Jar* more, even though I did not feel very close to the character." In Co's reading diary of Plath, we see a similar reaction to Eline's, failing to identify, but feeling moved by the intimate style: "Very sensitively written, so close, but far away at the same time because I can't identify with 'such a person' [with suicidal tendencies]."

At the same time, other readers remarked that it was exactly Plath's style which, to some extent, created a distance. Four readers still appreciated this distance as fitting with the subject and specifically fitting with the image of the bell jar. Malcolm:

> I don't understand the main character and I also explain the title as such; it seems to be the intention to describe the character as someone whom you clearly see suffering but who cannot be touched in that suffering. (...) The bell jar is a problem for her as well as for those who see her in the 'jar.'

Yet, that the style fitted the subject was not sufficient for Malcolm. He and Victoria, who was also among those who observed that Plath's style was appropriate, remarked they would have preferred to be moved more by the book. For them, the distance thus remained too large.

That style creates distance was also regularly mentioned in response to Hunt's novel. For Hunt, it was not just the personification, but rather the absurd humor of the scenes in which the black dog occurred that could create distance. Some readers, like Clint, GVentoux and Michael, appreciated the absurdity. For Michael, who otherwise may have felt too little distance (as he recognized the

way depression appeared in *Mr. Chartwell*), the absurdity of the situations with the black dog helped him to keep the text readable. Others, however, found the metaphor and the humor not fitting for the subject. This was expressed most explicitly by Bo, Bonno, Coleta, Mila, Margriet and Co. Margriet and Mila both remarked that the black dog was too "strange" for them, not a proper depiction of how they experience depression, with Mila taking offense that the black dog was smelly, scary and dirty. Others contrasted Hunt's method negatively with Plath's. There was no distinct personal factor that readers who appreciated Plath more than Hunt shared. Some of them did have a stronger identificatory or empathic reading style (Bo, Mila and Coleta), but that was neither a necessary nor a sufficient factor. What was clear, however, was that these readers preferred the more personal, intimate approach of Plath's text. Coleta:

> Through the personalization of depression as a black dog, the depression remains more outside of the characters, still close, but not IN the characters, like it was articulated in *The Bell Jar*. That made *The Bell Jar* much more gripping.

10.1.8. During/After Reading: Reflection and Deepened Understanding

During the reading process, readers experienced many smaller and bigger thoughts about the work, the author, and the subject. The books intruded into their everyday lives in various ways: consciously, for example for those who wanted to find out more about the author or characters and conducted internet searches accordingly, but also subconsciously, when readers encountered situations that made them automatically think about the book. This latter effect was clearly visible for Bonno, who actually had a combined dream about the two books, but also experienced intruding thoughts in her daily life, which sometimes triggered further reflection:

> At the station I saw a depressed looking woman, warmly dressed as if she didn't want to be in touch with the outside world (...). Do I notice this because I am reading about depression?

That the books triggered automatic thoughts was also evident through readers reporting that certain scenes and images kept lingering. This was particularly obvious for the image of the black dog, which stuck in most readers' minds, for example Jacques's: "In the meantime the image of the black dog as a metaphor for depression often came back in my memory." As Marleen specified, even though she found *Mr. Chartwell* rather too strange at first, this was the fragment that she thought would linger in the longer run, because of the original personalization of depression and because it triggered her curiosity.

The impact of the texts on reflection differed between the two studies. In the pilot study, readers showed some reflection on depression during reading, but (given the shorter exposure) less than in the full study, and most of these readers did not have a different image of depression after reading. Partly, readers indicated that this may have had to do with them being distracted by other things during the time that the study took place. Reading fragments may not be a sufficiently involving experience to compete with life's events as a subject of contemplation. Still, in the pilot, Margriet and Alexander were triggered to think about their own past and present feelings in relation to depression (self-reflection), especially in response to Plath. In addition, Liesbeth and Co, both readers without experience with depression, were quite affected by Solomon's text, which triggered them to contemplate depression itself. Liesbeth indicated that she already thought depression was distressful, but that Solomon really brought that point home, that depression is "much worse actually." Co had a very similar response:

> The third text of eh, yes, eh, that depression really is quite a blow if you have to, that is really a disaster for people. I never had to realize that, because I do not really, eh, know it in my own surroundings. Perhaps, I have to say, never noticed it.

In the pilot study, Huib and Jacques also had altered images of depression after reading, but they focused less on what the experience of being depressed itself is

like, and more on the causes. As Jacques said, musing on Solomon's text: "Depression is part of life itself, that much he makes clear to me." He contrasted this to the idea that depression is a modern epidemic. It is noteworthy that the non-fiction text had this effect in the pilot, which could be due to the fact that people are more accustomed to thinking about short non-fiction texts (e.g., newspaper articles) than to short fiction fragments.

In the full study, unsurprisingly perhaps given that readers read complete novels here, the impact was larger. Reflection on the causes of depression was a more common response: seven readers reported these types of thoughts in the full study. Readers were also thinking more about what can be done about depression, the different forms it can take and how others react to it. But most striking was the deepened understanding of depression after reading. This was evident both from readers' responses and from the quantitative measure used in the full study.

Looking at the quantitative measure of empathic understanding, there was a noticeable increase in the average score on the statements compared to the scores before reading: 1.5 points, making the average score after reading 32.93 (SD = 2.10). Even with the small number of participants (N = 14), a paired samples t-test showed a significant effect of reading: $t(13)$= -2.16, p = .049, Cohen's d = .62 (medium effect size). To some extent, there was a ceiling effect. Those who already scored 33 or 34 could not score much higher now. For six people, the score stayed the same. For six others, the score increased. There were now four participants who scored 35 (Mila, Bo, Michael and Adriana). Eline, who earlier scored the lowest with a sum score of 25, now scored 33. The only score that decreased was Henry's, from 30 to 28. Yet, Henry still showed some gained understanding in his responses, reporting that through reading it became clear for him that there are different types of depression.

The qualitative responses explained the change in the statements: many readers were now more convinced of the serious nature of depression. This is illustrated nicely in Bo's response about his change in thinking about depression:

[before reading] I was like 'most people are over-reacting,' well, I don't believe that anymore at all. (…) So yes, that understanding, you get that when you read the books, you get the situation of the people concretely, you understand that and then, I also think, yes, that could not be different, no, they cannot do differently.

10.1.9. Causes of Understanding: Narrative Feelings and Effective Images

The empathic understanding discussed above appeared to be aided by narrative feelings. This was especially evident for Bo, Coleta and GVentoux, who all had experienced strong narrative feelings (GVentoux only in response to Hunt), and all emphasized that they understood depression much better now (note that this increase was not reflected in Coleta's and GVentoux' quantitative scores due to the ceiling effect). Eline, whose quantitative change in empathic understanding was the greatest, also showed this clear relation between understanding and proximity in her responses. While Eline enjoyed both novels, she would sooner recommend Hunt's novel (in which she was consistently engaged) than Plath's (in which her proximity and emotionality shifted quite a bit). When explaining this, Eline emphasized that proximity to Hunt's character helped her to understand depression:

Uh, well, I think this one [Hunt], because this one, uh, shows more understanding, you know, you simply get more proximity to that story, you better understand what a depressed feeling is.

Personal experience and identification may have played a role here, since Eline was familiar with grief and the character in Hunt had lost her husband, which brought her closer to Eline.

When readers felt little for the character, a different route to understanding was style; style could still trigger these relatively distanced

readers to start reflecting on what depression might be like. This is illustrated by Adriana's response to Plath:

> Again all those thoughts about suicide, the only thing you are curious about is what she will think up next in order not to do it. Beautifully described, but by now it's getting annoying. Yet, maybe this is how it goes for people who are planning to do it.

While Adriana is obviously getting irritated and is not feeling very close to the character, Plath's crafty description does trigger her to think about how actual suicidal ideation works. Another example of the effect of style in the absence of proximity is given by Melanie, who did not feel particularly close to the characters, but who did indicate at the end of the study that she now understood depressed people better. As Melanie remarked, the metaphor of the black dog was decisive for this: "through explaining it with the dog you learn to understand how heavy a depression can be." On the other hand, Melanie's understanding remained limited: "But I still cannot imagine the real feeling." Overall, then, we can say that proximity to the character did seem important to establish a meaningful change in people's understanding of depression, a felt sense of what depression is like.

Indeed, the strongest reactions of deepened understanding showed the combination of narrative and stylistic engagement. The stylistic device that stood out most clearly was the black dog, which was already mentioned by Melanie. Eline's better understanding of depression, for example, was not simply due to her sympathy for the character in Hunt, Eline also showed high appreciation for the metaphor of the black dog. She felt that it communicated something about depression that she, lacking personal experience with depression, would not have thought of:

> Like an assassin the depression manifests itself in the form of a dog. Very inventive and it gives the layman a good image how a depression influences people's lives.

Michael, who did have personal experience with depression, agreed that the black dog was a good metaphor for "people who don't have experience with it." This is confirmed by GVentoux, who gained fundamental insight into the nature of depression through the black dog:

> Yes, the image I had [of depression] changed, but because of the second book. That it is a huge, I really mean that, an enormously heavy burden for people who are affected by depressed moods or melancholia or you name it. And, I never realized this, that it can appear like a monster which is constantly on the look-out, can show itself any moment of the day and can put you in a heavily depressed mood, and, with all possible consequences…

As is evident from both Eline's and GVentoux' response, the metaphor lives on in their conception of depression, with them inventing metaphors related to the looming black dog ("assassin," "monster"). This suggests a new impression of depression that will last beyond the period of the closing interviews.

Suggestive of this lasting impression are readers' responses to the question what they would be most likely to remember from the books. Many readers said "the figure of the black dog." If nothing more, it made an impact through the surprise effect. Defamiliarization, here, appeared to lead to reflection about the nature of depression. Yet, it needs to be noted that this only clearly translated in deepened understanding when readers thought it was a fitting metaphor. Some readers (e.g., Mila, Verloc) mainly stressed how the metaphor is not adequate for depression and others tried to determine for themselves to what extent it is adequate and to what extent it is not (e.g., Clint, Bo).

For Solomon's text, it was also the metaphor for depression (of an ivy-grown tree) that readers tended to appreciate and remember most vividly, even while Solomon was overall often deemed either difficult, boring, or both. For Plath, the lasting impact of metaphors was less evident, possibly because they were not as extensive as Hunt's black dog and Solomon's ivy-grown tree. Plath

typically worked with similes and metaphors on the sentence-level, not with page- (or book-) long Homeric ones. Some readers mentioned that they found the image of "the bell jar" itself strong, but what lingered after reading Plath were rather entire scenes that one had found beautiful (e.g., Esther contemplating suicide on the beach). Generally, those who felt a stronger impact of Plath than of Hunt showed appreciation for the dark atmosphere and the "personal voice": being inside a depressed person's head. As Bo explained his preference for Plath:

> Look, the story of *The Bell Jar* is actually much more emotional and you feel much closer there than, uh, in *Mr. Chartwell*. And why is that? Because it's very specific that story about what is happening to her and how she experiences it and how negative she is...

10.1.10. After Reading: Books as Conversation Starters

For five readers (all in the full study), reading about depression had an identifiable social impact: it allowed them to talk to others about depression, functioning as a conversation starter for a difficult subject that may otherwise not have been discussed. In cases where these conversations took place between someone with and someone without depression, this helped to bridge a gap. Eline, for example, used her reading experience to sympathize with a colleague whose husband was depressed:

> You know, you try to say things, but it is just very difficult, to deal with people who have that. Because you yourself are quick to think, also my colleague, 'Come on!', you know. And, yeah, in her case, her husband, it's very difficult to say the right things, and she [said] she also sometimes just doesn't know. And then I say: 'Yeah, I can imagine, because, I've read this…'

Bo had a very similar experience, being able to show empathy to a friend who otherwise may have kept his feelings to himself:

> I had a lunch date today. We talked afterwards and he told me that his son has a burnout and is in therapy. I spoke about *The Bell Jar* and the depressions and suicide attempts of Esther. His son had also done an attempt. They are not going

on holiday this summer in order to be there for their son. Through reading the book I could talk about it.

Apart from being helpful for those without depression who want to understand people who are dealing with depression, the books also offered those with a mood disorder a way to start talking about, or to explain, what they experience. This is expressed here by Mila:

> I take daily walks with my husband and [during those walks] I also talked about the books now and then. For me, it formed a way to talk about my own depression to him.

Through functioning as conversation starters, the books could thus form a starting point for further understanding. Above we saw that some readers found the black dog a particularly adequate metaphor for depression, while others disputed this and saw more realistic value in Plath's personal experiences as recounted through her alter ego Esther Greenwood. Yet, as long as people discuss what they read, it is not that important for empathic understanding that a book gets the description of mental pain exactly "right" (insofar as one can even speak of a "right" and "wrong" description). In conversation, those with experience with a certain type of mental pain can adjust the picture for those who have only read about it.

10.1.11. Side Note: Reading Diary Difficulties and Advantages

Overall, it is relevant to take into account what effect having to keep a reading diary had on participants' responses. As noted above, keeping a reading diary could interfere with readers' regular reading experience. While most participants did not mind keeping a reading diary, apart from it taking up more time than most expected, five participants indeed explicitly said that keeping the reading diary hindered reading on. Some participants therefore decided to first read the entire book or fragment and only wrote about their experience afterwards.

However, keeping the reading diary was also appreciated by many participants. Six participants reported that the process of writing made them reflect on what they had read in a way they normally would not. Bo, for example, said: "While you try to write it down and think those characters through again, you experience it in a very different way. And then it becomes much deeper what happens." Others also noted that keeping the reading diary could lead to a more intense and emotional experience. Michael, who suffers from a mood disorder, found this troubling, but also appreciated it: "Normally, I don't read this intensively, I just put it away if I don't feel like it (…). Now I'm more preoccupied with it and that is also kind of nice." The implications of this "reading diary effect" are discussed below.

10.2. Conclusion Qualitative Studies

There is a lot to gain when it comes to people's understanding for depression, and as these two qualitative studies showed, novels are one way to help people think and talk about what it means to be depressed. Starting with the most promising results from the studies, we can conclude that empathic understanding can be incited by an original metaphor (when deemed adequate by the reader) or strong feelings of identification or empathy with the character. These aesthetic and narrative feelings can also lead readers to talk to others about what they have read, thereby potentially increasing understanding even further.

These studies also shed light on more general processes of reading about suffering. During reading, as we have seen, readers engaged with characters and events in a process of continued negotiation of distance and proximity. They did not always find a balance that allowed for engagement, as the *Distanced* pattern of evolving emotions demonstrated. Different from Davis and Andringa's (1995) findings, for these texts, there was no clear overall primacy effect of sympathy with the character. Instead, sympathy and empathy with the character depended

to a large extent on whether readers felt they could still identify with what the character was doing and thinking. This was evident in the *Slow-to-warm-up* pattern, with increasing engagement towards the end (when characters became more pro-active and optimistic), and in the *Fluctuating* pattern, with high scores for scenes in which one recognized personal issues. The *Slow-to-warm-up* pattern could be seen as a recency effect (cf. Sklar, 2009), but the more complex *Fluctuating* pattern was more common. Finally, some reader-text interactions led to an overall *Engaged* pattern, either because of the reader's personal characteristics (willingness to empathize or personal experience which matched the character's) or because of a good match between a text with an interesting style and a reader who greatly appreciated that. These four patterns demonstrate, as expected, that when reading extensive narrative texts, the reading process is more complicated than is brought out in studies into a single short story.

Experiencing either distance or proximity could not be explained through looking at the different reading types. This may have had to do partly with the fact that the readers in this sample tended to have multiple reading preferences. In a more homogenous sub sample of, for instance, predominantly ludic readers, this might have been different. Identificatory reading was associated with under-distancing, but strong identification was not only experienced by those who generally reported to be identificatory readers. Rather, personal experience made all the difference for the subject matter under scrutiny. Under-distancing was experienced by all three readers who were currently dealing with depression.

Focusing on the style could help readers who experienced under-distancing to gain more distance (cf. Cupchik, 2002). Apart from focusing on the style, the under-distanced readers' strategies for establishing distance were pausing and distancing themselves from the character, the same strategies as observed by Pette (2001). In addition, one reader with current experience with depression had the strategy of remembering that what she was reading is fiction,

which corresponds with the idea of aesthetic distance, but seems to go against Oatley's (1999) claims that it is the fictional nature of narrative fiction that makes us feel more. Those who had experience with depression in the past did not feel under-distanced, but this did take conscious effort. Among these participants, taking distance from the character by stressing the differences between oneself and the character was a common response.

When proximity was low, style could also help to further engagement (cf. Koopman et al., 2012). Several readers who experienced no or low identification or empathy were drawn to read on because of the beauty or interestingness of the style. Style was thus crucial in mediating distance. In addition, style could help in furthering understanding. This was particularly evident for the metaphor of the black dog. The surprise effect here was strong, which attests to the potential of literariness (Miall & Kuiken, 1994, 2002). At least for some readers, the novel metaphor functioned as an eye-opener, giving them a new language to think and talk about a phenomenon. This is in line with Shklovsky's (1965) suggestions of the effect of defamiliarization. This potential has also been observed in the foregrounding studies in Part II, where the text with most foregrounded features led to the highest scores on empathic understanding after reading. In Part II, it was not entirely clear how this worked, although it was suggested that it might have to do with the mixed feelings being evoked. In the present studies, we saw that at least for some readers, the novel metaphor functioned as an eye-opener, giving them a new language to think and talk about a phenomenon. In addition, the current findings suggested that a combination of strong narrative and aesthetic feelings may be most conducive to empathic understanding (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 2002), which is in line with the findings for reflection in the genre study of Part I.

Generally, the metaphor of the black dog was something that readers remembered. By lingering in their memories, the metaphor can potentially help readers to think about depression when they encounter it again in real life (e.g., when meeting someone with a mood disorder). While there was some evidence

for this within the reading diaries and closing interviews (particularly in the full study), in order to see whether and to what extent lingering metaphors and scenes have an impact on the longer term, longitudinal studies are needed. In addition, more studies with novels varying in stylistic elements can help to explore the role of style further.

Contrasting the findings between the pilot and the full study, we saw that the full study had a more evident impact on understanding for depression. This may have had to do with the fact that readers were engaged with the topic through a story for a longer period, during which they thought about the work itself, the characters, but also about depression. Even if they were not consciously thinking about it, it may have played in the back of their minds. In the pilot study, many readers read the fragments in one or two settings, thus logically lowering the opportunity for a longer-lasting impact.

This contrast between the pilot and the full study in terms of impact demonstrates the importance of conducting studies in which readers get to read entire books. A set-up with full novels comes closer to the actual reading experience, but out of practical considerations, most reader response studies rely on fragments or short stories, leading to lower ecological validity. In the current full study, it needs to be noted that the ecological validity still was not perfect. As multiple readers remarked, keeping a reading diary leads to a more intense and/or reflective involvement with the book than regular reading. The impact may thus have been bigger than for a "normal" reading experience because of the addition of the reading diary. Also, in contrast to Pette's (2001) study or the *Tonio* study in Part I, readers were not free in their choice of the book they had to read. This implied that they did not have many expectations, while expectations can influence the reader experience, as Pette (2001) has suggested before. The current proliferation of book clubs (offline and online, e.g., goodreads.com) may offer new ways to get access to reader responses to books they actually want to read. Of course, it is challenging to combine an experimental set-up with such sources of data, but it is definitely worth our

research efforts if we want to gain further understanding of the reader experience.

While the potentially more reflective reading experience through the reading diaries may have negatively affected the ecological validity of the studies, the fact that readers reported this does point to possible practical implications of reading diaries in therapeutic settings. First of all, keeping a reading diary while reading a text about depression can help those who suffer from depression to relive their own experiences and reflect on them. Careful monitoring would be necessary here, since readers who had a mood disorder themselves were at risk of feeling under-distanced, suggesting that reading about depression could in some cases exacerbate dark moods. A second, and perhaps more promising potential implication is related to the finding that reading and keeping a reading diary allowed for communicating one's experiences to others. As Bernstein and Rudman (1989) have suggested in the context of bibliotherapy, one of the things that reading can do is provide you with words that were previously lacking. By providing words as well as by offering a common point of reference, discussing texts about others who are dealing with a mental health problem may further mutual understanding. This was also evident from the function of the books as conversation starters. Books may not only aid the communication between care professionals and those whom they care for, but also between the affected individual and his or her family and friends. In this way, the gap between those who are depressed and those who are not, illustrated in the opening quote from Plath's novel, may, to some extent, be bridged.

General Conclusion and Discussion

Reading good literature is an experience of pleasure, of course; but it is also an experience of learning what and how we are, in our human integrity and our human imperfection, with our actions, our dreams, and our ghosts, alone and in relationships that link us to others, in our public image and in the secret recesses of our consciousness.

(Mario Vargas Llosa – "Why Literature?," 2001)

This dissertation explored why people want to read novels about the suffering of others. In addition, it investigated whether and how reading about suffering leads to reflection and to empathy with actual people. Since scholars and critics making claims about the power of reading have generally singled out *literary* reading (e.g., De Botton, 1997; Habermas, 1983; Nussbaum, 2001; Rorty, 1989; Sontag, 2007), I focused on the effects of literary texts. Apart from reviewing the existing theoretical and empirical work, I used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative reader response studies. I conducted two surveys into readers' motives to read about suffering, two experiments to determine the effects of literary versus non-literary texts on empathy and reflection, and two qualitative studies to study the processes during reading which could lead to empathic understanding. The surveys and experiments each had a small qualitative component (open questions), and the more extensive of the two qualitative studies had a quantitative component (participants answering empathic statements on a scale before and after they read the novels). In this way, responses gathered through one type of measure were elucidated and extended by those obtained through another type of measure.

Overall, the findings in this project concerning why people read novels about suffering support the claim made by Vargas Llosa in the quote above: they

appreciate it when novels can make them feel, move them, but they also want to learn about themselves and others. The findings concerning the effects of literature are slightly more complex – these effects are not apparent in every comparison between different types of texts – but the findings at least suggest that literariness could have a specific role to play in fostering empathic understanding, possibly through evoking mixed feeling states and through presenting people with new words and images for experiences. In addition, literariness could have longer-lasting effects on some people's thoughts, through lingering original images and scenes. Such a "lingering effect" may be less likely for more straightforward stories which focus on plot. Indeed, in the current project, reports of lingering scenes and details were mostly given in response to literary narratives. In addition to these findings that were specific to literature, the studies demonstrated the potential ethical power of reading in general through showing relations between one's lifetime exposure to literature on the one hand and empathy and prosocial behavior on the other, and through showing that emotions during reading can affect empathy, prosocial behavior and reflection. Below, I discuss the results of this project in further detail.

Why people want to read stories about the suffering of others

That people voluntarily read stories which evoke feelings we tend to consider unpleasant in daily life, like sadness and fear, may at first view seem illogical, and is referred to as the "drama paradox" (cf. Oliver, 1993; Zillmann, 1998). Theories focusing on mood-management or hedonic (i.e., pleasure-oriented) functions of media seem insufficient in explaining our attraction to tragic narratives (cf. Oliver, 2003, 2008). More recent explorations of sad media preferences have therefore emphasized "eudaimonic" (i.e., meaning-oriented) functions (Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011).

Throughout this research project, there was more evidence that people read about suffering for reasons of meaning-making than in order to reduce

unpleasant emotions. Of the psychological functions that were researched in the larger of the two survey studies –

the "sad books survey" – "catharsis beliefs" could be considered the most clearly hedonic and "insight" the most clearly eudaimonic function, while the others (meta-emotions, narrative feelings, aesthetic feelings, downward social comparison, comfort, and preparation) fell in between. In this study, as well as in the survey study looking at readers' motives to read Van der Heijden's "requiem novel" *Tonio* (2015; original Dutch version: 2011), there was little indication that catharsis beliefs would be crucial. Catharsis beliefs did not predict a sad book preference in the sad books survey, and in the *Tonio* study, only a very small minority hoped to "purge" unpleasant emotions through reading this novel. People's motives as well as their experiences during reading *Tonio* rather pointed in the direction of "clarification," another translation of the Aristotelian "catharsis" (Golden, 1968; Nussbaum, 1986). In this alternative conceptualization, the unpleasant emotions during reading are not expelled, but experiencing them aids understanding of the emotions themselves and the events that evoked them (cf. Scheele, 2001). Such clarification could be considered an eudaimonic experience. In addition, participants in the qualitative studies who had already read about depression typically did so to either understand others or to understand themselves better. For the latter group, those with personal experience with depression, reading could be painful, but people still did it in order to find recognition – an experience that was also evident among participants in the *Tonio* study who were dealing with grief themselves. As Leader (2009) has suggested, reading literature can be a way to share the experience of loss in a time that is almost devoid of shared rituals. "[T]he arts," Leader (2009) proposed, might be "a vital tool in allowing us to make sense of the losses inevitable in all of our lives" (p. 6) (cf. Koopman, 2014).

The combined findings could be argued to support Nussbaum's (1986, 1990, 2001) ideas that experiencing emotions through reading literature about suffering can aid understanding. As Nussbaum (1990) has suggested (following

Proust), "the most important truths about human psychology cannot be communicated or grasped by intellectual activity alone: powerful emotions have an irreducibly important cognitive role to play" (p. 7). In the sad books survey, those respondents who appreciated gaining insights and experiencing personal growth as well as those liking to feel various emotions while reading (meta-emotions and absorption/empathy) were more likely to have a preference for sad books. This survey thus suggested that both the experience of feeling and the experience of learning could be important aspects of readers' attraction to sad stories, that it is not a matter of either/or. It further suggested that sad books may be quite unique in this. That an emotional experience during reading also actually triggers people to reflect was brought to light by the experimental studies in Part II and by the qualitative studies (cf. Igartua, 2010; Koopman et al., 2012; Vorderer, 1993). In addition, the correlations between empathic understanding and reflection suggested that feeling and thinking may not be entirely different domains.

Another factor that appeared to aid understanding was style. In the qualitative studies, original text features or beautiful passages made readers start reflecting on what depression might be like, even if they felt relatively little for the character. The first experimental study in Part II showed similar findings, with both subjectively experienced foregrounding and aesthetic attractiveness being able to trigger reflection about the narrative depression texts. Finding the style of novels important, however, was not a unique predictor of a general preference for sad books in the larger survey study in Part I. Still, answers to an open question about impressive sad books in that study suggested the potential role of style in making sad content manageable or even impressive for some readers. The *Tonio* survey confirmed this, since a large proportion of readers indicated they wanted to read this specific novel (by an acclaimed author) out of curiosity about the style.

Through the two different survey studies into readers' motives, this dissertation could show that general patterns in readers' preferences to read sad

books are reflected in those for reading one specific novel about grief, while also suggesting the social dynamics involved in making that specific novel into a best-seller. Readers appeared to want to read *Tonio* to have an impressive experience, emotionally and in terms of an extended understanding of loss – which is in line with readers' general motives to read sad books. The responses to both survey studies indicated people's need for meaningful reading experiences, which may be a combination of feeling and learning, of the emotional and the cognitive (cf. Nussbaum, 1990, 2001). Yet, there were also more everyday reasons for choosing to read *Tonio* in particular: social factors played a role, especially the media-attention the book received.

It remains to be further explored which role emotions play in eudaimonic reading – to what extent can we differentiate feeling and learning in such experiences and, if they can be separated, to what extent do they reinforce one another? Can catharsis as clarification exist in the absence of feelings, and if so, is this a shorter-lived experience than if strong feelings are present? The findings throughout the dissertation suggest that reflection is set in motion through readers experiencing empathy, distress and identification, but at the same time, particularly the *Tonio* study suggested that strong (self-reported) feelings may not be a necessary or sufficient precondition to gaining insights. It would thus be interesting to more fully track the experiences of people during reading, not just through self-report (which can only track people's conscious experiences, and is subject to social desirability) but also through sophisticated neurophysiological measures.[56] It could be the case, for example, that some readers "forget" they had emotions during reading precisely because a text led them to gain insights – the

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[56] Currently, however, such measures are not very precise yet – they cannot, for example, tell us which emotion is being experienced. Thus, such measures still need to be supplemented with self-report data. A recent example of neurophysiological research into the reading experience, the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research's (TNO) "Grunberg-project" which used EEG, ECG, skin conductance and respiration showed a rather limited ability to differentiate between reading emotional and non-emotional passages (Brouwer, Hogervorst, Reuderink, Van der Werf, & Van Erp, 2015).

process of intellectualization and rationalization might obscure previously felt emotions (cf. Koopman et al., 2012; Lazarus & Alfert, 1964).

In addition, it could be explored to what extent style matters for those specifically interested in meaning-making. Both survey studies were suggestive of at least some readers' appreciation of an intricate style being able to transform a chaotic experience into something we can try to comprehend. This might be a specific function of literary novels, but it needs to be further determined whether other artistic media representing suffering (films, games, songs) can lead to equally meaningful experiences and whether experiences are indeed deemed more meaningful for those media which can be said to be of higher artistic value. Eventually, such combined efforts from media and literary scholars may solve the riddle of the "drama paradox."

The effects of literary texts about suffering on empathy and reflection

Many have claimed that reading literary fiction makes us better people, but as the review in Part II showed, empirical evidence has been lagging behind (cf. Keen, 2007). While there is some support that exposure to stories can increase empathy, for example by changing attitudes about outgroup members (e.g., Batson et al., 1997, 2002; Hakemulder 2000, 2008; Johnson, 2013; Marlowe & Maycock, 2001) or by generally increasing one's ability to infer emotional states (Black & Barnes, 2015; Mar et al., 2006, 2009), there is little systematic empirical evidence for a specific contribution of *literary* narratives (apart from Kidd & Castano, 2013). In addition, there is no support yet that literary texts trigger more thoughts than non-literary texts, although there is some suggestion that a deeper kind of reflection might be triggered (Halász, 1991; Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Seilman & Larsen, 1989).

I argued that in order to understand the effects reading could have on empathy and reflection, it is necessary that empirical research distinguishes more systematically between effects that can be attributed to narrativity, to

fictionality, and to literariness. I presented the global pathways through which narrativity, fictionality and literariness could influence empathy in a multi-factor model of literary reading. The multi-factor model combined Oatley's (1994; 1999) role-taking theory and Miall and Kuiken's (1994; 1999; 2002) defamiliarization theory. Following Oatley, readers are invited to see things and events from a character's perspective, thus implicitly taking on his or her role, which subsequently can lead to more understanding (empathy) and reflection on the situations depicted in the story (cf. Batson et al., 2002; Hakemulder, 2000). Following Miall and Kuiken, the potential power of literature would lie mainly in style, with the striking features in a literary text ("foregrounding," see Mukařovský, 1976) leading readers to become unsettled and to start looking at familiar things in a different way ("defamiliarization," see Shklovsky, 1965). The multi-factor model suggested that while role-taking can take place for all types of narratives, literary narratives might evoke more aesthetic feelings, potentially giving readers a space to stop and reflect on the content as well. Narrative and aesthetic feelings were central in the model, even though it was hypothesized that fiction might also work directly through the aesthetic distance that stories without truth claims offer readers, and that narrativity might work directly through role-taking even if readers feel relatively little. While narrative feelings were deemed most likely to impact empathy with others, a combination of narrative and aesthetic feelings was expected to influence reflection. In addition, and not included in the model, the personal factors exposure to literature, personal experience and trait empathy were considered particularly likely factors of influence.

These theoretical expectations were put to the test in two experiments – the "genre study" and the "foregrounding study" (reported in Part II) – and further explored in two qualitative studies (reported in combination in Part III). The two experimental studies had somewhat different outcomes on the empathy measures. The genre study, which compared reactions to expository, simple narrative, and literary narrative texts, did not show any differences on an

attitudinal measure of empathy with others ("empathic understanding"). The foregrounding study, however, which compared reactions to three versions of one literary text differing in foregrounding, did: those readers who had read the most original text (containing most foregrounding) had the highest empathic understanding afterwards. This effect was upheld when controlling for personal factors like trait empathy.

There are multiple explanations for these varying outcomes. First of all, this may have been due to the different comparisons in the two studies: it could be the case that the (more sentimental and straightforward) simple narrative texts form a more directly affective pathway to empathic understanding than the literary texts, which might work through a combined affective-cognitive sensitization to others' experiences (cf. Nussbaum, 1990; Shklovsky, 1965). These different pathways could have led to similar outcomes on empathic understanding. Secondly, the fact that an effect was found in the foregrounding study while it was not found in the genre study could be due to the conditions of the experiments: the foregrounding study used a more elaborate instruction, which may have made readers pay more attention to the texts, and attention may be a necessary precondition for literary texts to have their effects (cf. Hakemulder, 2004; Van Peer, 1986). Moreover, in the genre study readers read from a screen, while in the foregrounding study they read from paper, which might have caused a more shallow type of reading in the genre study (cf. Ackerman & Goldsmith, 2011, Mangen & Kuiken, 2014).[57]

Finally, the current attitudinal measure of empathy may not have been able to capture subtle differences in people's understanding for others. Still, the suitability of this measure for this type of reader response research is suggested

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[57] The experiment by Ackerman and Goldsmith (2011) in which participants read expository texts, either from paper or from screen, demonstrated "more erratic study-time regulation on screen than on paper" (p. 18), which, they argued, may be due to people's perception that "the electronic medium is better suited for fast and shallow reading of short texts" (p. 29). In the experiment by Mangen and Kuiken (2014), participants reading from screen reported higher "dislocation" in a text (i.e., a feeling for the length of the texts) than those reading from paper, and when adding a non-fiction instruction, participants reading from screen experienced less narrative engagement than those reading from paper.

by the fact that both in the foregrounding study and in the qualitative studies, scores on this measure were higher after reading than before reading. In addition, the genre study found effects of both people's trait empathy and of their lifetime exposure to literature on this attitudinal measure, which is according to expectations. This latter finding, that one's lifetime exposure to literature has an effect on empathic understanding, is in line with earlier research using different measures of empathy (Mar et al., 2006, 2009).

While the effect of lifetime exposure to literature on empathic understanding was not replicated in the foregrounding study (there, the effect of the original text condition overruled all potential effects of personal factors), the foregrounding study did find that one's exposure to literature was the only variable to have an impact on the other empathic outcome measure: donating to a related charity. This effect remained in place when controlling for being a student or parent and for education, which is relevant, since people who read tend to be older and highly educated (Cloïn et al., 2011; Witte & Scholtz, 2015). In the genre study, on the other hand, it appeared to be mainly the emotional effect of the simple narrative text about depression that influenced whether one donated. Prosocial behavior as specific as donating might, then, be positively influenced by reading both in the short run (when reading emotional texts) and in the longer run (when reading diverse authors), but the current experiments do not yet provide enough evidence for a specific long-term effect of literariness (let alone fictionality) on such empathic reactions. In addition, of course, for actual prosocial behavior to occur, many other factors can play a role, not only one's awareness of need, but also one's income (Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012), one's values and one's calculation of the costs and benefits (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011).

Still, these are promising results for reading narratives in general, particularly given the fact that in addition to these findings, a significant correlation was found between lifetime exposure to literature and self-reported cognitive empathy (or: perspective-taking). There was no relation between

lifetime exposure to literature and self-reported emotional empathy. This suggests that Oatley's role-taking theory and Nussbaum's ideas about the importance of practicing one's imagination could be correct: reading may indeed train our ability to understand what it is like to walk a mile in someone's shoes, to take in other perspectives. While there is already some evidence pointing in this direction, it remains to be further researched whether literary texts are more conducive to training this ability than simple narrative texts (cf. Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kotovych et al., 2011).

What about the other claim about literature's potential power, its supposed impact on making people reflect on themselves and others (e.g., Althusser, 1980; Bronzwaer, 1986; Habermas, 1983; Nussbaum, 1995, 2001)? For the short run, the experimental studies showed no differences between conditions in the amount of thoughts (genre study) nor in the depth of thoughts (foregrounding study). However, the genre study also asked participants to report whether they had thought back to the text after one week, and at that point deeper thoughts were mostly reported by people who had read the literary texts. While this type of thinking back was only reported by a small minority, it is relevant to note this kind of impact: even though the texts were short and were read from a screen, they were still able to cause a deeper kind of reflection for some of those reading literature. In addition, people who had read the literary texts in the genre study were the only ones indicating that particular scenes or images were so impressive that they kept thinking of them. Again, only a small minority reported this, but the lingering presence of literature was also observed in the *Tonio* survey and in the qualitative studies. In the qualitative studies, especially the surprising personalization of depression as a black dog stuck in people's minds. Such an experience of lingering imagery might also affect people's thoughts and feelings in new situations. The qualitative studies were somewhat suggestive of such a real-life effect, since multiple participants had engaged in conversations about depression with acquaintances that they otherwise would not have had. Yet, the lack of a control group in the qualitative

studies makes it impossible to say whether reading literature is a prerequisite for this.

The mechanisms through which reading can impact empathy and reflection were not completely clarified in this project, although there is some support for the hypotheses from the role-taking and defamiliarization theories as outlined in the multi-factor model. Overall, sympathy/empathy with a character appeared to be the clearest predictor of empathic understanding for others in comparison to all the other narrative and aesthetic feelings. However, the conducted analysis does not exclude the possibility that the effect is the other way around: that people who generally have higher empathic understanding for people depressed or grieving also feel more sympathy for specific characters. In addition, this effect was only found in the genre study, not in the foregrounding study.

In the foregrounding study, on the other hand, responses to the open questions pointed towards a mixed emotional state as a potential explanation for increased empathic understanding. An example of such a complex emotional state, combining beauty and pain, was one participant's response in which both "a sad beauty" and "a gray joy" were mentioned. Similar responses were also seen in the *Tonio* study, in which readers attributed a beautiful style with the ability to transform what is painful into something truthful. While it could not statistically be checked in the foregrounding study whether mixed emotions affected empathic understanding, such an explanation would be in line with Shklovsky's (1965) defamiliarization theory, which posits that art can make us feel the essence of experiences and things – the stoniness of the stone. More research into these types of mixed feeling states within aesthetic experience and the potential "transformative" power of beautiful and original language could lead to further insight into the relation between foregrounding, feeling and understanding. Recently, Hanich et al. (2014), and Menninghaus et al. (2015) have looked into the mixed emotional state of "feeling moved," but they did not look into foregrounding. "Feeling moved" as they conceptualize it, as a

combination of sadness and joy, might be similar to the mixed feeling states reported in the foregrounding study, but I would hypothesize that beauty and/or originality form an additional aspect to sadness and joy. The joy that was experienced by the readers in the foregrounding study may partly have been joy in the beauty of the language.

As already noted in the section why people read about suffering, narrative feelings impacted reflection. While identification was shown to play an important role in the qualitative studies, overall, it may be particularly the affective responses of sympathy/empathy and empathic distress during reading that cause people to think, as both the genre study and the foregrounding study indicated. When we feel for and with suffering characters, this may set in motion cognitive efforts to deal with and to interpret these feelings (cf. Koopman et al., 2012). In addition, in the genre study, perceived foregrounding also predicted reflection. Such a surprise effect, this study suggested, is more likely to occur when people have limited previous exposure to literature. This is suggestive of the generally higher cognitive load that reading an original text forms for these readers. However, as the readers in the qualitative studies showed, original features can also trigger more experienced readers to reflect.

With the suggestion in mind that texts higher in (perceived) foregrounding demand more of our cognitive abilities, it is striking that the text with the most foregrounding did affect empathic understanding in the foregrounding study, even when controlling for factors like previous exposure to literature and education. As the responses to the open questions suggested, many people in this study may have read this text with their full attention, causing incredibly absorbed reactions like "I could almost touch the dead girl, and she feels cold." This attention may have been crucial for the effect on empathic understanding to come to the fore, and it may generally be crucial for emotions during reading leading to a felt knowledge. Even though not all readers had such strong experiences, the fact that these did occur after reading only 1500

words within the context of an experimental study is indicative of the potential power of literature.

General critique and further considerations

Through these six empirical studies, preliminary answers to the research questions have been provided, but this is far from the end of the story. First of all, of course, more experimental comparisons between texts varying in literariness, narrativity, and fictionality need to be made in order to (dis)confirm the current findings and the hypotheses of the multi-factor model of literary reading. In order to deduce what type of reactions are evoked by fictionality and by narrativity, future studies could include manipulations of mixed genres like literary non-fiction and journalistic prose which combine narrative and expository aspects, and experiment with different instructions. In addition, replications with other types of mental and physical suffering are necessary to determine the precise interaction between text and reader in triggering affective responses. As the current project showed, even in the limitation to texts about depression and grief, responses already differed per subject matter condition. Replications would also need to be conducted with a wider range of measures of empathy, as both measures of empathy in these studies might not have been able to detect subtle empathic differences between respondents.

Moreover, while the whole premise of this dissertation, following Nussbaum (e.g., 2001), was that stories about suffering are particularly conducive to the evocation of empathic responses, it could also be argued that when the goal is to get people to behave more prosocially, stories depicting outstanding moral behavior may be at least as, if not more, effective. According to moral psychologist Haidt (2003), when we witness acts of moral excellence, we feel moral elevation: a sensation of warmth and expansion, with admiration and affection for the morally good person and an increased desire to become a better person oneself. There is empirical support that people who have been

induced to feel moral elevation, through either watching or reading about admirable behavior, are indeed more likely to want to help others (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Freeman, Aquino, & McFerran, 2009; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010). The current project did not aim to find the most prosocial use of reading or literature, but for others who are primarily interested in that, moral elevation would definitely be something to look at. At the same time, such direct effects of watching or reading on behavior need to be treated with some suspicion, as people might just as easily be moved in an anti-social direction if that is the norm being portrayed (cf. studies on media violence leading to aggression: Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999). Insofar as we consider literature to be polyvalent, multi-interpretable, it would logically work against these types of immediate action tendencies.

More in line with the aim of this dissertation, namely, to further our knowledge concerning reactions to literature about suffering, a suggestion for future research would be to look into different aspects that vary between stories. A downfall of the current project is that it did not differentiate between readers' motives for reading different types of sad stories. The Aristotelian catharsis-hypothesis is based on the classic tragic form, whose noble but fallible characters would supposedly evoke both pity and fear. *Tonio*, which was about the loss of a child, also clearly evoked pity and fear, but this may not be the case for all dramas and tragedies. Stories about suffering containing hopeful elements (e.g., a happy ending) could be appreciated for different reasons than purely tragic stories (cf. Frye, 2000). The resistance readers appeared to feel towards the depicted suffering in the current project may not play a role for stories which are more hopeful or fantastical. An interesting challenge for future studies is thus to determine the extent to which meaning-making and feeling matter for different narrative types.

Apart from not distinguishing between different plot types, this dissertation also largely ignored several literary features which could play a role in readers' empathic and reflective responses, namely foregrounding on a

broader level (e.g., narrative perspective), polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984), and the extent to which a text contains gaps (Iser, 1988). The contribution of gaps in fostering perspective-taking and empathy is a relevant avenue for future research, since it can theoretically be expected that gaps are conducive to readers making mental inferences (cf. Kotovych et al., 2011). However, the current findings suggest that it would also certainly be worthwhile to further investigate to what extent and when semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding evoke mixed emotional states (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 1994, 2002; Shklovsky, 1965), and when and how such states lead to empathy for others.

In the General Introduction to this dissertation, I argued that we should not tell simple stories about the effects of literature, but seriously look at its power and at its limitations. In order to do so, it is evident that many different literary and non-literary texts need to be looked at, but we may also wonder whether the claims that we start from, the claims by Nussbaum, Sontag and others, are not already biased. They have singled out a specific type of medium – written texts deemed to be of high quality by critics – as having a special power. The praise literature receives is seldom heard for movies or games. Are we not dealing with an elitist perspective here that whatever an intellectual elite enjoys must be good for humanity as a whole? As Suzanne Keen (2007) has argued, should we not rather look into what "regular people" read and enjoy? In *Empathy and the novel*, Keen (2007) states:

> Limiting the effects of reading to those enjoyed by highly educated consumers of serious fiction shifts the emphasis to more rarified qualities of narrative such as defamiliarization. However, middlebrow readers tend to value novels offering opportunities for strong character identification. (p. ix)

I agree researchers should try to avoid bias. We should not just look into the type of stories we like, whatever kinds of stories that may be. However, the argument above neglects the fact that there is strong theoretical justification to explore the effects of defamiliarization. The theories of the Russian formalists are crucial to

our understanding of what "literature" and "art" are, and therefore deserve to be explored – in order to be extended, adapted, to generally be informed by empirical data. In addition, as the qualitative studies in this dissertation have brought to the fore, "average" readers may value transportation and identification, and identifying with a character may lead them to better understand others as well, but they also value meaning-making and aesthetics.

In fact, it is my position that we need to be careful that we do not too easily presuppose that literariness and experiences of defamiliarization are not appreciated by the average reader (cf. Miall, 2000). As Rose (1992) suggested, for example, on the basis of autobiographies by nineteenth century working class readers, Charles Dickens (whose novels they could buy from penny bookstalls) had a far larger impact on such readers than the authors of simpler, popular fiction. Dickens helped them, namely, to imagine that different worlds might be possible. While the word "defamiliarization" is complex, the works evoking such an experience need not be. Even those contemporary readers who say they primarily read for pleasure, relaxation or identification, can still be positively surprised by a novel which, to use the example from this dissertation, presents depression as a black dog. This was indeed the experience of Marleen (one of the librarians in Part III): she normally liked more realistic books, but found *Mr. Chartwell* intriguing – not immediately, but upon further consideration. This may be just one example, but it shows that readers may not always know in advance what they will find interesting, and that defamiliarization can also come in the form of a book that is exciting to read.[58]

Literature may have an image of complexity, of being for people from the higher classes, as the Dutch author Alex Boogers recently argued in a plea to emancipate the reader. However, as Boogers (2016) also argued, it does not have

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[58] A certain openness to being defamiliarized among the general reading public can further be deduced from the popular success of a range of novels with an original narrative perspective: the perspective of a high-functioning autistic boy in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), the perspective of death as a character in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) and the perspective of a high-functioning autistic man in Graeme Simsion's *The Rosie Project* (2013).

to be that way. People who have not been raised with books just need to realize that literature is also there for them, that they are "good enough" ["goed genoeg"] for the book (Boogers, 2016, p. 9). Good enough to experience beauty and good enough to experience defamiliarization.[59]

If literature is considered worthwhile (or "cool"), and people feel capable of reading it, class or education does not stand in the way of defamiliarizing and aesthetic experiences. This is exemplified by Eline (the florist in Part III), who derived her pseudonym from a nineteenth century Dutch literary character invented by one of the most canonical Dutch authors. Eline is an aesthetic reader with a clear preference for beautiful and estranging language, plots and perspectives. She fully appreciated the poetic sentences of Plath, as well as the defamiliarizing device of the black dog in *Mr. Chartwell*. And not only did she appreciate this, it also worked to make her think about what depression is like, and it made her engage in conversations with others about depression. Yet, there were no books in Eline's childhood home, and she did not receive education beyond high school. Her love for literature is self-trained. She liked to have books for herself and from there she developed her taste. I see no reason why literature would not be able to do for many others what it did for Eline.

If it is indeed possible to expose a wider audience to literature, would humanity then benefit? As I already suggested in the General Introduction, we should be careful in claiming great prosocial effects of literary reading. Not just because we as of yet do not have that much empirical evidence to go on, but mainly because it would reduce literature to one potential function, while it has value in and of itself. This value lies in beauty, in craftsmanship, in expression, and in the engagement with a human cultural practice, a tradition – whether by

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[59] As Dutch teachers have recently argued, this realization that literature exists and may be worthwhile should start in our schools, with "conscious literary competence" ["bewuste literaire competentie"] as an integral part of the language training children receive ("Manifest Nederlands op school," 2016). Yet, of course, teachers always need to be careful not to undo literature of its attractively outrageous aspects when integrating it in the school curriculum.

substantiating or breaking with that tradition. It remains valuable to see what literature can do to whom, in order to further our knowledge in general as well as for practical purposes such as reading programs in schools and prisons, but we should be wary of judging an art form primarily on the basis of its prosocial uses. Literature does not simply lead us to become "better" people; literary works can also be disturbing, and it is vital that they remain a free playing space for human thought.

To some extent, then, I hope that we will never completely find out which effects which literary features have on empathy and reflection. That, namely, would be like finding out exactly why we fall in love with whom. Probably, however, we will never be able to completely predict the effects of literary texts, since what is meaningful about literature may lie precisely in its polyvalence, in the fact that every reading experience can be somewhat different, can surprise us.

In John Green's bestseller *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) there's a passage where the fictional novelist Peter Van Houten replies to a letter by a young cancer patient who said Van Houten's book "meant a great deal" to him:

> This comment, however, leads me to wonder: What do you mean by *meant*? Given the final futility of our struggle, is the fleeting jolt of meaning that art gives us valuable? Or is the only value in passing the time as comfortably as possible? What should a story seek to emulate, Augustus? A ringing alarm? A call to arms? A morphine drip?
> (p. 68; emphasis in the original)

Indeed, what the ultimate "value" is in what we consider meaningful, in art and in real life, is a question empirical research cannot answer. It may be difficult enough to infer what people mean when they say "meant," as a feeling of meaningfulness may sometimes be exactly that: a feeling, a vague affective response that something matters. With our surveys, interviews and experiments,

we may try to grasp at that "fleeting jolt of meaning," but we may never catch it, and that may be for the better.

      To truly capture meaning, we need the poets and the novelists.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Scales for Survey Study Part I

Sad Book Scale (adapted from Oliver, 1993)

Table A.1
Items and Factor Loadings of the Sad Book Scale (SBS)

Item	Factor Loading
1. I'd rather read a book that brings me into a sad mood than a book that brings me into a cheerful mood ["Ik lees liever een boek dat me in een droevige stemming brengt dan een boek dat me in een opgewekte stemming brengt"]	.64
2. I appreciate it when a book can give me a lump in my throat ["Ik waardeer het als een boek me een brok in de keel bezorgt."]	.70
3. I like to read about the worries or problems of characters in novels (not based on true events) ["Ik lees graag over de zorgen of problemen van romanpersonages (niet-waargebeurde verhalen)"]	.72
4. I like to read about the worries or problems of "ordinary" real people (non-fiction) ["Ik lees graag over de zorgen of problemen van 'gewone' echte mensen (waargebeurde verhalen)"]	.61
5. I like it when there are tragic events in a book ["Ik houd ervan als er tragische gebeurtenissen in een boek zitten"]	.77
6. Books with a sad theme tend to bore me (R) ["Boeken met een verdrietig thema vind ik al snel saai"]	.66
7. I'd rather have a book that is about cheerful than about sad subjects (R) ["Ik heb liever een boek over vrolijke dan over treurige onderwerpen gaat"]	.59

Note. A principal component analysis with varimax rotation was conducted, specified to extract one factor. Reversed items (R) were recoded before analysis. Original Dutch items are between brackets.

Functions of Reading (different origins, see 2.1.3)

Table A.2
Items and Cronbach's Alpha of Functions of Reading

Construct	Items	alpha
Meta-emotions	1. I like to experience strong emotions when I read. ["Ik ervaar graag sterke emoties als ik lees."] Indicate for the following emotions to what extent you like to experience them while reading: ["Geef aan voor de volgende emoties in hoeverre u deze tijdens het lezen graag ervaart:"] 2. Tension/suspense ["spanning"] 3. Fear ["angst"] 4. Sadness ["verdriet"] 5. Joy ["plezier"] 6. Anger ["woede"] 7. Indignation ["verontwaardiging"] 8. Being moved ["ontroering"]	.71

Insight	I find it important that… :	.89
	["Ik vind het belangrijk dat… :"]	
	1. … the book lets me get acquainted with people who differ from myself	
	2. … the book provides me with new insights	
	3. … the book offers a different view of this world	
	4. … the book makes me aware of feelings or thoughts that were vague before reading	
	5. … the book helps me to understand my more negative feelings	
	6. … I am triggered to think	
	7. … the book is about meaningful human experiences	
	8. … the book has a deeper meaning	
	[1. "… het boek me kennis laat maken met mensen die anders zijn dan ik"	
	2. "… het boek me nieuwe inzichten geeft"	
	3. "… het boek een andere blik biedt op deze wereld"	
	4. "… het boek me bewust maakt van gevoelens of gedachten die eerder nog vaag waren"	
	5. "… het boek me helpt mijn meer negatieve gevoelens te begrijpen"	
	6. "… ik tot nadenken aangezet word"	
	7. "… het boek gaat over betekenisvolle menselijke ervaringen"	
	8. "… het boek een diepere betekenis heeft"]	
Absorption/ Empathy	I find it important that… :	.74
	1. … I can empathize with the characters (emp)	
	2. … I can feel the emotions of characters myself to some extent (emp)	
	3. … I can be absorbed in the narrative world (abs)	
	4. … the narrative world comes across as lively (abs)	
	5. … the book touches me emotionally (abs)	
	[1. "…ik mee kan leven met de personages"	
	2. "… ik de emoties van de personages zelf tot op zekere hoogte kan voelen"	
	3. "…. ik op kan gaan in de verhaalwereld"	
	4. "…. de verhaalwereld levendig overkomt"	
	5. "… het boek me emotioneel raakt"]	
Identification	I find it important that… :	.77
	1. I can recognize myself in the characters	
	2. The characters have traits that I myself also have (background or personality)	
	[1. "… ik me in de personages kan herkennen"	
	2. "… de personages kenmerken hebben die ikzelf ook heb (achtergrond of karakter)"]	
Style	I find it important that… :	.53
	1. … the book is beautifully written	
	2. … the book is originally written	
	3. … there are sentences in the book that I will remember	
	[1. "… het boek mooi geschreven is"	
	2. "… het boek origineel geschreven is"	
	3. "… er zinnen in het boek staan die me bijblijven"]	
Catharsis beliefs	1. Through reading sad books I can purge negative feelings that I had stored up	.76
	2. If a book makes me cry, I experience that as a release	

	[1. "Door droevige boeken kan ik negatieve gevoelens die ik had opgekropt uiten en kwijtraken" 2. "Als een boek me aan het huilen krijgt, ervaar ik dat naderhand als opluchtend"]	
Downward social comparison	1. Sad books make me aware of the difficult times that others go through 2. When I read a sad book, I compare my own situation to the situation of the character 3. Books about tragic events make me feel relatively more content about my own life [1. "Droevige boeken maken me ervan bewust dat anderen ook moeilijke periodes meemaken" 2. "Als ik een droevig boek lees vergelijk ik mijn eigen situatie met de situatie van het personage" 3. "Boeken over tragische gebeurtenissen maken dat ik me tevredener voel over mijn eigen leven"]	.82
Comfort	1. I like to recognize my own problems in the problems of characters 2. When I read about others who are suffering, I feel less alone [1. "Ik vind het fijn mijn eigen problemen te herkennen in de problemen van personages" 2. "Als ik lees over anderen die het ook moeilijk hebben, voel ik me minder alleen staan"]	.86
Preparation	1. Reading about tragic events gives me the sense I could handle it if such events would occur in my own life 2. Through reading about situations that frighten me, I get more control over my fears 3. Through reading about tragic events, I feel better prepared for life events [1. "Lezen over tragische gebeurtenissen geeft me het gevoel dat ik het aankan als zulke gebeurtenissen zich in mijn eigen leven voordoen." 2. "Door te lezen over situaties die me beangstigen, krijg ik meer controle over mijn angst" 3. "Door te lezen over tragische gebeurtenissen, voel ik me beter voorbereid op het leven"]	.89
Personal growth	1. Sad books make me start to think about my own life 2. Books about tragic events make me feel the need to do something good with my own life 3. Books about tragic events make me appreciate the good things in my own life more [1. Droevige boeken maken dat ik na ga denken over mijn eigen leven 2. Boeken over tragische gebeurtenissen maken dat ik de behoefte voel iets goeds te doen met mijn eigen leven 3. Boeken over tragische gebeurtenissen maken dat ik meer waardering heb voor de goede zaken in mijn leven]	.89

Note. Principal component analyses were conducted separately for the general functions and the specific sad book function items. As "absorption" and "empathy" loaded on the same factor and it made sense to combine them theoretically, they were combined into one scale. Other constructs were kept as originally intended.

Appendix B: Selection Materials Part II

The texts selected for the genre study (Chapter 6) were three excerpts of about 1500 words from texts about depression and three excerpts from texts about grieving the loss of a child. The three excerpts within a subject matter condition (depression or grief) came from three "genres": expository, non-literary narrative (or: "life stories"), and literary narrative. The literary text about grief chosen for the genre study was also used in the foregrounding study (Chapter 7).

Expository texts

The two expository texts were found through a search for informative texts about depression and about grief in Dutch library catalogues. These texts were selected to describe the experience of depression or grief in a non-narrative way, without becoming overly complex or clinical. After reading through various non-fiction books, the texts that were chosen were a Dutch translation of Lewis Wolpert's *Malignant Sadness* (1999) and a Dutch translation of Juliet Cassuto Rothman's *The Bereaved Parents' Survival Guide* (1998). The excerpt from *Malignant Sadness* gave both a brief history of thinking about depression and the thoughts and feelings experienced by people who are depressed. The excerpt from *The Bereaved Parents' Survival Guide* was about the various stages of grief, and again paid attention to both thoughts and feelings associated with loss.

Narrative texts

The four texts in the two narrative conditions were excerpts from literary novels and "life stories" on depression and grief. While both types of genre use a narrative format, the life stories have less literary pretence; they could thus be labelled "non-literary narratives." These were texts that are published to share the author's personal experience with others in a similar situation, without paying particular attention to style and structure. In selecting the materials, I started with a literature search using search engines LexisNexis and Google, as well as catalogues of Dutch libraries. Following the results lists, I collected approximately thirty novels and life stories from local libraries and read these globally to see whether they contained 4-8-page segments describing depression or grief which could function as relatively autonomous fragments. For the selection of the literary fragments, literary acclaim (literary prizes, positive reviews, canonical status of the author) was taken into account. Out of all the texts which included relevant passages, a further selection was made, in which literary texts were matched as closely as possible in content (i.e., gender and age of narrator) with life stories. Whether the literary texts were autobiographical or not was not used as a selection criterion, since this could not be directly told from the fragments, and the instruction varied this information. The life stories were autobiographical by default, but could be perceived by readers as fictional in the absence of para-textual information.

Panel study

In order to check whether the stylistic quality of the "literary" fragments was indeed perceived to be different from the stylistic quality of the life stories, a panel of students in Modern Languages (ages between 22 and 26) was asked to rate both literary and "non-literary" fragments. One group (*N* = 5; one male) read five different excerpts from narratives about

depression, three excerpts from literary and two from non-literary texts (authors: Sylvia Plath, Jean-Paul Sartre, Doeschka Meijsing, William Styron, Diane van Drie). The other group (*N* = 6; all female) read five excerpts from narratives on grief/loss of a child, again three literary and two non-literary (authors: Marie Darrieussecq, P.F. Thomése, Anna Enquist, A. Vastenhout, Wim Geysen). Texts were rated on beauty, originality, and perceived literary status on a 7-point scale. In addition, participants were asked to underline sentences they found striking/surprising. The main results of this panel study can be seen in Table B.1.

The panel study showed that the literary texts were much more likely to be perceived as of high literary status, and to be found more original. They also received higher average scores of underlined sentences (e.g., Meijsing *M* = 5.2 vs. Van Drie *M* = 0.4; Enquist *M* = 7.8 vs. Vastenhout *M* = 1.7). The literary texts were not, however, generally judged to be more beautiful. Following this general trend, the literary and non-literary texts that were selected were perceived as about equally beautiful, while the literary texts were perceived as more original than their non-literary counterparts. Also, texts were matched to have a narrator of the same gender. Based on these criteria, two of the five texts in each subject matter condition were selected for the "genre" study. These are underlined in Table B.1.

Table B.1

Materials Rated by the Panel, Selected Materials Underlined

		Gender protagonist	Beauty	Originality	Underlined sentences
	Literary narrative				
Depression	1. Jean-Paul Sartre – *La nausée*	M	5.2	5.4	3.2
	2. <u>Doeschka Meijsing – *Over de liefde*</u>	F	6.8	5.0	5.2
	3. Sylvia Plath – *The Bell Jar*	F	3.6	4.0	4.6
	Non-literary narrative				
	1. William Styron – *Darkness Visible*	M	3.0	4.2	0.4
	2. <u>Diane van Drie – *Lang niet gek*</u>	F	6.0	3.3	1.6
	Literary narrative				
Grief	1. <u>Anna Enquist – *Contrapunt*</u>	F	7.0	6.3	7.8
	2. Marie Darrieussecq –*Tom est mort*	F	6.5	7.5	9.3
	3. P.F. Thomése – *Schaduwkind*	M	6.9	7.1	12.3
	Non-literary narrative				
	1. Wim Geysen – *Zonder afscheid*	M	6.3	5.2	1.8
	2. <u>Akkie Vastenhout – *Het verlies van mijn kind*</u>	F	7.2	4.5	1.7

Appendix C: Scales for Studies Part II

Empathic statements

The "genre" study used all of these statements, the "foregrounding" study only those about grief.

Depression
- People with depression are being dramatic (R)
  [Depressieve mensen stellen zich aan]
- I feel understanding for people who are depressed
  [Ik heb begrip voor mensen met een depressie]
- It must be horrible to be depressed
  [Het lijkt me vreselijk om depressief te zijn]
- Societies should take action to help people with depression
  [Een maatschappij moet zich inzetten om depressieve mensen te helpen]
- The basic insurance policy should cover therapy for depression
  [Behandeling van depressie hoort in het basispakket van zorgverzekeraars]

Grief

- About two years after a significant loss, people should be able to resume their lives
  [Zo'n twee jaar na een groot verlies moet iemand zijn leven wel weer hebben opgepakt]
- I feel understanding for people who are deeply grieving
  [Ik heb begrip voor mensen die zwaar in de rouw zijn]
- If I experienced a grave loss myself, I would be devastated for multiple years
  [Als ik zelf een groot verlies zou meemaken, zou ik daar vele jaren van overstuur zijn]
- Societies should take action to help people who have difficulties to deal with their loss
  [Een maatschappij moet zich inzetten voor mensen die moeite hebben een verlies te verwerken]
- The basic insurance policy should cover complicated grief (grief which has not lessened after multiple years)
  [Behandeling van gecompliceerde rouw (rouw die na jaren nog niet is afgenomen) hoort in het basispakket van zorgverzekeraars]

Trait empathy – Translated and adapted TEQ (orig. Spreng et al., 2009)

This scale was used in the genre study.

Geef van de volgende stellingen aan in hoeverre ze, over het algemeen, op jou van toepassing zijn (1= helemaal niet, 7= helemaal):
- Het doet me niet zoveel als anderen iets ergs overkomt (R)
- Als een vriend of familielid vrolijk is, heeft dat weinig effect op mijn stemming (R)
- Ik doe graag mijn best om anderen zich beter te laten voelen
- Ik voel me bezorgd over mensen die het minder goed hebben dan ik
- Als een vriend(in) over zijn/haar problemen begint, probeer ik het gesprek in een andere richting te sturen (R)
- Ik merk aan anderen of ze verdrietig zijn zonder dat ze me dat hebben verteld

- Ik merk dat mijn stemming dezelfde richting opgaat als die van mensen in mijn omgeving
- Als iemand in mijn omgeving huilt, raak ik geïrriteerd (R)
- Ik ben niet zo geïnteresseerd in hoe anderen zich voelen (R)
- Als ik zie dat iemand overstuur is, voel ik de neiging hem/haar te helpen
- Het doet me weinig als ik zie dat iemand oneerlijk behandeld wordt (R)
- Ik vind het raar dat sommige mensen kunnen huilen van geluk (R)
- Als ik zie dat er misbruik gemaakt wordt van iemand, zou ik diegene het liefst willen beschermen

Trait empathy – Translated and adapted IRI (orig. Davis, 1980, 1983)

This scale was used in the foregrounding study. It only used the empathic concern and perspective-taking subscales.

Empathic concern
- Ik voel me vaak bezorgd over mensen die het minder goed hebben dan ik
- Ik heb niet veel medelijden met andere mensen wanneer ze problemen hebben (R)
- Wanneer ik iemand zie van wie wordt geprofiteerd, voel ik me nogal beschermend tegenover diegene
- Nare dingen die anderen overkomen, brengen mij meestal niet van mijn stuk (R)
- Ik voel weinig medelijden met mensen die oneerlijk behandeld worden (R)
- Ik ben nogal snel geraakt door dingen die met anderen gebeuren
- Ik zou mezelf beschrijven als een vrij gevoelig persoon

Perspective-taking
- Ik probeer mijn vrienden beter te begrijpen door me in te beelden hoe de dingen eruitzien vanuit hun perspectief
- Als ik van mijn gelijk overtuigd ben, verspil ik niet veel tijd aan het luisteren naar andermans argumenten (R)
- Ik geloof dat er meerdere kanten zijn aan elk menselijk probleem en probeer daar ook naar te kijken
- Wanneer iemand mij overstuur maakt, probeer ik mezelf meestal voor een tijdje in hem/haar te verplaatsen
- Voordat ik iemand bekritiseer, probeer ik me voor te stellen hoe ik mij zou voelen in zijn/haar plaats
- Ik kijk naar ieders kant van een meningsverschil voordat ik een beslissing neem
- Ik vind het moeilijk om dingen te zien vanuit andermans perspectief (R)

Exposure to Literature – Adapted ART (orig. Stanovich & West, 1989)

This adapted ART was used in both experimental studies. The names were put in random order.

Dutch literary fiction

Marek van der Jagt

Anna Blaman

Willem Kloos

Mensje van Keulen

Stephan Enter

Dimitri Verhulst

Dutch popular fiction

Saskia Noort

Heleen van Royen

Robert Vuijsje

Herman Koch

Esther Verhoef

René Appel

International literary fiction

Jonathan Franzen

Dave Eggers

Herta Müller

Italo Calvino

W.G. Sebald

Toni Morrison

Jennifer Egan

Albert Camus

William Faulkner

International popular fiction

John le Carré

Tatiana de Rosnay

Jenna Blum

Stephen King

Douglas Adams

Terry Pratchett

Isaac Asimov

Danielle Steel

John Grisham

Foils

J.B. Guthrie

Isabelle Liberman

Robert Tierney

Gerald Duffy

Mark Sorenson

Diane Corter

Erik Bogaart

H.P. Vliegenthart

Janet de Waal

Sophie Boomgaarden

Andries Blok

Arnon Iffegem

Narrative and aesthetic feelings

These items and constructs were used in both experimental studies. The first alpha under the name of the construct is that of the genre study, the second of the foregrounding study.

Table C.1

Items for Narrative and Aesthetic Feelings, After Factor Analysis

Construct	Items
Sympathy/Empathy *(α = .85)* *(α = .85)*	- "I felt understanding for the narrator" [Ik voelde begrip voor de verteller] - "I felt pity for the narrator" [Ik had medelijden met de verteller] - "I commiserated with the narrator" [Ik leefde mee met de verteller] - "I found the narrator an interesting person" [Ik vond de verteller een interessant persoon] - "The narrator annoyed me" (R) [De verteller irriteerde me] - "I did not feel much toward the narrator" (R) [De verteller liet me koud]
(Similarity) Identification *(α = .68)* *(α = .81)*	- "I could recognize myself in the narrator" [Ik kon mezelf herkennen in de verteller] - "It was like I was looking through the eyes of the narrator" [Ik keek als het ware door de ogen van de verteller] - "I started to feel the same emotions as the narrator" [Ik begon dezelfde emoties te voelen als de verteller]
Absorption *(α = .88)* *(α = .87)*	- "I felt absorbed in the story" [Ik voelde me meegesleept door het verhaal] - "I felt involved in the events" [Ik voelde me betrokken bij de gebeurtenissen] - "I could see the events vividly in front of me" [Ik kon de gebeurtenissen levendig voor me zien] - "The story world sometimes felt closer during reading than the world around me" [De wereld van het verhaal voelde tijdens het lezen soms dichterbij dan de wereld om me heen] - "The story did not touch me" (R) [Het verhaal liet me koud]
Empathic distress *(α = .88)* *(α = .83)*	- "The story made me feel miserable" [Ik ging me ellendig voelen door het verhaal] - "The story made me feel sad" [Ik ging me droevig voelen door het verhaal] - "During reading I felt increasingly unnerved" [Tijdens het lezen van het verhaal voelde ik me steeds minder op mijn gemak] - "The story aroused unpleasant sensations in me" [Het verhaal maakte onplezierige gevoelens bij me los]
Attractiveness *(α = .93)* *(α = .91)*	"I found the style of the text..." [Ik vond de stijl van de tekst...] - Interesting [Interessant] - Beautiful [Mooi] - Captivating [Boeiend] - Powerful [Krachtig] - Good [Goed]
Foregrounding *(α = .83)* *(α = .80)*	- Surprising [Verrassend] - Striking [Opvallend] - Original [Origineel]

Appendix D: Codebook Genre Study Part II

Question
"Did you think about the text during the last week? If so, what did you think?"
[Heb je de afgelopen week nog teruggedacht aan deze tekst? Zo ja, wat dacht je daarbij?]

Codebook
The coders attributed the following numbers to each thought instance when applicable:

0 = no thoughts
Explanation: respondents indicate they did not think back to the text.

1 = emotional
Explanation: respondents indicate they found the text emotional. These emotions can either be positive or negative. A common response is that one felt sad. This code is also applied when respondents talk about the general atmosphere of the text and/or the reading experience in emotional terms.

Example:
> "It definitely changes my mood. It is mostly sad things that move me. I think it would not have a good influence on me if I read these kinds of texts more often."
> ["het verandert zeker mijn stemming. het zijn vooral verdrietige dingen die me raken. ik denk dat het geen goede invloed op me zou hebben als ik vaker dit soort teksten lees."]

2 = current events
Explanation: respondents thought back to the text because of a recent/current event in their daily lives. This event can either be fact or fiction, mediated or unmediated: something seen on television (news, but also movies), something one has read in the newspaper, or something that happened "in real life." In either case, there is a trigger mentioned that made one think back to the text. (Note that when the text triggers one to think about one's own experiences, code 4 applies.)

Example:
> "It was on the news that a man had saved a woman from suicide but subsequently also was hit by a train. Then I thought back to this text. This was also a form of 'help' but then with a very sad outcome."
> ["Er was op het nieuws dat een man een vrouw had gered van zelfmoord maar vervolgens ook was aangereden door een trein. Toen heb ik aan deze tekst teruggedacht. Dit was ook een vorm van 'hulp' maar dan met een hele trieste afloop."]

3 = general
Explanation: respondents only report very generally that they thought back to the text. There appears to be no further/deeper reflection (if there is further reflection on the theme reported, code 7 applies).

Example:
> "Only the day after. Not explicitly to the details of the story. But to the general idea."
> ["Alleen de dag erna. niet expliciet aan details van het verhaal. wel aan de grote lijn"]

4 = personal experience
Explanation: the text triggers respondents to think about/remember their own experiences or experiences of someone close to them.
Example:
> "Only in the evening I thought about it for a bit and talked briefly to a friend about it. Because I have also been in a sanitarium."
> ["Alleen 's avonds nog even aan gedacht en even met een vriend erover gehad. omdat ik ook in een kliniek heb gezeten."]

5 = perspective-taking
Explanation: respondents indicate they are imagining what it would be like to be in a similar situation to the character/someone like the character (i.e., someone who is depressed or someone who has lost a child).

Example:
> "Once or twice I think. I thought then: I am happy that I am not depressed. Because I really wouldn't want to hurt myself or to cut my wrists."
> ["Ik denk een keer of twee. toen dacht ik: ik ben blij dat ik zelf niet depressief ben. want ik zou er niet aan moeten denken mezelf te verwonden of mijn polsslagaders door te snijden."]

6 = curiosity story
Explanation: respondents try to fill holes in the plot or give indication that they are wondering about certain elements in the story.

Example:
> "For a little while. I was thinking then about how the child would have died."
> ["Eventjes. toen ik dacht aan hoe het kind zou zijn overleden."]

7 = deeper reflection
Explanation: respondents show reflection on the theme, have come to a certain insight or realization. They make implicit or explicit connections between the (theme of the) text and their own life, or the world around them.

Example:
> "(…) it made me realize that you really have to take care of your own happiness and not depend on others for that."
> ["(…) het heeft mij doen realiseren dat je echt zelf voor je eigenlijk geluk moet zorgen en daarin niet afhankelijk zijn van anderen."]

8 = style/scene impressive
Explanation: respondents show they found the style impressive, either by saying this literally or by recalling a specific image or scene.

Example:
> "I thought a lot about the sentence that her cigarette was a good friend but would also betray her one day. I thought that was a very appealing image."
> ["ik heb veel nagedacht over de regel dat haar sigaret een goede vriend was maar haar ooit ook zou afvallen. Dat vond ik een erg aansprekend beeld."]

9 = negative story/style
Explanation: respondents express a negative appreciation of the text, particularly the style of the text.

Example:
> "I mainly thought that the text was weak in literary terms"
> ["ik dacht vooral dat het literair gezien een zwakke tekst was."]

Appendix E: Correlations Affective Responses Part II

Table E.1.
*Pearson Correlations of Affective Responses, Empathic Understanding and Reflection
Genre Study – Depression (Both Narrative Conditions)*

(*N* = 167)	Ident.	Abs.	Emp. Distress	Aesth. Attract.	Perc. Foregr.	Empathic Underst.	Reflection (Direct)
Sympathy/ Empathy	.59**	.76**	.38**	.70**	.23**	.40**	.53**
Identification		.63**	.44**	.40**	.17*	.27**	.38**
Absorption			.53**	.66**	.27**	.32**	.54**
Empathic Distress				.33**	.02	.15	.41**
Aesthetic Attract.					.36**	.18*	.54**
Perceived Foregrounding						-.08	.26**
Empathic Understanding							.31**

**. *p* < .01, *. *p* < .05 (2-tailed)

Table E.2.
*Pearson Correlations of Affective Responses, Empathic Understanding and Reflection
Genre Study – Grief (Both Narrative Conditions)*

(*N* = 167)	Ident.	Abs.	Emp. Distress	Aesth. Attract.	Perc. Foregr.	Empathic Underst.	Reflection (Direct)
Sympathy/ Empathy	.61**	.80**	.47**	.69**	.38**	.28**	.56**
Identification		.74**	.45**	.55**	.23*	.23**	.46**
Absorption			.57**	.73**	.36**	.22**	.56**
Empathic Distress				.30**	.19*	.14	.45**
Aesthetic Attract.					.53**	.07	.46**
Perceived Foregrounding						-.06	.33**
Empathic Understanding							.21*

**. *p* < .01, *. *p* < .05 (2-tailed)

Table E.3.
Pearson Correlations of Affective Responses, Empathic Understanding and Reflection Foregrounding Study (Three Conditions Together)

(N = 142)	Ident.	Abs.	Emp. Distr.	Aesth. Attract.	Perc. Foregr.	Emo. (gen.)	Emp. Underst.	Refl.
Sympathy/ Empathy	.70**	.76**	.46**	.66*	.32**	.67**	.30**	.64**
Identification		.83**	.50**	.64**	.36**	.58**	.31**	.57**
Absorption			.54**	.74**	.35**	.72**	.27**	.64**
Empathic Distress				.42**	.22**	.61**	.18*	.52**
Aesthetic Attract.					.52**	.63**	.12	.55**
Perceived Foregr.						.32**	.11	.32**
Emotional (general)							.20*	.57**
Empathic Underst.								.22**

**. $p < .01$, *. $p < .05$ (2-tailed). *Note.*: "Empathic Understanding" comprises the scores of participants answering the questions before and after reading.

Appendix F: Parsimonious Models Part II

Chapter 6 in Part II shows a number of full AMOS models. Below, the parsimonious (i.e., simplest) models are presented. In each case, this meant removing the variables in the full model which had no effect (neither significant nor bordering on significance) on the outcome variables empathic understanding and reflection. First, the results for empathic understanding are shown, then the results for reflection. In each case, first the results for the depression texts are shown and then for the grief texts. These parsimonious models are provided here as they can potentially inform new empirical studies into reading.

Parsimonious Models Empathic Understanding
Regarding the effects on empathic understanding when reading narrative texts about depression, the parsimonious model shown in Figure F.1 accounted for 42.0% of variance in empathic understanding, and displayed a good fit: : $\chi^2(2, N = 162) = 1.03$, $p = . 60$; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR = .021. All personal factors had main effects, as well as sympathy/empathy. Testing the indirect (i.e., the mediating path through sympathy/ empathy) and direct effect of trait empathy on empathic understanding (2000 bootstraps), further demonstrated that the indirect effect ($p = . 047$) and the direct effect ($p = . 001$) were significant. This suggests limited partial mediation.
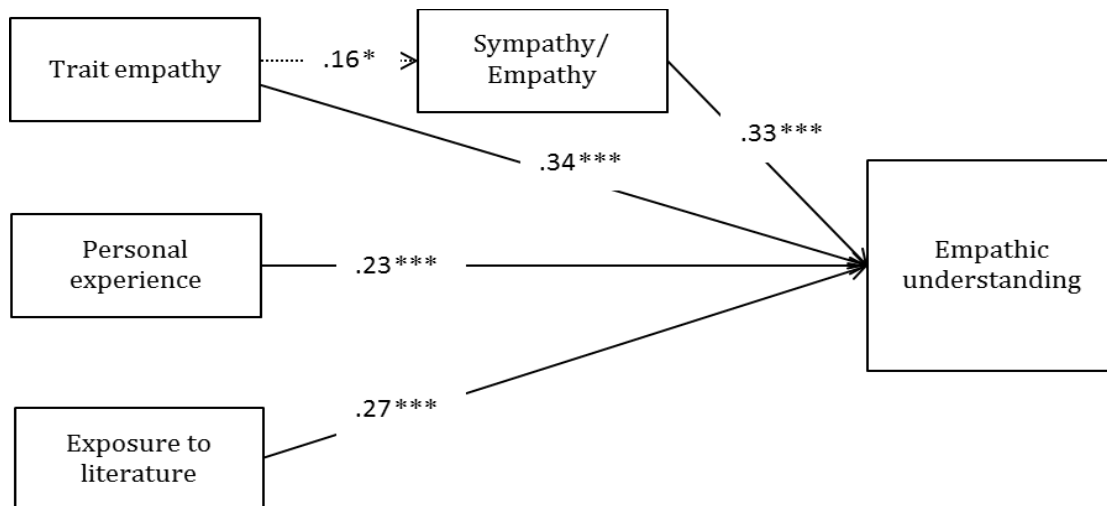

Figure F.1. Predictors empathic understanding depression – parsimonious model
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Errors and covariances (incl. those between exogenous variables) were included in the analysis, but are not represented, for reasons of visual clarity.

For reading narrative texts about grief, the model shown in Figure F.2 explained 21.9% of variance in empathic understanding and had a good fit: $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 1.39$, $p = . 24$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .03. Both trait empathy and exposure to literature had main effects, as well as sympathy/empathy. Testing the indirect and direct effect of trait empathy on empathic understanding (2000 bootstraps), further demonstrated that both the indirect effect ($p = . 013$) and the direct effect ($p = . 001$) were significant, suggesting limited partial mediation by sympathy/empathy.
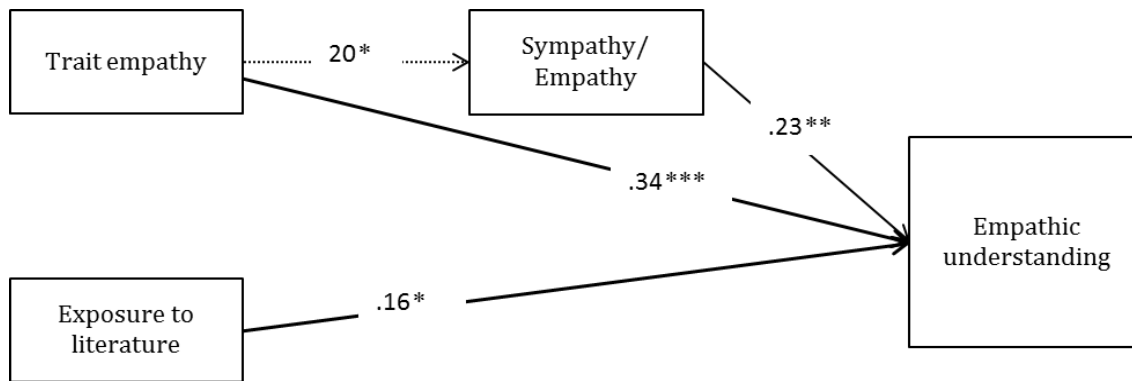
Figure F.2. Predictors empathic understanding grief – parsimonious model
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Errors and covariances (incl. those between exogenous variables) were included in the analysis, but are not represented, for reasons of visual clarity.

Parsimonious Models Reflection

The parsimonious model of the effects of reading narrative texts about depression on reflection is displayed in Figure F.3. As there were no main effects of trait empathy and exposure to literature, these relations were removed. In addition, as absorption and identification were no predictors of reflection, they were removed in order to arrive at the simplest model. This model had a good fit, accounting for 42.2% of variance in reflection: $\chi^2(10, N =162) = 7.73$, $p= . 66$; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR = .041. Figure F.3 brings out the main effect of personal experience, and the indirect effects of exposure to literature and trait empathy on reflection. Testing these indirect effects through bootstrapping (2000 bootstraps), demonstrated that these effects were significant at the $p < .05$ level.
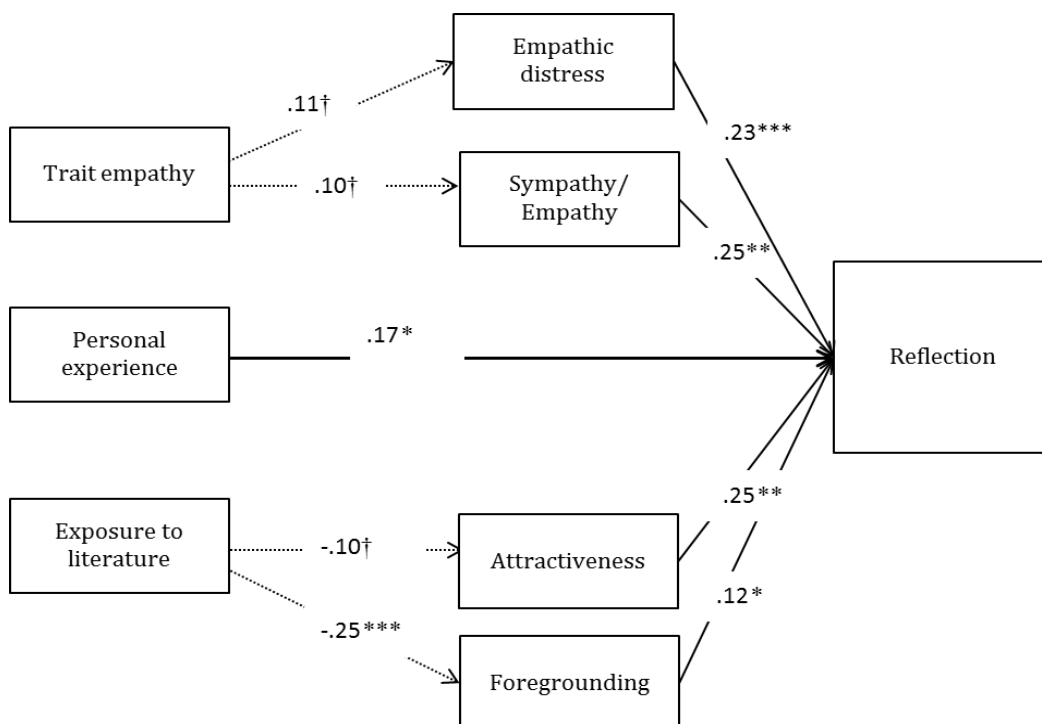

Figure F.3. Predictors of reflection – depression, parsimonious model
† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Errors and covariances (incl. those between exogenous variables) were included in the analysis, but are not represented, for reasons of visual clarity.

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The parsimonious model of the effects of reading narrative texts about grief on reflection is shown in Figure F.4. The direct relation between exposure to literature and reflection was removed, as were absorption and identification, since they had no effect on reflection. Figure F.4 shows a very similar pattern to Figure F.3. Both in the case of depression and of grief, personal experience, empathic distress, sympathy/empathy and foregrounding were predictors of reflection. Yet, for these grief texts, aesthetic attractiveness was no predictor. Also, trait empathy was a direct predictor as well as a relatively stronger predictor of sympathy/empathy. Personal experience showed a slightly lower *beta* for the grief texts than for the depression texts. The parsimonious model had a good fit, accounting for 41.0% of variance in empathic understanding: $\chi^2(7, N = 158) = 4.69$, $p = .70$; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR = .036. Testing the indirect effects of trait empathy and exposure to literature through bootstrapping (2000 bootstraps), further demonstrated that these effects were significant at the $p < .05$ level.
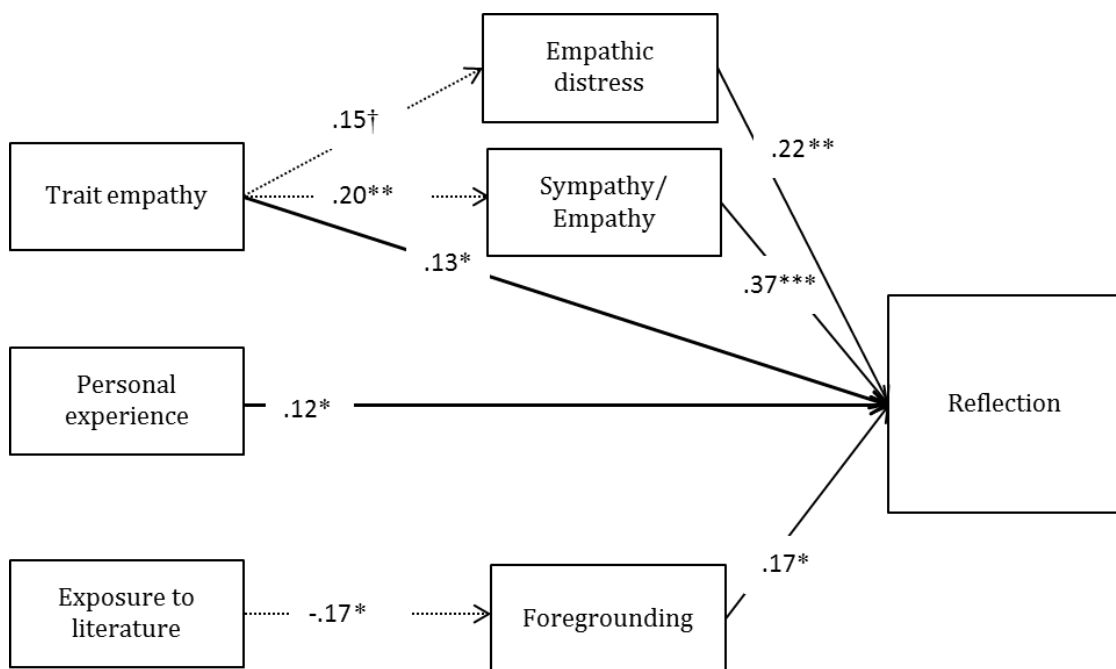

Figure F.4. Predictors of reflection – grief, parsimonious model
*† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Errors and covariances (incl. those between exogenous variables) were included in the analysis, but are not represented, for reasons of visual clarity.*

Appendix G: Reading Diary Instruction Part III

The reading diary: instruction

The reading diary is meant to record the ideas, thoughts, memories and feelings you experience during reading, but also the moments you think about the text while you are not reading. Therefore you are asked to write in the reading diary every day, beginning on the day you start reading. You can answer the following questions when writing:

If you did not read – to write down at the end of the day:

Write down the date. Try to answer the following questions:

- Did you <u>think back</u> to the text today?
- In which <u>situation</u>?
- What did you <u>think</u>?
- What did you <u>feel</u> (if you felt anything)?

If you did read – write this down after reading:

Write down the date. Try to answer the following questions:

- <u>Where</u> were you while reading?
- Which <u>pages</u> did you read (page numbers)?
- What is your <u>general opinion</u> of the passage you read?
- What did you think of the <u>character</u>? [For Solomon: What did you think of the author (the "I")?]
- How close to the character did you feel on a scale from 0-10, with 0 indicating great distance and 10 very close proximity? Can you explain this?
- What did you think of the <u>events</u>?
- What did you think of the <u>style</u>?
- How <u>emotional</u> was the passage to you on a scale from 0-10? Can you explain this?
- Were there any <u>sentences</u> that struck you in a positive or negative way (beautiful or ugly)? Can you explain this?
- Were there any <u>other aspects</u> of the text that evoked feelings or thoughts?

If you have any other remarks, please also write these down. You can also make notes on the printed text itself. You could underline passages that strike you (positively or negatively) and write down your thoughts. Anything you need to say, you can write down in the diary and/or on the text.

Het leesdagboek: instructie

Het leesdagboek is bedoeld om de ideeën, gedachten, herinneringen en gevoelens op te schrijven die je tijdens het lezen ervaart, maar ook de momenten waarop je aan de tekst denkt terwijl je niet aan het lezen bent. Schrijf daarom elke dag vanaf de dag dat je bent begonnen met lezen in het leesdagboek. Beantwoord daarbij de volgende vragen:

Als je niet hebt gelezen – schrijf dit op aan het einde van de dag:

Noteer de datum. Probeer antwoord te geven op de volgende vragen:

- Heb je vandaag aan de tekst <u>teruggedacht</u>?
- In welke <u>situatie</u>?
- Wat <u>dacht</u> je?
- Wat <u>voelde</u> je daarbij (als je iets voelde)?

Als je wel hebt gelezen – schrijf dit op na afloop van het lezen:

Noteer de datum. Probeer antwoord te geven op de volgende vragen:

- <u>Waar</u> was je terwijl je las?
- <u>Welke</u> passage of pagina's heb je gelezen (paginanummers)?
- Wat vond je over het algemeen van deze passage?
- Wat vond je van het <u>personage</u>? [Bij Solomon: Wat vond je van de <u>auteur (de 'ik')</u>?]
- Hoe 'nabij' voelde het personage [bij Solomon: de auteur] op een schaal van 0-10 waarbij 0 op grote afstand en 10 heel nabij is? ....
  Kun je dit toelichten?
- Wat vond je van de <u>gebeurtenissen</u>?
- Wat vond je van de <u>stijl</u>?
- Hoe <u>emotionerend</u> vond je de passage op een schaal van 0-10? ....
  Kun je dit toelichten?
- Waren er <u>zinnen</u> die je in positieve of negatieve zin opvielen (mooi of juist lelijk)?
  Kun je dit toelichten?
- Waren er <u>andere aspecten van de tekst</u> die gedachten of gevoelens opwekten?

Als je opmerkingen hebt die buiten deze vragen vallen, schrijf die dan ook vooral op. Buiten het dagboek om: maak tijdens het lezen aantekeningen op de uitgeprinte tekst. Onderstreep passages die je in positieve of negatieve zin opvallen, en schrijf erbij wat je ervan vindt. Alles wat je te binnen schiet kun je kwijt op de tekst en in het dagboek.

Appendix H: Topic List Interviews Part III

Topics opening interview

- Opening/Practicalities
    - Is it alright to record the conversation?
    - Explain anonymity, ask them for their preferred alias
    - Explain research, give opportunity to ask questions
- Personal background
    - Age
    - Profession and education
    - Family situation
    - Role of reading within hobbies (determining importance reading)
- Reading habits and preferences
    - Frequency of reading
    - Preferred genres and genres one does not like
    - Preferred aspects of books (what a book should offer, according to them)
    - Potentially: impressive reading experience (not necessary)
- Expectations (can also be addressed after "depression")
    - Expectations on Plath and Hunt (and, for pilot: Solomon)
    - Expectations on research (incl. opportunity to ask questions)
- Depression
    - Image of depression (addition full study: ask them to fill out the statements I emailed, and to comment on their answers)
    - Own experience with depression
    - Reading about depression: has one previously read books about depression and if so, what kinds of books and why?
- Closing
    - Make sure everything is clear, opportunity for further questions and comments

Topics final interview

- Process
    - What did they think of the entire process?
    - Any problems with keeping the reading diary?
- Checking first interview and reading diaries
    - Ask them if there were any mistakes in the transcriptions
    - Let them comment on unclarities
- Impression books
    - What sticks out?
    - Similarities and differences in their reading experience (comparing the three fragments/two novels)
- Impact books
    - Did the books have any effect on their daily lives?
    - Has their image of depression changed in any way? (Addition full study: ask them once again to comment on the statements.)
- Closing
    - Opportunity for further questions and comments

Summary

The persistent popularity in the Western world of stories about suffering, from Greek tragedy to today's novels and memoirs about loss and disease, raises two questions: what is the attraction of these types of narratives and what are their effects? These two questions have fascinated scholars within the Humanities at least as early as Aristotle, but in the last two decades they have acquired renewed relevance, given the larger debate concerning the importance of literary reading. Literature, particularly literature about suffering, Nussbaum and others have claimed, has the potential to evoke empathy and reflection (e.g., Booth, 1988; Nussbaum, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2010; Pinker, 2011; Sontag, 2007). These affective and reflective responses triggered by literary reading would even lead to more prosocial behavior.

The hopes for literature are high, but empirical evidence has been lagging behind (cf. Keen, 2007). While recently there has been considerable progress in the area of reader response research, it is generally unclear to what extent empathic and reflective effects can be attributed to a text being "narrative" (presenting related events happening to characters), "fiction" (depicting what could have been or should be instead of what actually was) or "literary" (containing aesthetic and/or unconventional features). Moreover, relatively little attention has been paid to the interaction between reader and text characteristics. To engage with the claims made by Nussbaum and others and to generally further our understanding of how readers relate to (literary) narratives about suffering, this dissertation posed the following research questions:

> (I)   *What are readers' motives to read about suffering?*
>
> (II)   *To what extent do literary narrative texts about suffering evoke affective responses during reading, reflection, empathy towards others and prosocial behavior in comparison to non-literary texts?*

(III) To what extent do personal characteristics of readers influence those affective responses, reflection, empathy towards others and prosocial behavior?

(IV) To what extent and how do affective responses during reading influence reflection, empathy towards others and prosocial behavior?

The dissertation concentrated on depression and grief as forms of mental suffering that are regularly described in contemporary literature. While depression and grief share certain symptoms and could both be seen as loss-related (cf. Freud, 1917), the external cause of grief is typically clearer. It was therefore expected that it would overall be easier for people to empathize with grieving characters and that personal experience with the subject matter would play a larger role when reading about depression than about grief. In addition, people's exposure to literature and trait empathy were taken into account as reader characteristics. Trait empathy, as a general disposition, was distinguished from empathic reactions to real-life others and to characters. The latter concept, empathy with characters (cf. Keen, 2007, "narrative empathy"), was measured as part of the broader concept "narrative feelings," which consisted of all feelings towards the narrative world (see Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Narrative feelings were in turn distinguished from aesthetic feelings, which are our feelings towards the style of the text (finding it beautiful and/or original).

Part I of the dissertation dealt with question (I), Part II and III with questions (II) to (IV) – with Part II predominantly employing quantitative and Part III qualitative methods. Question (I) was investigated through a survey study into readers' general motives to read sad novels (Chapter 2) and a case study into readers' motives to read A. F. Th. van der Heijden's "requiem novel" *Tonio* (Chapter 3). A large-scale experimental study comparing reader reactions to three different genres (literary narrative, non-literary narrative, and

expository texts) and a slightly smaller experimental study comparing reactions to three texts with different levels of literary devices ("foregrounding") provided answers to questions (II), (III) and (IV) (Chapter 6 and 7). Finally, two qualitative studies using reading diaries (one "pilot" and one "full study") were conducted to further elucidate questions II-IV for literary novels (Chapter 10). The remaining chapters introduced and concluded the separate sections, with Chapter 1 providing a selective review concerning our attraction to sad stories and Chapter 5 providing a more extensive review of empathic and reflective reader reactions.

Part I. The Attraction of Sad Stories

This section of the dissertation addressed the question why people read narratives about the suffering of others. First, tragic and dramatic plots were briefly addressed as those which deal with suffering in a serious way, and which can arouse sadness, as well as – according to the Aristotelian doctrine – pity and fear. Subsequently, a selective overview was given of psychological needs (or: motives) that can explain the attraction to such stories, drawing on theories and insights from media psychology and from empirical literary studies. The theoretical overview identified a shift in scholarship from emphasizing more "hedonic" (i.e., pleasure-oriented) functions of consuming sad stories to emphasizing more "eudaimonic" (i.e., meaning-oriented) functions (cf. Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). "Pleasure" can be interpreted here as minimizing the amount of negative emotions and maximizing the amount of positive emotions. While pleasure and meaning-making are not polar opposites, I followed Oliver (2008) in stressing the importance of exploring eudaimonic motives, since media preferences have in the past too often been explained within a purely hedonic framework. Such a framework seems insufficient in explaining our attraction to tragic narratives.

As potential psychological functions or motives of reading sad stories, the following were identified in the overview: catharsis beliefs, meta-emotions,

narrative feelings, aesthetic feelings, downward social comparison, comfort, preparation, and insight. Based on different translations of the term catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics*, namely as "purgation" or as "clarification" (Golden, 1968; Nussbaum, 1986), I further argued that experiencing pity and fear may also lead to those emotions being "clarified," being put into perspective, instead of being purged (cf. Scheele, 2001). In the overview of motives, "insight" is related to catharsis as clarification. Insight could be further split up into general insight into life and the human condition, and more strictly personal insights (called "personal growth," Kim, 2007). Of all of these motives, "catharsis beliefs" can be said to be most clearly hedonic, since the aim of those believing in catharsis would be to minimize discomfort through purging negative emotions. "Insight" can be said to be most clearly eudaimonic, while the other motives fall somewhere in between.

The relative predictive importance of the potential motives to read sad books was explored through a survey study among 343 readers. The results of this survey study indicated that both eudaimonic motives ("insight" and "personal growth") and meta-emotions (liking to feel various emotions while reading) predict a preference for sad books. Apart from meta-emotions, absorption/empathy was the only other motive within the mood-management framework that made a (small) significant positive contribution to a sad book preference. In an analysis of the predictors of preferences for other genres, it was found that no other specific genre (e.g., thriller, poetry) addressed both the need for meaning-making ("insight") and the need for feeling ("meta-emotions"). These results suggest that both the experience of feeling and the experience of learning are important to the attraction of sad stories, that it is not a matter of either/or, and that sad books may be quite unique in this. Apart from the quantitative data, answers to an open question about impressive sad books suggested the potential role of style in making sad content manageable for some readers. Multiple readers indicated that they do not tend to seek out sad books,

but that they found the way sad events were narrated in a specific book impressive. Those who valued style also tended to value insight.

The result, that sad books are appreciated for emotional and meaning-making reasons and that there may be a relation between stylistic appreciation and insight, was further confirmed in a second empirical study (Chapter 3), namely a survey study (N = 67) into motives for reading one specific (best-selling and literary) book about suffering: Van der Heijden's *Tonio* [2011]. The survey contained mainly open questions, addressing not only people's psychological motives, but also more social motives (e.g., the influence of media attention). In addition, it explored the experience of catharsis as purgation (hedonic) versus catharsis as clarification (eudaimonic) further. People's thoughts and feelings during reading received specific attention, as one's initial motive to read a text may not correspond to the function the text eventually fulfills.

Results of the *Tonio* study showed that the main motives given for reading *Tonio* were curiosity about the story ("story-driven reading"), about the style ("aesthetic reading"), being a fan of the author, seeking support during grief, and wanting to learn something about loss and grief ("eudaimonic reading"). Social factors were also important, particularly the media-attention the book received. Responses to open questions brought out the high prevalence of sympathy and empathy among readers, the identification felt by those grieving, and the fear experienced by parents who read *Tonio*. Experiencing fear typically went together with experiencing other narrative feelings, like pity. These emotions were not simply purged through being experienced. Seeking (and finding) deep insight ("clarification") appeared to be more prevalent than seeking the purgation of negative emotions. Results further indicated that empathic emotions were more strongly connected to deep insight than fear was, and that empathic emotions were not more prevalent among those who reported such insights than among the other readers. This finding did not correspond to the Aristotelian "hypothesis" that pity and fear lead to catharsis (in the sense of clarification), but a specific appreciation for the way grief was *articulated* did co-

occur with both fear and pity. This appreciation of the articulation appeared close in nature to gaining insight into grief, as responses suggested that the (beautiful) articulation attributed form and (therefore) meaning to the chaotic grief experience. Overall, the findings suggest a substantial proportion of the readers had an eudaimonic reading experience which also incorporated strong feelings. Attributing the term "clarification" to this experience may be premature, however, since no direct statistical relation was found between appreciating the articulation and gaining insight.

In the first part of the dissertation, we thus saw that people do not simply want to read stories about suffering to feel better (about themselves), but that their main motives seem to be to have a deep emotional as well as a cognitively meaningful experience. This implies that stories about suffering, for those who are attracted to them, are valuable in providing people with knowledge about experiences they have not yet had themselves and may never have, but that are part of what it is like to be human.

Part II. Empathy and Reflection When Reading About Suffering

The second section investigated reader and text characteristics which are likely to lead to responses of empathy and/or reflection. It also explored the influence of narrative and aesthetic feelings on reflection and empathy with others. Thus, it continued where the *Tonio* study left off, by looking further into readers' experiences during and after reading about suffering, using experiments. It also paid more attention than the first part to "literariness," which was conceptualized as the presence of "foregrounding" (striking stylistic features, e.g., original metaphors), and readers' perception of this. Part I suggested that without a beautiful or interesting form, many readers may not find sad books worth the trouble. But is an interesting style also crucial to evoking empathy and reflection?

Chapter 5 provided a theoretical-empirical framework of the effects of literature on empathy and self-reflection, including a multi-factor model of

literary reading. I argued that, while there is empirical evidence that exposure to stories can increase empathy, for example by changing attitudes about outgroup members (e.g., Batson et al., 2002; Hakemulder 2000, 2008; Johnson, 2013; Marlowe & Maycock, 2001) or by generally increasing one's ability to infer emotional states (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, Delapaz, & Peterson, 2006; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009), the question remains whether literary narratives are actually better at establishing such effects than non-literary narratives and non-narrative texts. Furthermore, it was shown that there is little empirical evidence that literary texts trigger more thoughts than non-literary texts, although the reflection that is triggered may be of a different nature (Halász, 1991; Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

The multi-factor model tried to predict potential reader responses, based on Oatley's (1994, 1999) role-taking theory and Miall and Kuiken's (1994, 1999, 2002) defamiliarization theory (cf. Shklovsky, 1965). While role-taking suggests that empathic and reflective responses arise mostly from identifying with a character, seeing things and events from his or her perspective, defamiliarization theory places the potential power of literature mainly in style. Striking features in a literary text ("foregrounding") would lead readers to become unsettled and start looking at familiar things in a different way ("defamiliarization"). The multi-factor model combined both theories and suggested that while role-taking can take place for of all types of narratives (although literary narratives may be more conducive to triggering mental inferences – Kotovych et al., 2011), literary narratives may evoke more aesthetic feelings, potentially giving people a space to stop and reflect on the content as well. While narrative feelings were deemed most likely to impact empathy with others, a combination of narrative and aesthetic feelings was deemed to influence reflection. In addition, the personal factors exposure to literature, personal experience and trait empathy were considered particularly likely factors of influence.

These theoretical expectations were put to the test in two experiments. Chapter 6 discussed the "genre study," which investigated the effects of text

genre (expository, non-literary narrative, literary narrative), personal factors (trait empathy, personal experience, general exposure to literature), and affective responses during reading (narrative feelings, empathic distress, and aesthetic feelings) on reflection (immediate thoughts and thinking back after one week) and on two types of empathy: empathy towards others, or "empathic understanding" (one's attitudes toward people who are depressed or grieving) and prosocial behavior (taking prosocial action to diminish others' distress: donating to a related charity). Participants (BA-3 and Master's students; *N* = 210) read two texts within the same genre, about depression and grief, with one week in between.

The study discussed in Chapter 7 (the "foregrounding study") looked into the specific effect of "literariness" (or: foregrounding), by randomly assigning participants (Bachelor's students and parents; *N* = 142) to read one out of three versions of an excerpt from Anna Enquist's *Contrapunt*, a literary novel about the loss of a child. Versions differed in the level of foregrounded textual features: the "original" version possessed a high level of semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding; semantic foregrounding was removed in the manipulated version "without semantic foregrounding," and semantic, phonetic *and* grammatical foregrounding were removed in the manipulated version "without foregrounding." The same measures of affective responses and of empathic understanding and reflection were used as in genre study, while the measure of trait empathy was expanded with a cognitive component. The foregrounding study also included a qualitative element: participants were asked to underline sentences that evoked thoughts or feelings and later report which thoughts and feelings they had experienced.

The two studies had different outcomes on the *empathic* measures. With regard to *prosocial behavior*, the genre study found an effect of the non-literary narrative condition for the depression texts, with more people donating after reading this text than after reading the informative or literary text. Prosocial behavior was further predicted by personal experience when reading about

depression, but not when people read about grief. The effects of the non-literary narrative text about depression on prosocial behavior appeared to be due to higher emotional involvement (absorption and aesthetic attractiveness). In the foregrounding study, no condition effect was observed: the manipulation of foregrounding did not affect donating. This is not surprising, since this study only used one of the texts about grief, and the difference between the grief texts also did not impact donating in the genre study. However, in the foregrounding study, people's general exposure to literature predicted donating, even when controlling for education and whether one was a student or parent.

On *empathic understanding*, no effect of genre condition was found in the genre study. Instead, empathic understanding was predicted by the emotional response of sympathy/empathy with the character, for grief as well as for depression. Empathic understanding was further predicted by the personal factors trait empathy and exposure to literature. In addition, for the depression narratives, personal experience predicted empathic understanding. In the foregrounding study, on the other hand, the manipulations of foregrounding had a main effect on empathic understanding, while all other factors did not matter. Readers who had read the "original," most "literary" version scored higher on the empathic statements after reading than those who had read the version "without foregrounding."

A quantitative analysis of qualitative data in the foregrounding study showed that participants who had read the original version experienced significantly more mixed emotions than those in the version without foregrounding (e.g., finding the text "bittersweet"). This mixed emotional experience might explain the higher scores on empathic understanding, as readers may have gotten a fuller sense of the experience of grief. This would be in line with Shklovsky's (1965) ideas about the defamiliarizing and sensitizing effect of art, but with the current measures, this could not be statistically confirmed.

The different effects of the two studies on empathic understanding could be explained through the different comparisons that were made: the emotionality of the non-literary narrative text and the originality of the literary text could both be pathways to a similar amount of empathic understanding, thus cancelling out differences between the conditions in the genre study. In the foregrounding study, with less variation between texts, the effect of originality on empathic understanding may have become observable. Additionally, the foregrounding study may have detected a "literariness" effect on empathic understanding because letting readers underline sentences may have demanded more attention to the text, and attention may be crucial for literariness to have an effect.

Regarding the *reflective* outcomes, results of the two studies were somewhat more similar. In the genre study, the condition had no effect on immediate thoughts for the grief excerpts and in the foregrounding study, the manipulations of foregrounding also did not affect reflection. However, after one week, as the genre study showed, respondents had thought back to the narrative texts more frequently. A small percentage of participants also demonstrated a tendency to deeper reflection after one week – predominantly in the literary condition, as was expected. The foregrounding study only measured immediate thoughts, and there, the type of thoughts that were reported did not seem to differ between conditions. For such immediate thoughts, then, the content might be more important in generating reflection than the form, but lingering scenes and details might aid reflection in the longer run. In line with the multi-factor model of literary reading, in both studies, immediate thoughts were predicted by empathic distress and by sympathy/empathy with the character. In addition, for the genre study, perceived foregrounding predicted reflection.

The second part of the dissertation thus showed that if people read stories about suffering, it does indeed seem to be the case, as Nussbaum and others have suggested, that empathizing with a character could lead people to feel more empathy for people who are similar to that character, as well as leading people

to reflect more on what they have read. Furthermore, the relation between higher life-time exposure to literature and higher scores on at least one of two empathic measures points to a potential "repeated exposure effect" of reading, in line with previous studies (e.g., Mar et al, 2006, 2009). While this second finding is not a clear causal relation, in combination with the other findings, it is at least suggestive of the power of reading narratives, possibly literary narratives. The power of specifically literary reading was further suggested by signs of deeper reflection in the longer run for a small proportion of readers, and by the effect of foregrounding on empathic understanding. The latter effect could have been due to the mixed emotional states that foregrounding can evoke, but this deserves more empirical attention.

Part III. Delving Deeper Into the Reader Experience: Qualitative Studies

While the experimental studies of Part II showed some general patterns, the discrepancies between them suggested that more in-depth explorations are needed to see how style and personal experiences influence feelings during reading and how feelings during reading can help or hinder understanding for people in similar situations as the characters. The third section offered such an in-depth exploration through two qualitative studies: one "pilot" study (N = 9) and one "full" study (N = 14). These qualitative studies presented readers with more extensive texts than the experimental studies in Part II, namely, excerpts of 50 pages each from three books about depression in the pilot study (Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Rebecca Hunt's *Mr. Chartwell* and Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon*), and two full novels about depression in the full study (Plath and Hunt). I focused on texts about depression, since personal experience mattered more for the depression texts and thus made a more interesting case to explore the dynamics between reader and text.

Through coding participants' reading diaries and the interviews I had with them before and after reading, I explored how they negotiated proximity and

distance to the represented suffering other in the texts they read. As Cupchik (2001) has argued, one needs an optimal distance to works of art in order to both enjoy the work and to reflect on it. If the work comes "too close," reminding us too much of actual, emotional situations we have experienced, we can feel overwhelmed by it ("under-distancing"). On the other hand, if stylistic features are too prominent or novel, we may not feel any emotional connection to the work anymore ("over-distancing").

Both studies combined showed that indeed both under-distancing and over-distancing occurred. Most readers who themselves had experience with depression said they felt overwhelmed at times (under-distancing), because they had experienced similar thoughts and feelings as the characters, particularly the character in *The Bell Jar*. In response to this, they generally had to put the novel away for some time until they felt they could read again. Reading *Mr. Chartwell* was for most readers a more light-hearted, "pleasant" experience, due to the more fantastical treatment of depression. Whether readers got drawn into *Mr. Chartwell* mainly depended on their acceptance and appreciation of the metaphor of the "black dog." Particularly among the participants without experience with depression, multiple people were surprised by the metaphor, which led them to reflect on the nature of depression.

Over-distancing generally did not have to do with the originality of stylistic features, but rather with problems in empathizing with a character. For readers without experience with depression, it often appeared to be rather difficult to really understand depressed characters, especially when suicidal ideation was discussed and when a clear reason for this was seen to be lacking. Finding beauty or originality in the style, however, could help people overcome such distance, leading to reader experiences that were still deemed worthwhile and even to reflection on depression.

Overall, reflection and understanding were both aided by feelings towards characters (identification and empathy) and feelings toward the style (surprise and appreciation), but the strongest shifts in understanding appeared to occur

for those readers who experienced both strong narrative and aesthetic feelings (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 2002). That readers' empathic responses were not limited to the characters was demonstrated through their higher scores on empathic statements about depression after reading and through the fact that for multiple readers, the books functioned as conversation starters. These readers indicated they were now able to talk to people who were depressed themselves or who had a depressed partner, by referring to the book they were reading. This "conversation starting" function also was apparent among some of the readers who had experience themselves with depression.

The findings of the qualitative studies point to potential practical implications of reading about depression in therapeutic settings. Keeping reading diaries while reading might help those who suffer from depression to relive their own experiences and reflect on them, although this would need to be carefully monitored, as texts about depression can also exacerbate dark moods. In addition, reading and keeping a reading diary could help those suffering from a disorder themselves and those who are close to them to communicate their experiences to one another, by providing them with words and a common point of reference (cf. Bernstein & Rudman, 1989)

The third part of the dissertation showed the importance of studying the entire process of reading a book to comprehend the interaction between text and reader. It suggested that reading novels about depression can indeed lead to a fuller understanding of depression, especially when a combination of strong narrative and aesthetic feelings is evoked (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 2002). It further showed that even in the absence of identification, surprising text features still have the ability to make readers start thinking and feeling.

Together, these six empirical studies provided preliminary answers to the research questions, but this is far from the end of the story of the potential power of literature about suffering. First of all, the dissertation only looked at texts about depression and grief, and as we saw, responses already differed per

subject matter condition, so replications with other types of mental and physical suffering are necessary to determine the precise interaction between personal experience and empathy. In addition, different story variables need to be researched further. Some stories about suffering contain more hopeful elements (e.g., a happy ending), and may therefore be read for different reasons than purely tragic ones, as well as having a different impact on readers affective responses. Also, this dissertation concentrated on the literary feature of foregrounding, while "literariness" is a much broader concept, including, e.g., "gaps" (Iser, 1988) and polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984). To further understand how perspective-taking during reading can influence empathy, gaps may be a particularly worthwhile literary device to look at (cf. Kotovych et al., 2011). Finally, more studies need to be conducted with various measures of empathy and reflection. Both measures of empathy in the experimental studies – although relatively ecologically valid – were somewhat crude. Reflection may be more worthwhile to explore in the longer term than in the short term.

All the points of criticism mentioned above do presuppose that we can predict the conditions under which reading literature leads to specific empathic and reflective responses, but I want to emphasize that we may not ever be able to, nor may we want to, predict these relations entirely. According to literary scholarship, the meaningful and aesthetic effects of literature lie precisely in literature's polyvalence, in the fact that every reading experience can be somewhat different, can surprise us. It is valuable to see what literature can do to whom, if only for reading programs in schools and prisons, but we should be wary of judging literature primarily for its potential prosocial uses. Literary works, namely, do not simply lead us to become "better" people; they can also be disturbing, and it is vital that they remain a free playing space for our thoughts and feelings.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

Van Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (429 v. Chr.) tot John Greens *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012): verhalen over lijden blijven populair in de westerse wereld. Die populariteit roept vragen op: wat is de aantrekkingskracht van dit soort verhalen? En: wat is hun effect op lezers? Deze vragen fascineren denkers al sinds Aristoteles, maar in de laatste twee decennia hebben ze hernieuwde relevantie gekregen binnen een breder debat over het nut en de noodzaak van het lezen van literatuur. Martha Nussbaum en anderen (o.a., Booth, 1988; Pinker, 2011; Sontag, 2007) hebben ferme claims gemaakt over de effecten van literatuur: het lezen van literaire teksten zou empathie opwekken en tot reflectie aanzetten. Deze emotionele en cognitieve reacties die literatuur zou uitlokken zouden zelfs leiden tot socialer gedrag.

De verwachtingen zijn dus hooggespannen, maar het empirische bewijs dat literatuur daadwerkelijk deze effecten heeft is schaars (cf. Keen, 2007; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Hoewel er recentelijk grote stappen zijn gezet binnen het empirische lezersonderzoek, is het vooralsnog onduidelijk in hoeverre effecten van lezen op empathie en reflectie kunnen worden toegeschreven aan het feit dat een tekst 'verhalend' is (ons gebeurtenissen en personages toont), 'fictioneel' (ons toont wat had kunnen, zou kunnen of zou moeten zijn in plaats van wat daadwerkelijk is gebeurd), of 'literair' (ons iets vertelt op een esthetische en originele manier). Bovendien is er in eerder onderzoek nog weinig aandacht geweest voor de interactie tussen specifieke kenmerken van de lezer en de tekst. Het huidige onderzoeksproject ging aan de slag met de claims die door Nussbaum en anderen zijn gemaakt en probeerde hiermee ons algemene begrip over hoe lezers omgaan met (literaire) verhalen over lijden te vergroten. De volgende onderzoeksvragen stonden centraal:

(I)   Wat zijn de belangrijkste motieven voor lezers om over lijden te lezen?

(II)   In hoeverre wekt het lezen van literaire narratieve teksten over lijden emotionele reacties tijdens het lezen, reflectie, empathie voor anderen en sociaal gedrag op (vergeleken met niet-literaire teksten)?

(III)   In hoeverre beïnvloeden persoonlijke kenmerken van de lezer die emotionele reacties, reflectie, empathie met anderen en sociaal gedrag?

(IV)   In hoeverre en hoe beïnvloeden emotionele reacties tijdens het lezen reflectie, empathie voor anderen en sociaal gedrag?

In dit project is gekeken naar depressie en naar rouw als twee vormen van (mentaal) lijden die regelmatig terugkomen in hedendaagse literatuur. Depressie en rouw hebben vergelijkbare symptomen en kunnen beide worden gezien als verlies-gerelateerd, maar bij rouw is de externe oorzaak over het algemeen duidelijker (zie Freud, 1917). Er werd verwacht dat persoonlijke ervaring met het onderwerp een grotere rol zou kunnen spelen bij het lezen over depressie, aangezien het moeilijk kan zijn begrip op te brengen voor depressieve mensen als je zelf geen ervaring met depressie hebt. Naast de invloed van persoonlijke ervaring is gekeken naar twee andere lezerskenmerken: hoeveel ervaring mensen al hadden met het lezen van literatuur ('leeservaring') en empathie als karaktertrek. Empathie als karaktertrek is te onderscheiden van empathie als reactie op werkelijke anderen en als reactie op personages. Dat laatste concept, empathie voor personages (cf. Keen, 2007, 'narrative empathy') werd gemeten als onderdeel van een breder concept, 'narratieve emoties,' waaronder alle gevoelens ten opzichte van de verhaalwereld en personages vielen. Narratieve emoties werden op hun beurt onderscheiden van esthetische emoties: gevoelens ten opzichte van de stijl van een tekst (zie Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

In het eerste deel van het proefschrift onderzocht ik vraag (I), in het tweede en derde deel vraag (II) tot en met (IV). Daarbij gebruikte ik in het tweede deel vooral kwantitatieve en in het derde deel vooral kwalitatieve methoden. Vraag (I) onderzocht ik via een surveystudie naar lezers' algemene motieven om droevige boeken te lezen (Hoofdstuk 2) en via een specifiekere surveystudie naar de motieven van lezers om A. F. Th. van der Heijdens 'requiemroman' *Tonio* te gaan lezen (Hoofdstuk 3). Om antwoorden te krijgen op vraag (II), (III) en (IV) deed ik twee experimenten: een relatief grootschalige experimentele studie waarin reacties van lezers op teksten uit drie verschillende genres (informatief, niet-literair verhalend, literair verhalend) werden vergeleken (Hoofdstuk 6), en een wat kleinere experimentele studie waarin reacties van lezers op drie teksten met een verschillende hoeveelheid literaire kenmerken werden vergeleken (Hoofdstuk 7). Vraag II tot en met IV werden verder beantwoord via twee kwalitatieve studies, waarin lezers langere teksten lazen waarover zij leesdagboeken bijhielden (Hoofdstuk 10). De overige hoofdstukken vormden de theoretische achtergrond en de conclusies voor de verschillende delen van het proefschrift.

Deel I. De Aantrekkingskracht van Droevige Verhalen

Dit deel van het proefschrift ging in op de vraag waarom mensen verhalen lezen over het lijden van anderen. 'Droevige verhalen' besprak ik als tragische en dramatische plotstructuren die op een serieuze manier lijden laten zien. Zulke verhalen kunnen niet alleen verdriet opwekken, maar ook – Aristoteles volgend – medelijden en angst. Vervolgens gaf ik een overzicht van de psychologische behoeften die ervoor zorgen dat mensen zich tot zulke verhalen aangetrokken kunnen voelen. In dit overzicht is uitgegaan van inzichten uit de empirische literatuurwetenschap en de mediapsychologie. Hierbinnen was een verschuiving te zien van theorieën die de 'hedonische' (op plezier-gerichte) functies van droevige verhalen benadrukken naar theorieën die meer 'eudaimonische' (op betekenis-gerichte) functies benadrukken (zie Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch,

2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). 'Plezier' betekent hier zoveel als het nastreven van zo min mogelijk negatieve en zo veel mogelijk positieve emoties. Plezier en betekenis sluiten elkaar niet uit, maar aangezien mediavoorkeuren in het verleden vaak binnen een puur hedonisch kader zijn geplaatst, volgde ik Olivers (2008) idee dat er meer aandacht moet worden besteed aan eudaimonische motieven. Een strikt hedonisch kader kan de voorkeur voor tragische verhalen namelijk niet goed verklaren.

De volgende psychologische behoeften ofwel motieven kwamen in het overzicht naar voren: het geloof in catharsis (als loutering), meta-emoties, narratieve emoties, esthetische emoties, neerwaartse sociale vergelijking, troost, voorbereiding, en inzicht. Op basis van de verschillende vertalingen van de term 'catharsis' in Aristoteles' *Poetica*, namelijk als 'loutering' (*purgation*) of als 'verheldering' (*clarification*) (Golden, 1968; Nussbaum, 1986), beargumenteerde ik dat het ervaren van medelijden en angst er ook toe kan leiden dat die emoties verhelderd worden in plaats van opgelost (vergelijk Scheele, 2001). In het overzicht van de motieven is de zoektocht naar 'inzicht' gerelateerd aan catharsis als verheldering. Inzicht kon verder worden opgedeeld in algemene inzichten in de menselijke conditie en beperktere persoonlijke inzichten (vergelijk 'persoonlijke groei,' Kim, 2007). Van alle motieven past het geloof in catharsis het best binnen een hedonisch kader, omdat hiermee negatieve emoties gelouterd zouden worden. Inzicht past het duidelijkst binnen een eudaimonisch kader. De andere motieven vallen tussen deze twee uitersten.

Via een survey onder 343 lezers werd onderzocht welke van deze potentiële motieven de sterkste voorspellers zijn van een voorkeur voor droevige boeken. De resultaten: zowel eudaimonische motieven (algemeen inzicht en persoonlijke groei) als meta-emoties (het graag willen ervaren van emoties tijdens het lezen) voorspellen een voorkeur voor droevige boeken. Wat betreft emotionele motieven speelde ook de narratieve emotie absorptie/empathie een kleine rol. Op alle andere motieven scoorden mensen met een sterkere voorkeur voor droevige boeken niet per se hoger dan mensen

met een minder sterke voorkeur. Uit een nadere analyse van voorkeuren voor specifieke genres (bijvoorbeeld thrillers of poëzie) bleek dat bij geen enkel ander genre zowel de behoefte om te voelen als de behoefte om inzichten op te doen een rol speelden. Het lijkt er dus op dat droevige verhalen een unieke functie vervullen voor mensen die deze gecombineerde emotionele en cognitieve behoefte hebben.

De antwoorden van de lezers in deze survey op een open vraag over indrukwekkende droevige boeken lieten hiernaast zien dat stijl een belangrijke rol kan spelen in het toegankelijk maken van een tragische inhoud. Meerdere lezers gaven aan dat ze weliswaar geen voorkeur hebben voor droevige boeken, maar dat ze de manier waarop een specifiek boek vorm gaf aan droevige gebeurtenissen indrukwekkend vonden. De kwantitatieve data toonden dat degenen die over het algemeen stijl belangrijk vinden bij het lezen ook sterker geneigd zijn om inzicht belangrijk te vinden.

De bevinding dat mensen droevige verhalen zowel waarderen vanwege het ervaren van emoties als vanwege het opdoen van inzichten, werd verder bevestigd in een tweede surveystudie, waarin werd gekeken naar motieven om Van der Heijdens *Tonio* te lezen (N = 67). Deze survey bestond voornamelijk uit open vragen, niet enkel over psychologische, maar ook over meer sociale motieven (zoals de invloed van media-aandacht). Daarnaast werd via deze survey verder gekeken in hoeverre mensen catharsis als loutering of catharsis als verheldering ervaren.

In deze *Tonio*-studie waren de belangrijkste motieven van mensen om te gaan lezen nieuwsgierigheid naar het verhaal ('*story-driven reading*'), nieuwsgierigheid naar de stijl ('*aesthetic reading*'), het zoeken van steun tijdens rouw, en iets willen leren over verlies en rouw ('*eudaimonic reading*'). Hiernaast waren er de fans van Van der Heijden die alles van hem willen lezen en speelden sociale factoren, met name media-aandacht, een rol. Tijdens het lezen ervoeren de deelnemers veel emoties: sympathie en empathie in het algemeen, identificatie specifiek voor degenen die zelf in de rouw waren, en angst onder de

ouders. Het ervaren van angst ging doorgaans samen met het ervaren van narratieve emoties als medelijden, maar niet veel mensen lazen om deze emoties te 'louteren' en men had ook niet de ervaring dat dit gebeurde. 'Verheldering' leek een grotere rol te spelen: zowel het op zoek zijn naar als het vinden van inzicht werd geregeld gerapporteerd.

De resultaten toonden verder dat het ervaren van empathische emoties tijdens het lezen sterker samenhangt met het opdoen van inzichten dan het ervaren van angst, maar het ervaren van empathie was niet voorbehouden aan degenen die inzichten rapporteerden. Wat dat betreft was er weinig bewijs voor het Aristotelische idee dat het ervaren van angst en medelijden zou kunnen leiden tot verheldering (van die emoties). Echter, het ervaren van angst en medelijden ging wel samen met een specifieke waardering voor de manier waarop rouw in het boek was verwoord. Die waardering voor de verwoording kan gezien worden als een zekere mate van inzicht, aangezien de reacties suggereerden dat de krachtige verwoording de chaotische rouwervaring vorm en daarmee betekenis gaf. Om hiervoor de term 'catharsis' te gebruiken is echter voorbarig, gezien het feit dat er geen directe statistische relatie werd gevonden tussen waardering voor de verwoording en het expliciet rapporteren van inzicht.

Al met al zagen we in dit eerste deel van het proefschrift dat mensen niet simpelweg over het lijden van anderen willen lezen om zich beter te voelen, maar dat ze een emotionele en betekenisvolle ervaring lijken na te streven. Verhalen over lijden zijn waardevol, voor degenen die zich hiertoe aangetrokken voelen, omdat ze vorm geven aan en kennis overdragen over ervaringen die lezers zelf (nog) niet hebben gehad en wellicht nooit zullen hebben, maar die deel uitmaken van wat het betekent om mens te zijn.

Deel II. Empathie en Reflectie bij het Lezen over Lijden

Het tweede deel van het proefschrift onderzocht wanneer lezen leidt tot empathie en tot reflectie: wat is de invloed van tekstkenmerken, van persoonskenmerken en van de emotionele beleving van de tekst (narratieve en

esthetische emoties)? Dit deel ging verder waar de *Tonio*-studie stopte, door in te gaan op de ervaring tijdens het lezen en door meer aandacht te besteden aan de invloed van stijl, of 'literariteit'. Onder 'literariteit' verstond ik de aanwezigheid van '*foregrounding*' (opvallende stylistische kenmerken, zoals originele beelden) in de tekst, en lezers' subjectieve ervaring van deze originaliteit. In Deel I bleek een mooie of originele stijl voor een deel van de lezers bepalend om een droevig boek de moeite waard te vinden. Maar is een interessante stijl ook cruciaal om empathie en reflectie op te wekken?

Hoofdstuk 5 bood een theoretisch-empirisch kader voor de mogelijke effecten van literatuur op empathie en reflectie, inclusief een multi-factor model van literair lezen. Eerder onderzoek suggereerde dat er een relatie is tussen het lezen van verhalen en empathie: verhalen zouden er onder meer voor zorgen dat lezers zich beter kunnen verplaatsen in het perspectief van een ander (bijv. Batson et al., 1997, 2002; Hakemulder, 2000, 2008; Johnson, 2013; Marlowe & Maycock, 2001) en dat empathische vaardigheden verbeteren (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, Delapaz, & Peterson, 2006; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). Maar aangezien in veel van deze eerdere studies literaire teksten niet systematisch zijn vergeleken met niet-literaire verhalende teksten en met informerende teksten, bleef het de vraag of literaire teksten een sterker effect hebben dan andere teksten. Daarnaast is er weinig empirisch bewijs dat literaire teksten meer gedachten zouden opwekken dan andere teksten, al doet eerder onderzoek vermoeden dat literatuur tot diepere reflectie zou kunnen leiden (Halász, 1991; Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

Het multi-factor model probeerde de mogelijke lezersreacties te voorspellen, op basis van Oatleys (1994, 1999) *role-taking*-theorie en Miall en Kuikens (1994, 1999, 2002) vervreemdingstheorie (vergelijk Shklovsky, 1965). Het idee achter de *role-taking*-theorie is dat empathie en reflectie voortkomen uit het feit dat lezers kijken vanuit het perspectief van een personage, terwijl de vervreemdingstheorie de kracht van literatuur vooral ziet in de stijl. *Foregrounding* in de tekst zou ertoe leiden dat lezers van hun stuk worden

gebracht en anders naar de wereld gaan kijken. Het multi-factor model combineerde deze twee theorieën, waarbij *role-taking* vooral zou worden opgewekt door verhalende elementen in teksten (hoewel de complexere personages en leemtes in literaire teksten tot sterkere '*mental inferences*' zouden kunnen leiden – Kotovych et al., 2011). Literariteit zou meer esthetische emoties opwekken en daarmee lezers mogelijk ook de ruimte bieden om te reflecteren. Vanuit dit model werd verwacht dat empathie met anderen vooral zou voortkomen uit narratieve emoties tijdens het lezen en reflectie uit een combinatie van narratieve en esthetische emoties. Buiten het model werden de persoonskenmerken leeservaring, empathie als karaktertrek en persoonlijke ervaring besproken als relevante factoren voor zowel empathie als reflectie.

Twee experimenten testten deze theoretische verwachtingen. Hoofdstuk 6 besprak de 'genre-studie', die de effecten onderzocht van tekstgenre (informatie, niet-literair verhalend, literair verhalend), persoonlijke kenmerken (leeservaring, empathie als karaktertrek en persoonlijke ervaring) en emoties tijdens het lezen (narratieve emoties, esthetische emoties en empathische pijn) op reflectie (directe gedachten en terugdenken na een week) en op twee typen empathie: 'empathisch begrip' (attitudes over langdurig rouwende of depressieve mensen) en sociaal gedrag (doneren aan een gerelateerd goed doel). Deelnemers (derdejaars bachelor- en masterstudenten; N = 210) lazen twee teksten binnen hetzelfde genre, één over depressie en één over rouw, met één week tussen het lezen van de teksten.

Hoofdstuk 7 besprak de '*foregrounding*-studie', waarin werd gekeken naar het specifieke effect van *foregrounding*. Deelnemers (bachelorstudenten en hun ouders; N = 142) lazen één uit drie versies van een fragment uit Anna Enquists *Contrapunt*, een literaire roman over het verlies van een kind. Deze versies waren zo aangepast dat ze verschilden in de mate van literaire kenmerken: de 'originele' versie bezat een hoge mate van semantische, fonetische en grammaticale *foregrounding*, de versie 'zonder semantische *foregrounding*' was zo gemanipuleerd dat er geen semantische *foregrounding* (metaforen,

vergelijkingen, etc.) meer in zat, en de versie 'zonder *foregrounding*' had ook geen opvallende fonetische of grammaticale elementen meer. Deze *foregrounding*-studie bevatte daarnaast een kwalitatief deel: deelnemers werden gevraagd zinnen die een emotie of gedachte opriepen te onderstrepen en later op te schrijven welke emoties of gedachten dit waren.

De uitkomsten op de empathische maten verschilden tussen de twee experimentele studies. Wat betreft *sociaal gedrag* vond de genre-studie een effect van de niet-literaire verhalende conditie bij de depressieteksten: meer mensen doneerden na het lezen van deze tekst dan na het lezen van de informatieve of literaire tekst. Persoonlijke ervaring had ook een effect op sociaal gedrag bij het lezen over depressie, maar niet bij het lezen over rouw. Dat het lezen van de niet-literaire verhalende tekst over depressie leidde tot meer donaties leek te liggen aan de hogere emotionele impact (absorptie en esthetische aantrekkelijkheid). In de *foregrounding*-studie werd geen effect van conditie gevonden op sociaal gedrag, wat niet verrassend is, aangezien deze studie alleen een tekst over rouw gebruikte en de verschillen tussen de rouwteksten ook geen effect op sociaal gedrag hadden in de genre-studie. Echter, in de *foregrounding*-studie was de algemene leeservaring van de deelnemers wel een voorspeller van doneren, zelfs als rekening werd gehouden met opleidingsniveau en of de deelnemer een ouder of student was.

Wat betreft *empathisch begrip* vond de genre-studie geen significant verschil tussen de condities. Empathisch begrip bleek in deze studie – zoals verwacht – voorspeld te worden door empathie/sympathie met het personage tijdens het lezen. Daarnaast waren de persoonskenmerken empathie als karaktertrek en algemene leeservaring significante voorspellers. Alleen voor de teksten over depressie was persoonlijke ervaring ook een voorspeller van empathisch begrip. In de *foregrounding*-studie, daarentegen, maakten de persoonskenmerken niet uit voor empathisch begrip – de enige significante oorzaak van een hoger empathisch begrip in deze studie was *foregrounding*. Wie de 'originele', meest literaire versie had gelezen scoorde ook hoger op de

empathische stellingen dan degenen die de versie 'zonder *foregrounding*' hadden gelezen.

Het kwalitatieve deel van de *foregrounding*-studie liet verder zien dat degenen die de originele versie hadden gelezen vaker een gemengde emotionele ervaring hadden (zij rapporteerden bijvoorbeeld woorden als 'bitterzoet'). Deze complexere emotionele ervaring tijdens het lezen zou de verklaring kunnen zijn van de hogere scores op empathisch begrip – wellicht kregen lezers een completer idee van de verlieservaring. Dit zou overeenkomen met Shklovsky's (1965) ideeën rondom het vervreemdende en sensitiserende effect van kunst. Met de huidige kwalitatieve meting kon echter niet statistisch gecontroleerd worden of gemengde emoties inderdaad verantwoordelijk waren voor het effect op empathisch begrip.

De verschillende effecten van de twee experimentele studies op empathisch begrip kunnen worden uitgelegd aan de hand van de verschillende vergelijkingen die zijn gemaakt: de emotionaliteit van de niet-literaire verhalende tekst en de originaliteit van de literaire verhalende tekst zouden twee aparte wegen kunnen zijn naar een vergelijkbare mate van empathisch begrip. In de *foregrounding*-studie, waarin de teksten minder verschilden, zou het specifieke effect van originaliteit observeerbaar kunnen zijn geworden. Dat de *foregrounding*-studie wel een effect vond van 'literariteit' op empathisch begrip zou er ook aan kunnen liggen dat het element van het onderstrepen meer aandacht voor de tekst vergde. Om effecten te bewerkstelligen zou aandacht voor de tekst cruciaal kunnen zijn.

Wat betreft de uitkomsten op *reflectie* kwamen de twee experimenten behoorlijk overeen. De verschillende condities hadden geen hoofdeffect op directe gedachten, noch in de genre- noch in de *foregrounding*-studie. Op de langere termijn hadden de verhalende teksten in de genre-studie echter wel een groter effect op reflectie dan de informatieve. Na een week was er ook een klein percentage dat diepere gedachten rapporteerde – deze mensen hadden voornamelijk de literaire teksten gelezen. In overeenstemming met het multi-

factor model werd reflectie in beide studies voorspeld door sympathie/empathie met het personage en door empathische pijn. In de genre-studie was *perceived foregrounding* (waargenomen originaliteit) een extra voorspeller van reflectie.

Het tweede deel van het proefschrift toonde dus dat als mensen verhalen over lijden lezen het inderdaad het geval lijkt, zoals Nussbaum en anderen beweerd hebben, dat meevoelen met een personage er ook toe kan leiden dat mensen meer begrip hebben voor mensen in een vergelijkbare situatie als die van het personage, en dat het meevoelen met een personage ertoe kan leiden dat mensen aan het denken worden gezet. Daarnaast kunnen we uit de resultaten afleiden dat mensen die vaker lezen (oftewel: hoger scoren op algemene leeservaring) empathischer reageren (vergelijk Mar et al., 2006, 2009). Deze tweede bevinding is geen duidelijke causale relatie, maar in combinatie met de overige uitkomsten is het wel veelbelovend voor de kracht van lezen en mogelijk van literatuur. De specifieke kracht van literatuur werd bovendien ondersteund door de diepere reflectie die een klein deel van de lezers na een week ervoor, en vooral door het effect van *foregrounding* op empathisch begrip. Dit effect van *foregrounding* zou kunnen komen door de complexere emotionele ervaring die originele tekstkenmerken opwekken, maar of dit werkelijk zo is verdient meer onderzoek.

Part III. Dieper Doordringen in de Lezerservaring: Kwalitatieve Studies

De experimenten uit Deel II toonden algemene patronen, maar de discrepanties tussen deze studies gaven al aan dat nader gekeken moet worden naar hoe stijl en persoonlijke ervaring emoties tijdens het lezen beïnvloeden en hoe emoties tijdens het lezen begrip voor anderen bevorderen of juist verhinderen. Het derde deel van het proefschrift probeerde hierin te voorzien, door middel van twee kwalitatieve studies: een *'pilot'*-studie (N = 9) en een 'volledige' studie (N = 14). In deze studies lazen de deelnemers langere teksten dan in de experimenten: fragmenten van elk 50 pagina's uit drie boeken over depressie in de *pilot*-studie

(Sylvia Plaths *The Bell Jar*, Rebecca Hunts *Mr. Chartwell* en Andrew Solomons *The Noonday Demon*), en twee complete romans in de volledige studie (Plath en Hunt). Aangezien persoonlijke ervaring meer uitmaakt bij het lezen over depressie werd er in dit deel voor gekozen alleen te kijken naar teksten over depressie.

Door het coderen van de leesdagboeken die de deelnemers bijhielden en van de interviews die ik met hen had, bekeek ik hoe lezers omgingen met afstand en nabijheid ten opzichte van het lijdende personage. Zoals Cupchik (2001) heeft gesteld, hebben mensen een 'optimale' afstand nodig om een kunstwerk te kunnen waarderen en erop te kunnen reflecteren. Als het werk te nabij komt, ons te zeer herinnert aan onze eigen emotionele ervaringen, dan kunnen we ons erdoor overspoeld voelen ('*under-distancing*'). Aan de andere kant, als stilistische kenmerken te veel aandacht opeisen door hun originaliteit, dan kan dit onze emotionele verbinding met het werk in de weg staan ('*over-distancing*').

In de twee kwalitatieve studies kwam inderdaad zowel *under-distancing* als *over-distancing* voor. Lezers die zelf ervaring hadden met depressie ervoeren geregeld te weinig afstand, omdat zij vergelijkbare gedachten en gevoelens hadden gehad als de personages, met name het personage in *The Bell Jar*. Om hiermee om te gaan legden zij vaak het boek een tijdje weg tot ze weer verder konden gaan. Het lezen van *Mr. Chartwell* was voor de meeste lezers een lichtere ervaring, door de fantasievollere representatie van depressie. Of lezers opgingen in *Mr. Chartwell* hing grotendeels af van hun acceptatie van en waardering voor de personifiëring van depressie als een zwarte hond die in dit boek werd gebruikt. Vooral de lezers zonder ervaring met depressie waren doorgaans verrast door deze metafoor, wat hen ertoe aanzette te reflecteren op wat depressie inhoudt.

Over-distancing had doorgaans weinig van doen met de stijl, het lag er eerder aan dat lezers zich niet konden herkennen in en niet konden meevoelen met het personage. Voor lezers die zelf geen ervaring hadden met depressie was het vaak moeilijk om begrip op te brengen voor de depressieve personages,

vooral als de personages zelfmoordgedachten hadden en als er geen duidelijke oorzaak was voor hun gevoelens. Echter, als lezers tegelijkertijd de stijl wel mooi of origineel vonden, dan kon dit hen helpen de afstand te overbruggen, alsnog een waardevolle leeservaring te hebben, en zelfs alsnog te reflecteren op depressie.

Reflectie en begrip kwamen voort uit gevoelens voor de personages (identificatie en empathie) en gevoelens ten opzichte van de stijl (verrassing en waardering), maar de sterkste verschuivingen in begrip leken plaats te vinden voor die lezers die zowel sterke narratieve als esthetische emoties ervoeren (vergelijk Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Dat de empathische reacties van lezers zich niet beperkten tot de personages werd verder duidelijk uit hun hogere scores op empathische stellingen over depressie na het lezen en uit het feit dat meerdere lezers door het lezen met andere mensen over depressie begonnen te praten. Deze lezers spraken met mensen die zelf depressief waren of mensen die een depressieve partner of familielid hadden, door te refereren aan het boek dat ze hadden gelezen. Deze 'gespreksfunctie' kwam ook voor bij de lezers die zelf depressief waren.

De uitkomsten van de kwalitatieve studies wijzen naar de praktische implicaties van lezen over depressie, bijvoorbeeld in een therapeutische omgeving. Het bijhouden van een leesdagboek zou mensen die lijden aan een depressie kunnen helpen om hun eigen ervaringen op relatief veilige wijze te herleven en op deze ervaringen te reflecteren. Dit zou wel onder professionele begeleiding moeten gebeuren, aangezien teksten over depressie zwaarmoedige buien ook kunnen versterken. Hiernaast kan het lezen en het bijhouden van een leesdagboek zowel degenen die lijden aan een psychische stoornis en hun naasten helpen te communiceren over hun ervaringen, doordat de boeken nieuwe verwoordingen bieden en een gezamenlijk referentiepunt vormen (vergelijk Bernstein & Rudman, 1989).

Het derde deel van het proefschrift toonde het belang van het bestuderen van het gehele leesproces als men de interactie tussen tekst en lezer wil

begrijpen. De bevindingen suggereerden dat het lezen van romans over depressie inderdaad tot een verruimd begrip voor depressieve mensen kan leiden, vooral wanneer een combinatie van sterke narratieve en esthetische emoties wordt opgeroepen (vergelijk Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Verder werd duidelijk dat zelfs als identificatie met een personage ontbreekt, verrassende stilistische kenmerken er nog voor kunnen zorgen dat lezers gaan voelen en gaan nadenken.

Deze zes empirische studies bieden voorlopige antwoorden op de onderzoeksvragen, maar dit is nog niet het eind van het verhaal over de potentiële kracht van literatuur. Allereerst keek dit proefschrift alleen naar teksten over depressie en rouw, en we zagen dat de lezersreacties bij deze twee vergelijkbare onderwerpen al konden verschillen, dus replicaties met andere vormen van mentale en fysieke pijn zijn nodig om de precieze interactie tussen persoonlijke ervaring, tekst en empathie te bepalen. Daarnaast variëren verhalen op meer manieren dan in dit proefschrift is onderzocht. Sommige droevige verhalen bevatten meer hoopvolle elementen dan andere (zoals een gelukkig einde). Zulke deels hoopvolle verhalen zullen om andere redenen worden gelezen dan puur tragische verhalen, en zullen ook andere reacties bij lezers uitlokken.

Behalve verdere variaties in inhoud, kunnen toekomstige studies ook meer variatie aanbrengen in de literaire kenmerken die worden bekeken. In dit proefschrift ging het vrijwel uitsluitend om *foregrounding*, terwijl literariteit een veel breder begrip is, waaronder bijvoorbeeld ook leemtes vallen (Iser, 1988) en meerstemmigheid (Bakhtin, 1984). Leemtes vormen een interessant uitgangspunt voor studies naar hoe *role-taking* tijdens het lezen empathie kan beïnvloeden, aangezien de lezer hierbij zelf de gedachten en gevoelens van personages moet invullen (zie Kotovych et al., 2011).

Ook de manier waarop empathie en reflectie zijn gemeten zou in toekomstige studies verder kunnen worden uitgebreid. De empathiematen die

werden gebruikt in de twee experimentele studies waren aan de grove kant – al hadden zij wel redelijke ecologische validiteit. Zowel voor empathie als reflectie is het relevant om nader te onderzoeken wat het effect van lezen op de langere termijn is.

Alle punten van kritiek die ik hierboven noem gaan er wel vanuit dat we kunnen voorspellen onder welke omstandigheden het lezen van literatuur leidt tot specifieke empathische en reflectieve reacties. Ik moet echter benadrukken dat we deze relaties waarschijnlijk nooit geheel kunnen voorspellen en dat we dat wellicht ook niet moeten willen. De betekenisvolle en esthetische effecten van literatuur liggen juist in de meerduidigheid van de literaire tekst, in het feit dat elke leeservaring weer net iets anders is, en ons daardoor ook zelf kan verrassen bij het lezen. Het is wel degelijk de moeite waard om te kijken wat literatuur voor wie kan doen, al is het alleen maar voor praktische toepassingen als literair onderwijs in scholen en leesprogramma's in gevangenissen. Maar het is niet verstandig om literatuur te reduceren tot haar sociale nut. Het lezen van literatuur leidt er immers niet automatisch toe dat we 'betere' mensen worden; literatuur kan juist verontrustend en schandalig zijn, een vrije speelruimte voor onze gedachten en gevoelens, en het is van groot belang dat dat zo mag blijven.

Curriculum Vitae

Eva Maria (Emy) Koopman (1985) holds a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology (2011) and a Research Master's degree (*cum laude*) in Literary Studies (2010). Both of these programs were completed at Utrecht University. During her studies, Emy explored what literature can do for people who are mourning a loss. In addition, she looked into the ethical issues involved in writing about the pain of others. While spending a semester at the University of Toronto, Canada in the fall of 2009, she conducted an empirical study into readers' reactions to literary rape scenes under supervision of Professor Gerald Cupchik.

In 2011, after a 9-month internship as a Psychologist at mental health institution PsyQ, Emy started her NWO-funded PhD research project "Reading Suffering" at Erasmus University Rotterdam. There, Emy also taught various classes, among which a new course she constructed with Johannes von Engelhardt: Human Suffering in Media and Arts. During the period of the PhD-project, Emy spent three months at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada to research meaningful reading experiences together with Professor Donald Kuiken.

Apart from her academic work, Emy is active as a writer and journalist. She is a contributing editor at online magazine *hard//hoofd* and an investigative journalist at *Platform Investico*. Her debut novel, *Orewoet*, was published by Prometheus in September 2016.

List of Publications Related to This Project

Koopman, E.M. (2012). De waarde van andermans leed. *De Groene Amsterdammer*, *136*(37), 50-53.

Koopman, E. M. (2013). The attraction of tragic narrative: Catharsis and other motives. *Scientific Study of Literature, 3*(2), 178-208. doi: 10.1075/ssol.3.2.03koo

Koopman, E. M. (December 2014). De "steenachtigheid" van de steen. Wat mooie metaforen en klinkende klankherhalingen met ons kunnen doen. *Tekstblad. Tijdschrift over Tekst & Communicatie*, *20*.

Koopman, E. M. (2015a). Why do we read sad books? Eudaimonic motives and meta-emotions. *Poetics, 52*, 18-31. doi: 10.1016/j.poetic.2015.06.004

Koopman, E. M. (2015b). Empathic reactions after reading. The role of genre, personal factors and affective responses. *Poetics*, *50*, 62-79. doi: 10.1016/j.poetic.2015.02.008

Koopman, E. M. (2015c). How texts about suffering trigger reflection: Genre, personal factors and affective responses. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, *9*(4), 430-441. doi: 10.1037/aca0000006

Koopman, E. M. (2016). Effects of "literariness" on emotions and on empathy and reflection after reading. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, *10*(1), 82-98. doi: 10.1037/aca0000041

Koopman, E.M. (2016). Readers' experiences with reading about grief. In K. Oterholm, K. I. Skjerdingstad, E. F. McKechnie, & P. M. Rothbauer (Eds.), *Plotting the reading experience –Theory/ Practice/ Politics* (pp. 199-214). Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Koopman, E. M., & Hakemulder, F. (2015). Effects of literature on empathy and self-reflection: A theoretical-empirical framework. *Journal of Literary Theory, 9*(1), 79-111. doi: 10.1515/jlt-2015-0005

Portfolio

Courses Followed During the PhD-Project

Academic / Methodological

2012
- Introduction Course for New PhD Students – NESCoR (University of Amsterdam, January-April; 6 ECTS)

2013
- Workshop Data Management – Graduate School Social Sciences and Humanities (Erasmus University, 27 November; 2.5 hours)
- Workshop Peer Reviewing for PhDs and Research Master's Students – RMeS (EYE, Amsterdam; 12 December; 1 ECTS)

2014
- Workshop ATLAS.ti for Beginners – EGS3H course (Erasmus University, 20-21 February; 1 ECTS)
- Master's course Advanced Qualitative Methods (CS5007) – ESHCC (Erasmus University, January – March; 5 ECTS, grade: 9.4)
- Bachelor's course Narratieve Psychologie (201000129) (Universiteit Twente, April – June; grade: 9.4)
- Workshop Qualitative Data Analysis – EGS3H course (Erasmus University, 9 May; 1 ECTS)
- Master's class Morality and Ethics (Erasmus University, 19 November; awarded *Dean's Award for Academic Excellence* for best research proposal)
- English Academic Writing for PhD Students – EGS3H course (Erasmus University, 26 November; 3 hours).

Didactic

2012
- Basic Didactics – Risbo (Erasmus University, January-March; 28 hours)
- Workshop Groepsdynamiek – Risbo (Erasmus University, 13 November; 6.5 hours)
- Workshop Verbale en Non-verbale communicatie – Risbo (Erasmus University, 28 November; 6.5 hours)
- Workshop Activerende werkvormen – Risbo (Erasmus University, 10 December; 6.5 hours)

Courses Taught During the PhD Project

2011-2012
- Communication and Media Practice (two tutorial groups)
- Research Workshop 1: Cross-National Comparative Research (one tutorial group)

2012-2013
- Introduction to Social Science Research (two tutorial groups)
- Communication and Media Practice (two tutorial groups)
- Research Workshop 1: Cross-National Comparative Research (one tutorial group)

2013-2014
- Elective: Human Suffering in Media and Arts (seminar for 25 students)
- Master's Thesis Supervision (1 student)
- Introduction to Social Science Research (one tutorial group)
- Communication and Media Practice (one tutorial group)
- Research Workshop 1: Cross-National Comparative Research (one tutorial group)

2014-2015
- Communication Ethics (one tutorial group)
- Internship Supervision (4 students)
- Elective: Human Suffering in Media and Arts (seminar for 25 students)
- Master's Thesis Supervision (2 students)
- Research Workshop 1: Cross-National Comparative Research

Conferences and Academic Workshops During the PhD Project

6-7 July 2012
Summer Institute International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and Media (IGEL) 2012, Montréal. *Workshop: The Experiential Reading of Literature*.
Role: Facilitator
Content: Discussions between IGEL members about current research projects in the empirical study of literature and media.

8-10 July 2012
Conference of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and Media (IGEL) 2012, Montréal.
Presentation (9 July, Session: Real World Applications):
"Reading as a coping strategy: who reads during hardship, and why?"

20-23 August 2012
Interrogating Trauma in the Humanities: International Interdisciplinary Conference, Lincoln (University of Lincoln).
Presentation (20 August, Session: Narratives of Suffering):
" 'An almost disconcerting sense of beauty': Exploring readers' responses to narratives of suffering**."**

9 March 2013
Expert-Meeting Narrative, Ethics, and Medicine with Rita Charon, Amsterdam (Central Library; organization: VU Amsterdam).
Presentation: "Predictors of empathy when reading about depression: Genre and reader variables."

22- 24 May 2013
Scientific Advances in Creative Writing and Literary Reading Research (CWLRR), Indiana, Pennsylvania (Indiana University of Pennsylvania).
Presentation (23 May, Session: Investigating Empathy and Emotion in Literary Reading and Personal Writing): "Predictors of empathy and reflection when reading suffering: Genre and reader variables."

11-12 June 2013
Researching the Reading Experience, Oslo (Høskolen i Oslo og Akershus).
Presentation (12 June, Session: Reading: Politics and Democracy): "Reading about grief: Readers' reasons for and experiences with reading A. F. Th. van der Heijden's 'requiem novel'."

28 October 2013	Course *Emoties in woorden, gesprekken, verhalen*, Utrecht (Utrecht University). <u>Guest lecture:</u> "Lezen over lijden: Emotionele en cognitieve reacties op verschillende verhalen over depressie en rouw."
8 November 2013	*Narrative Impact* (Symposium), Nijmegen (Radboud University). <u>Presentation:</u> "Empathy and Narratives on Suffering."
20-24 January 2014	*L'Emozione ha voce – Learning from Literature? An Italian-German conference*, Villa Vigoni. <u>Presentation</u> (22 January): "Learning from literature. Belief change and transforming the self."
3-4 February 2014	*Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap*, Wageningen, Nederland. <u>Presentation</u> (4 February): "Predictors of empathy when reading suffering: genre and reader variables."
27-28 June 2014	*StoryNet Workshop 2014*, Budapest. <u>Poster presentation</u> (28 June): "The attraction of sad stories: Reader motivations and the relation to personality traits."
21-25 July 2014	*Conference of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and Media (IGEL) 2014*, Torino. <u>Presentation</u> (22 July, Symposium: Aesthetic engagement during moments of suffering): "Narrative and aesthetic emotions while reading about suffering."
5-7 March 2015	*Interdisciplinary Conference Narrative and Medicine: Caring for the Future*, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon. <u>Presentation</u> (5 March): "Reading about depression: A qualitative reader response study."
10-12 July 2015	*Mini-conference Literature and Empathy*, Göttingen. <u>Presentation</u> (11 July): "Effects of literature on empathy and self-reflection: A theoretical-empirical framework."