I am submitting my essay, “Reading Between the Lines: On Empathy and Fiction” for consideration for Hannon Library’s Undergraduate Library Research Award. This paper was assigned as the final project for Dr. Timothy Burns’s Major Thinkers: Edith Stein course, and was allowed to focus on any topic related to Stein’s major field of study, phenomenology, provided it incorporated Stein’s work.

I first decided on my topic while our class was reading Stein’s book, On the Problem of Empathy. The piece focused on analyzing how it was possible for people to experience the consciousness of another. During our subsequent discussion, Dr. Burns mentioned an ongoing phenomenological debate on whether the concept of empathy applied to fictional characters. As someone pursuing a career in animation, storytelling and character development are some of my greatest interests, so I sprung at the chance to incorporate them in my paper. Dr. Burns informed me, however, that this debate worked differently depending on the medium of the characters—for example, film versus writing. Since Stein’s work on the matter focused on writing, I decided to largely restrict my paper to written characters.

My thesis initially asserted that people could empathize with fictional characters in much the same way as we empathize with other humans. However, as I read further on the subject, I found that many philosophers argued against empathizing at all with fictional persons. This initially caused my convictions to falter, but upon further research, I began to find their reasoning insufficient, especially in the context of the larger field of phenomenology. Nonetheless, I made certain to include and consider their assertions in my paper, in order to present a balanced argument. I continued reading and discovered many sources that supported my ideas, albeit in different ways than I expected. Surprisingly, however, I found these untraditional arguments to
be quite convincing, and thus, while my thesis remained positive towards empathy for fictional characters, I modified it to reflect the methods suggested by my sources.

I used the Hannon Library’s online philosophy database as one of my primary research locations. Dr. Burns taught us to use it during class and asked us to begin our projects by finding one article related to our topics, and then gathering more sources through its citations. This research strategy was invaluable, allowing me to quickly locate connected documents. The database’s access to PDF versions of these articles was also important to me, as my fall semester was very hectic. Being able to connect with pieces online and for free was thus both convenient and cost effective. Additionally, the ability to search pieces by author proved incredibly useful, as it allowed me to easily find the works of Dermot Moran, who Dr. Burns specifically recommended for my topic. On occasion, when the articles I found via citation were unavailable through the database, the school’s connection to Google Scholar become another important resource, and vice-versa. Dr. Burns also provided me with further information by forwarding me a list of articles that had been written for a conference on empathy. I located pieces of interest using both the database and Google Scholar.

Dr. Burns understandably asked we utilize only scholarly, peer-reviewed articles as sources. Both the philosophy database and Google Scholar provided some level of assurance in this regard due to their academic natures. However, an additional method I used to determine the validity of the sources was through cross-referencing. In many cases, a given article in my bibliography is cited by two others. When the articles presented agreeing information, this made it clear that the given article was well-read and the other articles well-researched. Further, knowing that not all pieces on Google Scholar are peer-reviewed, I also looked into the journals
in which articles I found there were published, in order to determine whether they fulfilled that requirement.

Writing the paper was an important learning experience for me. While I have written research projects before, I feel that this piece required more investigation and analysis than any prior assignment. Further, this was my first time utilizing the library’s online resources, the knowledge of which subsequently made planning assignments from my spring semester far more manageable.