



## Cultivating Empathy through Literature and Creative Writing

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### Abstract

*The aim of this initiative, which has been planned and implemented throughout the 2025-2026 school year in the 2nd grade of a greek private high school in Athens, is to cultivate empathy and understanding of the Other through Literature and Creative Writing. More specifically, this is pursued through organized and targeted activities grounded in contemporary theories of empathy in literary studies. According to these theories, empathy is not understood merely as an emotional response of students to literary texts, but also as a complex cognitive-emotional skill that develops through engagement with literary works. Through this process, students gradually become aware that differences among people are shaped by various factors and therefore should be approached with respect and understanding. Contemporary research suggests that while today's youth demonstrate proficient cognitive empathy –the intellectual understanding of others' emotional states– they often encounter difficulties regarding affective empathy, or the capacity to viscerally experience another's emotions. This deficit, partly attributed to digital mediation and its inherent interpersonal distance, hinders effective emotional self-regulation. Consequently, fostering the affective dimension of empathy is of paramount importance. Adolescents require “safe environments” to practice empathic engagement without perceived threats to their own identity. Literature can serve as such a sanctuary, offering a protected space for emotional exploration. Correspondingly, creative writing can function as a secure pedagogical tool, facilitating a deeper understanding of the “Other” while simultaneously promoting self-reflection and self-awareness. Starting from selected modern greek literary texts (prose or poetry), students come into contact with diverse human situations and different types of characters (both deviant and non-deviant, misunderstood and not misunderstood). They approach these heroes and heroines and attempt to interpret their behavior with an attitude of understanding toward human nature, without arrogance or condemnation. They reflect on questions such as: What led the hero or heroine to react in this way? How is this behavior perceived by others who do not know the circumstances? Indicative Creative Writing activities with a psycho-emotional orientation, aiming to strengthen empathy (narrative, poetic, and critical empathy) and sensitivity, include: the Emotion Diary, the “Cardiogram” of the character, the character’s internal monologue and others.*

**Keywords:** Empathy, Creative Writing, Literature

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this initiative, designed and implemented throughout the 2025–2026 school year in the second grade of a Greek private high school in Athens, is to cultivate empathy and understanding of the Other through Literature and Creative Writing. More specifically, this objective is pursued through structured and carefully designed activities informed by contemporary theories of empathy in literary studies. According to these approaches, empathy is understood not simply as students' emotional response to literary texts, but as a complex cognitive and emotional skill that develops through engagement with literature. Through this process, students gradually come to realize that differences among people are shaped by multiple factors and should therefore be approached with respect, sensitivity, and understanding.

Contemporary research indicates that, although today's adolescents often display strong cognitive empathy –that is, the intellectual ability to recognize and understand the emotional states of others– they frequently struggle with affective empathy, namely the ability to emotionally and viscerally experience another person's feelings. This limitation, partly associated with digital mediation and the interpersonal distance it creates, may hinder the development of effective emotional self-regulation. For this reason, strengthening the affective dimension of empathy is considered particularly important. Adolescents need “safe spaces” in which to practice empathic engagement without feeling that their own identity is threatened. Literature can function as such a refuge, offering a protected environment for emotional exploration and reflection. Likewise, creative writing can serve as a secure pedagogical



tool that encourages a deeper understanding of the “Other,” while at the same time fostering self-awareness and introspection.

Through selected modern greek literary texts, both prose and poetry, students encounter a wide range of human experiences and diverse character types –including individuals who are marginalized or socially accepted, misunderstood or fully understood.

## **2. Empathy in Literary Education**

The integration of Empathy into literary education is promoted by the emerging field of empathy studies in literature, which emphasizes the close connection between reading and the empathic process. This process does not presuppose the physical presence of another person, as the reader may develop an emotional connection with the “Other” through fictional characters.

This field argues that, at an educational level, empathy can be cultivated through students’ active engagement with literature (reading, writing, analysis) by means of a specific methodology focused on “perspective-taking,” encouraging students to identify with or approach characters while taking into account their sociocultural background. Creative Writing may play a central role in this approach, as it mobilizes imagination and thought, allowing students to experience the inner world of literary heroes. This experience appears to promote emotional maturity and strengthen respect and tolerance in everyday social life (Hoffman, 2000).

### **2.1 From Sympathy to Empathy**

Historically, the concept of “sympathy” (fellow-feeling) has been fundamental in Western thought regarding the experience of the self in relation to the other. Etymologically, it derives from the ancient Greek word “sympatheia” (syn + pathos), meaning participation in another person’s suffering (Hammond & Kim, 2014: 2). This form of emotional engagement became inextricably linked with art (Pinotti & Salgaro, 2019: 141). Contemporary approaches define empathy as the innate human ability to participate in, understand, and respond with care to the emotions of fellow human beings (Hammond & Kim, 2014). Despite interdisciplinary divergences, there is broad agreement that empathy possesses both cognitive and emotional dimensions (Decety & Jackson, 2006: 54).

- Cognitive dimension (perspective-taking): The conscious understanding of another person’s emotions.
- Emotional dimension: The indirect experience of another person’s emotion, which often develops into “empathic concern” (Van der Graaff et al, 2013).

### **2.2 The Pedagogy of Empathy**

Within the Pedagogy of Empathy, empathy is regarded as a pillar of social development and emotional intelligence (Batson, 2009; Mayer & Salovey, 1993). According to Jamieson (2015), empathy lies at the core of quality teaching. Practices such as collaborative learning, role-playing, and engagement with the arts enhance this ability (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). During adolescence, neurological development and the shift toward peer relationships make this stage of life ideal for the cultivation of empathy (Hoffman, 2000).

Contemporary studies on empathy, recognizing its conceptual multiplicity, focus on the ways in which the processes of “thinking with” (cognitive) and “feeling with” (emotional) are activated within the literary framework (Hammond & Kim, 2014: 1).

Literary engagement enables a profound connection with the “Other” on both cognitive and emotional levels (perspective-taking) (Leake, 2016; Coles, 1989; Hoffman, 2000; Mar et al., 2006). Systematic writing through shifts in perspective cultivates enduring empathic habits (Leake, 2016).

Through literature, students experiment with unfamiliar cultures and situations within a safe environment, thereby reducing social prejudices (Jamieson, 2015; Shuman, 2006; Mar, Oatley & Peterson, 2009). However, this ability often encounters social prejudices toward different population groups (Cameron et al, 2019; Kiser, 2017).

According to Keen (2013), narrative empathy concerns the sharing of emotions through stories in every form (literature, theatre, cinema). Keen (2006: 214-224) emphasizes that narrative techniques (such as narrator type and focalization) interact with the reader’s temperament. She distinguishes empathy into three categories:

1. Bounded empathy: directed toward one’s own group.
2. Ambassadorial empathy: directed toward selected groups.
3. Broadcast empathy: characterized by a universal human orientation.



Critical empathy incorporates critical awareness, recognizing that connection with the “Other” is complicated by sociohistorical factors that hinder equality (Leake, 2016). It is based on the assumption that the common human need for self-actualization encounters different cultural and social conditions (Lu, 1999: 173).

The theoretical approach of “feeling into” (Einfühlung) constitutes the cornerstone for understanding poetic experience and reader response to this day. Empathic reading contributes precisely to this process, allowing readers to broaden their horizons and the parameters of their reading act. Lou Agosta refers to the “hermeneutic circle” of the empathic process. This is a process consisting of four phases: a) empathic receptivity of the “open subject” to the various representations of emotional expressions and the lived experience, real or imaginary, of the other; b) empathic understanding; c) empathic interpretation, “as if you were the other, in the other’s place”; and d) empathic responsiveness, consisting of exemplary speech acts that ensure optimal communication (Agosta: 1984; 2010: 46).

Within the spectrum of reader-response theories, David Bleich’s “subjective criticism” occupies a prominent position, emphasizing the reader’s emotional participation (Beach, 1993: 53). In his works *Readings and Feelings* (1975) and *Subjective Criticism* (1978), Bleich proposes the “subjective re-creation” of the text. For Bleich, reading is not contact with a physical object (words on paper), but a perceptual act in which sensory experiences are transformed into consciousness through individual meaning-making processes (Bleich, 1978: 97).

### **2.3 Criteria for Text Selection**

The pedagogy of empathy presupposes the selection of texts that facilitate connection with characters while at the same time maintaining the distinction between self and hero (Coplan, 2004:144). Reading immersion is crucial, as lack of engagement may reduce levels of empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). Enjoyment, as an intrinsic motivation, is achieved through thematic relevance to adolescent life (Pitcher et al., 2007). Texts addressing moral dilemmas are also recommended (Edgar, 2020: 68-69), so that literature may function as a tool of social criticism. Selection must always be aligned with the cognitive and emotional level of the students (Junker & Jacquemin, 2017; Gallagher, 2009).

### **2.4 Typologies of the Empathic Reader’s Emotions**

Through the emotional stimulation of readers, the path toward empathic reading is opened (Keen, 2006). By responding empathically, the reader of a text (prose or poetry) shares the emotions of the characters (Miall & Kuiken, 1995).

The reader’s emotional engagement during literary reading differs from real social interactions, as it is primarily based on imagination. It may be distinguished into four fundamental categories (Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Sikora, Kuiken & Miall, 2004):

1. Evaluative feelings: These concern the overall assessment of the text as a whole (e.g., pleasure, satisfaction).
2. Aesthetic feelings: These arise from the formal structure of the work (stylistic devices, metaphors, irony, rhythmic organization) and enhance reading interest through the aesthetic enjoyment of form.
3. Narrative feelings: These focus on specific aspects of fiction, such as empathy toward acting characters.
4. Self-modifying feelings: These reconstruct the reader’s self-image, producing symbolic representations capable of transforming personality itself (Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Sikora, Kuiken & Miall, 2004).

### **2.5 Creative Writing in the Teaching of Empathy**

Creative Writing constitutes a quintessentially experiential method for cultivating empathy, since it requires students to adopt the perspective of literary characters (Jamieson, 2015: 230). Through the production of imitative or reflective texts and the subsequent critical discussion, students are gradually led toward the development of critical empathy (Junker & Jacquemin, 2017: 80).

## **3. Description of the Teaching Proposal**



The following teaching proposal was implemented with twenty-seven mixed-ability students in the Modern Greek Literature course of the second grade of a General Upper Secondary School in a private school in Athens. It was designed by two teachers between whom a mentoring relationship exists. The teachers implemented the following proposal in two classes. The first class consisted of 9 girls and 5 boys, while the second consisted of 11 girls and 2 boys.

The intervention, which utilized the activation of empathy during the educational process, lasted throughout the entire 2025-2026 school year. During this period, the teachers identified suitable texts (prose and poetry), selected the most appropriate creative writing exercises, and prepared the students for participation in a related conference held in Athens.

Regarding the selection of texts, it was considered necessary that they should raise concerns and questions through whose exploration students would cultivate their empathic ability. These questions were the following:

- What does the hero/heroine feel?
- Can I put myself in his/her place? Can I empathize with him/her?
- Do I identify with him/her?
- Do I understand him/her?
- What led the hero/heroine to react in this way?
- How is this behavior perceived by others who do not know the background?
- How easy is it for each of us to arrive at hasty and superficial conclusions about another person?
- How easy is it to assign a label or characterization to another person? How important (but also how difficult at times) is it to approach the diversity and uniqueness of human nature with understanding?

Regarding prose, texts were selected from the school textbook *Texts of Modern Greek Literature, Grade B of Lyceum*: “Pararlama” by Demosthenes Voutyras, “The Secret Poppy” by Stratis Myrivilis (excerpt from the novel *Life in the Tomb*), “The Seal’s Lament” by Alexandros Papadiamantis, and “Alexis Zorbas” by Nikos Kazantzakis (excerpt from *The Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas*). As for poetry, the teachers utilized the following works: “[We are something...]” by Kostas Karyotakis, “Marina of the Rocks” and “Maria Nefeli” by Odysseas Elytis, as well as a selection from the *Complete Works* of Kiki Dimoula.

Subsequently, the most suitable creative writing exercises for strengthening empathy and sensitivity were selected. These activities had a psycho-emotional orientation and focused on the creation of original student texts inspired by the texts presented to the students. Indicatively, these included the creation of a personal anthology, theatrical monologue/dialogue writing, dramatization, sketching, diary writing, and original poetic composition. These activities, however, will be presented in greater detail below.

The intervention concluded at the end of the school year with the distribution of a feedback questionnaire.

### 3.1 Empathetic Reading

Starting with prose, in Demosthenes Voutyras’s work “Pararlama”, the students became acquainted with the marginalized and unstable character of the eponymous short story, who longs to become the center of attention by writing the incomprehensible slogan “Pararlama” and taking pleasure in provoking fear and terror. In order to bridge the distance between themselves and the character, the students were asked to answer a series of questions:

- What might drive a person to such behavior?
- How can isolation and exclusion disturb one’s inner balance?
- What kind of treatment might people in a state of weakness deserve?

In approaching the short story, the aim was not to psychoanalyze the character or investigate his pathology, but rather to understand his behavior and human vulnerability.

In the excerpt “The Secret Poppy,” from Stratis Myrivilis’s book *Life in the Tomb*, teachers introduced their class to the following questions:

- How might Sergeant Kostoulas feel?
- What might the war have done to his soul?
- What psychological defenses might he have employed in order to survive in the trench?
- Why does the encounter with the poppy provoke such an emotional overreaction?
- How can a person manage their emotions during a period of intense crisis such as war?
- Does he allow himself room to feel?
- Might he need to “silence” his emotions (fear, guilt, love, hope)?



Furthermore, we followed the journey of old Loukaina in Alexandros Papadiamantis's short story "The Seal's Lament", alongside the tragic course of her little granddaughter, Akrivoula, who, enchanted by the melody of a carefree shepherd, was led to her death. Through discussion among the students, the following questions emerged:

- How might old Loukaina and Akrivoula's mother have felt?
- What emotions arise in the reader?
- Can we empathize with old Loukaina?
- What would we have felt if we were the shepherd?

Moving on to the excerpt from Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *The Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas*, an attempt was made to construct a psychological profile of the book's protagonist. To this end, students focused on the following questions:

- What type of person is Alexis Zorbas?
- How might we interpret his psychology?
- Would you like to meet such a person?
- What might companionship with him offer, and how easy would it be?
- What experiences may have led the character to adopt this attitude toward life and this behavior?

The students' empathetic engagement became even more intense through poetry. This empathetic journey began with Kostas Karyotakis's poem "[We Are Something...]", included in the second-grade school textbook. The teachers' aim was for the recipients of the poem to approach the poetic subject by constructing its psychological profile and answering key questions in order to achieve this goal more effectively. These questions were the following:

- What might the poetic subject be feeling? Disappointment? Dissatisfaction? Resignation? Understanding?
- How does the speaker express these possible emotions? Why might they feel this way? Are these emotions understandable? Might they be excessive?
- Why might the speaker refer to poets and to themselves in this manner?
- Where might the speaker place themselves?

Subsequently, the poetry of Odysseas Elytis was explored, specifically the poem "Marina of the Rocks" and excerpts from the poetic collection "Maria Nefeli". In the first poem, the emotional background was examined, and an attempt was made to answer the following questions:

- What does the poetic voice feel?
- What are the characteristics of "Marina of the Rocks" that may intensify the poetic voice's desire to "conquer" her?
- How do we explain the behavior of each figure?
- Which verse attracted our attention? Why might this have happened?

While it became clear that in this poem only the male poetic voice is heard, addressing a rebellious female figure, in "Maria Nefeli" at least two poetic voices are heard: Maria Nefeli, a different kind of girl who struggles to fit into the world, and the "Respondent," an entity that seems to embody adult thought, convention, limitation, and the Other. A voice that stands in opposition to Maria Nefeli. We attempted to define Maria Nefeli's nature, explain her behavior, and explore any similarities between ourselves and her.

After completing the empathetic approach to the poems of Odysseas Elytis, and in collaboration with the schools' drama instructor, an attempt was made to create a theatrical representation of the two poems, through which the students approached the emotions arising from experiential engagement with Elytis poetry. Through this activity, which was based on an original text by the drama instructor, "Marina of the Rocks" was connected with "Maria Nefeli", constituting a first step toward a more creative perspective through which students could appreciate poetry.

Similar were the empathetic reading approaches to the poetic texts of K. Dimoula and K. Karyotakis.

### **3.2 Empathetic Creative Writing**

The prose and poetic texts already mentioned served as stimuli for the externalization of students' emotions and thoughts regarding elements of the plot and the heroes/heroines that came alive in their minds during empathic reading. Among the creative writing activities utilized were the following: an "emotion cardiogram" (an attempt to record the emotions of the hero/heroine), the hero's monologue (a



written transformation of “feeling into” through the question “What might the hero/heroine be thinking?”), rewriting the story or part of the story from the student-author’s chosen perspective through the question “What would happen if...?” with emphasis on emotion, and the written transformation of “perspective-taking” through the questions “If it were me? How would I feel? What would I do?”

The poem “[We are something...]” by Kostas Karyotakis served as the poetic stimulus for the creation of original written compositions by the students. This activity allowed students to express what they feel as adolescents, pressured and anxious second-grade Lyceum students, or as observers of a world changing rapidly, abruptly, and uncontrollably.

One way of understanding the distinctive surrealist writing of Odysseas Elytis was the assignment of text production through the technique of automatic writing. This is a written production technique in which the filters of logic are bypassed and the speed of thought, the leaps of reasoning, and the faithful succession of emotions are recorded through writing. Although at first glance disconnected from empathy, this activity contributed to liberating students from the constraints of written discourse and the meticulous rules imposed by structured writing within the context of upper secondary education.

The poetry of Kiki Dimoula played a leading role in the empathic activation of students. Initially, students were asked to write a poetic “advertisement” inspired by Dimoula’s poem of the same title. Through this activity, they themselves requested something personal they desired and expressed what they could offer in return.

The next creative writing exercise revolved around the poem “The Periphrastic Stone” by the same poet. Students practiced creating a theatrical dialogue or monologue in which they depicted the conversation between the poetic subject and the recipient of the poem, or alternatively the recipient’s response to what had been heard through the poem.

In a subsequent teaching session, students came into contact with Kiki Dimoula’s poem “Dust” and created their own diaries in which they recorded their impressions from encountering these housewives, so familiar to all of us. Through diary-based creative writing, students practiced perspective-taking, self-empathy, self-understanding, and the expressive representation of a symbolic catharsis.

#### 4. Conclusions – Suggestions

For the evaluation of the intervention, the following tools were utilized:

- a. observation of the participating students during the creative exercises assigned each time by the two responsible teachers,
- b. the feedback questionnaire, and
- c. feedback from students who functioned as a focus group (oral feedback was requested from students of different academic performance levels and varying degrees of classroom participation).

The following findings emerged:

Not all students are familiar with such teaching models. Literature as a subject is often perceived negatively by learners, and there is always the possibility that certain stereotypical attitudes may be reinforced among some students. These attitudes may stem either from the tendency to criticize the portrayal of a character’s weaknesses or from the belief that Literature itself constitutes a secondary and less important field of study.

The active involvement of the teacher is essential in order to safeguard students and create a safe environment in which they can express themselves openly and without inhibition. The teacher must remain vigilant in maintaining classroom balance and in eliminating any tendencies toward judgment, belittlement, or arrogance among participants.

The respect that the teacher expects from students must also be demonstrated by the teacher during the presentation of creative assignments to the whole class. The purpose of the intervention is to encourage students’ self-expression and cultivate empathy, not to showcase the teachers themselves. Students should neither feel exposed nor pressured into making statements they do not wish to make.

Preparing these workshop-style creative writing lessons requires considerable time on the part of the teacher, both for selecting appropriate texts — texts that raise meaningful questions capable of activating empathy and/or texts preferred by the students themselves, with the ideal approach being a combination of both. Moreover, the implementation of creative writing activities cannot realistically take place outside the school environment, both for reasons of authenticity and reliability of the students’ work and because of the already demanding schedules students face. At the same time, teachers must also ensure that the prescribed curriculum is adequately covered.

Creative writing can bring students closer both to written expression and to the understanding of the Other. However, for this to happen, educators themselves must also become more familiar with such alternative teaching approaches. A shift in mindset is therefore required among teachers, students, and



parents alike if creative writing is to be meaningfully and systematically integrated into educational practice.

Students succeeded in putting themselves in the place of the Other. They viewed the world from a different perspective and understood emotions they had not previously experienced. They recognized and named emotions: poetic stimuli functioned as opportunities for emotions to emerge, enabling students to recognize and express them in their own way. They practiced listening and acceptance: their emotional understanding was strengthened, while any critical tendencies they may previously have had were weakened. Through the reading of their creative works before the whole class, both the absence of competitiveness and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships became evident. Particularly characteristic was the image of students who felt hesitant while presenting their texts receiving encouragement from their classmates.

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