

INTERTEXTUAL LIVES: REVERSE MIMESIS, SANITY AND SURVIVAL

*Abstract: Whereas the reliance of literature and other arts on reality has been the topic of numerous studies, the equally significant indebtedness of life to fiction has received considerably less critical attention but has fortunately been of interest to a number of novelists and screenwriters. This paper will analyse a variety of literary texts and films that feature instances of reverse mimesis, including several of David Lodge's novels, in particular *The British Museum is Falling Down*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, John Fowles' *The Collector*, Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, Jeremy Leven's *Don Juan DeMarco*, Peter Weir's *Dead Poets' Society* and Nicholas Hytner's *The History Boys*. The ultimate aim of focusing on some of the most memorable fictional protagonists whose lives are shaped by the discourses they assimilate is to establish the role played by literary identification in personal development and to observe its possible impact on sanity and survival.*

Key words: intertextuality; mimesis; originality; reality; sanity; suicide; uniqueness.

Introduction

The twenty-three and a half centuries elapsed since Aristotle's momentous observations on the relationship between art and life have witnessed quite an impressive array of texts debating the indebtedness of literature and the visual arts to aspects of reality, yet considerably less attention has been paid to the extent to which human behaviour exploits the resources of fiction and other forms of artistic endeavour, notwithstanding Wilde's thought-provoking observations in *The Decay of Lying*: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not merely from Life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realize that energy" (26). As is only to be expected, the mechanisms at work in this type of mimesis appear to be quite straightforward and instrumental in the formation of values and development of certain behaviour patterns:

Textual mimesis involves a verbal representation of human beings and events, whereas the audience's mimesis involves the active imitation in real life of the fictional world of the text. The members of the audience imbibe and adopt the values set forth by the literary text and endeavour to enact these in their actions. When they read or view textual mimesis, then, people are led to engage in mimetic behaviour in life. (Waugh 42)

The contemporary world provides ample evidence of an ever-growing blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction and increasing reliance on fictional role-models, yet many such instances are quite easy to dismiss as falling outside the scope of serious academic study. The penchant for using memorable film lines in everyday conversation or displaying literary quotes in social network status updates or on tee-

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shirts might be construed as indication of a growing lack of originality; the percentage of contemporary fiction readers or film viewers who invest time and effort into learning constructed languages such as Klingon or Elvish, wear outfits based on the attire of their favourite protagonists or engage in story re-enactments might be considered negligible; likewise, the relatively widespread current tendency to purchase fiction inspired products – from magic wands and rings of power to make up holding out the promise of a sparkling complexion worthy of a particularly glamorous Washington State vampire clan – seems quite easy to dismiss as a mere indication of immaturity, naivety or gullible consumer response to relatively clever marketing strategies.

It is however interesting to observe that an area relatively neglected by academics has clearly exerted some fascination on novelists and screenwriters, as evinced by the number of memorable fictional figures whose identity is significantly altered by the texts they assimilate. Therefore, rather than engage in a thorough analysis of the ways in which real audiences have adopted the appearance, word choices or way of life of their favourite literary or film protagonists, this paper aims to focus mostly on fiction and films that explore the mechanisms and outcomes of literary identification in an attempt to reveal the implications of “that reverse mimesis whereby life is said to imitate art” (Burnwick 161) as far as sanity, identity construction and personal development are concerned.

Reverse mimesis in David Lodge’s fiction

An appropriate starting point for any discussion on the ambiguous boundary between reality and fiction is to be found in David Lodge’s *The British Museum is Falling Down*, a novel whose protagonist has to handle, among numerous other personal problems, the uncomfortable realization that his life keeps taking on “the stylistic and thematic colouring of the fictional texts he is studying” (167) up to the point at which very few aspects of his existence can be seen as genuinely his and literature seems to have “annexed the rest.” (74) The use of Oscar Wilde’s “life imitates art” as the novel’s epigraph is particularly suggestive given Adam’s awareness of the extent to which “his humble life fell into moulds prepared by literature” (32) and his impressive insight into the intertextual nature of not just literature but life itself:

there’ve been such a fantastic number of novels written in the last couple of centuries that they’ve just about exhausted the possibilities of life. So all of us, you see, are really enacting events that have already been written about in some novel or other. Of course, most people don’t realize this – they fondly imagine that their little lives are unique... Just as well, too, because when you *do* tumble to it, the effect is very disturbing. (119)

Confounding the realist agenda that ‘art imitates life’, an intertextual approach suggests indeed that the opposite is quite often the case, in the sense that texts are instrumental not only in the construction of other texts but in the construction of actual existence and that we have access to no pre-textual experience (Chandler 205). People tend to derive a large percentage of their knowledge about the world around them not from direct experience but from books, newspapers, magazines, films, television and radio shows, so that life is lived through texts and framed by texts to a greater extent than anyone is normally aware of. Although the “intersecting and indefinitely expandable web called *intertextuality*” (Sarup 52) is generally associated with “the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before it” (Cuddon 454), a closer look at the equation reveals a similar interdependence of fiction and life indicative of a blurring of the boundaries not only between texts but between texts and the world of lived experience.

As far as *The British Museum is Falling Down* is concerned, the responses of other characters seem to indicate that this blurring entails a certain element of psychological imbalance and range from Barbara’s refusal to even accept the existence of a connection between the two realms – “a novel where life kept taking the shape of literature, did you ever hear anything so cracked, life is life and books are books and if he was a woman he wouldn’t need to be told that.” (157) – to Camel’s observation that Adam suffers from a “special form of scholarly neurosis” as a result of which he is “no longer able to distinguish

between life and literature" (BM 56). Nevertheless, far from being a classic victim of reverse mimesis gone too far and living in the perpetual state of confusion hinted at by his friend, Adam is merely more sensitive than others to the extent to which the overwhelming corpus of narratives already written and enacted in the course of history seems to deny anyone the privilege of leading a completely original existence. Moreover, although his tendency to respond to the successive events and traumas he is confronted with in the characteristic manner of a twentieth-century novelist (Bergonzi 7) often results in a rather chaotic narrative, it is important to remember that Adam's professional and domestic circumstances are not among the most conducive to sanity. It might therefore actually be the case that his tendency to short-circuit the "gap between the text and the world, between art and life" (Lodge 1977: 239) is part of his attempt to introduce some sort of order in an otherwise incoherent personal narrative.

Such tendencies to cope with one's problems by relating to literary protagonists are quite frequent in Lodge's fiction, ranging from Patricia Mallory's typically adolescent identification with Stephen's "sadness and revolt and rebellion and need to be free" (P 32) following her first exposure to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to Carrie Messenger's ironic but insightful comments in *Thinks...* on her identification with a female protagonist almost universally regarded as the embodiment of naïve confusion of the two realms: "It was a kind of Dorothea Brooke and Casaubon thing (...) I was through with the Dorothea role and ripe for Madame Bovary..." (T 208) Helen Reed, the main female protagonist of the same novel, is an even more representative case as most of her attempts to make sense of her own life entail comparisons with the circumstances of various literary heroines, usually phrased in the language of the respective writers or accompanied by witty intertextual allusions. Thus, her initial response to her possible involvement in an extra-marital affair consists in a rewriting of a famous line by Eliot so as to include a reference to the best-known adulteress in English literature – "I am not Lady Chatterley nor was meant to be" (T 261) – and the development of her relationship with Ralph Messenger prompts a parallel with Hawthorne's heroine: "For that was what she had become, a woman of pleasure, a scarlet woman, a woman of easy virtue, a woman no better than she should be – or so she would have been described in the pages of an old novel. Not in a modern one, of course." (T 258) She also comments on her teenage response to Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* and the transition from the youthful wish to share Sarah's destiny to the adult awareness of being entangled in a similar plot yet with none of the expected gratification: "Goodness how I cried over that book! How I yearned to be like Sarah when I grew up, to experience everything, and atone for my sins in a grand heroic gesture of self-sacrifice. Now I find myself much in her situation, but without her faith." (T 300)

In addition to featuring a large number of protagonists whose identity is visibly shaped by literary texts, Lodge's fiction also includes reminders of the frequency of such phenomena in actual history. For instance, *Out of the Shelter* contains references to the popularity of Heidelberg among American parents of college-aged children triggered by *The Student Prince*, an operetta based on Wilhelm Meyer-Förster's play, as well as to Hitler's almost obsessive fascination with Wagner and the similarity between his last rites and those of Siegfried and Brunnhilde. Moreover, the marked fusion between criticism and fiction that defines all of his novels ensures that the mutual influences exerted by art and life over each other often feature as central topics in the more or less professional discussions his academic protagonists engage in.

As regards the intensity of identification, it is quite interesting to note that whereas those of Lodge's protagonists that are more closely involved with literary texts, such as Adam Appleby and Helen Reed, tend to relate to a variety of characters depending on the situations they find themselves in at various points in their evolutions, without ever developing a fixation for any given text, there are also characters that establish such strong connections with the texts they read that the distinctions between textual elements and their actual identity become quite blurred. This would appear to be the case in *Therapy*, a novel whose protagonist becomes quite obsessed with the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, up to the point of seeing himself as a kind of reincarnation of the philosopher in question. The situation is somewhat different from that of Lodge's other protagonists since the identification in this particular case

is with a real rather than a fictional figure, yet the fact that the connection is established through Kierkegaard's texts makes Tubby's experience relevant to the discussion. His experience moreover appears to have a more obviously beneficial effect than any other such identification as his encounter with Kierkegaard's writings enables Tubby to view his own problems from a new angle and to finally solve his numerous issues, in particular those concerning romantic attachments and other types of relationships.

Becoming Juan

As far as Lodge's protagonists are concerned, interactions with fiction rarely go beyond the point of incessantly quoting literary texts or identifying with a certain character and into the realms of actual imitation of behaviour, with the possible exception of the never fulfilled plans made by Persse and Angelica to re-enact Keats's *The Eve of Saint Agnes*: "Be my Madeline, and let me be your Porphyro!" (SW 268) There are however numerous examples in the literary canon of narratives whose protagonists take their identification with fictional heroes to a different level and tend to model the behaviours described in various texts in the course of their interactions with others, particularly in the case of romantic attachments.

A particularly interesting example is the main character of *Don Juan DeMarco*, a 1994 film starring Johnny Depp as a young man from Queens who, after reading several versions of the Don Juan legend, decides to adopt the attire, behaviour and way of talking of the legendary Latin seducer: "one day I was, um, looking at this magazine, and there was a centrefold, and I, I knew she wouldn't go for me the way that I was, you know, so I, deci... I'd been reading a book, this book, and er, I decided to become Don Juan." (Leven) The discrepancy between the introverted and insecure personality of the protagonist and the charismatic figure he chooses to emulate would indicate an extremely wide bovaric angle, if we apply Huxley's observations on the topic: "What de Gaultier calls the *bovaric* angle between reality and assumed persona may be wide or narrow. *In extreme cases the bovaric angle can be equal to two right angles.* In other words the real and assumed characters may have exactly opposite tendencies." (Huxley 1937: 31) It is however important to observe that in the case of such a widely recycled legend it is almost impossible to speak of any fixed identity and that although the image of Don Juan evoked by most members of the public would probably entail such traits as arrogance, callousness and self-assurance, one of the texts on the basis of which John Arnold DeMarco constructs a new persona for himself is Byron's version, featuring a rather different type of hero than the more familiar Spanish one and its numerous avatars. Not only is "everything he recalls of his childhood, his youth, and his current state [...] taken directly from Lord Byron's mock epic" (Oyola 168) but all his interactions with women follow a pattern in which he is the (more or less compliant) victim rather than the seducer.

The fact that the protagonist ends up in a psychiatric hospital following a suicide attempt might be regarded as clear evidence of the dangers of taking literary identification too far:

Literary texts operate on readers and viewers by encouraging them to sympathize or identify with certain characters, to feel the joys, angers, and sorrows of fictional characters, as though they were real people. According to Plato, when we identify with a literary character, we abandon our internal integrity and take on the ideas and feelings of others. In the act of identification, we assimilate ourselves to another person. At times, Plato seems to believe that we lose ourselves entirely in the act of reading or viewing, that we liken ourselves to the characters in a full way. [...] When we enter into the lives of literary characters, we incorporate many different ways of thinking and speaking into our psyches. We become conflicted rather than integrated individuals. In the act of internalizing 'alien' voices, we lose our own voice and our own authority." (Waugh 43)

If one is to accept the fact that the protagonist has lost his own self in the act of identifying with the hero(es) of the texts he has read and actually believes in the truth of the narrative he has created to account

for his past life, DeMarco appears to suffer from a kind of dementia “similar to that of Don Quixote” (Oyola 168), which would imply that the already problematic combination of different versions of the legend of Don Juan is in fact a mere facet of the “fusion of two Hispanic icons, Don Quixote de la Mancha and Don Juan Tenorio” (Oyola 167-8). Nevertheless, DeMarco’s discourse and behaviour, whilst definitely on the eccentric side, reveal no signs of insanity and he seems reluctant to accept his actual circumstances rather than incapable of acknowledging reality:

Jack Mickler: What would you say to someone that, erm, that said to you, this is a psychiatric hospital, and that you're a patient here, and that I am your psychiatrist?

Don Juan: I would say that he has a rather limited and uncreative way of looking at the situation. (Leven)

Moreover, as the plot unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that DeMarco’s narrative represents a curious amalgam in which “reality and fantasy penetrate each other” (Oyola 170) so intricately that not only do those who “enter the world of the ‘madman’ with the intention of curing him” find themselves ultimately “lured by the magic of his fictitious creation” (Oyola 168) but viewers are likely find themselves questioning the possibility of drawing a line between sanity and madness (Oyola 170). Whatever conclusion the various members of the public decide to favour, there is no evidence to support the view that the protagonist’s quality of life and safety suffer as a result of his identification with a literary character.

Shakespearean re-enactments and insanity

Notwithstanding the fact that they seem to share little beyond a certain intertextual indebtedness to the same Shakespearean play, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and John Fowles’ *The Collector* are two particularly interesting examples as far as the identification and sanity equation is concerned. John, the unwanted and unexpected offspring of a Beta female stranded in the middle of a native reservation, finds it equally difficult to blend in with the savages and to make sense of his conflicting feelings until his mother presents him with a book she considers “full of nonsense” and “uncivilised” (Huxley 113) to practise his reading on, thus unwittingly providing him with the key to understanding and channelling his own emotions:

What did the words exactly mean? He only half knew. But their magic was strong and went on rumbling in his head, and somehow it was as though he had never really hated Popé before; never really hated him because he had never been able to say how much he hated him. But now he had these words, these words like drums and singing and magic. These words and the strange, strange story out of which they were taken [...] they gave him a reason for hating Popé; and they made his hatred more real; they even made Popé himself more real. (Huxley 114)

It is quite easy to dismiss his compulsion to kill his mother’s lover after reading *Hamlet* as resulting from the “failure to keep the categories of life and literature distinct” (CP 40) attributed by Lodge’s Morris Zapp to apparently sophisticated readers and only to be expected from a largely uneducated twelve-year-old child. Nevertheless, it might be also worth considering the unlikelihood of any other text exerting such an influence and entertaining the possibility that the force of the impact was due at least as much to the power of the text as to the age and susceptibility to influence of the reader, thus implicitly acknowledging Bloom’s observations on the extent to which “Shakespeare, as we like to forget, largely invented us [...] without Shakespeare, no recognizable selves in us, whoever we are. We owe to Shakespeare not only our representation of cognition but much of our capacity for cognition.” (Bloom 40)

Notwithstanding his youthful homicidal tendencies, John’s obsession with Shakespeare’s plays does not seem to interfere with his ability to survive among the natives, whose own code of behaviour is

based on similar principles and whose hostility is triggered by his different origin and above all by his mother's promiscuity. It is only when he has to face the universe inhabited by Bernard and Lenina that the incompatibility between his Shakespearean perspective and the completely alien values of his apparent rescuers results in increasing confusion, discomfort, anger and ultimately madness. His response to civilisation degenerates from initial enthusiasm about the brave new world inhabited by creatures as beautiful as Lenina to disgust the moment he realises that the woman he had naively assumed to be virtuous and pure was a "damned whore" and an "impudent strumpet" (Huxley 170) according to Shakespearean standards of morality.

Whereas John's insanity occurs as a result of his exposure to a world his upbringing in the reservation and his readings have failed to prepare him for, in the case of the protagonist of John Fowles' *The Collector* abnormality hides quite successfully under the guise of an apparently ordinary man who blends in perfectly with his environment. Moreover, whereas in John's case William Shakespeare's plays represent the basis of his entire worldview, Frederick Clegg's knowledge is restricted to several household names. His only reason for adopting the identity of one of the male protagonists of *The Tempest* is his obsessive interest in a woman who happens to share the relatively rare name of the heroine, yet this small detail prompts a series of further parallels with literary texts, some of which go beyond the Shakespeare canon. Although his decision to forcefully remove Miranda from her normal background and keep her in total isolation from the rest of the world is quite typical of an insane kidnapper, it is quite interesting to observe that the resulting situation bears considerable similarities to the circumstances accompanying the Shakespearean romance between Ferdinand and Miranda in *The Tempest*. By depriving Miranda of any form of contact with the outside and ensuring that he is "the only real person" (Fowles 140) in her world he transforms the microcosm of the basement into a replica of Prospero's island, where the female protagonist would appear to have little choice but fall in love with the first eligible man she meets, even more so given the element of predestination inherent in their first names. Unfortunately for Clegg, the modern Miranda considers his assumed first name a "vile coincidence" (Fowles 123) and selects a considerably less flattering literary identity for her captor: "I have to give him a name. I'm going to call him Caliban." (Fowles 130)

The contrast between Clegg and his victim, a clear reflection of the insurmountable gap between the ordinary man seen as "the curse of civilisation" (Fowles 127) and the artist, emerges not only from their behaviour and choice of words but also from the types of literary identification they favour. Miranda's complex personality and extensive readings lead her to relate in turn to a variety of literary models: in the early stages of her captivity she mentions having "marked the days on the side of the screen, like Robinson Crusoe" (Fowles 151) and she later sarcastically compares her oppressive yet relatively comfortable captivity with that of a sultan's wife or concubine: "It's like living in the Arabian Nights. Being the favourite in the harem." (Fowles 211) Far from confining her allusions to texts whose protagonists share her isolation, Miranda also attempts to make sense of her evolution and romantic attachments by trying to draw parallels between her existence and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* – "I must find out what happens to Marianne. Marianne is me; Eleanor is me as I ought to be." (Fowles 201) – and *Emma*: "The business of being between inexperienced girl and experienced woman and the awful problem of *the man*. Caliban is Mr. Elton. Piers is Frank Churchill. But is G.P. Mr. Knightley?" (Fowles 218) As far as Clegg is concerned, the fact that he only relates to male protagonists such as Ferdinand or Romeo, whose destiny and identity are inextricably tied to those of a woman, provides further proof of the intensity of his obsession with Miranda and consequent inability to identify with unattached and independent male figures. Miranda herself seems to be aware of this aspect, as she compares him in turn with Caliban, a slave, with Pip, a boy whose evolution is marked by a large number of external influences, and – following a failed parallel with Holden Caulfield, an entirely different kind of misfit from Frederick Clegg – with The Old Man of the Sea, an essentially parasitical creature.

However interesting the observations prompted by the two protagonists' use of literary allusions might be, it could be argued that the most interesting detail concerning the relevance of Fowles' novel as

far as reverse mimesis is concerned is to be found beyond the actual text, in its sinister yet quite compelling association with serial killers. Some might consider the fact that at least four such individuals – Leonard Lake, Charles Ng, Christopher Wilder and Robert Berdella – claimed or were believed to have been inspired by Fowles' text to abduct and kill female victims sufficient evidence to mark the book as a dangerous influence, yet blaming these real atrocities on *The Collector* would perhaps make no more sense than blaming Frederick Clegg's criminal behaviour on the influence of Shakespeare's *Tempest* rather than on his own insanity.

Reading and survival

Notwithstanding the rather vehement arguments against emotional fallacy brought forth by certain schools of literary criticism, identification has played quite an important part in the study of literature in the sense that certain "teachers have always tried to exploit the bovaric tendencies of their pupils, and the historical and literary model for imitation has from time immemorial played an important part in all moral education." (Huxley 1937: 31) Indeed, some of the most memorable fictional educators have displayed a marked tendency to use intertextual devices as part of their teaching strategy. One such example is John Keating, the protagonist of the highly acclaimed 1989 American drama film *Dead Poets' Society*, who starts his first poetry class at the conservative Welton Academy by challenging his students to use an unconventional form of address inspired by a line from Whitman: "Now in this class you can call me Mr. Keating. Or, if you're slightly more daring, Oh Captain, My Captain." (Weir) Far from representing a mere joke or gratuitous undermining of the traditional values promoted by the school, this intertextual game turns out to play a crucial part in Mr. Keating's classes and also provides teacher and students alike with alternative identities and a secret communication code. At the end of an entire semester in which literature is taught with the purpose of inspiring students to think creatively and act originally and independently rather than for its own sake, the students resort once more to Whitman's verse to defy the principal's authority and show their allegiance to their now disgraced teacher.

An even more representative example of intertextual teaching is the one provided by Douglas Hector (played, appropriately enough, by the late Richard Griffiths) in the 2006 British film adaptation of Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*. In the course of his classes, which the headmaster has chosen to give the "the dubious title of 'General Studies'" (Hytner), Mr Hector uses a complex and apparently chaotic combination of poetry reading and recitation, songs and games involving the identification of random literary quotations and the re-enactment of famous film scenes which the students, whilst clearly enjoying, tend to regard as a waste of precious study time. While most of his fellow teachers are inclined to allow the students to focus on the subjects they need for their entrance exams in the hope that some of them might make it to Oxford and Cambridge, Mr Hector chooses to continue preparing them not so much for university as for later life. It could be argued that by encouraging them to respond to and identify with a wide variety of texts he is attempting to insure them against the very feelings of loneliness and rejection he has to deal with as an aging homosexual teacher in a boys' grammar school in Sheffield:

The best moments in reading are when you come across something - a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things - which you had thought special and particular to you. And now, here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out, and taken yours. (Hytner)

Unsurprisingly, of all Hector's students it is the one characterised by the most marked sense of inadequacy – "I'm a Jew, I'm small, I'm homosexual, and I live in Sheffield." (Hytner) – who responds most enthusiastically to his classes and even employs intertextual strategies of his own, resorting in one memorable episode to a particularly suggestive rendition of "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" in order to declare his feelings for a fellow student.

This is by no means the only example of the (typically but not exclusively) adolescent tendency to

use excerpts from literary texts, film quotes or song lyrics instead of one's own words to communicate opinions or convey emotions. Perhaps one of the most representative such examples in literature is a scene in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* featuring the wordless telephone conversation between a group of teenage boys and the four neighbouring sisters they have developed an obsessive fascination for. Prevented from achieving closer interaction by shyness and rigid parental control, the two groups take turns playing songs to each other from a distance and somehow communicating as effectively as if permitted to engage in actual dialogue:

Holding the phone to one of Mr. Larson's speakers, we played the song which most thoroughly communicated our feelings to the Lisbon girls. [...] The song never meant much to us, speaking as it did of an age we hadn't reached, but once we heard it playing tinily through the receiver, coming from the Lisbon girls, the song made an impact. Gilbert O'Sullivan's elfin voice sounded high enough to be a girl's. The lyrics might have been diary entries the girls whispered into our ears. Though it wasn't their voices we heard, the song conjured their images more vividly than ever. (Eugenides 195-6)

Although the fact that the title of the novel points to one of the (fictional) songs favoured by the sisters around whose suicide the plot revolves might be read as indicative of the potentially negative influence of certain popular music genres on vulnerable personalities, there is no evidence in the text that the song played any part in the protagonists' decision. On the contrary, as far as the Lisbon girls are concerned, listening to music and relating to the various messages conveyed by the lyrics functions as a form of escape from the rigid confines of family life in American suburbia. Far from protecting the girls' sanity, the destruction of one of the protagonists' collection of rock records by her overcautious and overprotective Puritan mother actually represents the death of an important part of their identity and is more likely to contribute to their ultimate suicide than to help prevent it.

Although the central aim of this paper has been the discussion of fictional rather than actual identification with texts, it would be perhaps inappropriate to fail to include in an article featuring the relationship between literary identification and questions of sanity, suicide and survival at least a passing reference to the most widely discussed case of reverse mimesis, the Werther effect. Such a reference would indeed be particularly relevant given its importance in the shaping of the same theory that "real or fictional suicide can lead to other suicides through imitation or identification" (Berman 26) that appears to have prompted the view of suicide as a contagious condition shared by so many protagonists of the novel discussed above. Although most researchers of the Werther episode chose, quite understandably, to focus on the unfortunate readers who decided to share the hero's fate, perhaps the most interesting aspect as far as mimesis and reverse mimesis is concerned is the circularity this phenomenon entailed, with the fictional text drawing on the real life of its author and in turn inspiring readers to take the course of action the writer had narrowly avoided. Quite ironically, "Goethe healed himself through the telling of the story and lived a long and productive life, but this consolation came too late for those readers whose identification with his suicidal character proved fatal." (Berman 26) This last observation belongs to a study entitled *Surviving Literary Suicide*, a book whose title hints at recent anxieties concerning the dangers posed by literary texts featuring suicidal characters to vulnerable readers. It is however quite interesting to note that far from confirming the validity of such fears, Berman's study actually suggests that identification with a suicidal character is more likely to alleviate than to augment the problem. To paraphrase the protagonist of *The History Boys*, coming across a fictional protagonist that shares one's condition, however serious, might function like a hand coming out of the text to take the reader's and thus rescue them from feelings of dejection and loneliness and hopefully even from depression and self-inflicted violence.

Conclusions

The main aim of this paper was a discussion of reverse mimesis in the case of fictional

protagonists in terms of an assessment of the relationship between identification with literary characters and questions of sanity. However, in addition to yielding quite interesting results in this respect, the analysis of some of the most representative such protagonists has also prompted an unexpected yet quite interesting observation regarding gender issues, in the sense that the vast majority of characters under scrutiny have been male ones. This detail is quite suggestive of the discrepancy between modern reading practices and the dominant past mythology whereby ruling class men “read critically, read not to imitate but to engage productively with argument and with narrative” whereas “women and working-class readers, on the other hand, could not be so trusted. They would identify uncritically with the characters and be swept away by the fantasy of popular romance” (Kaplan 147). Unlike the heroine of Flaubert’s first published novel, whose name has inspired one of the critical terms employed in this paper (or, for that matter, Don Quixote) none of the protagonists under discussion identify with fictional figures up to the point of surrendering their personal identity or losing touch with reality. On the contrary, many of them find it easier to understand and cope with their own problems by relating to the protagonists of the texts they read, the obvious conclusion being that reverse mimesis is not only an inevitable aspect of reality but an essential element of identity formation and personal survival.

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