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### **Effects of “Literariness” on Emotions and on Empathy and Reflection After Reading**

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

These are the words of Susan Sontag (2007, p. 205) and she is certainly not the only one who has expressed a belief in the power of literary texts. Ever since Aristotle's *Poetics* (n.d.), countless critics and academics have made claims concerning the ethical potential of narrative drama and poetic language, particularly when it comes to empathy (e.g., Booth, 1988; De Botton, 1997; Nussbaum, 1995; Rorty; 1989), and reflection (e.g., Althusser, 1980; Bronzwaer, 1986; Habermas, 1983; Nussbaum, 2001). As Nussbaum (1995) has argued, the type of imagination triggered by literary reading teaches readers to walk a mile in a stranger's shoes, helping them realize how others feel (empathy). In addition, Nussbaum (2001) has claimed that literary reading helps us examine ourselves: thinking about how to relate to others, to ethical issues and to life in general (reflection).

These claims may sound reasonable if you are an avid reader, as you may have had one or multiple experiences of a literary text influencing your feelings and/or thoughts. However, we can wonder to what extent texts need to be “literary” to accomplish empathic and reflective reactions – could a simple fable or a newspaper article not have the same effect? What is it in a text that makes us understand others and ourselves, perhaps even the world, better? Or is it not so much the text, but what we bring to the text, our personal experiences and our general disposition to empathize?

It's only since the last few decades that these kinds of questions have begun to be addressed empirically, in the interdisciplinary field of "empirical literary studies," a field which can be said to have started with the initiative of Siegfried Schmidt in 1979. In its beginning stages, empirical literary studies mainly focused on discourse processing and text understanding, largely neglecting the experiential dimension of feeling and reflecting (Miall, 2006). In recent years, multiple studies have provided empirical evidence for a relation between reading and empathy (e.g., Hakemulder, 2000; Johnson, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009), as well as – to a lesser extent – reading and reflection (e.g., Kuiken, Miall, & Sikora, 2004; Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Sikora, Kuiken, & Miall, 2010; Levitt, Rattanasampan, Chaidaroon, Stanley, & Robinson, 2009; Waxler, 2008). Despite these efforts, it is still far from clear which textual features for which readers lead to increased empathy or deep thoughts. Studies into empathy and reflection often do not compare between literary and non-literary texts, and when they do, it is often not specified which features make the literary texts literary (for an overview, see Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). In order to substantiate claims like Sontag's and Nussbaum's about the power of literature, we need to pay more attention to textual features which can be considered "literary" and make systematic comparisons between texts higher and lower in "literariness" (cf. Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015).

This article aims to contribute to our knowledge of the potential power of literature, focusing more specifically on how "foregrounding" (striking textual features) in a literary text can influence affective (including empathic) and reflective responses. First, a selective overview of the available empirical evidence and theoretical expectations concerning the influence of foregrounding will be given. Subsequently, an

empirical study will be presented in which foregrounding was systematically manipulated.

## **Theoretical and Empirical Background**

### **Foregrounding as a Defining Feature of Literariness**

What “literature” and “literary” signify depends on one’s theoretical perspective. Coming from a sociological approach, one could argue that what qualifies as “literary” is based on social convention, and that the power of social institutions like publishing houses is more important than text-immanent qualities (cf. Bourdieu, 1996; Corse & Westervelt, 2002; Fish, 1980; Smith, 1988). Yet, there are narratives, sentences and metaphors that have survived throughout the ages, still feeling “novel,” even though the social context has changed radically (e.g., *Don Quixote* or the poetry of Sappho). Also, some (literary) texts may feel original to readers regardless of their reading experience. As Miall and Kuiken (1994) found in a study on responses to “literary” textual features (like phonetic repetitions and imagery), both readers with and without a background in literature found those passages with a higher amount of these literary features more striking (cf. Van Peer, 1986). While subjective judgments are likely to be at least partly shaped by social contexts and prior experience, some textual features thus generally increase the likelihood of a text being evaluated as original or striking. The current study looks into the effects of that originality (also known as “foregrounding”) as a text-immanent feature, while making sure the textual features are also subjectively perceived as making the text more original (for which the term “perceived foregrounding” is used).

The term “foregrounding” (orig. Czech “*aktualizace*”) has been coined by Mukařovský (1976), building on the work of Russian formalists like Jakobson and Shklovsky. Jakobson (1960) discussed the “poetic function” as one particular function of

language, namely directing attention to the form of the linguistic expression itself, which can potentially emphasize its beauty and/or originality. Shklovsky (1965) used the term “*ostranenie*” (“estrangement” or “defamiliarization”) to indicate that the function of literature is to make everyday objects and situations appear strange, by using, for example, an unfamiliar perspective or idiom. Mukařovský’s (1976) “foregrounding” is conceptually related to these concepts: “foregrounding” designates textual features standing out from ordinary language, with the supposed function of deautomatization instead of simple communication. Mukařovský distinguished between phonetic (repetitions of sounds, like alliteration), grammatical (e.g., ellipsis), and semantic (e.g., metaphor) foregrounding. While phonetic, grammatical and semantic deviations are most obvious on the sentence level, there can also be foregrounding on a more global level, like an unlikely focalizer, narrator or story structure (Short, 1996).

In most empirical research on foregrounding, manipulations are done on the word and sentence level (e.g., Hakemulder, 2004; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Van Peer, 1986; Van Peer, Hakemulder, & Zyngier, 2007), changing, for example, novel metaphors into dead metaphors. The current article also focuses on this type of manipulation. It should be noted that “literariness” cannot only be conceptualized at the sentence level. As literary scholars have argued, “indeterminacy” or ambiguity of the story structure is an important feature of literary texts: gaps in the narration allow for multiple interpretations by the reader (Iser, 1978). While the operationalization of literariness in the current study is limited, this has the advantage that experimental manipulation is relatively straightforward, that results build on a growing field of empirical scholarship and that the results could also apply to non-narrative genres like poetry.

Does foregrounding have an effect on readers’ feelings and thoughts? Theory suggests that it does. The structuralists’ defamiliarization-hypothesis proposed that

foregrounding makes the common unfamiliar and would thus make readers see the world in a new light. Shklovsky's (1965) and Mukařovský's (1976) writing about the defamiliarizing process suggests that it is accompanied by feelings and likely to lead to reflection (cf. Miall & Kuiken, 1994). Shklovsky (1965) explicitly stated that art "exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stoney" and "to increase the difficulty and length of perception" (p. 12). They were not specific, however, about the type of feelings and thoughts that would be evoked by which kind of deviating text feature. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, empirical evidence is divided on the effects of foregrounding.

### **Effects of Foregrounding on Emotions and Empathy**

Let us first look at the effects of foregrounding on emotions, including feelings of empathy. Miall and Kuiken (1994) conducted a series of empirical studies testing the effects of phonetic, grammatical and semantic foregrounding, using three literary stories divided in passages with less and more foregrounding. Generally, the segments which contained more semantic and phonetic foregrounding were perceived as more striking and evoked more affect. Yet, grammatical foregrounding seemed to have little effect on these measures. While these results seem promising, Miall and Kuiken (1994) only used one general item to measure affect (to what extent "feeling" was aroused), so it is not clear which specific emotions are evoked by foregrounding. Do readers start to feel what characters feel, to a greater extent than if they read a less intricate text? Or do the affect ratings simply reflect the surprise effect of deviation?

To answer these questions, it is useful to invoke the theoretical distinction made by several scholars (Kneepkens & Zwaan; 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Tan, 1996) between "narrative feelings" and "aesthetic feelings." In the conceptualization of Miall and Kuiken (2002), narrative feelings are those affective states directed toward characters and events (i.e., to the story world), and include identification, empathy and

sympathy with characters as well as general absorption into the narrative world (feeling like one is part of the scene). Aesthetic feelings, on the other hand, are directed towards the formal features of the text, and include appreciating the beauty of the form, but also finding the form original and striking, thus “perceived foregrounding” (Miall and Kuiken, 2002). According to Kneepkens and Zwaan (1994), texts higher in literariness (i.e., foregrounding), would evoke more aesthetic feelings, but less narrative feelings, as they argued that a focus on the style leads away from a focus on characters and events. However, one can also argue that finding a text more beautiful helps to find its characters more sympathetic and/or vice versa: aesthetic feelings and narrative feelings may reinforce one another, in a process of oscillation (cf. Cupchik, 2001). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that aesthetic and narrative feelings are moderately to strongly correlated (Andringa, 1996; Koopman, 2011; Koopman, Hilscher & Cupchik, 2012). Correlations between perceived foregrounding and narrative feelings appear to be lower than correlations between other aesthetic feelings (i.e., finding the style beautiful) and narrative feelings. These interrelations may depend on reader characteristics: in Andringa’s (1996) study, only experienced readers demonstrated a correlation between sympathy for characters and perceived foregrounding. It takes some experience with reading literature, Andringa proposed, to notice and appreciate unconventional stylistic features. On the other hand, Koopman (2015a) found lower ratings of perceived foregrounding for readers with more reading experience, suggesting that they are less easily surprised. Overall, we can say that foregrounding in a text does not necessarily work against narrative feelings, but that it is relevant to control for readers’ prior experience with literature.

That foregrounding does not always automatically lead to more affect is attested to by an experiment by Van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier (2007), who, in contrast to

Miall and Kuiken (1994), found no effect of foregrounding on the emotion items they used (feeling “moved,” “touched,” and “sad”). The lack of evoked affect could be due to the particular emotions they asked about, but could also be explained by the fact that they manipulated just one single poetic line. A short story or poem is likely to be a better stimulus to evoke emotion. In either case, the empirical evidence for a relation between foregrounding and emotion thusfar is inconclusive.

Despite claims like Sontag’s and Nussbaum’s, we know even less about specific effects of foregrounding on empathy after reading – so not just feeling with characters, but feeling with those in the real world who are similar to characters one has read about. Specific studies on foregrounding and empathy have, to my knowledge, not been conducted. A recent series of five experiments by Kidd and Castano (2013) showed effects of reading literary short stories (compared to non-fiction and to popular short stories) on Theory of Mind, the ability to make correct inferences of emotions. The fact that Kidd and Castano (2013) could replicate this effect with various literary stories, suggests that there is something about “literariness” which is conducive to this empathic ability. However, as they did not manipulate the texts, nor match them in content, these effects may just have been due to the themes of the literary texts. What is needed, therefore, are studies exercising more control over text features.

### **Effects of Foregrounding on Reflection**

The empirical evidence for foregrounding on reflection is not more convincing than the effect of foregrounding on emotions. A series of experiments by Kuijpers (2014) failed to show consistent effects of deviation in prose on reflection (i.e, a deepened understanding of life and finding the text meaningful), and a comparison between reactions to expository texts, life narratives and literary narratives by Koopman (2015b) failed to show an effect of literature on reflection (measured by the item “the text



triggered me to think"). Yet, Van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier (2007) did find a significant effect of foregrounding on their cognitive items (learning something; wanting to stop and think about it; wanting to memorize it). These differences might be due to the fact that Van Peer, Hakemulder and Zyngier's (2007) single line experiment did not provide readers with much other content to think about except for the original form, whereas Kuijpers' (2014) and Koopman's (2015b) less literary texts also offered content to think about.

On the other hand, Miall and Kuiken (1994) showed that foregrounded passages are associated with longer reading times, which can give readers the opportunity to pause and think about what they have read. In their phenomenological studies, Miall and Kuiken (2002), Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004), and Sikora, Kuiken and Miall (2010) found patterns suggesting that form also matters when reading longer poems and short stories: for the small percentage of readers who experienced deep reflection (10 – 15%), this reflection was preceded by emotionally engaging with striking passages, often finding resonance with a particular image. Apart from pointing to the possible influence of foregrounding, these studies also suggest that emotion and reflection go together (cf., Koopman et al., 2012). However, as these studies did not use a comparison condition, we cannot be sure whether reflective responses were necessarily evoked by foregrounding. An alternative explanation could be that what readers mostly respond to is content, as authors may use their most striking formulations for those moments in the texts which are most important and/or emotional (cf., Hakemulder, 2004).

### **Specific Effects of Imagery**

There is reason to believe that specifically semantic foregrounding can lead to a better felt understanding of what others are experiencing, an understanding that can also lead to better self-understanding and understanding of life in general (cf. Miall and

Kuiken, 2002). As Gibbs (2002) has claimed: “Metaphor has a special ability to evoke deep emotional responses and elevate the human spirit” (p. 13). On the basis of empirical evidence, Gibbs (2002; 2006a) has argued that our use of metaphors is grounded in our bodily experience, is connected to feeling, and potentially also to better understanding. Among other things, people are likely to use metaphors and metonyms when expressing emotion, and abstract ideas are often expressed and understood in terms of embodied metaphors, for example the idea that life is a “journey” and all its related submetaphors (e.g., taking “the road less traveled”) (Gibbs, 2005; 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; 1999). Gibbs (2006) connects these findings to the fact that our brains tend to automatically simulate the bodily actions and experiences we read about (the so-called “mirror neurons”), a process which may be a precondition for empathy (Gallese, 2003). As Gibbs (2006) has argued, when we read a metaphor or metonym grounded in bodily experience (as most are), our own bodies automatically get involved.

While Gibbs’ (2006) claims make sense for conventional metaphors, like having “warm” feelings for a person or trying to “grasp” a concept, it is unclear whether his theory also goes for novel metaphors used in literature. According to Gibbs (2006), most novel metaphors build on the existing conceptual metaphors outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Gibbs, Leggitt and Turner (2002) hypothesized that novel metaphors can have stronger effects than conventional metaphors, because novel metaphors express a more nuanced, elaborate bodily experience. As long as readers pause to try to understand what is being said by this novel metaphor, they will also get a sense of those nuances, which could lead to emotions like vicarious fear or sympathy (Gibbs et al., 2002). Yet, in a preliminary study to test this hypothesis, no difference was found between novel and conventional metaphorical expressions; both were equally seen by participants as reflecting more intense emotion than literal statements (Gibbs et al.,

2002). However, we need to note here that participants in this experiment listened to audiotapes with rather everyday short scenario's, ending in one either literal statement, conventional metaphor or novel metaphor. Reading a literary text in which metaphors are naturally incorporated may require more attention and engagement and may therefore be more likely to have effects (cf., Mar & Oatley, 2008). On the other hand, as Kuijpers (2014) found, the use of more novel imagery in a literary text can also decrease mental imagery, as it may be more difficult for readers to imagine (either automatically or consciously) a more complex metaphor.

### **The Importance of Personal Factors**

Apart from the different stimulus materials used in the studies discussed above, another reason for the mixed results may be personal attributes of the participants. Previous exposure to literature/expertise was taken into account in most of the studies mentioned, and it indeed appears to have significant effects. Reading experience makes it easier for readers to detect strikingness (Andringa, 1996; Miall & Kuiken, 1994), but it can also raise the threshold for experiencing surprise (Koopman, 2015a; Kuijpers, 2014; Van Peer, Zyngier, & Hakemulder, 2007).

Personal experience with the subject matter being described can also be a factor in one's appreciation for foregrounding. It matters whether the type of foregrounding that is used expresses the content in a way that makes sense to us, that corresponds with our experiences, or that we find overly aestheticized. While this personal resonance between reader and text is difficult to control for (and may indeed require qualitative studies, like Miall & Kuiken's, 2002), we can control for personal experience with the subject matter.

Controlling for personal experience becomes particularly relevant when we look at empathy and reflection as outcome measures, as the current study aims to do. Those

who have personal experience with the subject matter may generally feel more engaged, more likely to empathize and more likely to reflect. Furthermore, when we want to explore whether foregrounding can increase empathy, it is sensible to control for people's disposition to feel for others: trait empathy. Trait empathy has been found to predict empathy with characters as well as empathy with others after reading (Koopman, 2015a).

### **The Current Study**

The current study explores the role of foregrounding in general (semantic, grammatical and phonetic foregrounding combined) and of imagery (or: semantic foregrounding) in particular, in influencing affective responses during reading, and empathic understanding for others and reflection after reading. For these purposes, I find it most relevant to use a literary text about suffering as stimulus material, as Nussbaum and Sontag make their claims about literary texts about suffering. Their idea is that if we engage with such a text, this text may also make us empathize with people in similar situations as the character. However, as indicated above, empirical evidence that this effect would be stronger for literary texts is lacking (cf. Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). The current study therefore systematically compares between three versions of the same literary text differing in foregrounding.

Theoretically, we can expect more affective and reflective responses to texts higher in foregrounding, and we can expect that this is particularly due to imagery. The mixed or limited results of previous empirical studies, however, warn against formulating specific directional hypotheses. Instead of posing hypotheses, the current study poses the following three main research questions:

- 1) Do texts higher in foregrounding lead to higher affective responses (narrative and aesthetic feelings)?

- 2) Do texts higher in foregrounding lead to higher empathic understanding for extra-textual others who are in a similar situation as the character?
- 3) Do texts higher in foregrounding lead to more reflection?

For each of these questions, ANOVAs will be executed to compare readers' scores on the three text conditions.

Apart from exploring the main effect of foregrounding, it is also relevant to take into account readers' personal attributes, as explained above. An additional, fourth research question is therefore: what role do personal attributes play in readers' affective, empathic and reflective responses, most importantly personal experience with the subject matter, trait empathy, and exposure to literature? General Linear Models will be executed to see, simultaneously, whether main effects of foregrounding still exist when controlling for personal attributes, and what the contribution of the various personal attributes is.

In addition to the quantitative measures, the current study includes a qualitative component, to further explore which specific feelings and thoughts readers experience and whether this differs between those who read a text with and without foregrounding. The qualitative component functions to nuance and explain the quantitative findings.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were undergraduates from three Dutch universities, and, for a proportion of these students, one of their parents. As the stimulus material was about a woman who has lost her daughter, it was deemed relevant to include parents in the sample, to see whether a text can make people reflect and/or empathize regardless of their similarity to the character. The perspective of a mother is more dissimilar to

(childless) students than to parents. To increase the chance that students with different levels of exposure to literature would participate, students from various academic backgrounds were approached (Literature/Languages, Media & Communication, and Sociology). Students were invited to participate through recruiting talks before classes began; if they wanted to participate, they could take a paper copy with them.

Participation was voluntary, the researcher was not their professor, and they were rewarded for participation with 5 euros. Participation of parents was also voluntary: students could choose to take either no copy, one or two extra copies. Most students took only one extra copy. In total, 147 people returned their questionnaire, of which 5 were not analyzed because participants had more than 5 missing variables and/or did not fit in either the category “student” or “parent.” Of the final 142 participants, 64.1% were students. The mean age was 32.07 ( $SD = 16.79$ , range: 17-73); 74.6% of the total sample was female. Of the 142 respondents, 135 had the Dutch nationality.

### **Design and Materials**

The aim of the study was to determine the effects of foregrounding on empathy, on reflection, and on various affective responses during reading (narrative and aesthetic feelings), taking into account personal factors. A Dutch literary text about grief (a chapter from Anna Enquist’s acclaimed novel *Counterpoint*, 2010 – orig. *Contrapunt*, 2008) was manipulated to arrive at three text versions containing different levels of foregrounding. This particular text was chosen as it contained a high level of semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding, without becoming difficult to read.

The study used a between-subjects design with level of foregrounding as independent variable: participants either read a) the *original* version, containing a high level of semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding, b) a version *without imagery* (or: semantic foregrounding), in which as many (novel) metaphors and metonymies as

possible were replaced by literal alternatives, c) a version *without foregrounding*, in which not only semantic, but also phonetic and grammatical foregrounding were replaced by more common alternatives. Table 1 shows some of the textual manipulations. This type of manipulation is a complex and delicate process, as it is difficult to change just one foregrounded feature without changing other textual elements as well. For example, the original text by Enquist included multiple repetitions of the phrase “The cold child.” [“Het koude kind.”], which is semantic foregrounding (“cold” signifies “dead” here – it is a form of metonymy, as being cold is one aspect of being dead), phonetic foregrounding (alliteration), and grammatical foregrounding (an incomplete sentence). To replace the word “cold” with “dead,” simultaneously removed the semantic and the phonetic foregrounding for the version “without imagery.” However, overall, care was taken to keep phonetic foregrounding intact in the version without imagery.

To increase the chance of getting valid results, the manipulations were discussed with three associate professors in Modern Languages/Literary Studies, and adapted according to their suggestions. The final versions hardly differed in length (original: 1606; without imagery: 1545; without any foregrounding: 1611). The different versions were pretested among ten people with a background in literature, without telling them there were different versions. The participants in the pretest did not notice anything strange or annoying about the manipulated versions. In the actual study, participants in each condition scored equally high on an item measuring “interestingness” of the text, which is important, as potential effects should not be due to the manipulated version being more boring for participants (cf. Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, & Peterson, 2009). Note that even the version without any foregrounding can still be considered literary in other respects, for example in the original way the text deals with the theme of loss:

evoking the lost daughter through playing a musical piece that she used to love and reflecting on how nature is untouched by the wreckage inside someone who has suffered the loss of a beloved.

Table 1.

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

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

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



## Procedure

Participants were randomly given a questionnaire with one of the three text conditions (original, without imagery, without foregrounding). Care was taken to distribute an equal number of copies of each condition. This led to the following distribution of participants over conditions: Original:  $n = 49$ ; Without Imagery:  $n = 40$ ; Without Foregrounding:  $n = 53$ . The higher number of participants in the condition without foregrounding is likely to be due to the fact that this non-foregrounded text version was easier to read, thus non-response was lower. Apart from the three experimental conditions, questionnaires varied in asking questions about empathic understanding for people dealing with persisting grief and questions about one's general disposition to feel empathy (*trait empathy*) either *before* presenting the text, or *after* one had read the text. This was done for two reasons: 1) to be able to see whether empathic understanding was generally higher after reading; 2) to control for a potential order effect of trait empathy. Scores on trait measures are known to be influenced by participants' moods and other situational factors. To be able to use the trait empathy measure as a proper measure of people's general empathic disposition in this study, it was important that it was not significantly influenced by reading one text. In addition, it was relevant to check that the groups "before reading" and "after reading" did not have significantly different scores on this measure. There was no order effect of trait empathy,  $F(1, 140) = 1.22, p = .27, \eta^2 = .009$ .

While the study was mostly quantitative, it had a qualitative component. All participants were asked to underline those phrases in the text which evoked an emotion or feeling and mark these with an "E," and to mark phrases which evoked a thought or memory with a "G" (for "gedachte," the Dutch word for thought). After reading, they were all asked to select one "E" and one "G" that they found most important and describe

what kinds of emotions and thoughts they had had. This procedure is based on Larsen and Seilman's (1989) "self-probed retrospection method." Larsen and Seilman (1989) used a similar instruction to get at readers' "personal reminders," with readers making marks in a text and coming back to this later.

## Measures

The subject variables used in the current study were trait empathy as measured by two scales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980; 1983), exposure to literature as measured by the Author Recognition Test (ART; Stanovich & West, 1989; West, Stanovich and Mitchell, 1993), and personal experience with grief, measured by two items from the Inventory of Traumatic Grief (ITG; Boelen, Van den Bout, De Keijser, & Hoijtink, 2003). Apart from these constructs, which are explained below, two other subject variables were taken into account, namely, gender and whether one was a student or a parent. Both students and parents were asked whether they had one or multiple children and if so, of what ages. No students reported having children. Preliminary ANOVAs and Chi-squares were calculated in order to ensure that the participants in the three conditions did not differ significantly on the subject variables – they did not. The dependent variables were affective responses during reading, empathic understanding, and reflection.

**Trait empathy (IRI).** Trait empathy was measured using two subscales of Davis' (1980; 1983) empathy scale, namely empathic concern and perspective-taking. These scales measure, respectively, affective or "warm" empathy ("feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern" – Davis, 1980, p. 12), and cognitive or "cold" empathy ("an ability or proclivity to shift perspectives" – Davis, 1980, p. 11). Together, these subscales give a good idea of someone's dispositional empathy. Davis' scale has been tested as producing valid and reliable results (Davis, 1980; 1983). It is commonly used in reader

response research. The original items were used, in a validated Dutch translation (De Corte et al., 2007). To fit with the other measures, respondents answered on a 7-point likert scale of agreement, instead of a 5-point scale as Davis (1980) uses. Both subscales showed sufficient internal consistency in this study (empathic concern:  $\alpha = .75$ , 7 items; perspective-taking:  $\alpha = .74$ , 7 items), as did the combined total scale ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

**Exposure to literature (ART – adapted).** An adapted version of the Author Recognition Test (ART; see Mar et al., 2006; Stanovich & West, 1989; West, Stanovich and Mitchell, 1993) was used to measure one's general exposure to literature. From a list with names, participants have to indicate which ones they recognize as authors. Guessing is discouraged, as participants are instructed that some names are fake (foils). The adapted version of the ART included 15 “popular” and 15 “literary” authors, Dutch and international. Twelve foils were used. This adapted ART has been pretested and used in other studies, in which it was able to distinguish between more and less experienced readers (Koopman, 2015a, 2015b; Kuijpers, 2014). In the current study, the range of the ART was 30 ( $M = 10.93$ ,  $SD = 6.51$ ). The foils were effective: no one chose more than 3 foils. Foils were subtracted from the overall ART scores of these participants.

**Personal experience.** After a yes/no-selection question whether one had ever lost a beloved, to which 111 participants answered “yes,” personal experience with grief was measured by two questions: “How hard has this loss been for you?” and “To what extent did you find it difficult to deal with the loss?” (7-point scale). These two questions come from the “impact-scale” of the Dutch version of the Inventory of Traumatic Grief (ITG) (Boelen et al., 2003). The two items were combined into one scale, “Personal experience/Impact” ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Affective responses.** The affective responses first of all consisted of a measurement of one's general *emotional response* to the text, which was measured quantitatively by an item asking people to indicate on a 10-point scale to what extent the text had evoked emotions, and qualitatively by having participants write about which emotions were evoked.

Apart from this, participants filled out items about diverse narrative feelings and aesthetic feelings on 7-point scales. These narrative and aesthetic feelings are further described below. All specific items, including the alpha values per construct, can be found in Appendix A. All constructs about affective responses had good internal consistency, with alpha's ranging from .80 to .91. Scales were kept as concise as possible to prevent frustration and boredom in participants. The same items and scales were used as in Koopman (2015a), which were in turn inspired by items on previous scales about narrative feelings (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000; Koopman, 2011).

**Narrative feelings.** Within the overarching concept "narrative feelings," distinctions can be made between feelings towards narrative events and scenes and feelings towards characters (Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Feelings towards events/scenes were measured with the construct *absorption* (also known as "transportation"): feeling drawn into the narrative world, experiencing it as vivid (cf. Green & Brock, 2000; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Feelings towards characters were divided in one construct measuring *sympathy/empathy*: feeling for (sympathy) and feeling with (empathy) characters (cf. Coplan, 2004), and one construct measuring *identification*: seeing oneself as similar to a character, taking on their goals and perspective (cf. Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011). These constructs have been found to be separable and to have different effects (Koopman, 2015a). In addition, as the story was about human

suffering, *empathic distress* was measured, using four items (7-point scale), based on the adjectives named by De Wied, Zillmann and Ordman (1995) in their study on empathic distress. Empathic distress can either lead people to turn away from those who suffer (Davis, 1980) or to feel more concerned towards them and more likely to reflect on suffering (Koopman et al., 2012).

***Aesthetic feelings.*** Participants were asked to rate feelings towards the style on 7-point scales. Andringa's (1996) distinction between aesthetic feelings about "attractiveness" and those about "novelty" (or: "foregrounding") was used, leading to a construct *aesthetic attractiveness*, which judges the extent to which the style is found beautiful, good and interesting, and a construct *perceived foregrounding*, which judges how original, striking and surprising the style is.

**Empathic understanding.** To measure empathic understanding, i.e., showing a felt understanding of what people in a similar situation as the character go through, participants answered, either before or after reading (see Procedure), to what extent they were in agreement with five statements on people who are grieving (7-point scale). The statements expressed understanding (e.g., "I can understand people who, multiple years after a beloved has died, are still preoccupied with the loss") as well as support for actions to alleviate distress (e.g., "The basic insurance policy should cover therapy for people who keep struggling with loss after many years"). These statements have been used in an earlier study (Koopman, 2015a), in which they had satisfactory internal consistency ( $\alpha = .69$ ). In the current study, the internal consistency was acceptable ( $\alpha = .60$ ).

**Reflection.** After reading, respondents answered the following item on a 7-point scale: "The text triggered me to think." Apart from this quantitative measure of reflection, the qualitative measure asked participants to write about the thoughts or

memories that were evoked. The responses to the open questions about emotions/feelings and about thoughts/memories were coded by the author of this article, using an eclectic coding method (Saldaña, 2013). This type of combination between inductive and deductive coding is common within qualitative content analysis as described by Schreier (2012). The coding process was aided by using the qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA.

To validate the attributed codes, they were discussed with an associate professor of Modern Languages, who used the preliminary codebook made by the author of this article to code responses by 40% of the participants (randomly selected). This coding process was “blind,” meaning that the second coder did not know which codes the first coder had given to which responses. Furthermore, responses were separated from the original data file, only recognizable by the respondent’s number, so neither coder knew which response belonged to which experimental condition (original, without imagery or without foregrounding). Codes and categories were discussed with the second coder, leading to the codebook, which categories and codes are included in Appendix B. After discussion, both coders did a final (blind) coding round, in which the agreement percentage was 92.5% for the open question about thoughts/memories, and 94.5% for the open question about emotions/feelings. To aid quantitative analyses of the qualitative data, frequencies of codes were calculated, with each participant either scoring a 0 (not indicated) or 1 (indicated once or more) per code.

## **Results**

The results are structured according to outcome variable. First, the effects of foregrounding on affective responses will be discussed, secondly, the effects of foregrounding on empathic understanding, and finally, the effects of foregrounding on

reflection. For each outcome variable, the main effects of condition will be discussed first, followed by the effects of personal variables. In the case of the affective responses and reflection, this will be supplemented by the information from the qualitative data.

### **Effects of Foregrounding on Affective Responses**

A series of separate ANOVAs, including post-hoc tests (Fisher's LSD), was conducted to determine the general effect of foregrounding on the affective responses (research question 1). In order to explore the precise emotional effects of foregrounding, instead of using one sum-item for all affective responses together, the affective responses were looked at separately. The first part of Table 2 shows the effects of foregrounding condition on all affective responses. As can be seen in Table 2, the original condition evoked significantly more perceived foregrounding than the other two conditions, thus confirming effective manipulation of foregrounding. The original version also showed significantly higher averages than the version without imagery for the general emotional response, and for empathic distress. It is noteworthy here that the version without foregrounding did not differ significantly from the original version or the version without imagery in these respects.

Table 2.

*ANOVA Mean Differences of Affective Responses, Empathic Understanding, and Reflection per Foregrounding Condition (incl. Post-Hoc Test Significances)*

	Original	Without Imagery	Without Foregrounding			
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) (95% CI)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) (95% CI)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) (95% CI)	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
<b><i>Affective responses</i></b>						
<i>Emotional (general)</i>	6.10 (2.17) (5.49, 6.71) <i>n</i> = 49	5.11* (2.15) (4.44, 5.78) <i>n</i> = 40	5.61 (1.96) (5.08, 6.14) <i>n</i> = 53	2.48	.03	.087
<i>Empathic Distress</i>	14.47 (5.62) (12.90, 16.04) <i>n</i> = 49	11.88* (5.04) (10.32, 13.44) <i>n</i> = 40	13.55 (4.94) (12.22, 14.88) <i>n</i> = 53	2.76	.04	.067
<i>Sympathy/Empathy</i>	30.84 (6.73) (28.96, 32.72) <i>n</i> = 49	28.53 (7.28) (26.27, 30.79) <i>n</i> = 40	28.79 (6.64) (27.00, 30.58) <i>n</i> = 53	1.61	.02	.203
<i>Identification</i>	11.10 (4.78) (9.76, 12.44) <i>n</i> = 49	10.40 (4.58) (8.98, 11.82) <i>n</i> = 40	10.64 (3.96) (9.57, 11.71) <i>n</i> = 53	.29	.004	.746
<i>Absorption</i>	21.78 (7.87) (19.58, 23.98) <i>n</i> = 49	19.28 (7.78) (16.87, 21.69) <i>n</i> = 40	20.74 (6.30) (19.04, 22.44) <i>n</i> = 53	1.30	.02	.277
<i>Aesthetic Attractiveness</i>	17.39 (6.01) (15.71, 19.07) <i>n</i> = 49	15.25 (4.75) (13.78, 16.72) <i>n</i> = 40	15.83 (4.94) (14.50, 17.16) <i>n</i> = 53	2.01	.03	.137
<i>Perceived Foregrounding</i>	11.27 (4.19) (10.10, 12.44) <i>n</i> = 49	9.30* (3.43) (8.24, 10.36) <i>n</i> = 40	9.19** (3.35) (8.29, 10.09) <i>n</i> = 53	4.89	.07	.009
<b><i>Empathic understanding</i></b>						
<i>After reading</i>	26.64 (4.01) (25.07, 28.21) <i>n</i> = 25	25.00 (5.37) (22.65, 27.35) <i>n</i> = 20	23.15** (4.14) (21.56, 24.74) <i>n</i> = 26	3.88	.10	.025
<i>Before reading</i>	23.67 (4.31) (21.95, 25.39) <i>n</i> = 24	21.70 (4.89) (19.56, 23.84) <i>n</i> = 20	24.26 (4.76) (22.46, 26.06) <i>n</i> = 27	1.79	.05	.175
<b><i>Reflection</i></b>						
<i>Reflection</i>	4.49 (1.69) (4.02, 4.96) <i>n</i> = 49	4.03 (1.63) (3.52, 4.54) <i>n</i> = 40	4.21 (1.70) (3.78, 4.64) <i>n</i> = 53	.88	.01	.417

\*.  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed): indicates significant mean difference from the original condition, based on Fisher's LSD post-hoc tests. Note that none of the mean values of "without imagery" differed significantly from the mean values in "without foregrounding." The exact p-values in the table are the p-values of the F-test.



These results suggest foregrounding affects affective responses. However, does this still hold when taking personal factors into account, and what is the influence of various personal factors (research question 4)? A series of General Linear Models – with as fixed factors the nominal variables condition (original, without imagery, without foregrounding), gender (male/female), and student/parent, and as covariates the continuous variables trait empathy (IRI), exposure to literature (ART), and personal experience/impact – suggested the importance of personal factors. When the abovementioned subject variables were included in the models, the experimental effects on affective responses that were previously found significant (Table 2) became non-significant ( $p > .05$ ). While participants were divided randomly over the three conditions, and participants in the three conditions did not differ significantly on the subject variables (see Measures), the conditions did apparently still differ enough on the subject variables to cause this effect. This is likely to be due to the relatively small sample size. It also brings out the importance of personal factors.

With regard to the personal factors, significant effects were found for: 1) *gender*, with women experiencing more sympathy/empathy for the character ( $F(1, 127) = 5.14$ ,  $p = .025$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ) and more aesthetic attractiveness ( $F(1, 127) = 4.74$ ,  $p = .031$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ); 2) *student/parent*, with students experiencing more empathic distress ( $F(1, 127) = 5.96$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ ); 3) *trait empathy*, with those scoring higher on this personal factor experiencing more sympathy/empathy with the character ( $F(1, 127) = 5.43$ ,  $p = .021$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ), more identification ( $F(1, 127) = 4.08$ ,  $p = .046$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ), and more absorption ( $F(1, 127) = 4.42$ ,  $p = .037$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ).

### **Affective Responses: Qualitative Data**

As indicated in the Methods section, all participants answered two open questions about emotions/feelings and thoughts/memories. The analysis of these

responses sheds further light on which precise emotions people experienced and whether this differed per condition. As the overview of codes (Appendix B) shows, there was a high prevalence of emotional responses. The majority of readers experienced emotions in reaction to this short excerpt; a minority of 15.5% reported no emotions or a lack of emotions, and/or feeling distanced in some way. While the most frequently experienced emotions were “painful” ones like sadness and powerlessness ( $n = 61$ ), there were also readers experiencing ambivalent feelings: a combination of beauty and pain, comfort and loss (“bittersweet” and “touching,”  $n = 15$ ), and even readers responding with pleasant emotions ( $n = 24$ ), like feelings of hope or strength. Many readers reported feelings of identification, recognizing something in the character and/or her actions ( $n = 53$ ), and even more readers reported some form of sympathy and/or empathy, feeling for and/or with the character ( $n = 58$ ).

While it was not always clear whether reports of feelings like sadness were identificatory (about one’s own sadness) or empathic (about the sadness of the character and/or others in the character’s situation) (cf. Koopman, 2013), in other cases it was possible to distinguish between empathic responses and identificatory responses. The “identificatory” readers concentrated on their own personal losses and the feelings those losses evoked; reading about the character, for them, seemed to be like reading about themselves. Other readers stayed much more with the response of the character, keeping the distinction between themselves and the character. Some of these readers were imagining to experience the feelings of the character, which qualifies as a fully empathic response. This response often resembled the quantitative variable “empathic understanding,” in the sense that readers showed an emotionally experienced understanding of those grieving the loss of a child. A clear example of this was the following response:

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

This reader explicitly talks about experiencing similar feelings as the character, even though she cannot remember having felt this specific way herself. Such “empathic understanding” responses, combining imagining what the character felt, feeling compassion and understanding, were reported by 39 readers.

Did the emotions readers reported to the open question differ per condition? Generally, results do not suggest an important role for form, as “pleasant emotions” and “painful emotions” did not differ significantly per condition, and neither did “identification,” “empathy/sympathy” or “distance.” However, “ambivalent” emotions occurred significantly less often in the version without foregrounding (only 1 out of 53 participants, compared to 5 out of 40 in the without imagery condition, and 9 out of 49 in the original condition),  $\chi^2(2, N = 142) = 7.54, p = .023$ , Cramer's  $V = .23$ . Thus, these complex emotions, combining beauty and pain, appear to be aided by foregrounding. This is exemplified by one participant describing her ambivalent feelings in a poetic way, talking not only about “a sad beauty” but also about “a grey joy” [*een grijze blijdschap*]. Finally, aesthetic feelings also differed, with no one making positive comments about the style in the condition without imagery, while 10 out of 53 did in the without foregrounding condition, and 9 out of 49 did in the original condition,  $\chi^2(2, N = 142) =$

8.61,  $p = .014$ , Cramer's  $V = .25$ . While it may seem odd that the version without foregrounding did not differ in this respect from the original condition, this can be explained by people appreciating the "directness" of the version without foregrounding. This was explicitly reported by three participants. Negative comments about the style did not differ per condition.

### **Effects of Foregrounding on Empathic Understanding**

ANOVAs were conducted to compare the means between the three conditions for empathic understanding after reading (research question 2). The second part of Table 2 shows the effects of foregrounding condition on empathic understanding *after reading* and, by way of contrast, the mean scores on empathic understanding per condition *before reading* (between-subjects). As can be seen in Table 2, foregrounding had a main effect on empathic understanding *after reading*, there was a significant difference between the original condition and the version without foregrounding (Fisher's LSD). For the scores *before reading*, we should not see such differences, as empathic understanding scores measured before one started to read can logically not have been influenced by which condition one read. As Table 2 shows, there was indeed no difference between the groups before reading.

Further evidence for an effect of foregrounding on empathic understanding came from Independent Samples T-tests comparing scores before reading with scores after reading for each condition, shown in Table 3. Table 3 brings out that empathic understanding was significantly higher after reading compared to before reading for both the original condition and the version without imagery, but not for the version without foregrounding. The original condition had the strongest effect.

Table 3.

*Mean Differences of Empathic Understanding Before and After Reading per Foregrounding Condition (Independent Samples T-Test)*

	Before Reading	After Reading			
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
	(95% CI)	(95% CI)			
<b>Original</b>	23.67 (4.31) (21.95, 25.39) <i>n</i> = 24	26.64 (4.01) (25.07, 28.21) <i>n</i> = 25	-2.50	.71	.016
<b>Without Imagery</b>	21.70 (4.89) (19.56, 23.84) <i>n</i> = 20	25.00 (5.37) (22.65, 27.35) <i>n</i> = 20	-2.03	.64	.049
<b>Without Foregrounding</b>	24.26 (4.90) (22.41, 26.11) <i>n</i> = 27	23.15 (4.14) (21.56, 24.74) <i>n</i> = 26	.89	.24	.380

Note: A between-subjects design was used: half of the participants (*n* = 71) answered the empathic statements before reading, the other half (*n* = 71) after reading.

Foregrounding thus appears to play a role in increasing our understanding for people in similar painful situations as characters. But is this effect still present when controlling for subject variables (research question 4)? A General Linear Model was conducted to answer this question, with as fixed factors again condition, gender, and student/parent, and as covariates trait empathy (IRI), exposure to literature (ART), and personal experience/impact. The dependent variable was empathic understanding after reading; only the participants who answered the statements after reading were taken into consideration (*n* = 71).

After controlling for all the above-mentioned subject variables, foregrounding still had a significant effect,  $F(2, 71) = 3.47$ ,  $p = .038$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ . Post-hoc tests showed the significant difference was between the original and the without foregrounding condition ( $p = .012$ ). None of the other variables had a significant effect on empathic understanding after reading. We can therefore conclude that foregrounding – if

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

### **Effects of Foregrounding on Reflection**

In contrast to empathic understanding (the quantitative measure), foregrounding had no significant effect on reflection (item “the text triggered me to think;” research question 3), as the third part of Table 2 shows.

To explore the effects of the personal factors (research question 4), a GLM was conducted that comprised the subject variables as well as the condition variable. Results indicated a positive effect of *trait empathy* on reflection,  $F(1, 127) = 3.92, p = .050, \eta^2 = .03$ , and an effect of *student/parent*,  $F(1, 127) = 8.22, p = .005, \eta^2 = .06$ , with students scoring higher ( $M_{\text{students}} = 4.51, SD = .23, 95\% \text{ CI } [4.06, 4.96]$ ;  $M_{\text{parents}} = 3.53, SD = .25, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.04, 4.02]$ ).

### **Reflective Responses: Qualitative Data**

The analysis of the open questions helps us to see what people thought about and whether this differed per condition. As the overview of codes (Appendix B) shows, reflective responses could broadly be divided in three types: general reflection, personal reflection, and trivial thoughts. “General reflection” signified reporting insights going beyond the purely personal, saying something about life/the human condition, in relation to the themes addressed in the text (loss, grief, death). Within the category “general reflection” ( $n = 43$ ), a common response ( $n = 14$ ) was to comment about life continuing during and after a loss: the world keeps spinning. This idea of life’s relentless continuity was clearly thematized within the excerpt that participants had read. General reflection typically went together with empathic understanding: out of the 39 who reported empathic understanding, 17 also reported general reflection,  $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 4.51, p = .034, \phi = .18$ .

“Personal reflection” ( $n = 28$ ) was limited to the person him/herself. These remarks were not as generally applicable as those under “general reflection,” but deeper than those under “trivial thoughts.” While diverse, these types of thoughts typically expressed an inner battle of the participant. One recurring response ( $n = 4$ ) was people commenting about their own difficulties in expressing what they are feeling through language or music, also a clear theme in the excerpt. Personal reflection was associated with identification, with 16 out of the 28 people who reported personal reflection also reporting identification,  $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 5.86, p = .016, \phi = .20$ .

“Trivial thoughts” ( $n = 20$ ) were, as the code name indicates, rather trivial, addressing events which appear light, cheerful or mundane. These thoughts did not relate to the theme of loss, nor did they appear to express any inner battles. People typically commented on having been in a similar landscape ( $n = 6$ ), also having played the piano ( $n = 4$ ), and/or also smoking or knowing someone who smokes ( $n = 6$ ).

Style appeared to have little effect on reflective responses: neither type of reflection differed significantly per condition.

## Discussion

What can the current experiment tell us about the effects of foregrounding on affective, empathic and reflective responses? First of all, the clearest effect of foregrounding we saw was on the empathic statements after reading (“empathic understanding”). People who had read the original version of the text, containing a high level of semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding, also reported higher empathic understanding for other people experiencing grief than people who had read the version without semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding. However, as there was no significant difference between the original version and the version without

imagery (i.e., semantic foregrounding) on empathic understanding, we can hesitantly conclude that “literariness” needs to be quite high to cause detectable differences on this type of empathic response. Furthermore, we can speculate that imagery is not automatically the most important type of foregrounding in causing such responses, as only leaving out imagery was not decisive. Scores on empathic understanding were significantly higher after reading than before reading for both the original version and the version without imagery (but not for the version without foregrounding). Of course, we need to note here that a between-subjects design was used, so the people answering empathic statements after reading were different people from those answering these statements beforehand. However, people were randomly assigned to a condition and the groups who answered the statements before reading and after reading did not differ significantly on the subject variables, suggesting that the effects on empathic understanding were indeed due to the manipulations of foregrounding. Given the claims by scholars like Sontag and Nussbaum, this is an important finding: literariness may indeed be partly responsible for empathic reactions.

But how does that work? A possible explanation for the effect of foregrounding on empathy is that striking textual features can make one engage more with the character and the narrative world (e.g., Koopman & Hakemulder 2015; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Yet, in this study, there was little clear evidence for this. While there were initial significant results of the foregrounding manipulation on empathic distress and on a general emotional response, these effects disappeared when taking into account personal factors. This suggests that personal factors like trait empathy and gender could be more important than foregrounding in causing affective responses during reading. Students also seemed more emotional during reading than parents, perhaps because of having had less emotional experiences so far than their parents (thus being impressed



more easily) or possibly because the parents experienced psychological resistance, since the subject matter (losing a child) is more confrontational and painful for them than for the students.

The qualitative analysis further showed that the original text generally did not seem to evoke more painful or pleasurable emotions. It did, however, seem to evoke more ambivalent emotions: people commenting both on the beauty or hope and on the pain or sorrow of a certain passage. We can therefore conclude that foregrounding can cause a more complex emotional experience. This may play a role in influencing empathic understanding, although the current qualitative measurement could not be used to (dis)confirm this. Namely, only a small proportion reported ambivalent emotions. In addition, in response to the open questions, we did not find a higher report of “empathic understanding” for the original condition, even though the original version did score higher on “empathic understanding” as a quantitative measure. The fact that people do not report something in response to an open question, does not mean they did not experience it. Confirmation through quantitative measures is needed there. Here lies a challenge for future studies: to preserve the complexity of the emotional response to foregrounded features while also being able to measure general effects of such an emotional response on other variables, like empathic understanding.

An alternative explanation for the effect of foregrounding on empathic understanding is that it generally requires more attention to the text (e.g., Shklovsky, 1965), which could potentially make one pause and reflect (cf. Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Attention itself was not measured, so this explanation deserves further research. Yet, for this explanation we would also expect an effect of foregrounding on reflection, and no such effect was found. This lack of an effect of foregrounding on reflection was in contrast with studies by the Miall and Kuiken research group (e.g., Miall & Kuiken, 2002;

Sikora, Kuiken, & Miall, 2010), but those studies did not use comparison conditions. When comparing between expository texts, life narrative texts and literary narrative texts, Koopman (2015b) also did not find an effect of literary texts on reflection, although people were more likely to think back to the text in both narrative conditions (compared to the expository condition). It could be that texts high in literariness have a longer-lasting effect on reflection, due to their striking passages being more memorable (cf. Koopman, 2015b), but this was not measured in the current study.

For reflection, personal factors may be crucial: people who were higher in trait empathy were more likely to reflect, and students were more likely to reflect than parents. This latter outcome could again point to psychological resistance among the parents, which also may have played a role in parents' lower emotional engagement. Confirming results of previous studies (e.g., Igartua, 2010; Koopman et al., 2012), reflection seemed to be aided by affective responses, with personal reflection being associated with identification, and general reflection with empathic understanding. This connection between reflection and emotion is interesting, as it may not always be the texts with the most intricate style that cause us to be most emotional (cf. Koopman, 2015a), even though, as suggested above, an intricate style can lead to more intricate emotions.

We need to note the disadvantage of having used only one literary text in this study. The types of emotional responses that are evoked differ per literary text. This literary text about grief allowed for ambivalent feelings that were "bittersweet;" literary texts dealing with other subjects may also evoke ambivalent feelings, but perhaps not with this exact combination of pain and beauty. The comparison between texts also matters. One reason that the emotional effect of the original version was limited could be the more "direct" approach of the version without foregrounding. As was suggested

by the average scores on the affective responses (as well as by three participants explicitly and positively commenting on this “directness” in their answers to the open questions), directness can again cause a higher emotional impact of a text. The version without imagery (but with other types of foregrounding) was least engaging, which can be explained by the relative complexity of this text in combination with the lack of imagery. Another indication of the lower engagement with the version without imagery was the fact that less participants completed this questionnaire than in the other conditions. The relatively small group for “without imagery” could also have obscured some effects which would have become significant with larger groups.

Finally, it is important to stress that the current study did not compare between literary and non-literary texts, but between versions of one literary texts differing in foregrounding, which can be seen as a measure of “literariness.” The text without foregrounding, however, was still “literary” in expressing the same themes and having the same narrative structure. These kinds of comparisons are necessary to be able to attribute effects to specific text features, but they need to be replicated with different manipulations to be able to make more general statements about “literariness.” As the current study showed, foregrounding may indeed be one aspect of the potential power of literature, but readers’ emotions were not simply affected just because of one original metaphor here and one clever alliteration there. The general mood, the events, the themes, little realistic details: these are all things that can matter in a literary text. Furthermore, by manipulating foregrounding, the level of ambiguity of the text may simultaneously be affected, and ambiguity has been identified as a potential cause of mentalizing (Kidd & Castano, 2013). How foregrounding can lead to empathic understanding, including which emotions can play a role in that process, is clearly a question in need of further empirical attention. Future studies can use larger sample

sizes, various populations, and various texts to explore this issue. To understand which mechanisms are involved, future manipulations could attempt to separate features associated with originality (e.g., novel metaphors) and features associated with ambiguity (e.g., gaps in the narration). The quest for the power of literature is far from over.

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**Appendix A) Items for Narrative and Aesthetic Feelings**

Table 4.

*Items for Narrative and Aesthetic Feelings, Including Internal Consistency (N = 142)*

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Items</b>
<i>Sympathy/Empathy</i> ( $\alpha = .85$ )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "I felt understanding for the woman" [Ik voelde begrip voor de vrouw]</li> <li>- "I felt pity for the woman" [Ik had medelijden met de vrouw]</li> <li>- "I commiserated with the woman" [Ik leefde mee met de vrouw]</li> <li>- "I found the woman an interesting person" [Ik vond de vrouw een interessant persoon]</li> <li>- "The woman annoyed me" (R) [De vrouw irriteerde me]</li> <li>- "I did not feel much toward the woman" (R) [De vrouw liet me koud]</li> </ul>
<i>Identification (Similarity)</i> ( $\alpha = .81$ )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "I could recognize myself in the woman" [Ik kon mezelf herkennen in de vrouw]</li> <li>- "It was like I was looking through the eyes of the woman" [Ik keek als het ware door de ogen van de vrouw]</li> <li>- "I started to feel the same emotions as the woman" [Ik begon dezelfde emoties te voelen als de vrouw]</li> </ul>
<i>Absorption</i> ( $\alpha = .87$ )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "I felt absorbed in the story" [Ik voelde me meegesleept door het verhaal]</li> <li>- "I felt involved in the events" [Ik voelde me betrokken bij de gebeurtenissen]</li> <li>- "I could see the events vividly in front of me" [Ik kon de gebeurtenissen levendig voor me zien]</li> <li>- "The story world sometimes felt closer during reading than the world around me" [De wereld van het verhaal voelde tijdens het lezen soms dichterbij dan de wereld om me heen]</li> <li>- "The story did not touch me" (R) [Het verhaal liet me koud]</li> </ul>
<i>Empathic distress</i> ( $\alpha = .83$ )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "The story made me feel miserable" [Ik ging me ellendig voelen door het verhaal]</li> <li>- "The story made me feel sad" [Ik ging me droevig voelen door het verhaal]</li> <li>- "During reading I felt increasingly unnerved" [Tijdens het lezen van het verhaal voelde ik me steeds minder op mijn gemak]</li> <li>- "The story aroused unpleasant sensations in me" [Het verhaal maakte onplezierige gevoelens bij me los]</li> </ul>
<i>Aesthetic Attractiveness</i> ( $\alpha = .91$ )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "I found the style of the text..." [Ik vond de stijl van de tekst...]</li> <li>- Interesting [Interessant]</li> <li>- Beautiful [Mooi]</li> <li>- Captivating [Boeiend]</li> <li>- Good [Goed]</li> </ul>
<i>Perceived Foregrounding</i> ( $\alpha = .80$ )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Surprising [Verrassend]</li> <li>- Striking [Opvallend]</li> <li>- Original [Origineel]</li> </ul>

## Appendix B) Qualitative Coding Scheme

Table 5.

### Qualitative Coding Scheme Responses Open Questions

Categories	Main codes	Description	Example	Frq.
<i>RESONANCE LOSS</i>	<i>Personal Loss</i>	Comments about a loss one experienced oneself (in itself this is neither “affective” nor “reflective,” depends on what else one says about it).	“It made me think of the death of someone who was very dear to me (a parent) and who will not get to see me growing up.”	58
	<i>Loss of Someone Else</i>	Comments about a loss someone else has experienced.	“A good friend of mine has lost her mother at a very young age,...”	18
	<i>Media</i>	Comments that one was reminded of something one knows from the media; mediatized experience.	“Not a very personal memory per se, but more the image that you get with it: so many people putting down flowers. Like you always see it on television, I would almost say.”	6
<i>NARRATIVE FEELINGS</i>	<i>Identification</i>	Comments of recognizing oneself in the character: I do/have that too. Two specific emotions are clearly identificatory, triggered by the implicit thought “this character is (like) me”: missing someone (like the character misses her daughter); fear of losing a loved one and/or dying oneself.	- “I also think a lot about the past and try to forget the present now and then. Here I also identified with the character.” ( <i>General</i> ) - “... but the loss stays. It changes into: oh, if only I could tell him that, could ask that, could share that.” ( <i>Missing</i> ) - “I have a daughter myself and I am looking forward to becoming a grandma and to enjoy the children and grandchildren. This is a dream that would burst if you lose your daughter.” ( <i>Anxiety Dying</i> )	53 (31) (21) (11)
	- <i>General</i>			
	- <i>Missing</i>			
	- <i>Anxiety Dying</i>			

<i>Empathy/ Sympathy</i>		Comments about feeling for and/or	-	"I could almost touch the dead girl, and she feels cold" ( <i>Absorption</i> )	58
	- <i>Absorption</i>	with the character. In			(14)
	- <i>Sympathy/pity</i>	the case of the	-	"because it's sad for her that she lost her daughter"	(14)
	- <i>Empathic Understanding</i>	subcode "sympathy/pity" it is only feeling for the character, in the case of "empathic understanding" there is feeling with as well as understanding (imagining what it is like), in the case of "absorption," one feels directly affected by the narrative world, as if one were in it.	-	( <i>Sympathy/pity</i> ) "I can vividly imagine that you do not want to go on without the one you love, a combination of knowing rationally that you have to go on but missing so intensely that you can't go on, or only on automatic pilot." ( <i>Empathic understanding</i> )	(39)
<i>Painful</i>		Comments about emotions we	-	"I mostly feel sadness." ( <i>Sadness</i> )	61
	- <i>Sadness</i>	experience as painful	-	"... powerlessness, not being able to deal with a situation because it is outside of your own control." ( <i>Hopeless</i> )	(46)
	- <i>Hopeless</i>	in real life. It is generally unclear whether these emotions are empathic or			(20)
	- <i>Anger/despair</i>	identificatory (there can be a mixture of both). The subcode "hopeless" includes feelings of feeling lost, alone, powerless.	-	"Anger and frustration because our friend was cruelly denied the possibility to stay with her family." ( <i>Anger/despair</i> )	(8)
<i>Ambivalent</i>		Comments expressing an ambivalent emotional response,	-	"moving action, small with a lot of sorrow" ( <i>Touching</i> )	15
	- <i>Touching</i>	sorrow combined with more hopeful feelings, or pain combined with beauty.	-	"a beautiful ending, happy but also sad" ( <i>Bittersweet</i> )	(5)
	- <i>Bittersweet</i>				(10)
<i>Pleasant</i>		Comments which are unambiguously about pleasant emotions. These emotions can either possess a sense of depth ("meaningful positive"), like strength or admiration, or be uncomplicatingly "light" ("pleasant	-	"a feeling of strength, no one takes this moment away from me, being one with. But also a euphoric feeling." ( <i>Meaningful positive</i> )	24
	- <i>Meaningful positive</i>				(18)
	- <i>Pleasant simple</i>		-	"The beauty of nature made me happy." ( <i>Pleasant simple</i> )	(7)

		simple”).		
<i>AESTHETIC FEELINGS</i>	<i>Style – negative</i>	Negative comments about the style. Often co-occurring with “Distance,” as this can be the explanation why one did not have thoughts/feelings.	“It’s sad, but true: I am a seasoned literature lover and all my G’s [thoughts] are only about one thing: how bad the writing is!”	6
	<i>Style – positive</i>	Positive comments about the style. This can be explicit, by saying something is “beautifully” phrased (“appreciation articulation”), or implicitly by engaging with a particular image/detail in the text (“evocative metaphor”).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “I think this is beautifully put ...” (<i>Appreciation articulation</i>)</li> <li>- “The stump of a pencil signifies how desperate the mother is, she has sunk so deep that even her pencil cannot be saved anymore.” (<i>Evocative metaphor</i>)</li> <li>- “I thought this was the most emotional part, because it is 1) <u>very direct</u>, ...” (<i>Directness</i>)</li> </ul>	19 (7) (12) (3)
	<i>Defamiliarization</i>	Only explicitly reported by one person, but included here because it was a perfect expression of being defamiliarized.	“Because the text suddenly shifts to the present tense, the language aspect is brought to the foreground. I experience a strong disruption and briefly crash with the text.”	1
<i>DISTANCE</i>	<i>No emotions</i>	Comments about not having any emotions (or simply reporting no emotions).	“The text which stood there [sic] should evoke emotion, but I did not really feel it. Is probably also due to my mood at this moment.”	10
	<i>No thoughts</i>	Comments about not having any thoughts (or simply reporting no thoughts).	“I did not place any G’s [thoughts] because the story reminded me in no way of situations in my own life.”	7
	<i>Incomprehension protagonist</i>	Comments about not being able to sympathize/empathize, not understanding the protagonist.	“I was annoyed by the fact that the woman smoked. That made it impossible for me to identify with her or the let the story sweep me away.”	8
<i>THOUGHTS</i>	<i>General reflection</i> - <i>Circle of life</i>	Comments signifying general reflection: on the themes addressed in the text; insights which go beyond the personal, say	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “No one can determine for another person how he should mourn. Everyone mourns in the way that suits him/her. Everyone</li> </ul>	43 (14)

	something about life/the human condition. A recurring theme participants commented on is that life goes on after a loss ("circle of life")	-	determines their own path in that, and there is no right or wrong. There is no blue print to make of it." "This sentence mainly evoked the thought how 'true' is it that, if you experience something terrible, the rest of the world simply continues." ( <i>Circle of life</i> )	
<i>Personal reflection</i>	Reflection limited to the person him/herself. These remarks are not as generally applicable as those under "General reflection," but they are deeper than those under "Trivial thoughts." Remarks often express an inner battle of the participant.		"I also really want to write down what I feel in order to get rid of it, but it indeed often doesn't translate well to paper."	28
<i>Trivial thoughts</i>	Remarks about thoughts and/or memories about events which appear light. These thoughts do not express loss, an inner battle, a connection with the theme; they stay at the trivial, everyday level.	-	"It reminded me of the endless piano lessons and practice sessions I had when I was little."	20

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