

Reconsidering the Unreliability and Treatment of Mentally Ill Narrators

LAURE research process essay

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For the past two years, when people inquired about my plans for the summer I've gotten to reply in a way I never could have predicted: "I'm mostly researching at the library and reading about madness and women in attics." Truthfully, it was a bit of a conversation killer. But my summer of dedicated research, thanks to my Undergraduate Summer Scholars grant and the Office of Research for Undergraduates, was not only an incredible growth experience and integral part of my acceptance to several literature graduate programs for fall 2019, but it was truly so much fun!

During the summer after sophomore year (2017) I completed an independent study with Dr. Tim Melley, analyzing a broad scope of mental illness in literature. After completing that study, I was still left with a central unanswered question: how do we discern and interpret truth from mentally unstable narrators and/or authors? Countless well-respected and frequently studied texts feature "unreliable narrators", but I wondered how (and if) one's reading of a text changes (or should change) based on the unreliability caused by the narrator and or the author's mental health. I was thirsty for more, so I attended the Undergraduate Summer Scholars information session and spoke with Martha Webber about creating a more official project in this way. This past summer (2018), I won an Undergraduate Summer Scholars grant and, under the supervision of Dr. Erin Edwards, I built on the research strategies I had learned earlier to now pursue this more focused study in hopes of finding answers. This project explored how readers determine (un)reliability and where that categorization intersects with mental health. While several theorists and critics (including Fludernik, Carracciolo, McHale, Richardson, etc.) have studied individual narratives of mental illness or unreliability as a broad concept, no one has written theoretically on how to read and interpret mental illness accounts for their narrative trustworthiness. It is here that I made my intervention into these discussions.

In conjunction with USS, I was also part of the Humanities Summer Research Institute led by Andrew Hebard. During one meeting, we gathered at King to meet with Mark Dahlquist. He guided us through a number of activities and resources, including requesting an interlibrary loan and organizing sources with the Zotero app. I still remember him giving us advice about getting "unstuck" from a dead-end search by thinking about the language that would have been used for your topic at a given time rather than the current language used, and switching your search terms accordingly. For example, I had been searching with the term "mental illness" as the most general and acceptable term used today; however, some of the scholarship I needed was still using words like "mad/madness" and "hysteric". Reframing my search terms in this way allowed me to get past what appeared to be a roadblock in my research.

Some of my favorite work from the summer happened on the second floor of King. I savored having the stacks all to myself, and the gentle hum of the AC combined with the mixing

smells of new and old books put me in a trance from which I would emerge many hours later. While there were several texts I knew I wanted to use, there were many others that I didn't know I needed until I found them. It was actually this serendipitous process that marked a turning point in my research. I had grown frustrated that none of my current sources were addressing the reading and interpretation process of narrators. Upon searching for and finding a particular book, I discovered a shelf full of books on something called "narratology", or narrative theory. I browsed countless volumes, checked out another dozen or so (to add to the 40 I had already had,) and immersed myself in this theoretic dimension of my topic I hadn't been aware of. Not only did this discovery direct me toward narrative theory as a lens of analysis for my research, but it also led me to a book written by several members of Ohio State University's Project Narrative, which led to me applying and being accepted to OSU's literature PhD program. As of now, it is quite possible that I will be studying there, with them, in the fall.

I truly believe that, besides hard copies of books as a whole, the most underutilized library resource is Ohiolink and Interlibrary loans. I requested numerous books that proved useful. In particular, I was able to acquire a translation of a German text by Monika Fludernik, which proved to be the piece of critique off of which I based my essay.

While the resources at Miami's libraries were incredibly helpful, I longed to go even deeper than what was available here. I discovered one of two Sylvia Plath archives at the Lilly Library at Indiana University, I contacted the librarian to explain my project, and I was granted permission to visit the archive and see whatever materials I request from their collection. Travel expenses for the visit were covered by my USS grant, making the trip feasible. When the archivist delivered the folio box to my desk and placed a document stand in front of me, my project transformed from theory into tangible reality. As I moved the first composition book to the desk and slowly lifted the cover, I caught my breath as I realized I was opening the notebook in which Sylvia Plath had once written. As I sat in the Reading Room, holding manuscripts for texts I had spent much of the previous year studying, I was humbly reminded that Plath was not an icon of female "madness" to just be scrutinized and dissected but a real young woman, and one of many whose voice was so often suppressed, discredited, and disqualified. Holding her original writing reminded me that the study of narratives such as Plath's contributes to a cause much larger than that of literature alone. Contemporary discourse around both mental health and the disqualification of women's stories and experiences is as prevalent and problematic as ever.

By the end of the summer, I had written a 30-page paper, which I was able to use for my Departmental Honors Thesis, my grad school writing sample, and which I will be presenting at the ACA/PCA national conference in April. I was truly only able to accomplish as much as I did because of the resources available to me through the libraries at Miami, and thanks to this incredible experience, I can't wait to continue similar projects in my future towards a PhD.