ABSTRACT

MARK P. HUNTANAR. The Depiction of Emotional Trauma and the Literary Psychological Arc. (Under the direction of Professor Nick Halpern)

In the recently published book *The Believing Brain*, Michael Schermer describes the “evolution of all forms of patternicity,” including superstition and magical thinking, as the “natural selection for the cognitive process” which assumes “that all patterns are real and that all patternicities represent real and important phenomena” (60). Schermer’s depiction of the human brain as an indiscriminate “belief engine” lends strong credence to the ease with which readers suspend their disbelief when they encounter effective literary portrayals of emotional stress or psychological trauma. This is true even if the literary depiction veers into the realms of the supernatural and fantastic, or as Freud noted in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny,” we, the readers, accept “the ruling” of the author “in every case” (222). In this paper I will argue that this effect on the reader is not accidental.

Through a close reading of eighteen excerpts from literature, popular genre, and nonfiction writing, I will examine how a literary psychological arc supports the convincing portrayal of states of extreme emotional stress or psychological trauma. Some excerpts included in this study include the literary portrayal of the mind-state of Clyde Griffiths which leads him to murder Roberta Alden to escape from an unwanted pregnancy in Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy;* Jack Torrance’s encounter with the dead lady in Room 217 of the Overlook Hotel in Stephen King’s *The Shining*; James Bond’s paralyzing encounter with a venomous scolopendra gigantea centipede in Ian Fleming’s *Dr. No,* and the unflinching resolve of David Hackworth in the face of battle as recounted in his memoir *About Face*.

Evidence of the textual and stylistic divergence of literary technique among the selected excerpts demonstrates that the use of the literary psychological arc to portray intense psychological states transcends both genre and taste. I will consider the following questions: What elements of the literary psychological arc are required to effectively portray intense psychological states? How do these same elements within the arc vary among genres? Does the inclusion of the literary psychological arc in nonfictional narratives render them more convincing, credible, or compelling? Can the literary psychological arc be used as a prescriptive tool to identify and correct stylistic failings, narrative errors, and imprecise prose?