International Association of Literary Semantics Conference Proceedings on Wor(l)ds, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, April 2019.

This paper was funded by the Student Bursary from the International Association of Literary Semantics.

**“Pathetic Fallacy: Towards an Updated Definition.”**

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**Introduction**

Emotion communication is at the heart of literature: readers bond with characters over shared feelings and experiences. Figurative language and imagery techniques highly contribute to the communication of emotions by illustrating them explicitly. Pathetic fallacy is an imagery technique that conveys emotions by reflecting them onto the scene for all to physically see. Pathetic fallacy was first defined by John Ruskin in *Modern Painters vol. III* in 1856, although a universal and systematic definition or model for this technique is difficult to obtain. This is problematic in itself, but even more so because pathetic fallacy is required knowledge in the English National Curriculum at GCSE and A Levels.

In this paper, I will review pathetic fallacy considering primary and secondary sources. I will then present the study I have conducted to illustrate the gap in knowledge in education and academia on pathetic fallacy. I will offer an introduction to the updated definition and linguistics model for pathetic fallacy I have put together based on the data from the study. Finally, I will apply my model in a brief stylistics analysis of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, thus illustrating the impact pathetic fallacy has on the overall text as well as on the reader’s perception of characters.

**1. Literature review**

***1.1 Primary Sources***

‘Pathetic Fallacy’ is a term created by John Ruskin in 1856 in his book *Modern Painters vol. 3*, in which he states:

“"They rowed her in across the rolling foam—The cruel, crawling foam."

The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the ‘Pathetic fallacy’” (Ruskin: 1856, p. 155).

Ruskin shows the importance of nature and how it can mimic human emotions, or even convey them. Personification is used to explain his point: “The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl”. This is problematic, as it does not outline the difference between pathetic fallacy and personification.

*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines pathetic fallacy as such: “the attribution of human feelings and responses to inanimate things or animals, especially in art and literature” (Birch: 2012). *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines pathetic fallacy as a “projecting or displacing human emotions and feelings onto things that do not have them, although they may prompt emotions in us. We are supposed to commit the fallacy by talking of angry weather and sad trees. But the descriptions may be apt with no fallacy being committed, because of systematic ambiguity” (Blackburn: 2016). *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* states that pathetic fallacy is “the tendency of poets and painters to imbue the natural world with human feelings” (Cushman, S. et al: 2012, p.1048-1049). Those are just three of multiple examples of primary sources defining this literary techniques with conflicted definitions.

For the sake of clarity and consistency, I will define personification as a literary technique that gives human attributes to inanimate objects, for instance: “the blank page stared at me” (Cushman, S. et al: 2012, p.1064). The objects in questions can be any inanimate and natural element if no emotional context justifies the use of the technique. It is important to point out that giving human attributes to animals or other living creatures is called “anthropomorphism”, which is not a personification nor is it pathetic fallacy (Blackburn: 2016). Personification is a foregrounded effect achieved by associating inanimate objects as nouns for verbs which would only be associated with a human action.

Pathetic fallacy and personification are specific types of metaphors. Metaphors are analysed as “a convenient shorthand way of capturing this view of metaphor as the following: conceptual domain (a) is conceptual domain (b), which is what is called a conceptual metaphor. A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another. A conceptual domain is any coherent organization of experience” (Kövecses: 2002, p.4). Cognitive Metaphor Theory views metaphors to “employ a more abstract concept as target and a more concrete or physical concept as their source. Argument, love, idea, social organization are all more abstract concepts than war, journey, food, and plant” (Kövecses: 2002, p.6). This concept is logical and intuitive, it is a form of example given to actively illustrate a subjective and theoretical idea.

Pathetic fallacy is a specific type of metaphor relying on concrete images, which is best defined using Cognitive Metaphor Theory. Metaphors are used to picture an abstract concept into a concrete one, understandable by all. Emotions and life events are subjective and personal. Explaining them to others might not convey them with precision, as they are abstract (Lakoff: 1993, p.2). However, if explained with an image of a concrete process, such as an action or weather, it becomes universally understandable.  Cognitive Metaphor Theory does support this approach. A character’s feelings may need to be mirrored on his environment or by the surrounding natural elements because the reader would otherwise struggle to relate.

***1.2 Secondary sources***

Pathetic fallacy does not have a well-defined place in the literary or linguistic world. Not only is it under-researched, but the lack of systematic or universal definition makes the material on pathetic fallacy even more minimal. Young sees pathetic fallacy as “[…] the attributing of human characteristics to unhuman objects: this is to say, to objects which, by nature, could not plausibly be invested with such characteristics” (Young: 1949, p.54). Young is one of many to assume those two types of metaphors as one and the same. It also points out the unclear definition given by Ruskin. Young states that “Ruskin was not consistent in his objections since he admitted and demonstrated that the practice was acceptable when controlled by a special kind of talent or a unique condition of temperament, the fitness in a given case to be determined, apparently, by the honest reader’s response” (Young: 1949, p.55). He sees the issue with Ruskin’s methodology and he does conceive to the implication of the reader’s perception due to pathetic fallacy being a “broken, obscure and wild in metaphor”. However, in the rest of his article, Young mentions travel guide descriptions along with a description from *St. Mawr* by D.H Lawrence. A description of landscapes cannot contain pathetic fallacy, particularly the ones used by Young since no human presence is featured. Pathetic fallacy requires a human presence to express an emotion to be projected onto nature. A description does not fulfil this role. A. Wilde reviewed the novel, finding no pathetic fallacy but finding the present description “rich[ness] in imagery” (Wilde: 1964, p.168). Therefore, Young seems to have mistaken the presence of natural elements or even general metaphors for pathetic fallacy.

Ruskin’s attempt at labelling the pathetic fallacy lacked rigour and methodology to allow others to identify the device. J.D. Thomas defends Ruskin’s theory and believes it is “necessary for the correct interpretation of the whole phrase is recognition that *pathetic* operates as a causative in relations to the noun *fallacy*: a pathetic fallacy is a deceptive appearance caused by emotions” (Thomas: 1961, p.343). He points out that the emotions displayed ought to be linked to the “imagination” and can be “ennobled by the psychological truth of the poet’s feelings or by the dramatic truth to human experience in the emotions of his personae”. This idea that the reader’s imagination will engage with the projection of the pathetic fallacy is logical. In a paragraph with pathetic fallacy taking place, a certain lexical field will be used which will paint a picture in the reader’s mind, thus engaging their imagination via visualisation, which links with the Cognitive Metaphor Theory since “we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another”, as explained above (Lakoff: 1993, p.3). In accordance with Thomas, Lévy-Bruhl sees pathetic fallacy as a type of imagery, reflecting Man onto his environment, which can also be linked to Cognitive Metaphor Theory. He sees pathetic fallacy as an extent of the *loi de participation*: man sees himself as an extension of his environment (Lévy-Bruhl: 1910, p.2). It is interesting to consider that when used, pathetic fallacy blends Man’s emotional status with its own wilderness, bringing Man back to his roots and primitive state. This use of imagery would highly contribute to characterisation. B.F. Dick considers pathetic fallacy to be metaphoric: “not only will nature possess human emotions, but she will display them with all the variations that characterize human behaviour” and describes it as a “metaphor […] always standing for something more than mere ornament” (Dick: 1968, p.30). The projection of emotion occurring in the pathetic fallacy is indeed a metaphor, after all nature *is* described a certain way and the character *is* mirroring their feelings onto their surroundings. However, the idea that this metaphor has a deeper meaning than just an “ornament” needs to be developed. In some cases, pathetic fallacy is used to introduce a symbol or allegory in the text, which creates a certain association in the reader’s mind. But the introduction of symbols by authors in novels is not systematic, and more often than not, it is used to enrich the literary style of the text and how characters are built or perceived.

The need for an updated definition of pathetic fallacy and clear differentiation from personification is obvious, as seen is the literature review above. It has had little attention from linguists, and mixed approaches from literary critiques and authors. I intend to model a method to identify pathetic fallacy in texts (literary or not) in a systematic way. The following section will point out the use of pathetic fallacy in the British National Curriculum.

1. **Pathetic fallacy and the British National Curriculum.**

The British National Curriculum lists pathetic fallacy and personification as required knowledge for GCSE and A Levels: “analysing and evaluating how language […] contribute to quality and impact; using linguistic and literary terminology for such evaluation (such as, but not restricted to, phrase, metaphor, meter, irony and persona, synecdoche, *pathetic fallacy*)” (Department for Education, DfE: 2013, p. 5). However, nowhere in the curriculum is the definition of pathetic fallacy given. Therefore, it is up to teachers or other sources to deliver that knowledge to students. The exam boards enforce the texts chosen by most secondary schools for GSCE and A Levels, such as AQA or Edexel, which also supply teaching materials.

Exam boards supply varied resources and reports with assessment objectives to help teachers in their practice. Edexel board (through Pearson) does not define pathetic fallacy explicitly but does mention it in reports:

“The analysis of language continues with the comments on the personification of the house. The candidate perceptively explores this use of language - the remote location being highlighted, the parallel to his feelings, the use of pathetic fallacy.” (Pearson for Edexel: 2016, p. 52).

“The extract was rich in examples for candidates to discuss, such as ‘pathetic fallacy’ and foreshadowing, also how Pip’s reality compared with his expectation of London.” (Pearson for Edexel: 2017, p. 12).

Pathetic fallacy is referred to but not defined, which can be confusing for students, and it is also associated with ‘personification’. AQA board refers to pathetic fallacy in their exam report and mark scheme:

“Weather as a metaphor (pathetic fallacy) to indicate strong emotions: feel the fog in my throat; the press of the storm; darkness and cold; the elements rage” (AQA: 2017, p. 28).

“Exaggerated the effects of pathetic fallacy by highlighting a small detail like ‘damp grass’ as an example” (AQA: 2017, p. 4).

In these instances, not only is pathetic fallacy not defined clearly, but also the examples given with it do not refer to pathetic fallacy but to personification: “damp grass”.

Finally, students often revise using resources such as BBC Bitesize, since it is encouraged by their institutions and the government. BBC Bitesize defines pathetic fallacy as such: “a type of personification where emotions are given to a setting, an object or the weather” and illustrates this definition with the following example: “the clouds crowded together suspiciously overhead as the sky darkened”. Pathetic fallacy is explicitly explained as a “type of personification” and the example given is indeed a personification of natural element. Not only is this incorrect, it is also misleading for students.

I have shown that, in an educational setting, pathetic fallacy is not defined accurately, and is illustrated with examples of personification. This reflects the data collected from my survey and shows a clear issue in the teaching of this literary technique. It also echoes the lack of systematic research on pathetic fallacy in academia.

1. **Survey Study**

***3.1 Methodology***

The survey was designed using Qualtrics XM as a platform. The survey was kept open for four weeks from January 15th 2019 to February 12th 2019. Six questions were put together, four questions were free writing, one was a multiple choices question, and one was a matrix table. I wanted the participants to define in their own words ‘pathetic fallacy’ first, then define ‘personification’, and then complete the matrix table featuring examples of both literary techniques.

To understand the targeted audience of the survey, it is important to be remember that pathetic fallacy is taught at GCSE and A Levels, according to the British National Curriculum and Department of Education, as I have explained above. This means that English teachers from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 5 are required to teach students what pathetic fallacy is and its effect on a text. Therefore, I thought it would be logical to share the survey with English teachers in secondary schools and colleges as a “control group” (Fink: 1995, p. 14). I then also thought it would be interesting to ask academics to complete the survey, particularly in subjects such as Linguistics and Literature, since English teachers are taught to become teachers by academics.

The survey was shared with English teachers via social media such as Twitter. I used specific networks of teachers to share my survey, particularly `Team English’, ‘National Association for Teachers of English’ (NATE). The survey was shared similarly to academics via mailing lists and social media accounts of The International Association of Literary Semantics (IALS) and the Poetics And Linguistics Association (PALA), amongst others.

* 1. ***Data.***

The first two questions of the survey were relevant to the place of work of each participant. Since pathetic fallacy is taught at GCSE and A Levels, I wanted to be able to identify if teachers responsible to teach this literary technique could define it and identify it accurately. Similarly, English teachers with an education in Literature or Linguistics will have been taught, most likely, by academics in this discipline during their Bachelor degree or their PGCE. The high majority of the participants are English teachers in GCSE or A Levels settings. The second biggest group of participants is academics of English Language and Literature. Those results were to be expected, primarily due to the platforms on which the survey was distributed and advertised.

Questions 3 and 4 asked participants to define in their own words first ‘pathetic fallacy’ and then ‘personification’. The answers received in those two questions confirmed my hypothesis that pathetic fallacy and personification are often considered as interchangeable terms, which is a misconception. The terms used by participants to define pathetic fallacy were also used to define personification, thus showing the overlap in the terms’ definition: “personification”, “object”, “weather”, “attribute”, “human” and “emotions”. Overall, 36% of participants viewed pathetic fallacy as a type of personification. 49% of the participants did define pathetic fallacy in accordance with Lodge’s definition: “a projection of human emotions onto a natural phenomenon” (Lodge: 1992, p.17).

Question 5 was a matrix table asking participants if they thoughts each statement contained pathetic fallacy. The statements in the survey were chosen with care in order to test my model of pathetic fallacy. I argue that for pathetic fallacy to occur, it is crucial to have an animated being present as well as emotions expressed (implicitly or explicitly), presence of surrounding environment, and context when needed.

Out of 15 statements:

* 3 contained examples of pathetic fallacy
* 3 showed the presence of emotions
* 3 featured natural elements
* 3 had for purpose to contain human entity present
* 2 contained personification
* 2 statements combined the presence of human entity present and emotions
* 2 statements combined the presence of human entity and natural elements

Overall, participants who had defined pathetic fallacy as personification struggled to identify it correctly in the statements, which was to be expected. 39% of participants were able to identify pathetic fallacy in the correct statements, which is less that the amount of participants that could define pathetic fallacy in question 3. 46% of participants viewed statements containing personification as pathetic fallacy, thus evidencing the clear gap in knowledge between those two terms. This means that despite knowing what pathetic fallacy is, less than half of those participants could actually find it amongst a mixture of sentences.

The data drawn from this study is significant and illustrates my hypothesis clearly. Indeed, as many participants thought that the statements that featured personification were pathetic fallacy, in comparison to the participants who identified it correctly. This means that pathetic fallacy and personification are seen as interchangeable, which is not the case.

Moreover, the statements that contained natural and environmental elements were seen as featuring pathetic fallacy more than any of the other statements. This could be due to the fact that many participants described pathetic fallacy in the lines of “the attribution of human characteristics to inanimate objects, particularly nature”, that is to say the personification of nature. It is therefore not surprising to find that sentences with natural elements clearly stated were seen as featuring pathetic fallacy five times more often that the other two criteria.

Question 6 asked participants to provide examples they knew of pathetic fallacy from varied texts. Although only half of the participants did answer these questions, the references and texts that were submitted showed a wide variety. Some texts feature on the National Curriculum for GCSE and A Levels such as *Macbeth* and *A Christmas Carol*. Others were classic Romantic texts such as *Jane Eyre* and *Frankenstein*. This was ideal to test my model of pathetic fallacy.

I have evidenced the lack of research, understanding, and systematic definition of pathetic fallacy throughout this paper. I will now present a basic overview of the model I have put together to remedy this issue, based on the data collected.

1. **Updated Definition of Pathetic Fallacy: a Basic Overview.**

David Lodge defines pathetic fallacy in *The Art of Fiction* as “projection of human emotion” onto natural elements that is used to build characters’ emotions and that portrays them to the reader (Lodge: 1992). In order to fulfil this definitions, key elements must be present in the text for pathetic fallacy to occur, as shown by the study conducted:

* Presence of animated entity, implicit or explicit in the text. Without an animated entity, no emotion can be generated.
* Presence of emotions, implicit or explicit in the text. Without emotion, there would be nothing for the surroundings to reflect.
* Presence of surroundings. Without the surroundings, there would be nothing to project the emotion upon.
* Presence of context, particularly if the entity or the emotions in the text are implicit.

Those key criteria are essential, and work together to allow for the occurrence of pathetic fallacy. If one is missing, the pathetic fallacy cannot occur in the text by default.

In this section, I have briefly presented my linguistic model of pathetic fallacy. I will now demonstrate how it can be applied in a short text analysis of *The Hound of the Baskervilles.*

1. **Text Overview: *The Hound of the Baskervilles (Doyle: 2001).***

The opening of chapter 10 of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* features pathetic fallacy and all key criteria from my proposed model are met: the presence of an animated entity is filled by Watson and the Baronet, the emotions in the text are explicit (“melancholia”), and the surroundings are described (“moor”). The context is given away not only by the title of the novel, but also by the spatial and temporal deictic terms present in the text such as “October 16th”, “the moor”, or “the night”. The narration takes place in autumn, justifying the “dreary” weather, and the first person narrative is introduced by the diary entry. Using a first-person narrative allows for a greater bond between characters and the reader to form, particularly when conveying emotions. In this case, it facilitate for the pathetic fallacy to take place.

Pathetic fallacy is the projection of emotions onto the surroundings. In this example, the pathetic fallacy is shown by the surroundings of the moor and the weather mimicking Watson’s feelings. This effect is put in place in the narration through the use of the lexical field of nature (“fog”, “rain”, “clouds”) associated with negative adjectives such as “dreary” or “dull”, thus picturing Watson’s state of “melancholia”. The fog and clouds play an important part in the extract as it is a concrete representation of Watson’s state of mind: he is unsure about his feelings, and is “unable to define [them]”, although he knows something is bothering him but remains uncertain about what to do or what is going to happen. The lexical fields association creates an image in the reader’s mind, a physical representation of Watson’s emotions.

The natural element in the scene have been personified and given human attributes such as “rolling clouds […] rise [and] show” or “the light strikes”. The personification foregrounds the natural elements by deviation against the rest of the text, rendering them active and omnipresent. On the other hand, the actions used with Watson’s character are introduced by the state verb *to be* (“is”, “am”). This contrasts with the active image of the natural elements, thus facilitating the pathetic fallacy further since the elements showcase Watson’s state of mind.

There is a pattern and mirroring effect in the text foregrounded by parallelism: the first two sentences describe the weather and the environment around, and are followed by the simple sentence “it is melancholia outside and in”, which sums up what has been written in the extract so far. Two sentences then follow to display Watson’s worries, as well as the uncertainty of the situation. This is proceeded by the phrase “I am unable to define it”, which illustrate Watson’s train of thought so far. This pattern sheds light on Watson’s state of mind: he feels the need to sum up his thoughts and emotions, even if it to point out how “foggy” he is. The pathetic fallacy present in the extract helps the reader understand what Watson struggles to voice, and contributes to the suspense building. The suspense in the scene is built not only because Watson cannot figure out what is bothering him, but also because of “the excitements of the nights”. The word “danger” is repeated and announces what is about to happen in the storyline. This reflects, even accentuate Watson’s and the baronet’s nervousness.

Overall, this falls in line with Cognitive Metaphor Theory: although Watson cannot describe to the reader his emotions, he can give them a physical image by projecting his emotional state onto his surroundings. This is done using multiple techniques, as discussed in the literature review. Those techniques allow the reader to infer Watson’s emotional state. In addition to the techniques, the pathetic fallacy in this extract is also explicitly stated: “it is melancholia outside and in”, showing to the reader the correlation between the natural element and his feelings.

In this section, I have done a brief analysis, focusing on how pathetic fallacy can occur in a text and the impact it has on the process of characterisation.

**Conclusion**

Authors often use figurative language and imagery techniques such as pathetic fallacy in order to convey characters’ emotions. The reader’s perception of those emotions lead to an empathetic response and to the creation of a bond between readers and characters. Although extensive research has been done on metaphors, other imagery techniques have not been considered or modelled as much by academics.

Pathetic fallacy, as I have explained, is a common technique used in art, literature and entertainment. However, it is often mistaken for personification of natural elements. I have conducted a survey to identify the common gaps in knowledge regarding pathetic fallacy. It is important to bear in mind that the majority of participants are English teachers in secondary schools or academia and are responsible for teaching the concept of pathetic fallacy to students. Yet, less than half of the participant could define pathetic fallacy or identify it in examples given.

The misconception between pathetic fallacy and personification is statistically illustrated, which conveys the clear gap in knowledge between these literary techniques. Therefore I argue that it is crucial to be able to provide a systematic definition of pathetic fallacy, not only for the contribution it has to characterisation, but also for educational purposes, since it is features on the GCSE and A Levels National Curriculum.

In this paper, I have presented my model of pathetic fallacy based on a literature review. The model was tested and validated by participants’ answers in the survey conducted. The key criteria I have identified for pathetic fallacy are: presence of an animated entity, presence of emotion, presence of surroundings and context. They have been illustrated in a brief text analysis to point out the overall impact pathetic fallacy has on a text and on the character building process. The next steps for this research will be to gather further data on a collection of texts to keep the approach systematic and qualitative.

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