Modernist Empathy in American Literature: William Faulkner, Nathanael West, and Richard Wright

Kentaro Tabata
MODERNIST EMPATHY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: WILLIAM FAULKNER, NATHANAEL WEST, AND RICHARD WRIGHT

By

KENTARO TABATA

A Dissertation submitted to the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2017
Kentaro Tabata defended this dissertation on November 6, 2017.
The members of the supervisory committee were:

Ralph M. Berry  
Professor Directing Dissertation

Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya  
University Representative

Andrew Epstein  
Committee Member

John Mac Kilgore  
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the dissertation has been approved in accordance with university requirements.
To my family.

To my friends.

To my wife.
I would like to thank Dr. Berry for his patience, encouragement, and criticism of my dissertation. I also wish to thank my committee members, Dr. Epstein, Dr. Kilgore, and Dr. Wakamiya. Also, I want to thank several instructors of the Reading and Writing Center at FSU, especially Ms. Amanda May and Ms. Kristy Cherry-Randle, for their help with English proofreading of a large portion of my English writing. I could have not completed without their help. Also, I would like to thank Hiraishi Takaki Sensei, Shibata Motoyuki Sensei, Zettsu Tomoyuki Sensei, and Suwabe Koichi Sensei, my teachers of American literature when I was at the University of Tokyo. Their scholarly work and education originally motivated me to choose empathy as the topic of my study. I would like to thank my family in Japan, who are always looking over me with warm feelings. I also want to thank my friends in Tallahassee as well as those in Japan. Especially, I would like to thank Ms. Lucy Ho and the late Mr. John Ho, who have taken care of me in Tallahassee. Xièxie! Lastly but not least, I want to thank Akiko, my wife, who is now expecting our first child. Thank you. Thank y’all! Doumo-Arigatou!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ vi

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

1. EMPATHY IN MODERNISM ................................................................................................... 15

2. EXPERIMENTS OF MODERNIST EMPATHY:
   WILLIAM FAULKNER’S THE SOUND AND THE FURY ....................................................... 26

3. FAILED EMPATHY:
   EMPATHY AND COMPASSION IN NATHANAEL WEST’S NOVELS ............................... 59

4. POLITICIZING EMPATHY:
   RICHARD WRIGHT’S STRATEGY OF EMPATHY IN NATIVE SON .............................. 92

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................. 118

Works Cited .................................................................................................................................. 121

Biographical Sketch .................................................................................................................... 128
ABSTRACT

In this dissertation that discusses the American novels by William Faulkner, Nathanael West, and Richard Wright, I delineate the concept of modernist empathy as a radical urge for intersubjective immediacy, while adjusting the concept of empathy as each situation requires instead of squeezing various manifestations of empathy into a single, standardized definition. I observe how those writers struggle to represent modernist empathy by differentiating it from its similar psychological phenomena, especially sympathy. Instead of establishing empathy’s predominance over sympathy, however, I pay detailed attention to the constantly oscillating dynamic between a modernist urge for empathic immediacy and a realistic compromise of sympathetic distancing, thus revealing empathy’s instability and ambiguity. After briefly overviewing Amy Coplan’s conceptualization of empathy and sketching three categories of narrative empathy in the introduction, I have explained the concept of modernist empathy in the first chapter. In doing so, I first examine the discourse that surrounded the concept of empathy at the time, contrasting modernist empathy with its sisterly concept of sympathy. Then, since empathy and sympathy do not always form a clear dichotomy, I have argued that modernist empathy should be captured in the process of the oscillating dynamic between modernist urge for empathy and sympathetic compromise of distancing. In the second chapter, I have discussed how modernist empathy is manifested in William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury according to the three categories of narrative empathy. First, I have analyzed the novel’s experimental narrative in terms of readerly empathy. Then, I have discussed the novel’s empathic and anti-empathic characters as manifestations of represented empathy. Finally, I have examined Faulkner’s writerly empathy, and I have observed how he embraces the ultimate instability of modernist empathy. In the third chapter, by considering Nathanael West as a late modernist, I have argued that his novels are critiques of modernist empathy. In the analysis of his first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, I have revealed West’s dichotomy between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement. Then, I have attempted to depict how West dramatizes his protagonists’ failures of empathy in Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust. In the process, I critique Martha Nussbaum’s theory of compassion in relation to empathy. I also consider the relationship of empathy to the advent of the anonymous mass in the 1930s and observed West’s critique of empathy at the age of mass culture. The focus of the final chapter is about the writerly design of
the strategic use of empathy in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. After reviewing the past literary criticism of the novel’s empathy, I have discussed how the novel is strategized to establish an intimate readerly empathy with Bigger Thomas. At the end of the argument, I examine the author’s strategic design of empathy and its relation to racial politics.
INTRODUCTION

The word “empathy” is ubiquitously circulated in many different discourses. The word “empathy” and similar expressions—phrases like “put yourself in another person’s shoes” or “look through other people’s eyes,” for example—are uttered emphatically in mass media outlets, business situations, educational institutions, daily conversations, and academic discussions. Empathy, it seems, has become a buzzword, a word usually filled with positive connotations. But we are not sure exactly what “empathy” means. Whether it means feeling toward others, perspective-/role-taking, imaginative oneness with others, or something else, empathy thrives today. The word is markedly pronounced even in political discourse: the 44th president of the United States often puts a special emphasis on the word in his speeches, debates, and books. For instance, Barack Obama reveals in his book The Audacity of Hope that empathy has formed his moral core and ethical foundations: “a sense of empathy … is one that I find myself appreciating more and more as I get older. It is at the heart of my moral code, and it is how I understand the Golden Rule—not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but as something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes” (66). As Obama’s remark demonstrates, empathy is largely understood as an imaginative capability to take another’s perspective. Empathy is also generally defined by its difference from other similar interpersonal fellow-feelings, in this case, its difference from “sympathy or charity.” In addition, empathy is often mentioned in relation to our moral development.

Empathy and moral development are often positively associated with reading fiction in daily discourse today. Let us again take an example from Obama’s remarks on empathy, which typically illustrate a certain characteristic of contemporary empathy discourse. The former president of the United States considers the act of reading fiction an easy but crucial cure for what he deems a major problem of today, “empathy deficit”:

The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit. We are in great need of people being able to stand in somebody else's shoes and see the world through their eyes. And the great power of books is the capacity to take you out of yourself and put you somewhere else. And to suddenly say, “Oh, this is what it’s like”—maybe not perfectly—but it gives you some glimpse of “This is what it is like to be a woman,” or “This is what it is like
to be an African-American.” Or “This is what it is like to be impoverished in India.” Or “This is what it’s like to be in the midst of war.” And so much of what binds us together in society and allows it to function effectively depends on it. And so much of what is wrong with how we interact, and so much of what is wrong with our politics has to do with the absence of that quality. And so it’s books more than anything else that are going to give our young people the ability to see other people. And that then gives them the capacity to act responsibly with respect to other people. (“Pres. Barack Obama”)

Obama’s belief that books can effectively—and somehow almost exclusively (“it’s books more than anything else”)—foster our empathic capability is not an eccentric opinion but rather a largely accepted (and even trite) assumption/expectation we sometimes hold about reading: we conventionally (want to) believe that empathic imagination can be trained by reading books—especially fiction—and also that empathic capability developed via (fiction) reading naturally leads to an improvement in our generic social skills and moral sensitivity toward people who are different from us. In that sense, Obama’s belief in “the great power of books” is not particularly original or new: he is just recycling and reiterating an old and largely accepted idea about the positive aspects of (fiction) reading in terms of empathy. But the main reason the twenty-first century American president has to loudly advocate for “the great power of books” is, simply put, empathy’s scarcity value in the age of the “empathy deficit.” In the rapid and hectic world of today, people find it difficult to take the trouble and time to empathize with other people to better understand them in real life. Fiction reading has abruptly surfaced as the last stand for empathy as empathy itself has been gradually established as a significant issue of the contemporary world.

The notion that fiction reading fosters our empathic capability is not just a trite folk belief or unfounded homiletic speech. According to recent empirical studies, it is statistically likely that reading literary fiction improves our empathic skills. For example, following the trending line of research on the correlation between familiarity with fiction reading and empathic capability, David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano experimentally showed that literary fiction in particular is capable of enhancing readers’ Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM is, according to Kidd and Castano, “The capacity to identify and understand others’ subjective states” (377). The affective component of ToM is commonly considered to be deeply involved with empathic capability. Having recourse to canonical literary theorists, including Roland Barthes and Mikhail
Bakhtin, the researchers state that literary fiction, defined as text that is “both writerly and polyphonic,” particularly engages us with “the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters’ subjective experience” (378). Kidd and Castano conducted five different experiments in which participants are assigned to read literary fiction, popular fiction, and nonfiction. They then examined how reading each type of text affects the participants’ ToM cognitively and affectively. By putting the readers through a false-belief test and the Reading the Mind in the Eye Test, the researchers measured how the readers’ ToM improved after the reading of each text. According to Kidd and Castano, the results of these experiments statistically demonstrate that “reading literary fiction, relative to nonfiction, improves performance on an affective task” and that “this effect is specific to literary fiction” (379). From these results, they contend that literary fiction, compared to nonfiction or popular fiction, can significantly improve our empathic understanding because literary fiction recruits and facilitates our ToM processes, cognitively and especially affectively, by “prompting readers to take an active role to form representations of characters’ subjective states” (380).

The research result above is encouraging for those who love and appreciate literary works because scientists proved that literary fiction improves empathy. It may be even more encouraging for those who care about the future of literature as part of the twenty-first century culture. Recent surveys suggest that people have started to lose interest in reading fiction in the past two decades. According to a 2012 survey by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), “In 2012, fewer than half of all U.S. adults (46.9 percent, or about 110.2 million adults) read a novel, short story, poem, or play.” The rate of fiction reading has steadily decreased by almost 10 points since the 1982 survey (56.4 percent of U.S. adults). The reading public is conspicuously decreasing, and there is no positive indication of reversing the trend in the near future. Ironically, this depressing fact about the gradual loss of interest in literature also enhances the scarcity value of empathy, creating more discussions about the literature-empathy connection. It is perhaps an excessive expectation to place such a hope on literary fiction, but the concern itself is understandably serious. At the very least, the cultural status of literature has been steadily declining. In fact, Kidd and Castano’s study is clearly intended to address this issue, expressing at the end of their research article a grave concern about the recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards, which dictates more pedagogical focus on nonfiction texts (scientific booklets, maps, historical documents, and other practical texts) rather than on literary texts for
schoolchildren in the U.S. In this context, to propagate the literature-empathy hypothesis warranted by recent empirical studies is strategically quite significant for those who are concerned about the fate of literature.

It should be encouraging for literary scholars and teachers that researchers from other fields have been empirically examining the hypothesis that fiction reading fosters empathic capability. Empathy is largely considered to prompt people to altruistic behaviors and, if this is the case, literature might retain a culturally significant status in today’s society. Nevertheless, there are obviously concerns about literature in terms of this “empathy-altruism” hypothesis. It may not be the case that just empathically reading literary works makes us more altruistic or morally sensible. In fact, the major theme of Suzanne Keen’s pioneering book *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) is to critique the empathy-altruism hypothesis about novel reading. She reports that “Surveying the existing research on the consequences of reading, I find the case for altruism stemming from novel reading inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated in favor of the beneficial effects of novel reading” (vii).

My contention is that, as Keen claims, empathic reading of literary works does not necessarily make us more altruistic or morally sensible. Rather, I consider empathy as something we just do, something morally ambiguous or neutral. It might turn out to be morally good, but it could also do harm to other people. Empathy, it seems to me, is more like a skill or technique. Empathic reading of fiction might develop or facilitate empathic imagination, but I believe that whether empathic reading leads to altruistic behavior or prosocial motivation depends on how to contextualize it and how to use it, just like any other skill or technique. But even if one wants to use empathy for better purposes, one needs to know how it works as a process.

**Definition of Empathy**

It has never been easy to describe the process of empathy in academic language. Despite the growing interest in and importance of empathy in our society as well as in several, often interdisciplinary, academic fields, “There are currently numerous competing conceptualizations of empathy circulating the literature [of empathy study], which makes it difficult to keep track of which process or mental state the term is being used to refer to in any given discussion” (Coplan, “Real” 42). The current academic situation is that many new, different definitions of the concept
of empathy have been offered by scholars from fields like philosophy, psychology, aesthetics, and sociology, as well as several interdisciplinary scientific fields.

In literary studies, which is one of the most underdeveloped academic fields regarding empathy, the pioneer of narrative empathy is Suzanne Keen, who defines empathy as “a spontaneous sharing of feelings, including physical sensations in the body, provoked by witnessing or hearing about another’s condition” (Empathy xx). The argument in this dissertation will largely follow Keen’s definition as a general term, with some reservations and specifications along the way. I am aware that this definition is quite loose and is not sophisticated enough for scientific rigor compared to definitions in other fields of empathy study. Empathy is a relatively new topic in literary studies and therefore still in an early stage of discussion; to borrow the words of Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, who compiled the first collection of essays on empathy in literary studies, “Given the diversity of opinions that exist within literary studies, we hesitate to insist on a narrow definition of empathy” because “a singular definition of empathy would be too narrow to accommodate the wide range of exciting work on fellow-feeling that literary scholars are doing today” (1).

With those points in mind, a springboard definition is still needed to discuss empathy in the argument of my dissertation. The most relevant and sophisticated definition of empathy seems to come from psychology and philosophy. Psychologists and philosophers usually attempt to delineate the concept of empathy from other similar psychological phenomena—mainly emotional contagion and sympathy. Along this line, Amy Coplan offers a concise and clear-cut conceptualization of empathy. According to her, empathy is a psychological process that involves both cognitive and affective aspects, and there are three essential criteria for empathy: affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self-other differentiation. With these criteria taken into consideration, Coplan defines empathy as “a process through which an observer simulates another’s situated psychological states, while maintaining clear self-other differentiation” (“Real” 58). She also writes in another essay, “Only empathy that combines affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self-other differentiation provides experiential understanding” of another’s mental states (“Understanding” 17).1

1 See also Coplan’s “Empathic” and “Catching” for further definitions of the concept of empathy.
The first criterion for Coplan’s conceptualization of empathy is affective matching: an empathizer must experience the same or at least similar emotion as the target person. While affective matching may sound too obvious for a required component of empathy, this basic function is significant in distinguishing empathy from another highly cognitive psychological process: sympathy. As we will see in the first chapter from a literary point of view, empathy is a relatively new word, coined at the beginning of the twentieth century, and many characteristics pertaining to the psychological phenomenon that today is called empathy used to be included in the concept of “sympathy.” Because the concept of sympathy used to include much of the meaning of empathy, and also because these two phenomena often take place simultaneously, the two concepts, even today, are quite difficult to distinguish one from the other, not only in their daily usage but also as technical terms. Affective matching is the criterion that distinguishes empathy from sympathy. Sympathy, as summarized by Nancy Eisenberg, refers to “an affective response that consists of feeling sorrow or concern for the distressed or needy other (rather than feeling the same emotion as the other person)” (678). In other words, sympathy does not necessarily require affective matching between observer and target. The major emotion in sympathy on the observer’s part is not the distress itself that the target is feeling but a feeling of concern, which is an emotion toward the target rather than similar emotions the target is feeling. In other words, empathy is to “feel with” another, and sympathy is to “feel for” another. Thus, affective matching is one of the key criteria in the definition of empathy: empathy is different from sympathy in that the former requires affective matching with the target while the latter does not.

Empathy involves sharing emotion with another. Affective matching that occurs in empathy has garnered avid attention, especially from neuro-/cognitive scientists since the discovery of the mirror neuron system at the end of the twentieth century. However, affective matching alone does not define empathy because affective sharing can also be observed in other psychological phenomena similar to, but not the same as, empathy. One example is what many scholars call “emotional contagion.” In emotional contagion, one happens to “catch” other people’s emotional states or “moods” automatically, without being aware of doing so, which results in affective matching. Coplan considers that the crucial difference between affective

---

2 See Keen, *Empathy* 5-6.
matching of emotional contagion and that of empathy lies in self-other differentiation. Coplan insists that emotional contagion takes place rather quickly, automatically, and unconsciously in most cases and “involves little or no self-other differentiation. Subjects are typically unaware that their emotion has originated outside of themselves in a target individual” (“Catching” 27). On the other hand, an empathizer properly recognizes that the emotion he or she is feeling belongs to a target individual. Coplan also claims that while empathy is a route to understanding, affective matching via emotional contagion is “not sufficient for understanding” (ibid.). Thus, awareness of self-other differentiation regarding the matched emotion is a necessary criterion for empathy.

Since empathy requires self-other differentiation, empathy includes the cognitive faculty (self-awareness) as well as affective matching. If empathy means understanding another’s mental state through affective sharing while retaining self-other distinction, the concept comes close to an attitude of “putting myself in your shoes,” which is a quotidian version of affective perspective-taking. However, Coplan claims that “putting myself in your shoes” or imagining “what I would do in your situation” is not enough for a genuine, sophisticated type of empathy. Coplan insists that empathy should be distinguished from what she calls “pseudo-empathy.” Pseudo-empathy operates as self-oriented perspective-taking, whereas genuine empathy must be predicated on other-oriented perspective taking. According to Coplan, pseudo-empathy means:

an attempt to adopt a target individual’s perspective by imagining how we ourselves would think, feel, and desire if we were in the target individual’s position. It is, essentially, a type of self-oriented perspective taking. We use our own selves and our responses to various simulated or imagined scenarios as a way to gain access to or understand another person’s situated psychological states. (“Real” 54).

In short, pseudo-empathy means bringing one’s perspective into another’s situation—what I would feel in your situation, for example. On the other hand, other-oriented empathy means to appropriately imagine what you feel in your situation. Indeed, as Coplan admits, this definition of empathy is demanding, and self-oriented perspective-taking is, from a practical standpoint, good enough for a quick and makeshift generic understanding of another’s perspective. In reality, because of our egocentricity and deep-rooted bias toward familiarity, we tend to project our perspective on to another person or treat another person’s perspective as a version of our
own. Nevertheless, she insists that self-oriented perspective-taking or pseudo-empathy is “a significantly different mode of intersubjective engagement than one centered on other-oriented perspective taking” (57). For empathy to be truly empathic, the other-oriented perspective is required. 

So far, we have examined three key criteria necessary for empathy, mainly referring to Coplan’s conceptualization: affective matching, self-other differentiation, and other-oriented perspective-taking. A strong point of her conceptualization is that it effectively includes a target individual’s otherness with self-other differentiation and other-oriented perspective-taking as key criteria. Empathy has often been criticized because, to anti-empathy critics, empathic engagement with other minds appears to fail to recognize or respect otherness entailed in the target object. Although Coplan’s definition of empathy might be too demanding in terms of practicality, her conceptualization clearly delineates crucial elements of empathy.

Nevertheless, Coplan’s conceptualization has a few problems when it is applied to narrative empathy without appropriate modification. The main problem is that her conceptualization is too demanding and too static for literary studies. For instance, while there is no doubt that narrative empathy can serve, like empathy itself, as a way to understand other minds, it is also true that a reader opens a book and empathizes with a fictional character in search of pleasure as well. The reader enjoys and appreciates narrative empathy not only when s/he feels s/he succeeds in understanding a fictional character through empathy in Coplan’s sense, but the reader is also fascinated with the process of trial and error of empathizing. Thus, interpersonal empathy and narrative empathy differ slightly in terms of what an empathizer expects in each type of empathy, and Coplan’s conceptualization is not designed to consider some aspects specifically entailed in narrative empathy. Also, even when narrative empathy is used to understand other minds, the route to understanding varies between interpersonal empathy and narrative empathy. For instance, in narrative empathy, especially in reading, the reader can usually take relatively more time than in interpersonal empathy; but there is no reciprocal interaction or feedback from the target. Moreover, especially in fiction, a target’s otherness can be guaranteed to a large extent in the form of fictionality, which is an ontological difference between reader and character. This ontological difference can function as a safety valve that allows the reader to imaginatively transgress the self-other differentiation. This point is rather critical, for Coplan’s conceptualization of empathy does not explain why we want to empathize
with others in the first place. We desire to empathize with others because we want to know and feel what others think and feel, from their perspective, overstepping the self-other difference. Narrative empathy drives and is driven by the desire to transgress this intersubjective difference between minds. Coplan’s rigorous conceptualization of empathy might run the risk of suppressing this empathic desire itself.

Thus, Coplan’s conceptualization seems to need certain modifications when applied to narrative empathy. Therefore, while giving due attention to Coplan’s conceptualization, the concept of narrative empathy in the discussion of this dissertation uses a looser definition. Nevertheless, it is necessary to offer a specific definition of narrative empathy, so I will subdivide it into three categories in the following section.

**Three Categories of Narrative Empathy**

Hammond and Kim tentatively summarize five critical points of discussion on narrative empathy from the context of literary studies. In dealing with empathy in literature, critical attention should be paid to: “(1) who feels empathy; (2) who is worthy of empathy; (3) what kind of process empathy is; (4) the effects that socio-historical conditions, including heteronormativity and racism, may have on empathy; and (5) how empathy operates in specific literary forms” (Introduction 2). Since the second, fourth, and fifth of the five criteria are contextually determined in most cases, it seems safe to start with the subject of empathic feeling in narrative. By focusing on who empathizes, there appear to be three categories of narrative empathy: readerly empathy, represented empathy, and writerly empathy.

The most noticeable type of empathy in narrative is readerly empathy, in which the reader is the subject. It should be noted that, as suggested above, readerly empathy might differ or deviate from interpersonal empathy in terms of how it functions or what an empathizer wants from it. Based on who the reader empathizes with in enjoying narrative fiction, there appear to be two kinds of readerly empathy: empathy with a character and empathy with the author. In most cases, the reader empathizes with fictional characters. A typical reader usually empathizes with the main protagonist, who is foregrounded in a story. However, it is also possible, and quite common, for the reader to empathize, by digressively overstepping the intended narrative scheme, with other peripheral characters—supporting characters, minor figures, sidekicks, and the like—who do not have major roles or narrative focuses. This is the case especially when the
The reader has his or her own personal reading agenda or strategies or when s/he is particularly attracted to a certain detail of a minor character that has something to do with the reader’s personal interest or curiosity. As Keen proposes, “Empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization” (69, 169).

The reader not only empathizes with characters but also occasionally with the author. Although empathizing with the author has been regarded as too amateurish or naïve in modern critical discourse after Wimsatt and Bearsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy,” it is natural for the reader to think about or ask questions like, “Why did the author write this book this way?” “What made the author write this novel?” “What was the author thinking about when writing this scene?” Especially after s/he finishes reading a novel and deeply empathizing with its characters, or even when s/he finds it difficult to do so, the reader often moves on to try to empathize with the author to further understand the fictional world, by way of, for instance, looking up the author’s biographical information or cultural background, even though the image of the author with which the reader attempts to empathize might be inaccurate. To empathize with the author—or, at least, to attempt to do so—is definitely part of the pleasure and satisfaction of reading narrative fiction and should not be readily dismissed.³

In addition to readerly empathy, there is what I call represented empathy in narrative fiction. Represented empathy is a form of empathy that a character feels (or fails to feel) toward other characters, that is, an empathizing action described within the fictional world. In other words, it is “literary portrayals of empathy” (Roszak 150, italics original) embedded in the fictional world.⁴ The interest in empathy in literary studies, if any, has been mainly about readerly empathy, but recent literary critics have started to turn their attention to represented empathy as well, along with a perspective of the cultural and historical significances of the concept of empathy described in narrative fiction. Peculiar behaviors by empathic characters suggestively might embody or reveal cultural and historical conditions that regulate specific manifestations of empathy in their process of striving for, or failing to accomplish, a form of

---

³ Regarding readerly empathy, Keen investigates it in more detail by drawing on actual readers’ comments about narrative empathy as well as on several empirical studies about readerly empathy. See chapter 3 of her book.

⁴ See Roszak for the case studies of represented empathy in the writing of James Baldwin and Patricia Highsmith.
empathic understanding with each other. In the same light, some forms of represented empathy can be read as idealized manifestations of the author’s empathic desire. For the reader, too, represented empathy can serve as an embodiment of the ideal form of empathy on which the reader models his or her readerly empathy with characters, or as a negative example of empathy that makes the reader reflect on his or her own empathic engagement with the text. Also, represented empathy is the objectified representation of empathy inscribed in the fictional world and has a great significance in that it is relatively more tangible and therefore easier for the reader (including literary critics) to deal with than the other categories of empathy.

Lastly, but not least, there is writerly empathy. Since writerly empathy is not discussed very often, it might need an extended explanation. The author does not necessarily have to empathize with his or her own characters in writing them, just as the reader does not either, but it is true that a number of writers consider being empathic with them an essential part of their creative imagination and writing process.\(^5\)

Empathy brings a curious space to the imagination. If empathy is a reconstruction of the subjective experience of other minds, empathizing requires the empathic subject to put aside his/her own agendas and desires for a moment and to acknowledge and accept those of others. In this sense, empathizing involves essentially a selfless attitude. On the other hand, empathizing also relies on the empathic subject’s reconstructive imagination, which is ultimately an imposition of one’s own reconstructed image onto others. In this sense, empathizing is a selfish and egoistic exertion of imagination. Then, empathy is a psychological space where self-effacement and self-imposing constantly intersect and oscillate; also, the subject and the object are inverted and productively confused. The real charm of writerly empathy lies in the very oscillation between these two poles.

In a real-life situation, the oscillation between self-effacement and self-imposition is moderated through trial and error in, and kept in check by, constant communicative interactions and negotiations with others; in fiction writing, however, the oscillation is amplified. This is especially the case in the author’s relation to his/her own characters. On the one hand, the author is obviously the creator and owner of his/her characters. In theory and in principle, the author is

\(^5\) See chapter 5 of Keen’s *Empathy*, “Authors’ Empathy,” which compiles and discusses many authors’ comments on empathy involved in the creating processes. The chapter also introduces several fundamental strategies of writerly empathy and their possible effects on readers.
supposed to be in charge and have control of his/her own creation. However, on the other hand, it is largely well-known that many authors candidly confess how their own characters begin to act and speak on their own independently, apart from the authors’ control. It is as if characters “try to live their own lives,” to use E. M. Forster’s words (66). If this is the case, the author’s paradoxical acknowledgement of his/her own characters’ independence is similar to readerly empathic imagination: if empathy requires the empathizer to put aside his/her own agenda, plan, desire, and emotion (at least for a while) to welcome (the reconstructed version of) those of other minds, fiction writing can, for the empathic author, provide an imaginative space where, at the same time as s/he can exert writerly authority over his/her creation as the originator, the author can experience, and even embrace, the loss of authorial self and surrender some aspects of authority to his/her own creations.

Empathy thus brings about a space where self-expression leads to loss of self while the loss of self also fuels self-expression. Referring to the empathic author’s acknowledgment of his/her characters’ independent agency, psychologist-novelist Keith Oatley suggestively explains that “characters we writers create are probably unacknowledged aspects of ourselves. At least they draw on aspects of the selves we writers don’t develop in ordinary life” (28). To acknowledge his/her own characters’ independence and autonomy by putting aside his/her writerly agenda means to recognize and accept otherness in his/her own creation. This acceptance allows the author, as the reader of his/her own text, to make an emotional investment in his/her characters. By empathizing with his/her characters, the author is forced to become a reader of his/her own text, for empathic desire structurally preconceives a certain psychological distance to eventually overcome. At the expense of surrendering his/her textual authority, the author finds that his/her characters “try to live their own lives” because they, for the empathic author’s eye, quit being the author’s puppets.

6 Developmental psychologist Marjorie Taylor et al. call this “the illusion of independent agency (IIA)” and find that 92% of 50 fiction writers they investigated reported they have experienced IIA in one way or another. Also, see Keen 123–131 for a general discussion about how novelists might tend to be more empathic than ordinary people.

7 Speaking from the writerly point of view, Forster is commenting on how characters “live their own lives” by disrupting or subverting the author’s design and control of the fictional world. Here, the British modernist writer largely takes the independence of characters as something hostile or defiant against the author, describing it as characters’ “mutiny” or “treason” (66).
Obviously, the conceptualization of empathy differs slightly in each category of narrative empathy because objective, object, and subject, of empathy as well as degree of fictionality involved are different in each category. The distinctions of readerly empathy, represented empathy, and writerly empathy briefly described above are, after all, sketchy and not comprehensive at all at this point. They are sketchy mainly because no literary theorist has yet attempted to synthetically theorize or conceptualize each category to the full extent. Therefore, for now, there is no other option but to examine various aspects of narrative empathy case by case in each writer, each work, and each character.

In the following chapters, therefore, I adjust the concept of empathy and narrative empathy as each situation requires instead of squeezing various manifestations of empathy into a single, standardized definition. Nevertheless, a conceptual index is necessary for the argument on modernist works that I examine in this dissertation. Therefore, in chapter 1, I explain a concept of modernist empathy that expresses a modernist desire for a radical form of empathy that aspires to nullify the intersubjective distance between minds. To do so, I first examine the discourse that surrounded the concept of empathy at the time. In this process, I delineate the concept of modernist empathy in contrast to its sisterly concept of sympathy. Then, I make a case that, since empathy and sympathy do not always form a clear dichotomy, modernist empathy should be captured in the process of the constantly oscillating dynamic between a modernist urge for empathic immediacy and a realistic compromise of sympathetic distancing.

In the second chapter I discuss how modernist empathy is manifested in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* according to the three categories of narrative empathy. First, I analyze the novel’s experimental narrative in terms of readerly empathy. Then, I consider the novel’s empathic and anti-empathic characters as manifestations of represented empathy. Finally, I examine Faulkner’s writerly empathy and observe how he embraces the ultimate impossibility of modernist empathy.

In the third chapter, considering Nathanael West as a late modernist, I argue his novels as critiques of modernist empathy. In the analysis of his first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, I reveal West’s dichotomy between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement. Then, I depict how West dramatizes his protagonists’ failures of empathy in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The
Day of the Locust. In the process, I also consider the relationship of empathy to the advent of the anonymous mass in the 1930s and observe West’s critique of empathy at the age of mass culture.

The final chapter is about the writerly design of the strategic use of empathy in Richard Wright’s Native Son. After reviewing the past literary criticism of the novel’s empathy, I discuss how the novel attempts to establish an intimate readerly empathy with Bigger Thomas. At the end of the argument, I examine the author’s strategic design of empathy and its relation to racial politics.
CHAPTER 1
EMPATHY IN MODERNISM

Despite the fact that the concept of empathy has a long history under the name of “sympathy” the English word “empathy” was born as an inherently modernist term. The necessity to coin the new word instead of continuing to use the old and familiar umbrella term eloquently testifies that the people in the early twentieth century sensed something new and significant in the concept of empathy, something in it that they felt had to be distinguished from its similar concepts inherited from the previous centuries. However, empathy has not been much discussed in terms of modernism throughout the twentieth century. The reason for that inattention is, not exactly that the concept does not shed light on any modernist characteristic of the time, but rather that empathy belongs in the unconscious of modernism, something that has been constantly suppressed or hidden away. Empathy is, in that sense, a peculiar concept that is one of the underground flows of modernism.

This chapter aims to untangle the complicated discourse that surrounded the concept of empathy in the early twentieth century within the context of modernism. First, I will summarize the anti-empathic discourse of modernism. Then, I will make a case that empathy survived this adversity under the aegis of narrative fiction. By doing so, the concept of modernist empathy will be introduced. It is a radicalized version of empathy, a manifestation of the urge to overcome psychological, intersubjective distance between minds.

Empathy and Modernist Literature

“Empathy” was first introduced to the English language in 1909 by British psychologist Edward B. Titchener as a translation of the German aesthetic concept Einfühlung—literally meaning “feel into”—a term which had been gaining popularity in German aesthetics since the late nineteenth century. Then, British writer Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) put the English translation in circulation among the early twentieth century British literary audience. She introduced the concept as an aesthetic method of understanding natural and aesthetic objects. She
developed her own aesthetic theory of empathy based on the contemporary German aesthetics and offered the concept as a bodily and affective simulation of the observed objects.  

However, not long after empathy had been welcomed in the early twentieth century Anglophone art scene, this new aesthetic concept suddenly encountered a harsh response by the mainstream high modernists. The most obvious and influential attack came from within German aesthetics. As Suzanne Keen recounts, “Perhaps the best known assault on empathy as an aspect of aesthetic reception in the modern period comes from Bertolt Brecht’s so-called alienation effect, a translation of the Verfremdungseffekt (V-effect), which can be better rendered as an estrangement effect” (Empathy 56). Brecht did not hide his strong distaste for empathy and its effects in favor of the critical significance of the V-effect achieved by means of defamiliarization and dehabituation techniques, whereby audience is discouraged from emotionally identifying with fictional characters. As Juliet Koss observes, “The use of Einfühlung, according to Brecht, existed only for bourgeois entertainment: it encompassed an experience of psychological and emotional identification that encouraged spectators to lose control of their own identities and prevent the possibility of critical thought” (152).

This kind of anti-empathy tendency can be found in poetic theory too, usually in the form of anti-Romanticism by modernists. For Instance, to quote Keen’s observation again, T. S. Eliot’s poetics, especially his famous “dissociation of sensibility” theory, “played an important role in the denigration of the Romantic poets, whose emphasis on empathic connections with readers and subjects compromised a central part of their poetic theory and practice. This change in taste (celebrating seventeenth-century poets and downgrading more emotionally expressive writers such as Percy Shelley) has an enormous impact on the teaching of literature, through practical criticism and the New Criticism.” (Empathy 57-58)

---

8 See her The Beautiful. Oxford English Dictionary locates the first appearance of the word “empathy” in her diary (Feb. 20, 1904), which was later published in her book Beauty & Ugliness (1912). See Keen “Empathetic Hardy” 350-53 for a more detailed historical description of the English word in the early twentieth century.

9 This line of anti-empathic skepticism survives today in literary criticism. As Keen points out, “The legacy of Brecht’s anti-empathic aesthetic can be plainly seen in Marxist-descended postcolonial theory and criticism, in which the implausibility of universal emotions makes empathy a suspect end of representation” (Empathy 57). For how Brecht misunderstood the concept of empathy in the context of German aesthetics, see Koss 152-53.

10 Precisely speaking, Eliot is not completely anti-empathic. Rather, it could be said that, as Keen observes, he is pro-empathic in its purest form, “priz[ing] the empathic connection between poet
extension of the typically Romantic concept of sympathy, which Eliot believed should be restrained, corrected, or overcome by new poetry of the time. Thus, the newly born modernist concept of empathy soon began to get attacked by other newly introduced modernist concepts in the mainstream modernist discourse.

Another writer who played a crucial role in the Anglophone modernist discourse of (anti-)empathy in the beginning of the twentieth century was T. E. Hulme. During his short but variedly productive career as a proto-modernist, he brought to Anglophone literati a burgeoning German aesthetic theory developed by the German aesthetician Wilhelm Worringer. Worringer’s book *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* [*Abstraction and Empathy*]¹¹ argued that there are two distinctive poles to human artistic feeling: the urge to empathy and the urge to abstraction. According to his theory, the two urges have driven human creative motivation, each of them taking turns to take its dominant form of art through historical periods since the primitive stages of civilization. Worringer considered modern art as the product of the urge to abstraction like Egyptian and Byzantine arts in that the urge to abstraction is derived from a sense of insecurity, alienation, and “a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world” (15). On the other hand, the urge to empathy, derived from “a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world” (ibid.), results in a sensitivity to “the beauty of the organic” (4), as can be seen in the long history of Western representational art since the Renaissance. From the point of view of the proponent of new, post-realist forms of art, Hulme pushed Worringer’s theory into a more radical dichotomy in favor of the urge to abstraction. Hulme believed the urge to abstraction should be the incentive to burgeoning modernist art movements of his time, while boisterously declaring the death of empathy-driven, representational art of the Western modern age: “I came to believe first of all, for reasons quite unconnected with art, that the Renaissance attitude [which is predicated on the urge to empathy] was coming to an end, and was then confirmed in that by the emergence of [abstract,
geometrical] art” (Hulme 79). This dichotomy in favor of the urge to abstraction was sensationally delivered, through Hulme’s essays and lectures, to English avant-garde literati in London such as Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and T. S. Eliot. As we have briefly observed, empathy has been, from its inception, faced with the harsh adversity in the discourse of the mainstream modernism in drama, poetry, aesthetics, and criticism. The concept of empathy in modernism, if mentioned, has merely been employed as a foil to other conspicuously modernist concepts and expressions—defamiliarization, dehabituation, abstraction, and the like—that have been largely believed to better represent the new era. Nevertheless, empathy has survived: it has been preserved and developed in novels, as we will see in the following.

**Modernist Empathy and the Novel**

Empathy has been largely attacked or disregarded in the mainstream modernist discourse, but that does not mean it was completely annihilated from the modernist scene. The novel as the art form that has to be exposed to vast and diverse readerships always tends to have some room to let in empathy-inductive elements—such as character identification, narrative, sentimentality, and conventional expression of emotion. This suggests, as Keen explains, that, within narrative fiction, modernist empathy survived through the anti-empathic discourse of the mainstream modernism: “the rise of the middlebrow (often female) reader sustains empathy as a goal of literary representation even while fragmentation, difficulty, deliberate obscurity, and exploration of alienation effects enjoyed their vogue. This does not mean, however, that modernist experimental fiction eschewed empathy, rather that it recast the representation of consciousness and feelings as one of the primary tasks of novels rejecting conventional representation” (*Empathy* 58). That is to say, narrative fiction in the beginning of the twentieth century was a sort of safe haven or buffer zone for the criticized concept of empathy. Of course, empathy in

---

12 See Hulme’s “Modern Art and Its Philosophy” in his posthumously collected *Speculations* (1936): the piece was originally written for his lecture to the Quest Society held on January 22, 1914.

13 See Hammond 121-126. It is also notable that though Hulme did not publish a book-length work, it was Eliot who edited the posthumously published collection of Hulme’s essays. Also, Pound and Lewis were among those who attended and listened to Hulme’s lecture mentioned in the previous note.
narrative fiction did not remain intact nor went without facing any (self-)criticism: the modernist concept of empathy was always subject to examination, experimentation, and reinvention within narrative confines of modernist novels.

The concept of empathy in the early twentieth century should be understood as a markedly modernist enterprise, even though many writers at the time might not know that the word existed. In fact, while the concept of empathy *avant la lettre* has existed long before the twentieth century under the umbrella concept of “sympathy,” empathy began to claim for its own conceptual territory in the modernist way of understanding other minds. Meghan Marie Hammond is, as far as I know, the first literary critic who distinctively defines empathy as one of the undercurrent but conspicuous streams of modernism; she investigates, in the context of British literary modernism, how “modernist narrative reflects, complicates and enriches contemporaneous conceptions of empathy” (1). In the long line of the conceptual history of “fellow feeling,” she sees its decisive turn in the conceptual as well as lexical shift from sympathy (“feeling for others”) to empathy (“feeling with others”), which took place around the turn of the century. According to her mapping, the novelists since the eighteenth century, and especially the realism novelists in the nineteenth century, tried to “represent character minds through sympathetic structures that depend on a maintained psychological distance and inference by analogy” (19). This sympathetic “distance” often corresponds to the intermediacy of a narrating agent who fills in the space between character and reader in narrative fiction and warrants the spatiotemporal continuum of realist perspective. On the other hand, those modernist writers who are especially concerned with how others think and feel and how one can know the inner world of others—what is called “the problem of other minds” in philosophy and psychology—tended to be no longer satisfied with that “psychological distance” or a intermediacy of narrator, on which the sympathetic imagination of realism had been tacitly predicated. Instead, these empathic modernists pursued a more radical approach to transgress or nullify the psychological distance so as to accomplish a more direct and immediate, vicarious intersubjective experience of other minds: to use Hammond’s words, “Empathy is about overcoming psychological distance and establishing intersubjective experience of other minds— which encompasses both cognitive and affective functions. To empathise is, to bridge psychological distance” (9). Thus, the form of empathy in this sense can be viewed as the markedly modernist fellow-feeling in which one wants to go beyond the limitation of
representation predicated on the sympathetic realism. Modernist empathy is in this sense the radicalization of realist sympathy of the previous century.

Once we are able to see this tenuous yet distinctive line of the modernist enterprise, it might become much easier to disentangle the controversial appraisals of empathy in the mainstream modernist discourse. On the one hand, the mainstream modernists (mis)understood empathy as a direct inheritance or continuous extension of sympathetic imagination of realism, (dis)regarding it in the same light of other “old” literary legacies from the previous century. Those modernists rather tried to find new expressions by means of such new concepts as abstraction, fragmentation, and defamiliarization, which are theoretically and thematically considered to be incompatible with the fellow-feeling. On the other hand, other modernist writers sought to reinvent and radicalize the nineteenth century concept of the fellow-feeling—sympathy—into a new one—empathy—which is more radical and direct understanding of other minds without any mediation. As Hammond puts it, there are “two competing narratives of modernism. The first narrative understands modernism as a break with fellow feeling writ large, a turn towards abstraction. The second narrative sees modernism as a reinvestment in the ideal of fellow feeling, a further turn within,” and within the context of the second narrative of modernism, “modernist writers reject sympathetic fellow feeling and seek a more radical empathic fellow feeling” though “it is a clear, and well-established, fact that abstraction plays a major role in the developments of modernist literature” (124). Seen in this light, it becomes

14 It seems safe to say that some of anti-empathic modernists might in fact have confused empathy with other similar phenomena of fellow-feelings. For example, what Brecht seems to criticize in the name of empathy sounds to be, not empathy itself, but emotional contagion, which in itself is not empathy but its peripheral and derivative psychological phenomenon. It is also possible to interpret that T. S. Eliot’s criticism of the empathy-heavy Romantic poetics actually aims at their overemphasis on the affective side of empathy, while he sees in metaphysical poets his ideal form of sophisticated empathy in which both of its affective and cognitive components are fully functional. Seen in this light, it might just be that those seemingly anti-empathic modernists criticized these suboptimal forms of empathy in confused manners (using the general label of empathy). Moreover, if Hammond’s theory of modernist empathy is true, this means that modernist empathy is not exactly the ideal case of empathy from the perspective of today’s empathy study in that it does not meet the crucial criteria of the self-other distinction and the differentiation between the self-centered and the other-oriented forms of empathy. Hammond’s modernist empathy then should be understood as a more peculiar and excessive form of the fellow-feeling, characterized by the radical urge to become one with other mind.
possible for us to understand modernist empathy, not just as a buzzword of the time, but as one of the undercurrent yet distinct streams of what Peter Nicholls calls “modernisms” in the plural, where modernism is understood in its diversity, as “a highly complex set of cultural developments at the beginning of the twentieth century” (Nicholls vii). Modernist empathy is a modernist concept that experienced its own cultural and psychological development from its outdated conceptual predecessor but has been constantly tested and buffeted about by other modernist aesthetics.

With all that said, the conceptual history of modernist empathy summarized so far—a transition from sympathetic realism to empathic modernism in narrative fiction—is generalized from Keen’s and Hammond’s studies, both of which are done mainly in the context of British literature. Given that modernism is a multi-directional and globally synchronized movement of art and human science, and also given that empathy is essentially a ubiquitous and universal human capability, it is then not at all farfetched to assume that a similar type of modernist turn to empathy can be observed in American literature as well. Therefore, the main objective of the arguments in the following chapters of this dissertation is to follow that development in the context of American Literature. At the same time, it is also true that each nation’s history of literature has its own path and takes on a unique characteristic to some extent, even though the definition or division of nations is ultimately an arbitrary and conventional construction. Empathy, especially modernist one, takes its peculiar form of development depending on cultural influences surrounding it. This is also the case for each writer: each writer approaches and copes with (modernist) empathy in his or her own way. Then, it is worthwhile to examine in each context conceptual struggles between sympathetic realism of “feeling for” and empathic modernism of “feeling with.” By so doing, we can understand, on the one hand, how modernist empathy is not just an experimental psychological movement in British modernist novels but also a more influential paradigm shift inherent in modernism that can be observed across Anglophone literatures. On the other hand, as Hammond describes, “modernist empathy is, to say the least, a complicated one” and difficult to maintain (176). Because it is “a complicated one,” the way in which each writer embraces, copes with, compromises with, or sometimes gives

\[15\] There have been few attempt to discuss the modernist transition from sympathy in the context of American literature. One of the exceptions I could find is Ann Mikkelsen’s “From Sympathy to Empathy: Anzia Yezierska and the Transformation of the American Subject” (2010).
up on, empathy varies. To examine its variety further complicates, and enriches, our understanding of not only modernist empathy but also that of modernism as well as that of empathy itself.

The Sentimental and Modernism

Empathizing, and sympathizing as its precursor as well, involves the sentimental. For example, you feel sorrowful when seeing someone in sorrow, whether “feeling with” or “feeling for” that person. Regardless of the problem of psychological distance between empathy and sympathy, both concepts entail some sort of affective engagement with or, in many cases, emotional indulgence in, the target object. This overt emotionality of empathy/sympathy may be the major reason why it has been not so eagerly discussed in critical discourse. Then, to understand a cultural context surrounding modernist empathy, it might be helpful to see how the sentimental has been suppressed by—and nevertheless survived—the anti-sentimental mainstream modernist discourse.

For the mainstream literary modernists, sentimentality was, to use Suzanne Clark’s words, “both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised” (2). According to her, the New Criticism’s animosity toward the sentimental was so harsh that “The term sentimental makes a short-hand for everything modernism would exclude, the other of its literary/nonliterary dualism” (9). Clark’s main point from a feminist point of view is to reveal how the anti-sentimental and masculine discourse of the mainstream American modernists/New Critics constantly tried to contain femininity in the “unwarranted discourse” (1) of sentimentality and to see how several female modernist writers countered, revolted against, and struggled with that prevailing masculine anti-sentimental discourse by making the best use of productive and profound ambiguity of the sentimental. Claiming that “we should restore the sentimental within modernism” (4, italics original), Clark emphasizes the importance of paying a close attention to how those female modernist writers struggle under the modernist anti-sentimental atmosphere,

---

16 The most conspicuous manifestation of this anti-sentimental, or even anti-emotional, stance of New Criticism would be represented by “Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Affective Fallacy,” where they claim emotional effects on audience are too subjective and private for critical discourse, which they believed should be objective and scientific.
for it is in their struggle that contradictions of being modernist, feminist, and sentimental at the same time culminates.

Since Clark is making an argument mainly from a feminist standpoint, her argument naturally focuses on female modernist writers, but it might be safe to say that some male modernist writers, too, struggled to cope with and even utilize the sentimental on their own way under the anti-sentimental discourse. In other words, if it is possible to productively stretch her argument to some extent, it could be said that there are some male modernists, too, who might have been aware of, and made use of, rather than simply feared or repudiated, the sentimental power within their texts, even though their public stance outside their works might often claim otherwise. In fact, a new perspective is emerging in modernism studies that aims at revealing how some male modernists paradoxically preserved the sentimental in their texts despite their seemingly anti-sentimental stance. For example, Robert Scholes, in his attempt to extricate modernist “paradoxies,” points out that while “Modernist critics, from Richards through all the New Critics, had an almost pathological fear of sentimentality” (123), it can still be observed in some major male literary high-modernists such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound that “Sentiment … has been an integral part of Modernism for a long time, and the question, for the greatest Modernists, has always been not how to avoid it but how to include it, protect it, and enhance it” (135-36). His study suggests that the sentimental was actually an inherent condition of modernism, even though—or all the more so because—it has been constantly belittled and suppressed by those modernists. Clark must be aware of this when she indicates:

The modernist revulsion against sentimentality was not really so reasonable as its invective against emotion would imply. The sentimental is at issue because no discourse can escape appealing to the emotions of its audience, and yet modernist criticism pretended to do so. No discourse can escape some relationship with its

---

17 Clark’s book argues exclusively on female writers such as Emma Goldman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Bogan, Kay Boyle, Annie Dillard, and Alice Walker.
18 See Chapter 4 “Hard and Soft: Joyce and Others” in his Paradoxy of Modernism. “Paradoxy” refers to a terminology predicated on seemingly simple yet confusing binary oppositions like high/low, old/new, and hard/soft, which “seems to make clear distinctions where clear distinctions cannot—and should not—be made,” especially the “terminology generated at the time when what we know as Modernism was establishing its place in the culture of the English-speaking world, and sustained by the critics and scholars who sought to interpret Modernism and teach other about it.” (xi)
readers’ narcissism or its readers’ nostalgia; no criticism can be so objective that it avoids calling up the issue of ideology and subjectivity in its appeal to its audience. No text can escape issues of transference. Yet modernist criticism attempted to export all this out of its domain, to maintain the poem as an aesthetic object.” (5-6)

In the context of our argument, while admitting the most part of her claim, we do not have to agree on the final sentence of the quote. It might be worthwhile here to remember Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s observation that “antisentimentality can never be an adequate Other for ‘the sentimental,’ but only a propellant for its contagious scissions and figurations” (180). Then, it would be better to put it that the modernist discourse of anti-sentimentality, despite its antipathy toward the sentimental, has actually tested, experimented, and critiqued the sentimental to a fuller extent.

The same things can be said with regard to empathy in modernism, for both empathy and sympathy—especially, the latter—have potentials to involve sentimental emotions. As we have seen above by introducing Hammond’s scheme, empathic modernism is characterized as its transition from sympathetic realism. This scheme implicitly suggests that sympathy is a Romantic past or “other” for empathic modernist writers to grow out of or overcome. However, as I will argue throughout the arguments of this dissertation, modernist empathy—“feeling into” other minds, or a radical desire for oneness of two subjectivities—is often unstable, difficult, and sometimes dangerous to sustain. Also, it is not always easy to differentiate empathy from sympathy, let alone to purge from genuine empathy the nineteenth century’s umbrella concept of sympathy. Furthermore, especially for empathic modernist novelists, there is sometimes no other choice but to have recourse to sympathy, particularly because of its affective appeal to the reader as long as narrative has to deal with characters and readers who read them. This means that for empathic modernist writers it is not always possible to simply dismiss sympathy in favor of empathy. In other words, empathic modernism must be characterized in its dynamic relation to

---

19 For instance, to take up the example again that I mentioned at the beginning of this section, when we empathize with someone in sorrow in observing the target person, we feel a sorrowful emotion similar to the person’s. And yet, this empathic attitude in itself is an expression of sympathy for the person in that the attitude communicates one’s understanding of the person’s sorrowful state of mind. In this case, it is almost impossible or futile to extract empathy from sympathy.
sympathy as well as to other fellow-feelings. In fact, as I will illustrate in this dissertation, empathic modernist novelists often fail to sustain an empathic moment of understanding of other minds, readily referring it back to quasi-empathic forms such as emotional contagion, sympathy, pity, and compassion. They are, while strongly attracted, keenly aware of negative aspects—destabilizing, difficult, and dangerous aspects—of empathy. Consequently, modernist desire of empathy fluctuates between the ideal empathic unity with other minds and the compromised sympathetic distancing from other minds. Hammond might be aware of this, too, when she reflectively writes at the end of her book, “In fact, empathic modernism is always only just beginning to cohere, and in its ambivalence and anxiety about the dangers of fellow feeling, never solidifying .... the literary modernism that maps interiority lets us know that the ideal of ‘feeling with’ is always beyond our grasp, but nevertheless worthy of our reach” (174).20

Let us briefly summarize our argument so far. Empathy, as an English translation of *Einfühlung* (“feel into”), was born as a modernist concept that expresses a radical desire to overcome the intersubjective distance to directly reach other minds, which can be considered as one of the characteristically modernist urges. This modernist concept of feeling “with” other minds has been often dismissed or criticized mainly because of its closeness to the concept of sympathy derived from the previous century, a sentimental fellow-feeling “for” other minds. Nevertheless, empathic modernism is characterized as its persistent attempt to differentiate itself from sympathetic realism, especially in terms of psychological distance from other minds. However, like the critical discourse that surrounded the sentimental in modernist era or what Scholes calls paradoxies, empathy and sympathy cannot always form a clear dichotomy. Then, while admitting an empathic yearning for immediate contact to other minds in novelists, it is important to delineate empathy in modernism as “the ideal of ‘feeling with,’” a constantly oscillating dynamic between a modernist urge to empathic immediacy and a realistic compromise of sympathetic distancing.

---

20 Hammond’s argument sounds not so positive about empathy in narrative fiction after modernism in that she considers empathy as the singularity culminated in the modernist era in the history of the concept of fellow-feeling: “Modernism, as the empathic stage of that long historical arc [of fellow-feeling], is also the decadent stage, which, in its attempts to establish a more complete fellow feeling, is always under threat of destabilisation” (177).
CHAPTER 2

EXPERIMENTS OF MODERNIST EMPATHY: WILLIAM FAULKNER’S 
THE SOUND AND THE FURY

William Faulkner’s masterpiece *The Sound and the Fury* is one of the best novels in American modernist literature that fully explores modernist empathy. The novel is full of various empathic moments. Readers of the novel experience three internal monologues by Benjy, Quentin, and Jason Compson, and it is as if they are looking at the world through the mind of each Compson brother, experiencing raw streams of consciousness directly from inside without any filter. In addition, thematically, the Compson brothers (especially Benjy and Quentin) long for an idealized empathic embrace from their sister Caddy Compson in their almost incestuous desire for her. Furthermore, Faulkner himself appears to be a writer who writes in an empathic trance by identifying with his own characters. Thus, in and around the novel, readers empathize with the characters, the characters empathize with each other, and Faulkner empathizes with his own characters. Because of this, Faulkner’s modernist experiment is the best case study of modernist empathy in American literature.

Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is a mysterious book for the empathic reader. For the first-time reader, it is a difficult read. The stories in the book are fragmented, with scenes going back and forth in abrupt flashbacks, and the narrative voices are unstable and hard to follow, told by mentally disturbed characters who do not always expect their voices to be heard by any audience. Readers of the book find it challenging to keep an appropriate distance from the narrative so they can figure out what is happening in it. It is almost as if the novel tries to scare the reader away from itself by refusing to be readily approached by the reader. However, this masterpiece has attracted many avid readers since its publication, and the book provides those readers with a special reading experience that other books do not. And it is a fascinating read that constantly entraps a number of readers in its turmoil of emotional intensity with vivid language. In other words, the novel requires readers to cross the psychological barrier of readability, paradoxically inviting the avid ones to experience a more radical and deeper empathic involvement with the fictional world of the novel.

Faulkner himself had a breakthrough as a novelist in *The Sound and Fury*, too. He became a modernist regarding empathic desire and its expression. He found a way to get deeper
into characters’ minds and represent them. Philip Weinstein, who reads the novel, especially its first section, as “ground zero” for Faulkner’s literary career, explains how the young writer had to break down realism’s conventional norms to give voice to characters who have “unspeakable” experiences and feelings. As Weinstein says, both Faulkner before *The Sound and the Fury* and his predecessor Joseph Conrad “understand that what they are focused on is ‘unspeakable,’ but neither knows (Conrad never, Faulkner not yet) that it is ‘unspeakable’ only within realism’s norm for representing the subject’s interiority, within orderly time and space” (513), and Faulkner “had to rearrange the positioning of the subject in space and time, and the field of the other” (515) in order to write the Compson brothers. Weinstein’s argument is made mainly in terms of the writerly rearrangement of tools of representation, but we can paraphrase his observation from a perspective of modernist empathy. Faulkner before his first masterpiece had to compromise with the norm of sympathetic realism in representing the modern subject’s interiority, and the readers of his earlier novels have to read his characters from a psychological distance of “orderly time and space,” having no other choice but to accept the “unspeakable” as empty reference to—not as shared experience with—the modernist interiority, which is often in an unstable, confused, or disoriented state of mind. What readers of *The Sound and the Fury* experience is, on the other hand, a shared experience with the Compson brothers, an empathic understanding from within their consciousness, bypassing the sympathetic barrier of distance predicated on the norm of realism.

This chapter analyzes the empathic design of the novel from the perspectives of readerly empathy, represented empathy, and writerly empathy. By examining Faulkner’s experimentation with modernist empathy, I will establish the book as the American modernist work that most vividly represents the transition from sympathetic realism to modernist empathy. This redefines Faulkner as a modernist—not from the conventional perspective of New Criticism or mainstream modernism that has made reading the book “the ritual of admission into a select, educated, modernist readership” (Kreying 260)—but from a new point of view that can embrace a more banal yet more appreciative and emotionally appealing way of reading the text, which is an essence of narrative empathy. At the same time, I will also observe how he eventually compromises the impossible desire for empathy. Faulkner’s struggle for empathy epitomizes how modernist empathy in the context of American literature is always unstable and difficult to maintain while always being attractive.
Readerly Empathy: Stream of Consciousness, Narrative Mediation, and Readerly Appropriation

For a long time, the peculiar narrative style of *The Sound and the Fury*—especially that of its first three chapters—has been explained and examined using such terms as “stream of consciousness,” “internal monologue,” and “free indirect speech.” However, these conceptual devices, though they are in themselves readily useful and effective as technical terms, give us nothing but its epistemological aspects—the point of view, voice, consciousness, and the like—which reveal only cognitive elements of the modernist narrative. Such a narratological or epistemological explanation usually disregards affective and emotional aspects of the modernist narrative—desires, feelings, and affections involved in the narrating voice. To fully appreciate the emotionally inflected modernist narrative, it seems critically worthwhile to reconsider the modernist narrative from the viewpoint of empathy that entails its affective components. Suggestively, Meghan Marie Hammond, in her argument on British empathic modernist novelists, points out that there is a phenomenological connection or “associat[ion of] free indirect discourse, free direct discourse and internal monologue with empathy” (24) in that these narrative experiments can be read as a manifestation of modernist empathic desire. Characteristically, modernist narrative styles such as free indirect discourse, internal monologue, and stream of consciousness can be seen as a textual demonstration of the modernist desire for empathy, a desire to reach other minds more directly without a psychological distance that divides one subjectivity from another. These narrative features function as devices for readers to feel as if they are diving into the characters’ minds and seeing and feeling the world from within their minds.

Faulkner’s modernist empathy in *The Sound and the Fury* is not just about seeing from within characters but also about feeling with them. That is to say, readers of the book experience not only a cognitive alignment but also an affective one with characters’ consciousness.21 In order to see that, it is necessary to understand the narrative structure of the first three chapters told by the Compson brothers not only cognitively but also affectively. I will first analyze its

---

21 It is a common recognition among today’s empathy scholars that empathy involves both cognitive and affective alignment with another’s mind. For example, Amy Coplan argues that empathy requires three essential components: affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self-other differentiation. See her “Understanding.”
narrative structure from the cognitive point of view with reference to Gérard Genette’s explanation of “immediate speech.” Then I examine how the readers “feel with” the Compson brothers by paying attention to the readers’ appropriation and privatization of their affective components involved in reading the monologues.

In his analysis of the modernist narrative structure of the Compson brothers’ monologues, French narrative theorist Gérard Genette suggests using the term “immediate speech” (173). By paying close attention to a “narrative instance” (which refers to a narrating agent or situation according to Émile Benveniste), he differentiates immediate speech from free indirect speech, which is often associated with the narrative style called stream of consciousness or internal monologue. According to Genette, immediate speech is “immediate” because the narrative is seemingly delivered to the reader with no intermediation by the narrator:

As the example of … the first three sections of The Sound and the Fury (successive monologues of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason) [shows], the monologue does not have to be coextensive with the complete work to be accepted as “immediate”; it is sufficient, whatever the monologue’s extent may be, for it to happen on its own, without the intermediary of a narrating instance which is reduced to silence and whose function the monologue takes on. We see here the essential difference between immediate monologue and free indirect style, which are sometimes erroneously confused or improperly put together: in free indirect speech, the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or, if one prefers, the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are then merged; in immediate speech, the narrator is obliterated and the character substitutes for him. (174-175, italics original)

What Genette suggests here is that there is absence of a traditional narrating instance in the immediate monologues of the first three narratives of The Sound and the Fury. Functionally speaking, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, with no authoritative narrating instance, are narrating themselves almost in real time without being aware of doing so. To put it another way, in a conventional narrative, an intermediate narrating instance would offer readers a perspective that sets a psychological, temporal, or spatial distance between the narrated and the narrating; in the immediate narrative of the Compson brothers, however, the narrating (in the present) and the narrated (in the past) becomes so close that the two appear to be happening at the same time in
the characters’ minds as the stories progress. Thus, in the first three chapters of the novel, the narrating and the narrated are functionally merged, leaving minimal distance between the present and the past. This functional immediacy between the narrating and the narrated creates an empathic moment of narrative, where readers witness, without intermediacy of narrating instance, the way the narrators’ present and past are jumbled together. The immediacy of the narrative voice of the Compson brothers—the oneness of the subject and the object of narrating—is clearly suggestive of Faulkner’s desire for modernist empathy in his narrative.

For readers, too, the immediate speech of the Compson brothers creates an empathic reading experience of the characters’ minds without any intermediating filter of narrative. Beginning with a suggestive phrase—“Through the fence” (879)—which invites readers to have empathic oneness with Benjy’s perspective, the novel requires readers to participate in the narrating act in return. This type of empathic moment keeps occurring throughout the first three chapters, but the following passage from the penultimate paragraph of Quentin’s section, where Quentin is almost unconsciously remembering a scene from the past in which his father, Mr. Compson, was nihilistically trying to dissuade him from desperate actions, serves as an extreme example of such readerly narrative participation:

and he i think youd better go on up to cambridge right away you might go up into maine for a month you can afford it if you are careful it might be a good thing watching pennies has healed more scars than jesus and i suppose i realise what you believe i will realise up there next week or next month and he then you will remember that for you to go to harvard has been your mothers dream since you were born and no compson has ever disappointed a lady and i temporary it will be better for me for all of us and he every man is the arbiter of his own virtues but let no man prescribe for another mans wellbeing and i temporary and he was the saddest word of all there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time its not even time until it was. (1014)

To read this type of extreme case of immediate speech, readers must play the narrating role, which Quentin is supposed to do in the absence of a traditional narrator. The reader as the acting narrator must do all kinds of makeshift narrating jobs on his/her own, jobs that range from small but sometimes hard chores like adding appropriate punctuation marks and correctly capitalizing the first-person pronouns and proper nouns to identifying Quentin’s peculiar and personal use of
words such as “and i” and “and he” (which mean “and I said” and “and he said,” respectively). In other scenes, the narrating jobs include identifying in proper contexts a number of random and often fragmented phrases such as “*Mr and Mrs Jason Richmond Compson announce the marriage of …*” (936 and passim, italics original) and “*I have committed incest*” (937 and passim, italics original). The imperfectly rendered narrative voice of Quentin, while serving as a dramatic presentation of his hollow consciousness and madness on the one hand, requires the reader to participate in narrating his mind in real time on the other hand. Since the text does not provide a higher-level narrative instance that authoritatively articulates and edits the character’s halting voice on the behalf of the reader, the text rendered in immediate speech then becomes something like a personal play script for the reader to act out on his or her own and in his or her own make-shift way to fully appreciate it; “personal” and “make-shift” because the reader has to read it through without being very much sure of the authenticity of his or her reading in terms of, for instance, whether his/her punctuation of Quentin’s voice is actually correct or not. It is as if, by articulating Quentin’s voice—in other words, by partially taking over Quentin’s job of narrating—the reader has to be a Quentin the narrator=character while reading his dying voice.22

In this way, the reader is forced by the highly empathic narrative style into cognitively identifying him/herself with Quentin. For the empathic reader, then, Quentin is not exactly the object of reading from which the reading subject can keep a comfortable distance of narrative but rather an experience itself that needs to be narratively articulated and acted out by the reader. This narrative scheme as the readerly empathic experience in Quentin’s section seems more or less the case in the immediate monologues by the other Compson brothers as well.

The reader’s makeshift taking-over in the narrating act of the immediate monologues, which we have seen above in Quentin as an extreme example, is nothing but one side of a coin of empathic reading. Indeed, narratological analysis could serve quite well for understanding the cognitive aspects of readerly empathy, but empathy usually entails not only cognitive but also affective alignment with other minds. For a fuller understanding of readerly empathy, it is necessary to pay due critical attention to its affective aspects as well.

---

22 It is just a partial taking over because, precisely speaking from the narratological point of view, the fact is not that Quentin is not narrating but that, in immediate speech, he is in fact narrating (in place of a conventional narrating instance) without being aware of doing so at all and therefore without consciously addressing his narrating to any audience. The reader then just picks up narrating jobs where Quentin as character/narrator leaves off.
While cognitively aligning him/herself with the Compson brothers’ minds, the reader also must articulate their affective complexities manifested on their texts at the same time. Perhaps the following scene from Benjy’s section would be the best example of that:

They came on. I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out. I tried to get it off of my face, but the bright shapes were going again. They were going up the hill to where it fell away and I tried to cry. But when I breathed in, I couldn’t breathe out again to cry, and I tried to keep from falling off the hill and I fell off the hill into the bright, whirling shapes. (917–18)

Here Benjy remembers and relives a scene from the past in which he arguably attacks a neighbor girl who is commuting with other girls near the gate of the Compson house, which eventually leads to his castration by doctors. The scene empathically impresses the reader in spite of—or because—of the fact that Benjy’s halting language rendered in immediate speech does not provide enough information for the reader to fully understand what is happening in the scene. While it is easy for the reader to empathize with Benjy here, it is difficult to explain how the reader does so. First, it is unknowable what Benjy is “trying to say” to the girl here, and there is no explicit explanation or textual evidence of what kind of emotion makes him “trying to say” either. All that the reader knows through Benjy’s voice is the sheer intensity of his feelings rather than what he actually means to say or do or even what kind of feelings he actually has. The description lacks a logical explanation that would be provided by an authoritative narrating instance. The impression the reader gets from Benjy’s feelings, then, has to remain provisional and private since his feelings cannot be comfortably labeled or categorized by reference to a common or quotidian taxonomy of emotions. Benjy’s feelings are offered as something unnamable or indescribable; rather, the reader feels how intense his feelings are without knowing exactly what they are, just like Benjy has to feel those intense feelings without making sense out of his voice.

23 In this sense, Benjy’s voice might bring about what Brian Massumi calls “affect” or “intensity.” It is “characterized by a crossing of semantic wires,” taking place in a non-conscious manner and “not semantically or semiotically ordered,” and it is also “outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function” (85).
of them on his own. In this sense, it can be said that narrative empathy can serve as a way to experientially understand something unexplainable without the intermediacy of explanation.

If empathy in the face of real people is different from narrative empathy, one of the major differences is that there is no chance of reciprocal interaction with the target object in the latter. Readers can read the target characters carefully, but especially when they read under-explained characters like Benjy, they might have to draw out their own private, emotional memories by referring to similar past experiences. In this sense, Benjy’s transient and ambiguous emotions are heavily predicated on the readers’ intuitive understanding or personal memories of affective experiences. This means that the readers appropriate and privatize Benjy’s feelings in an improvised and makeshift manner. Basically, what the readers assume Benjy’s feelings to be are, in fact, the readers’ own, for the feelings felt by the readers occur nowhere else but in their bodies.24 The sense of possession of Benjy’s feelings as a result of the appropriation and privatization leads to a deeper affective commitment in the readers’ empathic engagement.25

However, the important point is that the readers’ private appropriation of Benjy’s feelings must be, at most, provisional. It is provisional first because readers intuitively know that emotions or feelings in general possess the inherently subjective quality of perception and experience.26 In other words, readers understand somewhere in the back of their mind that the feelings they appropriate from Benjy ultimately belong to him and are not inherently the readers’. Another reason the appropriation is provisional is that readers are ultimately aware that the emotions and feelings they feel are elicited by Benjy, the fictional character, and therefore the affective components readers vicariously feel as their own are all a product of “the game of

24 See Oatley 29.
25 According to an empirical study, reading a text both in a self-related manner and in an emotionally engaged fashion generally leads to a better recollection of the text. See Miall 55. It is then not farfetched to assume the privatization of an affective reading experience results in the reader’s deeper involvement with the text.
26 This quality—such as redness of red, saltiness of salt and the like—is called “qualia” in philosophical literature. It is largely understood as “the introspectively accessible, phenomenal aspects of our mental lives,” especially those which possess “intrinsic, nonphysical, ineffable properties” (Tye). Qualia, in short, refers to the quality of subjective experiences or feelings that is, in itself, indescribable and unquantifiable. Emotional experiences are generally considered to have qualia.
“make-believe” in Kendall Walton’s sense. To put it briefly, readers know the emotions are fictional and feel real as long as they are predicated on the rules of fiction. Accordingly, while vicariously feeling Benjy’s emotions as if they are their own, readers eventually give the possession of those appropriated emotions back to Benjy’s mind, where they belong. In a sense, what the empathic readers do in this empathic process can be likened to *premastication* or kiss-feeding, the (usually parental) act of chewing food on behalf of another who is not capable of mastication in order to feed him/her. Similar to premastication, the readers are masticating Benjy’s unarticulated emotions only to feed them back to him. This premastication-like interaction is not reciprocal, but through this empathic narrative process, the intimacy between the readers and Benjy deepens.

**Represented Empathy: Pursuit of the Ideal Form of Empathy**

*The Sound and the Fury* is designed so that readers not only experience the monologues in a highly empathic manner but also see the characters seek empathic relationships with other characters. In this section, we will see the forms of empathy represented in the fictional world of the novel. It must be noted, however, that more precisely speaking, what we actually see is failures of empathy. For the Compson brothers, empathic relationships are the ideal form of communication that are, in a sense, no communication at all. If empathy is sharing perspectives and affective experiences with other minds through a communicative medium like language, the Compson brothers desire a more radical empathic sharing—or merging—without any such medium at all. Of course, this is impossible in practice; it is an unachievable ideal. With that in mind, we see how the empathic way of understanding is represented in Benjy’s section as the ideal communication with others; and then how, for Quentin, the empathic route to understanding as the ideal of his incestuous communication with Caddy turns out to be unstable.

---

27 In *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Walton describes our experience of fictional works of art as something similar to what we experience in a game of make-believe. According to his theory, when we are appreciating a representational work of art, we are participating in a game of make-believe and following the rules of the game that can be generated and warranted only within the game world. In other words, we believe fictional propositions about the fictional world in a different way than we believe propositions about the real world: we do not actually “believe” but “make-believe” fictional propositions to be “fictionally” true.
and destructive; and finally how Jason, the most anti-empathic character of the novel, complicates and challenges the concept of empathy of the book.

As for the represented empathy in Benjy’s section, the argument made by Olga Kuminova, who reads the novel as “a peculiar, contradictory, and idealistic communicative gesture” (41), would be helpful to our argument. According to her, Faulkner’s goal of the novel “can be defined as ideal communication, a struggle to overcome the grammatical and pragmatic limits of language and annihilate the distance between the writer and the reader” (41), which is, as she happens to use the term in passing, a form of “empathy” (57). Faulkner’s ideal, she argues, is incarnated in the fictional world as Caddy and Dilsey, “two figures of an ideal reader for whom both the text and the author … show great love and respect” (56), especially in their relationship to Benjy.

Indeed, they appear to be the only characters who are able and attempt to understand what Benjy is “trying to say” without the intermediation of language, sometimes in an almost telepathic manner, as in the following scene, when Caddy comes to realize that Benjy does not like the smell of the perfume she puts on:

“Why, Benjy. What is it” she said. “You mustn’t cry. Caddy’s not going away. See here.” she said. She took up the bottle [of perfume] and took the stopper out and held it to my nose. “Sweet. Smell. Good.”

I went away and I didn’t hush, and she held the bottle in her hand, looking at me.

“Oh.” she said. She put the bottle down and came and put her arms around me, “So that was it. And you were trying to tell Caddy and you couldn’t tell her. You wanted to, but you couldn’t, could you. Of course Caddy wont. Of course Caddy wont. ...” (909)

Another example is provided below:

“I’ll run away and never come back.” Caddy said [to Quentin]. I began to cry. Caddy turned around and said “Hush” So I hushed. Then they played in the branch. … Caddy was all wet and muddy behind, and I started to cry and she came and squatted in the water.

“Hush now.” she said. “I’m not going to run away.” So I hushed. Caddy smelled like trees in the rain (891)
What is impressive in these scenes from the readers’ point of view is how Benjy’s halting language is richly evocative of what is not written: a gesture communication between Benjy and Caddy. This is especially the case in the latter scene: since Benjy is supposed to be incapable of any language-based communication or of understanding causal relationships, the sentence “So I hushed” would not make sense unless the reader interprets that Benjy hushes as a reaction to seeing some kind of “hush” gesture by which Caddy would tell him to be quiet—an index finger to the lips, a benign, assuring smile, a smoothing, affectionate hug, and such—instead of directly understanding her saying “hush” to him. Beyond her actual words or description rendered in the text, the readers cannot help but imagine how Caddy is performatively gesturing toward and communicating without language with Benjy.

Seeing this from the point of view of character analysis, then, it can be said that Caddy’s empathic understanding of Benjy covers more than what language can explicitly and superficially mean: it is a holistic communication that does not rely only on language. Also, Caddy’s typical mode of communication with Benjy is a maternal type of empathic perspective-taking, which can be observed, for example, in Caddy’s use of *illeism*. When she wants to understand Benjy, she puts herself in his shoes in the same way a mother would in an attempt to understand her child’s need: “So that was it. And you were trying to tell Caddy and you couldn’t tell her. You wanted to, but you couldn’t, could you. Of course Caddy wont. Of course Caddy wont. ...” (italics mine). By being maternally empathic and attentive, Caddy kindly tries to understand what Benjy needs even if he cannot explicitly express it to her through words. In this sense, Caddy (and Dilsey, too, according to Kuminova) can be considered as the ideal reader “who would generously and selflessly do the best he or she could to take care of the text, give it full affective attention, reading and re-reading, to make sure its communication is received” (Kuminova 56). And, if the narrative style itself demands the reader to be empathic with the characters as we have seen in the previous section, Caddy and Dilsey can be regarded, for the empathic reader, as the ideal empathizers represented in the text as well.

---

28 In fact, Benjy clearly shows the ability to understand simple gestures and facial expressions of other people. For instance, see the description of Mr. Compson later in the section: Benjy narrates, “The way he looked said Hush” (924).
29 *Illeism* is the use of the third-person expression to refer to oneself.
30 The empathic understanding shown by Caddy (and Dilsey) is contrasted by the fact that no one else in the Compson household tries to understand Benjy, but rather treats him in a cruel manner,
also be noted that while Caddy and Dilsey are undoubtedly the ideal empathizers, their treatment of Benjy is not purely empathic but also involves a maternal kind of concern for Benjy. This means that, even though it does not bring about a particular problem in the novel, the idealized form of empathy in Benjy’s section always presupposes a mother-child relation structure: that is, it is not mutual or equal in its empathic transaction.

For Quentin, too, Caddy appears as the ideal empathizer, but in a much more destructive and unstable sense. Quentin’s delusional projection of his desire onto Caddy makes her into the idealized figure of empathizer, not an actual empathizer that the reader encounters through Benjy’s eye. In fact, Quentin entertains a desire for incestuously idealized oneness with Caddy, which concurs with a modernist empathic desire to leap over intersubjective distance between minds: “… and that’s it if people could only change one another forever that way [like resonance of a bell, or if people could only] merge like a flame swirling up for an instant then blown clearly out …” (1012). He tries to achieve that idealized psychological fusion with his sister on a symbolic level—“the clean flame” where the two can “merge” into one—by making himself, as well as his sister and father, believe that they committed incest:

\[
\text{we did how can you not know it if youll just wait Ill tell you how it was it was a crime we did a terrible crime it cannot be hid you think it can but wait Poor Quentin youve never done that have you and Ill tell you how it was Ill tell Father then ill have to be because you love Father then well have to go away amid the pointing and the horror the clean flame Ill make you say we did Im stronger than you Ill make you know we did you thought it was them but it was me listen I fooled you all the time it was me you thought I was in the house where that damn honeysuckle trying not to think the swing the cedars the secret surges the breathing locked drinking the wild breath the yes Yes yes” (991, italics original)
\]

However, Caddy as the idealized empathizer is nowhere but in Quentin’s imaginative mind, and her actual voice is rarely heard in Quentin’s mind; her voice in reaction to him, as long as it is heard as in the above, often sounds rather disillusioning, critical, and pitying rather than empathically understanding like she is in Benjy’s perspective. In this sense, Quentin’s attempt
for empathic fusion is an egoistically self-centered perspective-taking, a unilateral projection of
his ideal onto Caddy: simply put, Quentin’s is a failure of empathy, even by a larger definition of
the word. He indeed desires to be empathically embraced and understood by Caddy, but he does
not try to empathically understand her at all. In fact, whereas he is, in general, unconditionally
“sympathetic” and attentive toward children, he does not understand them at all: Quentin’s
incapability of mutual understanding is glaringly revealed in his monologue. For instance, in the
scene when Quentin tries to encourage “the third boy,” who is left by the other two, to join them
in swimming, the boy “paid me no attention” (971), ignoring Quentin’s nagging questions. The
lack of intersubjective understanding on Quentin’s part is also highlighted in his interaction with
an Italian girl. During his walk with the girl, whom he even tries to abandon at one point, he
continually fails to understand her intention and desire. His incapability of dealing with these
people despite his concern for them is a stark contrast to Caddy’s maternally empathic
understanding of Benjy observed in the first section, thus ironically revealing that Quentin’s
empathic desire for Caddy is selfishly one-sided and delusively idealistic.

The closest form of empathy in Quentin’s section is more persistently manifested in his
dialogical interaction with Mr. Compson than in his idealization of Caddy. Throughout the
section, Quentin continues to reenact in his suicidal state of mind the dialogues he had with his
father. In fact, the section begins and ends with what “Father said” to him; Quentin’s mind
sporadically but continually resonates with his father’s until he commits suicide at the end of the
section. In that sense, Quentin seems more generally obsessed with his father (or his words) than
with Caddy (or the ideal image of his sister). What is particularly notable is that, as André
Bleikasten says, “The father/son conflict, so often evoked in Faulkner’s fiction, is apparently
missing here. Indeed, Quentin’s argument with Mr. Compson suggests not so much a duel as a
doleful duet, and he feels so close to his father that he makes him his confidant” (84). This
“duet” can be read as Quentin’s empathic attempt to put himself in his father’s place and, in that
empathic process, appropriate his father’s words. By reenacting the dialogues with his father or,
in other words, by playing both his own and his father’s roles in the remembered dialogues,
Quentin tries to empathically understand his father’s words before he finally commits suicide.31

31 On the other hand, it may also be the case that, by trying identifying himself with his father, or,
more precisely, with the ideal, authoritative father he wishes his father would be, Quentin, fanatic
believer in the power of the words, tries to go so far as to vainly attempt to usurp the
In that light, it is quite interesting that, unlike when he idealizes Caddy, Quentin is almost unselfish—or rather selfless—when it comes to his relation to his father in that he easily lets his internal world be eroded by and occupied with Mr. Compson’s hollow and pessimistic words. Throughout the monologue, Quentin is no more self-conscious or autonomic than his mentally challenged younger brother. As Bleikasten points out in terms of linguistic style, “there are obvious similarities between the two monologues, and especially when Quentin records ‘present’ actions and perceptions, he often uses strings of minimal sentences strongly reminiscent of Benjy’s speech” (72). Having probably already made up his mind to commit suicide, Quentin hardly tries to hold on to his identity and seems to do nothing but passively accept and repeat what “Father said” in his memories, without even talking back to his father from the “present” point of view on the last day of his life. He reenacts past conversations with his father by role-playing his past self and his father at the same time, and these words seem more real to him than what is happening in the “present.” As a result, he fails to keep an appropriate distance from his father and deeply immerses himself in the discourse of his father to the point where, as his first-person pronoun “I” becomes “i” toward the end of his last day, the contour of his identity is becoming blurred and questionable: “thinking I was I was not who was not was not who” (1007). This loss of identity could be considered a result of the failure of empathic perspective-taking due to a lack of self-other distinction. Indeed, for empathy, it is necessary to be willingly open to taking in, and being affected by, another’s perspective and mental state, but Quentin is probably too openly and desperately empathic with his pessimistic father to keep an appropriate distance from him, which further drives his suicidal desire.

While empathy is represented as a manifestation of the idealized communication in Benjy’s section, Quentin’s failure in empathic engagements suggests that empathizing with other minds can lead to an unstable and sometimes dangerous act of imagination. Empathy, especially the desire for a more radicalized form of modernist empathy that seeks affective and cognitive oneness with other minds without intermediacy, can easily end up with egoistic projection of the creative/reproductive power of the ideal father in order to maintain his vulnerable incestuous fantasy of becoming one with Caddy: in fact, he (arguably) declares to Caddy, “[I] am my fathers Progenitive I invented him created I him” (971, italics original). But this also adds up to Quentin’s failure of empathy in that he cannot keep the self-other distinction—he confuses himself with the father—or maintain other-oriented perspective-taking, either—he completely ignores the actual existence of Mr. Compson in the process.
ideal image onto others, as in Quentin’s idealization of Caddy, or result in a loss of identity due to excessive pretension of other minds as we have seen in Quentin’s obsessive role-playing in the recollected conversations with his father. Coming after Benjy’s, Quentin’s monologue reveals that the modernist longing for oneness through empathy is an ambivalent desire that can put the empathizing subject in an unstable and insecure state of mind.

Seeing his brother Quentin ruining himself, Jason, the only “sane Compson” in the family, might have somehow sensed the risks of empathizing with other minds. Jason Compson in the third monologue appears as the antithesis of the empathic narrative design developed in the previous monologues. His cruelty is so blatant throughout his section that he does not appear to be a type of empathic character. In fact, the reader can easily remember several scenes that highlight Jason’s cruelty. Besides his constant sarcasm and cruelty toward Miss Quentin throughout the section (and the novel, for that matter), there is, for example, a short yet poignant episode in which Jason pretends to sell Luster an extra ticket to the circus he happens to have but would not use himself, and he eventually burns them one by one in the stove in front of Luster (1072–73). There is another episode in which Jason does not allow Caddy to see her daughter except for, literally, a fleeting second, and later tries to swindle her out of her money by taking advantage of Miss Quentin’s custody (1034–38). In the latter episode, Jason “didn’t feel so bad” (1034) about his coldhearted treatment of Caddy, and after repelling his imploring sister, he even “felt better” (1035). Dilsey calls him “a cold man” (1036), and Caddy also directly says to him, “You never had a drop of warm blood in you” (1037). Thus, Jason seems to have a psychological disposition that is remotest to empathy or putting himself in others’ shoes.

Nevertheless, it is in fact possible to say that Jason is putting himself in others’ shoes, albeit in a quite insufficient manner: Jason exercises part of empathic imagination to better understand other minds. The fact that Jason’s maneuver for inflicting psychological pain on the people around him is so cruelly effective means that he actually understands exactly how they feel in response to his cruel intentions. In short, it is structurally true that he puts himself in their shoes. However, putting oneself in others’ shoes is just one side of empathy. As many empathy theorists insist, empathy requires affective matching as well as cognitive matching with, or,

---

32 The quote (1137) is from “Appendix” (pub. in 1946), which was written by Faulkner himself a little less than two decades after the novel was published in 1929.
simply put, perspective-taking of, other minds at the same time. Jason is good at the cognitive matching without sharing any affective component with others. In fact, Jason’s cognitive empathy is close to what is commonly called *schadenfreude* in psychology, which means feeling a malicious enjoyment and pleasure in observing the misfortunes of others. Psychologically speaking, *schadenfreude* is “a powerful and common alternative to empathy” (Cikara et al. 151) because of its cognitive similarity to empathy. Then, it is not so farfetched to assume that Jason exactly understands the pain and discomfort of others: he is all the more cruel because he understands how others feel.

Jason is obsessively observant—sometimes, almost clairvoyant—of the people around him and of how they behave, as illustrated in the scene below:

> So the next time I told [Caddy] that if she tried Dilsey again [to secretly meet with Miss Quentin], Mother was going to fire Dilsey and send Ben to Jackson and take Quentin and go away. She looked at me for a while. There wasn’t any street light close and I couldn’t see her face much. *But I could see her looking at me.* When we were little when she’d get mad and couldn’t do anything about it her upper lip would begin to jump. Everytime it jumped it would leave a little more of her teeth showing, and all the time she’d be as still as a post, not a muscle moving except her lip jerking higher and higher up her teeth. But she didn’t say anything. (1036-37, emphasis mine)

As is implied in his detailed recollection of her, Jason clearly understands not just how Caddy would feel but even what it would be like to be in Caddy’s situation. He sees, without actually observing, how Caddy is looking at him because he can easily imagine what Caddy would do and feel in this situation. He does not seem to presume or preconceive Caddy’s state of mind without any clue. Jason’s excessively detailed recollection of Caddy’s physical habit rather testifies to his excellence in imagination based on careful observation. This is also the case in the following passage:

> *I could feel* [Dilsey] *watching me at the door.* I read the paper.

---

33 See Coplan’s “Understanding.”
34 Nussbaum calls the type of sadist who finds pleasure in the empathic process of reconstructing and understanding another’s pain an “empathic torturer” or “empathic villain” (334). Also, in literature as well as other narrative media, especially in sub-genres like crime fiction and picaresque novels, it is not at all unusual that the reader feels empathy with the villain.
“Whut you want to act like this fer?” she says. “When you knows how much bother I has anyway.”

“If Mother is any sicker than she was when she came down to dinner, all right,” I says. “But as long as I am buying food for people younger than I am, they’ll have to come down to the table to eat it. Let me know when supper’s ready,” I says, reading the paper again. I heard her climbing the stairs, dragging her feet and grunting and groaning like they were straight up and three feet apart. I heard her at Mother’s door, then I heard her calling Quentin, like the door was locked, then she went back to Mother’s room and the Mother went and talked to Quentin. Then they came down stairs. I read the paper. (1074, emphasis mine)

Jason is almost obsessively conscious of how others are “looking at” or “watching” him, literally and figuratively. Jason’s putting himself in others’ shoes often begins when he can feel someone “looking at” or “watching” him, as is the case in these scenes. Once his cognitive empathy starts, his imaginings of how people behave and feel is largely accurate, regardless of whatever advantage he takes of his observation. Indeed, Jason often relies on clichés and stereotypes when assessing the people around him; suggestively, the section begins with his stereotypically misogynistic remark: “Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say” (1015). However, recent studies suggest that the “top-down,” cognitive type of empathy has much more recourse to stereotypical mental representations than people believe it does. This suggests that Jason has a potential for empathic capability regardless of how he uses it. Jason just does not associate the knowledge he obtains via empathy-related skills with concern for others. Precisely speaking, Jason uses this inverted form of empathy not just for the sake of sadistic pleasure, as is often the case with

35 The phrase is repeated at the end of the section along with his stereotypical caricaturing of the people around him: “Like I say once a bitch always a bitch. And just let me have twenty-four hours without any dam New York jew to advise me what it’s going to do. I dont want to make a killing; save that to suck in the smart gamblers with. I just want an even chance to get my money back. And once I’ve done that they can bring all Beale street and all bedlam in here and two of them can sleep in my bed and another one can have my place at the table too” (1080).
36 See Lewis and Hodges, “Empathy Is Not Always as Personal as You May Think: The Use of Stereotypes in Empathic Accuracy.” They claim, based on several experiments, that whereas relying on stereotypes for understanding others has some weak points, stereotypical representations can give the empathizer an imperfect yet relatively accurate and quick understanding of other minds, especially when personal and direct information about the target person is not immediately available.
Schadenfreude, but mainly for control over the people around him, especially the Compson household.

Jason’s abuse of empathic imagination suggestively tells us two things. The first is that empathy can not only go wrong as in Quentin’s failures but also can divert itself into a socially negative and maliciously effective manifestation as in Jason’s case. In other words, if empathy means, by a narrower definition, to have a mental representation/reconstruction of other minds, it is, structurally speaking, a socially ambivalent means for understanding them. It can serve as the ideal communicative route to a holistic understanding of other minds as partly incarnated in the figures of Caddy and Dilsey, but it can also be used as an ironically effective means to control or manipulate people. Faulkner must have known both aspects of empathy very well. The second is that Jason’s frame of mind is not that different from those of his siblings in terms of empathy. While it is true that Jason is, by a broader definition, the antithesis of empathy for his meanness and selfishness, he is, like his brothers, taking advantage of empathy in his own peculiar way. Jason is, in that sense, not an exception but definitely a legitimate member of the Compson brothers.

Now that we have seen Jason’s inverted empathic disposition, it is appropriate to examine readerly empathy in relation to Jason’s represented empathy. In Jason’s section, the empathic design of the narrative, which in the previous sections aligns the reader with the Compson brothers’ minds through narrative privatization and appropriation, now becomes less compelling for the reader: what Genette calls immediate speech, which is predicated on the absence of a narrating instance, loosens itself up as Jason’s self-conscious soliloquy takes over the narrative. Bleikasten concisely summarizes the change of the narrative:

Unlike Benjy’s “trying to say” and Quentin’s self-absorbed musings, Jason’s discourse at once emphasizes the narrator’s awareness of himself in the very act of speaking (through the countless interpolated *inquits*: “I say(s),” “like I say,” “what I say”) and suggests time and again the silent complicity of a listening *you*, often explicitly referred to in the text, who at any time could become an interlocutor. For all its self-consuming fury, or rather because of it, the rhetoric of Jason’s monologue points to an eagerness to communicate, a desire to win over his implied audience which has no parallels in Quentin’s or Benjy’s section. (105, italics original)
From the point of view of narrative empathy, we can rephrase Bleikasten’s observation in the following way: while his brothers tacitly presuppose empathic immersion from the reader (because they are not aware of the fact that they are narrating by themselves), Jason constantly asks for empathic complicity in his narrative. However, at the same time, his self-consciousness ironically gives the reader a chance to resist his request, which is different from his brothers’ unintended, therefore willy-nilly, enforcement of readerly empathy. Jason’s self-conscious design of empathy, in an inversely proportional way, dissuades the reader from empathizing with him.

Jason’s self-conscious narrative complicates the whole design of readerly empathy in the novel. On the one hand, the reader continuously tries to empathize with Jason, the first-person narrator, according to the habit constructed by the first two sections of immediate monologue, and Jason’s type of speech entreats the reader to do so, too. Moreover, as his narrative goes on, the reader gets used to it and begins to gradually understand him from various angles. The attentive reader may realize that Jason is not always a villain in the story. Jason is, in fact, not always in full control of his own narrative despite his excessive self-consciousness, and the reader comes across revealing scenes from time to time in which, for example, Jason blunders out his suppressed sentimentality or angrily loses control of himself because of his excruciatingly nagging headache. In reading these scenes, the reader tends to feel a certain degree of intimacy in terms of his/her psychological distance from Jason and might go so far as to empathize with, or even sympathize with him: Jason, too, is one of many vulnerable people who, trying to overcome adversity, puts on a tough front in disguise. In these moments, Jason elicits enough fellow feeling for the reader to feel as close to him as to his brothers in the previous sections. On the other hand, Jason is basically so mean and biased as a character and so obtrusive and pesky as a soliloquist narrator that common sense tells the reader to keep a certain psychological distance from him. In this sense, he does not seem to deserve any empathic feeling from the reader.

37 When he gets emotional or sentimental, he never names it but he just says he feels “funny”, trying to deny the fact that he gets sentimental. For instance, when he remembers the scene of his father’s funeral, he “began to feel sort of funny” in watching the burial and soon “got to feeling funny again” remembering the time when he and his sister were kids (1032). As for headache (1060-63), when he has a headache, his narrative becomes closer to his brothers’ immediate monologues, and the reader gets through his stream of consciousness in an empathic manner like when s/he does so in the previous two monologues.
reader. Jason the character repels the reader’s empathic approach. What is interesting is that, as can be seen in the scenes quoted above as well as in others throughout the novel, his blatant cruelty and meanness naturally directs the reader’s sympathy/empathy toward the people around him who are persistently besieged by his cruelty. For example, in the scenes cited earlier, it seems natural for the reader to feel sympathy for, or empathy with, Caddy and Dilsey, who are victims of his cruelty. Thus, Jason disturbs, diffuses, and deflects the reader’s empathic engagement with his narrative in various directions and in different dimensions throughout the fictional world of the novel. While narratively empathizing with Jason most of the time, the reader feels repelled by his meanness, which leads the reader to empathize with the other characters delineated in Jason’s narrative.

Jason thus complicates the empathic design of the novel: his narrative constantly invites the reader into empathic alignment with Jason while Jason’s story that records his cruelty repels the reader’s empathic attempt. The reader is put in a constantly unstable state of empathizing and un-empathizing with Jason throughout his narrative. This dilemma becomes even more complicated because Jason himself abuses empathic imagination for his sadistic purpose and also because Jason’s own mean actions in his narrative deflect the reader’s empathy to the other characters. The complication of empathy is, however, a sign that this novel opens up the social dimension: “There can be no question that Jason’s monologue offers a broader perspective than the two previous ones” (Bleikasten 120). This is true in terms of empathy, too. In the previous sections, the narratively designed empathy is indeed profound and intense, but it is too privately subjective and monotonously individual and, in that sense, limited in terms of the relational aspect of empathy. In Jason’s section, readerly empathy is directed not only to the central character (Jason) but is also deflected to the people around him. Readerly empathy takes various turns in different angles in the section. In other words, readerly empathy becomes polyphonic in Jason’s section, which creates leeway where the reader can emotionally engage him/herself with multiple minor characters in the fictional world. In this sense, in Jason’s section, this novel comes relatively closer to the traditional form of a novel. This transition is crucial for Faulkner, who, as the empathic author, tries to involve himself in the narrative in the final section of the novel.
Writerly Empathy of Faulkner

For the empathic author, empathy creates a space where self-expression leads to loss of self while the loss of self also fuels self-expression. To acknowledge his/her own characters’ independence and autonomy by putting aside his/her writerly agenda and plan means to recognize and accept otherness in his/her self. This acceptance allows the author, as the reader of his/her own text, to make an emotional investment in his/her characters. In other words, by empathizing with his/her characters, the author is forced to become the reader of his/her own text, for empathic desire structurally preconceives a certain psychological distance that makes one want to overcome. At the expense of surrendering his/her textual authority, the author finds that his/her characters act on their own because they, for the empathic author’s eye, quit being the author’s puppets. In this sense, writerly empathy with his or her own characters has to begin with a recognition of their otherness, which results in keeping a proper distance from them, which then elicits an empathic desire to bridge it.

William Faulkner is this type of empathic writer. Suggestively, Faulkner’s brother Johny remembers: “I have never known anyone who identified himself with his writings more than Bill did … Sometimes it was hard to tell which was which, which one Bill was, himself or the one in the story. And yet you knew somehow that the two of them were the same, they were one and inseparable” (qtd. in Blotner 213). Again, immersion in the fictional world and characters is especially true for him in *The Sound and the Fury*; as the writer himself says, “I was completely submerged in [The Sound and the Fury] (University 208). At the same time, Faulkner is a writer who is willing to admit the autonomy of his own characters. Although he did not particularly enjoy situations where he would have to comment on or write about literary topics, he never hesitated, if asked, to talk about his characters in interviews conducted later in his writerly career. And when he talked, he did so with gusto, despite his inherent shyness and strong sense of privacy. He loved his own characters as if they were real people, and it is as if they were, at least in his mind, larger than the book that contains them. He insists, “Those characters to me are quite real and quite constant. They are in my mind all the time. I don’t have any trouble at all going back to pick up one. I forgot what they did, but the characters I don’t forget, and when the book is finished, that character is not done, he still is going on at some new devilment that sooner or later I will find out about and write about” (University 78). Also, Faulkner would repeatedly emphasize the point that he was trying to present characters rather than ideas. He never tried to
control his characters in favor of expressing his idea or ideology, as is shown in the following comments:

“I was trying to talk about people, using the only tool I knew, which was the country that I knew. No, I wasn’t trying to—wasn’t writing sociology at all. I was just trying to write about people, which to me are the important thing. Just the human heart, it’s not ideas. I don’t know anything about ideas, don’t have confidence in them.” (*University* 10)

“No no, they [his characters] exist. They are still in motion in my mind. I can laugh at things they’re doing that I haven’t got around to writing yet.” (*University* 197)

“I mean that any character that you write takes charge of his own behavior. You can’t make him do things once he comes alive and stands up and casts his own shadow.” (*University* 263)

“Once these people [his characters] come to life, they begin—they take off and so the writer is going at a dead run behind them trying to put down what they say and do in time. … They have taken charge of the story. They tell it from then on. The writer has just got to keep up with them and put it down, and to give it some order, to follow the rules of composition, but I think he himself never knows just what they might do and say next. It’s got to fit in with his concept of what is true before he will put it down.” (*University* 120)\(^{38}\)

Faulkner’s comments like these suggest not that he is just a naïve humanist, but rather that he is an empathic fiction writer who believes in his characters and is willing to embrace their independence at the cost of his authorial plan or “idea” or “sociology” for his books. Also, what is notable is that his characters actually “live,” not necessarily just in his printed books but also in the author’s mind for quite a long time. In fact, when Malcolm Cowley first read “Appendix” in 1945, which he asked the author to write for the anthology later called *Portable Faulkner*, he

\(^{38}\) These comments are from *Faulkner in the University*, whose interviews were conducted in the latest stage of his career (1957–58), as are most of his other public interviews. But his predilection for characters over ideas was already observed in one of his earliest interviews (1931), where the young writer talked about how he was interested in Dickensian characters themselves rather than in how Dickens wrote them. See *Lion* 18. Thus, Faulkner’s predilection for characters seems constant throughout his career.
was quite impressed with how Faulkner remembered the details of—and had even privately developed—the story of *The Sound and the Fury* 16 years after the publication, even though the author did not even own a copy of the novel around the time he wrote the short piece. As Cowley says, “He never set a high value on his printed works, even this one [*The Sound and the Fury*]; what possessed him was the story he had tried to tell” (Cowley 39). Indeed, it is a well-known fact that characters reappear in Faulkner’s works as in Balzac’s, but the reappearance of characters is not merely a learned technique for the American writer; it must be a consequence of his empathic imagination as manifested in his predilection for characters.

Faulkner’s empathic relationship with his characters is also the case in his readerly attitude. Instead of analyzing or evaluating them from a distance, he treats fictional characters like “old friends”: “I suppose I have about fifty [books] I read—I go in and out like you go into a room to meet old friends, to open the book in the middle and read for a little while, and I imagine over the course of every ten years I would have read all of them through” (*University* 150).\(^{39}\) In order for a writer to be empathic with his or her own characters, the writer has to be an empathic reader. Keith Oatley, who suggests “Fictional characters aren’t, of course, as important as real friends, but they can become more important than mere acquaintances” (163), claims that “For a character to come alive, the reader needs to become emotionally attracted to him or her, and this occurs because the character is likable, or is in a situation that is interesting” (164). With this in mind, Oatley points out that “The writer offers suggestions, but only the reader or audience member can bring the character to life, make that character real” (165). If Oatley’s observation is correct, to be an empathic reader should be a prerequisite for an empathic writer. Faulkner, who considers fictional characters as the most important element in fiction and treats them like “friends,” meets the prerequisite.\(^{40}\)

It is then not surprising that Faulkner’s writerly relationship with fictional characters is as empathic as his readerly one, for narrative empathy is a space where reading and writing converge and become indistinguishable. In fact, Faulkner himself claims that “Reading is part of writing” (*Lion* 276). Especially interesting is that, when he wrote the introductions to *The Sound

\(^{39}\) See also *University* 202.

\(^{40}\) Faulkner repeatedly expressed the idea of supremacy of characters and stories over authors on several occasions. To cite a few: “To me, the story, the poem, is more important than who wrote it.” (*Lion* 137); “what is important is *Hamlet* and *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, not who wrote them, but that somebody did. The artist is of no importance.” (*Lion* 238)
and Fury, he confides that “I wrote this book [The Sound and the Fury] and learned to read” (Essays 296). For Faulkner, writing involves empathic reading of his fictional characters, and he realized this by empathically writing them, that is, by projecting versions of his self onto them while identifying himself with the characters as externalized versions of his self. As David Minter says, “Faulkner knew that characters … were indirect ways of exploring, projecting, and reaffirming both the life he lived and the tacit, secret life underlying it. At least once he was moved to wonder if he ‘had invented the world’ of his fiction ‘or if it had invented me’” (Minter 103). Thus, empathic immersion provides Faulkner the author a means for self-exploration. While empathic immersion provides Faulkner with a means for self-exploration, it also endangers the writer’s self at the same time. Empathic immersion in creative writing can be, after all, a route to the loss of self, too, in that it requires the writer to partially relinquish his/her authorial power over his/her characters and also to face, as a result, hidden and unacknowledged aspects of his/her self in the process of self-exploration by empathically externalizing some part of his/her self onto the characters. This is a great hardship for an author in that it causes him or her to face self-effacement as well as an unexpected exposure of unwanted aspects of his/her self. In Faulkner’s case, he would often resort to heavy drinking in such tough times. Indeed, almost every time he recounted the experience of writing The Sound and the Fury, he would emphasize the fact that he wrote it “for pleasure” (Essays 177), but, in fact, not long after he finished the typescript of the book, there was an incident in which he passed out from heavy drinking alone in a locked apartment room and was fortunately found and saved by his friends who happened to visit him. Faulkner’s drinking might be his way of alleviating the pain and depression that could be the after effects of surrendering his self in the empathic process. In addition, Faulkner’s daughter describes her father’s drinking habit as “a safety valve” for deeply committing himself to writing a book: “He used drinking as a safety valve. It had to come out someway and almost inevitably at the end of a book” (qtd. in Blotner 225). The empathic immersion

---

41 There are two introductions to The Sound and the Fury: the first was written in 1933 but abandoned and unpublished at the time; the second, which was written in 1946 as a revised and shortened version of the first, was eventually removed from the book in which it was supposed to be included. See the note for “Two Introductions to The Sound and Fury” (Faulkner Essays 289.)

42 The quote is the opening sentence of the second version of the two introductions. A similar confession is also found in the first version. See Essays 295.

43 The quote within the quote is from a manuscript fragment. See Minter 284 (note 50).

44 See Blotner 225.
immersion is thus not always a blissful experience of creation but can be a quite unstable and energy-draining mode of writing, requiring recourse to escape behaviors from the imaginative self-effacement that is entailed in empathic immersion.

What is more important, however, is Faulkner’s readiness and willingness for self-effacement, as that enables him to take on different voices in the text. Viewed in this light, Minrose Gwin’s interpretation of Faulkner as “father and daughter of his own text” (Gwin 154) from a feminist point of view serves as a good suggestion to Faulkner’s empathic writing. Gwin claims that “Faulkner … creates a symbolic order of father-author only to allow its disruption—often by a female character’s own voice of difference within the patriarchal text” (Gwin 154). Citing Foucault’s theory of author disappearance, Gwin interprets the open space engendered by the writing subject’s disappearance as a “bisexual space” in Cixous’s sense, where female voices and male voices creatively intersect. As Gwin says, “Within this bisexual space, the daughter’s creative voice is engendered by paternal absence, the father’s vanishing—that is, his repudiation of authority, and, just as important, his willingness to vanish, to disappear into that opening as his text moves beyond its own boundaries and goes somewhere else” (Gwin 158, italics mine). What Gwin is describing here interestingly resembles how empathic writing functions. The empathic space where the writing subject relegates his/her authority and control over his/her own characters can indeed be read as a “bisexual space,” where the male author involves the female voice in the creative process by accepting his self-effacement in the capacity of the writing subject. Again, the most impressive is Faulkner’s “willingness to vanish” into a space of difference, his ready acknowledgement of his limit as a white, male southern writer. In that sense, Faulkner derives his creativity from a space of difference through empathic immersion by imparting creativity to his characters, who are half-self and half-others. This seems to fittingly apply to the first sections of the novel.

However, Faulkner takes a more direct measure in the final section: the narrator of the section is “Faulkner” himself, a more conspicuous self-inscription of the empathic writer. Faulkner in fact describes the process of writing the novel by referring to himself in the third-person: “I wrote the Benjy part first. That wasn’t good enough so I wrote the Quentin part. That still wasn’t good enough. I let Jason try it. That still wasn’t good enough. I let Faulkner try it and that

45 As for the argument on dealing with the fourth section featuring “Faulkner” the implied author instead of Dilsey the focalized character of the section, see Matthews 76-87.
still wasn’t enough … (University 84, emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{46} Indeed, narratological common sense tells us that the real author and the implied author (or the narrator) “need not be, and in fact are often not, identical” (Rimmon-Kenan 87), but it is also conceptually productive to interpret the narrator of the fourth section as “Faulkner” in that how Faulkner the author tries to embed and inscribe himself in the novel shows his idea and attitude about empathy, especially narrative empathy. In other words, the fact that the real author and the implied author/the third person narrator are not identical is part of the design of narrative empathy that involves the play of similarities and differences as well as the textual dynamics of identification and alienation.

For Faulkner, the empathic experience of writing The Sound and the Fury is the perfect storm, so to speak, achieving too perfect and fortunate a balance between self-effacement and self-exploration. However, he also believed it was so perfect and fortunate that the empathic moment should happen only once in his writing career. In other words, he sees the writerly experience of modernist empathy in the novel as something too perfect and therefore unstable to maintain or reproduce. Accordingly, he must have felt it necessary to eventually “get completely out of” the ecstatic oneness with the fictional world:

So I wrote Quentin’s and Jason’s sections, trying to clarify Benjy’s. But I saw that I was merely temporising; That \textit{I should have to get completely out of the book}. I realised that there would be compensations, that in a sense I could then give a final turn to the screw and extract some ultimate distillation. Yet it took me better than a month to take pen and write [the opening line of the fourth section] before I did so. There is a story somewhere about an old Roman who kept at his bedside a Tyrrenian vase which he loved and the rim of which he wore slowly away with kissing it. I had made myself a vase, but \textit{I suppose I knew all the time that I could not live forever inside of it}, that perhaps to have it so that I too could lie in bed and look at it would be better; surely so when that day should come when not only the ecstasy of writing would be gone, but the unreluctance and the something worth saying too. (\textit{Essays} 295-96, emphases mine)

\textsuperscript{46} Faulkner repeats the explanation in a similar fashion elsewhere. See, for example, \textit{University} 32 and \textit{Lion} 245.
Though there have been various interpretations by Faulknerians about what the “Tyrrhenian vase” personally, artistically, and symbolically means for Faulkner,\(^{47}\) this metaphor is also suggestive for our argument of writerly empathy. The most interesting for us is not exactly what the vase itself symbolizes but rather how Faulkner tries to cope with the vase. If the vase simply means the fictional world of *The Sound and the Fury* as many Faulknerians have conventionally interpreted, how the writer immerses himself in the vase can be considered a version of empathic immersion in the fictional world. However, more important is the fact that he almost deterministically feels the necessity to “get completely out of the book,” being aware of the unsustainability of complete empathic involvement with the fictional world. His retreat from the empathic identification with the fictional world, nevertheless, does not simply mean to regress to an acknowledgement of unbridgeable psychological distance of sympathetic realism. Rather, it is to maintain a snuggling close distance, as it were, not becoming one with his own creation while embracing it; not “liv[ing] forever inside of it” but positioning himself psychologically *beside* it. That is what Faulkner settles into after experimenting with the radical form of modernist empathy.

This snuggling *beside*-ness of Faulkner is manifested in his attempt to be “Faulkner” the narrator of the fourth section of the novel. In the final section, “Faulkner” narrates in an ambiguous capacity between insider and outsider. “Faulkner” is the insider in a sense that he is the fourth narrator of the novel: to narrate a section after the three Compson brothers’ first-person narrations means that he performatively aligns himself and identifies with them as narrator. Or, at least once, he called himself “the spokesman” (*Lion* 245) of the brothers, to use the writer’s own word. Indeed, “Faulkner” does not use first-person narrative, which is a narratologically significant difference, but he does not act like a traditional omniscient narrator, either, and his narrative perspective is limited in a way similar to the Compson brothers in the first three sections: “Faulkner” does not contextualize or provide any comprehensive account of the events told in the previous sections from an outsider’s point of view, in the same way the Compson brothers do not. Like the other sections’ narrators, the narrator of the fourth section is exclusively independent in terms of what he narrates, and it remains the reader’s task to connect the dots or fill the gaps of the fragmented stories of the Compson family told throughout the

\(^{47}\) See Minter 102, where several examples of the interpretation are concisely summarized.
novel. In this narratological sense, acting in the same limited way as the other narrators of the novel, “Faulkner” positions himself as an ally of the Compson brothers, or as a Compson brother.

On the other hand, paradoxically, for the same reason he performatively pretends to be a Compson brother, “Faulkner” remains “an outsider, which was the writer” to some degree (Lion 147). The narrative focus of the fourth section’s narrator is rather clumsily external, hardly diving into the characters’ minds. For example, Dilsey is certainly the focalized character of the section, but the narrator’s focus is external and not constant, and the narrator does not represent her internal mind directly or in an immediate fashion. As for the other characters, he never mentions Benjy’s internal agony or develops Quentin’s doomed symbolism, let alone narrates what Caddy is doing as of April 8, 1928, as if “Faulkner” does not know or meet the Compsons until the beginning of the fourth section. “Faulkner’s” narration is clumsy at best, having to face a certain degree of psychological distance from the characters’ minds. As Bleikasten says, “if what is reported is not left totally unexplained, there is no full elucidation either. Meanings are suggested but never asserted. Faulkner’s method is throughout conjectural, and its tentativeness is evidenced by the recurrence of comparative-conditional clauses (introduced by as if or as though) and words or phrases denoting uncertainty (seemed, appeared, it might have been)” (125, italics original). In this sense, “Faulkner” is psychologically an outside narrator, with a paradoxically limited knowledge of the fictional world of his own novel. Thus, as he structurally identifies with the Compson brothers while keeping a psychological distance from the characters’ minds, “Faulkner” narrates the fourth section in an ambiguous capacity of both insider and outsider to the narration. This ambiguous positioning, which I called his “beside-ness” above, is what Faulkner has recourse to after the radical experience of modernist empathy.

The culmination of Faulkner’s beside-ness as an alternative to modernist empathy is manifested in the famous scene of Shegog’s Easter sermon, where the narrative tries to represent how the ideal form of empathic oneness is temporarily achieved by Shegog and the black congregants. At first, Shegog looks to the black congregants just like an outside “visitor” (1102) who “sounded like a white man” and whose voice is “level and cold” (1103). Once he begins to preach, his voice “consumed him, until he was nothing and [the congregants] were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words” (1104). As his voice becomes “negroid”—from “Brethren
and sisteren” to “Breddren en sistuhn!” (1104), for instance—the congregants begin to achieve, by way of the image of “de little Jesus” and “de blood en de ricklickhun of de Lamb!” (1105), a trance-like collective oneness, where they do not even need a definite signifier but just a nonsensical cry of “Mmmmmmmmmmmmm!” (1105) to communicate and share their minds with each other. This sermon scene certainly describes the ideal of collectively empathic communication: it is ideal in terms of immediate psychological distance between their minds in that they are “speaking heart to heart to one another” without any mediation, even language. In this sense, the scene indeed reveals the idealized moment of represented empathy.

However, more important is that the sermon scene cannot be read in an empathic manner: that is, the representation of the idealized empathic moment does not necessarily elicit readerly or writerly empathy. As many critics have noticed, how “Faulkner” deals with the sermon ironically reveals his “unfamiliarity with the experiences and point of view of the black congregants” (Matthews 114). Also, in a part of his analysis of the novel’s linguistic representation of black dialect, Noel Polk says, “The verisimilitude [of the representation of the black speech] threatens to reduce Dilsey and other black characters in the novel to the plastic black characters of Joel Chandler Harris, those of the popular imagination, in ways that Benjy’s narrative does not. The farther the point of view distances us from her, the stranger Dilsey appears to us. It’s a striking illustration of just how ‘other’ Dilsey is to Quentin and Jason, to the ‘narrator’ of [the fourth] section, and to us as we read it” (Polk 133). The unfamiliarity or strangeness they observe in “Faulkner” can be considered, in the context of our argument, as a performative expression of his psychological distance from the empathic moment. That is, “Faulkner” does not identify himself with the collective unity of the empathic black congregation while closely observing it. Nevertheless, the narrative by “Faulkner” is not completely objective or detached. Rather, he stays beside it, captivatively looking at the empathic unity while keeping a not so detached yet tangential distance from it, being attracted without being completely swallowed up by it. Thus, the Easter sermon scene does not necessarily indicate that “Faulkner” entirely gives up on the empathic way of understanding. Then, how “Faulkner” describes the

48 Before this part, Polk examines how Dilsey and other black characters in Benjy’s section “speak” in the standard English, which represents Benjy’s (and, in effect, the reader’s) psychological closeness to her. What Polk means by “verisimilitude” here is the other Compson brothers’ (and “Faulkner’s”) attempt to render the black dialect in sub-standard pronunciation or spelling in order to make it as “accurate” as it seems to the reader. See Polk 129–136.
scene following the sermon could be read as his humble and subtle reflection on the empathic moment achieved by the black congregation:

As they walked through the bright noon, up the sandy road with the dispersing congregation talking easily again group to group, [Dilsey] continued to weep, unmindful of the talk.

“He sho a preacher, mon! He didn’t look like much at first, but hush!”
“He seed de power en de glory.”
“Yes, suh. He seed hit. Face to face he seed hit.”

Dilsey made no sound, her face did not quiver as the tears took their sunken and devious courses, walking with her head up, making no effort to dry them away even.

“Whyn’t you quit dat, mammy?” Frony said. “Wid all dese people lookin. We be passin white folks soon.”
“I’ve seed de first en de last,” Dilsey said. “Never you mind me.”
“First en last whut?” Frony said.
“Never you mind,” Dilsey said. “I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin.”

What is noticeable here is a subtle dysfunction of communication among the black congregants. Curiously, once the extraordinarily empathic experience of the collective unity without language is over, the congregants immediately begin “dispersing” into discrete groups and “talking” to each other. Despite its intensity, the collective empathic unity at the sermon does not last long. More salient is Dilsey’s sudden yet distinct aloofness among the other congregants. She does not seem to listen to, or care about, her daughter Frony’s worry about her shedding tears in public, especially in front of “white folks,” and, instead of replying to her daughter’s complaint, Dilsey makes an almost out-of-context comment: “I’ve seed de first en de last.” Dilsey’s aloofness goes so far as to show a hint of refusal of communication with the people around her as she realizes she has something that cannot be communicated to or shared with them: she repeats, “Never you mind me.” It is then possible to assume that Dilsey’s tears and mysterious comments are not directly meant for the people around her in the scene. Dilsey’s action here is rather a meta-narrative one, transgressing the narrative levels: Dilsey’s tears and messages are actually meant to be read by and shared with “Faulkner” (and the reader, of course), who has been an attentive
yet ultimately outside observer—*beside* her—in the sermon scene. Dilsey is crying, arguably, out of sympathy for the decline of the Compsons, the once-distinguished Southern family, a feeling that “Faulkner” privately and exclusively shares with her, as she clairvoyantly “sees de beginning” and “de endin” of the Compson family. 49

All these instances of “Faulkner” in the sermon scenes suggest, first, that he does not seem to fully believe in the empathic unity by a collective group of people like the black congregants. Rather, he seems to prefer a one-to-one unity, as can be seen in his transgressive complicity with Dilsey. The transgressive yet privately intimate sharing of the meaning of the Compson family history between Dilsey and “Faulkner” marks a stark contrast to the collective sharing of a more generic religious image of “de blood en de ricklickhun of de Lamb” by the empathic congregants in the previous scene. The second is his modest and humble recognition of the impossibility of empathy. “Faulkner”—and Faulkner—seems to realize that the perfect empathic moment as materialized in the intensely affective unity of the black congregants can last only temporarily. However, even if the radical oneness of modernist empathy is not any more feasible for him, he still wants and tries to be *beside* it, as close to it as possible. This stance of *beside*-ness by “Faulkner” should be read not exactly as a critique but as a result of his humble self-examination and self-reflection on the instability of the radically modernist form of empathy he experienced in the previous sections.

This stance of “Faulkner” then somehow resembles that of Benjy in the final section, who has been literally *beside* Dilsey in all those sermon scenes. Accordingly, it is natural that “Faulkner,” after intimately following Jason for a while after the sermon scene, 50 tries to conclude his narration by aligning himself with Benjy’s perspective: “The broken flower drooped over Ben’s fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard

49 Of course, Dilsey’s comment is profound and vague enough to allow the reader to have several possible interpretations; I take one of the most common interpretations here. The point is that her comment has to be read as something symbolic or meta-commentary, which should be largely unavailable to the characters on the story level.

50 Jason is the only character for whom “Faulkner” exceptionally gives a semi-internal focalization in the section. The narrator, closely following Jason’s futile chase of Miss Quentin, describes Jason’s mind from within, sometimes using tentative, semi-free-indirect speech (1112-14). Compared to the empathically immediate monologue by Jason, the narrative here should be considered a semi-empathic one, a narrative manifestation of *beside*-ness of “Faulkner.”
each in its ordered place” (1124). Nevertheless, this alignment by “Faulkner” with Benjy’s perspective is subtly yet significantly different from that of modernist empathy. The final scene does not empathically represent Benjy’s emotionally troubled mind that we saw in the first section; rather, Benjy’s eyes are just “empty and blue and serene,” and what he is seeing is just random objects that flow in front of his eye. This means that “Faulkner” is looking closely into Benjy’s eyes or what reflects in his eyes from outside, not from within Benjy’s perspective. Benjy’s eyes are for “Faulkner” like a mirror—something that cannot be looked into beyond its surface, the surface that maintains an ultimate distance from its observer. Also, Benjy’s “empty” and inanimate eyes suggest that for “Faulkner,” the characters do not quite appear to “live their own lives.” Then, what “Faulkner” does in the final line is not to go back to the first section’s Benjy and radically empathize with that version of him again, but to performatively express his decision to stay beside his characters even when he knows the blissful experience of empathy with them is already out of his reach, while, on the other hand, giving the sense of an ending to the experimental narrative of empathy.

The turn to modernist empathy cannot be brought to complete fruition: “In fact, empathic modernism is always only just beginning to cohere, and in its ambivalence and anxiety about the dangers of fellow feeling, never solidifying” (Hammond 174). In Faulkner’s case, it seems that, seeing the instability of modernist empathy, he refers the narrative mode back to a more traditional, distanced realism of sympathy in the final section of the novel told by a hesitantly detached third-person narrator. But this reversion to sympathetic realism in the novel can be understood as representative of Faulkner’s general stance toward modernism. As Daniel Singal says, Faulkner’s artistic root lies in the constant “conflict of cultures within him” (2), which is manifested as his struggle between “two divergent approaches to selfhood—the Victorian urge toward unity and stability he had inherited as a child of the southern rural gentry, and the Modernist drive for multiplicity and change that he absorbed very early in his career as a self-identifying member of the international artistic avant-garde” (15). Thus, the reversion from empathy to sympathy in The Sound and the Fury can be understood as part of Faulkner’s own ongoing processing of the “Victorian urge” (sympathy) and the “Modernist drive” (empathy).

To see Faulkner’s struggle with the instability of modernist empathy as part of his larger, career-long oscillation between Victorianism and modernism gives us a simple yet crucial insight: that Faulkner embraces modernist empathy despite its instability. This point, it seems to
me, makes a significant difference. As can be observed in Hammond’s quotations, the course of
the conceptual history of empathic modernism highlights the stalemate its experiment eventually
comes to: by carefully pointing out its instability, ambivalence, and danger, Hammond sees a
critical limit of empathy in modernism. For her, the radically intersubjective form of empathy not
only begins but also ends in modernism. Faulkner, on the other hand, seems to keep a relatively
more positive attitude toward the limit of empathy by trying to cope with it. In a sense, he
unremittingly challenges the limit by accepting the limit. Accordingly, “failure” becomes a
positive criterion for him, and his comments seem to suggest that to fight a losing battle against
the instability of modernist empathy still results in a great deal of emotional investment in, and
affective commitment to, his writing:

[The Sound and the Fury] is the best failure. It was the one that I anguished the
most over, that I worked the hardest at, that even when I knew I couldn’t bring it
off, I still worked at it. It’s like the parent feels toward the unfortunate child,
maybe. The others that have been easier to write than that, and in ways are better
books than that, but I don’t have the feeling toward any of them that I do toward
that one, because that was the most gallant, the most magnificent failure.

(University 61)

What Faulkner emphasizes here is that important for him is “the feeling” or emotional
investment as a result of the repeated “failure” or impossible challenge, which is the empathic
writing of The Sound and the Fury. Nobody stops empathizing with others just because it is
ultimately impossible to do so perfectly. Every attempt at empathic engagement may end with
failure, but it is still worth trying.
CHAPTER 3

FAILED EMPATHY:
EMPATHY AND COMPASSION IN NATHANAEL WEST’S
NOVELS

In the previous chapter, we examined how William Faulkner, through a radical pursuit of the ideal form of narrative empathy in *The Sound and the Fury*, creates a narrative that exhibits a structural instability inherent in the concept of modernist empathy. This trajectory of Faulkner, as we also saw, largely concurs with Meghan Marie Hammond’s scheme of modernist empathy developed in the context of British modernist literature. Faulkner chooses to embrace the instability in a uniquely positive, defeatist manner, which distinguishes the American modernist from his British counterparts. And yet, it is clear that Faulkner generally fits in the modernist scheme of empathy in that he keeps displaying a radical desire to reach other minds without intermediacy.

Nathanael West, in that light, can be called a *late modernist* in terms of empathy. Cheryl Hindrichs, overviewing literary and critical arguments on late modernism by focusing on the concept of lateness/belatedness, claims that “It is the historical context of ‘lateness,’ of an awareness of being at a moment of ending and judgment, that most reshapes the topography of modernism in late modernism” (850) and therefore that “The historical contexts of late modernism led writers to reflect on the role of aesthetics in periods of crisis and to construct dialectical modes for readers to explore questions of the mass and the individual, the *longue durée* and the moment of Monday or Tuesday, the progress of civilization and its blighting discontents” (851). West clearly belongs in this “historical context of late modernism.” As Tom Cerasulo suggestively describes in his evaluation on West’s first novel, “[*The Dream Life of Balso Snell*] isn’t ‘a disavowal’ of high modernism; it’s a late entry within it” (60). Thus, if applied to our argument, this can mean that West is a late modernist writer who “reflect[s] on the role of aesthetics” of empathy. The modernist aesthetics of empathy are deeply ingrained in him, but he does not/cannot entirely commit himself to it without being critical of it at the same time. As a result, he often finds himself questioning the concept without being able to establish a vantage point to do so. While Faulkner and other empathic modernists bump into the problematic instability of empathy as a result of their enchanted pursuit of it, West, from the outset of his
literary career, has to objectify and problematize empathy at a critical distance. He persistently—almost obsessively—poses a question how and why one keeps failing to empathize with others in spite of the desire or need to do so, especially when one tries to stretch the concept for cultural, social, and political purposes. What his works offer us through those dramatized failures of empathy is a critical perspective on empathy.

West faces a challenge to empathy that is different from the challenge faced by other, earlier modernists. In Faulkner’s case, as we saw in the previous chapter, the problem of empathy is a psychological, epistemological, and ontological, distance that divides self from others. Empathic modernists like Faulkner try to solve the problem aesthetically by bridging that intersubjective distance through narrative experiments. During this process, modernist empathy paradoxically collapses at its peak, revealing its inherent instability. In West’s case, as we will see in this chapter, the difficulty lies in his intellectual stance as a late modernist artist, which always reminds him of holding a critical distance that gives him room for irony without being entirely emerged in emotion. However, this does not mean that he is an anti-empathic artist, nor does he try to reject or eliminate empathy from his writings. Rather, he is always already attracted to empathic, emotional involvement with others. After all, he does not fully believe in the intellectual stance that readily makes him question empathy. As a result, West examines empathy by making his protagonists feel constantly torn and oscillate between empathic involvement and critical distancing. What is more, West curiously observes the emergence of the anonymous and ubiquitous mass society in the 1930s as amplifier of empathy, a constant presence that keeps eliciting empathic imagination from his intellectualist/artist protagonists. The anonymous voice of the mass that asks for empathy appears with no psychological or physical distance, putting the protagonists in an inevitable situation where they are not allowed to fully escape or reject empathy. Their task is, then, to reconcile their intellectual stance with the people’s demand for empathy, but West always makes them fail at their attempt at the end. By ironically dramatizing their failure, West as author succeeds in maintaining his intellectual critical stance at the same time as examining a cultural and aesthetic significance of empathy on the representation level.

Since the concept of empathy is always put in question in West’s novels, it is naturally difficult for the reader to genuinely make a simple empathic identification with his characters, nor does the author form a straightforward empathic engagement with them. For this reason, this
chapter’s attention to empathy focuses on represented empathy rather than readerly or writerly empathy. Accordingly, my argument develops based on character analysis, closely following West’s protagonists’ pursuit for various forms of empathic engagement with the people around them. Indeed, this methodology sometimes might look anachronistic or even amateurish, especially compared to the past critical work on West’s literature, most of which has interpreted his characters’ affective and emotional struggle as a symptomatic manifestation of larger problems latent in the American society in 1930s. However, character analysis is nevertheless a necessary step to take in reading his works in terms of empathy, for West represents his reflection on empathy ironically in the form of its failure, instead of positively crystallizing its ideal form in the main characters’ relationships. For that reason, it is crucial to contextualize the protagonists’ attempts of empathy on the story level by way of character analysis in order to appreciate West’s ironical exposition of failed samples of empathy. Also, West’s experimentation with empathy should be conceived as involving similar concepts, such as compassion, pity, and sympathy, partly because the writer himself did not use the word “empathy” at the time, and partly because he questions the concept in various contexts, linking it to its related concepts. Then, it is also necessary, whenever the occasion demands, to keep the concept of empathy relatively loose and examine its relation to other similar concepts so as to put West’s pursuit in a larger scale.

51 From the discovery/reappraisal of West in the 1950s to the emergence of critical theory around the 1980s, the main argument on West tended to be about his genealogical position in the history of American literature, emphasizing how different his works are from realist conventions: W. H. Auden claims “Nathanael West is not, precisely speaking, a novelist” (41) while Harold Bloom praises his “Satanic” style of writing (6). Thanks to the rapid development of several critical theories, literary critics, including Rita Bernard and Jonathan Veitch, began to reevaluate the writer as a cultural satirist, investigating his relentless insight into the mass-cultural, socio-economical, and political atmosphere that surrounded the post-Depression America. In the twenty-first century, more attention has been paid to West’s characters’ affective and emotional aspects, probably in tune with the advent of affect theory. However, the recent affective readings of West’s works naturally focus not on emotion but on affect, which is largely considered as an intensity that transgresses the threshold of one’s consciousness or internality. Therefore, individual characters’ emotional experiences in relation to other characters on the story level, which should be the reader’s initial concern as well as the author’s obsession, have been often left unexamined. My character-analytical argument on West’s novels thus puts more attention on the author’s and his protagonists’ conscious and strategical approach for emotional involvement with others.
In the first section, we will see how West forms his basic approaches to empathy. These approaches can be situated relative to two poles: intellectual distancing and emotional involvement. The former represents the author’s intellectual desire to keep an ironic distance toward objects. The latter consists of his idealized connection to people, which includes some forms of empathy. We will examine how the young writer oscillates between the two incompatible attitudes in his first novel *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. In the process, we will also observe a few narrative methods West has often used throughout his literary career in trying to reconcile the two urges. In the second section, we will investigate how West, in his second novel *Miss Lonelyhearts*, develops the two themes of intellectual distancing and emotional involvement into a problematic of empathy by introducing the epistolary form of the anonymous mass. In order to do so, we will bring in Martha Nussbaum’s theory of compassion and point to a theoretically severed yet conventionally connected relation between the two concepts of empathy and compassion. Considering the tenuous yet tenacious relation of these two concepts in terms of West’s two poles, we will consider how they are thematically connected with the anonymous mass. Then, we will analyze West’s characters to see how empathic imagination is manifested in Shrike, Betty, and the protagonist of the novel. To conclude the section, we will again witness how West offers his thought on empathy and compassion by dramatically setting up his protagonist’s failure. The final section of this chapter deals with West’s attempt to connect the theme of empathy to expression in his final novel *The Day of the Locust*. First, we must see how West’s understanding of the discord between external and internal reality in Hollywood complicates the way Tod Hackett, the protagonist, pursues an empathic expression in his painting. Second, we will examine how Tod politicizes his artistic project while reducing the internal reality of the people in Hollywood and, in the process, we will analyze Homer, the deuteragonist whose story offers a relativizing perspective on Tod’s. Finally, we will evaluate West’s way of dramatizing Tod’s failure in the mob scene at the end of the novel.

**Intellectual Distancing and Emotional Involvement in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell***

According to one of West’s friends, Nathanael West was a person who “had true empathy. He didn’t have a ‘sociological’ attitude toward [the people in socially or economically challenged positions], or a political one either—he empathized with them because they were
bruised people. … He was extremely sensitive to hurting the feelings of people who had had more than their quota of hurt.” (qtd. in Martin 96). At the same time, as is well known, he was intellectually keen enough to internalize the modernist urge for critical distancing entailed in an intellectual perspective—as well as its anti-sentimental stance—shared among his (especially avant-garde) contemporary intellectuals of the time.\(^{52}\) Then, as his biographer concisely describes, “The leading element and perhaps the chief source of West’s intricacy lay in the contrast between his intellectual and emotional life, between his passive ability to understand experience and his lack of capacity for deeply active involvement in it….Clearly his intellectual convictions were in many ways opposed to his emotional predilections” (Martin 94). This conflict between “his intellectual and emotional life” is about distance in relation to people. While empathy, one of the most common forms of emotional involvement, is an attempt to bridge the distance, an intellectual mindset—a detached stance of irony, especially in West’s case\(^ {53}\)—necessitates the distance for a critical perspective. This struggle between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement continues to haunt West in various ways throughout his literary career.

Some of those ways of dealing with the conflict already appear in his first novel *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* in which West begins to problematize the conflict between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement in a quite conspicuous way. In this absurd, surrealist novel, the problem takes on a dichotomous form in which intellectual/artistic characters ruminate over the difficulty of emotion, and West oscillates between the two poles in various fashions. His initial solution—or rather compromise—is found in John Gilson’s satirical laughter, for it involves both intellectual distancing and emotional involvement. At one point, Balso Snell, the protagonist traveling through the intestine of the Trojan horse, buys a little pamphlet from Gilson, an intellectually precocious boy writer. In it, Gilson narrates how he is searching for emotion only to deplore his incapability of emotion: “Open, oh flood gates of feeling! Empty, oh vials of passion!” (23). Gilson then reasons, “That I failed in my search was for me a sign of my intelligence. I am on the side of intellect against the emotions, on the side of the brain against the

---

\(^{52}\) The time West came (physically and culturally) closest to avant-garde modernism was when he went to Paris in October, 1926, but, entreated by his father, he had to return to the U.S. about three months later in January, 1927.

\(^{53}\) As he himself once confessed, he recognizes himself as “a comic writer” who makes fun of things that interest him (“To Malcolm Cowley” 794).
heart” (ibid.). However, it is noteworthy that the choice is made based on sheer arbitrariness, as can be clearly seen in Gilson’s frivolous way of taking the side of intellect, “just as children choose sides to play ‘cops and robbers’ or ‘Indians and cowboys’” (ibid.). This almost childish “play”-fulness of Gilson’s arbitrary choice, in itself, reflects one of the author’s characteristic compromised attitudes in face of the conflict: laughter. Accordingly, Gilson has to persuade himself to laugh at everything: “An intelligent man finds it easy to laugh at himself, but his laughter is not sincere if it is thorough. … But I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is ‘bitter,’ I must laugh at the laugh” (25). This desperate laughter compromisingly involves both intellectual distancing and emotional involvement. Laughing entails objectification of others, creating a distinctive separation between the one who laughs and the one who is laughed at. Indeed, Gilson tries to “laugh at the laugh” aspiring to establish his intellectual position and to objectify and demystify the “feeling at its source.” At the same time, however, laughing is an affective behavior, taking place with positive emotions on the laugher’s part and necessitating the laugher’s emotional involvement with the target of the laughter. In this way, West’s laughter turns out to be a compromise delicately managed in his struggle between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement.

Nevertheless, the emotional involvement via laughter is a transient, unstable compromise, just like every bitter laugh. Therefore, the two inherently incompatible urges of intellectual distancing and emotional involvement are internalized as something like a double consciousness. Gilson tells his girlfriend Saniette that “When you think of me, Saniette, … think of two men—myself and the chauffeur within me” (27). Gilson continues to explain that the chauffeur “sits within me like a man in an automobile”; and “his hands, covered with wool, refuse me speech for the emotions aroused by the face in my brain” because “From within, he governs the sensations I receive through my fingers, eyes, tongue, and ears” (ibid.). This “cloth-covered devil” (ibid.) inside Gilson’s mind, whose name is “The Desire to Procreate” (ibid.), is the intellectual self-consciousness as artist, controlling and layering Gilson’s expression of raw emotion. The metaphor might seem to suggest the intellect’s predominance over emotion; and indeed West himself seemed to have the “predisposition toward a tough intellectualism at the expense of tender emotions” (Martin 95). However, Gilson’s intellectualism is actually quite fragile. In fact, his explanation above is originally made in excuse of his constant irritation and
succeeding violence unreasonably directed against Saniette. In short, the “chauffeur,” the apotheosis of his intellectual self-consciousness, turns out to be almost incapable of controlling Gilson’s emotion despite being in the driver’s seat. Gilson’s failed explanation of his double consciousness that layers intellectual self-consciousness over emotionality suggests two points. First, it prefigures one of West’s signature writing techniques featured in his later works: as we will see in later sections, the author often offers his critical and ironical insights negatively, that is, by making his characters performatively fail at their own schemes. In Gilson’s case, his failure reveals intellectual consciousness’s tendency to control and contain emotion as well as the former’s instable reign over the latter. The second is a discovery that emotion possesses an uncanny elasticity whose intensity is evasively circulated at the very moment when it is getting layered over or contained, just as Gilson’s control by self-consciousness over emotion triggers his violent irritation.54

As the layering of intellectual self-consciousness inadvertently triggers uncontrollable bursts of emotion for his characters, West also finds out that narrative framing can offer him some leeway to emotionally set him free from his acute intellectual consciousness without compromising his intellectual stance of distancing. A story of emotion, once embedded within a multilayered narrative structure, can be rather naively narrated while keeping a cognitively mediated distance. Tired of all the stories he has listened to in his journey inside the Trojan horse, Balso decides to tell his own story for himself. Balso’s story takes the form of a dream, whose Chinese-box-like narrative structure allows Balso to explore the theme of emotional involvement. In his dream/story, Balso gets romantically attracted to a lady with hydrocephalus, Janey Davenport. When he tries to make love to her, Janey, who is a romantic proponent of sacred love, rejects him by criticizing him for the lack of genuine emotional involvement: “You, Balso, do not love” (35). In the face of Balso’s impatient insist on making love, Janey tells him to “prove [his] love as did the knights of old” by killing Beagle Darwin, who has impregnated

54 This can be rephrased as West’s discovery of affect, whose transgressive potential many affect theorists consider as one of the main features of affect, as compared to emotion, which is more categorical and normative. However, my study’s focus is on empathy, which usually requires, by (the narrow) definition, some sort of conscious recognition of emotion in others in the process, as compared to emotional contagion, which features unconscious transference of affect. Of course, my argument also aims at enlarging the narrow definition for analytical purpose, so I am using the term “emotion” here inclusively.
and then betrayed her. In the process of explaining to Balso her affairs with Beagle, she shows
two letters from him. In these letters, Beagle explains why she should break up with him by way
of narrating from Janey’s point of view a possible scenario that results in her desperate suicide.
In doing so, the narrative of Beagle, who is an intellectual mocker and self-professed “clown”
(45), suddenly changes from third-person to the first-person speech, impersonating and
parodying Janey’s voice full of emotion. After introducing this Chinese-box of narrative layers,
West can allow Janey (as the disguise by Beagle) to express her version of a naïve yet serious
claim for emotional involvement:

I don’t want to laugh at myself. I’m tired of laugh, laugh, laugh. I want to retain
some portion of myself unlaughed at. There is something in me that I won’t laugh
at. I won’t. I’ll laugh at the outside world all he wants me to, but I won’t, I don’t
want to laugh at my inner world. It’s all right for him to say: “Be hard! Be an
intellectual! Think, don’t feel!” But I want to be soft. I want to feel. I don’t want
to think. I feel blue when I think. I want to keep a hard, outside surface towards
the world, and a soft, inner side for him. And I want him to do the same, so that
we can be secure in each other’s love. But with his rotten, ugly jokes he keeps me
at arm’s length just when I want to be confiding and tender. When I show him my
soft side he laughs. I don’t want to be always on my guard against his laughter.
There are times when I want to put down my armor. I am tired of eternally
bearing armor against the world. Love is a merging, not an occasion for
intellectual warfare. I want to enjoy my emotions. I want, sometimes, to play the
child, and to make love like a child—tenderly, confidingly, prettily. I’m sick of
his taunts. (37)

This emotional burst is not expressed until it is cognitively (over-)framed by the narrative
Chinese box. Here, Janey’s layered pro-emotional statement advocates not only emotion’s
significance for her existence against Beagle’s oppressive and corrosive intellectualism but also
expresses an idea that seems like something close to modernist empathy—“Love is a merging”
or emotional unity of understanding without any mediating “armor.” This superb narrative
meticulousness in dealing with empathic merging testifies to the young West’s self-reflection on,
and sensitivity to, the modernist aesthetics of empathy.
Narrative layering allows West, who as late modernist artist is more prone to intellectual distancing against the world, to get emotional and even pursue something like modernist empathy. However, his stereotypical labeling that links women to the sentimental is just as noticeable as this—and also more problematic. At least in his first novel, West preserves the male-chauvinistic dichotomy of viewing men and women as intellectual and sentimental, respectively, by rigidly framing Janey’s sentimental burst of emotions within Beagle’s as well as Balso’s larger, phallocentric narrative scheme.

The young West’s phallocentrism in the face of a struggle between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement exposes itself again in the final scene in which he abruptly attempts to conclude the novel by compromising the two stances in the form of a modernist-empathic merging of the two lovers. In the final scene of the novel, Balso, who wakes up from his own dream story, finds out that Miss McGeeney, the biographer and Gilson’s English teacher, is actually Balso’s “old sweetheart” (51), Mary. Making a case for a sexually liberated frame of mind on the pretense of political, philosophical, and aesthetical arguments, Balso begins to seduce Mary and, in a forcible way, makes love with her. They sensually merge into one as Balso comes to a sexual, and spiritual, orgasm: “Yes … Yes … Ooh! Ah! // The miracle was made manifest. The Two become One. The One that is all things and yet no one of them” (53–54). Since this is not only a narrative merging rendered in free direct speech but also a mental, spiritual, and physical one, the sexual unity of the two seems to be achieving a modernist-empathic merging of two minds. However, the text also shows that this merging is actually the result of Balso’s rape-like assault on Miss McGeeney. She in fact tries to resist him: “No: No, Balso, not tonight. No, not tonight. No! I’m sorry, Balso, but not tonight” (ibid.); and yet “Balso would not take no for an answer, and he soon obtained the following yeses” (ibid.). These scenes tellingly suggest how deeply a masculine rape-fantasy is ingrained in the ideal of the modernist-empathic merging, just as was the case with Quentin in Faulkner’s novel. This is still more clearly highlighted if we remember that the concept of that merging is originally submitted as Janey’s sentimental and feminine idea carefully embedded in a multilayered narrative by Beagle=Balso. Thus, this abrupt and awkward presentation of the ultimate form of emotional involvement at the ending scene is presented as its phallocentric, laughable failure: the reader is constantly reminded of Balso’s rape-like forcibleness and of plainly pornographic
conventionality of his sexual intercourse with Mary—their contesting yeses and noes—which is concluded with Balso’s almost premature ejaculation in the end.

Compared to his male artist-intellectual characters, West himself seems to remain comfortably ironical and emotionally detached, hiding behind the layered narrative throughout the novel. There is no moment of serious self-criticism of his own intellectual stance in relation to emotional involvement, for there is always an easy way out: this is just a “dream life.” This novel is after all not more than an étude for him, displaying his narrative techniques of dealing with the theme of emotional involvement. What he lacks in this novel is fictional characters who put his protagonist in a constant state of emotional involvement. And West happened to find those characters—not exactly “characters” in a conventional sense but more of an anonymous mass—in the form of a newspaper column, which provided the inspiration for his next novel.

**Empathy with the Anonymous: the Weak Link Between Empathy and Compassion in Miss Lonelyhearts**

In the first letter the reader encounters in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a catholic wife “Sick-of-it-all” writes to Miss Lonelyhearts:

> Dear Miss Lonelyhearts— // I am in such pain I dont [sic.] know what to do sometimes I think I will kill myself my kidneys hurt so much” (59, italics original). The letters delivered to ML seem uncannily so painful and sincere that there are few readers who do not feel any degree of empathy or sympathy in reading them. Without some form of affective caring for them, it would be almost pointless to read this novel. Above all, ML’s struggles lie in the very fact that he himself feels empathy with and compassion for these suffering people. In fact, another letter-writer writes, “what would you do if the same hapend [sic] in your family” (61, italics original), asking for ML’s empathic perspective-taking. The author, too, seems to have been deeply affected when he happened to read, in 1929, the letters delivered to “Susan Chester,” the pseudonymous columnist for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. The affective core of his second novel has the form of empathy with those anonymous suffering people. The question for West is how to, if possible, link this form of empathy to ethically

---

55 From this point on, I will abbreviate Miss Lonelyhearts, the protagonist of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, to ML in order to avoid a confusion, keeping the title of the novel as it is.

56 This event in 1929 brought him the first inspiration for his second novel. See Martin 109-110 and 139.
appropriate altruistic behaviors: this question, in the protagonist’s case, takes the form of writing sincere and helpful replies to the letters. ML clearly feels some kind of responsibility, but his nagging worry throughout the novel is that he does not know what kind of responsibility is appropriate or how he can respond to their suffering. What is at issue in this novel, then, is not empathy itself but the relation of empathy to other fellow-feelings, especially compassion. If empathy is an experience of another mind—in short, if it is a way of understanding another mind—West poses an ethical question of how empathic understanding leads to altruistic feelings or behaviors.

In order to grasp West’s way of forming the question of empathy in this novel, it might be helpful to refer to Martha Nussbaum’s understanding of empathy in relation to her theory of compassion, a prosocial feeling that she claims can lead one to altruistic behaviors. She defines empathy as “an imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience” (301-02); and in her theory of compassion, empathy occupies a little awkward position in relation to compassion. In fact, she severs the theoretical tie between empathy and compassion. Taking a cognitivist view on emotion (as involving “judgements” about things), Nussbaum theorizes compassion as entailing three cognitive elements: “the judgment of size (a serious bad event has befallen someone); the judgment of nondesert (this person did not bring the suffering on himself or herself); and the eudaimonistic judgement (this person, or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted)” (321, emphasis original). Her theory of compassion is built by way of modifying Aristotle’s concept of compassion, which, according to her, involves three cognitive elements slightly different from Nussbaum’s. Although the first two cognitive elements—the judgment of size and that of nondesert—are shared by both theories, Aristotle’s third cognitive element for compassion is, according to Nussbaum’s explanation, the “judgment of similar possibilities” (315, emphasis original), which is based on “the belief that the possibilities of the person who experiences the emotion are similar to those of the sufferer” (306). Nussbaum considers Aristotle’s third element—the judgment of similar possibilities—as not always necessary for compassion. She claims that compassion can theoretically take place as long as one can recognize “the suffering of another as a significant part of his or her own scheme of goals and ends” (319). In Nussbaum’s theoretical scheme of compassion, empathy is regarded as belonging in this judgment of similar possibilities. Accordingly, she considers empathy as
neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for compassion.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, Nussbaum claims that theoretically speaking, empathy is not directly connected to compassion.

Curiously, however, Nussbaum seems to apply a double standard in dealing with the concept of compassion. While claiming empathy is neither sufficient nor necessary for compassion, she also says that “there is something correct in the contention that empathy is psychologically important as a guide” (330). She thus admits a practical relevancy of empathy as a condition of compassion, noting that “without an attempt at empathy we would surely be less likely to have appropriate compassion, or to take any actions that might be associated with this emotion” (332). In other words, “empathy is a mental ability highly relevant to compassion, although it is itself fallible and morally neutral” and therefore not necessary or sufficient for compassion (333). As Nussbaum’s honest yet somewhat strained explanation shows, the link in her argument is not so self-evident or causative as it is merely pragmatic. The link between these two fellow-feelings might be more largely predicated upon sociocultural conventions. It is, however, not my intent to criticize Nussbaum for the double standard applied in her theory of compassion or for her conviction about the link between compassion and helping behavior.\textsuperscript{58} Rather, what Nussbaum’s double standard inadvertently points to is ambiguity of the link between empathy and compassion. And this ambiguity is the theme of West’s second novel.

Whether empathy can lead to compassion, morality, or altruistic behavior is an ongoing discussion in today’s empathy studies. Simply put, if empathy is to match one’s mind affectively and cognitively with another’s, the question is whether such matching is enough for one’s prosocial motivation, especially when another is in a needful state. My contention is that West is participating in this discussion by making his protagonist struggle with such a question. West offers ML as a protagonist who wants to be a proponent of the empathy-compassion link but is unable. ML is deeply empathic with the letter-writers; or, in other words, he, as an advise-columnist, cannot keep a distance from the letters that come to him one after another. Being deeply moved by the letters, he even begins to feel compassion for them, wanting to help them by way of writing sincere words to them in return. He searches for a reason or a means to go from empathic understanding to altruistic, compassionate behaviors. However, ML’s conversion

\textsuperscript{57} See Nussbaum 302 and 327-330 for her theoretical explanation.

\textsuperscript{58} For Nussbaum’s argument for the case that having compassion largely leads us to helping behaviors, see Nussbaum 335-342.
is constantly frustrated by his editor, Shrike, who nihilistically satirizes and laughs at every possible compassionate answer ML could write to his readers, especially when ML’s approach begins to take on a tone of Christian compassion. Shrike’s acrid irony constantly “[makes] a sane view of this Christ business impossible” (67), preventing ML from acting upon his empathic feeling with the suffering public. Influenced by Shrike’s persistent ironical reminders, ML’s ethical struggle is thus suspended between empathy and compassionate behavior without being able to find a legitimate logic to connect the two fellow-feelings. This suspension becomes an oscillation because the compassion-soliciting letters keep coming to him and to give them sincere, compassionate advice is his job. And, as I will show, this epistolary form of empathy amplifies the oscillation, which results in ML’s comically failed attempt to become the compassionate Christ at the end.

All the anonymous letters in the novel are more or less empathically touching. The stories told in them are excruciatingly poignant if taken at face value. Almost all of them are the stories about the suffering women who are victimized, situationally or physically by the men around them. These are the letters written by the women who manage to muster up courage to confess their worries to ML. The letters and the emotions expressed in them look genuine enough to make William Carolos Williams go so far as to write: “The letters-to-the-papers which West uses freely and at length must be authentic. I can’t believe anything else” (61). On the other hand, there is a slight yet noticeable feel of fakery to each story in the letters so that its reader (including ML) can have a vague suspicion about its seriousness, genuineness, and reality. The people and stories told in the letters are, in fact, uncannily absurd and grotesque—a catholic wife who has had seven children in twelve years while suffering a kidney disease, a sixteen-year-old girl who is suicidal because she was born without a nose, and a deaf and mute girl who tells his brother that she was molested by a stranger. In addition to the absurdity of the stories, ML senses a certain type of mannerism about their sufferings expressed in the letters as if they were mass-produced: “on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife” (59).

59 West served as associate editor of the revival version of the literary magazine Contact, of which Williams was the editor. West submitted some pieces from his earlier draft of Miss Lonelyhearts to the magazine, and Williams was one of the earliest readers of the novel.
Here, West’s theme of emotional involvement connects to the problematic of the mass. To use Walter Benjamin’s term, the mannerism ML recognizes in the letter is a quotidian version of lack of “aura,” a sense of originality and authenticity of the work of art which, according to Benjamin, “wITHERS IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION” (“Work” 221). Or, to put it by using the aura’s counterpart in terms of storytelling, what ML struggles with might be the decline of “the ability to exchange experiences” (“Storyteller” 83), through which an organic sense of community would have been formed before the rise of the mass. If “the ability to exchange experiences” involves some form of empathy—if empathy is a means to share another’s experience by affectively and cognitively matching one’s mind with another’s—this means empathic ability might be declining in the age of mass culture. Then, the mass-ness of the letters—anonymity, mannerism, and grotesqueness—denotes that ML’s empathy with the letter-writers is always in peril of deflation, quickly losing the intensity that could have otherwise affectively tied him to each letter-writer. At the same time, however, their letters, as the mass, keep coming to him—as can be observed on the very first page of the novel, “On his desk were piled those [letters] he had received” (59)—and do not give him a break to sincerely process each empathic involvement.60

Curiously, ML does not abandon these anonymous letter-writers. When Betty, his fiancé, advises him to quit “the Miss Lonelyhearts job,” ML confesses: “You don’t understand, Betty. I can’t quit. And even if I were to quit, it wouldn’t make any difference. I wouldn’t be able to forget the letters, no matter what I did” (94). Unlike the most of modernists who fear “the accession of the masses to complete social power” (Ortega 11), West seems to see the mass more ambivalently. Or, more often than not, as Rita Barnard puts it, “For West … mass culture is not a regrettable sign of the demise of culture, but a sign of need” (185). West’s reluctance to generalize the mass and recognition of their “sign of need” is, however, problematized in the epistolary form of the mass discourse in the novel. As Justus Nieland correctly observes: “while

60 As I will argue in the next paragraph, I view ML as affectively exhausted by having to feel empathy constantly, instead of interpreting ML’s affective waning as alienation from affect. Or his case can be diagnosed as a sort of “compassion fatigue.” “Compassion fatigue” is well known and discussed in the clinical literature as occupational hazard in which doctors more sensitive to others’ emotions end up with “burnout” or emotional exhaustion by being constantly exposed to their patients’ negative emotions in their medical treatments. See Gleichgerrcht and Decety; also Figley.

72
each letter-writer’s pain in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is ‘singular’ and material in its extreme physicality … these pains are only legible through the mass-mediation of the newspaper and through the specific conventions of the advice column to which the sufferers submit” (206). Nieland is right again to point out that “Lonelyhearts can’t laugh at the letters because he can neither fully distance himself from their writers (‘I’m glad I don’t suffer as you do’) nor adequately sympathize with them (I suffer like you’)” (207). However, when he makes a case that the characters including ML are “alienated from their affects” (210), his argument starts to differ from mine.61 My contention is that ML does feel empathy; but he does that so constantly that he seems to become affectively exhausted. This trifling difference takes on a crucial significance for ML, for he becomes critical of those who are not willing to empathize with the anonymous letter-writers. In the following, we will see how he does so in his relationship to Shrike and to Betty.

ML observes how cruel and violent Shrike’s intellectually detached, ironical stance becomes for the letter-writers. Shrike’s irony, even though it might be part of the editor’s humor and joke, often sounds violent and merciless for ML, as the protagonist contemplates: “Why laugh at [myself] … when Shrike was waiting at the speakeasy to do a much better job? ‘Miss Lonelyhearts, my friend, I advise you to give your readers stones’” (63). Since ML is well aware of the fact that the letter-writers are the suffering women victimized by men, Shrike’s “stone”-cold irony sounds misogynistic. In fact, albeit kiddingly, ML tellingly says to Shrike “you’re an old meanie who beats his wife” (81). ML also hears Shrike jokingly complain that Mrs. Shrike “claims that I raped her” (82) in order to win ML over to his side by pulling ML into misogynistic solidarity. Thus, although mystified by the smokescreen of his ironical joking, Shrike is suggestively associated with misogynistic violence. Moreover, ML also senses a

---

61 Nieland, who highly evaluates Shrike’s deadpan for its subversive effects, emphasizes how emotional uncertainty in West’s text unsettles and reveals “the violence of Enlightenment ideology of affect” such as sympathy. I agree with Nieland’s argument on many points but my interpretation about ML’s affective experience slightly differs from Nieland’s. The difference might be mainly a terminological one. While Nieland does not particularly define “sympathy,” he takes it for something like a combination of empathy and compassion in my argument. Therefore, whereas Nieland considers that Shrike’s deadpan makes it impossible for ML to form any substantial feeling of sympathy, my argument takes it that ML still feels empathy even without being able to properly connect it to compassion, a successful result of which, in my view, would be forming sympathy in Nieland’s term.
misogynistic tendency ingrained in the male intellectualist stance represented by Shrike. In a scene at the bar, ML comes across his friends, a group of ex-literature-enthusiasts. They are grumbling about the recent rise of the number of female writers and start telling rape stories in which fledging female writers are victimized by male violence. They even conclude their stories by saying that “what they all needed was a good rape” (74). Just like he senses a mass-product-like mannerism in the letters, ML acknowledges a machine-like banality in the discourse of joke and irony by these male intellectuals, relativizing Shrike’s cruel irony: “Like Shrike, the man they imitated, they were machines for making jokes” (75). He thus becomes aware of the intellectual men’s lack of empathic imagination with women, seeing through the ideological implications behind the Shrike-like ironical stance of detaching themselves from women by joking about them.  

Another character who conspicuously lacks empathic imagination is Betty. Curiously, Betty is the only character in the novel who may be able to give a certain sense of order to the struggling protagonist who has “an almost insane sensitivity to order” (70). And yet ML realizes that Betty’s sense of order is just a product of her lack of empathic imagination toward the anonymous other who can be known only through representation. ML perceives Betty does not even try to recognize the mediated mass as part of the world: “It was Betty, however, that he criticized. Her world was not the world and could never include the readers of his column. Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily.” (72). Betty’s stable sense of

---

62 However, ML’s recognition of the misogynistic ideology inherent in the ironical stance of men does not immediately set ML free from it. The reason may be 1) ML is self-aware of the fact that he does/did belong in them and therefore 2) he understands them from within as if he were them, that is, he can empathize with them as well. In fact, ML seems even sympathetic with the male intellectuals at the bar, understanding—with a know-it-all smile—that their cynic stance comes from their sober disbelief in what they used to believe in: “literature,” “Beauty,” and “personal expression” (74). Furthermore, immediately after the scene, ML carries the harsh intellectualism within him to an extreme by pretending to be one of “scientists” (77) in an attempt to understand an unnamed old man he and his friend Gates happen to find sitting on a toilet in the park. This attempt results in a sudden, unreasonable violence by ML. He extorts a “life story” from the old man in the name of “science”: he jokingly announces “Science gives me the right [to ask personal questions]” and claims “sentiment must never be permitted to interfere with the probings of science” (78). When the old man refuses, ML impulsively begins to twist his arm, symbolically seeing it as “the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (ibid.). Thus, since ML empathize with everyone, his stance accordingly oscillates in a devastating manner.
order is predicated solely on her exclusivist attitude in which no reality of mediated or represented others is recognized. If empathy means to imaginatively reconstruct another’s internal experience, she does “limit experience” by not empathizing with imagined others. In other words, in Betty’s imagination, the anonymous, mass-mediated letter-writers do not exist at all. Hence ML criticizes his fiancé for her exclusive self-righteousness by claiming his sense of humanity is more inclusive as opposed to hers: “I’m a humanity lover” (72). Thus, what ML sees in Betty’s self-sufficient sense of order is a cruel ignorance produced by excluding imaginable others from consideration. In a sense, Shrike’s empathy-less misogyny—albeit undoubtedly vicious in itself—is less cruel than Betty’s ignorance in that such ignorance means a denial of humanity or human relationality itself.

What ML finds out through his relationship with Shrike and Betty is their lack of empathic imagination, especially that with imagined others. In this light, the most significant characters for ML in Miss Lonelyhearts are Mr. and Mrs. Doyle. Each of them not only writes letters to ML asking for advice but also, different from the anonymous letter-writers, they meet ML in person, giving a more immediate reality to his struggle with emotional involvement. In short, they compound ML’s struggle with the relation of mediate empathy to face-to-face empathy, which drives ML to the edge. Accordingly, after he listens, in person, to Mrs. Doyle’s story about the marriage life with her physically disabled husband—which seems no different from the stories written in the letters to him—ML’s struggle goes so far as to make him “physically sick and …unable to leave his room” (93) for three full days. Even though Betty takes him to her rural farm in Connecticut for his convalescence, his struggle has gotten so inveterate that his fiancé’s romantic charms do not work but as a temporary escape: “Miss Lonelyhearts knew that Betty had failed to cure him and that he had been right when he had said that he could never forget the letters” (103).

ML’s encounter with Mrs. Doyle as the compound target of both face-to-face and mediated empathy, however, brings about a change to his empathic imagination: it begins to become involved with the anonymous yet actual people around him, which, as we will see later, leads to the first step to his failure at the end of the story. In short, he misunderstands the applicability of his empathic imagination. He observes: “Crowds of people moved through the street with a dream-like violence. As he looked at their broken hands and torn mouths he was overwhelmed by the desire to help them, and because this desire was sincere, he was happy
despite the feeling of guilt which accompanied it” (103). Apparently, ML’s emotional involvement with the anonymous crowds here is tending more toward compassion than empathy in feeling the “desire to help them” instead of just sharing their suffering. What is more, “Prodded by his conscience,” he even “began to generalize” his face-to-face empathic understanding of the anonymous crowd into a universal compassion, going so far as to “dream[] the Christ dream” (ibid.), the feeling of expansive compassion that can contain all humanity whether imagined (through mediate empathy) or real (through face-to-face empathy). Indeed, this is too much of a leap, as he himself admits with “the feeling of guilt” above, but the transition here is made possible because he misunderstands his ability to empathize with the anonymous crowd in person as the universality of his empathic imagination. Since empathy must take place with an individual other even when he seems to be able to empathize with the anonymous crowd, he must be doing so through his face-to-face empathy with each component of the anonymous crowd that pass before him. Put simply, ML mistakes the anonymity of the crowd for the generality of his empathic imagination.63 This confusion leads to his final failure, but, at least at this point of the story, he seems to be aware of the “vanity” (104) involved in the leap and manages to check his desire for the “Christ dream,” realizing “his lack of humility” in the dream and “vow[ing] to make a sincere attempt to be humble” (ibid.).

While he still manages to “cling to his humility” (108), ML achieves the most complete empathic moment of the novel, the ideal unity with Mr. Doyle. It is a non-verbal, mutual understanding. ML makes a smile “full of sympathy” toward Mr. Doyle: “the smile … was for Doyle and he knew it. He smiled back gratefully” (110). Their unity is so immediate that they do not seem to need the medium of language to communicate with each other: “They sat staring at each other until the strain of wordless communication began to excite them both” (ibid.). ML and Mr. Doyle gradually get out of the confine of interactive bidirectionality of language between sender and receiver of message. ML goes beyond the language medium (so far as to be, in turn, unable to understand Mr. Doyle’s verbally mediated message), reaching directly Mr. Doyle’s mental images by almost maniacally observing the physically handicapped old man’s gesturing:

63 It seems that ML’s confusion of anonymity with generality in terms of the target of empathy is also a variation of the problem between singularity and plurality, one of West’s continuous themes, developed as early as in his first novel. See Veitch 29-38.
When the cripple finally labored into speech, Miss Lonelyhearts was unable to understand him. He listened hard for a few minutes and realized that Doyle was making no attempt to be understood. He was giving birth to groups of words that lived inside of him as things, a jumble of the retorts he had meant to make when insulted and the private curses against fate that experience had taught him to swallow. // Like a priest, Miss Lonelyhearts turned his face slightly away. He watched the play of the cripple’s hands. At first they conveyed nothing but excitement, then gradually they became pictorial. They lagged behind to illustrate a matter with which he was already finished, or ran ahead to illustrate something he had not yet begun to talk about. As he grew more articulate, his hands stopped trying to aid his speech and began to dart in and out of his clothing. One of them suddenly emerged from a pocket of his coat, dragging some sheets of letter paper. He forced these on Miss Lonelyhearts. (110)

While reading Mr. Doyle’s letter, this empathic moment develops into a more physical one. When West describes the ideal moment of empathic union, it is usually achieved physically as well as metaphysically, just like the one at the ending scene of his first novel. However, this time, the empathic moment is rendered in a more realistic, spontaneous, and almost homoerotic fashion, as opposed to the one in the previous novel, which is a rape-like, coerced sexual unification in the protagonist’s fantasy.

While Miss Lonelyhearts was puzzling out the crabbed writing, Doyle’s damp hand accidentally touched his under the table. He jerked away, but then drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple’s. After finishing the letter, he did not let go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage. At first the cripple covered his embarrassment by disguising the meaning of the clasp with a handshake, but he soon gave in to it and they sat silently, hand in hand. (111-12)

The scene between ML and Mr. Doyle is indeed the ideal moment of a tacit yet radically direct mutual understanding of something indescribable via language. ML might want to call it “love,” but we need to remember that this empathic moment is possible, firstly because it is formed as a face-to-face empathy where ML can refer to Mr. Doyle’ gestures and physical expressions in person; secondly because ML stays in an empathic understanding mode and yet does not go so far as to hastily convert the feeling into compassionate behaviors; and lastly because he stays
“humble” in a sense that he refrains from generalizing Mr. Doyle into the representative of the anonymous suffering mass. ML just empathically understands Mr. Doyle as an individual in front of him but does not symbolize him into the suffering mass. This is the ideal moment of empathy of this novel, which could not be achieved without a non-verbal, tactile immediacy as well as “humility” that prevents him from easily generalizing the shared experience and from translating it into an obtrusive compassion.

ML’s empathic experience with Mr. Doyle is so pure and immediate that it refuses to be translated into a compassionate action. That is why, when he makes a “speech” trying to help the Doyles out of their broken marriage life at their table right after that ideally empathic scene, ML miserably fails to find a helpful word: “With the first few words Miss Lonelyhearts had known that he would be ridiculous. By avoiding God, he had failed to tap the force in his heart and had merely written a column for his paper” (115). Thus, he realizes that without a religious rhetoric of “God” he could not convert his empathic feeling into a compassionate, altruistic action.

After the sobering failure at the Doyles’ where he fails to link the ideal form of empathy to any altruistic behavior, ML’s empathic project begins to take a drastic turn. In a surprisingly reactionary manner, he suddenly gives up entirely on empathy. It is not merely a rejection of the empathic feeling itself but a complete negation of his affective self. He feigns a transcendentally apathetic state of mind in himself, which is represented by the metaphor of a “rock” in his mind. The rock repels any incoming “wave” of emotions or irony thrown against it (117). ML attempts to keep being the rock, trying to not be affected at all by either Shrike’s ironical ridicule or Betty’s naïve affection: “neither laughter nor tears could affect the rock” (123). By dismissing his real-life affective and intellectual interaction with actual people around him and also by achieving a transcendental “identification with God” (125)—in other words, by sublating his struggle between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement into God-like indifference—ML finally succeeds in replying to the suffering anonymous mass who would write to him: “He

---

64 Also, in the chapter titled “Miss Lonelyhearts Attends a Party,” ML keeps indifferently calm in the face of Shrike’s constant ridiculing the letters: “Miss Lonelyhearts stood [Shrike’s ironical mocking of the letter] with the utmost serenity; he was not even interested. What goes on in the sea is of no interest to the rock” (119). Also in “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Party Dress,” ML literally objectifies Betty as “the party dress” (123) and, with that perception, proposes marriage to her by almost mechanically following a conventional discourse of Romantic love but, for doing so, “He did not feel guilty. He did not feel. The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge” (123-24).
immediately began to plan a new life and his future conduct as Miss Lonelyhearts. He submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them. God approved his every thought” (ibid.). Notably, what ML identifies himself with in the final chapters of the novel is the celestial “God,” instead of “Christ,” with the latter of whom ML is originally obsessed in the first half of the story. This conversion is crucial in that it suggests he has purged Christian compassion from his religious obsession, developing his religious emotion into a pure abstraction that lacks a concrete object but covers all humanity. Of course, ML’s Godliness comes with a price. It becomes so abstractly inclusive and universal that he cannot even understand what Mr. Doyle, the actual person in front of his eye, says to him:

[ML] rushed down to the stairs to meet Doyle with his arms spread for the miracle. // Doyle was carrying something wrapped in a newspaper. When he saw Miss Lonelyhearts, he put his hand inside the package and stopped. He shouted some kind of warning, but Miss Lonelyhearts continued his charge. He did not understand the cripple’s shout and heard it as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S., Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband. He was running to succor them with love. (126)

The “vanity” entailed in his God-like compassion, which ML calls “love,” is obvious: ML generalizes Mr. Doyle so much as to disregard his actuality, to the point where he misinterprets Mr. Doyle’s revengeful hostility as “a cry for help.” Because of his abstract unity with God he has lost interest in the actual people in front of him. In this sense, ML’s “heart of God” is indeed filled with humane compassion but definitely devoid of humanly empathy: his “love” may be able to cover the anonymous mass but his love is for nobody.

The story comically executes poetic justice to the protagonist at the end of the novel: West offers ML’s transcendence as a failure: ML is suspended in the middle of the hierarchical “stairs” between the God-like, too inclusive compassion and the Betty-like, too exclusive world of non-empathy in the ending scene. ML gets shot by Mr. Doyle and symbolically falls with the old man from the heavenly height of his tiny room on the second floor, “roll[ing] part of the way down the stairs” (ibid., emphasis added), at the bottom of which Betty happens to be waiting.

In this suspended tableau at the end of the novel, as is usually the case with West, nothing is decisively solved. Rather, it seems as if the story had stopped just because West has
exhaustively used up every possible scenario of failure entailed in the relation of empathy to compassion. If that is the case, what West performatively shows through ML’s constant struggles and succeeding failure is a simple yet humbling reflection that empathy is difficult to deal with, especially when its objects are anonymous others. But West’s meticulous examination of this mediated empathy is critically significant, especially if we take it into consideration that this was done in the 1930s: in the emerging age of mass culture, when the anonymous voices of the imagined mass began to resonate everywhere; and also in the post-Depression era, when the suffering voices from various kinds of people could be heard in any city or town. How to cope with empathy with the suffering, anonymous mass must have been a serious ethical question to ask at the time. The characters like Shrike and Betty demonstrate that taking an ironically critical pose or indifferent attitude against empathically imagined others is nothing but a naïve defensive reaction to this emergence of the mass. However, ML’s hasty conversion to universal compassion is not an answer either. West’s ironical depiction of the story then reminds us of how significant yet unstable a role empathy plays in forming compassion and how challenging it is to keep empathizing in face of the looming voice of the suffering mass.

**Empathy, Expression, and Politicizing of Empathy in *The Day of the Locust***

*A Cool Million* is the novel in which Nathanael West leans more heavily toward the ironically detached stance. Compared to the fact that empathy itself is never questioned except for its applicability to compassion in the previous novel, his third novel mocks any conventional narrative of fellow-feelings such as the reader might find in Horatio Alger stories. The ironical narrative preemptively deprives the reader of empathic identification with its protagonist Lemuel Pitkin, let alone sympathy, pity, and compassion. As Veitch puts it, “Since Lemuel Pitkin is a machine, his dismantling inspires neither pity nor indignation, thereby making West’s hero unsuitable as a cause célèbre or an object of nostalgia” (101). This is a radical experimental novel whose narrative always already checks—and hysterically laughs at—the reader’s empathic involvement with the otherwise empathy-worthy protagonist.

Then, there seems to be not much that can be said about West’s third novel in terms of empathy. The most apathetically ironical—almost excessively so—scene of Lemuel’s dismantling is inscribed in Chapter XX. After each of the two comedians’ punch lines, the protagonist’s prosthetic body is repeatedly beaten on the vaudeville stage and literally
disembodied part by part. Watching him mercilessly dismembered, the people in the audience are “convulsed with joy. They laughed heartily until the curtain came down, and for some time afterwards” (233). The way it is narrated does not leave any room for a caring affect toward Lemuel to enter in this violent scene, even though the author’s intended effect might be to self-reflectively laugh at the laughing audience. Clearly, the detached narrator is complicit with the cruel, de-empathized audience by nonchalantly describing Lemuel’s dismantling from a far. Indeed, as Veitch puts it, “Actor and audience: there is almost no relationship in West’s fiction that exists outside this rubric” (118), but the reader’s as well as the narrator’s “relationship” to Lemuel here is nothing beyond a conventional actor-audience role in which the former is expected to “laugh” at the latter with any potential empathic involvement foreclosed from the scene.

In The Day of the Locust, however, the vaudevillian actor-audience relationship is revisited and critically displaced by West so that it can be approached in terms of empathy. The relationship is featured in the figure of Harry Greener, an ex-vaudevillian actor, and Tod Hackett, the protagonist of West’s fourth novel, who incidentally becomes familiar with Harry in the process of his pursuit of Faye, the ex-vaudevillian’s daughter. Tod begins to see Harry as “a clue” (261) to “the people who come to California to die” (387), the main material for his ongoing painting “The Burning of Los Angeles” (242). The vaudevillian actor-audience relationship appears in the form of “an old clipping from the theatrical section of the Sunday Times” (262) that Harry shows to Tod, thus being doubly embedded in the main narrative. The article headlined “Bedraggled Harlequin” describes how Harry, every time he begins to make a joke, gets persistently hindered from finishing it by his colleagues’ brutal harassment in various forms. The author of the article writes: “The pain that almost, not quite, thank God, crumples his stiff little figure would be unbearable if it were not obviously make-believe. It is gloriously funny” (263). Contrarily to what the article’s description literally means, the subjunctive statement in this embedded text meta-narratively suggests to the reader (including Tod) a possible, imagined “pain” that Harry might be suffering on the stage playing a clown, circumventing the conventional vaudevillian actor-audience relationship. This subjunctive, imagined internal space of the people in Hollywood is where empathy is at stake in this novel. From the start, Tod is empathic with the people in Hollywood and their warped desires, suspending any ironical gaze toward them: he contemplates that “it is hard to laugh at the need
for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are” (243). In a sense, compared to ML, who tries to convert empathy to compassion by writing replies to the letter-writers, Tod struggles to convert empathy to an artistic expression. Tod’s main artistic as well as ethical pursuit is not to laugh at “the people who come to California to die” but to understand their opaque state of mind from within and then to represent it in his painting, giving an expression to their emotion. If empathy is not just an understanding but also a simulated reconstruction of other minds, then it can be exercised as an expression—in this case, it is not exactly an expression of one’s own mind but that of other minds. Thus, what is examined through Tod’s pursuit is the relation of empathy to expression, or empathy as expression.

The way empathy is linked to expression is what makes West’s last novel more modern than, and distinctive from, his second novel. An empathic understanding of other minds is the point at issue both in Miss Lonelyhearts and in The Day of the Locust, but in the former, the question is about whether to empathize with others or not. In The Day of the Locust, on the other hand, the crux of the question is, at least initially, about how to empathize with other when there is a looming discordance between internal mind and outside appearance in the age of mass. Tod, who, “despite his appearance … was really a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes” (242), observes the people in Hollywood:

As he walked along, he examined the evening crowd. A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really sports clothes. Their sweaters, knickers, slacks, blue flannel jackets with brass buttons were fancy dress. The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneakers with a bandanna around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court. (ibid.)

In Hollywood, the people’s appearance does not straightforwardly reflect what they are or what they do. What Tod observes in them, and experiences in himself, is a slippage of relationship between signifier and signified in the abundance of mass-produced signs that do not have definitive references.65 This recognition of the discordant superficiality makes this novel one step

65 In fact, when Homer Simpson, another focal character of the novel, comes to Hollywood for rehabilitation, he, too, observes the same discordance between signifier and signified of mass
closer to postmodern literature. Tod’s interest in this opaque discordance between outside appearance and internal mind, however, is not oriented toward revealing Saussurean arbitrariness of the link between signifier and signified, or toward acknowledging the signifier’s predominance over signified in the production of meaning as in James-Lange theory, either. Tod does not seem to be interested in the playful superficiality of their outside appearance in the consumer/mass-product society. Rather, Tod is more attracted to what is supposed to lie beneath the discordance: that is, a nebulous, disgruntled internal reality of the people in Hollywood, whose expression is frustrated or foreclosed by the discordance. In other words, Tod—and probably his author West, too—still believes in the modern view of interiority, or what Fredric Jameson calls a “depth model” of the subject’s mind, while being keenly aware of, and accepting part of, the superficiality of the late capitalist world at the same time. However, that is especially why empathy becomes a crucial means of communication for Tod. If empathy is the means to imaginatively reconstruct and share internal experience with other minds, it can, of

products—houses, furniture and interior decorations—the description of which occupies most of chapter 7.

In Tod’s initial observation there are two kinds of people in Hollywood. After observing the fancily dressed people in Hollywood, whom he calls “masqueraders,” Tod shifts his focus more on the marginal habitants of Hollywood who stare “with hatred” the “masqueraders” in front of them (242). However, I take this dichotomy (between “masquerades” and those who “stare” them with grudge) as Tod’s frankly realist worldview of Hollywood as it is. In other words, it is not that Tod is simply drawing a populist or Marxist picture out of his observation: it does not seem that Tod particularly takes sides either with those who “stare” over the “masqueraders,” or vice versa. In fact, Tod interacts with both types of people without particular antagonistic or discriminating attitude; and in his (imagined) painting, his acquaintances from both types of people are simultaneously given a high profile and foregrounded with the anonymous raging mob mostly on the backdrops. Thus, Tod seems to see the dichotomic conflict among the people in Hollywood as it is in one picture, without taking particular sides with either of them. Therefore, from now on, when I mention “the people in Hollywood,” it refers to the collective group of people in Hollywood including both types.

See Fredric Jameson. In the chapter titled “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” he points out, as one of the constitutive characteristics of the postmodern, “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality” (9), whereas those of the modern are largely based on several “depth models” (12). Also, Chip Rhodes, examining the relationship of the novel’s artistic design and cynicism, observes a similar situation where Tod believes in “the emotional content of the performance” (35) while his self-conscious cynicism makes him aware of the “fictiveness” (31) of referential reality of signs. As Rhodes concisely puts it, “The old ways of representing ourselves are no longer viable [in The Day of the Locust], while the self that inhabits the world (and therefore ideology in general) is essentially unchanged” (35).
course, be achieved through a medium of conventional system of sign, but it is also more likely to be expressed materially through gestures, bodily attitudes, and facial expressions. This means that empathy can be enacted even when a conventional system of sign stops functioning well. Thus, Tod’s painterly observation makes it possible for him to empathize with people in Hollywood despite the discordance of appearance.

West’s interest in the interiority of people despite their discordant superficiality must be derived from the fact that he is, in the literal sense of the word, a materialist. West as novelist is such a materialist that he cannot commit to any political idea without ridiculing and relativizing its abstract ideology. Nor can he deny the internal reality of other minds for the same reason: his materialist attention never fails to make him realize, and emotionally commit to, the internality of other minds. This is the case for Tod, as can be seen in his observation of Harry: “Tod began to wonder if it might not be true that actors suffer less than other people. He thought about this for a while, then decided that he was wrong. Feeling is of the heart and nerves and the crudeness of its expression has nothing to do with its intensity. Harry suffered as keenly as anyone, despite the theatricality of his groans and grimaces” (311). Tod’s belief in the interior reality of other minds is thus predicated on the material reality of “the heart and nerves.” In the face of the emergence of mass/consumer culture, Tod’s materialism makes him recognize both external superficiality and internal depth at the same time. In his eye, therefore, the discordance between appearance=expression and internality=feeling is seen merely as an impediment that deprives the people in Hollywood of their accustomed and familiar way of expressing feelings that they internally hold. For Tod, the discordance makes it difficult to access the internal, emotional reality of the people in Hollywood through a conventional course of affective understanding. He has to reach the internal reality of the people in Hollywood through empathy. Thus, for Tod, the discordance between external and internal reality manifests itself as the difficulty of emotional involvement in the form of empathy.

Tod’s calling as painter is to empathically represent the internal reality of the people in Hollywood. This has to involve two processes: the first step is, in a more commonsense use of

---

68 Regarding West’s political consciousness in relation to his novel writing, Johnathan Greenburg notes, “the novels themselves are fraught with contradictory impulses. West employs the same satiric method in treating causes with which he claims sympathy as in treating ideologies he rejects” (592). As is well known, West in his later years had repeatedly confessed in the letters to his friends his split political consciousness.
the word, to empathize with them, reconstructing their internal reality within himself. It has to be an empathic understanding: otherwise, he would have no direct access to their internal mind, because they have, due to the discordance, no conventional expression in which to appropriately convey their feelings. The second process is to externalize, as expression, what is internally reconstructed by representing their internal reality in a tangible form of art, in his case, the painting called “The Burning of Los Angeles.” In other words, he has to reverse the empathic process of understanding other minds so that more people can be empathically affected by his representation of the internal reality of the people in Hollywood. His aesthetic quest for empathic representation then begins to take on a political implication in him. As Johnathan Greenberg puts it, in The Day of the Locust as well as in Miss Lonelyhearts, “the fulfillment of the characters’ ethical-political ambitions curiously resides in aesthetic solutions. Like West himself, both Miss Lonelyhearts by writing his columns and Tod Hackett by painting his canvases seek expressive forms adequate to the task of representing or relieving the pain of the masses” (594).

For Tod, representing (in a creative sense) their internal reality comes to mean the same thing as representing (in a political sense) them, giving a voice to their otherwise indescribable internal reality. As is always the case with this ironic writer, West examines themes in a negative, almost apophatic fashion by making his protagonists desperately fail at their endeavors. Tod is no exception. In almost the same way as ML spectacularly fails at empathic understanding due to his religiously converted agenda of Godly compassion, Tod’s artistic project on empathic representation goes wrong because of its radically political reductionism: Tod myopically takes the people’s disgruntled “fury” for nothing but a revolutionary motivation. In fact, in his wandering in Hollywood, Tod encounters a raging congregation of a cult group and thinks of Alessandro Magnasco, Italian late-Baroque painter, who Tod believes “would paint their fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy

---

69 More precisely speaking, as Tod himself is aware and also concerned, his artistic endeavor initially begins taking on a slightly religio-political tone, oscillating his self-recognition between artist and “Jeremiah” (308). However, its religious implication is not particularly emphasized or sought after except in that quoted page in the novel, so I will leave it at that and focus on its political aspect exclusively.

70 As for a study that follows Tod’s search for model painters and examines the development of his painting “The Burning of Los Angeles,” see Jeffrey Meyers “The Paintings in The Day of the Locust.”
civilization” (337). Moreover, after confirming the belief in the interiority beneath discordant appearance by way of observing Harry, Tod takes it to such an extreme as to cease to be a materialist, belittling the external material reality of appearance—even “rhetoric” as material reality of a speech—while giving a privileged status to the internality of furious minds. Hearing a clumsy, almost nonsensical speech by an enraged man at another cultic congregation, “Tod didn't laugh at the man’s rhetoric. He knew it was unimportant. What mattered were his messianic rage and the emotional response of his hearers” (338). Eventually, Tod’s reductionism of the internality of the people in Hollywood into a simple revolutionary rage ends up receiving an ironic retaliation by the anarchic crowd at the end of the story. To see through Tod’s failure as an artist representative/representer of the people in Hollywood, however, it is necessary to juxtapose him to Homer Simpson, the deuteragonist of the novel, who is, according to Tod, “an exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die, perfect in every detail down to fever eyes and unruly hands” (264).

In chapters 7 through 12, Homer becomes the focalized character on his own, with Tod’s story completely stalled and left out from the main narrative in the meanwhile. Homer’s sudden interruption into the otherwise straightforward narrative of Tod indeed aesthetically looks bizarre at best, but it might have to be so, for Homer’s story establishes itself as a contrapuntal narrative that relativizes Tod’s aesthetically politicalized application of empathy. What Homer’s story reveals to the reader is rather a prosaic life of a middle-aged man: “the forty years of his life had been entirely without variety or excitement” (275). The exception is a chance romantic incident with Romola Martin. Homer’s brief, awkward interaction with her is the critical point of reference in The Day of the Locust. Hugging and caressing the desperate, lonely prostitute in the spur of the moment, Homer curiously gets to hold an awkward yet sincerely generous feeling, getting anxious to transfer to her the effusive satisfaction he feels: “He was completely unconscious of what he was doing. He knew only that what he felt was marvelously sweet and that he had to make the sweetness carry through to the poor, sobbing woman” (271). There are two points about this scene that need our attention. One is that, in a somewhat inverted sense of the word, Homer wants Romola to empathize with him so that she can feel his elated satisfaction instead of her current desperation: he genuinely wants to share his internal positive experience with Romola in order to help her out of her desperate state of mind, even though he does not know how and acts awkwardly. Interestingly, Homer’s genuine desire for shared emotion
structurally concurs with Tod’s project of empathic expression in that both aim at sharing an internal experience in an empathic fashion that centrifugally expands out of the empathic subject at the center.

The second point to be noted is that Homer’s altruistic desire for shared experience simply comes out of his spontaneous compassion for the vulnerable woman. Especially since their forms of empathic expression are similar, Homer’s altruistic attitude makes a stark contrast with Tod’s rather artistically egoistic motive inherent in his project of representation. The main reason why Tod can empathize with the people despite the discordance between external and internal reality is that he originally feels the grudging “fury” on his own part: he is also one of the people who come to California to die, with a broken ambition as painter. This means that Tod can affectively and effectively resonate with those people in addition to his materialistic observation but also indicates an inherent risk related to the subjectivity of empathic understanding—a risk that he might just unilaterally project his own internal emotional experience onto that of the people in Hollywood, just as he himself “wondered if he weren’t exaggerating the importance of the people who come to California to die” (308) at one point of his drawing process. Tod fails at the very moment when he tries to politically utilize empathy. In other words, he stops respecting the material individuality of each person’s subjective emotional experience when he hastily assumes that his expression of the raging internal reality of the people in Hollywood is affectively contagions enough to instigate a collective revolutionary uprising all over the country. To put it in more psychological terms, Tod, in the process of his painting, comes to confound empathy with “emotional contagion,” an automatic, unintentional, and unconscious transmission of emotion from one to another. According to Amy Coplan, the decisive difference between emotional contagion and empathy lies in self-other differentiation. Emotional contagion takes place automatically and unconsciously and “involves little or no self-other differentiation. Subjects are typically unaware that their emotion has originated outside of themselves in a target individual” (“Catching” 27). On the other hand, an empathizer usually recognizes that the emotion he or she is feeling via empathy belongs to a target individual, being

---

71 See Rhodes 44-5, where he describes Homer’s drive for shared experience as “something giving and other-directed” from the psychoanalytical perspective, (45).
72 See Coplan “Catching” 27. See also my introduction 6-7. For the definition of primitive emotional contagion in the psychological literature, see Hatfield et al.
aware of self-other difference. In this sense, Tod begins to lose empathic access to the internal reality of the people in Hollywood when he starts disregarding the material difference of each individual of whom the mass consist. Instead, Tod takes empathic shareability of experience for the contagious power of affect for the sake of his artistic project.

Indeed, Tod seems to be exquisitely capable of empathy itself. Speaking without a break, Homer rashly tells Tod how Faye Greener cheats on and leaves him the previous night, but Tod manages to orderly reconstruct the “timeless” and condensed story of Homer:

He sat down and tried to make sense out of what Homer had told him. A great deal of it was gibberish. Some of it, however, wasn’t. He hit on a key that helped when he realized that a lot of it wasn’t jumbled so much as timeless. The words went behind each other instead of after. What he had taken for long strings were really one thick word and not a sentence. In the same way several sentences were simultaneous and not a paragraph. Using this key, he was able to arrange a part of what he had heard so that it made the usual kind of sense. (368)

Here Tod seems to very well understand Homer’s awkward and stupefying “gibberish,” even “arrang[ing]” Homer’s wild language and giving it a decent shape. But this is also an act of reduction, cutting down what Homer’s “gibberish” to just “one thick word.” And Tod, who has started disregarding the material reality or otherness in others—hence his reduction of Homer’s speech—in favor of sharable internal reality, would believe the “one thick word” has to mean a single intense emotion: fury.

73 “The Cheated” was one of the earlier titles suggested by the author for this novel.
74 Sianne Ngai mentions Tod’s encounter with Homer’s “thick” language as an introductory case study to her own concept “stuplimity.” See Ngai 249-50 and 253-57. Her approach and focus of argument are different from mine, but she suggestively observes that Homer’s language has “a mimetic effect: Tod finds himself temporarily stupefied by the language generated by Homer’s stupor. Which is to say he discovers that it challenges his own capacity to interpret or respond to it in conventional ways” (250), which to me seems to resemble an empathic understanding in that it involves a mimetic sharing of emotion and requires a non-verbal communication of internal experience instead of a conventional verbal communication of message-based information.
75 In fact, the version of Homer’s story that the reader actually reads is what would come between Homer’s actual speech and the “one thick word” version by Tod. Although it is not the original version by Homer, the story on text is told by the narrator in the third-person speech in one long paragraph so that the reader can tell that Tod’s “one thick word” version is too hasty a reduction.
Tod’s failure of empathic expression is spectacularly dramatized in the final scene, where the mob gathering for a movie premiere ironically outdoes Tod’s project of political representation of their collective fury, which he assumes would automatically translate into a revolutionary mood contagiously spreading all over the country once they are given an expression by his drawing. Simply put, Tod underestimates the collective manifestation of the people’s affects: he reductively interprets the collective affects as unanimous disgruntled fury. However, as Peter J. Pappas puts it, it turns out that “Affective responses within the crowd are hardly consistent” (145) and, collectively, they manifest themselves as “undefinable energies” (146), something too anarchic and random to be controlled or orientated by Tod’s artistic imagination. Also, as H. N. Lukes, who interprets manifestations of the mob’s affect through metaphors of virus, observes:

The senselessness of the final riot seems to confirm Tod’s worry that the virus of group affect is infectious but not necessarily telic. Herein lies the difference between mob and revolutionary violence. … [It is] not that viral feeling is always already fascist, but that it must be understood on its own terms before being harnessed for political change. (197)

Swallowed by the violent yet variegated manifestations of the mob’s affect, Tod has no other choice but to retreat and “escape” (388) into a purely imaginary realm. Curiously, there is no scene in the entire novel where Tod is actually working on his picture “The Burning of Los Angeles”: all his elaboration over the picture is presented only in his mind, not on a physical canvass. In the light of finding an expression that can vent the internal reality, this means that he fails at forging a material expression. And what is more, ironically enough, he is brought back out of his imagined drawing of an anarchic revolution by “a policeman” (Ibid.), who in fact saves him from the violent stampede. The finishing stroke to the irony is the very ending of the novel:

He was carried through the exit to the back street and lifted into a police car. The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could. (388-89)

Laughing, Tod comes to realize that he is losing his autonomous, artistic capability for empathy. All he can do then is just “imitate” the artificial sound of the siren, as if contagiously and
automatically affected by it—as contagious and automatically as he hopefully wanted his imagined mob to be affected by his revolutionary drawing. Tod’s empathy thus comes to reduce itself into a mere act of imitation. It might seem too sudden and drastic a conversion for Tod from empathy with the raging mass to a mimicry of the authorities. However, his conversion takes place, I believe, not because he has actually converted to the authorities, but because he lacks compassion. Curiously, while he is quite capable of empathy, there is no scene in the novel in which he is described as sincerely compassionate or concerned for the furious people in Hollywood. Therefore, all he does is to affectively resonate with them, instead of giving a critical thought to what makes them furious. In this light, in contrast to ML, who fails by prioritizing compassion at the expense of empathy, Tod fails by sticking to empathy at the cost of compassion. For Tod, the people in Hollywood is nothing but an amplifier of his own interior reality. His last laugh is an empty, self-ironizing one, revealing he has no more interior reality of his own to resonate with that of the people in Hollywood.

As we have seen, it is one of West’s favorite techniques to maintain a critical distance toward his protagonist at the end of a story by making the protagonist massively fail at his vocational project about emotional involvement. This is the case in The Day of the Locust, too, but there is another layer to it in this novel. While letting Tod fail at his apocalyptic drawing of the mob’s fury by making him actually walk through the violent and variegated vicissitude of the people’s affects, West seems to succeed in aesthetically verbalizing what Tod originally wanted to achieve in his drawing: the audience’s simulative experience of the people’s affects. In short, the author usurps his protagonist’s project by ironically exercising his authoritative power. But more importantly, by so doing, West aesthetically achieves a new mode of writing in which he can maintain both intellectual distance and emotional involvement: keeping an ironical distance by dramatizing Tod’s failure at the same time as minutely reconstructing and patiently following—that is, empathically re-living—Tod’s experience of the people’s affective manifestations.

---

76 For an interpretation on Tod’s imitation of the police car “siren” as an anguished cry of the American avant-garde of the time, see Blyn.
77 If we remember that he is initially described as “a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes,” it is suggestive that, however “complicated” and layered, “Chinese boxes” eventually turn out to be empty.
Throughout his literary career, Nathanael West has thoroughly critiqued empathic imagination and its implications in relation to other fellow-feelings and to his ironical stance derived from his intellectualism. What he ironically reveals to us is that while the link between empathy and compassion is weak, neither compassion without empathy nor empathy without compassion is politically and aesthetically good enough. Empathy can become a strong personal motivation for prosocial attitude and behavior, but once it is applied to or served for more political, public purposes, that is, once it is used as a means, empathy can also become too unstable to maintain. It is extraordinary that his critical thinking (and feeling) of empathy was done at the time when, on the one hand, most high modernists shied away from the fellow-feeling for fear of its possible sentimentality and, on the other hand, many of his contemporary, post-Depression-era social novelists seemed to naïvely believe in a trite convention of narrative empathy in which simply setting characters in socially and culturally challenging situations is effective enough to make the empathy-worthy characters look politically motivating to the readers. By critiquing and believing in empathy at the same time, West denaturalizes our accustomed ways to deal with it. But that does not mean that reading his novels sets us free from empathizing with people; contrarily, it rather makes us constantly question why we do not more often, more delicately, and more intensely, empathize with actual, imagined, particular and anonymous others in our life as well as in our fiction reading.
CHAPTER 4

POLITICIZING EMPATHY: RICHARD WRIGHT’S STRATEGY OF EMPATHY IN NATIVE SON

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Nathanael West problematizes the danger in the politicization of empathy. He critiques how empathy changes into something similar yet different—sympathy or compassion—and is distorted from its original form of understanding when his protagonists try to utilize it for more public, prosocial purposes. On the other hand, it is also true that certain groups of authors, whose works are usually categorized as protest novels or social novels, have to strategically rely on readerly empathy or sympathy with their protagonists for political purposes. It can be generally considered that in a protest novel, its author makes use of empathy or sympathy so that the reader can recognize a certain social problem through its protagonist’s perspective via empathy or through a sympathetic concern for the protagonist.

Richard Wright, who was “the first African-American writer to sustain himself professionally from his writings alone” and “the first internationally celebrated Black American author” (Gates xi), is considered to belong to that group of authors who try to make effective use of empathy. Especially, his first novel Native Son has recently gathered some—though not substantial yet still relatively exceptional—critical attention for its strategy of empathy. In the following, I will examine and compare three critical analyses written on the novel’s empathy. In the process, we will observe some basic common findings about empathy in the novel, especially the author’s design to separate empathy from sympathy. At the same time, I will make my own case about the empathic design of the novel in the form of arguing against a few points shared by the past critics. Then, I will examine Wright’s design to distinguish empathy from sympathy in relation to the political implications of the novel as a protest novel. This examination leads us to reconsider the relation of empathy, especially that of narrative empathy, to its political potentials that other protest novels conventionally assume it to have.

These three literary analyses appear to be the only such pieces that directly discuss the empathy of the novel. It has to be noted that one of these analyses is a brief essay (Giovannucci) and the other two are parts of a larger argument for each critical research. That is, their discussions are not substantial enough; and yet, since literary argument about empathy focusing on a single literary work is in itself a rare attempt, I believe it is significant and worthwhile to examine at length the previous arguments in this chapter.

92
The Past Studies on Native Son’s Empathy

In her “Empathy in the Work of Richard Wright,” Perri Giovannucci contends that “An enduringly powerful aspect of Wright’s work is … his own considerable capacity for empathy—his ability to feel it, to portray it and evoke it for his readers” (107). In analyzing Wright’s design of empathy in Native Son, Giovannucci claims that “Wright’s empathy is not sentimental” and that “the distinction between empathy and the related value, sympathy, was a central concern for him” (ibid., italics original). She does not explicitly define the concept of empathy itself, but she seems to delineate the concept by its contrast to sympathy. What she understands as sympathy is particularly the white condescending gaze of “moralizing pity” (ibid.) toward African-American victims. It involves a self-indulgent, sentimental emotion that elicits a cathartic satisfaction on the part of the sympathizer, who belongs to a dominant group. This white sympathetic gaze results in the preservation of the status quo without disrupting the racial structure that afflicts the sympathized victim. With that implication in mind, Giovannucci makes the case that Wright’s empathy in Native Son, which “steers clear of any saccharine notion of sympathy” (109), prompts the reader “to think critically as the first step on the road to social justice” (ibid.). It seems that she considers empathy as a form of understanding from within Bigger’s perspective without being sentimentally sympathetic for him as a victim.

What Wright explains in his famous essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” seems to support Giovannucci’s claim that the author of Native Son tried to avoid involving sentimentality in sympathy while promoting empathy instead. He writes at one point that:

The second event that spurred me to write of Bigger was more personal and subtle. I had written a book of short stories which was published under the title of Uncle Tom’s Children. When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest. (874)

Wright’s anti-sentimentalist attack is undoubtedly directed toward white, rich women—“bankers’ daughters”—whose “consolation of tears” keeps them from “fac[ing]” the reality of racism in America. His comment in the interview conducted immediately before the publication
of *Native Son* also emphasizes a similar point: “[*Native Son*] is not a sentimental picture of Negro life. It accounts for human behavior and personality in terms of environmental factors” (Kinnamon and Fabre 27). Furthermore, going beyond just expressing his antipathy against sentimentality inherent in sympathy—“feeling for”—the writer also describes, in the above mentioned essay, a writerly as well as readerly form of empathy with—“feeling with”—Bigger Thomas:

> Always, as I wrote, I was both reader and writer, both the conceiver of the action and the appreciator of it. I tried to write so that, in the same instant of time, the objective and subjective aspects of Bigger’s life would be caught in a focus of prose. And always I tried to *render, depict*, not merely to tell the story. If a thing was cold, I tried to make the reader feel cold, and not just tell about it. In writing in this fashion, sometimes I’d find it necessary to use a stream of consciousness technique, then rise to an interior monologue, descend to a direct rendering of a dream state, then to a matter-of-fact depiction of what Bigger was saying, doing, and feeling. (878, italics original)

Wright’s design of empathy is undoubtedly modernistic in that he aims to zero the distance between the reader’s mind and the protagonist’s: “the most part the novel is rendered in the present; I wanted the reader to feel that Bigger’s story was happening *now*, like a play upon the stage or a movie unfolding upon the screen” (ibid., italics original).79 Also, the author claims that he minimized the narrator’s involvement with the story in order to dramatize the immediacy of the protagonist’s consciousness in the reader’s mind: “I kept out of the story as much as possible, for I wanted the reader to feel that there was nothing between him and Bigger; that the story was a special *première* given in his own private theater” (879, italics original). It is clearly observed in these comments that Wright intends to cultivate a purer form of empathy, empathy that is contrasted to other fellow-feelings—especially sympathy.

Thus, Wright’s design of empathy of *Native Son* is quite self-conscious and strategic. By avoiding the sentimental sympathy by which the sympathizer maintains a condescending distance toward the victimized other, the author wants to make the reader experience Bigger’s mind more directly and vicariously from within. Indeed, it goes without saying that the authorial

79 It is obvious that Wright captures the intersubjective distance between (the protagonist’s and the reader’s) minds in temporal terms rather than in spatial terms.
intention is always put in question in literary interpretations and critical theories; even in terms of narrative empathy specifically, as Suzanne Keen suggests, “empathy for a fictional character need not correspond with what the author appears to set up or invite” (*Empathy* 75, 136, and 169). It is commonsensical that the authorial strategic design of empathy is not always fully achieved or functional as the author intends. Nevertheless, it is also possible to say that the author still has a certain degree of control over readerly empathy by means of such narrative devices as focalization, free-indirect speech, realistic description, and others. Moreover, specifically in Wright’s case, he is not just aesthetically but also politically motivated to navigate and orient his (white) reader’s empathic imagination against the racial discourse of the time. Therefore, it is an indispensable procedure to examine the way in which the author’s empathic design is achieved in the novel.

Wright’s design can be considered to be “ambassadorial strategic empathy,” one of the forms of what Suzanne Keen calls “strategic empathy.” Strategic empathy is “a variety of author’s empathy, by which authors attempt to direct an emotional transaction through a fictional work aimed at a particular audience, not necessarily including every reader who happens upon the text” (*Empathy* 142). Keen offers three subcategories of strategic empathy: *bounded strategic empathy*, *ambassadorial strategic empathy*, and *broadcast strategic empathy*. Bounded strategic empathy is a strategic empathy that “occurs within an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others” (ibid.). Of course, it cannot be completely denied that Wright might possibly aim at this in-group oriented empathy among working-class African Americans in his description of Bigger Thomas, but it is safe to say that this is not the main intention of his empathic strategy for the book. It is, however, quite difficult to determine whether Wright’s strategic empathy should be categorized as ambassadorial strategic empathy, which “addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end,” or as broadcast strategic empathy, which “calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes” (ibid.).

This difficulty corresponds to the two competing interpretations of the novel in its reception history. According to Ian Afflerbach, *Native Son* has been largely received either as a protest novel (literary naturalist novel) by such critics as Alfred Kazin, Robert Bone, and Edward Margolies, or as an existentialist novel by those like Robert Butler, Katherine Fishburn, and Houston Baker. In the former line of reading, Bigger Thomas has been interpreted as “an
exemplary victim of reprehensible social conditions and Native Son [as] a seminal case study of literary naturalism” (Afflerbach 91) for the purpose of protesting against the American reality of racial inequality. If Native Son is viewed as a protest novel, Wright’s design of empathy can be regarded as ambassadorial strategic empathy in that the intention of the novel can be considered to be cultivating the white reader’s empathy with Bigger as an exemplary African American who is victimized by American racial injustice. On the other hand, the existentialist reading of the novel generally pays due “attention to Bigger as an individual” (ibid.), carefully following the protagonist’s personal struggle against the society that oppresses him. From this viewpoint, the author’s design of empathy could be understood as broadcast strategic empathy that directs the reader’s empathic focus on Bigger’s personal “vulnerabilities and hopes” toward universal ones. As we will see in the following, the critics who analyze the novel’s empathic strategy generally appear to agree upon the point that Wright effectively succeeded in using ambassadorial strategic empathy to create a protest novel. The novel is clearly addressed to white, middle class, liberal readers with the aim of cultivating their empathy for working-class African Americans so that the former can correctly recognize the racial structure of American society that oppressed the latter group of people. A point at issue is whether the novel does more than what a protest novel usually is designed to do by way of ambassadorial strategic empathy—in other words, whether the novel’s strategic empathy can be considered as broadcast one that submits universal “vulnerabilities and hopes” through empathy.

Going back to Giovannucci’s interpretation, she seems to imply that Wright is very much successful in terms not just of ambassadorial strategic empathy but also of broadcast strategic empathy. She does not explicitly mention any universal “vulnerability and hopes” in her arguments on Wright’s empathic design, but when she makes the case that “Wright conceived Native Son not only as an indictment of racism but as an analysis of the capitalistic American system which nurtured it” (109), she appears to imply that the author’s empathic strategy brings the reader’s focus on what makes Bigger vulnerable, which is “the capitalistic American system.” Moreover, when she argues that empathic reading makes it clear for the reader that “the violence—inherent and actual—of white racism would inevitably turn upon its progenitors” (114) as a version of “a basic Marxist tenet—that capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction” (113), Giovannucci seems to try reading relatively more universal values into the novel than those which a racial protest novel could offer. Thus, instead of seeing the book as just
a protest novel, Giovannucci’s reading seeks to interpret Wright’s design of empathy as something closer to broadcast strategic empathy.

Differing from Giovannucci’s interpretation, Eric Leake, in his “Humanizing the Inhuman: the Value of Difficult Empathy” seems to conclude that Wright’s broadcast strategic empathy in *Native Son* is ultimately a failure and is successful only within the limit of ambassadorial strategic empathy as a protest novel. To frame his entire argument, Leake sets up a standard between easy and difficult empathy, almost in the same way as Giovannucci purifies empathy of white, sentimental sympathy. Actually, what Leake considers as “easy empathy” is very similar to the concept of sympathy. According to Leake’s explanation, easy empathy is automatically directed toward “victims of abuse and oppression” and “helping us relate to characters and, by extension, helping us understand ourselves and our relations with the world” (175). But the main problem of easy empathy is that it is “a non-threatening form of empathy that does not much challenge our view of ourselves” and even “make[s] us complacent in that view, as we are reassured that we are the caring people we consider ourselves to be while we empathize with those who are suffering or in less advantageous situations” (ibid.). Conversely, what he calls difficult empathy “unsettles us and places easy empathy into question, showing us our vulnerabilities reflected in victims and our shared human capacity to victimize reflected in victimizers” (ibid.). Then, difficult empathy is an attempt to cognitively and affectively “reach out” (177) toward others whose experiences challenge or defy the limit of our understanding of them. Thus, Leake’s differentiation between easy and difficult empathy in favor of the latter of the dichotomy largely corresponds to Giovannucci’s separation between sympathy and empathy. Also, Leake’s difficult empathy can be considered to aim at the goal of what Keen calls broadcast strategic empathy.

With these premises, Leake takes up Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* as exemplary novels in which it is difficult to empathize with the protagonists: Bigger Thomas and Patrick Bateman are both serial-killer protagonists, who completely lack empathic concern for other people, precluding any easy form of empathy from the reader. In this way, Leake’s argument mainly problematizes readerly empathy, or how challenging and demanding—and therefore worth trying—it is for the reader, but he also evaluates writerly strategies of empathy as well. In his analysis of *Native Son*, Leake observes that “Empathy for Bigger Thomas is at its most difficult in the first two sections of the novel, ‘Fear’ and ‘Flight,’ as
he kills those who care about him and would try to help him” (178). He discusses how the first two sections of the novel challenge the reader to difficult empathy which requires the reader to understand the racial and economic environment that pushes Bigger into desperate actions. This empathic understanding, he claims, “blur[s] the boundaries between victim and victimizer” and makes it possible for us to “change[] how we understand others and ourselves” (ibid.) as well. Although the terminology, the focus, and the course of arguments are different, Leake’s analysis of the empathic strategy of the novel so far largely offers a similar interpretation to Giovannucci’s in that their interpretations are based on the idea that the novel or the writer demands the reader form an unsentimental version of empathy so that the reader can better understand what structurally constitutes the racial issues that afflict the protagonist in the story.

Leake’s argument, however, diverges from Giovannucci’s interpretation of Wright’s strategic empathy in terms of the evaluation of the ending of the novel. Seeing how the defense speech by Boris Max, Bigger’s lawyer, makes it suddenly easier for the reader to empathize with Bigger, Leake concludes his analysis of Native Son by claiming that “in the emphasis of [Bigger Thomas’s] victim status for the purposes of explicit social criticism, Thomas loses some of his power to affect how we understand ourselves and our own social situations” (180). In other words, while admitting that the novel achieves the goal of Wright’s ambassadorial strategic empathy as protest novel, Leake criticizes Native Son for the reason that by reducing the novel to nothing but a protest novel, the author eventually fails to maintain the difficult empathy that the reader feels with the protagonist in the final section.

Rajini Srikanth offers a short analysis of Wright’s Native Son in her larger argument, which covers the history of American literature, about the representation of empathy and antipathy, or about the way in which the latter can transform into the former. In the main course of her argument, she does not try to narrowly define the concept of empathy in contrast to other similar concepts, but in her analysis of Native Son in particular, she largely follows Wright’s design of rejecting “simple sentimental sympathy” (Srikanth 56), especially by emphasizing the connection of Wright’s design to the larger collective protest by such African-American writers as Chester Himes and Ralph Ellison against the racial structure of sentimental feeling or what Srikanth calls “white redemption” (55), whose attitude is typically represented by that of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. In this sense, Srikanth loosely shares with the other two critics the same assumption about Wright’s empathic deign.
Srikanth reads *Native Son* as “a record of white antipathy toward Bigger” (56) or as the failures of white empathy with him. Since her conceptualization of empathy is relatively loose enough to include sympathy and compassion as extensions of empathy, Srikanth, unlike the other critics, embraces empathy’s ambiguity and does not particularly discriminate between empathy and sympathy. Rather, she focuses on represented empathy depicted in the text, sketching the ways in which the white characters fail at or abuse empathy in their relations to Bigger. The two white characters she particularly takes up as negative examples of empathy are Jan Erlone, Mary Dalton’s boyfriend, and Buckley, the state’s prosecutor. According to Srikanth’s reading, Jan, who is a member of the Communist Party, “wants to rescue Bigger, [but] his Communist sympathies settle on Bigger as the ideal ‘project’ of left politics” and therefore he “cannot see Bigger in all his complexity and understands him only as the unfortunate product of a racist and failed capitalist system” (ibid.). As for Buckley, whose attitude and behavior are explicitly depicted as racist in the text, Srikanth points out that Buckley shows the capability of empathy in his dealing with Bigger and yet he abuses it as “feigning understanding of Bigger’s situation in order to make him pliable and willing to speak” (57). Srikanth analyzes that Buckley’s empathy can be understood as “a manifestation of cognitive empathy minus positive emotional empathy” (ibid., italics original), claiming that empathy without an emotional component can be “a manipulative instrument of power and control” (58). Srikanth then seems to consider that *Native Son* reaches the goal of Wright’s ambassadorial strategic empathy by way of revealing to the white readership “the dark side of empathy” (ibid.) represented in the white characters’ failed or abused attempts of empathic understanding of the African-American protagonist.

So far, we have seen three critics who discuss *Native Son*’s empathy. Although what each of the critics means by the concept of empathy slightly varies, it is worth investigating several points of their interpretations of the novel that overlap. First of all, what these three readings about the novel’s empathy seem to agree upon is Wright’s design of empathy that attempts to distinguish it from a sentimental or easy sympathy. Their interpretations differ in terms of whether the author’s intended empathy is well achieved or not, but none of these three critics questions the author’s scheme of empathy itself. Also, they appear to assume that, to use Keen’s terms, Wright’s novel at least achieves the goal of ambassadorial strategic empathy; but whether the goal of the more universalized version of strategic empathy—broadcast strategic empathy—is achieved or not is where their interpretations differ. Next, in terms of represented empathy in
the novel, it seems safe to say that the three critics all agree on the point that most of the characters fail at an empathic understanding of Bigger. The exceptions are Jan and Max, who seem to show a deeper understanding of the protagonist and his situation than any other character of the novel. The difference among the three critics’ interpretations largely depends on how to evaluate these relatively more empathic characters. Also, in relation to this, the critics generally concur on the point that Bigger himself lacks an empathic understanding of other people around him. A point at issue among the critics about Bigger’s empathic capability is whether to admit the possibility that Max, who shows some kind of fellow-feeling toward Bigger, or his speech, might influence the anti-empathic protagonist in any way. Lastly, as for readerly empathy, it is explicitly or implicitly assumed by all three critics that the reader is expected to make a deeper, empathic commitment to Bigger than a general form of sympathetic concern, and that readerly empathy readily cultivates an appropriate political awareness of the racial injustice in American society.

In the following, I will examine these points submitted by the three critics’ analyses. I will make my case mainly in the form of arguing against Leake’s analysis, which is the most organized and developed among them. My arguments about empathy of this novel will be centered on readerly empathy, but writerly and represented empathy will also be examined in relation to readerly empathy. The aim of my argument about the structure of the empathic feeling of the novel is to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the empathic strategy of the novel based on the previous studies of it.

**Strategy of Empathy in Native Son**

To start our analysis of the structure of the empathic feeling about Bigger Thomas, it would be appropriate to begin with an examination of Leake’s claim about empathy in *Native Son*. As quoted above, Leake claims that “Empathy for Bigger Thomas is at its most difficult in the first two sections of the novel,” but he does not explain why it is difficult, except for a brief comment that “he kills those who care about him and would try to help him” (178), implying that the Bigger of the first two sections is not a protagonist worthy of (an easy form of) readerly empathy because he is, after all, a murderer of two women or, to use a word from Leake’s essay title, because Bigger is an “inhumane” character lacking the capability of empathy and akin to Patrick Bateman of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, the other target character of Leake’s
analysis. Indeed, as Suzanne Keen points out in reference to Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner*, for example, “Humans feel empathy. We aren’t the only animals to do so, but empathy seems so basic a human trait that lacking it can be seen as a sign of inhumanity” (*Empathy* 6). It is usually difficult to empathize with someone who lacks the capability of empathy, someone in whom we cannot recognize a trait of humanity to be shared through empathy. Even though he is not an “android” in any sense, it seems at least possible to say that Bigger Thomas’s lack of empathic capability or humanity, inferred from his murderous actions in the plot, might make the reader hesitate to empathize with him.

However, my contention is that, contrary to Leake’s claim, it is not so difficult as Leake claims it is for the reader to empathize with the Bigger Thomas of the first two sections of the novel. In other words, it can be said that Richard Wright has designed the first two sections to facilitate as much readerly empathy with his protagonist as possible. I will discuss this point in the following from several angles, but let us see one example of the general reader’s reaction first. In an essay that reports student reaction to *Native Son* in 1988, Paul Newman observes how his “predominantly white, middle-class, college students at state universities in the Northeast” (138) were generally “shocked, sobered, and put into a reflective mood” (139) every time he assigned the book for his course. These types of reactions Newman reports—“the fear, the guilt, the horror” (145) instead of sentimental sympathetic reactions—illustratively testify to their empathic reading of Bigger, especially of him in the first two sections, where the protagonist experiences “the fear, the guilt, the horror” mainly in relation to his two murders and life on the run thereafter. Admittedly, these emotions are negative, distasteful ones, and some readers might find it difficult to experience such negative emotions. But, overall, it would need no further evidence to consider Newman’s students’ empathic reaction as a common one shared by many other readers of the novel, even by those of today.

*Native Son*’s syncretism of genres also makes it easy for the reader to empathize with Bigger in the first two sections—“easy” in a different sense from Leake’s “easy” empathy. More specifically, with its crime fiction narrative, the novel is strategically designed to make the reader readily empathic with the protagonist. In that sense, Newman’s students’ reaction to the novel such as “the fear, the guilt, the horror” would also be typically common emotional reactions for an empathic reader of crime fiction, where the reader is expected to be ready for negative emotions elicited by its plot or characters’ actions. Although Leake himself does not make this
point, it is suggestive that he juxtaposes the two crime fictions—*Native Son* and *American Psycho*—side by side in his discussion of difficult empathy. Like Ellis’s *American Psycho*, the first two sections of Wright’s book definitively take the form of a crime fiction narrative, which could strongly appeal to a larger, middle-brow/-class, mainly white, audience. Heather Duerre Humann, who examines *Native Son*’s complexity of genre, claims that “the novel resists any easy generic classification, precisely because Wright violates all of these genres [such as social protest fiction, crime fiction, courtroom drama, and bildungsroman] as they are traditionally understood” (143). In other words, *Native Son*’s syncretism of literary genres, especially crime fiction, suggests Wright’s effort to appeal to a wider audience. While depicting a complex situation of American racism, he also had to acquire and appeal to a large audience because, as an African-American writer, he sought to raise public awareness of the racial reality of the American society of the time.

Wright’s attitude with regard to popular fiction genres corresponds to his abstemious use of modernist techniques. According to Craig Werner, who discusses Wright’s blues articulation of *Native Son* in the context of African-American modernism, one of the reasons why Wright, while very familiar with modernist experiences of art of the time, did not write his first novel in a more conspicuously modernist fashion could be that “To employ a modernist form would have been to relinquish the possibility of an audience, of the contact which Wright consistently images as crucial to full articulation. Speaking from margins of Euro-American discourse, Wright could not risk further marginalization” (141). The same argument can be made in terms of Wright’s empathic design of this novel. It would make more sense to assume that Wright employs the form of crime fiction to invite more readers to be readily empathic with his protagonist. To inhibit easy access to the empathic understanding of Bigger for the sake of deeper empathy, if possible at all, might have resulted in no empathy at all from the general readership. Rather, it would be more appropriate to consider that Wright’s empathic strategy is deployed for the reader to readily empathize with the protagonist. The employment of crime fiction narrative is a huge part of that strategy.

Of course, Bigger Thomas is a serial killer who seems to (at least at first) lack the capability of empathy with or concern for others. Bigger’s hideous crimes might make morally sensitive readers hesitate to identify with the protagonist. But it is also true that the reader, especially the one who is familiar with popular fiction, knows well that the reader can empathize
even with a villain, especially in crime fiction. Indeed, moral sensitivity sometimes “limits one’s capacity to empathize with those who perform atrocious acts” (Morton 318). Nevertheless, the form of the crime fiction narrative of the first two sections of *Native Son*, or the horizon of expectation inherent in the genre, effectively suspends moral sensitivity that would otherwise impede readerly empathy with the protagonist. Also, it goes without saying that the use of a narrative point of view that is almost exclusively identified with Bigger’s mind, rendered in a realism depiction with the fitting occasional application of free indirect speech, facilitates the reader’s empathic reading of Bigger in that the narrative leaves no other choice for the reader but to follow Bigger’s thoughts and feelings closely.

This type of strategy employed by Wright to facilitate readerly empathy in *Native Son* might also be understood as one of the variations of what John Reilly sees as the “signifying” strategy of the novel, which is, according to Reilly, “an example of creative politics that draws upon a store of knowledge about the way of white folks to achieve ends that custom and prevalent racial assumptions deem improper” (42).80 Employing a crime fiction narrative for Bigger’s murder plot is such a “signifying,” an attempt to effectively invite the white majority readership to emphatically reconstruct in their mind “the fear, the guilt, the horror” of the African-American protagonist without scaring them off with these otherwise negative and repelling emotions. Reilly considers the novel as “a remarkable innovation in American realistic fiction” and argues that while American “normative texts create an identification between readers and authors that expresses the monopoly of discourse by a ruling caste and class,” such monopolized discourse is “exactly what Richard Wright aims to subvert in *Native Son* by use of a narrative point of view that draws readers beneath the externals of surface realism, so that as they are led into empathy with Bigger, they will be denied the conventional attitudes of American racial discourse” (46). In this sense, to empathize with Bigger is not necessarily difficult for the reader. Rather, contrary to Leake’s assumption, it is actually readily accessible for the reader to empathize with Bigger Thomas in the first two sections of the novel.

As we have seen so far, Leake’s claim that it is difficult for the reader to empathize with Bigger seems questionable. Rather, *Native Son* invites, or has to invite, readerly empathy with Bigger in order to achieve the goal of raising awareness on the American racism of the time. The

80 Reilly’s definition of “signifying” seems inclusively large in its application to his discussions. See Reilly 41-43 for his general argument on the concept of “signifying” in terms of *Native Son*.  

103
dichotomy between easy and difficult empathy—especially, the dichotomic discrimination in favor of the latter—seems too simplistic in that it cannot fathom the complexity of the author’s strategic design of empathy. If anything, it is not readerly empathy with Bigger but readerly sympathy or compassion for him that is actually difficult in the first two sections of the novel. Bigger’s action in the first two sections is in itself not a kind of action worthy of simple sympathy or compassion. Indeed, the reader might want to take sides with Bigger, but as I will argue later, if the reader can be sympathetic or compassionate for Bigger, that fellow-feeling owes much to Max’s speech that takes place in the final section of the novel. Max’s speech makes it possible for the reader to be retrospectively and retroactively sympathetic and compassionate for Bigger and his actions depicted in the first two sections. This testifies to the significance of the final section where readerly empathy with Bigger is to be challenged, but before examining the final section of the novel, it is necessary to analyze the representation of Bigger’s (failure of) empathy in the first two sections of the novel. Since the narrator does not particularly contextualize Bigger’s racial situation from a larger perspective but almost exclusively focuses on the protagonist’s limited perspective, the reader is made to experience “the fear, the guilt, the horror” of the protagonist empathically with him. In the following, we will see how readerly empathy with Bigger becomes exclusively intimate and private for the reader through the first two sections of the novel.

**Bigger’s Incapability of Empathy**

In the first two sections of *Native Son*, what is difficult is not readerly empathy but actually Bigger’s empathy with other people around him. Bigger is depicted as an empathy-less/sympathy-less, self-centered character from the beginning of the novel. In the famous opening “rat” scene where he kills a huge rat and makes his sister, Vera, faint with fright by showing the dead rat to her, he impresses on the reader not only his violent cruelty but also his lack of concern for others and of perspective-taking imagination, as his mother reproaches: “‘Suppose you wake up some morning and find your sister dead? What would you think then?’ she asked. ‘Suppose those rats cut our veins at night when we sleep? Naw! Nothing like that ever

---

81 See Newlin 140 and Reilly 45, for instance. They point out a tendency that, despite his murder of them, the general reader takes sides with Bigger rather than with Mary or Bessie, actual victims in the story.
bothers you! All you care about is your own pleasure!” (452). If empathy requires a capability of “putting oneself in another’s shoe,” in other words, a capability of imaginative displacement of oneself in a situation cognitively and affectively different from one’s own of here and now, Bigger’s lack of imagination or incapability to “Suppose” might be an indicator of his lack of basic empathic skills.

Nevertheless, it is not necessarily accurate to say that Bigger completely lacks any empathic skill. As Ross Pudaloff, who claims that Bigger’s identity is made under the influence of mass culture and media, points out (160-1), Bigger is of the same type as other Wright characters who desire to identify themselves with heroes on a movie screen and, in fact, Bigger decides to accept a job with the Daltons after watching a movie featuring Mary and Jan. This form of Bigger’s identification cannot exactly be called empathy, but he is undoubtedly capable of imaginatively putting himself in someone else’s situation or thinking about what it is like to be in a different situation from one’s own—the idealized world of “the rich white people who were smart and knew how to treat people” (476), in this particular case of Bigger. This is just an envious kind of identification with the (false) ideal, but to imagine oneself in a different situation from one’s own is a necessary condition for empathy and Bigger’s envious identification with the white world can be considered as an incipient skill set for empathic imagination, though he does not make use of it for building a meaningful relationship with others.

It is worth noting that the power structure of Bigger’s envious identification with the idealized world of “the rich white people” is isomorphic (in a mirroring fashion) with the structure of the white sympathetic gaze toward Bigger, despite its difference in perspective. In the former, Bigger ambitiously desires to be a member of the idealized world of “the rich white people,” imaginatively breaking—or simply ignoring—economic, social, and racial barriers

---

82 For my discussion of Native Son, I will refer to the Library of America version (1991) of the restored text rather than to the originally published version. The novel was originally published in 1940 after the original manuscript’s sexual and political passages among others had been censored by the Book-of-the-Month Club and Harper editor Edward Aswell. As Kenneth Kinnaman observes, “the uncensored version is closer to authorial intention in its graphic power than the tamer version published in 1940” (“Library” 175). Since my argument is examining the author’s strategic empathy, it is more appropriate to use the Library of America version in that the restored version is considered to reflect better the “authorial intention” in many ways and is more useful for my argument than the censored version. See Kinnaman “How” 119-24 for a further examination of the censor’s influence on the text; see also Raynaud for a “critical genetic reading” of the censorship of the text.
between him and the rich white people; but since his desire for the ideal is not to be fulfilled in reality, the power structure that separates him from the rich white people maintains the status quo, thus reproducing his desire by setting up the barriers again; it is the barriers themselves that create his desire to imaginatively cross them. In the latter, the white sympathetic gaze toward Bigger indeed desires to emotionally reach out to him; but firstly because sympathy structurally requires a certain degree of psychological distance toward the target object, and secondly because the sympathizer’s emotion tends to be cathartically consumed on the sympathizer’s part regardless of the target object, the power structure that distances Bigger from the sympathizer remains intact or reinforced, reaffirming the condescending distance that allows the rich white people to sympathize for him. Thus, both sides try to reach out to each other from respective positions but to no avail, resulting in the reinforcement of the existing hierarchical structure. The mirroring similarity between these two gazes suggests two significant points for our argument. First, these two structures of feeling in tandem reinforce the economic, social, and racial distance—therefore preserve the asymmetrical power balance—between the dominant white and the oppressed African-American protagonist. The second is that the very structural similarity implies a possibility that Bigger internalizes the white sympathetic gaze himself. It is not that he feels sympathy with “the rich white people” at all but that he knows that they want to sympathize for him for their own good and that he accepts it as part of his reality of the world with which he is (at least at first) comfortable. Thus, the white sympathetic gaze and Bigger’s envious gaze are complicit with each other, reassuring the status quo of the racial structure of emotion.

In terms of this white sympathetic gaze, many critics often take Mr. and Mrs. Dalton as the two most exemplary figures of such white complacent sympathy, which is undoubtedly correct. However, since my argument analyzes sympathy in relation to empathy, it might be more illustrative to observe a scene in which Peggy, the Dalton’s housekeeper, tries to sympathize with—at the same time as she fails to empathize with—Bigger when he visits the Dalton’s for the first time.

“Was [Mrs. Dalton] alone?”
“Yessum.”
“Poor thing! Mrs. Patterson, who takes care of her, is away for the week-end and she’s all alone. Isn’t it too bad, about her?”
“Oh, yessum,” [Bigger] said, trying to get into his voice some of the pity for Mrs. Dalton that he thought Peggy expected him to feel.

“It’s really more than a job you’ve got here,” Peggy went on. “It’s just like home. I’m always telling Mrs. Dalton that this is the only home I’ll ever know. I wasn’t in this country but two years before I started working here…."

“Oh,” said Bigger, looking at her.

“I’m Irish, you know,” she said. “My folks in the old country feel about England like the colored folks feel about this country. So I know something about colored people. Oh, these are fine people, fine as silk. Even the girl. Did you meet her yet?” (498)

Clearly Peggy shows sympathy for Mrs. Dalton, almost too theatrically; and by so doing, the immigrant white working-class housekeeper tries to take sides with the American white dominant class represented by the Daltons. Swaggering under borrowed authority, she then tries to make Bigger take her side, too, by attempting to elicit the same sympathetic feeling for Mrs. Dalton from him. And Peggy even tries to show an empathic understanding of Bigger by suggesting the generic situational similarity between Irish and African-American people. Indeed, to find some kind of similarity can be a good first step for further empathic understanding, but her comparison is clearly too simplistic and reductive in that she is content to be just aware of the generic similarity, not recognizing the historical and cultural differences between them that would allow further understanding, let alone trying to treat Bigger as an individual. In this way, Peggy tries to reach out to Bigger by way of sympathy but her recourse to the stereotypical and generic similarity simply does nothing but to demarcate the interracial distance between the two.

With that said, what is still more striking about this scene is the fact that Bigger can pretend to show, without a qualm, “the pity for Mrs. Dalton that he thought Peggy expected him to feel.” This nonchalant pretension of the expected “pity” by Bigger denotes that he almost unquestioningly internalizes the white sympathetic gaze as his reality and pretends the emotion like it is his familiar survival technique. At least at this early point of the story, Bigger seems comfortable with the condescendingly sympathetic white gaze that actually distances him.

Mary Dalton is the only character through the first two sections who attempts to overcome the sympathetic distance. Bigger is so comfortable with the sympathetic distance imposed by the white dominant class that Mary causes a great consternation in Bigger:
Oh, boy! This would be an easy life. Everything was all right, except [Mary]. She worried him. She might cause him to lose his job if she kept talking about unions. She was a funny girl, all right. Never in his life had he met anyone like her. She puzzled him. She was rich, but she didn’t act like she was rich. She acted like….Well, he didn’t know exactly what she did act like. In all of the white women he had met, mostly on jobs and at relief stations, there was always a certain coldness and reserve; they stood their distance and spoke to him from afar. But this girl waded right in and hit him between the eyes with her words and ways. (500)

To Bigger, Mary Dalton is the first ambassador of empathy, if not a perfect one. She constantly acts in a subversive way in relation to the stable power structure of the sympathetic racial distancing that Bigger comfortably and conservatively accepts. With Jan, she asks Bigger to take them to “one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places” to “just see how [Bigger’s] people live” from inside at first hand, insisting that “they must live like we live. They are human” (510, italics original). Indeed, Mary’s actions and thoughts are deeply influenced by the communist ideology she commits to as a sympathizer of the Party, but instead of just regarding Bigger as a stereotypical victimized figure of racism, she and Jan in fact try to be “friends” with him (515), forming a friendship intimate enough to elicit from him his personal history dating back to his original birth in Mississippi (514-5). Indeed, there is no ideally empathic moment in the relationship between Mary and Bigger throughout the novel, but if Mary’s effort for empathic understanding of Bigger does not appear enough in the novel, it might be because their relationship, as Bigger himself says after the murder, just does not last “long or well enough for that” (550).

In this sense, Bigger’s murder of Mary is his rejection of empathy or any other fellow-feeling directed toward him. His murder of her is indeed not a deliberate action; it is almost an accidental homicide. However, murdering Mary allows him to transcend possible fellow relationships with others and changes his way of seeing people around him. As many critics have pointed out, Bigger begins to consider all the people around him as “blind” after his first murder. As Afflerbach argues, Bigger’s rhetoric of blindness denotes “not merely a racially coded failure of sympathy, or of the empirical faculties, but a limit on understanding” (94) or that which “constrains the interpretations that others might form of Bigger and his life” and “In Book II,
blindness rapidly develops into the governing metaphor through which the narrative isolates Bigger from the world around him. … Blindness serves as the presiding figure for this ‘barrier,’ protecting Bigger, and yet preventing other characters from understanding him” (95). Branding people around him as blind is his negation of any germination of relationship based on fellow-feelings, let alone an empathic one. To kill Mary—the only empathic character he knows at this point of the story—is his first step in eliminating any possibility of empathic understanding of him by others. Also, his concealment of the murder, as long as it lasts, guarantees that no one understands his thoughts and feelings in any accurately empathic manner in that no one knows his true identity as a murderer. Now he knows any attempt by others to understand him will necessarily fail, he transcends any affective concern for and from others. On the morning after the murder, eating breakfast with his family, Bigger thinks: “Yes; he could sit here calmly and eat and not be concerned about what his family thought or did. He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them. … He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them; they were incapable of even thinking that he had done such a deed” (542). This situation of Bigger, in which no one but himself understands his true identity as a murderer, actually provides him with a new, personal power: power as knowledge. The power derived from the knowledge that only he knows the truth allows him to transcend and make use of the power structure that used to implicate him in the form of his own idealized identification with the rich white people and of the white sympathetic gaze toward him all at once. Bigger realizes: “The whole thing came to him in the form of a powerful and simple feeling; there was in everyone a great hunger to believe that made him blind, and if he could see while others were blind, then he could get what he wanted and never be caught at it” (543).

Despite the power with which the private monopoly of knowledge of his act of murder provides him, Bigger’s transcendence—or negation—of any humanly meaningful relationship through fellow-feelings naturally makes him vulnerably isolated from the world. Therefore, even in “rare moments when a feeling and longing for solidarity with other black people would take hold of him” (550), Bigger’s vision of the “solidarity” inevitably takes on a negative and pessimistic tone, as he considers that such solidarity could take place “only when [they are] threatened with death” and “Only in fear and shame, with their backs against a wall” (ibid.).
It is also true, however, that despite his negation, Bigger still “long[s] for” a meaningful relationship with other people. At the end of the second section when he is cornered by the police search, he speculates about empathic relationship with others:

> It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black. (671)

His ideal of interpersonal relationship expressed here is quite empathic in that he desires to establish his own identity through intersubjective “merg[ing]” with others without any intermediate psychological distance, to the extent of initially “los[ing] himself in it.” This image is completely different from his earlier, envious identification with the white world represented on a movie screen, even though mass culture’s influence on him is still obvious here. Indeed, Bigger’s vision of an empathic relationship with others expressed here is still idealistic, but it is noticeable that this ideal centers on the establishment of intersubjective relationships with others on an equal footing.

The reader’s narrative empathy with Bigger becomes at this point exclusively intimate. Bigger’s rejection of fellowship with other characters while longing for an idealized empathic relation to others gives readerly empathy with him a sense of exclusive intimacy, a sense that only the reader is empathically understanding him. The empathic reader understands his true identity through narrative despite his self-acclaimed monopoly of the knowledge. This exclusively intimate sense of empathic connection is to be tested in the final section with the advent of another empathic character of the novel, Max.

**Empathy and Politics**

Even after he is caught by the police and imprisoned, Bigger still longs for “a new identification with some part of the world in which he lived, and this identification forming the basis for a new hope that would function in him as pride and dignity” (702). He understands, however, that “maybe it would never come; maybe there was no such thing for him” (ibid.), as he waits for the inevitable outcome that is the death penalty, which leaves him no time or chance to build a meaningful relationship with the world. At such a moment, Max appears as a character
who attempts to empathize with him and even propagate his empathic understanding of Bigger to the audience in the form of his plea to court.\footnote{I use the term “audience” in terms of Max’s speech to refer to the judge, who is the main addressee of his speech in court, the jurors and the people who attend the court, and, meta-narratively, the reader of the novel as well.}

Max’s speech has been notorious among literary critics of the novel for various reasons. One of the reasons for its notoriety lies in the fact that, as one critic puts it, “Max, for all this good will, has never really seen Bigger’s individual humanity” (Skerrett 38) in that the lawyer presents the defendant as an exemplary victim of the American racist environment. In fact, at the beginning of his speech, Max calls Bigger “a symbol, a test symbol” and claims that “The prejudices of men have stained this symbol, like a germ stained for examination under the microscope” (804). To commute the death sentence to life imprisonment, Max has to contextualize Bigger’s life in the light of American racial injustice and, in doing so, he chooses to offer the image of Bigger as “a symbol” of victimized African Americans, not as an individual with autonomous agency. As I summarized earlier, among the critics of the novel’s empathy, Leake considers this as weakness in that with Max’s speech “the reader begins to empathize with Thomas as a victim, and so his actions are retroactively seen in that context” (179).\footnote{To avoid a possible misunderstanding, it should be noted that Leake is discussing “easy empathy” in the quote. His argument is that readerly empathy with Bigger becomes easier (and therefore sympathetic) by seeing him as victim by way of Max’s speech. As for the other critics of the novel’s empathy, Giovannucci takes it that “Max had regarded [Bigger] with empathy, precisely at a time when Bigger—having renounced the sense of power which his crimes falsely led him to experience—was able to receive it, and more importantly, to reciprocate it” (110-11). However, she does not discuss either Max’s speech or the crucial misunderstanding between Max and Bigger at the end of the novel. Therefore, Giovannucci’s claim about Max’s empathy seems unconvincing. Srikanth does not mention Max at all; but she instead discusses Jan’s (failed) empathic attempt to understand Bigger and makes a case that “Jan … cannot see Bigger in all his complexity and understands him only as the unfortunate product of a racist and failed capitalist system. Jan wants to rescue Bigger, and his Communist sympathies settle on Bigger as the ideal ‘project’ of a left politics” (56).}

In other words, the rhetoric of Max’s speech tries to elicit sympathy for Bigger by depicting him as a victim. Indeed, there is nothing sentimental or condescending about the form of sympathy that Max evokes, but his sympathetic rhetoric still victimizes Bigger’s existence.

At the same time, however, as Paul Siegel points out (109), Max himself explicitly tries to prevent his audience from sentimentally sympathizing for Bigger: “Allow me … to state
emphatically that I do not claim that this boy is a victim of injustice, nor do I ask that this Court be sympathetic with him. … Let us banish from our minds the thought that this is an unfortunate victim of injustice” (809, italics original). Cautioning the audience to not to be sympathetic with Bigger, Max attempts to make the audience empathize with him by encouraging them to take on Bigger’s perspective: “The central fact to be understood here is not who wronged this boy, but what kind of a vision of the world did he have before his eyes, and where did he get such a vision …” (817). In this sense, it can even be said that Max’s speech is exactly embodying Wright’s strategy of empathy expressed in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born.” Like the author of the novel, Max offers his own version of Bigger’s “raw stuff of life, emotions and impulses and attitudes” (808) so that the audience vicariously understands it without naïvely forming the sympathetic gaze toward him and without molding him as a victim. Moreover, as Siegel correctly points out (110-12), Max’s speech even relies on the themes and images that recur in Bigger’s mind in the first two sections of the novel to evoke Bigger’s subjective reality in the mind of the audience. Max then seems to compose his speech so that the audience can simulate Bigger’s individualized internal reality as accurately and closely as possible.

There is then apparently a contradictory element to Max’s rhetoric, if empathy must be distinguished from sympathy as the critics of the empathy of this novel as well as the author himself insist. On the one hand, Max designs his speech as an empathy-inducing narrative devoid of sympathetic distancing toward Bigger. With that design, the lawyer seeks to commute Bigger’s likely death sentence to life imprisonment by making the audience understand the defendant’s perspective: by letting them reconstruct in their mind his internal reality that has been structurally deformed by the American racial environment. On the other hand, his speech has to emphasize Bigger’s existence as a symbolic victim of American racial injustice, rather than as an individual, to explain the social and historical contexts that led him to commit the serial murder and to elicit in the audience merciful emotion for Bigger. It seems there are two competing rhetorical designs at work in his speech.

---

85 Max repeats a similar warning of sympathy a couple of pages later (810-11).
86 Siegel confirms “blindness” (110-12), “the wall or curtains or veil behind which Bigger withdraws and hides rather than face reality” (112), and “The theme that Bigger’s killing has given him a freedom he never before had” (112) as the themes and images Max uses in his speech that also appears in Bigger’s mind in the first two sections.
Indeed, it is possible to consider that Max simply fails to properly effect his empathic rhetoric and lapses into a sympathetic victimization of Bigger. Or it can be argued that empathy and sympathy are two compatible modes and can occur at the same time. My contention is that Max’s contradiction represents a larger problem entailed in the very narrative design to separate empathy from sympathy. If we remember that Wright tries to prevent the reader from forming sympathy for Bigger in the same way as Max does, it can be said that Max is the implied author of the novel. Just as Wright strategizes the novel so that the reader can vicariously experience Bigger’s thoughts and emotions without the sympathetic distance toward him, Max narrates Bigger’s life in his speech so that the audience can empathize with the protagonist without sympathizing with him. Eventually at the end of the novel, Max’s rhetoric and Wright’s design differ from each other, but let us see the problem they share in terms of their insistence on the distinction between empathy and sympathy.

It is helpful here for our argument to refer to Coplan’s explanation of the difference between empathy and sympathy, the one derived from the psychological and philosophical literature of empathy. She summarizes it as follows:

> Sympathy involves caring about another individual—feeling for another. It does not as such involve sharing the other’s experience. While sympathetic emotions are typically triggered by and related to a target individual’s emotions, they need not be qualitatively the same. … Sympathy means having concern for another’s well-being, not imaginatively experiencing her mental states. This is an important difference. Just as I can sympathize with another without trying to imagine the world from her perspective, I can also empathize with another without experiencing concern for her well-being. (“Empathic” 145, italics original)

If this is the case, the design to forcefully distinguish empathy from sympathy leads to “empath[y] with another without experiencing concern for her well-being.” Empathy without sympathy might allow the audience/the reader to relive Bigger’s mental state as purely and faithfully as possible but the problem is that it might mean to take the risk of individualizing Bigger’s mental state too much and not eliciting any concern for his well-being, let alone concern for that of oppressed African Americans. In reality, empathy without sympathy would

---

87 As Coplan points out, “Perhaps one of the reasons for the frequent conflation of empathy and sympathy is that they often occur simultaneously.” (“Empathic” 145).
be an extreme case. The distinction between the two is usually vague, especially when the target individual is in need of help or in a predicament; empathy and sympathy can co-occur and correlate to each other in most cases. Max’s speech can actually be regarded as a compromise between the two modes, despite his initial insistence on the distinction. For his speech has to aim, above all, at the judge’s extenuation of Bigger’s circumstances, and Max needs to let the audience not only share Bigger’s experience but also have concern for him. In this sense, Max’s compromised strategic empathy cannot go much further than doing what a protest novel is supposed to do. To put it in Keen’s terms introduced earlier, the strategic empathy of Max’s speech is ambassadorial at best in that it addresses the white audience with the aim of cultivating their empathy for Bigger (and the African Americans he represents) to raise awareness of the racial injustice inherent in American society, which he believes results in Bigger’s extenuation. Thus, Max’s speech embodies the paradox of the empathy/sympathy distinction when it is employed in narrative fiction for protest or social purposes.

Conversely, Wright tries to execute the strategy of empathy more thoroughly than Max. In this sense, he seeks to make the novel more than just a protest novel. But he does so, not “by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes” by way of broadcast strategic empathy, but by suddenly negating readerly empathic access to Bigger. First, the author depicts Bigger as an isolated individualist while exposing Max’s compromised rhetoric. Thankful as he is to Max for making such a strong speech for him, Bigger “had not understood the speech” (826), revealing how the speech’s sympathetic generalizing effect fails to reach him as an individual. After the death sentence is handed down, the reader observes how the distance between Bigger and Max becomes irrevocably conspicuous and how Max loses access to Bigger’s mind: “Max reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder, and Bigger could tell by its touch that Max did not know, had no suspicion of what he wanted, of what he was trying to say. Max was upon another planet, far off in space. Was there any way to break this wall of isolation?” (843). In fact, while Max ascribes too much significance to Bigger’s life/death in his speech and conversation with his client, Bigger himself simply accepts his identity as a murderer with no apparent self-justification or sense of being victimized, thus defying Max’s victimizing rhetoric. Bigger calmly “felt that his life was not worth the effort that Max had made to save it” (826-27). Even at their final meeting, while Max gives him the final advice that “y-you’ve got to b-believe in yourself,” Bigger almost indifferently replies that “Aw, I reckon I believe in myself. … I ain’t got nothing
else. … I got to die. …” (848). Bigger justly understands his murder as a wrongdoing that should be punished. For Bigger understands that his identity consists of nothing more or less than what he did: “what I killed for, I am! (849, italics original). Thus, at the ending of the novel, Bigger is left alone without being understood by anybody while solitarily embracing his fragile identity, repeating the phrase “I’m all right” (848-850).

Like Max, the reader is denied empathic access to Bigger at the end of the novel. The previous instance when Bigger was in complete solitude without being understood by any characters around him was in the second section of the novel, giving the reader exclusive access to his internal mind and therefore allowing the building of an empathically intimate relationship with the protagonist. In the ending scene, however, this is not the case anymore. Different from the first two sections where the narrative focus is narrowly and limitedly put on the protagonist’s consciousness, this ending scene is mostly composed of the conversations between Bigger and Max, and the reader has to accept the role of the listener to Bigger’s inarticulate voice, almost in the same capacity as Max. The reader at this point cannot know Bigger’s mind any better than Max does, thus losing the exclusive, intimate empathic access to his consciousness. What the reader encounters through Bigger’s inarticulate voice that distances the reader from him is a sense of otherness in Bigger, which is manifested in the form of Max’s “terror” (849). Curiously, in a rare descriptive part of narrative of this ending scene, the narrator moves away from Bigger’s consciousness and closely follows, albeit externally, Max’s action as if to align the reader’s perspective with Max’s, whose eyes are “full of terror” (849). The author himself explains in the essay that “The lawyer, Max, was placed in Bigger’s cell at the end of the novel to register the moral—or what I felt the moral—horror of Negro life in the United States” (880, italics original). While Bigger’s behavior at the end indeed does “shock [the] readers into a new awareness of the terrible dimensions of American racism” (Kinnamon “How” 127), it also brings the reader, along with Max, to a humble realization that there is always an unbridgeable distance between the white and African-American minds, between the privileged and the underprivileged, or more generally between human minds. It is an awareness of otherness, which always challenges our complacent attitude of empathic understanding. That is why, at the end of the novel, the author attempts to negate readerly empathy with Bigger by leaving him in an almost solipsistic solitude. However, it is also true that there has to be in the first place a distance or sense of otherness that divides our minds in order for us to want to bridge that gap by way of
empathy. Introducing a sense of otherness is then not necessarily a rejection of empathy but rather a renewed invitation to it. How to approach or react to otherness should vary for each reader, but seeing through the fence the figure of Bigger “[holding] on to the bar” (850), the reader still desires to keep reaching out to him with a renewed empathic feeling toward him. This empathy that encounters a sense of otherness but renews itself for a further understanding—empathy as process—is what Wright’s design of empathy ultimately intends to achieve.

There still remains one problem about *Native Son* with regard to empathy. That the author chooses to renew readerly empathy into a process by introducing Bigger’s otherness means that he makes readerly empathy a more intimate, more personal, and therefore more individualized approach to Bigger. But, whatever form or path each reader’s empathic process takes, as long as this novel is also expected to take on the role of protest novel that serves for racial political purposes, a question to be asked is whether or not readerly empathy of the novel, by which the reader reconstructs, experiences, and reaches out to Bigger’s mind and recognizes the racial injustice through his mind, is enough to cultivate such appropriately prosocial and political consciousness about American racism, especially when the reader’s empathic connection to the protagonist becomes this personal and individualized. Even though it may sometimes cultivate a certain degree of awareness or provide a certain kind of incentive for prosocial behavior on the personal level, empathic reading by itself is, after all, a private experience, taking place in the private sphere, not the public sphere. Empathic reading of novels does not necessarily contribute to the empathic reader’s moral improvement, as Keen reports that “the evidence for a relationship between narrative empathy and the prosocial motivation of actual readers does not support the grand claims often made on behalf of empathy” (*Empathy* 145). It is always difficult to translate personal empathic experiences to prosocial, political actions in general. Nevertheless, as Kimberly Davis argues in her reception study of the white empathic reading of African-American literary works, it should be noted that:

When the personal and often emotional act of reading fiction is followed by group discussion prompting connections between the book’s content and larger social and political concerns—as often happens in book clubs, college classrooms, Internet discussion boards, or even televised forums such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show*—the lines between the public and the private become increasingly blurred. (82)
In that sense, empathic reading, as she claims, can be regarded as “an incipient form of political action rather than its antithesis” (109). In fact, Keen herself emphasizes a similar point in her recent article: “In narrative empathy as in other aspects of moral development, people have more influence on other people than narrative fiction by itself” (“Novel” 24). Then, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, which heavily relies on readerly empathic involvement with Bigger, should be not just read more empathically but also must be discussed more often and broadly in class, in book clubs, or anywhere, with anybody, for every political implication of its empathic potential to be fully explored.
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation that discussed the American novels by William Faulkner, Nathanael West, and Richard Wright, I have attempted to delineate the concept of modernist empathy as a radical urge for intersubjective immediacy between minds, while adjusting the concept of empathy and narrative empathy as each situation requires instead of squeezing various manifestations of empathy into a single, standardized definition. I observed how those writers struggle to represent modernist empathy by differentiating it from its similar psychological phenomena, especially sympathy. Instead of establishing empathy’s predominance over sympathy, however, I paid detailed attention to the constantly oscillating dynamic between a modernist urge for empathic immediacy and a realistic compromise of sympathetic distancing, thus revealing empathy’s instability and ambiguity.

After briefly overviewing Amy Coplan’s conceptualization of empathy and sketching three categories of narrative empathy in the introduction, I attempted in chapter 1 to explain the concept of modernist empathy. To do so, I first examined the discourse that surrounded the concept of empathy at the time. In this process, the concept of modernist empathy was delineated in contrast to its sisterly concept of sympathy. Then, since empathy and sympathy do not always form a clear dichotomy, it was argued that modernist empathy should be captured in the process of the oscillating dynamic between modernist urge for empathy and sympathetic compromise of distancing.

The second chapter discussed how modernist empathy is manifested in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* according to the three categories of narrative empathy. First, the novel’s experimental narrative was analyzed in terms of readerly empathy. Then, the novel’s empathic and anti-empathic characters were discussed as manifestations of represented empathy. Finally, Faulkner’s writerly empathy was closely examined, and I observed how he embraces the ultimate instability of modernist empathy.

In the third chapter, by considering Nathanael West a late modernist, I argued his novels as critiques of modernist empathy. In the analysis of his first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, West’s dichotomy between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement was revealed. Then, I attempted to depict how West dramatizes his protagonists’ failures of empathy in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. In the process, I referred to Martha Nussbaum’s
theory of compassion in relation to empathy. I also considered the relationship of empathy to the advent of the anonymous mass in the 1930s and observed West’s critique of empathy at the age of mass culture.

The focus of the final chapter was about the writerly design of the strategic use of empathy in Richard Wright’s Native Son. After reviewing the past literary criticism of the novel’s empathy, I discussed how the novel is strategized to establish an intimate readerly empathy with Bigger Thomas. At the end of the argument, I examined the author’s strategic design of empathy and its relation to racial politics.

I am aware of some problems that remain unsolved in terms of the discussion in my dissertation. At the same time, these problems will be future challenges for my study of empathy in narrative. First of all, there is a problem of definition. I tried the best I could to clarify what empathy means in my argument, but in not a few cases, the definition of empathy and other related concepts tended to become unclear and inconsistent. Besides my skill of argument, the cause of ambiguity in terms of the definition of empathy also lies in the fact that, as I mentioned in my introduction, empathy study is still in the burgeoning stage and no consensus has been made among the scholars yet. It would be impossible to make a substantial argument by sticking to a single definition of empathy at this point. Therefore, I had to be eclectic in incorporating into my argument the conceptualization of empathy made in various fields of study. Especially, while specifying modernist conceptualization of empathy in my argument, I often referred to new, ongoing discussions of the concept of empathy at the same time. I decided to employ such an eclectic method based on a belief that narrative empathy involved in modernist novels still belongs in our contemporary sensibility in the appreciation of narrative fiction, but the eclectic method might have brought some unnecessary confusion to my argument. As various empathy studies are developing in the near future, more sophisticated conceptualizations of empathy might be available for literary studies of empathy. I hope my work contributed to the development instead of bringing confusion to it.

Another problem about my argument would be the fact that the novelists I discussed are limited to male writers. If empathy is an effective means to understand other minds beyond differences, the potential of empathy should become all the more evident when it is applied to the understanding of someone different in terms of gender, race, or ethnicity. Therefore, another future challenge for my research of narrative empathy should be to pay critical attention to other
writers of different gender, race, and ethnicity. Then, my study of narrative empathy would be more comprehensive in perspective.

Speaking of perspective, although my dissertation’s focus is on how modernists separates empathy from sympathy or compassion, literary study of empathy does not have to limit itself to modernism but can widen its historical scope to cover literary works from previous centuries. What is understood as empathy was, before the word was born, covered by the umbrella term of sympathy. Therefore, it seems possible to find empathic psychological phenomena in what was called sympathy in previous centuries. By doing so, it might become possible to put empathy in a proper, larger historical perspective.

As of today, there are still many unknown aspects to empathy, let alone narrative empathy. Whether narrative empathy—or empathy in general, for that matter—can serve for better purposes in society or not, empathy will have to be critically examined and pleasurably appreciated as long as we are attracted to empathic reading of the novels. As I have shown in my dissertation, narrative empathy is always unstable and fragile. It is difficult to grasp it. But all the more for that reason, narrative empathy, and empathy itself, has to be discussed, analyzed, and appreciated.
**WORKS CITED**


Cerasulo, Tom. “*The Dream Life of Balso Snell* and the Vocation of Nathanael West.” *Arizona Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 2, Summer 2006, pp. 59-75.


---. *Faulkner in the University*. Edited by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, UP of Virginia, 1995.


Lewis, Karyn L. and Sara D. Hodges. “Empathy Is Not Always as Personal as You May Think: The Use of Stereotypes in Empathic Accuracy.” Decety, pp. 73-84.


---. “Pres. Barack Obama: literacy & empathy”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGHbbJ5xz3g


---. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. Novels, pp. 1-54.


---. *Native Son*. Early Works, pp. 443-850.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kentaro Tabata was born and raised in Toyama, Japan. He graduated from the University of Tokyo with a Bachelor of Arts in Modern European and American Languages and Literature. He then received his Master of Letters in English Language and Literature from the same university in March 2008. His research interests include modernist novels, twentieth century American novels, empathy in narrative.