

Distressful Empathy: The case for Terror Management Theory?

Willie van Peer

Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich (Germany)

The term 'empathy' is associated with positive values in western cultures: it is generally thought good if people feel empathetic, and children are standardly brought up to take feelings of other people into consideration. But what if empathy is distressful? Literary authors are often quite adept at describing situations or events which may evoke extremely strong empathetic emotions. Concerning such emotions, two questions will be raised in this paper. First, *why* is it that people seek out such powerful yet distressing emotions? Secondly, what are the *effects* of being exposed to such literary descriptions evoking distressful empathy?

To answer the latter, the results of a reading experiment will be presented. The hypothesis, developed in the framework of Terror Management Theory, that direct confrontation with one's mortality strengthens both prejudices against outsiders and in-group values, will be tested. The results will be compared with earlier work, in which this hypothesis, contrary to the bulk of work in Terror Management Theory, could *not* be confirmed. This raises the question whether mortality confrontation in literary texts is different from other such confrontations. This leads back to the first question, namely *why* people indulge in such distressful emotions.

It will be argued that art and literature indeed provide special outlets for the 'terror' created by the consciousness of one's mortality. Whereas such reminders of one's finality may indeed strengthen prevailing world views within a culture (and the concomitant rejection of outsiders' values), in literature such confrontation may actually relieve the tension produced by mortality reminders. This perspective on literature as an outlet for distressful empathy may be linked

to Aristotle's notion of *catharsis*, which, however, may be in need of a new specification.