



## Article

Julia de Jonge\*, Serena Demichelis, Simone Rebora and Massimo Salgaro

# Operationalizing perpetrator studies. Focusing readers' reactions to *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2022-2057>

**Abstract:** Within the field of Holocaust Studies the last decade has witnessed a turn to the figure of the perpetrator, who had hitherto received little attention due to ethical, legal and psychological reasons. A similar turn can also be observed in connection with the study of empathy. In this context, the concept of “negative empathy,” intended as a sharing of emotions with morally negative fictional characters, has become an increasingly discussed topic. For research in this area, the novel *The Kindly Ones* (2006) by Jonathan Littell takes up a privileged position in light of its intrinsic literary quality and due to its commercial and critical success. This novel recounts the memories of an SS-officer, Maximilian Aue, who participated in the Shoah. We have carried out an experiment using some passages of this novel to test the empathic reactions of (104) readers. Passages were presented under either of two conditions: as a fictional text or as part of an autobiography. Results showed that fictionalization has a significant effect on moral disengagement; readers who read the narrative presented to them as *fictional* experienced higher levels of moral disengagement compared to readers in the autobiography condition. Moreover, higher levels of moral disengagement led to significantly higher levels of empathy for the protagonist of the novel.

**Keywords:** effects of fictionalization; empirical aesthetics; holocaust studies; Jonathan Littell: *The Kindly Ones*; moral disengagement; negative empathy; perpetrator studies

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\*Corresponding author: Julia de Jonge, University of Verona, Verona, Italy; and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, E-mail: [annamariajuliet.dejonge@univr.it](mailto:annamariajuliet.dejonge@univr.it)

Serena Demichelis, Simone Rebora and Massimo Salgaro, University of Verona, Verona, Italy, E-mail: [serena.demichelis@univr.it](mailto:serena.demichelis@univr.it) (S. Demichelis), [simone.rebora@univr.it](mailto:simone.rebora@univr.it) (S. Rebora), [massimo.salgaro@univr.it](mailto:massimo.salgaro@univr.it) (M. Salgaro)

# 1 Perpetrator studies and empirical aesthetics: an introduction<sup>1</sup>

Within the field of Holocaust Studies the last decade has witnessed a turn to the figure of the Perpetrator. This new focus comes after years of attention mostly paid to the representation of victims of the Holocaust, as well as to survivors' testimonies, which were rightly given precedence. Undoubtedly, perpetrators' silence has also been a defensive strategy on the part of those who knew they were guilty. Consequently, we have only a very few autobiographical texts written from the perpetrators' perspective, such as *Kommandant in Auschwitz* by Rudolf Höss (Broszat 1998), or *Götzen* by Adolf Eichmann (Nescher 2016).

The following investigation deals with literary texts written from a fictional perpetrator's perspective, another rather uncommon trend within the broader category of Holocaust literature. Among texts adopting this strategy, key examples include *La mort est mon métier* (1952) by Robert Merle, *La danse de Gengis Cohn* (1967) by Romain Gary, *Der Nazi & der Friseur* (1977) by Edgar Hilsenrath, *Time's Arrow: Or The Nature of the Offense* (1991) by Martin Amis. More recent novels belonging to this genre are *Er ist wieder da* (2012) by Timur Vermes and *Der Kommandant: Monolog* (2012) by Jürg Amann. One of the reasons for such scarcity is surely a "taboo, which places the imagination of the consciousness of the perpetrator outside acceptable discourse on the Holocaust" (McGlothlin 2010: 213). Fictionalization is generally seen as an inadequate process when dealing with the Shoah, especially if it involves a Nazi perspective. The representation of the point of view of those who carried out a genocide puts both authors and readers on a problematic ethical ground, on which aesthetic criteria seem to fail. Another problem is that such fictional texts seem manipulative, inducing empathy and sympathy for the vicious protagonists, and exculpating them.

In recent years we also observe another turn, namely in empathy studies. Since the Nineties, there has been an ever-increasing focus on empathy in literary theory and in empirical studies of reading (Keen 2007; Koopman and Hakemulder 2015). David Miall's work notably dealt with this concept, which to him consists in the ability to "share the feelings and emotions of the characters we read about (whether a narrative or a poem) or watch on stage or screen" (Miall 2011b, 286). Drawing on the theory of the immersed experiencer and the evidence of mirror neurons, empathy is considered by Miall from an embodied perspective. Not only

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<sup>1</sup> The four authors have contributed equally to this work. For the Italian evaluation system: Part 1 has been written by Rebora, Part 2 by Salgaro, Part 3 by Demichelis, Part 4 by De Jonge, Part 5 by Salgaro and De Jonge.

are concepts and imagery evoked during literary reading, but also descriptions of bodily movements are immediately felt in the reader's own body, causing motor and kinaesthetic responses and feelings. For Miall, empathy is closely related to expressive enactment, i.e., a cognitive process through which characters and objects depicted in a literary text are experienced as sensuously present (Sikora et al. 2010). This simulation experience can be enhanced by foregrounding and defamiliarization induced by particular literary features (Miall and Kuiken 1999). In Miall's words:

[...]the textual description of a feeling or an occasion for feeling is adequate to reinstate a feeling from my existing repertoire, with whatever variants or nuances are required to match the fictional situation – and textual features such as a foregrounded phrase or the description of a setting may modify my existing understanding of the feeling. (Miall 2007: 388)

After a widespread inclination to associate empathy with the morally “good” (Johnson 2013; Koopman and Hakemulder 2015) and the tendency to confound it with compassion (Pinotti and Salgaro 2019), the “dark side of empathy” (Breithaupt and Hamilton 2019; Bubandt and Willerslev 2015) came more and more in the focus of research. Literary theory has started to express a “dissent from mainstream empathy” (Keen 2007: 74), showing that readers can connect emotionally with unsavory, nasty or even vicious characters.

In this context, the concept of “negative empathy” (intended as a sharing of negative emotions with morally negative fictional characters) has become an increasingly discussed topic. A number of studies have highlighted in particular its dominant role in contemporary narratives. Stefano Ercolino (2018) reconstructs the evolution of the concept, starting from the original formulation by Theodor Lipps (1909: 222), following its mutations in the contexts of philosophy, psychology, and literary studies. Ercolino's thesis is that, while negative empathy holds a cathartic function with respect to the reader, it can also bring unpredictable outcomes in social life. In his own words:

*As far as literature is concerned, negative empathy, a form of high-level empathy, can be defined as a potentially regressive aesthetic experience, consisting in a cathartic identification with negative characters, which can be either open to agency—indifferently leading either to pro- or antisocial behavior—or limited to the inner life of the empathizing subject (Ercolino 2018: 252, italics in the original).*

Negative empathy thus becomes an uncontrollable phenomenon, which builds upon the same dynamics of empathy (originating, for example, from an experience of identification with the fictional character) and could bring extremely negative consequences through practices such as internalization of sociopathic worldviews and emulation of crimes. The substantial amorality contained in Ercolino's

definition is made possible by a specific interpretation of the concept of catharsis, which strengthens its “distancing” function (with reference to Lucretius’ “shipwreck with spectator”). However, other definitions, like the one by Massimo Fusillo (2019) restore the positive moral function of catharsis, highlighting how its final goal is stimulating a cleansing of emotions through emotional overload. In such a context, empathy and identification are just means to obtain a further (ethical) goal, not objectives in themselves.

A connected concept, which further strengthens the problematic nature of empathy when looking at contemporary narratives, is that of the “hybrid hero”. According to Salgaro and Van Tourhout (2018), hybrid heroes put into question moral assumptions by acting on the threshold between good and evil. They

have become increasingly popular during the post 9/11 period, offering escapism and reassurance to audiences in difficult times in which clear-cut divisions between good and bad, between right and wrong came under pressure (345)

Again, the concept of empathy proves fundamental to understanding their success, especially when distinguished from sympathy. Research has shown that sympathy implies a moral evaluation, whereas empathy is more neutral and could even exist without identification (cf. Nussbaum 2003: 325–327; Jolliffe & Farrington 2006: 591). The fundamental amorality of empathy—that is, its “independence” from a strictly moral sphere—allows on the one hand enjoyment of negative characters, thus explaining the success of the hybrid hero. On the other hand, and even more importantly, it can also transform narratives into dangerous weapons, especially when produced by amoral authors. As highlighted by Bubandt and Willerslev (2015), the “dark side of empathy” resides in the fact that empathy can also be used to manipulate audiences, when stimulating identification with characters who convey negative moral values. Still, it is only through a deep investigation of evil psychologies that the most profound reasons for evil can be understood—and finally countered. Overall, both negative empathy and hybrid heroes exist at the threshold between a “bright” and a “dark” interpretation of human nature and of the function of narratives, frequently leaving the task of distinguishing risk from potential to readers’ sensitivity.

It is not by chance, then, that studies have started to focus on the fascination for “hybrid heroes,” ambiguous protagonists (Krakowiak and Tsay 2011), or morally bad characters (Konijn and Hoorn 2005). In particular, Salgaro et al. (2021) devised an experiment by putting readers into three different conditions, determined by a different manipulation of the first few pages of José Saramago’s novel *Blindness* (1995). In the first condition, the protagonist (a man suddenly becoming blind while waiting in his car at the traffic lights) is characterized as a doctor who

volunteered in Africa; in the second condition he is a former Egyptian spy, who also carried out torture on prisoners; in the third condition he is a Nazi, who worked in the concentration camps during the Second World War. While empathy measurements did not differ in the three conditions, participants assigned a significantly higher aesthetic appreciation for the story casting the Egyptian spy in the role of the protagonist.

One of the possible reasons to explain the success of negative and hybrid heroes lies in the fictional nature of narratives, leading to a “suspension of moral judgment” or “suspension of values” (Vaage 2013: 226–7). As the actions of evil fictional figures do not have real-life consequences, we allow them a much higher degree of moral disengagement (Krakowiak and Tsay 2011). However, when we believe a story we are reading is non-fictional, we may not allow ourselves any “moral disengagement” or “suspension of moral judgment,” considered to be typical for fiction reading. A possible empirical confirmation of this phenomenon was provided by Ruedinger and Barnes (2022), who compared readers’ reactions to immoral characters under conditions of either a realistic or fictional narrative. When asked to evaluate the actions of the character, participants in the realistic condition judged the actions as more immoral compared to the fantasy condition. Overall, multiple proofs seem to support the idea that the success of perpetrator narratives is tightly linked with the notions of fictionality and moral disengagement, in their relationship with the phenomenon of empathy. With this paper, we intend to provide a contribution to such a debate, by focusing on a particular specimen of perpetrator narratives.

## 2 *Les Bienveillantes* and perpetrator studies

*Les Bienveillantes* (2006) (translated by Charlotte Mandell as *The Kindly Ones* in 2010) by Jonathan Littell surely takes a privileged position in the brief list of perpetrator novels, in light of its intrinsically literary quality and the commercial and critical success it had. The novel was published by the prestigious French publishing house Gallimard, translated into many languages and was awarded the Grand prix du roman de l’Académie française and the Prix Goncourt in 2006. The novel recounts the fictional memories of SS-officer Maximilian Aue, who participated in the Shoah on the Eastern front. The protagonist has a complex persona, multilayered and described in detail: besides being a Nazi, he holds a PhD in Law, has a deep knowledge of literature and music, is homosexual, and has an incestuous relationship with his sister. His “intellectual” background does not obliterate his diabolic nature, and Aue intertwines his continuous and deep reflections with atrocious sadism. The novel was criticized for its “pornification of violence,”

its “simulation of authenticity” (Manoschek 2008) and for inducing empathy and sympathy for the perpetrator (Richards 2009: 136, 142).

Several studies have theorized the complex interaction between the protagonist and the numerous readers of the novel, given its commercial success. The novel demands to be perceived as fiction, but it ultimately deals with historical facts, even mentioning witnesses of the Holocaust or studies related to it. *Les Bienveillantes* also shows many intertextual links to other literary and essayistic texts (Altmann 2021: 329–331). Erin McGlothlin (2016) describes the interaction between the protagonist and the readers of *Les Bienveillantes*, highlighting the limitations and problems of readers’ identification: indeed, identifying with the first-person Nazi protagonist poses a problem in ethical terms. McGlothlin distinguishes five types of identification, going from the weakest form of “existential identification,” which is “the reader’s basic recognition of the perpetrator as a human agent” (McGlothlin 2016: 260), to “ideological identification,” which is “the strength of the reader’s alignment with the perpetrator’s moral and ethical worldview and his justification for his own behavior” (264). To McGlothlin, this form of identification is indeed the most powerful one, because if a reader identifies with the protagonist’s moral and ethical worldview “she will be more willing to view the events through his perspective, give credence to his account of them, and align emotionally with him” (264).

A more complex model is offered by Eva Mona Altmann in her 2012 dissertation. She offers not only an introduction to perpetrator studies, but also to important concepts in the reception of literary texts, such as empathy or sympathy. In her study we also find a tabular overview (Altmann 2021: 236–239) of the literary features that promote or hinder empathy, sympathy, and antipathy. Elements corroborating empathy are, among others: the proximity between reader and protagonist, the perceived resemblance, the inner-perspective of the narrator, his attractiveness and reliability.

The third part of Altmann’s thesis is devoted to the analysis and reception history of two paradigmatic novels of perpetrator studies: *La mort et son métier* (1952) by Robert Merle and *Les Bienveillantes* (2006) by Jonathan Littell. With regard to *Les Bienveillantes*, she focused on 3 passages of the novel, the first and the final chapter, and the episode describing the massacre of Babi Yar. In the first chapter Maximilian Aue introduces himself, refers to his war experiences at the Eastern front and the reasons pushing him to write his memoir. In the Babi Yar chapter, he describes his involvement in the shooting of thousands of Jews at the Ukrainian site of Babi Yar. In the final chapter, the end of the war is described, including Aue’s encounter with Adolf Hitler and his rather comic attempt to bite his nose. The book ends with the enigmatic killing of his friend Thomas.

The novel is accused by many critics of eliciting empathy or sympathy in the reader (Altmann, 2021: 334). In all the chapters taken into account, Altmann lists those elements pushing or blocking readers' empathy/sympathy for the protagonist. She especially (2021:361) relies on a study by Meretoja to exemplify the priming effect the first chapter has on the reader:

It proposes a readerly contract that asks the reader to do several things at once. First, on a superficial level, it persuades the reader to read in the mode of >as if<, to imagine that they are reading the confessional memories of an SS officer. Yet, second, the self reflexive, metafictional level undermines simple, realist or naïvely identificatory readings. [...] third, the opening raises the issue of unreliability. As the narrator is a self-confessed former SS officer, a perpetrator of the worst kind, why should we trust him? (Meretoja, 2018, 229)

Because of the complexity of the novel and of Aue's persona, Altmann hypothesizes a rather discontinuous reaction on the part of the reader. In her analysis, in fact, the protagonist/narrator elicits sympathy and empathy (Altmann 2021: 352, 365, 368, 329, 370, 372, 373) as well as antipathy and distance (350, 351, 353, 354, 356, 367, 376). The reader may experience mixed feelings while confronting such contradictory scenes. Paradoxically, the massacre of Babi Yar, one of the most cruel scenes depicted in the novel, and reporting real facts concerning the Holocaust, seems, for Altmann, to give a considerably less 'monstrous' and 'evil' image of the protagonist than the first and final chapter. One of the aims of our study was to operationalize Altmann's hypothesis on the reading behavior and reactions of people presented with Littell's character and situations. We used passages taken from two chapters analyzed by Altmann, the first one and the one recounting the Babi Yar episode, as materials for a reading experiment carried out at the University of Verona. Participants read a text consisting of excerpts from the novel and answered questions concerning their feelings and judgment towards the protagonist (and narrator) and the events depicted in the narrative. In choosing these passages, we wanted to capture the complexity of Aue's character, as well as his constant and varied attempt at minimizing his responsibility and role in the horrors described.

### **3 *Les Bienveillantes* as stimulus material: a literary analysis**

The novel, narrated throughout by Maximilian Aue himself, is famously divided into seven parts, each of them named after sections of a Bach suite – yet another example of the book's extensive intertextual and erudite play. The extracts we

decided to use come from the very opening of the novel, *Toccata*, and from the second part, *Allemande I and II*; in them, Aue first offers readers insight into his contorted, twisted personality, then starts recounting the events in which he took part during the Second World War.

The opening of *Toccata*, “[a] new unsettling chapter in the history of perverse addresses to readers in modern literature” (Ercolino 2018: 253), immediately betrays Aue’s attempt at positing himself on the same level as his readers, the “human brothers” who will be the addressees of his tale. The contradictory nature of Aue’s claim is soon apparent: indeed, he starts off by stating that

[T]hank God I have never been driven, unlike some of my former colleagues, to write my memoirs for the purpose of self-justification, since I have nothing to justify, or to earn a living, since I have a decent enough income as it is. (Mandell 2010: 4)

The idea that Aue has “nothing to justify” anticipates a much-reiterated leitmotif of perpetrators’ discourse: for there to be something to justify, you need to be guilty. Yet, how can one be guilty, when they were just “obeying orders,” “doing their jobs,” or only carrying out one of the many tasks involved in a larger criminal or violent action? The diffusion of responsibility advocated by such people like (most famously) Adolf Eichmann is a constant background in Aue’s attempt at rejecting the idea of being in any way morally responsible. One of the key defense points in Eichmann’s trial was rooted precisely in the absence of “guilt”; as we read in a rather recent volume by Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt,

He [Avner Less, chief inspector of Bureau 06] and his police colleagues anticipated that Eichmann might refuse to cooperate. [...]. To their surprise, he spoke freely. He inundated them with details about the Final Solution. [...]. Despite this acknowledgement of his actions, he refused to acknowledge personal guilt. He told Less that he was just a “little cog” and “exclusively a carrier out of orders.” He was not guilty, he insisted, because his superiors ordered him to do terrible things. (Lipstadt 2011: 43)

While far from defining himself as a “little cog,” very pointedly Aue writes “I do not regret anything: I did my work that’s all” (Mandell 2010: 5) and repeats the very same phrasing when talking about his current job in the lace factory - “we work together, that’s all” (10). While the narrator’s arguments to alleviate his culpability sound somewhat familiar to post-Arendt (and now post-Lipstadt) readers, Littell’s decision to depict his protagonist as a man with an intellectual background seems to point in the opposite direction: as suggested above, Maximilian Aue is not represented as an ideologically fanatic, rather flat and linear man, but more like an ambiguously evil character with a complex and “rounded” existence. The augmented realism implied in this nuanced representation can trick the reader into an enhanced form of identification.



In *Toccata*, readers are offered a series of elements which will also occur later and with more depth throughout the book – and which will serve the purpose of not only rendering Aue’s representation more complex, but also readers’ relation with him. The protagonist’s passion for literature, for instance, supplanted but not replaced by a steadier career in Law, places him dangerously close to the people who are reading *Les Bienveillantes* (supposedly themselves lovers of literature); proximity is thus enhanced by a perceived similarity. The fact that Aue needs to hide his homosexuality to pursue a desirable social position could even elicit one’s sympathy, as also does his impossible dream to become a pianist one day. These elements do not blot out the cruel reality of Aue’s ultimately negative representation, but they add layers to the picture and indirectly strengthen the narrator’s own statement that “things are far more complex than that.” In a way, Aue’s ambiguity is the essence of his own fictional credibility.

The *Allemande I and II* sections present Aue in action during the events taking place on the Eastern Front. They provide an ever-increasing amount of complexity with the same strategies anticipated in *Toccata*. The infamous episode of Babi Yar, which we included in our sample for the experiment, has been singled out by previous critics (Altmann 2021: 362–379) as providing an essential piece of insight into the construction of such an ambiguous character. Indeed, while Aue is unapologetically active in the monstrosities described, a few instances seem to reiterate his own conviction that victim and perpetrator are interchangeable, and that it is just a matter of luck if one happened to be on the surviving side. The narrator’s physical and mental discomfort while having to witness the senseless massacre, as well as his decision to shoot a dying girl to spare her more suffering, can be seen as attempts at offering a new dimension of “humanity” in Aue’s dark soul, yet another displacing element for a reader to find their place with respect to his story. Because of Aue’s acknowledged unreliability (Roth 2017: 81), however, we cannot really anticipate which kind of reaction can be expected from the insertion of such elements. Aue’s is the only point of view through which we are looking, and readers’ choice is made harder as the perspective gets more and more tainted by its own contradictory nature.

## 4 Reading experiment

This paper builds up on work of the literary scholars mentioned above, containing theoretical assumptions about empathic responses to fictional Holocaust perpetrators (in particular, to the protagonist of Jonathan Littell’s novel). We devised an experiment that focuses on the above-described passages from *The Kindly Ones* and measures the reactions of readers.

The two assumptions we aim to test are:

- Does fictionality foster moral disengagement?
- In turn, does moral disengagement foster the experience of empathy for a perpetrator protagonist, i.e., a Nazi?

The aim of this experiment is to illuminate the cognitive mechanisms that allow the emergence of negative empathy towards morally negative characters such as a Nazi. In fact, we believe that fictionality and moral disengagement can be important mediators for such an empathic response.

## 4.1 Participants and design

Participants, randomized over two conditions, read the same adapted passage from *The Kindly Ones*. In one condition, the narrative was presented as passages from a novel, narrated by a *fictional* SS-officer. In the second condition the narrative was presented as passages from an autobiography, written by an SS-officer who *actually existed*.

Participants were 104 B.A. and M.A. students of foreign languages and literatures and staff at the University of Verona. There were 57 participants in the novel condition and 47 in the autobiography condition. They read passages from the Italian translation of Littell's novel: *Le benevole* (Botto 2014). The experimental data was collected online, through the surveying software *Limesurvey*.

## 4.2 Measures

To measure *actual* moral disengagement, this study follows the example of Krakowiak and Tsay (2011), and thus we formulated nine items fitting both our narrative and Bandura's (2002) dimensions of moral disengagement: *moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization, attribution of blame*. Three items were then added to measure overall moral disengagement (see Table 1; Cronbach's alpha: 0.816).

Empathy for Maximilian Aue was measured using the *State Empathy Scale During Message Processing*, constructed by Shen (2010). The scale captures the three dimensions of state empathy in four items each, *affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and associative empathy* (see Table 2; Cronbach's alpha: 0.903).

Answers to all items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale: 1 = not at all, 7 = very much.

**Table 1:** Reliability analysis ‘moral disengagement’.

Item	Corrected item – Total correlation
Maximilian Aue is a person like any other. He behaved like everyone else.	0.535
Maximilian Aue is not to be blamed for his action during the war, because he was simply carrying out orders.	0.732
The Nazi regime is to be blamed for the killings Maximilian Aue committed, not Maximilian Aue himself.	0.621
Maximilian Aue is an intellectual with a passion for the absolute and for overcoming limits. What he did in war was a consequence of this creativity.	0.229
It is impossible to establish who is guilty in a genocide, as so many people are involved.	0.185
Maximilian Aue never wanted to become a murderer, he was forced to do it.	0.535
Maximilian Aue is right when he says that in most cases the man standing above the mass grave no more asked to be there than the one lying, dead or dying, at the bottom of the pit.	0.473
As the Jews who were deported and arrested were dirty, without proper clothes and without documents Maximilian Aue could consider them like non-humans.	0.047
In the circumstances of war a man is forced to kill, so Maximilian Aue had no other choice.	0.720
Maximilian Aue was morally justified in all his actions during the war.	0.617
I consider Maximilian Aue’s actions as incorrect.	0.366
I believe that in general, Maximilian Aue is a morally just person.	0.590

We did not include any items on ‘advantageous comparison’, since pre-tests showed that this did not fit the narrative.

### 4.3 Results

Results of the reading experiment show that fictionalization of perpetrator narratives does not *directly* impact the empathy readers felt for Maximilian Aue, as readers who read the narrative presented to them as a *novel* ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) and readers who read the narrative presented to them as an *autobiography* ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) did not experience significantly different levels of empathy,  $t(102) = -0.301$ ,  $p = 0.764$ .

Yet, results show that there is an *indirect* effect of fictionalization on empathy, *through* moral disengagement,  $B = 0.190$ ; 95% CI [0.005, 0.415]. Fictionalization has a significant effect on moral disengagement, as the readers who read the narrative presented to them as a *novel* ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) experienced significantly higher levels of moral disengagement than readers who read the narrative presented to them as an *autobiography* ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ),  $t(102) = 1.990$ ,

**Table 2:** Reliability analysis ‘empathy’.

	Item	Corrected item – Total correlation
Affective empathy	Maximilian Aue’s emotions are genuine.	0.520
	I experienced the same emotions as Maximilian Aue when reading this story.	0.696
	I was in a similar emotional state as Maximilian Aue when reading this story.	0.696
	I can feel Maximilian Aue’s emotions.	0.605
Cognitive empathy	I can see Maximilian Aue’s point of view.	0.622
	I recognize Maximilian Aue’s situation.	0.715
	I can understand what Maximilian Aue was going through.	0.501
	Maximilian Aue’s reactions to the situation are understandable.	0.663
Associative empathy	When reading the story, I was fully absorbed.	0.377
	I can relate to what Maximilian Aue was going through in the story.	0.682
	I can identify with the situations described in Maximilian Aue’s story.	0.670
	I can identify with Maximilian Aue in the story.	0.736

$p = 0.049$ . Moreover, higher levels of moral disengagement lead to significantly higher levels of empathy for Maximilian Aue,  $B = 0.535$ ,  $t(101) = 4.708$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

Thus, to answer the questions: yes, fictionality does foster moral disengagement and this, in turn, fosters readers’ experiences of empathy for a perpetrator protagonist such as a Nazi.<sup>2</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

Our analysis aims to contribute to the two fields of perpetrator studies and the empirical study of literature by analyzing the reactions to a novel with a Nazi

<sup>2</sup> To control for gender, age, and education level we ran a multivariate analysis of variance with the experimental condition as fixed factor, moral disengagement and empathy as dependent variables, and gender, age, and education level as covariates. Results show that neither *gender* ( $F(2, 98) = 0.676$ ,  $p = 0.511$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.014$ ; 82.7% female, 16.3% male, 1% non-binary), *age* ( $F(2, 98) = 0.626$ ,  $p = 0.537$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.013$ ;  $M_{age} = 21.42$ ,  $SD = 5.34$ ,  $Range = 19$  to  $50$ ), or *education level* ( $F(2, 98) = 0.210$ ,  $p = 0.811$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.004$ ; 94 high school diploma, 5 bachelor degree, 5 doctorate) significantly impact moral disengagement or empathy.

protagonist and narrator. Overall, evidence seems to support the idea that the success of perpetrator narratives is tightly linked to the notions of fictionality and moral disengagement, as well as empathy. Our results show that fictionality increases empathy for Nazi protagonist Maximilian Aue *through* the increased moral disengagement that comes with fiction reading. The success of negative or hybrid heroes in films and tv series is possibly due to the fact that in a fictional context we do not so much look for opportunities to test our moral categories and to express prosocial thoughts and intentions, but rather for a space to experience the strong emotions and moral disengagement allowed by a dimension safely distant from our everyday life. As David Miall stated, literary texts have the power to let readers experience *modification of their feelings*:

Since, at any given stage in life, the self almost certainly pursues conflicting concerns, the feelings associated with these concerns will often also conflict: one feeling will reconfigure, modify, or cancel another. [...] For the reader a literary text provides a framework for such conflicting processes of feeling, causing them to be felt consciously and, at times, their significance realized. [...] In the modifying process, then, as we interpret it here, emotion during reading is not purged or eliminated (one common interpretation of Aristotle's catharsis); at the core of the process one feeling is recontextualized and thus modified by another. Literary texts are, in this way, effective vehicles for calling up feelings and modifying their significance. (Miall 2011a: 341)

If literary fiction provides a framework for the reader to process and modify conflicting feelings, it is likely that literary reading can also resolve conflicting feelings about the narrative itself or its protagonist. When a negative or hybrid hero appears in a literary story, readers might experience conflicting feelings and modify these through moral disengagement, and as a result can still have empathy for perpetrator figures such as Maximilian Aue. This “fictional pact” between reader and author makes literature a different and privileged dimension of existence – something that Frank Hakemulder (2000) defined as a “moral laboratory.”

**Research funding:** This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 860516 (ELIT – H2020-MSCA-ITN-2019).

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