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The Portrayal of Empathy in Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon*

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Abstract

This study explores the complex function of empathy as a thematic concern in Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*. The study analyses how different levels of empathy impact main characters - Will Graham, Francis Dolarhyde, and Reba McClane's interactions, decisions, and personal development through a close examination of these three characters. The paper examines how Dolarhyde's lack of empathy contrasts with McClane's empathic perception of him, causing his metamorphosis, and how Graham's remarkable empathetic qualities influence his investigation methods. The study reveals how this topic drives the plot, encourages reader involvement, and prompts ethical reflection by exploring the relationship between empathy and character development. This paper is significant in drawing readers' attention to consider the complex dimensions of human nature by illuminating the psychological complexities of the characters and showcasing the lasting value of empathy and its portrayal in crime fiction.

Main paper

The importance of empathy in literature is found in its ability to shed light on complex human processes and elicit thoughtful reflections. Empathy becomes a major issue in Thomas Harris's well-known book *Red Dragon*, intricately braided with character interactions, plot development, and reader interest. The characters of Will Graham, Francis Dolarhyde, and Reba McClane stand as stark manifestations of different sympathetic capacities as the story develops within the context of crime and psychological suspense. This research article studies these individuals closely, examining how their various levels of empathy affect their interactions, thought trajectories, and psychological environments. Through this investigation, the article hopes to shed light on the significant influence empathy has on character growth, highlighting its importance as a powerful narrative device that has applications far beyond the realm of fiction.

Thomas Harris is a well-known author in the field of crime fiction, and his unsettling stories that explore the most sinister aspects of the human psyche have had a lasting impression on the genre, as well as on various facets of pop culture. "Understanding Harris's creations encompass the insights of numerous scientific fields including psychology, psychiatry, pedagogy, sociology, philosophy, cinematography, criminology, anatomy, and even pop culture, where he left a substantial impact." (Prisc 16) His book *Red Dragon* is regarded as a classic, laying the groundwork for a number of captivating stories that have grabbed readers and sparked adaptations in a variety of media. This work has been an acknowledged inspiration for

several authors who wrote crime fiction: “James Ellroy has described *Red Dragon* as 'the best pure thriller I've ever read' and cited it as an influence on his own novel *Killer on the Road*.” (Rich) In *Red Dragon*, Harris introduces a group of people whose complex psychological composition serves as the basis for the narrative complexity and thematic resonance of the book.

The major subject of *Red Dragon* is empathy, a concept that permeates the story's eerie setting and complex character interactions. In this situation, empathy acts as a potent lens through which the characters' intentions, deeds, and changes are viewed. The story also explores the inner landscapes that push people towards darkness or redemption in addition to the criminal activities that take place. Thematically exploring empathy sets *Red Dragon* apart from traditional crime fiction and elevates it to a psychological investigation into the lines separating the hunter and the hunted, the saviour and the tormentor.

The characters that make up Harris' story are complex people with both present and absent sympathetic traits that weave intricate webs of connection and conflict. The main character, Will Graham, has the unique talent of inhabiting the minds of killers, which enables him to comprehend their motivations and foresee their deeds. However, this sympathetic talent takes a significant toll on his own psyche, leaving him trapped between figuring out the motives of killers and protecting his own mental health. The following lines highlight how strong and profound Graham's empathy towards others is:

Jack Crawford heard the rhythm and syntax of his own speech in Grahams voice. He had heard Graham do that before, with other people. Often in intense conversation Graham took on the other persons speech patterns. At first, Crawford had thought he was doing it deliberately, that it was a gimmick to get the back-and-forth rhythm going. Later Crawford realized that Graham did it involuntarily, that sometimes he tried to stop and couldnt. (Harris 1)

The character of Francis Dolarhyde, a deranged guy driven by sinister compulsions, stands in stark contrast to Graham's empathy. Graham's empathic character is the contrast of Dolarhyde's, who is a captivating antagonist due to his lack of sympathy for his victims and his internal struggle. The conflict between Graham and Dolarhyde is the focal point of the story's tension, illuminating the novel's examination of the effects of having or not having empathy. The lack of empathy in Dolarhyde is attributed to the violence in his childhood which critics call it mechanised: “the explanation for Dolarhyde's behavior, trauma in his youth, was too mechanistic.” (Fleming) Even McClane, the third character who is studied in this article remarks on Dolarhyde's lack of empathy; or sympathy: “Strange man, Mr. Dolarhyde. There had been no awkward pause of sympathy and concern in his voice when she turned on the lights. Maybe he already knew she was blind. Better yet, maybe he didnt give a damn.” (Harris 151)

A major character named Reba McClane joins Dolarhyde's life, adding to the book's complex sympathetic terrain. Reba uses her enhanced emotional intelligence and other senses to navigate the world despite being blind and lacking visual perception. Dolarhyde undergoes a change as a result of her empathy for him, igniting a spark of compassion amid his gloom.

The study of empathy crosses the boundaries between psychology and literature, fusing their ideas to shed light on the nuanced dimensions of human connection and comprehension. Empathy has been a recurring issue in literature, with researchers examining its expressions, impacts, and ability to elicit strong emotions in readers. Literary critics have looked at how writers utilise empathy as a plot element to immerse readers in the emotions of characters and create a sense of a shared emotional journey. Through this dialogue between text and reader, narratives are able to go beyond the simple words on a page and create rich, human reading experiences that bridge the gap between fiction and real-life situations.

From a psychological perspective, research on empathy has revealed its complexity and revealed how it affects social interactions and human behaviour. Different aspects of empathy have been broken down by psychologists, who differentiate between cognitive empathy (knowing others' feelings) and emotional empathy (feeling others' emotions). These distinctions have been incorporated into literary studies, where the impact of characters' empathy on the development of the story and reader interest is assessed. Existing research demonstrates how readers' own sympathetic reactions to characters can spark emotional investment,

resulting in a complex feedback loop where the experiences of characters resonate inside readers' own emotional landscapes.

The importance of empathy in determining reader involvement serves as the unifying theme that connects literary and psychological viewpoints. The degree to which readers can identify with the characters as they become engrossed in a novel might affect how emotionally invested they become in it. Researchers have shown that readers get more invested in the outcomes and interact at a higher degree when they can relate to the emotions and experiences of the characters. As readers consider moral conundrums and query social norms via the prism of characters' decisions and intentions, empathy also adds to the moral complexity of literature. This connection between empathy, literature, and reader engagement highlights the significant impact empathy has on the creation of engaging and thought-provoking narrative experiences.

Academic studies of empathy in the setting of psychological thrillers and crime fiction present a complex tapestry of interpretations that highlight the genre's potential for nuanced character growth and narrative depth. Crime literature frequently introduces readers to ethically complicated people whose capacity for empathy shapes their behaviour and interpersonal interactions. The ability of protagonists to empathise with both victims and criminals adds levels of psychological depth, according to critics, and encourages readers to consider the hazy boundaries between right and wrong. These investigations explore the use of empathy as a plot device, obfuscating the distinction between protagonist and adversary, and deepening the investigation of human motivations.

Empathy becomes a key component in psychological thrillers that ups the suspense and emotional involvement. Researchers have studied how writers use readers' emotional connections to characters to heighten suspense and foster a sense of dread. Psychological thrillers can produce a visceral awareness of the characters' concerns, vulnerabilities, and moral quandaries through creating relationships between readers and characters. Researchers have also emphasised how authors purposefully hide or expose characters' emotions in order to influence readers' sympathetic engagement and, ultimately, how they understand the developing narrative twists. These analyses of the complex function of empathy in psychological and criminal fiction highlight the power of empathy to convert narratives into compelling and thought-provoking investigations of human psychology and morality.

The interplay of empathy between the three main characters in Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon*, Will Graham, Francis Dolarhyde, and Reba McClane, makes for an engrossing case study in the book's examination of the human psyche. Each character's unique levels of empathy have a role in their interactions, decisions, and the narrative's many layers. Harris builds a network of connections between them based on their empathy, which propels the plot forward and shows how empathy changes characters' fates and the novel's thematic complexity.

The main character in *Red Dragon*, Will Graham, is an example of a person whose capacity for empathy is both his greatest asset and his biggest personal challenge. "What he [Graham] has in addition is pure empathy and projection, Dr. Bloom said. He can assume your point of view, or mine--and maybe some other points of view that scare and sicken him." (Harris 102) Graham is a skilled profiler, and his ability to connect with both victims and killers gives him a special perspective that helps his investigations. He is able to enter the brains of criminals, follow their thought processes, and solve the complex puzzle of their reasons because of his empathy. He has insights that conventional investigation techniques could miss due to his intuitive understanding of the emotional landscapes on both sides of the law.

Graham's ability to empathise, though, comes at a high emotional cost. His ability to enter the thoughts of murderers has a significant negative impact on his mental and emotional health. The distinctions between his own self and the personalities he momentarily assumes become hazy, making him susceptible to psychological stress. "What he saw and learned touched everything else he knew. Some of the combinations were hard to live with. But he could not anticipate them, could not block and repress. His learned values of decency and propriety tagged along, shocked at his associations, appalled at his dreams; sorry that in the bone

arena of his skull there were no forts for what he loved.” (Harris 5) Graham struggles with the darkness he experiences while empathising with criminals, and this inner struggle is highlighted in the book. This internal conflict heightens the tension in him, resulting in a complicated and likeable figure who must negotiate the moral conundrums of his sympathetic endeavours.

In contrast, Francis Dolarhyde exhibits a profound lack of empathy, a quality that fits with his development into the dreaded "Tooth Fairy" serial killer. Dolarhyde becomes detached from humanity as a result of his incapacity to comprehend or relate to other people's emotions. He is further cut off from empathy's emotional realm by his infatuation with the Great Red Dragon picture and his deluded fixation on becoming something other than human. He thumbed through a new high-fashion magazine. The hatred and brutishness in some of the photographs were remarkable. He began to feel excited. He swiveled the metal shade of his reading lamp to light a print on the wall at the foot of the bed. It was William Blake's The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun. The picture had stunned him the first time he saw it. Never before had he seen anything that approached his graphic thought. He felt that Blake must have peeked in his ear and seen the Red Dragon. For weeks Dolarhyde had worried that his thoughts might glow out his ears, might be visible in the darkroom, might fog the film. (Harris 54-55)

Dolarhyde believes that he has to metamorphose into something beautiful in order to make himself powerful and in turn respected, revered and more importantly recognised as a fellow human being by the society that has always looked down upon him for all his physical deformities. Dolarhyde was born with a facial deformity that left his mouth misshapen: “The obstetrician remarked that he looked more like a leaf-nosed bat than a baby, another truth. He was born with bilateral fissures in his upper lip and in his hard and soft palates. The center section of his mouth was unanchored and protruded. His nose was flat. The hospital supervisors decided not to show him to his mother immediately.” (Harris 132) As a child, he had suffered continuous and extensive trauma. Even though his grandmother took him under her protection, she was violent and her brutal behaviour towards his bedwetting is a horrific instance of his traumatic childhood.

Dolarhyde's effort to gain empathy by using force serves as a terrifying examination of what happens when it doesn't exist. By force here is perceived by Dolarhyde as becoming powerful and ethereal and he begins to transform himself into the red dragon believing that his transformation would make people recognise him. Dolarhyde is desperate for attention that he forces the reporter Lounds to see his transformation: he seemed very tall standing in his kimono. A stocking mask was rolled up to his nose. He turned his back to Lounds and dropped the robe. The great back muscles flexed above the brilliant tattoo of the tail that ran down his lower back and wrapped around the leg. The Dragon turned his head slowly, looked over his shoulder at Lounds and smiled, all jags and stains. ... Do you want to know What I Am? ... Look. The first slide was Blake's painting, the great Man-Dragon, wings flared and tail lashing, poised above the Woman Clothed with the Sun. Do you see now? ... Dolarhyde, the Dragon rampant, muscles flexed and tail tattoo above the Jacobis bed. (Harris 145)

Reba McClane's entry into Dolarhyde's life provides a different viewpoint on the effects of empathy. Reba, who is blind and unable to see, uses her other senses and high level of emotional intelligence to get around. Dolarhyde's evil existence gains a shred of humanity thanks to her empathy for him. She is able to see the vulnerable, sympathetic side of him that others miss since she is unable to evaluate him only on outward looks or social conventions.

Her voice was kind, but firm. It carried no taint of sympathy. ... “I hope you will talk. Because you can, and I'm interested in what you have to say. Ummm.” “That's good,” Dolarhyde said softly.... Her next statement was incredible to him. “May I touch your face? I want to know if you're smiling or frowning. Wryly, now.” ... How well would she get around with her fingers bitten off? Dolarhyde mused. Even in street teeth he could do it as easily as biting off breadsticks. ... He took her wrist between his thumb and forefinger and turned her shapely,

hard-used hand in the light. ... Take my word that I'm smiling, he said. He held her wrist above her lap and released it. (Harris 162)

Dolarhyde changes as a result of Reba's empathy because she exposes him to a different kind of connection—one based on understanding rather than fear.

Empathetic characteristics of these characters come together to create a narrative tapestry that ties their destiny together. Graham's sympathetic research forces him to face Dolarhyde's intricate psychological composition. The contrast between those who sympathise with victims and those who cause harm is best exemplified by the relationship between Graham and Dolarhyde. Graham unintentionally builds a bridge between them as he tries to comprehend Dolarhyde's intentions, showing empathy as both a unifying and dividing factor.

Empathy dynamics in *Red Dragon* shed light on the complex connections, decisions, and internal conflicts of its primary characters. Will Graham's innate ability to empathise is both a useful tool for research and a source of internal conflict. Reba McClane's compassion serves as a ray of hope while Francis Dolarhyde's lack of empathy leads him down a dark path. Together, these characters highlight the theme of empathy's power by demonstrating how its presence or absence affects people's perceptions, deeds, and destinies. *Red Dragon* goes beyond a simple mystery fiction because of Harris's expert portrayal of empathy's complex nature. Readers are encouraged to think about the significant influence of empathy on human nature as a whole.

In *Red Dragon*, empathy acts as a potent catalyst for character growth, inspiring people to become complex, morally nuanced characters. Characters are transformed into real people whose struggles and development transcend conventional roles through the use of empathy lenses, moving them beyond the status of mere archetypes. As empathic people negotiate the choppy emotional waters of their own emotions and the darkness within others, the novel's examination of empathy dives into the inner conflicts that develop.

Will Graham and Francis Dolarhyde, two sympathetic characters, deal with a duality that highlights their depth. Graham's capacity to enter the minds of murderers gives him unmatched knowledge, but it also compels him to face the evil he encounters. This internal struggle serves as a testing ground for his development as he struggles to maintain his sanity while penetrating the depraved minds of criminals. This complexity ultimately promotes a multidimensional portrayal by enhancing Graham's character and adding reality to his challenges.

Similar to this, Francis Dolarhyde's change is dependent on his effort to develop empathy, although by means of heinous means. His desire for connection and his need to execute horrific deeds are at odds with one another, which causes him internal struggle. Dolarhyde demonstrates the devastating results of empathy's absence when his need for empathy and inability to obtain it send him on a path to self-destruction. The transformation of his character from tortured soul to merciless killer perfectly portrays the interaction between empathy, desperation, and moral decline.

Empathy plays a significant part in character development in both situations. Graham has a greater awareness of human complexity as a result of his empathy-driven reflection, which forces him to face the darkness both inside himself and in others around him. On the other side, Dolarhyde's journey exemplifies the destructive force of the absence of empathy, turning him into a sad person tormented by his need for connection. These complex character arcs highlight the complex interplay between empathy, inner turmoil, and change.

Character growth in *Red Dragon* is greatly impacted by empathy. The delicate balancing act between comprehending and facing the evil within oneself and others is something many empathetic characters struggle with. Their representation gains depth from this internal conflict, which also makes them more likeable and interesting characters. Additionally, the development and change of characters like Graham and Dolarhyde show how empathy—or the absence of it—can influence their trajectories and complexity. Harris'

examination of empathy's complexity complements the book's examination of human psychology by giving the characters internal conflicts that stick with readers long after the last page has been turned.

In *Red Dragon*, Thomas Harris skillfully ties together personalities and thematic complexity with a tapestry of empathy. Character interactions are enhanced through the examination of empathy's many elements, which influence their decisions and inner conflicts. The book explores the tremendous influence of this emotion on human behaviour, from Will Graham's singularly empathetic investigative method to Francis Dolarhyde's frantic search for empathy.

Empathy is portrayed in the book as both a unifying force and a source of personal struggle, underscoring its paradoxical character. Empathetic relationships between characters spur them on to development and evolution, creating multifaceted portraits that connect with readers. The interaction of empathy and moral ambiguity raises *Red Dragon* above the level of a typical crime story and promotes reflection on the complexities of human nature. *Red Dragon* urges readers to consider the limits of knowledge and darkness as the protagonists traverse their emotional journeys. Harris's depiction of empathy's function in character development highlights the genre's enduring importance and serves as a reminder of its capacity to shed light on the unfathomable complexity of the human experience.

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