

From Fear to Fondness:

How Empathy for Flawed Foes on Screen Falters in the Real World for Teens and Young Adults

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Introduction

How does the cultivation of empathy for villains and anti-heroes in young adult television affect real-world cognitive and behavioral responses to issues requiring empathetic action in a gradually desensitizing society?

- Many teens and young adults films and movies feature compelling villainous characters
- These morally ambiguous characters are often more popular than protagonists due to their well-written depth
- Complexity provides a fictional outlet for teens and young adults to reflect on their own inner darkness
- Despite viewer empathy for these characters, such empathy may not translate to real-life situations
- The rise of the digital age and social media has reduced face-to-face interactions
- This shift contributes to desensitization among teens and young adults regarding current events and relationships

Empathy vs. Sympathy

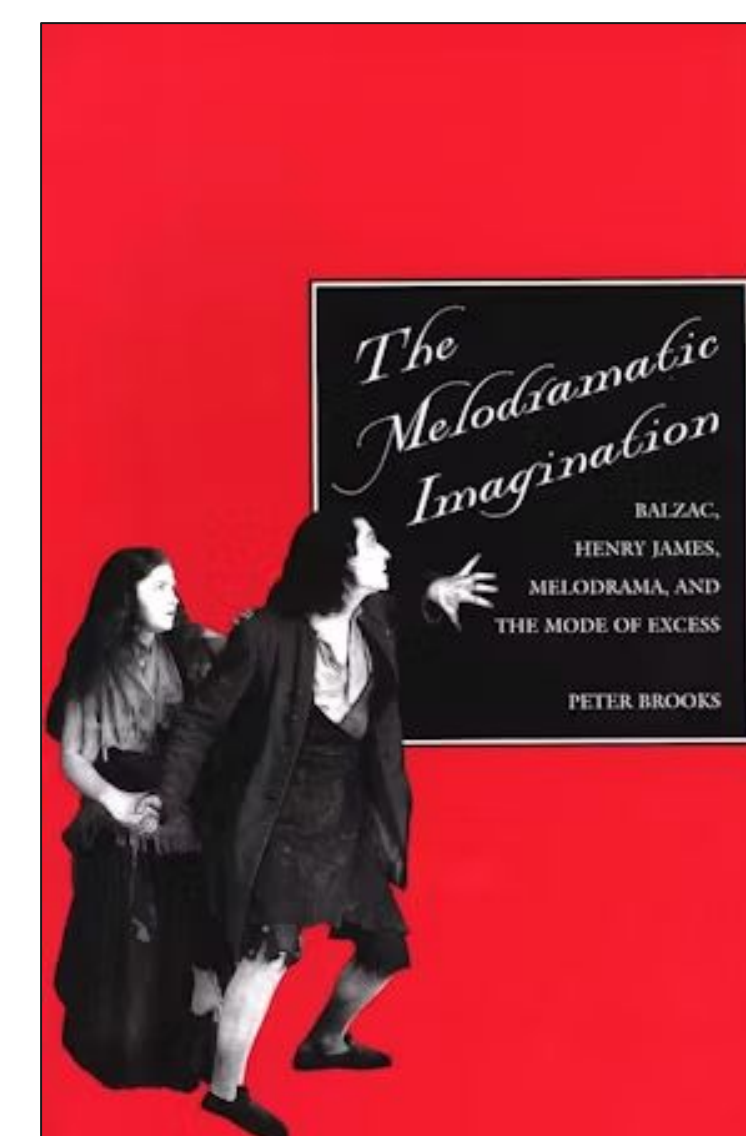
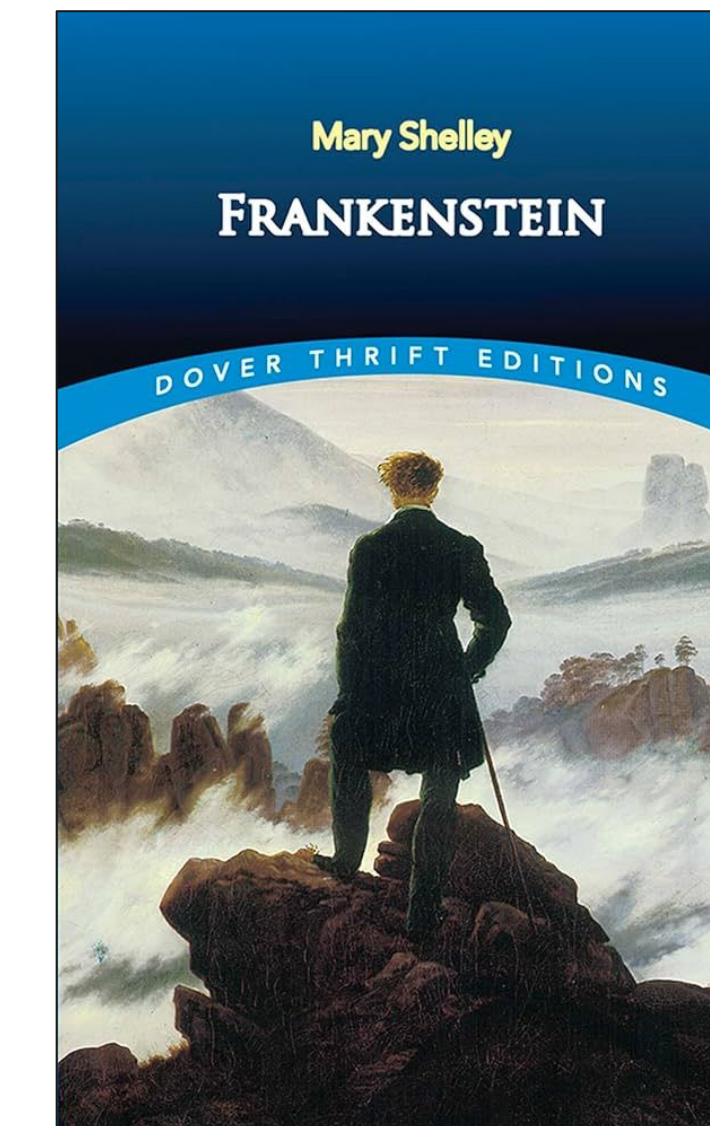
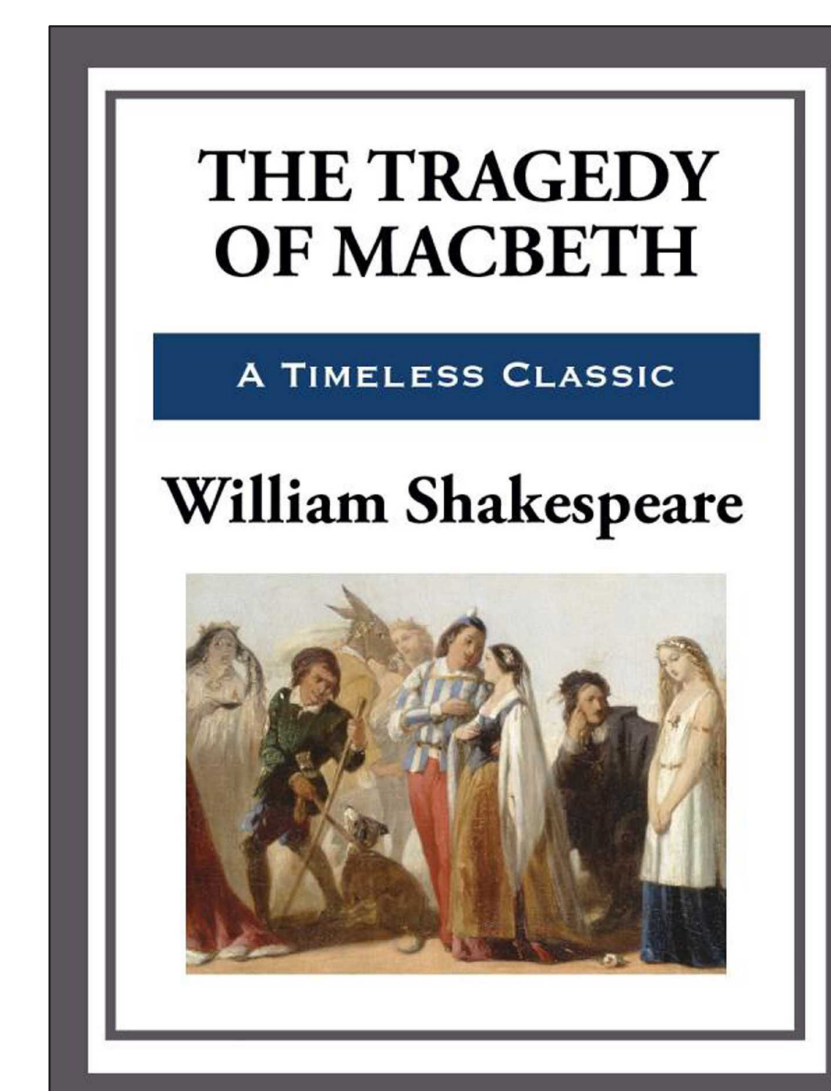
- **Empathy** - when humans mirror another's emotional reaction using mirror neurons in the brain
- **Sympathy** - when one feels a supportive emotion for another's emotion rather than the sharing of emotions
- Empathy and sympathy trigger complex cognitive and affective responses in viewers
- They use their imagination to adopt character perspectives while remaining self-aware and engaging in emotional projection
- Viewers are not expected to treat fictional characters like real people, perceiving them as "virtual people" instead
- Freedom to form any opinion lessens moral obligation
- Humans enjoy familiarity of characters who mirror their own flaws

Background

- Melodrama - genre of exaggeration conveying human experiences in a deeply emotional way intended to explore moral lessons
- Theory of melodrama proposed by Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (20th century)
- Melodrama emerged as a way to explore morality in a newly secular world following the deconstruction of traditional systems
- People experienced a moral aimlessness that was mended by hidden truths about the extremes of good and evil in flawed characters of melodrama
- Genre sought to uncover the "moral occult"
- Particularly influential on impressionable audiences like teens and young adults who are in a continuously fluctuating transition stage of life
- Dramatization of emotions in modern storytelling communicates a clear and necessary moral direction

Findings and Argument

- Empathy for villains in fiction indirectly results in a decrease in empathy for real-world people, relationships, and pressing issues
- Empirical data showing a detachment from real-world consequences suggests a lack of accountability for real-world behavior (**Keen**)
- Identification with villains triggers a superficial reflection
- Fails to trigger a reflection of greater depth due to projection without ownership (**Coplan**)
- Romanticization of characters adds a level of artificiality that does not translate into the authenticity needed for change (**Newman**)
- Lack of empathy in real life leads to a dangerous disconnect from worldly issues (**Bushman & Anderson**)
- Social media cultivates a highly individualized mindset in American teens and young adults of this generation (**Bushman & Anderson**)



Fiction fosters empathy, but reality demands it.



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Scholarly Conversation

Historical Archive:

- *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley critiques moral responsibility and societal failure through empathy and sympathy
- The monster is a victim of a mad scientist's creation, seeking revenge on creator and humankind after rejection from society for ghastly appearance
- Viewers respond with understandable sympathy for his desire for revenge, amplified by first-person narrative from monster's perspective
- Simultaneously, viewers experience moral conflict by recognizing his wrongdoings
- In contrast to Adam Smith's moral philosophy (*Theory of Moral Sentiments*), narration can substitute in-person accounts of sympathy (**Britton**)
- Monster exhibits more humanity than man himself

Contemporary Archive:

- *The Vampire Diaries* directed by Williamson & Plec, popular teen and young adult show, garnered mass empathy from audiences for main antagonist turned anti-hero (Damon Salvatore)
- Explores redemption and emotional investment rather than larger moral framework
- Vampires are traditionally perceived as demon creatures of the night meant to elicit fear from humans due to their supposed lack of humanity
- *The Vampire Diaries* adds a human dimension to all of its supernatural creatures through vulnerability, attractive appearances, detailed character development, inner turmoil
- "Species difference" distinguishes humans from other entities in order to evaluate human traits and qualities from external perspective
 - Present in both *Frankenstein* and *The Vampire Diaries*

Digital Dangers

- A lack of real-world empathy risks loss of humanity altogether, resulting in the deterioration of social bonds
- Media consumption affects real-life outlooks and attitudes of individuals (**Keen**)
- Digital age will continue to evolve and modernize, further distancing individuals from one another
- Melodrama persists as a powerful vehicle of expression in contemporary & future narratives

Sources

Historical:

- Peter Brooks - *The Melodramatic Imagination*
- Mary Shelley - *Frankenstein*
- Shakespeare - *Macbeth*
- Shakespeare - *Hamlet*

Present:

- Kevin Williamson & Julie Plec - *The Vampire Diaries*
 - Based on book series by L.J. Smith

Other:

- Psychological studies including empirical data
- Literary analysis of famed works turned to film